

# **The Good, the Bad, and the Mad**

## **Representations of Iran(ians) in Mainstream European News Sites**

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To my father

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## **List of Acronyms**

CDA Critical Discourse Analysis  
CDS Critical Discourse Studies  
CiF Comment is Free  
DHA Discourse-Historical Approach  
G The Guardian  
IAEA International Atomic Energy Agency  
LM Le Monde  
NPT Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty  
SPON Spiegel Online  
UGC User-Generated Content  
WMD Weapons of Mass Destruction



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## 1. Chapter One: Setting the Scene

*'You can't dress like this back home, can you?'* *'Where is your headscarf?'*, *'Will I get arrested when I visit?'* *'How dangerous is it over there?'*, *'How big is your family?'*, *'Do you ride camels?'*, *'Where is your bomb?'* These are some of the most common remarks – at times out of curiosity and at times facetious or sarcastic – that I, an Iranian woman, have encountered since moving to Europe 17 years ago. A journey that took me, amongst other places, to France, Germany, and the U.K. A journey that began in 2005, coincided with the election of then little-known Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and planted the seed of this project.

The word *Iran* evokes the Orient, oil, and Mad Mullahs on a quest for nuclear bombs. Over the past decades, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has come to be regarded as an object to be feared and a global challenge to be tackled. According to the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project (PRC, 2012), Iran's international image was overwhelmingly negative in 2012<sup>1</sup> particularly in the U.S. and the European Union (EU), most notably France (86%) and Germany (91%). The survey also showed that over 90% of British, French, and German populations opposed a nuclear-armed Iran and that the majority were in favor of tougher sanctions (79% in Britain, 74% in France, 80% in Germany). As for the use of military force, the survey noted some divisions, with British and German citizens leaning more towards endorsing a military action against Iran. As Iranians were preparing to elect a new president in 2013, BBC's Country Rating Poll (BBC World Service Poll, 2013) announced that Iran was "once again the most negatively viewed country", with unfavorable ratings above 80% expressed in EU states, namely France (82%), Germany (85%), and the U.K. (84%).

The predominantly negative views and perceptions in the West about Iran – specifically at the time of the above-stated surveys – can be ascribed to various (immediate and enduring) factors, inter alia, the Iranian leadership's anti-Western/ideological stance and theocracy; Tehran's foreign and domestic policies i.e. its highly-publicized nuclear program, support to Bashar Assad's Syria, grim human rights record; and last, but not least, the legacy of Ahmadinejad's eight-year presidency, a turbulent period marked by his bellicose rhetoric and confrontational approach. These topics/issues, whilst related to the 'real' world, constitute *some* aspects of Iran, or what Chimamanda Adichie (2009) terms 'a single story'. Hence, the "average westerner holds Iran to be the forecourt to hell. Why? Because western media

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<sup>1</sup>Amid renewed concerns over its nuclear ambitions at the time of this writing, Iran "once again has become a top focus of international tensions" (PRC, 2020) and continues to be viewed negatively in the West.

reduce Iran to the nuclear issue, Muslim veiling and Ahmadinejad's Holocaust denial" (Hafez, 2011, p.485) whereas, at other times, they laude (or appropriate) the resistance of Iranians and protests inside the country (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2018), including the much-hyped 'Twitter Revolution' in 2009 and the more recent unrest in 2019, without amply taking the complexities into account. Iran's dominant *image* – defined by Hafez (2000a, p.30) as "any kind of perception, whether it be based on prefabricated or authentic cognition" – in mainstream Western media can thus be attributed to a mix of high visibility and negative valence (Manheim & Albritton, 1984 cited in Zhang, 2012, p.80).

### **1.1 Foreign news reporting and international conflicts**

News, therefore, matters: it provides a space where journalists, media organizations, politicians and other information sources as well as the audience gather "to inform, persuade, influence, endorse or reject one another in a collaborative process of making meaning from events" (Meikle & Redden, 2011, p.1). Besides influencing public opinion, news media can further reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes – described by Fowler (1991, p.2) as "a socially-constructed mental pigeon-hole into which events and individuals can be sorted, thereby making such events and individuals comprehensible" – and prejudices.

Foreign news serves as a window through which we learn about, understand, and make sense of the world we live in. Each day, while countless events transpire worldwide, a selected few receive media attention and are placed on the (public and/or policy) agenda. Journalists and news makers decide, based on a web of complex factors, what their (intended) audience needs or wishes to know. In the words of Hafez (2011, p.485), "the foreign news agenda [...] at best just touches the tip-of-the-iceberg of all events and news produced daily around the world", thus making the public "inhabit news geographies containing some hot spots and many pale areas" (p.485). While certain events/issues attract substantial media attention on a global level, thereby constructing 'an identical media agenda', they are often covered and reported in accordance with 'their home-grown narratives' (p.486). "Today's international exchanges of images and information", accordingly, "are no guarantee for global intertextuality in news, for a growing awareness of the others' stories and perspectives or for more complexity in the mass media's world views" (Hafez, 2011, p.486). This is of particular importance in the case of a country like Iran with a rather low number of (Western) tourists<sup>2</sup> due in part to its wide reputation as a dangerous/unsafe place and regular travel warnings issued by foreign ministries in times of bilateral/international political tensions or internal unrest, thereby adding further to the

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<sup>2</sup> This study pre-dates the booming tourism after the 'Iran (nuclear) Deal', an agreement reached in July 2015 between Tehran and the P5+1 (five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany).

crucial role of media, as a primary source, in constructing the image associated with foreign countries, influencing public perceptions of these places, and exerting impact on intercultural and international dialogue. Regarding (international) conflicts, the impact of media is twofold; “they can either promote peace or deepen crises and reinforce conflict” (Hafez, 2000a, p.4). Similarly, concerning intercultural communication, the media “can become either agents of international and intranational cultural conflict or of transcultural communication” (p.38). The main aim of this thesis is to investigate Iran’s coverage in mainstream European media during a decisive period. In 2012, the EU imposed an oil embargo, amongst other restrictions, on the country, that were “the most far-reaching against an individual country adopted [...] since the sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s and the broadest unilateral sanctions regime ever adopted by the EU” (Meier, 2013, pp.15-16). The June 2013 presidential election was taking place in Iran at a critical juncture for several reasons: tensions were high between Tehran and the West, on one hand, over the nuclear dispute and renewed threats of an Israeli military action, and, on the other hand, due to Iran’s involvement in Syria’s ‘civil’ war; and, in addition, it was the first since the widely contested Iranian election in 2009 which was followed by nationwide protests that came to be known as the Green Movement – an uprising unprecedented since the 1979 Islamic revolution – and the violent crackdown that followed. Thus, while bearing in mind the potential effect of temporary ‘event-oriented spikes’ (Fredette, 2014, p.38; Mertens, 2016a, p.63) on media’s attention and coverage, the pre- and post-election months served as a momentous period to examine and compare news reporting on Iran. In this respect, France, Germany, and the U.K. are of particular interest due to their centuries-long relations with Iran and their ‘presence’, to varying degrees, in the country’s political history; their roles as key members of the nuclear negotiating team in addition to being the three most powerful European countries who “play an informal leadership role in shaping EU foreign policy” (Lehne, 2012, p.3; Patterson, 2013). Moreover, the three countries have diverse media systems and journalistic cultures. Hence, investigating Iran’s coverage in leading British, French, and, German news sites attempts a threefold contribution to: (1) comparative research on online journalism that remains understudied (e.g. Humprecht, 2016); (2) providing deeper insight into the similarities/differences across Europe with regard to foreign news reporting; and (3) filling a void in the literature concerning non-anecdotal empirical research on the image of Iran(ians) in mainstream European media<sup>3</sup> (outlined in Chapter Three). Thus, the first objective of this study is to examine:

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<sup>3</sup> To the best of my knowledge, most empirical studies on Iran have, with few exceptions, mainly focused on U.S. and/or U.K. media, and those that have investigated other contexts (e.g. France and Germany) are mostly single- country and issue-specific case studies.

*Against the backdrop of heightened international tensions in 2013, how was Iran covered in some of Europe's leading news websites?*

Central to this analysis is tracing 'othering' in the form of "the media's role in explaining international relations, conflict and culture" (Fürsich, 2010, p.116), which is closely linked to 'representation', a concept that "move[s] beyond understanding media messages as simply a portrayal or reflection of reality" and is, indeed, "constitutive of culture, meaning and knowledge about ourselves and the world around us" (p.115). In uncovering the dynamics of Self/Other representation(s) in mainstream media (discussed in Chapter Three) and Iran's portrayal as the Other, this research, it should be stressed at the outset, does not seek to decipher *the* 'truth' in the sense of elucidating which version(s) of Iran is more accurate than other(s); rather, to detect what Foucault (1980, p.131) refers to as 'regimes of truth'. "Each society", Foucault (1980, p.131) argues, "has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true". "The question of whether a discourse is true or false", as Hall (1992, p.205) stresses, "is less important than whether it is effective in practice". Thus, this study aims to examine the 'regime(s) of truth' at work by analyzing *what/who* is (not) reported in Iran's coverage in three European news outlets, namely *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and *Spiegel Online*<sup>4</sup>; *how* mainstream media discourse constructs and (de)legitimizes opposing sides in the face of conflict; and what possible convergences/divergences exist amongst – and within – the sampled news sites. The reason behind focusing on left-leaning media for this study, similar to some (e.g. Blackledge, 2005, p.134), was a keen interest in investigating discursive constructions of Otherness and dichotomous representations within a 'liberal' setting, that is, the liberal left discourse which advocates and aims to promote inclusion, tolerance, and pluralism.

## **1.2 Online news production and consumption**

In a world of 'information overload and one-click communication' (Fenton, 2010, p.3), the news environment is marked by both continuity and change (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014): continuities with respect to the enduring relevance of historically-inherited national and institutional variations in different media systems and journalistic cultures as well as shared cross-national trends i.e. the *softening* of journalistic political communication (Otto et al., 2017); and changes driven by an accelerated news cycle, digitization on the supply side, and rapid emergence of new news sources (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014), shaped, in part, by local conditions in addition to cross-cutting economic and technological forces and professional

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<sup>4</sup> The timeframe chosen for this study pre-dates the merging of the German news site's editorial office with that of the print Spiegel (in 2019) and its subsequent renaming to Der Spiegel (in 2020). For this reason and to avoid confusion, the outlet is mentioned in this thesis by its former name, Spiegel Online (or abbreviated SPON).

practices. This ‘new ecology of news’ (Saltzis, 2012, p.473), characterized by convergence – that is, the “coming together of telecommunications, media content and computing in multiple platforms, coupled with ongoing processes of industry merger, acquisition and alliance” (Meikle & Redden, 2011, p.2) – of media forms and textual systems, of media and personal communication, and of the professional and the non-professional, has enabled a digital mediascape that functions in real time on a global scale and continues to change “not only in content, but also in the ways citizens discover, use, consume and interact with that content” which “have a significant impact on what the media report, the way that their content is consumed, and, finally, on the quality of informed citizenship” (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013, p.701).

Notwithstanding the rise of digital media in an era of varied choices and increased audience fragmentation, television remains the most popular source for news in Western Europe (Matsa, 2018; Papathanassopoulos et al., 2013). In the three countries selected for the present study, with internet penetration levels of 80% (or above), online news – after TV – vies for the second most frequently accessed news source<sup>5</sup> (Table 1.1), dominated by legacy media, namely newspapers in both France and Germany and public service broadcasters in the U.K. (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014, pp.7-8). The two mentioned platforms – and traditional brands – constituted the main news *sources* (most valued/relied upon) in all three countries’ online market at the time of this study, with a more fragmented online usage and a stronger preference for TV in France and Germany (Newman & Levy, 2013). While a generational divide exists in Germany and the U.K., with younger people preferring the web and older groups favoring TV, the former continues to remain loyal to television news in France (Newman & Levy, 2013).

	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>U.K.</b>
<b>TV</b>	84%	82%	79%
<b>Radio</b>	44%	51%	37%
<b>Print</b>	46%	63%	59%
<b>Online</b>	68%	66%	74%

**Table 1.1. Weekly news access by source**

Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman & Levy, 2013, p.25)

Domestic news, followed by international, local, and regional news (especially in Germany) were the most popular news *types* in all three countries at the time of this research, with a strong interest in entertainment and celebrity news (especially in the U.K.) being fueled by a

<sup>5</sup> France and Germany have comparatively low levels of online news access and a strong allegiance to traditional media (Hasebrink & Hölig, 2013). According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, preference for TV over online news is more pronounced in both countries (Matsa, 2018). The majority in the European countries surveyed, it should be added, use multiple (analogue and digital) platforms for their daily news use.

growth of this news type in the digital – compared to the analogue – sphere (Newman & Levy, 2013). In terms of news partiality and polarization, impartial news is firmly supported in all three countries, who have strong public service traditions, and only a minority (4% in France, 1% in Germany, 10% in the U.K.) prefer to have their viewpoints challenged by news media (Newman & Levy, 2013). As for interest in particular *stories*, a BBC audience research in 2010 showed “higher levels of interest for global-themed coverage such as terrorism, economics and climate change than for specific country coverage”, therewith “reflecting a merging of the international and domestic news agenda” (cited in Sambrook, 2010, pp.61-2). Accordingly, a quarter of those surveyed stated that they would follow news on Iran over the coming years compared, for instance, to 22% and 13% on China and Africa, respectively. Another study by Reuters Institute (Sambrook et al., 2013) on audience interest in foreign news such as natural disasters and the ‘Arab Spring’ on TV and online found that human-interest and (some) disaster stories stimulated higher levels of interest. Concerning demographic breakdown, more affluent and educated audiences are reported to have shown more interest in foreign news (Sambrook, 2010, p.61).

Internet and web-specific affordances have enabled a platform that offers online users a (potential) space for participation. Thus, in addition to accessing news online, another issue is how users engage with the news by embracing various interactive and participatory options available in the online environment. Studies have shown similar cross-national patterns concerning users’ participatory practices as well as differences in terms of ‘participatory cultures’<sup>6</sup> (Nielsen, 2013). Fifteen years ago, Bruns (2007) observed a paradigm shift whereby the emergence of Web 2.0 applications blurs the traditional boundaries between active (news) production and passive (news) consumption, resulting in what he labelled the portmanteau of ‘produsage’. Various terms have entered academic parlance when describing this phenomenon: ‘citizen journalism’, ‘digital journalism’, ‘online journalism’, ‘participatory journalism’, ‘user-generated content’ (UGC), etc. (e.g. Deuze et al., 2007; Siaper & Veglis, 2012; Singer et al., 2011). As the most dominant news providers (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014) and the most popular news sources (Redden & Witschge, 2010) online, mainstream news sites offer a selection of editorial content, ‘originated’ (produced for the Web) and/or ‘aggregated’ (shoveled from the affiliated offline edition) along with a filtered and/or moderated form of participatory communication (Deuze, 2003, p.208). Measuring online journalism types against interactivity, a key characteristic of Web 2.0, alongside

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<sup>6</sup> Nielsen (2013, p.78) draws on the definition of participatory culture proposed by Jenkins et al. (2006, p.3) as one “with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship [...]. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created)”.



‘hypertextuality’ and ‘multimodality’, Deuze (2003) argued two decades ago that mainstream news sites mostly adopted ‘navigational’ interactive features (p.215) and “tend[ed] to translate the traditional way of doing things to the web, repurposing not only their content, but also their journalistic culture (including relationships with publics)” (p.219). More recently, Siapera (2012) detected seven forms of online journalism, including among others, ‘participatory or civic journalism’ and ‘online versions of mainstream news media’. The author makes a clear distinction between *participatory journalism* – in which readers actively and directly take part in the journalistic process by posting their own news and opinion pieces – and *mainstream online journalism*, which is “the traditional form of journalism that for the most part has merely shifted its platform from print to online” (p.167). While acknowledging changes in the print-to-online move of mainstream journalism concerning news content and readers, with the former expanding and the latter having the possibility to give feedback, the author argues that readers “are primarily positioned in a passive manner” (p.167). By contrast, Singer et al. (2011) choose *participatory journalism* to describe the contributions to news sites by those Jay Rosen (2006) famously described as ‘the people formerly known as the audience’, arguing that the term “captures the idea of collaborative and collective – not simply parallel – action” (p.2). The authors add that people in- and outside newsrooms “are engaged in communicating not only *to*, but also *with*, one another. In doing so, they all are participating in the ongoing processes of creating a news website and building a multifaceted community” (p.2, emphases in original). In sum, online journalism has “evolved from textuality to hypertextuality and then to multimodality and is now inching toward an amorphous, citizen-led, networked, social media phase” (Kperogi, 2012, p.449).

### 1.2.1 Reader comments

As Fowler (1991, p.43) states, “being a reader is an active, creative practice”. In reading media texts that are “polysemic and open to interpretation” (Poole, 2020, p.479), readers undergo encoding/decoding processes that could include adopting a ‘dominant/hegemonic’, ‘negotiated’ or ‘oppositional’ position (Hall, 1980). Accordingly, “a more holistic account of how meaning is produced in the communication process” (Poole, 2020, p.479) involves examining both the elite institutional discourses and representations conveyed and communicated through the messages of legacy media (e.g. print or online news) and non-institutional discourses enabled and afforded by Web 2.0-based media (e.g. user comments and discussion forums) that entail, amongst others, the consumption, reproduction, and negotiation of communicated messages (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, pp.4-5).

Comment sections are one of the most prevalent forms of UGC on news sites and among the most popular participatory practices (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Reich, 2011; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015; Weber, 2014; Quandt, 2018). This popularity amongst news outlets and their audience has spurred a burgeoning scholarly attention. Notwithstanding myriad studies investigating participatory journalism and its signature characteristic – user comments – from various theoretical and empirical perspectives, the actual content of online comments, beyond normative assessments of their deliberative quality, remains a relatively understudied domain (discussed in Chapter Four), a research gap that has been acknowledged repeatedly in the past years (Abdul-Mageed, 2008; Dorostkar & Preisinger, 2017; McElroy, 2013; Milioni et al., 2012; Paprota, 2017; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2017; Ruiz et al., 2011; Zamith & Lewis, 2014). The juxtaposition of online news and readers’ reactions – to the article itself as well as to fellow commenters – represents an “unprecedented intersection between the two traditionally separate processes, mass and interpersonal communication” (Lee & Jang, 2010, p.827). While comment sections often pave the way for ‘dark participation’ (Quandt, 2018) involving misinformation, hate campaigns, trolling, and cyberbullying, they reflect “a new public space – serving as a gauge of society’s pulse” (Loke, 2013, p.184). A rich source of qualitative data, comment sections encompass a breadth of opinion stemming from a safer medium provided via computer-mediated communication, thereby reflecting more personal and “less inhibited content from a large audience”, compared with focus groups and face-to-face interaction (Park et al., 2012, p.730). As such, comments can provide invaluable insights into public sentiments, or alternative views, about specific topics/issues. Comment sections have so far been analyzed “largely in isolation, that is without a systematic, content-based analysis of mass-mediated discourse” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p.468). Given the dearth of empirical research in this area, this study seeks to contribute to the extant literature by analyzing the (re-)production of discourses “grounded in the mass media” alongside those that “occur in media-defined discursive spaces” (Molek- Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.4). In other words, to concurrently explore top-down and bottom-up mediated discourses and representations of Self/Other. Thus, the second objective of this study is to examine:

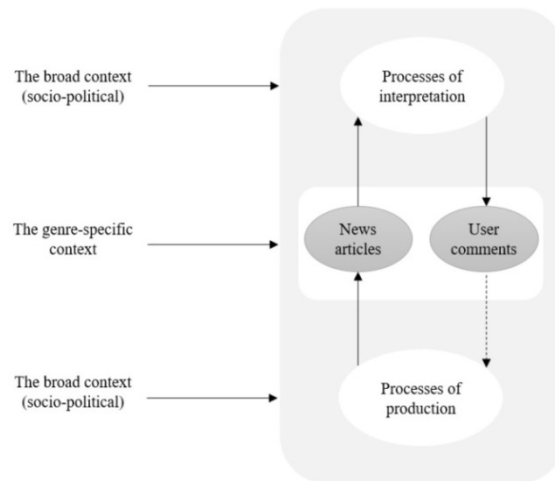
*Against the backdrop of heightened international tensions in 2013, how was Iran represented in the selected news sites’ comment sections?*

In analyzing reader views and perceptions about Iran, of particular interest to this study is shedding light on the extent to which the opinions expressed on Iran and Iran-related issues in comment sections resonate with, or differ from, mainstream media discourse(s). Similar to what has been noted concerning the dearth of audience research, excluding few (e.g.

Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016), in an otherwise plethora of empirical work thus far on Western media representation of Islam/Muslims (see Ahmed & Matthes, 2016; Poole, 2020 for reviews), no study, to my knowledge, has delved into audiences' reception of news in the West about Iran to date.

### 1.3 Thesis outline

News is 'socially constructed' and is a *practice* – a discourse – which “reveals the operation of a complex and artificial set of criteria for selection” that is “far from neutrally reflecting social reality and empirical facts” (Fowler, 1991, p.2). Journalism, therefore, is “inescapably connected to the social, political and cultural context (etc.) in which it is written and consumed” (Richardson, 2007, p.221). Accordingly, media and media-related discourses should be situated within their 'setting', that is, “the social *contexts* in which journalistic language is used and the social *consequences* of its use”, both which are “*intimately* related to power” (p.220, emphases in original). The overall approach – theory and method – adopted in this research is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), informed and guided by the Faircloughian model (Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b) that “is perhaps the most established for the study of media discourse” (Kautsky & Widholm, 2008, p.86) and entails three interconnected levels of analysis: the textual; the inter-related processes of news production and consumption (discursive practices); and the relation between journalism and the wider socio-cultural, socio-political, and historical context (social practices). In this respect, discourse is viewed “as a circular process in which social practices influence texts, via shaping the context and mode in which they are produced, and in turn texts help influence society via shaping the viewpoints of those who read or otherwise consume them” (Richardson, 2007, p.37). Social and discursive practices of production, on one hand, and the consumption/interpretation of media texts and social practices, on the other, “exist as a dialectical (i.e. a two-way) relationship” (Richardson, 2007, p.45): While producers encode meaning(s) into the text, the text and its conventions i.e. text-genre also shape the production process (pp.40-41). Readers, on their part, decode the texts' meanings based on their own knowledge/beliefs about the world, and texts, in turn, go on to shape these readers' knowledge/beliefs, either via transformation or reproduction (Richardson, 2007, p.45). CDA aims to investigate the “mediation between language (microfeatures of discourse) and society (macrostructures surrounding discourse)” (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017, p.3619). Thus, in order to “*explicate* 'discourses in place'” (KhosraviNik, 2010a, p.66, emphasis in original), this study considers the wider social, political, and historical settings in which meanings and representations are (re)produced, negotiated, and/or resisted in addition to the immediate context of institutional and non-institutional discourse genres under examination (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1. Discourse context levels**  
 Source: Amended from KhosraviNik (2015, p.6)

Like print media, leading news sites “reflect the social mainstream (or *a* mainstream, given that in pluralistic societies there is generally more than one)” and thus can be considered “obvious sources to turn to” if one is more interested in ‘dominant discourses’ than ‘dissident or idiosyncratic voices’ (Mautner, 2008, p.32, emphasis in original). Besides, the well-known dialectic of discourse within the CDA paradigm as ‘socially constituted and constitutive’ (e.g. Blackledge, 2005, p.4; Wodak & Meyer 2009, p.2; 2016, p.12) is relevant to established news sites, given their popularity as online news sources as well as high internet penetration rates in Western Europe, since “[d]issemination to large audiences enhances the constitutive effect of discourse – its power, that it, to shape widely shared constructions of reality” (Mautner, 2008, p.32). It is also worth acknowledging the fact that the countries examined in this study are democracies, given “the premise underlying this form of government: It rests on a public that is both *informed* about matters of civic importance, and, importantly, *able to talk* about those matters with other citizens”<sup>7</sup> (Singer et al., 2011, p.5, emphases added).

Taking as a point of departure the tenet that current views and ‘synchronous’ (Blommaert, 2005, p.130) narratives about Iran are placed within “a diachronic series of discourses and histories” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.6) influencing news production and interpretation processes, **Chapter Two** contextualizes the relations between Europe and (post-revolution) Iran from an historical perspective in order to situate the conflict between the two sides in 2013 and the associated Self/Other nexus in its broader socio-political context. In so doing, the insights offered prepare the ground for understanding – beyond descriptive observations such as *what* is being said – *why* certain discursive strategies are constructed/adopted by the media and

<sup>7</sup> For normative theories and various functions of media across democracies, see Humprecht (2016, pp.11-23)

*how* they correspond to the (assumed) shared knowledge (KhosraviNik, 2015, pp.112-17) of their respective societies/audience.

**Chapter Three** is divided into four sections and presents the theoretical framework used in this study, namely CDA, in the context of foreign news reporting. The first part deals with dominant patterns/trends in foreign news coverage and some of the main factors and forces shaping international news. The second part discusses media(ted) representation and the ‘othering’ process therein. The third part outlines Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and their core principles/defining characteristics alongside the interplay of discourse (as ‘language in use’), media, and society. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), adopted in this thesis, and notions of ‘discourse’, ‘context’, and ‘ideology’ therein are outlined next, followed by the main criticisms directed at CDA-oriented research – and responses to them. The last section reviews the current state of research on Western media’s representation of Iran.

Divided into two sections that draw upon separate strands of literature, **Chapter Four** discusses the immediate, genre-specific context of the ‘communicative events’ (Fairclough, 1995b, p.58) examined in this study; online news texts and comment sections. The first part contextualizes foreign news reporting, discussed in Chapter Three, within its national, systemic, and digital settings. It also briefly sketches online journalism in France, Germany, and the U.K., and reviews the processes of newsgathering and production as well as news content in digital era. The second part, divided in two sub-sections, reviews user comments from two distinct, but overlapping, lines of empirical research that look at (1) attitudes and perceptions of journalists/producers and (2) the users’ participatory practices. The chapter concludes with situating online comments in CDA along with the main challenges involved.

Drawing on the theoretical and empirical reviews outlined in the two preceding chapters, **Chapter Five** begins by presenting the methodological approach alongside the main analytical tools/categories adopted and employed in this thesis. Research questions are subsequently presented, followed by a description of the sampled news sites, the data, and the stages of data collection, selection/corpus-building, and analysis. The chapter concludes with indicating the limitations and challenges pertaining to the material examined in this research and those related to data analysis/interpretation – and how they were addressed.

**Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight** constitute the empirical part of this research. The first two deal with the analysis of media texts. Chapter Six begins by presenting a quantitative overview of the (British, French, German) corpora and proceeds with discussing salient topics/issues in the selected news sites’ Iran coverage and the dominant themes therein that stem from an entry-level thematic analysis. Chapter Seven starts by explaining the process to “whittle down” (Reynolds, 2019, p.57) and build a smaller, manageable corpus for further in-

depth analysis based on the preceding chapter's findings as well as other criteria pertinent to this research and its objectives. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to deconstructing top-down Self and Other representations in the sampled articles. Chapter Eight likewise begins with an overview of the news sites' comment sections and the three corpora, followed by discussing the pervasive strategies of Self and Other representations in the non-institutional media-enabled discourse space.

Lastly, **Chapter Nine** provides a synthesis of this study's findings, while highlighting blind spots in the selected media's Iran coverage. This is followed by suggestions for journalistic practice and indicating this study's theoretical implications. Possible directions for future research deriving from this research, contributions to CDA-oriented research in media studies, and its limitations are stated thereafter.

## 2. Chapter Two: Iran and Western Europe

This chapter presents an historical account of Iran-Europe relations, focusing on Britain, France, and Germany in particular. Starting with an overview of dominant perceptions of Persia (renamed Iran in 1935) that continue to influence Western views of present-day Iran (Tharoor, 2015), the chapter contextualizes the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and reviews the Europe-Islamic Republic relations over the following phases: revolution's immediate aftermath, Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and post-war period; years of Critical and Comprehensive Dialogue (1992-2003); and nuclear dispute (2003-2013)<sup>8</sup>. By outlining major events and prevailing discourses, with more weight on the nuclear row which has come to not only dominate but also define European policies towards Iran, this chapter seeks to sketch the broader socio-political and historical contexts in which the relations between Iran and the three selected European countries as well as the production and reception of their respective media in 2013 were embedded.

### 2.1 Persia in Western narratives

Western perceptions of Persia<sup>9</sup> trace back to biblical and classical texts, and ancient Greeks' early accounts of Greco-Persian wars in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC (Hunter, 2010; Nanquette, 2017). In his seminal work, Edward Said (1978) cites Aeschylus's *The Persians* – a play written eight years after the Battle of Thermopylae and the Greeks' inconceivable victory over the numerically-superior Persians – as one of the earliest extant instances of 'Orientalism':

What matters here is that Asia speaks through and by virtue of the European imagination, which is depicted as victorious over Asia, that hostile 'other' world beyond the seas. To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster that seem thereafter to reward Oriental challenges to the West; and also, the lament that in some glorious past Asia fared better, was itself victorious over Europe (Said, 1978, p.56).

This imaginative demarcation, as Said (1978) argues, rests upon two essential motifs, namely 'Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant' and 'the Orient as insinuating danger' (p.57). In this vein, the Greek tragedy created "a lasting stereotype whereby the civilized Persians are reduced to cringing, ostentatious, arrogant, cruel,

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<sup>8</sup> The main focus here is the period prior to, and during, the timeframe selected for the present study.

<sup>9</sup> In his essay, Ansari (2005, p.8) distinguishes between Persia "as a Western narrative construct emanating from classical perceptions" and "the indigenous historical traditions of Iran". Whilst using the premise of Europe's 'imagining' of the East, articulated by Edward Said, as a focal point in his analysis, Ansari posits that "the 'Persians' should not be exclusively considered in terms of the 'other' awaiting discovery, investigation, invention and control, but should instead be regarded as part of the totality of the Western narrative, a people familiar to the Western imagination long before the imperatives of empire and, through a curious transformation of the narrative, moved from being an essential 'other', to an integral part of the self" (p.10).

effeminate, and lawless aliens” (Davies, 1997, p.103). Through Western narratives over centuries, the Battle of Thermopylae came to symbolize the triumph of European ideals of freedom and self-determination over Eastern despotism<sup>10</sup> (see e.g. Basu et al., 2007, p.28; Hunter, 2010, p.78; Santini, 2010, p.469). By contrast, Herodotus painted a more nuanced depiction in *Histories*, considered the founding work of history in Western literature. The Persians, whom he terms ‘barbarians’<sup>11</sup>, “are capable of great deeds and have their moral principles, such as love of truth, justice, generosity” (Asheri, 2007, p.44):

That in 480-79 BC the Persians were the ‘national’ enemy of the Greeks, or rather, of those Greeks who had chosen to resist them, does not prevent Herodotus from moral evaluation of their virtues or from calm and objective assessment of their civilization, devoid of ‘chauvinistic’ passions and of racial hatred [...] (Asheri, 2007, p.44)

Europe’s familiarity with Persia grew through trade and travel in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ansari, 2005, 2012; Frye, 2003). Amongst their observations, European writers/travelers propagated the ‘myth of *Persian* decadence’ which, amid political turmoil in Persia throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, came to stand for “a salutary lesson of how overindulgence could lead to decadence, weakness, and ultimately moral if not political collapse” (Ansari, 2012, p.11). By early 19<sup>th</sup> century, “the dominant image” of Persia amongst Europeans “was of a country and of a nation which had lost some of its lustre, and which was prone to ‘corruption’ in its many and varied forms” (p.11). Persian decadence was further popularized by James Morier’s *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824), an English novel replete with Orientalist tropes that portrayed Persians “as a nation of picaresque characters, quite happy to indulge in swindling, cheating and stealing”, leaving a lasting mark on Western imagination and framing of Persia/Iran (Ahmadi Arian, 2016, p.73). In the words of Rastegar (2007 p.138 cited in Ahmadi Arian, 2016, p.59), whilst oriental tales i.e. *One Thousand and One Nights* highlighted the Orient’s “exotic otherness”, “Morier was able to innovate the genre in such a way so as to reflect the change which occurred in colonial discourse from a discourse of *othering* to one of *knowing*” (emphasis in original). Although travelogues including Edward Browne’s more sympathetic *A Year Amongst the Persians* (1893) sought to counter Morier’s depiction (Frye, 2003), *Hajji Baba* remained a highly influential stereotype of the ‘Persian

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<sup>10</sup> The Hollywood blockbuster movie 300 (2006) is a case in point. While acknowledging the comic-book genre’s Hero-versus-Villain mythos, Basu et al. (2007) argue that by portraying Persian soldiers as ‘[s]lavish, corrupt, and sometimes corpulent..often dark-skinned, serving as unsavory foils for white, lean, muscular Spartans’ and with the Persian army containing ‘several gruesome, monstrous creatures’, 300 “somehow asks the viewer to accept a pernicious correlation between physical appearance and moral qualities” (pp.29-30).

<sup>11</sup> Some scholars view ‘barbarian’ through its modern-day pejorative connotation (e.g. Basu et al., 2007; Frye, 2003). Iranian-American historian Abbas Milani (2003), for instance, states: “Though in what must be the first clear instance of smug Eurocentrism, he [Herodotus] calls Persians ‘Barbarians’, he nevertheless marvels at their many accomplishments”. Others argue that the word, as used by Herodotus, was not a derogatory remark and referred to “non-Greek language or culture, for Persians and others equally” (Kasravi n.d.,p.7).



character’ and only with the emergence of Orientalist and post-colonial critiques in the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the myth of *Hajji Baba* as an accurate representation of the Iranian national character was gradually laid to rest” (Amanat, 2003). Parallel to this popular Oriental genre, ancient pre-Islamic Persia was ‘re-discovered’ in European intellectual circles in 18<sup>th</sup> century, with a reinvigorated interest in Zoroastrianism<sup>12</sup> gaining momentum and, alongside Aryanism<sup>13</sup>, becoming profoundly mythologized through to the following century (Ansari, 2012, p.15). This is evident in the works of German thinkers i.e. Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and Hegel’s inclusion of Achaemenid Persia as the ‘first Historical People’ in his *Philosophy of History* (Ansari, 2012, pp.15-17). To Hegel, Persia, part of the Oriental world (albeit belonging to the Caucasian race), was a place where the European “finds himself still somewhat at home, and meets with European dispositions, human virtues and human passions” (quoted in Tibebu, 2011, p.272). Similarly, according to Hourcade (1987), French orientalist traditionally placed more emphasis on ancient Persia compared to modern Iran – a tendency that changed by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Nanquette, 2017, pp.25-6) – and on the Aryan character of Iranian peoples in contrast to Semitic and Turkish civilizations. Citing the *Lettres persanes* (1721), Hourcade argues: “It was not by chance that Montesquieu chose a Persian instead of a Turk or an Indian to symbolize the independent foreigner” (p.2). This construction of Persia as an object of study that was ‘not entirely alien’ (Nanquette, 2017, p.25) was disrupted by the Iranian Revolution that turned Iran into an ‘incomprehensible Other’ (p.58).

## 2.2 Iranian Revolution in historical context

It was merely a fortnight after the visit of Jimmy Carter to Tehran – during which, in his famous speech on New Year’s Eve 1977, the U.S. president toasted Iran as “an island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world” – that widespread protests erupted, culminating in the 1979 revolution. This event, which marked a turning point in Iran’s history and its relations with the West, and the birth of an Islamic Republic that espoused a populist, anti-imperialist, and pro-Third Worldist *Weltanschauung* based on a certain politico-ideological reading of Islam, are placed within the country’s interaction with imperialism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>14</sup>. Seen in historical perspective, the revolution was, *inter alia*, the continuation of a centuries-long struggle against failed

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<sup>12</sup> The official religion of Persia prior to the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. For the impact of Zoroastrianism on Western thought, see Bekhrad (2017).

<sup>13</sup> See Motameni (2014, pp.183-227) for how the history of Persia and the ‘Aryan Myth’ was appropriated by Nazi propagandists in shaping Aryan nationalism. See also Ansari (2005, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Although Persia/Iran was never colonized, it was divided into spheres of influence under the Anglo-Russian Convention (1907) and, later, occupied by British and Tsarist/Soviet forces during both world wars.

modernization attempts by despotic rulers coupled with the quest to curb foreign domination and interference, starting from the Tobacco Revolt (1891-92)<sup>15</sup>, a watershed event that, amongst other factors, led to the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), which replaced the hitherto absolute monarchy with a constitutional one and established the Majlis (parliament); and the oil nationalization movement, led by Mohammad Mosaddeq (1951)<sup>16</sup> (Kaussler, 2008a; KhosraviNik, 2015; Rakel, 2009).

The revolution's anti-imperialist component and its impact on shaping the country's identity and foreign policy trace back to Britain's legacy in Iran<sup>17</sup>. Current relations between the two countries should be understood in view of the following milestones in **Anglo-Persian** relations since the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup> (Ansari, 2013; Kaussler, 2008a, pp.351-72): The Definitive Treaty (1814), which obliged Persia to declare alliances with European powers (hostile to Britain) null and void, turning it into a pawn in the Great Game of British and Russian Empires (1856-1907); the Reuter Concession (1872), which granted Britain an all-embracing monopoly that even the imperialist Lord Curzon described as a 'complete surrender of the entire resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has ever been dreamed of, much less accomplished, in history' (quoted in Kaussler, 2008a, p.356). The concession, annulled the following year amid domestic outrage and Russian hostility, laid the ground for the Tobacco Revolt; the D'Arcy oil Concession (1901) that awarded Britain exclusive rights for 60 years to oil in Persia. The concession, later assigned to the Anglo-Persian Oil Company – established in 1908 shortly after the discovery of a large oil field – was renegotiated in 1933 and ultimately cancelled in 1951 after Iranian oil was nationalized; Persia's division under the Anglo-Russian Entente (1907), which officially marked the end of the Great Game; disregarding Persia's neutrality during World War I, after which Britain became the uncontested dominant power in Persia; the Anglo-Persian provisional Agreement (1919), annulled by the Majlis which, if ratified, would have turned Iran into a *de facto* British protectorate; the British-backed coup in 1921 that brought Reza Khan (later Reza Shah

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<sup>15</sup> The Tobacco Concession, granted by the Qajar king in 1890, which gave Britain a monopoly over Iran's tobacco trade that constituted a substantial part of the country's economy, was withdrawn following public outcry and the clergy's fatwa (religious decree) calling on Iranians to boycott tobacco sale and consumption.

<sup>16</sup> In 1951, the Majlis voted unanimously to nationalize the oil industry and Mohammad Mosaddeq, the bill's leading advocate, was elected as Iran's prime minister. Subsequently, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company and its holdings were replaced by the newly-established National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC).

<sup>17</sup> Historically, both Britain and Russia competed over exerting influence in Iran. In fact, over the past two centuries, Russia "posed a much greater threat to Iranian sovereignty than Britain ever did. It was the Treaty of Turkmenchai in 1828 that reduced Iran to the status of a second-rate power, confirming the loss of territories in the Caucasus" (Ansari, 2013, pp.381-2). Yet, while the Islamic Republic forged a strategic relationship with Russia, it branded Britain 'Little Satan' from the outset that has endured until today.

<sup>18</sup> According to Sir Denis Wright (2001), long-serving British ambassador to Iran, until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century "Britain's interests in Persia were not considered of sufficient importance to justify the establishment there of a permanent diplomatic mission. Generally speaking, Persia was regarded as a remote, fabulous country, difficult of access, of some commercial but minor political importance" (p.1).

Pahlavi) to power; the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in the wake of World War II that forced Reza Shah's abdication in favor of his son Mohammad Reza (the Shah); and the CIA-orchestrated coup in concert with the British MI6 that ousted the democratically-elected Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953, preserved the monarchy and empowered the Shah, while turning the U.S. into the 'Patron Power' – supplanting Britain – in dictating Iranian policies (Kaussler, 2008a). Britain's interference in Iran's affairs bequeathed a legacy of distrust and paranoia in both popular and elite mindsets. Anglophobic sentiments and conspiracy theories linking the country's misfortunes to 'the hidden hand' of Britain – the “myth of Perfidious Albion” (Ansari, 2013) – were already embedded in Iranian psyche before the revolution, as exemplified by the TV series *My Uncle Napoleon* (1976), adapted from an eponymous novel from 1973. “The English”, according to a famous line from the comedy-satire show, set during the Anglo-Soviet invasion in early 1940s, “are always the enemy of those, who love their homeland” (quoted in Adib-Moghaddam, 2008, p.232).

Despite early encounters dating back to the Middle Ages, it was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the Safavid epoch that **Franco-Persian** relations deepened (Tork Ladani, 2018). Considered the golden age of Franco-Persian ties, this period, which saw the flourishing of economic, cultural, and political relations, was disrupted by the Afghan invasion of Persia in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and, later, the French Revolution. Relations were restored in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Qajar king, playing the French card to counter Britain and Russia, concluded the Treaty of Finkenstein in 1807 that led to the formation of the Franco-Persian Alliance. However, the Treaty of Tilsit, signed the same year between Napoleon 1<sup>st</sup> and Russia, coupled with British diplomatic maneuvering rendered the alliance void. Between the resumption of ties in mid-1830s and the First World War, relations, while continuing in commercial and diplomatic realms, were primarily culture-centered (Tork Ladani, 2018). This included the establishment of Dar al-Fonun – the first modern institution of higher education in Persia – with French support and modelled on Ecole Polytechnique, with the curriculum, initially based on military subjects, later extended to medicine and non-military topics; a monopoly over archeological excavations in Persia<sup>19</sup>; and the Iranian intellectuals' adoption, and later inclusion, of French Revolution's principles, namely the notion of adālat, the Persian equivalent to égalité [equality] in the Constitutional Revolution (Nanquette, 2017, pp.11-13; Tork Ladani, 2018, pp.153-57). Thus, despite the lack of France's visible colonial ambitions in Persia, as Nanquette (2017) argues, “some imperialist processes were

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<sup>19</sup> French Ministry of Public Education had the monopoly from 1894 to 1931. “In charge of uncovering the past, of unearthing the splendors of the pre-Islamic era”, Hourcade (1987, p.2) states, “French archeologists thus helped embellish the image of a prestigious Iranian civilization distinct from the Muslim, and mostly Arab, Middle East”.

nonetheless at stake between France and Iran throughout the cultural domain in the last two centuries” (p.11).

After World War I, France sought to bolster its presence in Persia via a number of initiatives: setting up a French bank in Tehran; increasing the number of French instructors at Dar al-Fonun and at the newly-established Law Faculty at Tehran University; and founding a lycée français and an agriculture school (Tork Ladani, 2018). Amid developments in cultural, commercial, and military spheres, relations were ruptured in late 1930s, following the publication of satirical articles about Reza Shah in the French press, and resumed on the occasion of the Persian crown prince’s wedding ceremony and were further strengthened after the Vichy regime was established (Tork Ladani, 2018). On Norouz (Persian New Year) 1941, Reza Shah declared that “the French have finally realized, like us and after us, that in order to be strong, there needs to be a strong government” (Elahi, 2016). However, the Anglo-Soviet invasion and Reza Shah’s abdication weakened bilateral ties until 1944 when General de Gaulle visited Tehran and expressed support for the Shah, a gesture that stood in stark contrast to that of the Allied leaders at the Tehran Conference<sup>20</sup> the previous year, during which Churchill summoned the young Shah for a brief meeting and Stalin was the only leader to visit the Shah in his palace<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, factors including the Algerian and Indochina Wars, which tarnished France’s image amongst Iranians, the Shah’s over-reliance on Washington and his increasingly repressive policies after the White Revolution – a series of modernizing reforms – created mutual reservations (Tork Ladani, 2018). While trade expanded between the two countries during the 1970s when Iran’s purchasing power improved dramatically thanks to increases in oil revenue, “diplomatic relations remained cordial but static” (Tarock, 1999, p.45). This was evident when French President Georges Pompidou sent his prime minister on his behalf to attend the 1971 Persepolis celebrations, marking the 2,500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Persian Empire.

Historically, **German-Persian** relations have been characterized by “more or less friendly mutual opportunism” (Lane, 1995). Imperial Germany, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw Persia as a fertile ground for trade and, to the Qajar kings, Germany represented a source of top-quality technology as well as a neutral power to counterweigh Britain and Russia (Lane, 1995; Rakel, 2009, p.207; Tarock, 1999). In 1906, a year before the Anglo-Russian Entente, Persia, having lost its financial independence, offered a banking concession to Germany, which was

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<sup>20</sup>The strategy meeting of the so-called ‘Big Three’ (U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Russian Marshall Joseph Stalin) from 28 November to 1 December, which led to the opening of a second front against Nazi Germany. Iran, under Anglo-Soviet occupation, would become the fuel and supplies route to the Allies, known otherwise as the ‘Bridge to Victory’.

<sup>21</sup> In other words, “Iranians themselves will neither be informed of this vital meeting on their soil nor invited to it” (Anvari, 2015).

rejected, as Germans considered the expansion of investment in the politically-fragile Persia too risky (Bast, 2015). After World War I, Persia, now ruled by the Pahlavi monarchy, became an attractive emerging market thanks to the revenues from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (Motadel, 2015). Subsequently, Germany became involved in various sectors in Persia, including the air force and the Trans-Iranian Railway. In order to further increase its economic and political influence, Germany established the National Bank of Persia (today's Bank Melli) in 1927, upon which Reza Shah relied for his modernization projects. German-Persian relations suffered several setbacks in late 1920s and early 1930s such as the publication of anti-Shah articles in Berlin and the corruption scandal involving the National Bank's management (Motadel, 2015). Nonetheless, relations continued after the National Socialism takeover. The close ties between Reza Shah and Nazi Germany, ascribed to the two regime's supposed ideological sympathies and geopolitical calculations were primarily driven by mutual economic incentives (Jenkins, 2016). On the eve of World War II, Germany was Iran's "foremost trade partner" (Jenkins, 2016, p.728). Ultimately, the Anglo-Soviet occupation thwarted Germany's influence in Iran (Lane, 1995). In the post-war period, relations between Tehran and West Germany were restored. Most notably, the Shah acquired 25% of Friedrich Krupp GmbH, the West German steel and engineering concern, which, as the *New York Times* (1976) reported, was "the first foreign stake in the 164-year-old company". Moreover, Bonn is said to have refused to allow Amnesty International to hold a conference in Germany on Iran's human rights and even passed on information about political dissidents to the SAVAK, the Shah's notorious intelligence service (Lane, 1995). It should also be reminded that it was the Shah's visit to Germany in 1967 and its aftermath that marked a turning point in the German Student Movement and the history of the Federal Republic (Abadi, 2017).

This brief overview demonstrates that, historically, "Iranian interpretations of their role in the region's political evolution and in international affairs were by and large neglected and never incorporated in European discourses", a pattern that partly shapes Europe's attitudes vis-à-vis Iran today, "in isolation from Iranian own readings and discursive justifications" (Santini, 2010, p.470). Current European perceptions of, and policies towards, Iran should thus be placed in an historical trajectory marked by both continuity and change: On one hand, they are situated in an historical disregard for Iran's independence i.e. ignoring the country's neutrality during both world wars and interpreting the Shah's efforts in the mid-1970s to be treated like an ally, in lieu of a client, as part of his regional ambitions and self-

aggrandizement<sup>22</sup>, leading the West to adopt “what at best could be called a complacent attitude” towards the events unfolding in 1977 in Iran and escalating the following year, and “at worst [...] a policy in support of replacing the Shah”<sup>23</sup> (Hunter, 2010, p.80); On the other, they are placed within the climate of mutual distrust and intersubjective otherization in the post-revolution era<sup>24</sup> (Behraves, 2011). The revolution marked a paradigm shift in how Iran perceived itself and the outside world: the Islamic discourse adopted by Ayatollah Khomeini laid the foundation for the formation of an oppressed/oppressor (Islamic world vs. non-Islamic West) dichotomy and a crusade to empower the former, while demonizing the latter, as manifested in the two slogans of ‘*Independence, Freedom, and the Islamic Republic*’ and ‘*Neither East, Nor West, (only) the Islamic Republic*’ (Behraves, 2011, p.333). This anti-Western stance is closely intertwined with the construction of a perpetual enemy, real or imagined, embodied by the epithets of ‘Great Satan’ (the U.S.), ‘Little Satan’ (Britain), and the ‘Zionists’<sup>25</sup> (p.328).

### **2.3 Revolution’s immediate aftermath, Iran-Iraq War and post-war period**

Whereas U.S.-Iran relations were hostile since the Islamic Republic’s inception, those between Tehran and Western Europe, as Tarock (1999, p.44) states, had “a rather auspicious and promising beginning” for three main reasons: (1) Despite its strong ties to the *ancient régime*, Europe (excluding Britain) had not been so deeply involved as the U.S. in Iran’s affairs and, as such, was not the primary target of the revolutionaries’ anti-Western rhetoric; (2) Europe had granted a temporary home to Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been forcibly exiled from Iran since 1964 and later from Iraq in 1978. It was in the Parisian suburb of Neauphle-le-Château where the Ayatollah spent four months – and enjoyed substantial media access – prior to returning to Iran on February 1, 1979, two weeks after the protests led the Shah to flee the country. Notwithstanding his official neutral stance on the conflict between the Ayatollah and the Shah, French President Giscard d’Estaing foresaw the latter’s impending downfall and admired the early revolutionary and anti-authoritarian fervor (Tork

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<sup>22</sup> In 1974, American journalist Mike Wallace asked the Shah: “The brown-eyed peoples are teaching the blue-eyed peoples something. Is that it?” to which he responded: “Well, we really are not teaching something. The blue-eyed people have to wake up..from this complacency..from this torpor in which they put themselves by taking maybe too many sleeping pills”. The clip ‘Shah’s Message to the “Blue Eyed People”’ is from a 2002 documentary by CBS News and the History Channel entitled 20th Century with Mike Wallace: Crisis in Iran—Death of the Shah and the Hostage Crisis. Posted by ‘Goodfellow62’, September 18, 2006 [Online video]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKYlvYzWwHU>

<sup>23</sup> See Simpson (2017) for how the U.S., deliberately or inadvertently, misread the events unfolding in Iran.

<sup>24</sup> In his critique of Said, Halliday (1993) cautions against the tendency to consider Orientalism an historical continuity without taking the socio-political dynamics into account: “The thesis of some enduring, trans-historical, hostility to the Orient, the Arabs, the Islamic world, is a myth” (pp.158-9).

<sup>25</sup> Before 1979, Iran and Israel had a close, strategic alliance (Menashri, 2006; Rezaei & Cohen, 2014). The statement on the last page of the Iranian passport, in Farsi and English, that “[t]he holder of this passport is not entitled to travel to the occupied palestine [sic]” is indicative of the Islamic Republic’s position on Israel.

Ladani, 2018, pp.246-8); and (3) the Islamic Republic realized that it would be unfeasible, economically and politically, to confront both the U.S. and Europe. Nevertheless, various factors precluded the normalization of Europe-Iran relations throughout the Khomeini era (1979-89), most notably the Hostage Crisis<sup>26</sup>; Iran-Iraq War and Europe's support for Iraq; and Tehran's ideologically-driven foreign policy based on the notion of 'Exporting the Revolution' aimed at liberating Muslim- and non-Muslim countries from their "oppressive and corrupt rulers" (Rakel, 2009, pp.147-48). Iran's support for the Shia militia in the region and backing the hostage taking of Western nationals during Lebanon's civil war alongside its (alleged or confirmed) implication in the assassination of exiled dissidents, "made it easier for the West to take a critical stance on issues where – given their behavior elsewhere in the Middle East, such as regarding Iraq –they otherwise might have remained reticent, namely, on Iran's human rights record" (Halliday, 1994, p.312). Hence, while Washington severed all ties with the Islamic Republic<sup>27</sup>, Europe and Iran entered a decade-long phase that Moshaver (2003, pp.292-93) characterizes as 'Cold Peace'.

After Iran's invasion by Iraq in September 1980, a war broke out between the two neighboring countries that lasted eight years. "At the outset", Halliday (1994, p.312) states, "Britain and France, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, were seen (correctly so) as having connived at Iraq's aggression by not demanding an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal". At the time, it was believed that Saddam Hussein could save the world from Islamic 'fundamentalism' (Tarock, 1999, p.43). Despite its official neutral stance, France became one of the biggest arms exporters to Iraq against the Islamic Republic that was widely perceived as a threat not only to the stability of the Middle East, but also to the West (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.252). France's support for Iraq continued following the 1981 election of François Mitterrand, who, shortly after assuming office, sent a message to Saddam, reassuring him of French support while stressing the necessity to maintain equilibrium between the Arabs and the Persians (Razoux, 2015, p.94). French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson declared that "Iraq is the only barrier to an Islamic onslaught that would destabilize the entire region and topple the moderate Arab regimes" (quoted in Razoux, 2015, p.95). Similarly, in spite of its official neutrality in addition to signing a UN Security Council

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<sup>26</sup> On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranians belonging to the Students Following the Imam's Line took over the American embassy in Tehran, demanding the Shah's extradition from the U.S., where he was receiving medical treatment for cancer. The diplomatic stand-off, during which 52 Americans were held hostage for 444 days, ruptured the two countries' relations and continues to have reverberations today. The 2013 Oscar-winning film *Argo* is a case in point. According to former hostage John Limbert, the movie, which was presented with the Best Picture award by first lady Michelle Obama, "highlights the negative attitudes that the two countries have held toward each other for decades [...]" (quoted in Rogin, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Despite the U.S. embargo, the Lebanese magazine *Ash-Shiraa* exposed, on November 3, 1986, a clandestine arms-for-hostages deal involving Iran, Israel, and the U.S. The next day, *The New York Times* revealed secret negotiations between the Reagan administration and Tehran over the liberation of American hostages in Lebanon, a controversy that came to be known as the 'Iran-Contra Affair' (Hijazi, 1986).

resolution that called upon member states to ‘refrain from any act which may lead to a further escalation and widening of the conflict’, the government of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was “covertly supplying military equipment to Iraq as early as 1981” (Stothard, 2011). This included the construction of a clandestine chemical plant in 1985, as the *Guardian* disclosed in 2003 (Leigh & Hooper, 2003), amid British ministers’ suspicion that it might be used for producing mustard and nerve gas, and despite the fact that Saddam was known to be using chemical weapons against Iranian troops<sup>28</sup>.

Whereas Britain and France pursued “an anti-Iranian policy during the Iran-Iraq War”, as Rudolf (1999) argues, “Germany, looking back on a long, good relationship with Iran, stuck to a position of neutrality” and “even tried to moderate between the warring parties” (p.73). While Chancellor Helmut Schmidt opted for neutrality on the grounds that the German Constitution prohibits his country’s involvement in armed conflict, Bonn supplied Iran with ‘nonoffensive’ military equipment i.e. Mercedes trucks and tank transport trailers, so as not to jeopardize Germany’s privileged economic relations with Iran (Razoux, 2015, p.97). There were also negotiations between Bonn and Tehran over the sale of type 209 submarines, which ultimately failed due to pressure from Paris, Riyadh, and Washington. In March 1984, at Iran’s request, the UN Secretary-General sent a team of experts to investigate Tehran’s allegations that Saddam was using chemical weapons. Following their visit, the specialists reported unanimously that “chemical weapons, in the form of aerial bombs” had been used in the areas inspected in Iran (*The New York Times*, 1984). At the same time, West German companies, including Karl Kolb GmbH, were assisting Iraq with its chemical weapons infrastructure, disguised as selling pesticide laboratory equipment. Pressured from Washington, Chancellor Helmut Kohl stepped up investigation into German companies’ trades with Iraq (Markham, 1984) and, months later, imposed restrictions on export of chemical manufacturing equipment (Tagliabue, 1984).

Situated in this turbulent context, bilateral relations between individual European countries and Iran, unsurprisingly, also faced constraints. Despite a promising start, by virtue of having offered residence to the founder of the Islamic Republic, France’s relations with Tehran deteriorated rapidly (Tork Ladani, 2018, pp.248-63). Difficulties began when France granted political asylum to members of the Pahlavi family and notable opposition figures i.e. in 1979 to Shapour Bakhtiar, the last Prime Minister under the Shah, and in 1981 to the Islamic Republic’s first president, Abolhassan Banisadr, and Massoud Rajavi, the founder of

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<sup>28</sup> See also McEldowney (1997) for the Arms-to-Iraq affair (the ‘Scott Inquiry’).



the exile group People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran<sup>29</sup> (MEK), designated by Tehran as a terrorist organization. In response to France’s ‘hostility’, Iran prevented 157 French nationals from leaving the country, resulting in the withdrawal of respective ambassadors (Tarock, 1999, p.46). Notwithstanding prospects for rapprochement in mid-1980s after the expulsion of Rajavi from France, relations were strained due to several impediments, namely the two countries’ dispute over nuclear deals from the Shah era (see section 2.5.1); the hostage taking of French nationals by pro-Iran militants in Lebanon; and terrorist attacks and assassinations on French soil – including the failed attempt on Bakhtiar’s life in 1980 – that Paris accused Iran of either encouraging or sponsoring. Ultimately, the Gorji affair and the subsequent ‘war of embassies’ [*la guerre des ambassades*] <sup>30</sup> culminated in the rupture of the two countries’ diplomatic relations in July 1987—lasting until June 1988, two weeks before the end of the Iran-Iraq war and after the release of French hostages in Lebanon (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.262).

While Franco-Iranian relations suffered a series of crises, those between Bonn and Islamic Republic, Tarock (1999, p.53) states, “began on a very positive note and continued almost trouble-free” throughout this period, owing to the lack of historical bad memories, German government’s neutrality during the Iran-Iraq war, and Iran’s economic needs (Hunter, 2010, p.81). Germany’s share in the Iranian market rose from 21.9 to 26.2 percent between 1978 and 1987, becoming the leading exporter to Iran following the complete departure of the U.S. from the Iranian market (Rudolf, 1999). Furthermore, as the first Western official to publicly blame Iraq, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher’s characterization of Saddam as the aggressor in the Iran-Iraq war, during his 1984 visit to Iran – the first such by a Western official since 1979, which, from the Iranian standpoint, “served as a token of recognition of post-revolution Iran” (Reissner, 2004, p.48) – is argued to have been a decisive factor behind Tehran’s acceptance of the UN cease-fire resolution (Struwe, 1998, p.15). In fact, as will be shown, Germany played a prominent role in shaping European – and later EU – diplomacy with Iran since the revolution, which “not only was due to its commercial relations with Iran, but also stemmed from the special historical

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<sup>29</sup>An Islamist-Marxist group that seeks to overthrow the Iranian regime and sided with Saddam against Iran. MEK was designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. in 1997 (until 2012) and the EU in 2002 (until 2009). On the controversial de-listing of the group, see Greenwald (2012).

<sup>30</sup>Gorji was wanted in connection with the 1986 bombings in France. After the French authorities encircled the Iranian embassy compound, where Gorji took refuge, the Pasdaran [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] blocked the French embassy in Tehran (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.262). The Gorji affair was at the forefront of the 1988 presidential elections. During their televised debate, Prime Minister, and presidential candidate, Chirac contested President Mitterrand’s account regarding Gorji’s implication in the attacks, daring him to challenge his own version – that Gorji’s guilt was never proven – to which Mitterrand famously replied: “[I look you] [i]n the eyes, and I challenge that” [“Dans les yeux, je la conteste”] (Markham, 1988).

relationship between Iran and Germany that began in the nineteenth century” (Reissner, 2000, p.36).

Unsurprisingly, relations were more complicated with Britain, a country denounced by Ayatollah Khomeini as the “aged wolf of imperialism” (quoted in Tarock, 1999, p.58). Historical animosity juxtaposed with Britain’s support for U.S. policies as well as various incidents i.e. anti-British protests in Iran amid the seizure of the American embassy, the 1980 siege of the Iranian embassy in London by a group of anti-Khomeini dissidents, and the closure of British embassy in Tehran in mid-1980s following the abduction of the British *chargé d’affaires* by the Revolutionary Guards – in response to Britain’s backing of Saddam – rendered bilateral relations volatile throughout this period (Halliday, 1994; Hunter, 2010). According to Kausler (2008a), using Iran’s intermediary role to negotiate the liberation of British hostages in Lebanon and the need to release two Britons held in Iran on charges of espionage prompted London to restore diplomatic ties and re-open its embassy in the Iranian capital in late 1988. However, the outbreak of the Salman Rushdie affair<sup>31</sup> in February 1989 which, in the words of Hunter (2010, p.82), became “a litmus test for freedom of speech and expression and the safeguarding of Europe’s liberal and democratic values”, not only disrupted the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries<sup>32</sup>, but also hindered the normalization of European-Iranian relations. Whereas the ambassadors of other European states, who were withdrawn in solidarity with Britain, returned to Iran a month after the Rushdie crisis ensued, Britain became the only European country to be represented below ambassadorial level in Tehran for years (Rudolf, 1999, p.74). It should also be mentioned that amid their acrimonious relations, Iran was Britain’s second largest market in the Middle East, even in the wake of the Rushdie affair (Rakel, 2009, p.206).

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in August 1988, the death of Ayatollah Khomeini less than a year later, and the election of Ali Akbar Rafsanjani as president marked a new chapter in European-Iranian relations. The post-Khomeini era, which Ehteshami (1995) labels the ‘Second Republic’, witnessed a shift in Iran’s discourse and foreign policy, from the ideological and confrontational stance during the revolutionary and war periods to the adoption of a more pragmatic approach vis-à-vis the West—with the exception of the U.S. (KhosraviNik, 2015, pp.32-5; Tarock, 1999). During his presidency, widely termed the Period of Reconstruction (1989-97), Rafsanjani distanced himself from ‘Exporting the Revolution’ doctrine, focusing more on post-war reconstruction needs, re-integrating Iran into the international economy, and improving ties with Europe as well as the Persian Gulf

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<sup>31</sup>After the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against its author. The controversy saw Muslims engage in widespread protests, calling for a ban on the book deemed blasphemous.

<sup>32</sup> See Kausler (2008a) for a detailed account of the Rushdie affair’s impact on British-Iranian relations.

countries i.e. Saudi Arabia (Rakel, 2009, p.148). These political dynamics, situated within the broader post-Cold War context and regional developments e.g. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (the Gulf War) which, Hunter (2010, p.83) argues, "invalidated the dominant view in the West, including Europe, that Iraq could be the West's new partner in the Persian Gulf, replacing post-Shah Iran", paved the way for improved relations with Iran. Replacing its economic self-sufficiency policy with seeking foreign investment, Iran launched a multi-billion reconstruction program, namely the First and Second Five-Year Development Plans (1989-1993 and 1995-1999) (Tarock, 1999, p.52). By 1991, European-Iranian trades reached a high record, and while Britain and France were major importers of Iran's oil, Germany became the biggest importer of the country's non-oil exports (Reissner, 2000).

Against this backdrop, Franco-Iranian relations "oscillated between détente and tension" (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.265). In 1990, President Mitterrand pardoned the Lebanese militant Anis Naccache, who was serving a life sentence for the 1980 attempted assassination of former Iranian Prime Minister Bakhtiar – a decision that was widely suspected, at home and abroad, of being part of a bargaining chip for the release of French hostages in Lebanon (Simons, 1990). The contentious release of Naccache, whose arrest had been at the heart of bilateral tensions throughout the 1980s (Riols, 2015), marked a new episode in bilateral relations, with a series of high-level delegations visiting Tehran and Paris respectively (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.266). In December 1990, Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited France where he met with President Mitterrand (Rakel, 2009). His French counterpart, Roland Dumas, visited Iran the following May, after which he declared: "Nothing else stands in the way of restoring highly desirable normal political relations, both for expanding trade with a country that is entering a reconstruction stage and for an indispensable diplomatic cooperation at a time when a new regional order is taking shape" (quoted in Tork Ladani, 2018, p.267). The main purpose of Dumas' trip was to prepare the ground for Mitterrand's forthcoming visit to Iran (Ibrahim, 1991) with the aim of "crowning the complete normalization of the two countries' relations" (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.266). However, the scheduled visit – the first by a European head of state since 1979 – did not transpire due to the assassination of Bakhtiar in August 1991.

Similarly, the planned visit of British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd was cancelled after three Iranians (two embassy officials and a student) were expelled from the U.K. for having conspired to kill Mr. Rushdie (Halliday, 1994, p.322). Amidst the Rushdie crisis, with Ayatollah Khamenei, the new Supreme Leader, reaffirming his predecessor's death decree against the author, there were positive developments in British-Iranian relations, namely the 1991 release of Terry Waite, the Church of England envoy who was held

hostage in Lebanon – with Iran’s help (Sciolino, 1991). Kaussler (2008a, p.188) sums up Britain’s policy towards Tehran between 1989 and 1992 as follows: “Whilst the government continued its protective measures for the author, the fates of the hostages [in Lebanon, added] ranked higher on the agenda in Downing Street [...].What was more, the fact that Iraq had invaded Kuwait and was defeated by a multinational force, produced a dynamic in the region that positioned Iran to fill the vacuum left by a weakened Iraqi regime and to act as a reliable economic partner and diplomatic player”. In this vein, Britain undertook a number of initiatives (Kaussler, 2008a, pp.192-95): the decision in 1990 not to go ahead with a paperback edition of *The Satanic Verses*; the humanitarian response of Thatcher’s government in the aftermath of the Manjil-Rudbar earthquake in Iran<sup>33</sup>, whereby the Prime Minister conveyed that “[w]e shall do all we can to help the enormous efforts which will be needed to cope with this tragedy”, adding that “[a] consignment of relief supplies from Britain will shortly be on its way to Tehran” (quoted in Kaussler, 2008a, p.193); and upgrading diplomatic relations to the chargé d’affaires level.

As former Iranian ambassador to Bonn recounts: “In 1990, Iran’s national strategy was to regard Germany as ‘the door to the European Union’” (Mousavian, 2008, p.133). Genscher’s second trip to Iran – followed shortly by the visit of the Federal Minister of Economics – made the German Foreign Minister appear as “the driving force behind the European quest for improved relations with Iran” (Reissner, 2004, p.48). Moreover, while President Rafsanjani accepted the invitation conveyed by Chancellor Kohl, Foreign Minister Velayati visited Bonn, on his behalf, in the summer of 1992. Despite hopes for stronger ties after the release of the last German hostages in Lebanon, Genscher’s departure from the Foreign Ministry “was accompanied by a noticeable sharpening of German policy toward Iran, evident in more overt official support for Rushdie and in a reduction of credit guarantees for trade with Iran” (Halliday, 1994, p.323). After Rushdie’s 1992 visit to Bonn, the Bundestag passed an all-party resolution, stating that Germany holds Iran legally responsible for the author’s safety and that Tehran would face economic and political consequences, should any harm befall him (Deutscher Bundestag, 1992). As will be discussed, the 1992 assassination of Sadegh Shirafkani, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran, along with his two associates at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin resulted in a diplomatic crisis the repercussions of which surpassed German-Iranian relations.

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<sup>33</sup> The earthquake struck northwestern Iran near the Caspian Sea in June 1990, claiming more than 40,000 lives.

## **2.4 Years of Critical and Comprehensive Dialogue (1992-2003)**

Rafsanjani's pragmatism, Tehran's neutrality during the 1990/91 Gulf War, release of Western hostages in Lebanon (Tyler, 1991), and the visit of the UN Special Representative on Human Rights to the country, for the first time, suggested the regime's move towards moderation (Reissner, 2000, pp.36-7; Struwe, 1998, pp.15-18). Furthermore, while dismissing Washington's calls for isolation due to Iran's geopolitical significance combined with the prospect of expanding commercial relations with the country that was in the process of post-war reconstruction, Europe remained concerned about Iran's human rights record, including the liquidation of exiled dissidents on European soil and the death sentence against Rushdie; Tehran's opposition to the Arab-Israeli Peace Process; and the country's alleged plans to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), all of which contradicted the newly-established European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Reissner, 2000; Struwe, 1998). It was within this context that Europe adopted a 'constructive engagement' approach towards the Islamic Republic in the format of Critical Dialogue (1992-97), followed by Comprehensive Dialogue (1998-2003), to uphold contact in order to influence the leadership on key areas of concern, particularly to Britain, France, and Germany (Kaussler, 2014).

The strategy of political dialogue, which came to guide Europe-Iran relations within the framework of the EU since its formation in 1993, stood in stark contrast to Washington's approach (Hunter, 2010; Kaussler, 2012). The Clinton administration's attempt to revise a Persian Gulf policy culminated in passing the 1992 'Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act' and the subsequent adoption of the Dual Containment strategy<sup>34</sup> in the spring of 1993, targeting Iran (alongside Iraq), based on "a conclusion that Iran must be isolated if it is to be prevented from emerging as a substantial threat to Western interests" (Jehl, 1993). Earlier that year, Secretary of State Warren Christopher branded Iran an "international outlaw" and a "dangerous country" for its links to terrorism and pursuit of nuclear weapons, signaling Clinton's antipathy towards Iran (Jehl, 1993). In 1996, the Congress passed the 'Iran and Libya Sanctions Act' (ILSA), renamed the 'Iran Sanctions Act' in 2006, imposing secondary penalties on firms investing more than \$20 million per year in Iran's energy industry. Moreover, since 1984, Iran (alongside North Korea, Sudan, and Syria) has consecutively been on the U.S. State Department's annual list of leading state sponsors of terrorism<sup>35</sup>. By contrast, Europe's policy of constructive engagement rested upon two interrelated premises,

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<sup>34</sup> Whilst the foundations of Dual Containment were laid during the previous administration, it was first articulated by Martin Indyk, a senior official in the Clinton administration, during a speech at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank with strong ties to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), in May 1993. The main purpose of the Dual Containment strategy was to ultimately alter the political landscape of the Middle East (see Hunter, 2010, pp.49-52; Rakel, 2009, pp.171-74).

<sup>35</sup> See also Seeberg (2016) for an outline of U.S. sanctions on Iran.

namely strengthening moderate forces inside Iran and influencing the regime's behavior through dialogue and incentives, via what Rudolf (1999, p.76) terms 'diffuse linkage', exemplified by Germany's refusal to establish cultural ties with Tehran without progress in the Rushdie case. In short: "The EU chose engagement plus trade, the U.S. isolation plus sanction" (Moshaver, 2003, p.294).

#### 2.4.1 Critical Dialogue (1992-1997)

Critical Dialogue was launched by the European Council at the Edinburgh Summit in 1992:

Given Iran's importance in the region, the European Council reaffirms its beliefs that a dialogue should be maintained with the Iranian Government. This should be a critical dialogue, which reflects concern about Iranian behaviour and calls for improvement in a number of areas, particularly human rights, the death sentence pronounced by a Fatwa against the author Salman Rushdie, which is contrary to international law, and terrorism. Improvements in these areas will be important in determining the extent to which closer relations and confidence can be developed (European Council, 1992).

While acknowledging the "right of countries to acquire the means to defend themselves", the Council expressed concern "that Iran's arms procurement should not pose a threat to regional stability", and regarding the Middle East Peace Process, the Council voiced "the wish that Iran take a constructive approach" (European Council, 1992). Critical Dialogue, consisting of bi-annual meetings between the European Troika and representatives of Iran's Foreign Ministry, during which "the Iranians both listened and were listened to" (Posch, 2006, p.100), was a German initiative, stemming from its insistence on maintaining a dialogue with Iran since 1979 (Reissner, 2000; Rudolf, 1999; Struwe, 1998). The strategy of 'Non-Exclusion' [*Nicht-Ausgrenzung*], formulated by Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel for Germany's Iran policy, was based on the belief that Iran would be influenced through economic and diplomatic engagement which, Lane (1995) argues, was partly rooted in "an extrapolation from the claimed success of Ostpolitik". Changing the Islamic Republic, hence, became Germany's 'new Ostpolitik' (Lane, 1995). Yet, the emphasis on human rights within Critical Dialogue, as evident in the four German-Iranian Human Rights Seminars that took place under Foreign Minister Genscher and continued under Kinkel (until 1994), can also "be interpreted as political cover for booming business relations with Iran" (Rudolf, 1999, p.74). By mid-1990s, the EU was Iran's biggest trading partner, accounting for more than 40% of the country's total imports and 36% of its total exports, 75% of which was oil (Rakel, 2009, p.211). Within the EU, Germany became the country's leading trading partner. The German-Iranian Chamber of Commerce (AHK Iran), established in 1975, already had more than 2000 members in the 1990s and Germany was, consistently, "the biggest foreign exhibitor in all

the trade fairs held in Tehran” (Tarock, 1999, p.54). Moreover, Iran avoided a major financial crisis when Germany rescheduled a substantial sum of the country’s debt to German banks in 1994, encouraging other European countries to follow suit (p.54). In addition, according to Mousavian (2008), more than 20 high-level ministerial visits took place between 1990 and 1996, the most contentious of which was “the development of close collaboration between the security services of the two countries” (p.58). This included the controversial 1993 visit of Iran’s Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian – whose prominent role in the ‘Mykonos killings’ was already suspected and proven shortly thereafter – at the invitation of his German counterpart, Bernd Schmidbauer, who had visited Tehran the previous year. This incident and a subsequent telephone call by Chancellor Kohl to President Rafsanjani on ‘humanitarian’ grounds i.e. the release of German citizens arrested in Iran, most notably Helmut Szimkus, who was sentenced to death on charges of spying for Iraq and the U.S., resulted in harsh criticism at home and abroad (Halliday, 1994; Mousavian, 2008). During a debate at the Bundestag, the Green Party questioned the role of intelligence services in the country’ foreign policy-making:

Durch die Geheimgespräche von Staatsminister **Schmidbauer** mit dem iranischen Staatssicherheitsminister **Fallahian** ist der **Beschluß des Europäischen Rats von Edinburgh**, keine engeren Beziehungen zum Iran aufzunehmen, solange es keine Anzeichen für die Abkehr vom Staatsterrorismus gibt, grob mißachtet worden. Wir haben die herbe Kritik der USA, Israels und weiterer Verbündeter gehört und täten gut daran, sie mit der gebotenen Sensibilität zu berücksichtigen.

Überhaupt wäre zu fragen, wer denn hierzulande für die Außenpolitik zuständig ist (Deutscher Bundestag, 1993, p.16157, emphasis in original).

Thus, while Critical Dialogue was a common European policy, countries prioritized their own bilateral agendas: for Britain, it was the Rushdie case and for France, oil business with Iran<sup>36</sup>, which ultimately turned the meetings into “empty rituals” (Reissner, 2000, p.34). Furthermore, Critical Dialogue lost its momentum amidst strong opposition from Israel, the U.S.<sup>37</sup>, and across Europe. Within Germany, Reissner (2000, p.41) argues, “[a]bundant criticism in the media portrayed critical dialogue as selling on human rights to the devil” and “American rhetoric calling Iran a pariah and ‘rogue’ state was highly welcomed”.

#### 2.4.1.1 The Mykonos verdict and the suspension of Critical Dialogue

In April 1997, a German court concluded that the 1992 assassination of Kurdish dissidents in Berlin was carried out on the direct orders of the highest members of the Iranian leadership,

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<sup>36</sup> In 1995, following the withdrawal of the U.S. oil concern Conoco after ILSA was enacted, French energy giant Total signed a contract with NIOC to develop the Sirri oil and gas fields (Hunter, 2010, pp.52-3).

<sup>37</sup> For the transatlantic rift between Germany and the U.S. concerning Iran, see Lane (1995), Mousavian (2008), and Tarock (1999).

implicating Intelligence Minister Fallahian alongside President Rafsanjani and the Supreme Leader. In light of the court ruling and the German ambassador's withdrawal from Iran, EU countries, with the exception of Greece, followed suit and recalled their ambassadors, who returned nearly seven months later, with the German ambassador arriving last (Reissner, 2000; Rudolf, 1999). In his verdict, presiding Judge Frithjof Kubsch stated:

Durch das Ergebnis der Beweiserhebung ist offenbar geworden, dass iranische Machthaber terroristische Anschläge im Ausland nicht nur billigen und ihren Tätern unverständlicherweise Ehrungen zukommen lassen, sondern dass sie selbst solche Anschläge gegen Menschen ins Werk setzen, die ihnen allein wegen der politischen Einstellung missliebig geworden sind. Ihre politischen Gegner lassen sie um der reinen Machterhaltung liquidieren (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 2012)

Attorney Otto Schily, who later became Germany's Interior Minister (1998-2005), argued in his closing remarks that “[f]or much too long, European governments have watched Iran's violent behavior. A regime that touts terror and even commands it must not be the recipient of our loans or red carpet receptions” (Hakakian, 2012). U.S. State Department's spokesman proclaimed that the verdict confirmed Washington's “long-held view that Iran's sponsorship of terrorism is authorized at senior levels of the Iranian Government”, adding that Critical Dialogue “has not succeeded in moderating Iran's behavior” (Cowell, 1997). Although Critical Dialogue was suspended after the verdict, engagement remained EU's preferred course. In the wake of the verdict, during a debate at the Bundestag, Klaus Kinkel said:

“... wenn man über dieses Thema spricht, muß man in Betracht ziehen, daß das deutsche und das iranische Volk durch eine hundertjährige **Tradition guter Beziehungen** miteinander verbunden sind; das muß man sagen dürfen [...]. Seine geostrategische Lage verschafft ihm eine Schlüsselstellung in Fragen der Sicherheit. Ohne oder gar gegen den Iran kann in der Region langfristig keine erfolgreiche Politik betrieben werden (Deutscher Bundestag, 1997, p.15276, emphasis in original).

In defense of maintaining contact with Iran, amid the court ruling, Kinkel added:

Aus unserer Sicht, die alle unsere europäischen Partner teilen, bleibt es daher entscheidend, sich Möglichkeiten der **Einwirkung auf den Iran** zu erhalten und nicht auf eine Politik der Isolierung zu setzen, die nicht zum Erfolg führt. Das war und bleibt unsere Haltung. Die Reaktion der iranischen Regierung [...] zeigt - bei Ausnahmen - insgesamt, daß auch Teheran den Stellenwert seiner Beziehungen zu Deutschland und zu Europa sieht und kein Öl ins Feuer gießen will (p.15276, emphasis in original).

Later that year, at a joint news conference with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Kinkel referred to the difference between American and German approaches in countering fundamentalism, arguing: “We believe that you need to talk to people if you are to influence them. If you are to influence Iran, you need to talk to them, and on the points where there's disagreement” (U.S. Department of State, 1997). The German government's accommodating



stance, which had already been, as mentioned earlier, strongly criticized prior to the verdict, faced further reproach after the court's ruling<sup>38</sup> (Lane, 1995). Bilateral relations were further strained following the arrest of Helmut Hofer in Iran. The arrest of Hofer, who was twice sentenced to death on charges of having an illicit relationship with an Iranian woman, was, according to observers, a reaction to the Mykonos verdict and an attempt to exchange the German businessman with Kazem Darabi, one of the assassins behind the 'Mykonos killings' (Rakel, 2009).

The landslide victory of the reformist Mohammad Khatami in Iran's presidential election few months after the Mykonos verdict paved the way for rapprochement. After the return of European ambassadors to Tehran, Germany – once Iran's biggest trading partner – “was henceforth relegated by the Iranians to the position of an ordinary country, rather than as one with which, as had hitherto been the case, Iran had a special relationship with” (Mousavian, 2008, p.202). Meanwhile, notwithstanding bilateral issues, most notably Tehran's vehement objection to the visit of MEK co-founder Maryam Rajavi in 1993 to France, where she resided thereafter (Tork Ladani, 2018, pp.270-71), Paris became the driving force behind Europe's relations with Iran (Rudolf, 1999). In September 1997, French energy giant Total signed a \$2 billion contract, alongside Russia's Gazprom and Malaysia's Petronas, with Iran to develop Phases 2 and 3 of South Pars, the world's largest natural gas field (Wood, 1998). The deal, which encouraged other European energy firms to later follow suit, was in direct violation of ILSA. French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin defended the contract, adding that “personally I rejoice in it”, while stressing that “American laws apply in the United States. They do not apply in France” (Cohen, 1997). Similarly, the EU trade commissioner challenged the U.S. sanctions' extraterritoriality by stating that ILSA would “establish the unwelcome principle that one country can dictate the foreign policy of others” (quoted in McCurdy, 1997, p.415). Consequently, the EU filed a complaint against the U.S. at the World Trade Organization (WTO), a move that, as Tarock (1999, p.51) states, was “the strongest position that Western Europe has collectively and publicly taken” in favor of the Islamic Republic. Faced with a united European stance that also included Britain, the Clinton administration reached an agreement with the EU in 1998 (Wood, 1998, p.578).

#### 2.4.2 Comprehensive Dialogue (1998-2003)

Khatami's election, which marked the beginning of the Reform Era (1997-2005), opened a new chapter in the relations between Tehran and the West. At home, he endorsed socio-

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<sup>38</sup>Amid protests in Iran against the verdict, Chancellor Kohl wrote a letter to the Iranian president, asserting the independence of German government's policy from the judiciary, while apologizing for having hurt the “religious feelings” of Iranians and their leaders (Koszinowski & Mattes, 1997, p.14).

political change by promoting ‘civil society’, ‘pluralism’, and ‘the rule of law’ (Hunter, 2010; KhosraviNik, 2015; Rakel, 2009). Moreover, distancing himself from both the hardliners’ slogan of ‘fight against the cultural aggression of the West’ – formulated by the Supreme Leader in 1992 – as well as Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’, Khatami emphasized upon a foreign policy based on détente and espoused the concept of ‘Dialogue among Civilizations’<sup>39</sup> (Reissner, 2006, p.120). Khatami’s presidency and the reform movement reinvigorated optimism towards Iran, introducing a promising phase of European-Iranian relations. Whereas France endorsed a more rapid normalization, Germany and the U.K. were more cautious in continuing their engagement with Tehran, the former stressing improvement in human rights and the latter, in addition to that, prioritizing the issues of WMD and terrorism (Rakel, 2009, p.226). This led to the launch of Comprehensive Dialogue in 1998, which covered a wide array of global (e.g. terrorism and non-proliferation of WMD) and regional (e.g. the Middle East Peace Process) issues as well as areas of mutual interest (e.g. drugs, energy) (European Commission, 1998). According to Kaussler (2014, p.18), “the rationale” behind the resumption of bi-annual meetings “was that the EU would eventually assist the reformist agenda by tilting the balance of interests and would encourage moderate policies and the process of democratization in the country”. Comprehensive Dialogue managed to empower pro-reform activists and politicians as well as to depoliticize the human rights discourse (Kaussler, 2008b, 2014). What followed were Khatami’s landmark visits to Europe – the first such by an Iranian president since 1979 – not only to mend Tehran’s relations with Europe, but also to boost investment in Iran’s energy sector as well as to procure new lines of credit (Hunter, 2010, p.87). The visit of French Prime Minister Hubert Védrine to Tehran in August 1998, during which he conveyed an invitation from President Chirac, prepared the ground for normalization in the EU-Iran relations (Tork Ladani, 2018). After his trip, Védrine stated:

The dialogue took place indeed, we talked about future prospects and areas of contention, amongst other issues. One can see that on certain points, such as Human Rights, we have at times different, at times divergent, interpretations, but that’s precisely where the dialogue of civilizations should replace the clash of civilizations (quoted in Tork Ladani, 2018, p.274).

Reciprocating the visit, Khatami travelled to France in October 1999. This trip, initially scheduled for April and cancelled due to disagreement over protocol (Perrin, 1999a), was, according to Chirac, based on France’s “decision to encourage the political openness and détente” pursued by Tehran, and his country’s wish to “foster Iran’s return to the international community” (Perrin, 1999b). Shortly thereafter, French banks provided Iran

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<sup>39</sup> In this vein, the UN observed 2001 as the ‘United Nations Year for Dialogue among Civilizations’.

with a reported \$1.5 billion loan (Abdo, 1999) and the French energy group Elf Aquitaine signed a deal to develop Iran's Balal offshore oil field (Atkinson, 1999). Similarly, the British-Dutch oil and gas company Royal Dutch/ Shell Group signed a buy-back contract with NIOC to restore Soroush and Norouz, two offshore oil fields damaged during the war (*Bloomberg News*, 1999). Following the trip of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer to Iran, which the Foreign Ministry described beforehand as a "Sondierungsmission auf schwierigstem Terrain" (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 2000), Khatami visited Germany in 2000 with high hopes for German investment in Iran's third Five-Year Development Plan (2000-5) (Hunter, 2010, p.88). After meeting with Khatami, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder stated that "[w]ir wollen an die traditionell enge Bindung zwischen beiden Ländern wieder anknüpfen", and Berlin agreed to a fivefold increase in export credit guarantees (the so-called Hermes-Bürgschaften) and the German-Iranian joint Economic Commission, halted since 1991, was reactivated (*Spiegel Online*, 2000). In an interview with *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (2000) on the occasion of Khatami's visit, Foreign Minister Fischer, who had been amongst the most vocal opponents of his predecessor's Critical Dialogue, defended Comprehensive Dialogue, arguing: "Man kann die damalige iranische Führung nicht mit den Reformern von heute vergleichen. Khatami betreibt eine Politik der Öffnung", adding that "es wäre ein großer Fehler, wenn wir nicht die Reformer unterstützten".

The most groundbreaking of these high-level visits was the trip to London of Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi – the first since 1979 – in January 2000, during which he met with his British counterpart, Robin Cook, as well as Prime Minister Tony Blair (MacAskill, 2000). This significant milestone in bilateral relations took place nearly 18 months after Iran officially revoked the *fatwa* against Rushdie, with Khatami announcing during his visit to New York that the issue was "completely finished", followed by Kharrazi's statement that Iran "has no intention, nor is it going to take any action whatsoever, to threaten the life of the author of 'The Satanic Verses' or anybody associated with his work, nor will it encourage or assist anybody to do so" (Crossette, 1998). Consequently, diplomatic relations were restored and upgraded to ambassadorial level – after almost a decade. A reciprocal visit by British Foreign Secretary Cook was, however, postponed several times due to the "delicate political situation" in Iran and "the extreme historical sensitivity of bilateral relations" (Muir, 2001). It was in the wake of 9/11 attacks that Cook's successor, Jack Straw, visited Iran which, unprecedented since the Iranian Revolution, "clearly provided an opening for Iran and Britain to move closer together and for Britain to act as a channel of communication with its close ally, the United States" (Muir, 2001). In 2001, after 23 years of absence, British Council resumed its activities in Iran at the

request of Khatami's government "to promote friendly interchange and understanding" between the two countries "through academic, scientific and cultural activities" (Borjian, 2011, p.548). Relations suffered a huge setback when Iran rejected London's choice of ambassador to Tehran (Whitaker, 2002).

In hindsight, Khatami's first term can be characterized as the golden years of Islamic Republic's relations with the West. It was during this period, in response to Khatami's call for deconstructing the "bulky wall of mistrust" between his nation and "the American people" in an interview with British-Iranian CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour that the U.S. government acknowledged Washington's "significant role" in the 1953 coup d'état that was "clearly a setback for Iran's political development" (U.S. Department of State, 2000). It should be added that the C.I.A officially admitted its role in orchestrating Mosaddeq's overthrow for the first time in August 2013 (Kamali Dehghan & Norton-Taylor, 2013). Yet, Khatami's policy of détente and prospective improvements in European-Iranian relations were hampered during his second term (2001-2005) due to a mix of internal and external factors: continuous factional rivalries inside Iran (KhosraviNik, 2015; Rakel, 2009); the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S. campaign for a Global War on Terror juxtaposed with the promotion of regime change in 'rogue states' such as Iran, and President Bush's inclusion of the country, alongside Iraq and North Korea, as part of the so-called 'Axis of Evil'<sup>40</sup> (Ansari, 2006; Hunter, 2010; Kaussler, 2008b; Wagner & Onderco, 2014); and the revelations in 2002 by the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the political wing of MEK, concerning clandestine nuclear activities in Iran, making the nuclear dossier the most prevailing issue in Iran's relations with the West (Cronberg, 2017; Harnisch, 2007).

### **2.5 The nuclear dispute (2003-2013)**

The nuclear-centric focus that almost exclusively dominated European-Iranian relations should be situated within (1) the broader animosity between Iran and U.S.<sup>41</sup> (Perthes, 2010; Tarock, 2006) and (2) the geostrategic context of two regional subcomplexes, namely the Levant and the Persian Gulf (Seeberg, 2016, p.2), and what Europe widely "perceive[s] to be bent on regional hegemony" (Geranmayeh, 2015, p.2) whereas Iran considers crucial "to preserve the Axis of Resistance against what it believes to be a US and Israeli plan for regime change in Tehran" (p.3). This entails, amongst other areas of contention between Iran and Europe, the former's strong alliances with the Lebanese Hezbollah – whose military wing was designated by the EU, following repeated calls from the U.S. and Israel, as a terrorist

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<sup>40</sup> See Heradstveit and Bonhman (2007) for the impact of the 'Axis of Evil' metaphor on Iranian politics.

<sup>41</sup> In the words of Joschka Fischer (2006): "After all, the issue at the heart of this [nuclear] conflict is this: Who dominates the Middle East—Iran or the United States?"

organization during the period sampled for this study – as well as the Palestinian Hamas and the Alawite regime in Syria<sup>42</sup>, and the latter’s close ties to Israel and the Gulf States (Posch, 2013, pp.25-30). Throughout the nuclear talks, EU’s roles and demarches transformed in response to internal and external circumstances, including political dynamics in both Iran and the West as well as geopolitical shifts in the region i.e. Arab Spring upheavals, from an initially autonomous negotiator by adopting persuasive engagement (2003-05) to a coordinator through coercive containment (2006-10), sanctions enforcer via dual-track (carrots and sticks) policy (2010-13), and facilitator in the Iran-U.S. bilateral phase defined by the ‘political will’ of both countries’ presidents (2013-15) (Cronberg, 2017, pp.246-52). The remainder of this chapter outlines EU-Iran relations, with more focus on the areas of convergence/divergence among Britain, France, and Germany in their collective and individual attitudes towards Iran’s nuclear program.

### 2.5.1 The history of Iran’s nuclear program

“The irony of the present dispute between the West and Iran”, as Tarock wrote in 2006, “is that, for three decades up to the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Europeans and Americans helped, in fact earnestly encouraged, Iran” to develop nuclear technology (p.645). Iran’s nuclear program dates back to mid-1950s when the first facilities were built with Western support (see Davenport, 2018; Nikou, 2018 for detailed timelines). In 1957, an agreement for civil nuclear cooperation was signed between Iran and the U.S. under the ‘Atoms for Peace’ program of the Eisenhower administration (Mousavian & Mousavian, 2018, p.169). The goal was primarily to “empower Iran so that it could serve as a buffer state against the Soviet Union” (p.169). In 1968, a year after the opening of the Tehran Research Reactor, fueled by highly enriched uranium supplied by the U.S., Iran signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which was subsequently ratified by the parliament in 1970.

The Shah pursued an overall ambitious plan throughout the 1970s to develop numerous power plants in order to diversify the country’s energy sources. After the establishment of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (1974), a civil nuclear partnership was initiated between Iran and France and the former joined Eurodif<sup>43</sup>, a subsidiary of the French company Areva (renamed Orano in 2018). As part of the arrangement, the 10 percent share of Sweden, following its withdrawal from the project, was transferred to Iran in exchange for a one-billion-dollar loan from the Shah and an additional 180 million dollars in 1977 (Tork Ladani,

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<sup>42</sup> The period examined for this study pre-dates the surge of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Daesh, considered a mutual threat by both Iran and the West (Seeberg, 2016).

<sup>43</sup> The European Gaseous Diffusion Uranium Enrichment consortium formed in 1973 by Belgium, France, Italy, Spain, and Sweden. Eurodif was closed, indefinitely, in 2012.

2018, pp.280-82). Accordingly, the French and Iranian governments established Sofidif<sup>44</sup> to handle the two countries' nuclear cooperation, with 60 and 40 per cent shares respectively. In addition, the West German company Kraftwerk Union, a joint venture of Siemens and AEG, began work on the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in 1975 (Hunter, 2010). Moreover, Tony Benn, then-British secretary of state for energy, wrote in 2005 in the *Guardian* that the Shah "intended to build [a nuclear reactor with] a 24 megawatt capacity by 1994, which was bigger than the programme Britain itself had at the time" and told Benn in 1976 that he was "getting [nuclear technology] from the French and the Germans and might even get it from the Soviets-and why not?" The following year, Dr. Marshall of the British Atomic Energy Authority, who advised the Shah on nuclear policy, prepared a deal based on which, in Benn's words, "Iran would become a 50% owner of our nuclear industry for the purpose of building the [pressurized water-reactor] PWRs". The plan, also supported by British Prime Minister James Callaghan, was ultimately cancelled (Benn, 2005).

Although the nuclear ambitions of the pro-Western Shah did not raise significant concerns, suspicion remained over his wish to ultimately acquire nuclear weapons (Hunter, 2010). In 1976, U.S. President Gerald Ford issued the National Security Decision Memorandum 324 in favor of assisting Iran to formulate a plan for building 23 nuclear power reactors, albeit stopping short of allowing the country to develop independent (fuel) reprocessing capabilities (Nikou, 2018). Instead, the U.S. administration proposed the option of launching a multinational reprocessing plant in Iran, which Tehran rejected. President Carter resumed nuclear talks with the Shah in 1977 and the two reached an agreement the following year, according to which Iran concurred to safeguards beyond the NPT requisites and the U.S., in turn, granted Iran the 'most favored nation' status for fuel reprocessing (Nikou, 2018). Had the Shah remained in power, as Tarock (2006, p.652) postulates, Iran "would by now be a member of the club of nuclear weapon states".

The wide-ranging and multifaceted cooperation between Iran and the West was abandoned after the revolution and during the war that followed. Iran annulled its contract with Eurodif in 1980 and demanded the remuneration of the foregoing loan granted by the Shah. The dispute, a "stubborn obstacle to improved relations" between Tehran and Paris was eventually settled in 1991 (Greenhouse, 1991). In addition, Iran halted its payments for uranium enrichment services that had started in 1978, resulting in Eurodif's appeal to the Arbitration Court of the International Chamber of Commerce and the confiscation of Iran's assets in the company (Tork Ladani, 2018). Similarly, the work of Kraftwerk was terminated on the grounds that Iran had failed to make payments. However, German engineers returned

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<sup>44</sup> Société franco-iranienne pour l'enrichissement de l'uranium par diffusion gazeuse [the Franco-Iranian enterprise for uranium enrichment through gaseous diffusion]

to Iran in 1984 to conduct a feasibility study in order to complete the Bushehr reactor, severely damaged during war, which did not materialize (Nikou, 2018). With German government's refusal to finish the project, Russia, eventually, took over the completion of the plant in 1995. While nuclear activities in Iran were substantially reduced due to wartime economic requirements, they were not fully halted (KhosraviNik, 2015). "Anxiety over Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions", according to Hunter (2010), "began as early as the 1980s, when reports about Iran's intentions began to circulate" (pp.64-5). Several factors played a decisive role in Iran's resumption of its nuclear program: Iraq's invasion of Iran and the West's support for Saddam; exposure to external threat especially from Washington, following the U.S. military victory in the Gulf War and, later, U.S. invasions of Iran's neighbors Afghanistan and Iraq; and the West's refusal to develop the Bushehr reactors – and to partake in Iran's nuclear program – at Tehran's repeated invitations (Tarock, 2006, pp.652-54). As a result, Iran sought assistance from other countries including China, Pakistan, and Russia to revive its nuclear program in the 1990s (Iran Watch, 2016). Hence, thwarting the country from obtaining a nuclear-weapons capability became a focal element of the Clinton administration's Iran policy, resulting, as mentioned earlier, in the U.S. adoption of the Dual Containment approach, by means of embargo and isolation, which stood in stark contrast to Europe's strategy of dialogue. In 2002, the EU's initiative, offered the previous year within the context of Comprehensive Dialogue, to deepen economic and political ties with Tehran through a Trade and Cooperation Agreement that was contingent upon progress in human rights, non-proliferation of WMD, terrorism, and the Middle East Peace Process, was entering a critical stage (Kaussler, 2008b, p.269; Meier, 2013, p.3). "By linking the economic to the political track and thus exerting positive conditionality on Iran", Tocci and Voltolini (2010) state, "the EU attempted concomitantly to pursue its strategic and commercial objectives alongside its normative goals" (p.124). However, the disclosure of hitherto undeclared nuclear sites turned Iran's nuclear program into one of the most pressing issues on the international agenda, leading to a marked shift in Europe's priorities vis-à-vis the country (Kaussler, 2008b, p.289).

#### 2.5.2 Britain, France, and Germany: The 'Big Three' (2003-2005)

Various factors such as the U.S.-led military action in Iraq coupled with President Bush's belligerent rhetoric towards Iran and the fear of a U.S./Israeli strike, North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT, and fearing that "a nuclear Iran could set in motion a regional nuclear weapons domino effect" (Bergenäs, 2010, p.504), prompted Britain, France, and Germany to launch a tripartite diplomatic initiative to defuse the mounting tension over

Iran's nuclear program (Alcaro & Tabrizi, 2014; Dalton, 2016; Posch, 2016). This ad hoc 'bridge-building effort', initiated by Germany (Borchard, 2015; *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 2003), was inadvertent (Cronberg, 2017, pp.245-46): the idea, led by the French<sup>45</sup>, was to originally include Russia – who also had opposed the invasion of Iraq at the UN Security Council – in negotiations with the Iranians. The reasons behind choosing Britain instead were twofold, namely Russia's preference to have the Iranians 'suspend' rather than 'stop' enrichment, and Britain's ability to "act as a sort of bridge toward the Americans."<sup>46</sup> In the fall of 2003, foreign ministers of the EU's 'Big Three' (also referred to as the E3), that is, Dominique de Villepin (France), Joschka Fischer (Germany), and Jack Straw (U.K.) travelled to Tehran to convince Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, be more transparent about the scope of its nuclear activities, and sign the NPT Additional Protocol which would grant International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors more and impromptu access to nuclear sites (Posch, 2016, p.4). Based on the Tehran Declaration<sup>47</sup>, the E3 acknowledged Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program and refrained from referring the file to the UN Security Council. Iran, in turn, agreed, on a temporary and voluntary basis, to suspend enrichment and, as a confidence-building gesture, signed the Additional Protocol and its safeguards agreement with the UN's nuclear watchdog (Hunter, 2010). Later that year, however, the IAEA announced that Iran "has failed in a number of instances over an extended period of time to meet its obligations under its Safeguards Agreement with respect to the reporting of nuclear material and its processing and use, as well as the declaration of facilities where such material has been processed and stored" (IAEA, 2003).

Amid growing suspicions, Iran and the EU-3 – European Troika and Javier Solana, EU's High Representative for the CFSP who joined the talks in 2004 – concluded the Brussels Agreement, according to which Iran agreed, inter alia, to suspend the manufacture of parts and assembly of centrifuges (Mousavian, 2008, pp.166-71). Several factors, including inconsistencies between Iran's statements and IAEA reports (IAEA, 2004), Libya's unilateral decision to abandon its nuclear ambitions, Iran's domestic politics, with the nuclear program taking center stage at the forthcoming presidential campaign, and strong U.S. opposition, led to the collapse of the agreement and Iran's subsequent cancellation of its enrichment suspension (Hunter, 2010, pp.93-4). In order to avert growing international pressure to refer the nuclear file to the Security Council following the failure of the Brussels Agreement, the

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<sup>45</sup> According to Gérard Araud, who served as French negotiator on Iran's nuclear dossier between 2006 and 2009, it was France's idea to have the U.K., instead of Russia, on board (Davenport & Philipp, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>This agreement was reached once the European Troika agreed to 1) Iran's "suspension", and not "complete cessation", of its enrichment activities and 2) a formula that incorporated "mutual commitments of both sides" (Mousavian, 2008, p.158).



EU-3 and Tehran reached the Paris Agreement in November 2004 after exchanging several proposals that called for the country's temporary suspension of nuclear fuel cycle in exchange for EU's technical assistance in resuming enrichment after having reached a negotiated solution (Mousavian, 2008). A later accord in 2005 between the Europeans and Iran's then-nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani supplementing the Paris Agreement, according to which Tehran agreed to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment, was rejected in Washington. On the day of Rouhani's presidential inauguration in August 2013, Britain's Jack Straw, one of the negotiating foreign ministers in 2005, stated that "had it not been for major problems within the US administration under President Bush, we could have actually settled the whole Iran nuclear dossier back in 2005, and we probably wouldn't have had President Ahmadinejad as a consequence of the failure as well" (cited in Osborne & Morisson, 2013).

### 2.5.3 The EU+3 and nuclear diplomacy under Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)

Khatami's presidency was a "mixed blessing" (Posch, 2016, p.4); despite his will to negotiate with the West, each compromise encountered further backlash from hardliners inside Iran. As a result, the so-called concessionary foreign policy of Khatami's administration became one of the key issues in the 2005 presidential election, with the opponents accusing the reformists of selling out national rights and interests as well as acting against the revolution's principles (Hunter, 2010, p.96). Ahmadinejad's priority was, therefore, to revive the (early) revolutionary and ideological aspects of Iran's foreign policy, namely self-sufficiency. Thus, he "embarked on a nationwide propaganda campaign to make the nuclear issue a litmus test of Iran's sovereignty and independence similar to the case of oil nationalization in 1951" (Hunter, 2010, p.96). Positioned within the socio-political climate of a Radical Conservative rise (KhosraviNik, 2015, pp.39-42), with Ahmadinejad adopting a defiant stance on Iran's nuclear program and a bellicose policy towards the West i.e. using ostensible breakthroughs in nuclear activities as showcase events, combined with his inflammatory remarks on the Holocaust and Israel, the nuclear issue – and Iran – became increasingly perceived as a threat, aggravating Iran-West tensions throughout his eight-year tenure.

Shortly after Ahmadinejad assumed office, Tehran informed the IAEA that it would resume enrichment at the Isfahan uranium conversion facility (Nikou, 2018). Awaiting election results while anticipating the victory of Rafsanjani, the EU-3 proposed a 'Framework for a Long-term Agreement' on August 5, offering Iran support to develop peaceful nuclear energy in exchange for Tehran ceasing all nuclear fuel work permanently. Iran rejected the offer, calling the package "a humiliating and insulting empty box"

(KhosraviNik, 2015, p.3). In September, the IAEA Board of Governors reported Iran's non-compliance with the NPT Safeguards Agreement (IAEA, 2005). By early January 2006, Iran removed the seals at Natanz and Isfahan, clearing the path to resuming research and development on uranium enrichment. In response, on January 12, the E3 and Solana issued a statement describing Iran's decision a "clear rejection of the process the E3/EU and Iran have been engaged in", concluding that "the time has now come for the Security Council to become involved to reinforce the authority of IAEA Resolutions."<sup>48</sup> The following month, IAEA's Board of Governors voted in favor of referring Iran's nuclear file to the Security Council. Two days later, Tehran reacted by announcing that it would halt its voluntary implementation of the Additional Protocol and other inspection procedures (Davenport, 2018). Following these developments, while the European Troika – and the EU High Representative – remained involved, China, Russia, and the U.S. joined the negotiations.<sup>49</sup> The U.S., whose policy towards Iran since 1979 "oscillated between vague dreams of forced or induced regime change and the sterile continuation of unilateral containment" (Alcaro & Tabrizi, 2014, p.16), was convinced to take part in multilateral talks with Iran – for the first time since 1979 – on the condition that Tehran suspends its enrichment activities (Sauer, 2008, p.13). In July, the UN Security Council (2006) adopted Resolution 1696, demanding Iran to "suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, including research and development". Between 2006 and 2010, six UN resolutions were passed in total (Davenport, 2017). This period is marked by "ineffective – often circular – talks, during which both sides tried to obtain leverage over the other" (Dalton, 2016, p.353). Europe's initial role as mediator shifted to an alignment with U.S. policy of politicizing Iran's nuclear program by linking it "to the issues of proliferation, weaponization, and deterrence" (Barzegar, 2010).

The disputed victory of Ahmadinejad in the June 2009 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown further deteriorated the relations between Tehran and Europe. The European Parliament (2009) condemned the worsening state of human rights in Iran, "one of the very normative foundations on which the initial 'Comprehensive Dialogue' had been built" (Kaussler, 2012, p.61). "To the EU-3", Kaussler argues, "this meant that engagement with Iran needed to show tangible results both in terms of human rights but particularly on the nuclear front" (p.61). As a result, Europe (Britain and France, in particular) adopted a tougher stance in the upcoming nuclear talks in Geneva (Hunter, 2010). In September that year, the newly-elected U.S. President Barack Obama, who had campaigned on a promise to

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<sup>48</sup>The statement is available from: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/fd/d-ir2006013004/d-ir2006013004en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/d-ir2006013004/d-ir2006013004en.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> The format of the talks is either referred to as the "P5+1" (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) or as the "E3/EU+3" (the three members of the EU, plus China, Russia, and the U.S.).

negotiate, directly and “without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect”<sup>50</sup> – a marked shift from his predecessor – with Iran, revealed, together with French President Nicholas Sarkozy and U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the construction of a new enrichment facility in Fordow, outside the holy city of Qom. The following month, a package was proposed during talks in Geneva and later in Vienna, with a U.S. envoy present for the first time, offering to have 75 per cent of Iran’s low-enriched uranium transferred abroad for reprocessing fuel rods for medical use in Iran, which was initially approved by Ahmadinejad but ultimately rejected due to opposition (from both reformists and conservatives) in the country (Cronberg, 2017; Posch, 2016). In February 2010, Iran announced that it had begun producing 20 per cent enriched uranium, presumably necessary for medical isotopes at the Tehran Research Reactor, up from the previous 3.5 percent (Nikou, 2018). The following June, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1929, imposing further sanctions, while adding an arms embargo to tighter proliferation-related measures as well as banning Iran from conducting nuclear-capable ballistic missile tests (Davenport, 2018). Moreover, both the U.S. and the EU approved unilateral punitive measures beyond those contained in UN resolutions; the U.S. Congress adopted the ‘Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act’ (Davenport, 2018), while the foreign ministers of EU member states announced “a comprehensive and robust package of measures in the areas of trade, financial services, energy, [and] transport as well as additional designations for [a] visa ban and asset freeze, in particular for Iranian banks, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL)” (European Commission, 2010). Thus, the EU “responded by ‘over-complying’ with US policy preferences in general, and US unilateral Iran sanctions in particular” (Pieper, 2017, p.101). The following year, after the IAEA’s report mentioned “possible military dimensions” to Iran’s nuclear program and suspected weapons-related activities after 2003 (IAEA, 2011), the European Council meeting concluded that:

given the seriousness of the situation, including the acceleration of the near 20% uranium enrichment activities by Iran, in violation of six UNSC resolutions and eleven IAEA Board resolutions, and the installation of centrifuges at a previously undeclared and deeply buried site near Qom [...] the EU should extend the scope of its restrictive measures against Iran (European Commission, 2011).

Consequently, the EU, formerly accounting for 20% of Iran’s oil sales, imposed an embargo in January 2012 (effective July 1<sup>st</sup>), banning all member states from importing oil and gas

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<sup>50</sup> The transcript of President Obama’s speech on 4 June 2009 in Cairo, entitled ‘A New Beginning’, is available from: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/2009/124342.htm>

from the country, in addition to stricter limitations on financial transactions (Cronberg, 2017; Nikou, 2018). In a joint statement<sup>51</sup>, British Prime Minister Cameron, German Chancellor Merkel, and French President Sarkozy said:

Our message is clear. We have no quarrel with the Iranian people. But the Iranian leadership has failed to restore international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme. We will not accept Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon. Iran has so far had no regard for its international obligations and is already exporting and threatening violence around its region.

In response to Tehran's subsequent threat to block the Strait of Hormuz – through which 20 per cent of the world's oil exports pass – Britain, France, and U.S. sent warships to the area, giving Iran a clear signal (Blair, 2012). Due to stringent sanctions coupled with government mismanagement the country's economy suffered a sharp decline<sup>52</sup>. In 2013, EU's total exports to Iran reached a mere 5.4 billion euros, less than half of what it was in 2010 (Table 2.1). Sanctions had been supplemented by parallel EU restrictions i.e. asset freeze and travel ban on Iranian individuals and entities, the former standing at 150 and the latter 490 as of December 2012, in addition to disconnecting EU-blacklisted Iranian banks from the Belgium-based financial messaging network SWIFT (Patterson, 2013, p.136). After a period of interruption in face-to-face talks, marked by a so-called 'epistolary diplomacy' between Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and the EU's new High Representative Catherine Ashton, negotiations resumed in the spring of 2012 (Fabius, 2016, p.8). Between April 2012 and June 2013, Iran and the P5+1 held several meetings to no avail, with exchanges becoming what Laurent Fabius, former French Foreign Minister, characterizes as 'a Dialogue of the Deaf' (Fabius, 2016, p.8). Against this backdrop, "the array of sanctions in place and the disquieting state of advancement of the Iranian nuclear program justified the fear of military intervention to shut it down" (Fabius, 2016, p.7). In April 2013, another round of talks in Kazakhstan ended without future meetings scheduled. Negotiations reached a stalemate and a 'time out' was agreed upon until after the June 2013 presidential elections in Iran (Fabius, 2016, p.11). The victory of Rouhani, Iran's seasoned nuclear negotiator, paved the way for constructive talks: Finally, "[a] conciliatory Rouhani administration was met by an Obama administration willing to explore direct bilateral channels" (Pieper, 2017, p.109).

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<sup>51</sup> The statement is available from the UK government's website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-chancellor-merkel-and-president-sarkozy-statement-on-iran-sanctions>

<sup>52</sup> See Moret (2015) for a review of previous studies on the impact of sanctions on Iranian society.

	2010		2011		2012		2013	
	from	to	from	to	from	to	from	to
France	849	1,787	1,747	1,670	128	803	283	494
Germany	854	3,786	716	3,082	313	2,524	256	1,840
U.K.	218	327	420	204	137	120	32	89
EU	14,528	11,319	17,329	10,497	5,652	7,379	783	5,446

**Table 2.1 Total Exports from/to Iran (€ million)**

Source: The British Iranian Chamber of Commerce (n.d.)

#### 2.5.4 Intra-EU differences

Notwithstanding their shared concerns (e.g. the prospects of a nuclear-armed Iran and/or a military confrontation) and their multilateral roles as members of the (E3 and later EU+3) negotiating teams Britain, France, and Germany differed in their approaches regarding Iran’s nuclear program. While the Troika toughened its collective stance over the course of the negotiations, the three countries diverged in terms of their accommodationist or confrontational positions, ascribed to various factors, namely the history of respective individual relations with Iran, economic and/or geostrategic considerations, and changes in internal political dynamics (Onderco, 2015; Patterson, 2013; Shirvani & Vuković, 2015; Tabrizi & Santini, 2012; Wagner & Onderco, 2014).

##### 2.5.4.1 Britain’s discourses and practices vis-à-vis Iran

During the initial phase, London acted as an interlocutor between the E3 and the U.S. and, according to observers, “sometimes sought tacit US approval of E3 proposals” (Meier, 2013, p.5). As former spokesman for Iran’s negotiating team recounts:

In spring 2005, I privately presented a similar proposal to my counterparts in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. While it was met with support in Berlin, my meeting with French nuclear negotiator..led me to conclude that France would accept the proposal only if the UK did. However, London’s nuclear negotiator..would ultimately turn down the offer in my talks with him, telling me that Washington would not tolerate even one centrifuge spinning in Iran (Mousavian, 2016, p.84).

Similarly, on the occasion of a meeting between British Prime Minister David Cameron and the Iranian President Rouhani – the first since 1979 – in 2014, former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw stated, as mentioned in section 2.5.2, that already a decade ago, “[a] deal was close. It only failed when hardliners in the Bush administration refused any concessions over issues such as spare parts for Iran’s ageing civil airline fleet” (Straw, 2014). After his return from a visit to Tehran earlier that year as part of a U.K. parliamentary delegation, Straw expressed optimism over negotiations with Iran, while acknowledging the “very malign” influences of Britain and the U.S. on Iran’s domestic affairs in the past, referring to the 1953 coup and supporting Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war (Woodcock,

2014). As British Foreign Secretary, Straw advocated for closer ties with Tehran, which, combined with President Khatami's policy of *détente*, rendered the early stage of negotiations a period characterized by mutual "appreciation and rapprochement" (Santini, 2010, p.475). In 2004, amid Iran's arrest of a British Royal Navy team for having trespassed its territorial waters (Smith & Farsian, 2004), Straw explicated the course of Anglo-Iranian relations to BBC radio listeners as follows:

Part of the problem that we have in terms of our relations with Iran go back to our domination of that region. We had been instrumental in putting the Shah's father on the throne and many aspects of the Shah's regime were brutal, repressive, sought to strike out Iran's past and also its Islamic heritage and its Islamic beliefs (quoted in Beck, 2006, pp.543-4).

According to Santini (2010), the cultural diplomatic discourse adopted by Straw in this and similar occasions, whereby he sought to contextualize Iran's antipathy and distrust towards the West, stood in stark contrast to parallel calls from his European counterparts – including the hawkish position of British Prime Minister Tony Blair (Helm & La Guardia, 2005) – to view the nuclear issue strictly through the prism of "an existential threat to the Middle East, European and international security" (p.475). While France and Germany securitized the nuclear issue from the outset, the U.K. did so after Jack Straw's departure (Santini, 2010, p.472). In 2006, Margaret Beckett, Straw's successor, stated that while military option was at the time "not discussed", sanctions were being considered, arguing that "we cannot continue with the assumption that Iran can just continue to flout the will of the international community this way" (Tempest, 2006). During his speech in Abu Dhabi in 2008, then-Foreign Secretary David Miliband declared that "the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran poses the most immediate threat" to Middle East stability, while insisting that imposing sanctions "are not an attempt at regime change. And nor are they a precursor to military action" (Black & McCarthy, 2008). Nevertheless, in September 2009, Miliband refused to refer to the prospect of military action as "inconceivable" (Borger et al., 2009), a term reiterated by Straw as Foreign Secretary<sup>53</sup>. Thus, as Santini (2010) argues, Miliband "came full circle from where British diplomacy vis-à-vis Iran started with Jack Straw" (p.483), who "had espoused a politicised but non-securitised frame of the Iranian nuclear programme, a nuance which afterwards 'got lost'" (p.482).

Britain's refusal to rule out military action in tandem with the U.S. and Israel was also shared by France – a position that Germany opposed. The increasingly confrontational stance adopted by London and Paris over the course of the negotiation years led some observers to

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<sup>53</sup> "I don't see any circumstances in which [U.S.] military action would be justified against Iran, full stop." Quoted in BBC (2004).

characterize the two as “client states” of Washington regarding Iran’s nuclear file (Osborne & Morrison, 2013, p.6 cited in Pieper, 2017, p.103). With Obama’s election and his expressed willingness to engage with Tehran, Britain and France adopted a harder line, as exemplified by the statements of British Prime Minister Brown and French President Sarkozy, following the 2009 disclosure of a nuclear plant in Iran (section 2.5.3); the former accused Tehran of “serial deception”, leaving “no choice but to draw a line in the sand” (BBC, 2009a), while the latter stopped short of mocking Obama’s naivety: “President Obama dreams of a world without [nuclear] weapons...but right in front of us two countries are doing the exact opposite”, Sarkozy said, mentioning Iran and North Korea. “I support the extended hand of the Americans, but what good has proposals for dialogue brought the international community? More uranium enrichment and declarations by the leaders of Iran to wipe a UN member state off the map” (Spillius, 2009), he added, referring to Israel and Ahmadinejad’s controversial remarks (see, for example, Steele, 2006). The tough position adopted by former British Prime Ministers Blair and Brown continued under David Cameron (2010-16), with the new government pursuing additional sanctions “with more energy and vigor” (Patterson, 2013, p.139). In March 2012, Cameron warned that “there are signs that the Iranians want to have some sort of inter-continental missile capability” which poses a threat not only to Israel and the entire region but also to Britain’s security (Wintour & Borger, 2012), a “hyperbolic claim”, as one observer noted, that was “eerily reminiscent of Tony Blair’s untrue claim that Iraq could strike British interests within ‘45 minutes’” (Beaumont, 2012).

#### 2.5.4.1.1 Other aspects of British-Iranian relations

In August 2003, a diplomatic row ensued when the British police arrested Iran’s former ambassador to Buenos Aires for his involvement in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Argentina (BBC, 2003a), exacerbating existing tensions between the two countries, following Britain’s military presence in Iran’s immediate neighbor after the invasion of Iraq. During the initial negotiation phase, while nuclear talks ran parallel to human rights roundtables, EU’s priorities shifted from normative concerns to strategic interests (Kaussler, 2008b, p.288); IAEA’s 2003 report prompted EU officials to rescind their promised incentives which, in turn, led to then-National Security Adviser Hassan Rouhani to withdraw from Comprehensive Dialogue – at Ayatollah Khamenei’s request. As a result, “the Europeans decided to maneuver cautiously in order not to jeopardize what they considered crucial international security concerns” (p.291). Against this backdrop and amidst a major political crisis unfolding at the time in Iran, following the massive disqualification of reformist candidates for the upcoming elections of the 7<sup>th</sup> Majlis, Britain’s humanitarian

response to the Bam earthquake<sup>54</sup> was seen in a different light. The unexpected visit of Prince Charles, in his capacity as the head of the British Red Cross, to the devastated town in January 2004 was widely perceived as an “insult to apparent injury” (Ansari, 2013, p.379). While reformists awaited a reaction from Europe over the conservative backlash, widely reported in the pro-reform press as a ‘coup’, the unexpected first visit by a member of the British Royal Family to Iran (since 1975) “was taken by many as a real slap in the face from Britain, and confirmation – if it were ever needed – that Britain, up to its old tricks, had in fact backed the ‘coup’ all along” (p.380). The already fraught relations between Iran and Britain, deriving from the rivalry between the two countries following the latter’s occupation of southern Iraq in the mid-2000s (Patterson, 2013, p.139) and Iran’s allegations that Britain was behind bomb attacks on its soil (BBC, 2005), were aggravated by the arrest of 15 British sailors who had entered what Iran saw its territory whereas Britain considered disputed waters, resulting in a diplomatic standoff (Hunter, 2010, p.98). Two years later, British Council withdrew from Iran due to the “intimidation and harassment” of its staff by Iranian authorities, marking the lowest point in the two countries’ relations (Borger, 2009). Anti-British sentiments were further reinforced during Ahmadinejad’s presidency:

For Ahmadinejad, appropriating Mosaddeq helped foster the narrative [...] that the nuclear crisis was his ‘oil crisis’, and while many Iranians found his identification with the National Front Prime Minister a stretch, they were more willing to see parallels between relations with the West then and now. Indeed the narrative of the coup of 1953 ultimately segued nicely into the narrative of ‘Velvet Coup’ of 2009, with the British once again the villain of the piece (Ansari, 2013, p.381).

Accusing the West, while singling out Britain as “the most evil of them” (BBC, 2009b), of meddling in domestic affairs and orchestrating the post-election unrest, Iran expelled two British diplomats, which was retaliated by the expulsion of two Iranian diplomats from London (McElroy, 2009). On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, after the arrest of local staff at the British Embassy in Tehran, all EU Ambassadors were temporarily withdrawn (Iran-Report, 2009, p.17), a consensus that was reached, despite an earlier call by London which was initially rejected by some countries e.g. Germany (Charter, 2009), only when Tehran threatened to have the staff put on trial (Meier, 2013, p.14). Moreover, Oxford University’s decision to establish a scholarship in honor of Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman killed during the unrest who became the symbol of the Green Movement, was denounced by Tehran as “politically motivated” (BBC, 2009c). British-Iranian relations suffered from other incidents, namely Iran’s allegations that London was “backing” the MEK (*The Telegraph*, 2010) and supporting Jundallah (‘Soldiers of God’), a Sunni militant group that was behind the 2010

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<sup>54</sup> The earthquake struck the ancient town in Kerman province in December 2003, claiming 30,000 lives.



mosque attacks in the city of Zahedan (Black, 2010). In view of heightened tensions, the British Museum's initiative to lend the Cyrus Cylinder<sup>55</sup> to Iran, after having settled a dispute over the artefact with its Iranian counterpart, was seen as “[o]ne of the great, indeed heroic, cultural events of recent years” (Lamont, 2015, p.3). Nonetheless, the deeply-rooted animosity towards Britain, exemplified by Iranian authorities' harassment of the relatives of journalists at BBC Persian TV (Kamali Dehghan, 2011), reached its peak in November 2011 (Mousavian, 2016). After the latest IAEA report, Britain ceased all financial ties with Iranian banks, including the Central Bank, which, in the words of British Chancellor George Osborne, was a step necessary “to improve the security not just of the whole world, but the national security of the United Kingdom” (BBC, 2011). In response, the Majlis voted to have the British ambassador expelled, in a move that “was not a spontaneous decision, but rather the result of years of increasingly louder calls in Iran to downgrade relations with Britain” (Mousavian, 2016, p.85). Shortly thereafter, a group of protestors stormed the British Embassy compound in Tehran, resulting in its immediate closure – lasting until 2015. This incident, which reduced ties to a bare minimum, served as a catalyst for Britain (alongside France) to push for the oil embargo that was ultimately approved by other EU states. Urging Iran to “come to its senses”, British Foreign Secretary William Hague stated that the oil sanctions were “peaceful and legitimate measures” and “not about conflict” (Blair, 2012).

#### 2.5.4.2 France's discourses and practices vis-à-vis Iran

After the IAEA resolution in February 2006 to refer Iran to the Security Council, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked U.S. Congress for an additional \$75 million to fund 24-hour broadcasts in Farsi and to support human rights activists and dissident groups inside Iran, in an attempt to “actively confront the policies of this Iranian regime” and, at the same time, “work to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom in their own country” (Kessler, 2006). Against the backdrop of a rhetorical escalation in the U.S. and Washington's effort “to put its official stamp on anti-Iran propaganda” (Tarock, 2006, p.654), French Foreign Minister Douste-Blazy announced on TV that Iran was being dishonest regarding its nuclear activities; that “no civil nuclear program can explain the Iranian nuclear program. It is a clandestine military nuclear program” (*Le Figaro*, 2006). The following month, John Sawers, the political director at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, wrote a confidential letter – later leaked to the Associated Press – to his American, French, and German counterparts in which he insisted that the first UN Security Council resolution

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<sup>55</sup> The cylinder of Persian King Cyrus, dating back to the 6th century BC and considered the first human rights declaration, was last on display in Iran in 1971 to mark the opening of the Persepolis celebrations.

should invoke Chapter VII<sup>56</sup>, as “[t]hey [the Iranians] will need to know that more serious measures are likely” (Beeston, 2006). At this stage, France was opposed to punitive measures. Prior to meeting other world leaders at the UN General Assembly, President Chirac urged other countries to remove the threat of sanctions against Iran, which he termed “ineffective”, breaking ranks with London and Washington, while adding that he did not believe “in a solution without dialogue” (BBC, 2006).

Nicolas Sarkozy’s election marked a rupture with France’s previous policies, including its position on Iran’s nuclear program (Tork Ladani, 2018, p.288). With Paris adopting a more hawkish stance, France became “the toughest member of the European Union when it comes to Iran” (Bahout & Haddad, 2015). After assuming office, in his first major foreign policy address in August 2007, Sarkozy described the nuclear stand-off with Iran as “the most serious crisis weighing on the international order”, arguing that imposing further sanctions while remaining open for talks, should Tehran respect its obligations, “is the only initiative that allows us to avoid a catastrophic alternative: the Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran” (*Le Monde*, 2007) He also insisted that “for me, a nuclear-armed Iran is unacceptable”, signaling a clear shift from his predecessor who had recently announced that a nuclear-armed Iran could be inevitable (Sciolino & Bennhold, 2007). Moreover, the new French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner warned, during a radio and television interview, that “we must prepare ourselves for the worst” facing Iran, and, when asked, added that “[the worst] it’s war” (*Le Figaro*, 2007). Although Kouchner later rephrased his comment, telling *Le Monde* that he was no “warmonger” and that his statement was “a message of peace, of seriousness, and of determination” (Nougayrède, 2007a), the remark was significant, as it appeared to contradict EU’s official opposition to military action (Meier, 2013, p.9). By adopting a sharper tone and a more offensive approach, French officials were, according to the former editor-in-chief of *Le Monde*, sending the signal to the Bush administration and Israel that Paris “remains intransigent” (Nougayrède, 2007b). Kouchner had previously expressed his views on the alleged threat posed by Iran and the possibility of a military response in an op-ed in the magazine *Politique Internationale*:

I know that French diplomacy exercises great vigilance regarding the looming crisis. But I am distressed by the silence of our leaders, who stubbornly refuse to warn the people about this real danger. Without a shared understanding of what is at stake in dealing with Iran, how do we hope to legitimize a necessary defensive response? It took years of images from Sarajevo, yet located on our continent, for the French public to support sending troops to the Balkans! How can one give

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<sup>56</sup> Chapter VII of the UN Charter entitled ‘Action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression’ allows punitive action i.e. sanctions or military force to be taken in order “to maintain or restore international peace and security”. Available from: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii/>

credibility to talks if we are not able, one day, to act alongside our allies against Tehran? (Kouchner, 2006)

At the launch of a nuclear submarine, Sarkozy stated that “nuclear missiles of even distant powers can reach Europe in less than half an hour”, adding that while such means are currently in the possession of major powers, “other countries, in Asia or the Middle East, are strenuously developing ballistic capabilities”. He continued as follows: “I am thinking in particular of Iran” that is “increasing the range of its missiles, while serious suspicions weigh on its nuclear program. It is the security of Europe that is at stake” (*Le Monde*, 2008). In line with a new military doctrine set out in the 2008 White Paper on French Defense and National Security, which, observers noted, placed “greater emphasis on cooperation with the United States in countering Iran’s growing influence” (Moran, 2009), France opened a military base in 2009 at the so-called ‘Peace Camp’ in the UAE (BBC, 2009d). Linking the military base, France’s first outside its own territory in 50 years, to the nuclear threat posed by Iran and the necessity to adopt a “deterrent position”, a French diplomat stated that “[i]f Iran attacks the Emirates, it also attacks the French” (Lasserre, 2009). Amid growing voices in the U.S., who had started to call into question the goal of zero-enrichment policy as part of a final deal with Iran and given the new mood in Washington with Obama’s diplomatic outreach to Iran, “there was ‘unease’ and ‘apprehension’ in Paris that Obama would go soft on Iran” (Marashi & Parsi, 2012). The French Head of State had declared 2009 a “decisive” year for Iran: “The moment is approaching when Iranian leaders will have to make a choice: either they provoke a serious confrontation with the international community”, Sarkozy warned, “or, and this is what France hopes, we finally reach a solution in the negotiations”, he said, while asserting that Iran’s nuclear program “has no civilian purpose” (Barluet, 2009). Based on a leaked U.S. cable from September 2009, Sarkozy’s security advisor had labelled the Iranian regime “effectively a fascist state”, while stressing that “the time has come to decide on next steps” (Nougayrède, 2010a; see also *The Guardian*, 2010). Thus, as Obama was taking office, France, alongside Britain, pushed for tougher sanctions on Iran’s banking and energy sectors in 2009 (Nougayrède, 2009a) that which elicited criticism from other EU states: “Going in hawkish on the European side while Obama was stretching out his hand would certainly undermine the credibility of the outstretched hand” (non-E3 diplomat quoted in Parsi, 2012, p.13).

Iran’s regional roles, widely seen by Paris as destabilizing and adversarial to France’s ‘Arab Policy’ [*Politique Arabe de France*], have impaired the two countries’ bilateral ties throughout the post-revolution period, with France’s support of Iraq, Tehran’s involvement in the 33-Day War between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah in 2006 (Tork Ladani, 2018,

p.280), and Iran's unwavering support to the Assad regime during the still-ongoing 'civil war' in Syria. In August 2011, Sarkozy described the Syrian regime's actions against its people "beyond repair", while warning against Tehran's "military, nuclear and ballistic ambitions" that constitute "a growing threat that could lead to a pre-emptive strike against Iranian sites" (*Le Monde*, 2011). Shortly afterwards, Sarkozy wrote a letter to his counterparts in Canada, Japan, the EU, and the U.S., calling for new sanctions on an "unprecedented scale" that included "the decision to immediately freeze the assets of the Iranian central bank [and] stop purchases of Iranian oil" (Reuters, 2011). Similarly, urging "stricter sanctions", former Foreign Minister Alain Juppé declared that Tehran "is pursuing the development of its nuclear arms, I have no doubt about it" (BBC, 2012). The tough line adopted by the center-right Sarkozy administration (2007-12) vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear dossier continued under the Socialist Party of his successor François Hollande, leading observers to conclude that France's Iran policy "seems to have taken a decisive neoconservative turn, independent of the political party in power" (Gresh, 2013). In November 2013, Paris torpedoed the first stage of a deal with Iran by rejecting a roadmap endorsed by both Tehran and Washington. Accompanying the French delegation, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius stated skeptically: "We wish to avoid the euphoria of a glass half full", referring to the failed talks with Iran in the past and, later, warned against accepting a "fool's' game" (*Le Monde*, 2013). According to diplomatic sources, Fabius, who served as prime minister between 1984 and 1986, a period during which Paris-Tehran ties were at their lowest point (section 2.3), "has gained a disastrous impression of the Iranians and does not trust them at all" (*L'Express*, 2015).

#### 2.5.4.2.1 Other aspects of Franco-Iranian relations

In 2003, Tehran welcomed France's move to arrest key members of the MEK on charges of "preparing to commit or finance acts of terrorism" (BBC, 2003b). Nicolas Sarkozy, who was Interior Minister at the time, announced that the group "recently wanted to make France its support base, notably after the intervention in Iraq", adding that "[w]e cannot accept that" (BBC, 2003c). This context, some observers argue, led Velayati, senior advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, to take a stand in favor of Sarkozy during the 2007 presidential campaign, against Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal, who reportedly received campaign endorsement from the MEK and was resolutely opposed to Iran's nuclear activities, including for civilian purposes (Therme, 2012, p.31). In a clear effort to distance himself from the policies and polemics of Ahmadinejad, Velayati adopted a more conciliatory tone in an interview with French newspaper *Libération*, stating that "the doors are wide open for negotiation with

[IAEA Director General] Mohammed El-Baradei”, adding that “[t]here are no limits” within nuclear talks (Guetta, 2007). Moreover, according to leaked U.S. cables, Velayati sought to establish a back-channel with French officials to circumvent the Iranian president, while holding “the erroneous view that Mr. Sarkozy would break France free of its ‘dependence’ on the U.S.” concerning its foreign policy i.e. its stance on Iran’s nuclear program (Nougayrède, 2010b).

The reasons behind France’s singularity throughout the nuclear negotiations vary and can be ascribed to a mix of changing and continuous factors (Tork Ladani, 2018, pp.289-302): the two countries’ nuclear cooperation in the past and the decade-long legal dispute over Eurodif; France’s nuclear deterrence doctrine central to its foreign policy and defense strategy, juxtaposed with the will to preserve its monopoly as a nuclear weapon-state (see also Pelopidas, 2012); conflicting geostrategic interests with those of Iran’s in the Middle East i.e. Tehran’s growing influence in Lebanon, “a country that remains dear to France” (Bahout & Haddad, 2015) as well as in Iraq and Syria, and France’s economic and military cooperation with Iran’s regional rivals, namely the Sunni Arab States of the Persian Gulf (Jarry, 2008); stronger French-Israeli relations under Sarkozy and closer ties with Washington – since the transatlantic rift following the U.S. invasion of Iraq – characterized by Sarkozy’s strong ‘Atlanticism’<sup>57</sup> (Patterson, 2013, p.140); and the two countries’ ideological confrontation. Therme (2012, p.31) argues that the gap between the legacy of Khomeini’s Islamism and the French universalism –which, from the Iranian viewpoint, is “only the continuation of the civilizing mission [mission civilisatrice], the ideological pillar of France’s colonial enterprise” – deepened with Sarkozy’s presidency, since his Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner, was a leading advocate for foreign intervention and among the rare French politicians to have spoken in favor of Iraq’s invasion (e.g. Reuters, 2007).

Following the disputed re-election of Ahmadinejad, Sarkozy denounced the “extent of the fraud” in Iran that was “proportional to the violent reaction”, a strong remark that stood in contrast to U.S. President Obama’s cautiously articulated statement at the time in which he avoided the term ‘fraud’ and, instead, expressed his “deep concern” over the events unfolding in the country (Tran, 2009). The French president also stated that “[t]he Iranian people deserve something else”, hinting at Ahmadinejad and his supporters, whom, a month later, he referred to as “the same leaders in Iran who tell us that the nuclear program is peaceful and that the elections have been fair”, adding, rhetorically, “[w]ho can trust them?” (Nougayrède, 2009b). Diplomatic tensions between Tehran and Paris also affected their cultural ties, which had been “the symbol of a deep understanding between the two countries

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<sup>57</sup> According to leaked U.S. cables, Sarkozy was described as “viscerally pro-American” and “the most pro-American French president since World War II” (Benhold, 2010).

since the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Therme, 2012, p.32). In the wake of the post-election turmoil, Iran arrested or expelled several members of, or French nationals connected to, the Institut Français de Recherche en Iran (IFRI), a Tehran-based archeological and historical research center, on charges of spying for the French Embassy. In July, Iranian authorities detained the French teacher Clotilde Reiss. The charges against Reiss, accused of reporting on Iran’s political scene to the IFRI as well as inciting the protests, were dropped in May 2010, coinciding with France’s refusal to extradite Majid Kakavand, an Iranian national suspected by Washington of procuring electronic equipment for military use, to the U.S. and the release of Ali Vakili Rad – who was serving a life sentence in France since 1991 for the murder of Shapour Bakhtiar – raising suspicions of a quid pro quo, which the governments of both countries denied (Boroumand, 2009). Tensions between the two countries were exacerbated by other incidents, most notably the diplomatic contretemps in 2010 when a state-run Iranian newspaper insulted Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, France’s then-First Lady and the president’s wife, after she signed a petition for the release of Sakineh Ashtiani, an Iranian woman whose death sentence by stoning had spurred an international outcry (BBC, 2010a).

Due to international sanctions and pressure from Sarkozy’s administration, the once-strong economic ties between Paris – previously one of Iran’s top European trading partners – and Tehran suffered considerably. Between 2004 and 2014, France’s market share in Iran plummeted from 7% to 1%. Furthermore, while crude oil and petroleum products accounted for 90% of Iranian exports to France before 2012, the oil embargo reduced purchases of Iranian oil from 1.7 billion euros in 2011 to a mere 1.7 million in 2013 (*Le Monde*, 2016). Threatened by U.S. extraterritorial penalties, Total withdrew from a \$5 billion project in Iran to develop South Pars<sup>58</sup>. Similarly, French carmakers PSA Peugeot Citroen and Renault, with sizeable markets in Iran, withdrew from the country in 2011 and 2012 respectively, with the former’s sales having peaked 458,000 vehicles, “in what used to be its second-biggest market worldwide after France”, and the latter having sold 103,000 vehicles the year before pulling out (Middle East Institute, 2013).

#### 2.5.4.3 Germany’s discourses and practices vis-à-vis Iran

In 2003, while sharing the fear of American and European allies that Tehran was seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, Berlin proposed a strategy of combined economic incentives and diplomatic pressure to persuade Iran to be more transparent regarding its nuclear activities

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<sup>58</sup> Total was the last Western energy company to leave Iran in 2010 and the first to return after the 2015 nuclear deal. In 2017, it signed a \$4.8 billion contract with NIOC to develop and produce gas from phase 11 of South Pars. However, under pressure from the sanctions reinstated unilaterally by the U.S., Total withdrew from the project in 2018 (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

(*Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 2003). Over the years, despite a gradual toughening in its position, Germany's stance toward Iran was less confrontational compared to Britain and France (Wagner & Onderco, 2014). One of the key areas of contention between Berlin and its partners was its "long-standing position in favor of the right to enrichment" (Fabius, 2016, p.11) and the broader division between nuclear and non-nuclear weapon states within the context of E3 (and later EU+3) talks. As Sauer noted in 2008, it is "not by chance that Germany, the only non-nuclear weapon state in the [EU+3], takes the softest approach" (p.19). Moreover, Reissner (2009) argues that while Germany's goals of maintaining strong transatlantic ties *and* following the strategy of non-exclusion towards Iran conflicted with President Bush's isolationist doctrine, to the extent that "German politicians and media often creat[ed] the impression that regime change in Tehran [was] not just their personal wish but the very objective of German policy" so as not to appear soft compared to the U.S. and Israel (p.47), Obama's election made it "easier for Germany to rebut the charge of appeasement and abide by its fundamental position of non-exclusion" (p.51).

In concert with the ultimatum set by the British government in September 2004, Berlin increased pressure on Tehran, with Chancellor Schröder describing Iran's nuclear activities as "extremely alarming" and Foreign Minister Fischer warning that a nuclear arms race in the region would be "a nightmare scenario" (MacAskill et al., 2004). Fischer added: "Das Recht eines jeden Staates, sein ziviles Nuklearprogramm zu entwickeln [...] ist unbestritten", while advising the Iranians against "Fehlkalkulation" and insisting that "[w]ir Europäer haben unseren iranischen Partnern immer geraten, uns als Schutzschild im wohlverstandenen eigenen Interesse zu begreifen"<sup>59</sup>. Two years later, however, Fischer (2006) wrote that the E3 initiative has "failed", adding:

There can no longer be any reasonable doubt that Iran's ambition is to obtain nuclear weapons capability. At the heart of the issue lies the Iranian regime's aspiration to become a hegemonic Islamic and regional power and thereby position itself at eye level with the world's most powerful nations. It is precisely this ambition that sets Iran apart from North Korea: Whereas North Korea seeks nuclear weapons capability to entrench its own isolation, Iran is aiming for regional dominance and more [...]. In short, nuclear Iran would call Europe's fundamental security into question. To believe that Europe could keep out of this conflict is a dangerous illusion.

Germany's stance toward Iran hardened with the victory of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the election of Angela Merkel as chancellor in 2005. These political dynamics were similar to those in France, as Chancellor Schröder of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), who, alongside French ex-President Chirac had strongly opposed the U.S.-led

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<sup>59</sup>The transcript of Joschka Fischer's speech is available from: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/bulletin/rede-des-bundesministers-des-auswaertigen-joschka-fischer--792544>

invasion of Iraq (*The Guardian*, 2003), was replaced by “another ‘Atlanticist’” (Patterson, 2013, p.140). The toughening position of Germany – which coincided with the presidency of Ahmadinejad, whom then-German Interior Minister Otto Schily labelled “ein Fundamentalist..bei dem nicht sicher ist, dass er absolute Distanz zum Terrorismus hält”<sup>60</sup> – is best exemplified by the speeches of former German chancellor and his successor at the 41<sup>st</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> Munich Security Conferences: Schröder urged the U.S. to support the diplomatic efforts of the E3 and to end “die massive Isolierung” of Iran, arguing that “der Iran wird auf die nukleare Option nur dann dauerhaft verzichten, wenn neben seinen wirtschaftlichen Interessen auch seine legitimen Sicherheitsinteressen gewahrt sind”<sup>61</sup>. Schröder’s ‘accommodationist approach’ (Wagner & Onderco, 2014, p.717), one that he continued to espouse after his chancellorship i.e. during an unofficial visit to Iran<sup>62</sup>, stood in stark contrast to the more confrontational position adopted the following year by Merkel at the annual conference – held under the motto ‘Renewing Transatlantic Partnership’ – during which she made the following statement<sup>63</sup>:

Wir wollen und wir müssen die Entwicklung iranischer Nuklearwaffen verhindern. Das Nuklearprogramm des Iran erweckt den berechtigten Argwohn, die berechnete Sorge, die berechnete Befürchtung, dass es hierbei nicht um die friedliche Nutzung der Kernenergie geht, sondern dass es hierbei auch um militärische Optionen geht. Der Iran hat mutwillig - ich muss das leider so sagen - die ihm bekannten ‘roten Linien’ überschritten.

Linking the danger posed by Ahmadinejad’s Iran to that of Nazi Germany, Merkel added:

Ich muss hinzufügen, dass die völlig inakzeptablen Provokationen des iranischen Präsidenten für uns natürlich Reaktionen notwendig machen. Ich sage dies ganz besonders als deutsche Bundeskanzlerin: Ein Präsident, der das Existenzrecht von Israel in Frage stellt, ein Präsident, der die Existenz des Holocaust leugnet, kann nicht erwarten, dass Deutschland in dieser Frage auch nur die geringste Toleranz zeigt. Wir haben aus unserer Geschichte gelernt.

Merkel’s tone led some German politicians to wonder whether the new chancellor would follow the “American military doctrine”, as she appeared to “no longer rule out a military option [against Iran] if needed” (Young, 2006). Later that year, Ahmadinejad sent a 10-page letter to the office of Chancellor Merkel, expressing his country’s strong interest in cooperation with Germany. The letter, which in the words of the government spokesman contained “viele Aussagen, die für uns nicht akzeptabel sind, insbesondere zu Israel, dem

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<sup>60</sup> For the diplomatic row after Schily’s remark during an interview with *Der Spiegel*, see Iran-Report (2005).

<sup>61</sup> The transcript of Gerhard Schröder’s speech at the 2005 Munich Conference is available from: <http://www.ag-friedensforschung.de/themen/Sicherheitskonferenz/2005-schroeder.html>

<sup>62</sup> On the controversy surrounding Schröder’s visit to Iran in 2009, see Monath (2009).

<sup>63</sup> The transcript of Angela Merkel’s speech at the 2006 Munich Conference is available from: [https://web.archive.org/web/20060211135227/http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu\\_2006=&menu\\_konferenzen=&sprache=de&id=170&](https://web.archive.org/web/20060211135227/http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2006=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=de&id=170&)



Existenzrecht des Staates Israel und zum Holocaust”, remained unanswered (*Spiegel Online*, 2006). While Sarkozy’s election played a decisive role in hardening the stance of France – and the negotiating bloc – towards Iran, the change in Germany’s head of state yielded a more gradual toughening in Berlin’s policies (Patterson, 2013, p.140). In 2007, as Paris was already preparing the ground for unilateral sanctions, Germany saw taking additional measures outside the framework of the UN Security Council as ‘premature’ (Crail, 2007). Moreover, German Foreign Minister Steinmeier argued at the time that the France-and U.S.-backed calls for unilateral sanctions were hypocritical so long as both American and French companies continued business with Tehran whilst German exports to Iran had dropped dramatically (*Spiegel Online*, 2007). Meanwhile, Berlin’s willingness to consider a Russian proposal that allowed Iran limited enrichment, under IAEA supervision, was rejected by London and Paris (Sauer, 2008, p.13). According to the WikiLeaks files, this led U.S. diplomats to assess that not all EU members “share the British and French sense of urgency” concerning Iran (*The Telegraph*, 2011). As a result, Germany was isolated, with the balance among the E3 shifting towards more punitive measures (Meier, 2013, p.9). In her much-applauded speech before the Knesset in 2008<sup>64</sup>, Angela Merkel – the first German chancellor invited to address the Israeli parliament – referred to Ahmadinejad’s anti-Israel rhetoric and Iran’s nuclear program as a “danger to peace and security”, adding:

If Iran ever acquires nuclear weapons, the consequences will be disastrous – first and foremost for the security and existence of Israel, secondly for the entire region and ultimately, far beyond that, for all of us in Europe and the world, for all who cherish the values of freedom, democracy and human dignity. This must be prevented [...]. The world does not have to prove to Iran that Iran is building a nuclear bomb. Iran has to convince the world that it is not striving towards such a bomb.

Later that year, the German energy company SPG Steiner-Prematechnik-Gastec signed a €100m deal to build three facilities in Iran for liquefied natural gas production, after the Federal Office of Economics and Export Control (BAFA) ruled, following a year-long investigation, that the agreement did not violate sanctions on Iran, prompting strong criticism from the U.S., Israel, and some observers (Weinthal, 2008). In response, Berlin urged German firms to show “sensitivity” and use their “moral sense” in their businesses with Iran (*Deutsche Welle*, 2008). Despite Berlin’s call for a (self-)discouragement strategy [‘freiwillige Selbstbeschränkung’], German exports to Iran rose by 10.5 percent, leading Chancellor Merkel to impose further restrictions on export credit guarantees to firms seeking business with Tehran (*Deutsche Welle*, 2009). By 2009, Germany was the third largest

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<sup>64</sup>The English translation of Merkel’s speech at the Knesset is available from: [https://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/doc/speech\\_merkel\\_2008\\_eng.pdf](https://www.knesset.gov.il/description/eng/doc/speech_merkel_2008_eng.pdf)

exporter to Iran, after China and the UAE (Sauer, 2011, p.96). *Le Monde* described Berlin's support for Paris and London's initiative to extend sanctions to Iran's banking and energy sectors as "more nuanced" than other EU members, arguing that "[i]n Germany, a country whose numerous [Small-and Medium-sized enterprises] SMEs are active in Iran, a strong friction exists between Chancellor Angela Merkel (in favor of new sanctions) and her Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (who is opposed to them)" (Nougayrède, 2009a). Sharing this view, Patterson (2013, p.141) maintains, based on interviews with diplomats, that the replacement of Steinmeier with Guido Westerwelle in 2009 was a decisive factor – besides a general disappointment in the German Foreign Ministry over the deadlock in nuclear talks – behind EU's approval of similar sanctions the following year (Busse, 2010). As former British Ambassador to Iran recalls: "I was puzzled too as to why the considerable anti-sanctions feeling in the EU was crushed. I suspect Germany was key. Germany was always the front marker as regards addressing Iranian concerns when the [EU+3] were meeting on Iran nuclear issues" (quoted in Patterson, 2013, p.145). This shift, following years of reluctance in Berlin to push for more stringent measures against Iran, was pivotal for the EU's approval of the oil embargo in 2012, after which Foreign Minister Westerwelle stated: "Derzeit haben wir aber keine andere Wahl, als neue Sanktionen zu ergreifen, die die Finanzquellen des Atomprogramms austrocknen", since Iran "weigert sich bisher unverändert, mit der internationalen Gemeinschaft zusammenzuarbeiten, er weigert sich, seinen internationalen Verpflichtungen nachzugehen" (*Zeit Online*, 2012). Later that year, following EU's decision to impose additional sanctions on banking and shipping sectors, Westerwelle expressed pessimism on the prospect of talks, telling reporters that he believed "Iran is still playing for time", adding that "[w]e don't see a sufficient readiness for substantial talks about the nuclear program" (Pawlak & Moffett, 2012).

#### 2.5.4.3.1 Other aspects of German-Iranian relations

In 2004, a diplomatic tit-for-tat ensued after the unveiling of a commemorative plaque outside the Mykonos restaurant, displaying the victims' names and the following words: "Murdered by the regime in Iran at the time. They died fighting for freedom and human rights". Shortly afterwards, a German government-funded language institute in Tehran was shut down and a plaque was erected outside the German Embassy in the Iranian capital, denouncing Germany's assistance to Saddam in the 80s (*Deutsche Welle*, 2004). In response to repeated calls from Iranian authorities to limit the freedom of action enjoyed by MEK in Europe, and as part of the Paris Agreement according to which "irrespective of progress on the nuclear issue", Iran and the E3/EU "confirm their determination to combat terrorism"

(Posch, 2006, p.105), Germany revoked the refugee status of some MEK members in 2005, banning their ‘criminal’ activities in the country (Mousavian, 2008, p.225). End of that year, German tourist Donald Klein was arrested for illegally trespassing the border in southern Iran. He was released 16 months later with former Foreign Minister Genscher’s mediation, according to *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Fried & Hickmann, 2010), and in an apparent prisoner swap for Kazem Darabi, one of the assassins behind the ‘Mykonos killings’, who was serving a life sentence in Germany (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2010). In 2006, amid protests including in Iran over the Prophet Muhammad cartoons, German daily *Der Tagesspiegel* published a caricature depicting the Iranian football team dressed as suicide bombers with a captain that read: “Why the German army should definitely be used during the [forthcoming] football World Cup”, causing a row between Tehran and Berlin (Harding et al., 2006).

In a bid to amend diplomatic ties, Iran hosted a classical music concert performed by the Osnabrück Symphony Orchestra in 2007 – a rare visit by a European ensemble – as part of an exchange after the Tehran Symphony Orchestra’s performance in Germany the previous year (Karimi, 2007). Yet, tensions intensified in bilateral relations over the years due to several incidents, most notably: Berlin’s reaction to the 2009 post-election unrest in Iran, with Angela Merkel announcing that “Deutschland steht auf Seiten der Menschen in Iran, die ihr Recht auf freie Meinungsäußerung und Versammlungsfreiheit ausüben wollen” (*Spiegel Online*, 2009); the arrest of German lawyer Andreas Moser during the protests in Iran (Röbel, 2009); accusations made by German intelligence that Iranian authorities spied on, and intimidated, dissidents on German soil (*Handelsblatt*, 2009); Berlin’s rejection of Tehran’s request in 2010 to extradite the leader of PJAK<sup>65</sup>, who was arrested by German authorities (Hunter, 2010, p.101); and the arrest of two journalists from the weekly paper *Bild am Sonntag* after interviewing the son of detained Sakineh Ashtiani (see section 2.5.4.2.1). The journalists, who, according to Iranian authorities, entered Iran without the requisite permit, were released four months later (*The Guardian*, 2011). Based on the information obtained by *Spiegel Online*, negotiations over the journalists’ release were linked to Berlin’s approval to assist with an oil deal between Iran and India by allowing the transfer of payments via the German central bank (Marquart et al., 2011). Amid harsh criticism, particularly from Washington, Chancellor Merkel halted the planned involvement of the Bundesbank (Brüggmann et al., 2011).

The traditionally-strong economic ties between Iran and its biggest European trading partner suffered over the course of the nuclear dispute. German exports to Iran – where 75% of SMEs use German-made equipment (*Deutsche Welle*, 2009) – that reached 4.4 billion

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<sup>65</sup> The Iranian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

euros in 2005, plummeted to 1.8 billion by 2013 (Heller, 2015). While Deutsche Bank and Commerzbank withdrew from Iran amid earlier UN resolutions and fearing U.S. reprisals<sup>66</sup>, German manufacturing companies remained in Iran until much later. In 2010, pressured by the German and U.S. governments, Siemens – the industrial and manufacturing conglomerate that had been operating in Iran since it built the Indo-European telegraph line in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Prodhan, 2016) – halted all new businesses in Iran. The company’s announcement coincided with Chancellor Merkel’s warning that “time is running out” for Tehran, on the occasion of a state visit by the Israeli President Shimon Peres to Berlin, who had criticized Germany for allowing its companies to continue business in Iran (Schaefer et al., 2010). The year before, Siemens was hit by growing calls for boycott following allegations that its joint venture Nokia Siemens Networks provided the Iranian regime with monitoring technology that was later (mis)used to track dissidents in 2009 (Kamali Dehghan, 2009). Similarly, German automotive giant Daimler that had been present in the Iranian market since 1953, pulled out of the country, having sold up to 10,000 commercial vehicles per year in Iran (Daimler AG, 2016). Without referring explicitly to Iran’s nuclear program, Daimler’s then-chief executive stated that “[t]he policies of the current Iranian leadership have compelled us to put our business relationship with that country on a new footing”, while stressing that “[n]one of these measures are directed against the Iranian people” (BBC, 2010b).

## **2.6 Conclusion: Dominant European discourses on Iran**

To Europe (and the West), Iran has been the Other since classical times, with some of the old tropes remaining pertinent in the context of present-day tensions with the country (Tharoor, 2015). The prevailing image of Persia/Iran in Western mindset underwent a sequence of changes in the course of time, which can be encapsulated – albeit in a simplified fashion – as a shift from a *respected enemy* (ancient times until the Arab conquest) to the currently *despised enemy* (post- Revolution period) (Frye, 2003). Throughout the more than four-decade history of the Islamic Republic, Iran and U.S. have perceived each other respectively through a Manichean lens of ‘Satan’ and ‘evil’<sup>67</sup> (Tarock, 2006, p.647). Contrary to Washington’s primarily ideologically-driven Iran policy (Ansari, 2006), Europe’s approach since 1979 has been more pragmatic (Rakel, 2009, p.249). Yet, as Kausler (2012, p.66) argues, despite its engagement with the Islamic Republic, based on the realities of economic interdependence and through non-coercive soft power, “essentially the EU has been treating

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<sup>66</sup> Both banks have since been subject to penalties for having breached U.S. sanctions i.e. under the ‘Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights act’ of 2012. See Atkins and Hübner (2014).

<sup>67</sup> See Beeman (2008) for the mutual demonization of Iran and the U.S since 1979. This depiction was nuanced when President Obama addressed Iranian people and their leaders in a groundbreaking message on the occasion of Norouz in 2009. Referring to Iran as ‘the Islamic Republic’, Obama announced: “The United States wants the Islamic Republic of Iran to take its rightful place in the community of nations” (The White House, 2009).

Iran as an outlaw state”, seeking to alter the regime’s behavior in line with the norms and practices of the international system. This conviction to maintain the status quo, Kaussler (2012) continues, is exemplified by the 2003 speech of Chris Patten, EU Commissioner for External Relations, at Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which he called upon the country to “embrace the family of nations” (see Iran Watch, 2003). Referring to Iran as “not only an ancient civilization and a regional power [...] endowed with an abundance of natural resources”, but also “an increasingly modern nation, with a potential to play a constructive role in the modern international community”, Patten added that “the choice lies with you. Rome was not built in one day, nor was a democratic Europe or even the European Union created overnight” (Iran Watch, 2003).

During Critical Dialogue, the pervasive discrediting of Iran as the ‘mullah state’ or ‘theocracy’ by the European public and exiled Iranians coupled with discussions about Iran’s ‘clerical system’ and the need for its ‘secularization’ raised Iranians’ suspicion as to whether, amid opting for dialogue with Tehran whilst exhibiting antipathy towards its leaders, Europe’s ultimate goal (same as U.S.) is regime change (Reissner, 2006, p.118). This “perceived ambiguity”, Reissner (2006, p.119) argues, became more obvious following Khatami’s election, whereupon Iran’s political elite came to be viewed through a “simplistic and dichotomous” lens: reformists (‘good guys’) and conservatives (‘bad guys’), as evident when only the former, following their triumphant victory in the 2000 Majlis election, were invited to represent Iran at the Berlin conference organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Nüsse, 2000).

By examining official European and international documents on Iran’s nuclear dossier and situating them within historical discourses about Iran, Santini (2010, pp.473-84) detected three overlapping, albeit distinct, discursive typologies and their corresponding practices vis-à-vis Iran: “one underlining the dangers posed by an aggressive and often seemingly irrational Iranian foreign policy”, therewith constructing the image of ‘Iran as untrustworthy’ and prompting coercive diplomacy; “one focusing on Iranian domestic concerns, especially human-rights violations”, constructing the image of ‘Iran as semi-authoritarian’ and leading to democracy and human rights (HR) promotion; and, one “stressing Iranian resources and demands, from its great civilization to its geopolitical perceptions”, emphasizing ‘Iranian rights and resources’, as reflected in cultural diplomacy whilst taking Iran’s security concerns into account. The first discourse and the subsequent mainstreaming of a securitized stance, “with the dichotomic depiction of an aggressive and irrational actor as opposed to a peaceful and restrained international community and Europe”, as Santini argues, became hegemonic over years (p.484). In sum, relations between Europe – beyond bilateral issues and

developments – and Iran since 1979 has gone through a “discursive evolution”: dealing with a pariah state torn by revolution and war; constructive engagement; dual track diplomacy and sanctions; the prospect of military escalation, shifting, by 2013, towards the end of the securitization spectrum, whereby “Iran as a particular actor, with its features, its demands, its context, disappears from the picture and what is left are only seemingly objective considerations and ‘matter-of-fact assessment’”(Santini, 2010, p.482).

### **3. Chapter Three: Theoretical Background**

This chapter provides an overview of trends/patterns in – and factors influencing – foreign news reporting in general, and those relevant to this research, in particular. Given the politico-historical context of Iran-West relations and the enduring perceptions of Persia/Iran in the West (Chapter Two), and since the core objective of this thesis is to examine Iran’s coverage in mainstream European media amid international tensions and diplomatic standoff, notions of ‘representation’ and ‘othering’ will be subsequently delved into. This is followed by discussing CDA and its main principles/features in addition to explaining the links between discourse, the media, and society. In this vein, the Discourse-Historical Approach, adopted in this study, will be reviewed alongside the core concepts therein. Some of the main criticisms directed at CDA-oriented studies and responses to them are stated next. The chapter concludes with a review of the extant research on Iran’s depiction in Western media.

#### **3.1 Foreign news reporting**

Within communication studies, foreign/international news has become an independent line of inquiry, with scholars examining this field from a variety of perspectives i.e. international news flow, media effect, and critical studies (see Sakurai, 2017 for a review). Foreign news – much like news in general – is undergoing transformation. According to Sambrook (2010), a combination of three factors, namely economy, globalization, and technology, has “accelerated change over a 20-year period and has fundamentally altered the structures of international news coverage established over the previous 120 years” (p.9). Studies have noticed a general decline in international news reporting<sup>68</sup> (e.g. Hafez, 2011, p.485; Moore, 2010). The reasons behind the ‘shrinking’ of foreign news is attributed to factors including editorial resources/priorities i.e. the closure of foreign bureaus and cuts in overseas staff; a perceived lack of public interest in foreign affairs; and the rise of digital media and access to alternative sources of news (Moore, 2010, pp.31-42; Sambrook, 2010). While political news constitutes the vast bulk of international coverage (Hafez, 2011), the overall decline in foreign news reporting has been shown to be coupled with a shift from focusing on public affairs and ‘hard’ news to more ‘soft’ news and infotainment<sup>69</sup> (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2013).

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<sup>68</sup> According to a survey by Media Standards Trust (U.K.), international news coverage across four leading British newspapers fell by 40 per cent since 1979, with international news accounting for a mere 11 per cent of the examined newspapers’ output compared to 20 per cent in 1979 (Moore, 2010). The trope of current decline in foreign news coverage has been challenged by some scholars (e.g. Archetti, 2012; Williams, 2014).

<sup>69</sup> For the distinction between sensationalism, soft news, infotainment, and tabloidization, see Otto et al. (2017).

Studies have noted differences concerning the levels of interest and diversity of topics in international news with regard to various regions. For instance, while Hafez (2002) observed a predominantly politics-oriented reporting of Middle East and North Africa (discussed later) in German press, Richter and Gebauer (2010) found an unexpectedly broad range of topics in the German media coverage of China. Studies have also shown that foreign countries are unevenly covered in world news (Segev, 2017; Wu, 2007), with their newsworthiness determined by elements pertaining to national trait (e.g. size, power), relatedness to the reporting country (e.g. geographic proximity), and the relevance/magnitude of the event or issue itself (e.g. wars, conflicts, disasters) (Segev, 2017, p.2). In their analysis of 35 leading news sites in different countries over a 2-year period, Segev and Blondheim (2013) found that the U.S. remained the most prominent country in global news coverage online, excluding in Egypt and France. The authors attributed the reason behind less interest in the U.S. in the case of the former to its regional focus, and a resistance to U.S. hegemony in the latter's case, which is "both demonstrated and practiced by diverting attention – including news attention – from it" and focusing instead on topics such as Greece's economic crisis and Iran's nuclear issue (p.157). In another study on North Korea's coverage between 1998 and 2010, Kim (2014) showed how U.S. news outlets portray and group nations together based on their pro- or anti-U.S. stance. In this vein, the "limitation of the world in the mainstream news to tiny bits of event-centred information", according to Hafez (2011, p.485), "leads to an enormous fragmentation, de-contextualization and a dangerous loss of complexity".

As 'gatekeepers', journalists and editors select events/issues deemed worthy of reporting. Taking into account the influence of market-related pressures, infotainment trends, and new technologies, Bennett (cited in Livingston & Bennett, 2003, pp.367-70) proposed a 'multigated model of news gatekeeping' that contain six dimensions of news construction – *decision basis, information gathering and organizing style, journalist's role* i.e. as watchdog or content provider, *concept of the (intended) public* i.e. engaged citizens or entertainment audience, *press-government relations* i.e. personalized or commodified, and *gatekeeping norm* i.e. independence, objectivity or fairness, infotainment, or eyewitness – that vary across four gatekeeping types, namely individual/professional judgement ('reporter driven'), organizational newsgathering routines ('organizationally driven'), economic constraints on news production ('economically driven'), and new Information and Communication Technologies ('technologically driven').



### 3.1.1 The interplay of media, politics, and society

To examine the causes and effects of foreign news reporting, Hafez (2000a, p.27) proposes taking the ‘subtle interaction processes between media, state and society’ into consideration. As such, international news coverage is viewed in terms of three interrelated levels “or, influences exerted on the journalist, on the media organization/media system and on domestic politics and society” (Hafez, 2011, p.492): *micro-influences* that entail the individual and professional socialization of journalists or others involved in mediated discourse; *meso-influences* that include the media’s power structures, interests, and behavior (e.g. investment in foreign bureaus/correspondents, reliance on news agencies, market pressure) that could reinforce sensationalist reporting, namely extensive coverage of conflicts and crises, or the media’s political/ideological stance; and, finally, *macro-influences* encompassing the impact of foreign policy, namely bilateral relations between reporting and reported countries as well as political actors upon news coverage through, for instance, ‘indexing’ (Bennett, 1991) elite national sources and perspectives or, vice versa, that of media on public and political agenda-setting (e.g. the CNN effect). In this vein, a parallel can be drawn between Hafez’s three-level model and two of the three conceptual dimensions proposed by Fairclough (1995a, 1995b) and stated already in Chapter One (section 1.3), to wit, *discursive practices*, meaning “the processes through which journalists produce texts, and readers use and understand them” (Richardson, 2007, p.75) that include, amongst others, professional and organizational norms/routines, and wider *social practices* that “while residing outside of the newsroom, permeate and structure the activities and outputs of journalism” (Richardson, 2007, p.114) and encompass economic, political, and ideological practices. Accordingly, the remainder of this section touches upon some of the main forces and dynamics that influence foreign news coverage, that is, interactions between media and their domestic environment, on one hand, and between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ issues (Hafez, 2000a, pp.31-8; Hafez, 2011, pp.492-94) on the other, which are relevant to the present study.

#### 3.1.1.1 News factors and values<sup>70</sup>

In terms of discursive practices that “amount to the processes involved in the production and consumption of texts” (Richardson, 2007, p.75) in (international) coverage, ‘news values’ are of particular significance. News values “can help us to understand the ways in which some phenomena become identified as ‘events’, the ways that some of those ‘events’ are then selected to become ‘news’, and the ways in which certain elements of the selected ‘events’

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<sup>70</sup> News factors are the news stories’ characteristics, the impact of which on their selection is referred to as news values. Thus, news values are “not qualities of news stories but characteristics of journalists – their judgement about the relevance of news factors” (Kepplinger & Ehmig, 2006, p.27 cited in Wendelin et al., 2017, p.138).

will be emphasized while others will be downplayed or excluded” (O’Neill & Harcup, 2020, p.225). In their seminal paper called *The Structure of Foreign News*, Galtung & Ruge (1965) presented a systematic list of 12 ‘culture-free’/‘culture-bound’ criterial factors<sup>71</sup> that make it more likely for foreign events to become news. Despite its enduring relevance, Galtung and Ruge’s taxonomy has since been revised and updated (see O’Neill & Harcup, 2020 for a review). For instance, based on their content analysis of news stories published in 3 leading British newspapers, Harcup and O’Neill (2001) proposed a list of news values that include (1) reference to elite, (2) celebrity, (3) entertainment, (4) surprise, (5) bad news i.e. conflict and tragedy, (6) good news i.e. rescues and cures, (7) magnitude (in terms of impact/people involved), (8) relevance (to target audience), (9) follow-up, and (10) newspaper agenda (pp.278-79). Bearing in mind the landscape of journalism today, Harcup and O’Neill (2017) revisited their list more recently and by expanding their research to encompass 10 British newspapers in addition to comparing journalist-selected news with most-shared stories on social media, suggested a modified set of news values that incorporates elements such as ‘exclusivity’, ‘audio-visuals’, and ‘shareability’ (p.1482), stressing that “the pressure to obtain clicks and shares” influences news selection and treatment (p.1483). Chang and Lee (1992, pp.555-56; 2012, p.373) group factors that influence foreign news reporting into distinct categories, namely *context-oriented* that considers the event’s origin in connection with contextual variables such as trade relations, cultural relevance, and political involvement; and (*content-* or) *event-oriented* that deals with the nature/characteristics of the event itself, namely human interest, crisis, and violence – irrespective of external setting. In their study, Chang and Lee (1992) found that notwithstanding differences among newspaper editors in U.S. and the newsrooms’ organizational constraints, the determining factors behind foreign news selection entailed American security and national interest (e.g. threat to U.S. and world peace, U.S. involvement), perceived reader interest, and timeliness. A decade later, through a longitudinal analysis (1988-2008), Chang et al. (2012, p.379) saw that “the priorities of journalistic values in foreign news reporting appear unchanged” in the U.S. and “the factor structure of foreign news values remains invariant over time”, which “cultivates a common worldview in the newsrooms” across the country. In another work, Guo (2012) conducted a comparative study on news value perceptions in China and U.S. Acknowledging the Western perspective of news values – as proposed by Galtung and Ruge – and “the subjectivity and culture-bound nature of news selection” (p.27), Guo (2012, p.34) noted that

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<sup>71</sup> Frequency, threshold, absolute intensity, intensity increase, unambiguity, meaningfulness, cultural proximity, relevance, consonance, predictability, demand, unexpectedness, unpredictability, scarcity, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, and reference to something negative. For an overview and critique, see Fowler (1991, pp.12-19).

both Chinese and U.S. perspectives tend to “emphasize the audience-oriented approach in articulating determinant factors of news value” (p.34).

Events, issues, and topics are filtered and selected for reporting based on a complex – and artificial – set of ‘newsworthiness’ criteria that fulfill a gatekeeping function involving “an ideological act of interpretation” (Fowler, 1991, p.19), therewith making news “not simply that which happens, but that which can be regarded and presented as newsworthy” (p.13). News values, Richardson (2007) explains, are the criteria that journalists use “to measure and therefore to judge the ‘newsworthiness’ of events” (p.91) in addition to “the (*imagined*) preferences of the expected audience” (p.94, emphasis in original). Accordingly, they are “intersubjective mental categories” involving “a reciprocal, dialectical process in which stereotypes are the currency of negotiation” (Fowler, 1991, p.17). In this vein, the media “do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy *in themselves*”, and what is considered ‘news’ “is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories” (Hall et al., 1978, p.53, emphasis in original).

Since news selection process entails a complex web of economic, institutional, societal, political, and ideological considerations, the taxonomies of news values indicated above offer “only a partial explanation” (O’Neill & Harcup, 2020, p.222-5) as to what becomes news. One enduring factor that continues to exert influence upon international reporting in the West and is manifested in, and expressed through, news values is the concept of ‘Ethnocentrism’ (e.g. Cazzamatta, 2020; Fürsich, 2010), of which ‘Eurocentrism’ is a particular case.

### 3.1.1.2 Eurocentrism<sup>72</sup> and Western media

The world, as mentioned earlier, is disproportionately covered in international news. The hierarchy of nations in foreign news reporting, with ‘the core countries of the international system’ (Williams, 2014, p.233) receiving more coverage, to paraphrase Segev (2017, p.2), not only mirrors but also preserves a specific world order. Amid growing media commercialism that accords primacy to what the audience wants, “there is a tendency to reproduce values, perceptions, and hierarchies steeped in the history of international relations – a history of colonial interaction” the legacy of which varies across countries and exists in different forms today (Williams, 2014, p.233). Of considerable relevance in this context is ‘Eurocentrism’, a “historically situated discourse” (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p.4) that “envisions

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<sup>72</sup> Shohat and Stam (2014, pp.1-2) describe Eurocentrism as “the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world’s center of gravity, as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the world’s shadow. Eurocentric thinking attributes to the ‘West’ an almost providential sense of historical destiny.”

the world from a single privileged point” (p.2) and is argued to be so deeply entrenched in contemporary representations and practices in the West that it has become “naturalized as ‘common sense’” (p.1). According to Wiedemann (2018), German journalist and the author of *Vom Versuch, nicht weiß zu schreiben*:

Es ist allgemein anerkannt, dass eine Reportage vom Kollegen A ganz anders geschrieben wird als vom Kollegen B; das wird als Subjektivität bezeichnet. Doch haben A und B in der Regel viel mehr gemein, als ihnen bewusst ist: ihren europäischen oder womöglich eurozentrischen Blick. Diese Gruppen-Subjektivität wird jedoch anders als die individuelle Subjektivität kaum reflektiert. Sie ist die selbstverständliche Ausgangsbasis unserer Arbeit (p.24).

Wiedemann clarifies that *weiß* does not merely indicate skin color, but also “ein System von Überzeugungen, Werten, Prämissen, Gewohnheiten, kurzum eine Ideologie von Privilegierung, die oft in bräsiger Unbewusstheit daherkommt ” (p.195). Uludağ (2017), for instance, studied how elite, liberal newspapers in U.K. and U.S. reported the ‘Arab Spring’ through the prism of what she labels a “Eurocentric conceptualization of revolution” (p.267) that constructs and reinforces the East/West dualism, concluding that “the politics of othering not only manifest themselves as an isolated set of neo-conservative beliefs behind foreign policies, on the contrary, the politics of othering are still very much present in everyday communications” (p.273). Closely related to – and intertwined with – Eurocentric discourse and the ‘West and the Rest’ bifurcation (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p.2) is Orientalism, “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said, 1978, p.2). Concerning the Western media coverage of Islam, Said (1997, xxii) argues that the practice of othering (discussed later) is “a one-sided activity that obscures what ‘we’ do, and highlights instead what Muslims and Arabs by their very nature are”.

### 3.1.1.3 Domestication of foreign news

Foreign news is often covered and interpreted “in accordance with the political culture, national interest and collective memory” of the country where news is being reported (Curran & Witschge, 2010, p.103). This process of ‘domestication’ gives certain international topics more salience, makes them more appealing/relevant/understandable to the target national audience (Gurevitch et al., 1991; Olausson, 2014, p.711), and/or functions as a market strategy in light of other competing media (Chang et al., 2012). Hafez (2000a, p.36) explains that the linkages between foreign and domestic *issues* are twofold: First, “foreign reporting can be drawn into domestic contexts and thus undermine any effort to report ‘objectively’”, and second, “the ‘domestizing’ of international coverage is evidence for the fact that

international communication has started to transform the world, which no longer consists of isolated entities, and that global interactions *do* exist that might also bring about globalized issue and value patterns” (p.36, emphasis in original). While foreign news domestication is not a new phenomenon<sup>73</sup>, it has grown in journalistic practice. In their longitudinal analysis, Chang et al. (2012) observed a notable shift in time from “the emphasis of *foreign* properties of events or countries involved to *domestic* audience orientation” (p.377, italics in original).

Scholars have examined foreign news domestication in various contexts (e.g. Taradai, 2014; Yarchi et al., 2017). For instance, through their comparative analysis of British, Finnish, and Pakistani media coverage of the 2011 unrest in Egypt, Alasuutari et al. (2013) identified four discursive modes of domestication constructed, albeit in different ways, across the studied countries, namely: ‘appealing to emotions’; ‘compatriots involved in the events’; ‘statements, moves and acts by domestic actors’; and ‘implicating domestic politics’. Besides “extroverted domestication”, Olausson (2014, p.722) refers to ‘counter-domestication’, acknowledging “a full-grown global news discourse” in view of the de-territorialized nature of contemporary challenges i.e. climate change and terrorism that blur the traditional domestic-versus-foreign news boundaries. In the context of mediated distant suffering, Joye (2015) identified four domestication strategies used by news producers at two Belgian TV stations: ‘emotional domestication’; ‘what are the stakes for us’; ‘aid-driven domestication’; and ‘familiarizing the unfamiliar’. While these modes of domestication invite (and entice) the audience to care, the author found that dominant power relations remained unchallenged: “the distant Other in need is [...] attributed far less screen time and relevance in comparison to so-called *proxies*, i.e., Belgian expats, tourists and relief workers. Therefore, most news items are not so much about the distant sufferers as they are about us, the westerners” (p.690, emphasis in original), adding that an emphasis on ‘proximity’ could reduce interest in *pure* foreign news and perpetuate a Eurocentric view of the world (p.690, emphasis in original). Later, Huiberts and Joye (2017) compared the domestication of foreign news by journalists *and* the audience in Belgium and found the most effective strategies for the latter to be “those that aimed to imagine or create a shared experience, either emotionally by narratively focusing on someone from the home country or by familiarizing the unfamiliar” (p.344). In her recent analysis of foreign news reporting about Latin America in German quality press (2000-2014), Cazzamatta (2020) measured domestication through expert interviews and noted how events are selected based on their relevance to Germany/German interests (e.g. environmental issues, dealing with the past etc.), how domestic references are transported to

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<sup>73</sup> Four decades ago, Peterson (1979, p.120) stated that the “majority of foreign news is domestic news about foreign countries, not international news” (cited in Joye, 2015, p.683).

foreign reporting, as well as differences between foreign correspondents and their editorial office in Germany concerning the predominance of self-reference (e.g. involvement of Germany/Germans in an event) in hard and soft news.

#### 3.1.1.4 Power, access, and diversity

Mass-mediated discourse is predominantly controlled by those van Dijk (2011) calls *symbolic elites*, “professionals who produce talk and text for the multiple public domains of communication in society” (p.6). The ways in which media (re)produce the ‘dominant discourse’ (van Dijk, 1996, p.91) and therewith reinforce existing power dynamics are not only linked to professional journalistic norms such as ‘objectivity’, realized through a number of strategies (e.g. use of elite sources), that perpetuates “an imbalance between the representation of the already privileged on the one hand, and the already unprivileged on the other” (Fowler, 1991, p.22), but also to organizational practices including, amongst others, hiring ‘beats and sources’ that result in institutional discrimination (van Dijk, 2011, pp.6-7) and what Richardson (2004, p.43) refers to as the “burden of representation”. In the U.K., for instance, research has shown a notable under-representation of Muslims in workforce – less than 0.5% of journalists compared to almost 5% of the British population (Versi, 2016). The “differential access of majority elites and minorities to the media” leads to “differential access to the structures of news reports”, namely, the “[s]election and prominence of news *issues* and *topics*” (van Dijk, 1996, p.93, emphases in original). The lack of diversity, meanwhile, has been counteracted by individual (e.g. Subramanian, 2018) and institutional<sup>74</sup> initiatives in various places. Based on interviews with journalists and news makers across Europe, O’Boyle et al. (2013) found that notwithstanding cross-national differences in terms of the opportunities provided, the majority of interviewees were “broadly supportive of diversity training, if somewhat hesitant about its implementation and likely effects” (p.301). As for diversity in media content, Bennett et al. (2013) noted variances among European countries as well as across media types regarding the tone and balance in coverage, but an overall “inaccurate group labelling and designation, negative or victimised representation, under-representation of migrants in quotations, and the scarce reference to a wider European context” (Bennett et al., 2013, p.248).

Diversity, however, does not automatically translate into pluralism. According to Hafez (2011, p.494), while a substantial segment of staff at CNN has an international background,

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<sup>74</sup> See, for example, the ‘Media4Diversity’ report . Available from: [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/mars/Source/Resources/References/Media4diversity\\_en.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/mars/Source/Resources/References/Media4diversity_en.pdf); One rather recent initiative is ‘The Muslim Story’ in Germany. See: <https://www.br.de/radio/b5-aktuell/sendungen/interkulturelles-magazin/the-muslim-story-102.html>

“power structures within the media organization can prevail and multicultural representation is what has sometimes been called ‘representation without participation’”. In the U.K. context, ‘ethnic diversity’, Richardson (2004, p.41) argues, “has historically been interpreted in a simplistic tokenistic manner, with Black staff expecting to fit into a news room culture dominated by the values of white, middle class, Oxbridge educated men”. In their analysis of Iran’s coverage in U.S. media, Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013) noted that despite their (cultural, linguistic, physical) access and privileged position as ‘authentic’ voices (p.65) that could add needed nuance and context when covering issues and events, Iranian diasporic journalists perpetuate dominant (stereotypical) discourses about Iran. In a similar vein, Nanquette (2017) observed what she termed ‘new orientalist narratives’ in diasporic/exilic discourses of Iranians in France (pp.65-78), characterized by three discursive elements, namely a simplistic view of Islam, a binary depiction of the world, and bias in favor of France (p.66). Shooman (2014, pp100-23) noticed a similar pattern with regard to prominent ‘Islamkritiker(innen)’ in Germany. Besides individual attitudes, to wit, the *micro* level in the aforementioned matrix proposed by Hafez (2000a), media institutions’ (profitable) interests as well as socio-cultural factors (*meso* and *macro* levels) influence diversity in both workforce and news content. In the German context, for instance, Wiedemann (2018) argues: “Migrantische Sichtweisen gelten im Mainstream als akzeptabel und medientauglich, wenn sie sich ohne größere Verwerfungen in ein kollektives deutsches Medien-Wir einfügen” (p.192).

### 3.1.1.5 Media freedom and state control in the reported country

Besides the factors and forces stated above, foreign news coverage can also be influenced by conditions that are specific to the reported country. This includes, for example, state control and restrictions that foreign journalists/correspondents face in getting access to, and reporting on, authoritarian countries such as Iran, “a closed society with tight controls over foreign media – and over those wishing to speak to the media” (Sambrook, 2010, p.89). In 2013, Iran was ranked 174<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2013). Media censorship – and, more generally, the human rights situation – in Iran has been subject of much international concern and criticism, especially since the 2009 post-election protests and the state’s nationwide crackdown, with another wave of pressure/intimidation on Iranian journalists and news media intensifying prior to the 2013 election to preclude potential unrest (Wojcieszak et al., 2013). Foreign journalists wishing to cover Iran on the ground face several hurdles: They are obliged to obtain official accreditation from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and the few who are granted access to the country are subjected to tight restrictions on their movement in addition to close

surveillance during their stay and, moreover, are perceptible to self-censorship so as to avoid crossing the ‘red lines’ (Niknejad, 2014a; Sambrook, 2010; Wiedemann, 2018). Officially, interview sessions should be conducted in the presence of a ‘minder’, who acts as translator and is appointed by the Ministry of Culture (Niknejad, 2014a, p.22). The situation is even more complex and risks much higher for dual nationals working in a country that often brands journalists ‘enemies of the State’. For instance, German-Iranian correspondent Natalie Amiri had to give up the ARD bureau in Tehran, which she headed since 2015, after being warned against returning to Iran by the German Foreign Office in 2020 for fear of being held (political) hostage (Ahnefeld, 2021), a common practice and part of Tehran’s policy of ‘hostage diplomacy’ mentioned before in the context of bilateral relations (Chapter Two), affecting, amongst others, Iranian-American journalist Jason Rezaian who served as Tehran bureau chief for *The Washington Post* and was charged with espionage in 2015 – and released in 2016.

In view of major obstacles, creative measures have been adopted to circumvent official access restrictions. One such initiative is Tehran Bureau, an independent news organization launched by Golnoush Niknejad initially as a blog, that offers original reporting, commentary and analysis on Iran from contributors in- and outside the country. According to its Iranian-American founder, Tehran Bureau was “a response to shrinking foreign news coverage” in the U.S. (Niknejad, 2014a, p.20) and, by working anonymously, has raised the possibility to “penetrate a closed society” and conduct “the kind of independent reporting that is virtually impossible for a physical news bureau inside Iran” (p.21) via its hybrid model using undercover journalists and distant editors (Niknejad, 2014b). In January 2013, *Guardian* formed a partnership with Tehran Bureau to “open a window on life in the Islamic republic” and “bring the voices of ordinary people to an international audience” (Soal, 2013). While hosting the virtual bureau (until 2016), with its posts yielding “anywhere from 10,000 to 50,000 hits” and featured on occasion in print (Niknejad, 2014, p.20), *Guardian* assured that it would “retain [the bureau’s] independence under [Kelly Golnoush] Niknejad” (Soal, 2013).

### **3.2 Representation and the foreign Other**

The above-stated factors greatly influence how media portray – and how people perceive and learn about – foreign places. In this context, the concept of *representation* is particularly relevant. As Fürsich (2010, p.115) states, “representations in the media [...] create reality and



normalise specific world-views or ideologies”. Representation<sup>75</sup>, according to Hall (1997, p.226), functions both as notion and practice. In other words:

[...] Images do not carry meaning or ‘signify’ on their own. They accumulate meanings or play off their meanings against one another, across a variety of texts and media. Each image carries its own, specific meaning. But at the broader level of how ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ is being represented in a particular culture at a particular moment, we see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations from one text or site of representation to another [...]. We may describe the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment as a regime of representation (Hall, 1997, p.232).

Hence, image plays an important role in constructing identities and defining who we are (not) in relation to others. “Images”, de Buitrago (2012, xiv) states, are not static and “can also be newly created and constructed, even though there must some link to memory or to existing perspectives or ideas for those new images to be able to take hold in the minds of people and to thus be effective from the view of those promoting them”. The way the Self is understood is intertwined with how the Other is viewed, “for there could be no self without the other and no other without the self. In essence, defining the self always requires a differentiation from that which is not the self” (de Buitrago, 2012, xiv). Therefore, in addition to how foreign places and topics/issues related to them are depicted, international news “is about how *we* interpret *ourselves* through foreign countries”, and serves as a form of cultural expression and manifestation “as to how we make sense of a given discourse within our cultural milieu” (Sakurai, 2017, p.6, emphases added). Representations “are thus a product of mutual constructions of the self and other” (de Buitrago, 2012, xiv) and entail the othering process. In simple terms, othering involves establishing the dichotomy of Self and Other, of Us versus Them, whereby concepts of ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’, mentioned in the above-cited quote, are deployed to construct and identify in- and outgroup categories that lead to strengthening a sense of belonging (for Us) while, at the same time, propagating exclusion – either group-based or at individual level – and inequality (for Them). Identity formation in the Self-Other relation operates “as part of an interactive and intersubjective process” (Vaahensalo, 2021, p.230).

Constructing Otherness can function as ‘a significant identity-forming agent’ or rather as ‘a counterpoint for positive self-perception’ (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.4). The former includes, for example, the Western Self versus Oriental Other juxtaposition, and the latter, for instance, a rogue state actor as opposed to the (assumed) law-abiding and rational ingroup members, with a negative Other being crucial for positive Self. Besides (c)overly

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<sup>75</sup> Fowler (1991, p.12) chooses ‘representation’ over ‘bias’ to denote “the processes which lead to ‘skewing’ and ‘judgement’”.

promoting a favorable self-image, motivations behind othering vary and the process brings about consequences at verbal and practical (policy) levels (de Buitrago, 2012, xv). Othering serves to: (re)produce (and justify) discrimination against (ethnic, religious, cultural etc.) minority groups within a nation or prejudice against other nations, preserve the asymmetry in power relations (e.g. between the West and the Orient) and further empower Us while disempowering Them, rationalize ingroup's domination and use of hard power i.e. 'Axis of Evil' and the subsequent 'War on Terror', or carry soft power implications (e.g. de Buitrago, 2012; Fürsich, 2010; Lams, 2017; Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017; Pan et al., 2019, p.58). Power, it should be stressed, need not be in actual, political sense and can function by means of representation and production of knowledge and culture (Hall, 1992;1997). While othering entails (re)presenting Self and Other as different, this differentiation is not always conducted in a hostile manner, or, in other words, "filled with purely negative content, such as dislike, aversion or enmity" (de Buitrago, 2012, xv). It can also be expressed favorably through admiration and "manufacturing, celebrating and exoticising difference" (Fürsich, 2010, p.118), albeit from a reductionist perspective sometimes, through the prism of which "the foreign Other is reduced to essentialist stereotypes" (Lams, 2017, p.2). "Most often though", de Buitrago (2012, p.xv) maintains, "a view of hierarchy is part of othering processes" with the Self "being typically placed above" the Other. This involves (implicit, explicit) positioning of the ingroup's superiority and the inferiority of the outgroup/outsider. Dominant views, conceptions, and beliefs in a given society about the foreign Other are recycled and disseminated in mass media and, accordingly, "can easily become 'common sense' characterizations of the Other without being questioned" (Lams, 2017, p.2). Moreover, they "can also be instrumental for those in power", who tend to use (or exploit) these ideas – and simplifications – as compelling argumentation to lend legitimacy to enacting policies and actions (p.2). "Once this position has become consensual", Lams (2017, p.2) argues, "those who have everything to gain by categorizing the world in a certain way will struggle to keep their meanings mainstream or dominant and therefore, hegemonic." Regarding (challenges related to) media representations of the Other, Fürsich (2010, pp.116-18) addresses two types of Othering: representation of 'minorities as Others in a nation' and that of 'international Others', the latter which and "the media's role in explaining international relations, conflict and culture" (Fürsich, 2010, p.116) is especially pertinent to this study<sup>76</sup>. In this vein, Fürsich (2007, pp.117-18) mentions some key factors that influence, and therewith limit the scope of,

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<sup>76</sup> As Chapter Eight will show, the two Othering forms overlap in some comments. However, given the aim of this study, which is to examine Iran's image in mainstream European news sites, the main focus remains on mediated representations of the 'international Other'.

foreign news coverage in the West<sup>77</sup>, including those discussed above such as news values, an ethnocentric vision – and its historical manifestation, Orientalism – as well as indexing. Referring to prior research, Fürsich (2007, p.117) maintains that Western news coverage of the developing world “is almost exclusively triggered by crises, catastrophes and natural disasters – thereby re-emphasising an image of the developing world as is chaotic beyond relief and in constant need for support by the west”. While representation is ingrained in the representer’s language, culture, and institutions, amid challenges of foreign correspondence in places such as Iran in view of strict state control and media censorship, as stated earlier, local (alternative) voices and perspectives cannot be easily accessed and amply incorporated in foreign news reporting, thus rendering locals under- or misrepresented, with the Other spoken for, rather than listened to. In the absence or lack of interpersonal contact and intercultural relations, the knowledge and perception of people in the West about the foreign Other are largely based on the (simplified) image of the Other as constructed and depicted in Western media – be it intentional or unconscious. These formed assumptions can, in turn, influence individual behavior, at times with harmful implications, such as distrust in (or fear of) the designated outgroup, belief in the Self’s superiority over the Other, (latent, manifest) bias/dogma and exclusion, etc.

In line with Molek-Kozakowska and Chovanec (2017, pp.3-4), this study adopts the notion of ‘Other’ “as an umbrella term to investigate a given discursive representation of a collective identity of a social group that is forged by different segments of the ingroup”. This includes, on one hand, “a more powerful group that typically has privileged access to the mass media and holds certain symbolic capital (such as political and intellectual elites, established media professionals, mainstream/majority opinion leaders)”, and othering in “citizen discourse” – news sites’ commenters, in this case – “often claiming to speak on behalf of the silent crowd”, on the other. In this sense, the Other “is to be regarded as a discursively constructed category”, with othering practice being “inescapably linked with the expression of one’s differentiation from other social actors, be they individual or collective entities” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.3). Representation, likewise, is ‘a discursual matter’ and, accordingly, one can “distinguish different discourses, which may represent the same area of the world from different perspectives or positions” (Fairclough, 2003, p.26). Considering the aforesaid interplay of media, politics, and society (section 3.1.1.), and given that news discourse tends to (re)produce “problematic (that is, limited) representations” of reality, meaning “constructed images that carry ideological connotations”, which “can have negative consequences for political and social decision-

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<sup>77</sup> For othering in non-Western contexts, see, for example: KhosraviNik (2015); Lams (2017); Pan et al. (2019).

making and can be implicated in sustaining social and political inequalities” (Fürsich, 2010, p.115), media(ted) representation of the Other is inevitably relevant to CDA.

### 3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), or Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of approaches and methods that examine discourse practices.<sup>78</sup> CDA is “fundamentally political in its orientation, interdisciplinary in its scholarship, and diverse in its focus” (Blackledge, 2005, p.3). As a ‘school’ or ‘paradigm’, CDA is defined by the following key principles: all approaches, regardless of their differences, are problem-oriented, and, as such, interdisciplinary and eclectic; they have a shared interest in eliciting ideology and power by means of a systematic and reproducible<sup>79</sup> investigation of data; and the practitioners make explicit their adopted methods while having self-reflection throughout their research (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.3, italics in original). The approaches within CDS are neither isolated from the specific issue(s) under scrutiny, nor from the research questions and interests (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p.3). Despite their differences, all CDS have “an inherently ‘holistic’ approach toward the subject matter of analysis where the analysts are interested to account for how ideologies are interwoven into discourse and try to explicate the link between discourse and the society” (KhosraviNik, 2010a, p.68). CDS view language ‘as social practice’ and highlight the relevance of the context of its use. “In essence”, Richardson (2007, p.42) explains, CDA “involves an analysis of how discourse (language in use) relates to and is implicated in the (re)production of social relations – particularly unequal, iniquitous and/or discriminatory power relations”.

CDA views discourse as “not only a container and carrier of ideologies – whereby ideology is represented in discourse – but also an action in itself, which contributes to or constitutes ideologies” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.47, emphasis in original). Given ideology’s social aspect, language “as the means of communication” serves “a pivotal role” in the (re)production or transformation of ideologies in and through discourse (p. 47, italics in original).

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<sup>78</sup> For a review of CDA approaches, see Bell and Garrett (1998); Caldas-Coulthard & Coulthard (1996); Wodak & Meyer (2009, 2016).

<sup>79</sup> ‘nachvollziehbar’

### 3.3.1 The notion of ‘discourse’ within CDA

The term ‘discourse’ and its associated meanings have been “subject to a hugely proliferating number of usages in social sciences”, resulting in “confusion – which leads to much criticism and many misunderstandings” (Wodak, 2008, p.1). Discourse<sup>80</sup> has come to mean:

anything from a historical monument, a *lieu de mémoire*, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language *per se*. We find notions such as racist discourse, gendered discourse...media discourse, populist discourse, discourses of the past, and many more— thus stretching the meaning of *discourse* from a genre to a register or style, from a building to a political programme (Wodak, 2008, p.1, italics in original).

One of the most popular definitions is proposed by Fairclough and Wodak (1997):

CDS sees discourse – language use in speech and writing – as a form of ‘social practice’. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institutions and social structure(s) which frame it: That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned – it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contributes to transforming it. Since discourse is so socially consequential, it gives rise to important issues of power. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects – that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations...through the ways in which they represent things and position people (p.258 cited in Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p.6).

CDA scholars distinguish between ‘text’ and ‘discourse’; ‘texts’, as *instances* of discourse, are “often sites of struggle in that they show traces of differing discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.10), whereas ‘discourse’, broadly speaking, is defined as *text in context*. Each text is linked to other texts and social practices through processes of ‘intertextuality’ and ‘interdiscursivity’ (Blackledge, 2005, pp.5-6). *Intertextuality* refers to the fact that each text “relates both synchronically and diachronically” to other texts (Wodak, 2008, p.9), either through “explicit reference to a topic or main actor; through references to the same events; by allusions and evocations” etc. (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.90), or via *recontextualization* that involves transferring certain elements to a new context in a way that “[t]he element (partly) acquires a new meaning, since meanings are formed in use” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.90). *Interdiscursivity* indicates that discourses are connected to one another in various ways; for instance, a discourse on (un)employment is linked to (sub)topics of gender and racism (Wodak, 2008, p.3) or a discourse on climate change is connected with economy or health (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009,

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<sup>80</sup>Fairclough (2003, p.26) distinguishes between discourse as an uncountable and a count noun: ‘discourse’ “is being used here in two senses: abstractly, as an abstract noun, meaning language and other types of semiosis as elements of social life; more concretely, as a count noun, meaning particular ways of representing part of the world”.

p.90). Interdiscursivity, moreover, denotes “the intertextual relation of genres and discourses within a text” (Blackledge, 2005, p.11).

As CDA is “fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language”, meaning, it “aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (Wodak, 2001a, p.2), the notion of power “in or behind language use/discourse is quintessential to critical discourse studies” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.64).

### 3.3.2 Discourse and power

A discussion on the link between discourse and power would be incomplete without mentioning Michel Foucault and his work on the intimate power-knowledge relationship. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000, p.227) write that knowledge, according to Foucault, “is at the base of the exercise of power, while the exercise of power also produces knowledge”. In other words, “power becomes a crucial dimension in knowledge supported by institutional practices as well as institutional practices based on knowledge” (p.227). Foucault aimed at exploring how the social and power converge by investigating power’s modes of operation in modern societies (Westwood, 2002, p.134) In this vein, as Westwood (2002, p.134) points out, “for Foucault, to be part of the social is to be enmeshed in power relations and the power/knowledge complex”. What knowledge comprises, how it evolves and is imparted, what its functions are in terms of forming subjects and shaping society, and what its wider impact upon society are, constitute central issues in Foucauldian discourse analysis (Jäger, 2001, pp.32-3). As ‘agents’ of ‘knowledge (valid at a certain place at a certain time)’, discourses exercise power” (Jäger, 2001, p.37).

Westwood (2002, p.33) points out that notwithstanding Michel Foucault’s ability “to inspire elaborations of the West in relation to the Other – the Other is absent from Foucault’s work. Issues of race and racism and post-coloniality do not figure ostensibly in Foucault’s work”. Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus is central to, and built upon, Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism*. Said (1978) views and examines Orientalism as a discourse (in Foucauldian terms), without which “one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (Said, 1978,p.11), and a manifestation of power/knowledge. European colonialism and (cultural, economic, political) domination of the Orient, according to Said, was associated with how the latter was constructed, conceptualized, and made ‘known’ by

the former as well the power asymmetry between the Occident and Orient. “Knowledge of the Orient”, Said (1978) maintains, “because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient” (p.48, emphasis in original), and this “knowledge [of ‘the Orient’/‘Orientals’] gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (p.43). Building on Said’s work, Hall (1992) analyzes how the discourse of ‘the West’ took hold through an ostensibly natural differentiation from ‘the Rest’ – or, according to Said, ‘the Orient’. Hall (1992, p.201) stresses the significance of discourse, that is, “a particular way of *representing* ‘the West’, ‘the Rest’, and the relations between them”, as an integral medium between construction of knowledge and the ensuing representation of reality. Emphasizing the dialectics of discourse, power, and knowledge (Foucault, 1980), Hall (1992, p.205) maintains that discourses are:

“ways of talking, thinking or representing a particular subject or topic. They produce meaningful knowledge about that subject. This knowledge influences social practices and so has real consequences and effects. Discourses are not reducible to class-interests, but always operate in relation to power – they are part of the way power circulates and is contested. [...]”

Referring to Foucault (1980), Hall (1992) characterizes Orientalism as a ‘regime of truth’ (p.205), arguing, further: “When it [discourse] is effective, - organizing and regulating relations of power (say, between the West and the Rest), it is called ‘a regime of truth’” (p.205). In tune with Said, Hall views discourse of ‘the West’ as being shaped and influenced by interests/motives and produced and exercised amid unequal power dynamics. Discourse, therefore, “is about the production of knowledge through language, but it is itself produced by a practice: ‘discursive practice’ – the practice of producing meaning” (Hall, 1992, p.201).

Language, as Fowler (1991, p.1) stresses, “is not neutral, but a highly constructive mediator”. “Language use”, as Richardson (2007) argues, “is one way in which subjects – people – may act upon society” and media discourse, specifically, is “one active element in bringing about such a change” (p.29, italics in original), given its ubiquitous presence in people’s lives and high level of exposure to it. The context in which journalistic language is used and the consequences thereof are “intimately related to power” (Richardson, 2007, p.220, emphasis in original). Power “is an essential issue to acknowledge”, since journalism “has more power to shape our understanding about events, ideas, people and the relationships between people, than many other forms of communication” (p.220). Based on these observations, mass- mediated discourse should be understood and examined in a way that it is “explicitly related to power, ideology and hegemony” (Richardson, 2007, p.225).

### 3.3.3 CDA and mainstream media

Journalistic discourse, Carvalho (2008, p.161) states, is “media representation of social issues” in addition to “the discursive construction of events, problems and positions by social actors”. News, according to Fowler (1991), is a genre that not only shapes but also is shaped by human experience and (cultural, political) worldview. Accordingly, news, Fowler (1991, p.101) argues, “is not just a value-free reflection of facts. Anything that is said or written about the world is articulated from a particular ideological position”. Mass- communicated discourse thus “becomes the main field of action for competing ideologies” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.48). Concerning the interplay between discourse and mass media, the following approaches exist; discourse *about* mass media, discourse *of* mass media, and mass media *as* discourse (Torfing, 1999, pp. 212-13). While focusing on the *discourse of mass media* provides an insightful – albeit narrow – examination of the form and content of message(s) produced, it fails to view media texts as “not only socially shaped but socially constitutive”, therewith undermining the impact of media on the power mechanisms at play (p.213). By contrast, a *mass media as discourse* approach enables a multifaceted reflection on different levels of analysis (Torfing, 1999, pp. 213-14). In this vein, Mautner (2008, p.33) lists the following contextual factors to be considered: economic, political and legal background; the institutional environment within which the text is produced; authorship (individual or collaborative); the production process (sourcing, writing and editing); and the demographics/lifestyle of the intended audience alongside their literacy practices.

Given the importance attached to the relation between discourse and power in CDS, van Dijk (1996, p.84) draws attention to ‘discursively mediated dominance’ through – among other domains – media. Since “[m]uch ‘modern’ power in democratic societies is persuasive and manipulative rather than coercive (using of force)”, van Dijk (1996, p.85) explains, this involves “the manipulation of *mental models* of social events through the use of specific discourse structures, such as thematic structures, headlines, style, rhetorical figures, semantic strategies, and so on”, which could result in “the formation of *preferred models* of specific situations” (p.85, italics in original). Power, in fact, constitutes a key element in every aspect of the dialectical and interdependent relation between media discourse and society stated in the beginning (Chapter One, section 1.3). In other words: “Central to each of these discourse processes is *power*: the power of social practices on production; the power of texts to shape understandings; the power of readers to resist such management; and the power of people to reproduce or transform society” (Richardson, 2007, p.45 emphasis in original). This includes reinforcing and disseminating worldviews that serve to uphold – and naturalize – dominant power relations; privileged access to mass media and journalistic practices such as objectivity



in news reporting through quoting sources, viewed as “the most visible capitulation to power, since access to any particular medium of discourse is a power resource *in itself*”, and incorporating ‘facts’ that “are themselves a product of social discourse and hence an index of power” (Richardson, 2004, p.45, emphasis in original), indicated earlier (sections 3.1.1.2 and 3.1.1.4). Each of these factors and choices entails, and contributes to, exercising ‘discursive power’ as conceptualized by Jungherr et al. (2019).

Two specific aspects of news production, namely selection/filtering based on *news values* discussed before (section 3.1.1.1) and *news sources* (sourcing procedures), are “crucial to an appreciation of the fact that between an event and its appearing (or not appearing) in print there lies a chain of selection processes. Selection is conditioned by economic, political, cultural and social structures made evident through institutional practices so highly routinized that the result appears normal and inevitable” (Mautner, 2008, p.33). The *ideological* aspect of news values that is particularly relevant to CDA, as it seeks to uncover the (re)construction of ideology<sup>81</sup>, has been shown in several studies. For instance, through a Discursive News Values Analysis and by examining two territorial disputes – one between China and Japan, one between South Korea and Japan – in U.S. media, Kitano (2019) found how different sets of news values (e.g. Eliteness and Negativity) are used and accentuated to “effectively group US allies together as being of high status and importance, while non-allies are constructed as dangerous” (p.29). The findings from an earlier study by the Glasgow Media Group (2000) indicated that the majority of news on British television about developing countries focused on negative events involving war, terrorism, conflict or disaster. In another study, Baker et al. (2013a) noticed a strikingly high number of conflict-related stories in the British press coverage of Islam/Muslims:

[...] bad news stories tended to be viewed as having a higher news value than good news stories. This is one argument that editors could make [...]. However, to counter this, we would point out that, when we compared our corpus of stories about Islam with other corpora of more general news..we found that there were more references to conflict in the Islam corpus – a difference that was statistically significant. Even taking into account the general press tendency to focus on bad news, the amount of conflict stories regarding Islam and Muslims looked suspiciously high (Baker et al., 2013a, p.258).

Furthermore, journalists rely on various sources i.e. the information they obtain themselves and that which they gather from news agencies, press releases, and ‘authoritative’ sources (Richardson, 2007, p.182). “The result” of a tendency to depend heavily on elite sources (e.g. politicians) “is a predominantly establishment view of the world” (Fairclough, 1995b, p.49).

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<sup>81</sup> See Bednarek and Caple (2014) for their discursive approach to news values – as “values that exist in and are constructed through discourse” (p.135, italics in original).

Fowler (1991, p.20) also reminds us of economic and social factors behind news selection, arguing that the media is ‘an industry and a business’ – with institutional and commercial structures and mechanisms influencing what is to be selected and published as news. Fowler refers, for example, to the intertextuality of editorials, namely their reliance upon official sources, and maintains that powerful institutions “provide the newspapers with modes of discourse which already encode the attitudes of a powerful elite. Newspapers in part adopt this language for their own and, in deploying it, reproduce the attitudes of the powerful” (Fowler, 1991, p.23). Hence, discursive representation is “a constructive practice” (p.25):

Events and ideas are not communicated neutrally, in their natural structure, as it were. They could not be, because they have to be transmitted through some medium with its own structural features, and these structural features are already impregnated with social values which make up a potential perspective on events [...]. *How* the medium is used implies options for the producer or editor: the physical and structural characteristics of the medium [...] offer choices; these choices are made with systematic regularity according to circumstances, and they become associated with conventional *meanings* (Fowler, 1991, p.25, emphases in original).

Hence, “the sourcing and construct of the news is intimately linked with the actions and opinions of (usually powerful) social groups” (Richardson, 2007, p.1) While analyzing media output can inform us about “what has been selected for publication as news” which, in turn, assists in expanding one’s knowledge about “what is news beyond the anecdotal and the realm of what we may think we know into more systematic analysis of what has actually been selected” (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017, p.1475, emphases in original), it is crucial to bear in mind that textual (or journalistic) meaning is “communicated as much by absence as by presence; as much by what is ‘missing’ or excluded as by what is remembered and present” (Richardson, 2007, p.93, emphasis in original). Moreover, the media’s agenda and their content should be considered in view of their (imagined, intended) audience. In the case of broadsheet newspapers in the U.K., for instance, Richardson (2004, p.36) states that British media’s coverage “reflects the preferences and politics” of their “predominantly middle and upper class audience”.

### 3.3.3.1 Deconstruction of othering in mediated discourses through CDA

Media discourse serves a pivotal role in shaping views and perceptions. Conflicts, be they within a nation or beyond borders, can be preserved, intensified, or transformed depending on the role assumed and exercised by media. As stated above, media are a public domain in which the Self and Other are (re)produced, perpetuated, and/or challenged. The question of who belongs to Us and who does not – along with its inclusionary and exclusionary effect – “feeds into power relations and ideologies from various perspectives” that transcend “various

economic, political and social realms” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.70). In other words, media representations tend to reflect, maintain, and/or rationalize (economic, political, ideological) interests of dominant groups (p.72). Considering the power of the media and their significance to society, it is hardly surprising that news discourse has been (and will continue to be) critically investigated. CDA “engages with, analyses and critiques social power and how this is represented and, both explicitly and implicitly, reproduced in the news” (Richardson, 2007, p.29). In national and international contexts, the ‘problem of representation’ (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p.170), that is, “the reproduction/construction of a particular reality (re-presentation)” and “what (and whose) interests and views (voices)” are endorsed (p.170), involving conflictual and hierarchical positioning of Us and Them, dichotomous in- and outgroup construction, and the consequential (dis)empowerment/(de)legitimation, occupy a prominent place in elite discourse and practice, and thus continue to be a focal point of investigation in CDS (e.g. Baker et al., 2008; Baker et al., 2013a, 2013b; Bridge, 2017; KhosraviNik, 2010b; Richardson, 2004, 2007; Wodak & Matouschek, 1993; van Dijk, 1991). The official (political, institutional) discourse and othering therein can, in turn, be (re)constructed or resisted in citizen discourse in “an attempt to delimit the powerful group’s own identity more sharply” or in order “to entrench its power” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.4). Online discussions in the form of comments are particularly pertinent to CDA-oriented research, including this study, since they constitute “a domain of identity articulation in which self and other are established, enforced and reinforced” (Fielder & Catalano, 2017, p.208). News sites’ comment sections, as Chapter Four (section 4.3.2.4), are a communicative space where prevailing narratives are consumed and (re)produced, since “discourse not only reflects the world around us but constructs it as well” (p.208), and also constitute a public site where counter-narratives that contest representations in mainstream media discourses, and various forms of othering, which may differ from that in official discourse, are (allowed to be) expressed.

According to van Dijk (1998), personal beliefs “derive from socially shared opinions or attitudes as well as from people’s personal experiences and evaluations as these are represented in so-called *mental models*” (p.26, italics in original). The underlying ‘mental models’<sup>82</sup> behind group-based beliefs, ideologies, and attitudes that polarize and therewith (de)legitimate Us and Them are determined by the polarizing propositions of positive Self-

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<sup>82</sup> While van Dijk (1998) views ideologies as ‘cognitive structures’ (p.23) and ‘group-self schemata’ (p.25), others propose taking a more materialist approach to language ideology. Milani and Johnson (2010), for instance, stress the importance of extracting “the social mechanisms through which particular ideas or beliefs about linguistic practices are produced, circulated and/or challenged through meaning-making activities under particular conditions. And...such a materialist approach cannot be fully achieved without a close scrutiny of the texts, practices, and politics of mass mediation” (p.4, italics in original)

presentation and negative Other-presentation – We are Good and They are Bad – and have an evaluative structure that he calls the ‘Ideological Square’<sup>83</sup>, which encompasses the following principles (van Dijk, 1998, p.33):

- Emphasize our good properties/actions
- Emphasize their bad properties/actions
- Mitigate our bad properties/actions
- Mitigate their good properties/actions

Since representational discourses and constructions of Self and Other are inextricably tied to classification and categorization, van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach and the concept of ‘Ideological Square’ therein, together with the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) outlined below offer a suitable framework in addition to “very useful tools that allow us to trace the minute operation of discursive othering at the micro-level of linguistic form as well as strategic and thematic analysis” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.6). The ‘discursive strategies’ set by the DHA, “which are all involved in the positive self- and negative other presentation” (Wodak, 2001b, p.73), along with van Leeuwen’s (1996) taxonomy of social actors’ representation (discussed in Chapter Five, section 5.1), are applied in the present study to deconstruct “the discursive construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’”, viewed “as the basic fundamentals of discourses of identity and difference” (Wodak, 2001b, p.73), and its (de)legitimation function in media texts and media-related contexts. This entails attending to linguistic choices and mechanisms by means of which (positive, negative) stereotypes and biased/prejudicial perceptions about, in this case, Iran(ians), are perpetuated in media texts and reproduced – and spread – in online discussions or, on the contrary, to detect counter-narratives that challenge/contest dominant views and clichés about an (international) Other (Chapter Two) in media and citizen discourses, the latter which, Chapter Four (section 4.3.2) elaborates, constitutes “a domain of articulation and struggle of various hegemonic and non-hegemonic identity representations” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.2). Besides the explicitly value-laden references and overt forms of evaluation and articulation, notably in comment sections, CDA helps uncover (ideological) premises upon which unquestioned and common-sense views are based, and reveal the more subtle aspects of othering and ways of persuasion therein, especially in media texts, that on the surface – depending on their genre – might otherwise appear objective; to wit, CDA addresses the subtle (re)production of what van Dijk (1997, p.41) refers to as “underlying social cognitions”. When analyzing “the description of Others”, van Dijk (1997, p.42) emphasizes that “we must focus on several

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<sup>83</sup> See the 10 ‘discourse structures’ outlined by van Dijk (1998, pp.31-45)

discourse dimensions that either overtly or more subtly play a prominent role in the expression and communication of the social representations of Others as well as their social and especially their political conditions and functions”.

### 3.3.4 The Discourse-Historical Approach

DHA was developed by Ruth Wodak and her colleagues at Vienna University<sup>84</sup>. The first research project in which DHA was adopted was a study on Austrian postwar anti-Semitism<sup>85</sup> during which some of the approach’s main features were established: (1) an interdisciplinary research project with a specific emphasis on historical embedding; (2) multiple triangulation (data, theory, and methods), and (3) orientation towards practical application of the findings (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.31). Since then, DHA has been widely used in myriad works on a range of social/political issues including, but not limited to, mediated discourses on climate change (e.g. Reisigl & Wodak 2009, 2016), discriminatory (political, media) practices (e.g. Blackledge, 2005), media representations of ‘Others in a nation’ (Fürsich, 2010, pp.116-17) i.e. migrants and refugees (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2010b), the discursive construction of (Self and Other) identities in traditional/new media (e.g. Baker et al., 2008; Dorostkar & Preisinger, 2017; KhosraviNik, 2015; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017, Paprota, 2017), and rightwing populism in Europe (e.g. Bridge, 2017; Wodak & Matouschek, 1993; Wodak et al., 2013). The multiplicity of topics and interests<sup>86</sup> shows that DHA is “a flexible and productive variety of CDS that always opts for a problem-oriented perspective”, which, in turn, “demonstrates a clear preference for interdisciplinary research, since the selected discourse-related social problems are multidimensional” (Reisigl, 2017, p.47). DHA is interested in the social processes through which discourse is *formed* in addition to the discourse’s social *impact* (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.69, emphases added). Since the study on Austrian postwar anti-Semitism, several principles have come to characterize DHA, the most salient of which are summarized by Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p.95) as follows:

1. The approach is interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity involves theory, methods, methodology, research practice and practical application.
2. The approach is problem-oriented.
3. Various theories and methods are combined, wherever integration leads to an adequate understanding and explanation of the research object.
4. The research incorporates fieldwork and ethnography (study from ‘inside’), where required for a thorough analysis and theorizing of the object under investigation.
5. The research necessarily moves recursively between theory and empirical data.

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<sup>84</sup> For the history of DHA over the past 3 decades, see Reisigl (2017, pp.44-7).

<sup>85</sup> See Wodak (2001) for a review.

<sup>86</sup> DHA is concerned with diverse areas of discourse studies i.e. ‘discourse and discrimination’ (e.g. racism, nationalism, islamophobia etc.), ‘discourse and politics/policy/polity’ (e.g. migration, asylum, nationalism etc.), ‘discourse and history’, and ‘discourse in the media’ (traditional and new) (Reisigl, 2017, p.48).

6. Numerous genres and public spaces as well as intertextual and interdiscursive relationships are studied.
7. The historical context is taken into account in interpreting texts and discourses. The historical orientation permits the reconstruction of how recontextualization functions as an important process linking texts and discourses intertextually and interdiscursively over time.
8. Categories and tools are not fixed once and for all. They must be elaborated for each analysis according to the specific problem under investigation.
9. ‘Grand theories’ often serve as a foundation. In the specific analyses, however, ‘middle-range theories’ frequently supply a better theoretical basis.
10. The application of results is an important target. Results should be made available to and applied by experts and be communicated to the public.

Informed by Critical Theory, DHA belongs to inductively-oriented approaches within CDS whereby researchers “select problems they are ‘curious’ about and where they attempt to discover new insights through in-depth case studies and ample data collection” (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p.18). Despite sharing commonalities with other CDA approaches regarding, for instance, emphasis on the discourses’ practice-related quality, their context-dependence, and constructive character (Reisigl, 2017, p.49), DHA distinguishes itself in a number of ways: it accentuates the historical alignment of certain discourses more than others; the (extended) research projects within its framework follow the principle of triangulation more systematically; and, finally, it underscores the importance of argumentation analysis more than most approaches (Reisigl, 2017, p.49). Given the fact that the notions of ‘critique’, ‘ideology’ and ‘power’, on one hand, and the concepts of ‘discourse’ and ‘context’, on the other, constitute integral elements in all CDA approaches, the next sections briefly show how they are conceptualized within the DHA (Reisigl, 2017, pp.50-54; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp.87-93; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, pp.24-31).

#### 3.3.4.1 Critique, ideology, and power

‘Critique’ carries a multitude of meanings<sup>87</sup>. Adhering to a ‘critical’ stance indicates maintaining distance from the data, contextualizing the data, explicating the (political) standing of discourse participants, and remaining self-reflective throughout the research process (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009, p.87). Within DHA, ‘critique’ encompasses all stages, namely “in the context of discovery, of justification and of application” (Reisigl, 2017, p.50).

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<sup>87</sup> Some scholars have suggested ‘positive discourse analysis’ to refer to counter-discourses that contest media’s mainstream narrative (e.g. Macgilchrist, 2007). This has been criticized by others on the basis that the “notion of the ‘critical’ has itself become obscure in western CDA [...]. Competing notions such as ‘positive discourse analysis’...will need to be assessed, not least because adopting a ‘positive’ stance towards public discourse may slip over the complicity in injustice or oppression. The very notion of ‘positive’ discourse analysis, moreover, contextually presupposes a rather limited notion of what the ‘critical’ in CDA implies in the first place – in fact it presupposes that ‘critical’ discourse analysis is ‘negative’ discourse analysis, which is surely misleading” (Chilton & Wodak, 2005, xvi)

DHA distinguishes three forms of critique, listed by Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p.25, italics in original) as follows:

1. '*Text or discourse-immanent critique*' aims to discover inconsistencies, (self)-contradictions, paradoxes and dilemmas in text-internal or discourse-internal structures.
2. '*Socio-diagnostic critique*' is concerned with uncovering the—particularly latent—persuasive or 'manipulative' character of discursive practices.
3. Future-related *prospective critique* seeks to improve communication (e.g. by elaborating guidelines against sexist language use or by reducing 'language barriers' in hospitals, schools and so forth).

Based on this conceptualization, DHA aims to make transparent both the topic under scrutiny and the researcher's own position to justify "why certain interpretations and readings of discursive events seem more valid than others" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.25). Furthermore, one of the main purposes of DHA is to 'demystify' the hegemony of particular discourses (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.88) by unravelling ideologies "that serve to establish, perpetuate or resist dominance" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.25). In this vein, DHA views ideology as:

an (often) one-sided perspective or world view composed of related mental representations, convictions, opinions, attitudes and evaluations, which is shared by members of a specific social group. Ideologies serve as an important means of establishing and maintaining unequal power relations through discourse: for example, by establishing hegemonic identity narratives, or by controlling the access to specific discourses or public spheres ('gate-keeping'). In addition, ideologies also function as a means of transforming power relations more or less radically. Thus, we take a particular interest in the ways in which linguistic and other semiotic practices mediate and reproduce ideology in a variety of social institutions (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.88).

For DHA, language does not hold power in and of itself. Rather, language is a means to obtain and uphold power through its use by those in power. Since texts are often sites of social struggle and negotiation, with competing ideologies fighting for dominance, power "is legitimized or de-legitimized in discourses" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.89).

#### 3.3.4.2 Discourse and context

From a DHA perspective, 'discourse' is understood as:

- a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action
- socially constituted and socially constitutive
- related to a macro-topic
- linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.89).

Within DHA, ‘discourse’ encompasses groups of actual texts, conversations, interactions and other *semiotic events*. These *discursive units*, which correspond to particular genres, are *intertextually* connected by a *macro-topic* that is divided into different *topics*, *subtopics*, and *content-related argumentative schemes (topoi)* (Reisigl, 2017, pp.51-2). As with other CDA approaches, DHA views discourse as ‘text in context’. Adhering to the triangulation principle mentioned earlier, DHA takes four dimensions of context into account (Reisigl, 2017; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.93, 2016, p.53) that connect micro-level analytical categories to macro-structure (ideology) and can be broken down into the following (KhosraviNik, 2010a, pp.66-67): the immediate text (*intra-textual*); the intertextual and interdiscursive relations between texts genres and discourses (*inter-textual*); the next level that situates discourse(s) and the way specific topics evolve within a given society (*discoursal*); and the wider socio-political and historical context that “explicate the possible interpretations and linkages between a current discourse and the base of public ‘knowings’” (KhosraviNik, 2010a, p.67).

### 3.3.5 Criticism of CDA and responses

Having outlined CDA as an appropriate theory *and* method for analyzing representation in mediated discourses, it is imperative to review the main criticisms facing this approach. Given the centrality of the notions of ‘power’ and ‘ideology’ to CDS, as these studies aim at “revealing structures of power and unmasking ideologies” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.8), some scholars such as Milani and Johnson (2010, p.5) caution – concerning the intersection of *language ideology* and *media discourse* – against treating the power of language ideology as “simply embedded within the mediated text alone”, therewith undermining the multiple readings of intended audience in addition to overemphasizing the semiotic and technological affordances in the production process surrounding media texts. Greg Philo from the Glasgow University Media Group argues that conclusions drawn from a text-based analysis of media output are limited, as they fail to amply incorporate the context(s) of production, reception, and circulation – to wit, the full cycle of news discourse – and, as such, highlights “a need to develop methods which can trace the communication of messages from their inception in contested perspectives, through the structures by which they are supplied to and processed by the media, then to their eventual appearance as text and finally to their reception by audiences” (Philo, 2007, p.192). Philo’s call for situating news discourse in its context has been reiterated by others. Acknowledging valid concerns with regard to the researcher’s interpretive oversight arising from a text-only analysis, Fürsich (2009, p.249) defends a well-executed textual analysis that establishes the *ideological potential* of texts between production and consumption: “A combination of meticulous reading and contextualized interpretation of text”, she argues, “will be able to explain the specific ideological moment”



(p.248). The limits of textual analysis have likewise been addressed by Fairclough (2003), who stresses the importance of considering different elements in the ‘processes of meaning-making’, namely “the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text” (p.10), adding that “one needs to look at interpretations of texts as well as texts themselves, and more generally at how texts practically figure in particular areas of social life” (p.15). As for DHA, it insists on “accounting for discursal absences as well as presences” and strives to examine “the available discourses vis-à-vis the context of possible or alternative (absent) discourses” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.67)

Other concerns/critiques are related to data selection/sampling and their representativeness (Baker et al., 2008, pp.281-83) as well as the potentially biased results (e.g. Widdowson, 1995, 2000). CDA studies have, in general, been criticized for examining a limited set of data i.e. a small number of texts, short texts and/or text fragments (e.g. Stubbs, 1994). Schegloff (1997) voices concern about the inclusion of categories defined a priori by researchers that derive from their own bias rather than from the data itself. In a similar vein, some have warned against the dangers of bias and the tendency to ‘cherry-pick’ in CDS (e.g. Baker & Levon, 2015, p.222). Widdowson (2000) likewise cautions that researchers might select only those texts for analysis that confirm their pre-conceived (ideological) position. While Widdowson (1995) argues that CDA is, above all, (partial) interpretation and not analysis, others dismiss this claim by maintaining that the interpretative work within CDA is more of an *explication* than mere subjective understanding (e.g. Fairclough, 1996; KhosraviNik, 2010a, 2015). Some have also challenged the very assumption that it is at all possible to conduct any research entirely free from preconceived value judgements: “Widdowson is, strangely enough, missing the fact that there is no value-free CDA, that, ultimately, there is no value-free science” (Gouveia, 2003, p.57, cited in Blackledge, 2005, p.17). Koller and Mautner (2004) warn against the inclination to choose texts that are atypical, rendering their generalizability and representativeness problematic: “The hidden danger is that the reason why the texts concerned are singled out for analysis in the first place is that they are not typical, but in fact quite unusual instances which have aroused the analyst’s attention” (Koller & Mautner, 2004, p.218, cited in Baker et al., 2008, p. 281). In this respect, notwithstanding the explicit stance taken by CDA practitioners with regard to the subject of analysis, some could be accused of selecting texts that are either erroneously considered to be representative or have been intentionally picked to “prove a point” (Baker et al., 2008, p.283). As a result, “texts that present a more complex or even contradictory picture might be overlooked” (p.283). Despite the claim that CDA is ‘political’ and thus ‘unscientific’, the approach, it is argued, “is political in the sense that it concentrates on *power* relations as its

central theme” as well as “in terms of its commitment and contribution to struggles against *inequalities* and *suffering* (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.50, italics in original). In this vein, to reduce the risk of politicizing, some CDA scholars follow the principle of triangulation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.89). In their Discourse-Historical approach, which is argued to be “the most equipped approach to studying collective social identities in discourse” (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017, p.3619; see also KhosraviNik, 2010a; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, 2016), Reisigl and Wodak base their triangulation on a conception of ‘context’ that takes four dimensions (or levels of analysis) into consideration (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.93):

1. the immediate, language or text-internal co-text and co-discourse
2. the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses
3. the extralinguistic social variables and institutional frames of a specific ‘context of situation’
4. the broader sociopolitical and historical context, which discursive practices are embedded in and related to.

The suggested triangulatory approach attempts to minimize the risk of being too subjective (Wodak, 2015, p.2) as well as ‘cherry picking’, by “providing retroductable, self-reflective presentations of past or current research processes” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.11). Within the variety of approaches to CDA, the Discourse-Historical approach “takes into account the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses, as well as extralinguistic social/sociological variables, the history and ‘archeology’ of an organization, institutional frames of a specific context of situation and processes of text production, text reception and text consumption” (Baker et al., 2008, pp.279-80). In other words, the approach aims to transcend the linguistic dimension and incorporate, more or less systematically, other aspects i.e. the historical and political in both the analysis and the interpretation of discursive events (Wodak, 2008, p.12).

### **3.4 Iran in mainstream Western media: a review of scholarship**

Regarding Western media’s portrayal of Iran, two lines of empirical work can be detected: those using Iran, a predominantly Muslim country<sup>88</sup>, as a case study to examine the wider representation of Islam/Middle East in mainstream media (‘Iran, the archetypical Islamic country’) and those that focus exclusively on Iran/Iran-specific topics (‘Iran’s image’).

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<sup>88</sup> According to CIA World Factbook (2011), 99.4% of Iranians associate themselves with Islam (Shia 90-95%, Sunni 5-10%), 0.3% with other religions i.e. Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian, and 0.4% unspecified.

### 3.4.1 Iran, the archetypical Islamic country

Western media's coverage of Islam/Muslims has been studied extensively<sup>89</sup>. Notwithstanding differences in terms of adopted approaches and methods or selected medium, nation, and timeframe, numerous studies have shown an overall negativized and stereotypical depiction of Islam (as a monolithic religion) and Muslims (as a homogeneous outgroup), replete with Orientalist tropes and often entangled in conflict, violence, and fanaticism. As such, Islam and Muslims are (re)presented as the negative mirror image of Western ideals and values; in other words, an *Other* to one's *Self*. Over the past decades, the discursive construction and perception of Muslims in media/public discourse has transformed from "an 'exotic presence' to bearers of values, cultural traits and political predispositions deemed radical, threatening, and incompatible" (Tsagarousianou, 2016, p.3). While this shift – notably since 9/11 and the climate thenceforth – "from a focus on cultural differences to a securitization discourse, [...] a reduction in the topics in which Muslims are considered newsworthy, [and] their further homogenization" (Poole, 2020, p.474) has been observed cross-culturally, scholars have also noted the relevance of nation-specific variances in their reporting. In the German context, Ceuppens' (2016) study confirms the main findings of earlier empirical research (e.g. Hafez, 2002; Schiffer, 2005): "the 'othering' of Islam was found to be symptomatic for German media", with violence as a central topic playing a significant role (p.144). In her book entitled "*...weil ihre Kultur so ist*", Shooman (2014) examined anti-Muslim discourses propagated through a repertoire of recurrent argumentative strategies across various genres, including, but not limited to, mainstream media, blogs, and books. Using the coverage of the first German Islam Conference in 2006 as a case study, the author noted the othering of Muslims in sampled newspapers (*FAZ* and *Die Welt*) which, concurrently, perpetuated a good-versus-bad Muslim dichotomy:

Zusammenfassend lässt sich feststellen, dass [Interior Minister] Wolfgang Schäubles Initiative [to convene the Conference] zwar als Bemühung um eine Anerkennung von Musliminnen und Muslimen als Mitglieder der deutschen Gesellschaft [...] gelobt wurde, dies dennoch mit einer bipolaren Rhetorik einherging, der eine Wir-Sie-Dichotomie zugrunde liegt und die Muslime folglich als Andere festschreibt. Zugleich perpetuierten viele Journalistinnen und Journalisten eine nicht minder binäre und stereotype Einteilung in "gute" (säkulare/liberale) und "schlechte" (organisierte/praktizierende/orthodoxe) Musliminnen und Muslime (Shooman, 2014, p.139).

In the U.K. context, Poole (2016, 2020) presents an extensive review of Islam's coverage (pre- and post-9/11) in British media. Referring to a dominant "framework of interpretation" that has prevailed British (and global) reporting, Poole identifies the most prevalent topics associated with Islam and Muslims after 9/11 as 'terrorism', 'extremism', 'conflict/violence',

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<sup>89</sup> See the meta-analysis by Ahmed and Matthes (2017) of 345 studies conducted in English between 2000 and 2015; the cross-cultural study by Mertens and de Smaele (2016); and the literature review by Poole (2020).

and ‘cultural values/differences’ especially regarding veiling and freedom of speech (Poole, 2016, pp.26-35; Poole, 2020, pp.473-78). This “framework of reporting”, Poole (2020, p.475) argues, “shows that news will be selected if it fits with preconceived notions of who Muslims are and an issue’s significance to dominant groups” and is strongly linked to “the ‘frameworks of interpretation’ of different, particular elite groups and nations”. Based on their corpus-driven linguistic analysis, Baker et al. (2013b, p.275) found that Muslims are often constructed collectively by means of two collocate pairs, namely *Muslim world*<sup>90</sup> and *Muslim community*, which “help to create the idea of Muslims as belonging to a distinct and separate ‘imagined community’ at both the global and national level, and, thus, contribute towards a process of ‘othering’”.

As for French media, De Cock and Du Pont (2016) have noticed that ‘foreign Islam’ receives substantial attention in French broadsheets, which the authors attribute to France’s principle of *laïcité* combined with the country’s own colonial past and historical connection to the ‘Muslim world’. This attention to foreign Islam varies across media in Western Europe, as shown in a cross-country content analysis, whereby “th[e] national factor outweighs the importance of the ideological differences between progressive and conservative newspapers” (Mertens, 2016a, p.73). In another study, Scalvini (2016) examined European public debate on religious diversity in four countries, including Britain, France, and Germany. By analyzing the news coverage in selected broadsheets from each country between 2009 and 2010, after the minaret ban controversy, the author detected nation-specific patterns with regard to similar discourses: the nationalist discourse, for example, was observed in all countries albeit constructed through divergent argumentative means such as ‘identity’ in Germany, ‘loyalty’ in Britain, and ‘secularism’/‘republicanism’/‘values’ in France.

In line with these studies<sup>91</sup> and as part of a wider investigation of Islam/Middle East’s representation, scholars have examined Western media depiction of Iran. Said (1997), for instance, maintains that a homogeneous and belligerent Islam epitomized by two key events, namely the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis became emblematic of Western media

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<sup>90</sup> Baker et al. (2013b, p.274) draw on Carpenter and Cagaptay’s (2009) criticism of the notion ‘Muslim world’: “This term is not only an analytical error – it’s also a critical public diplomacy mistake. Muslim world unfairly and singularly assigns adherents of Islam into a figurative ghetto. And particularly in the post-September 11, this relegation carries a real moral hazard: By lumping together extremists, secularists, and everyone in between, the term Muslim world legitimizes the idea that all of the group’s members are locked in deadly conflict with the non-Islamic world [...]”. This critical reading, Baker et al. (2013b) argue, depends on the context of its usage, that is, whether or not the term intends to accentuate the Muslim world/West bifurcation (p.274).

<sup>91</sup>Acknowledging a notable gap in the literature, Douai and Lauricella (2014) analyzed the coverage of Shia-Sunni relations over a decade in American and Canadian media. Besides differences in the ways the two branches were represented, the authors noted the framing of the Shia-Sunni rivalry from ‘the war on terrorism’ perspective.

parlance. In his longitudinal study<sup>92</sup>, Hafez (2000b) noted that the coverage of Middle East in German elite press was “almost *confined* to politics, whereas all other parts of life were neglected” (p.186, emphasis in original). In Iran’s case, while entertainment-related topics about the Pahlavis were published throughout 1950s – during the Shah’s marriage to half-German Soraya Esfandiari<sup>93</sup> – and 1960s, Iran attracted significant attention “only *after* the Iranian Revolution broke out in 1978-1979” (p.193, emphasis in original). In other words:

Im Fall Irans war es also nicht ‘kulturelle Nähe’ [...] sondern im Gegenteil (die zeitgenössisch nahezu durchgehend attestierte) kulturelle Gegensätzlichkeit zwischen islamischem Fundamentalismus und westlicher Kultur, die im Verbund mit der politischen Zentralität und Konflikthaftigkeit Irans die mediale Beachtung steigerte (Hafez, 2002, p.68).

This shift was paralleled by an overall change in German public perception of the Middle East; regarded once as a region of “exotic Oriental charm”, the area came to be viewed as “a source of political ‘hard news’ only” (Hafez, 2000b, p.188). Moreover, Hafez (2002) argues that the Iranian Revolution exacerbated deeply-rooted stereotypes about Islam as violent, extremist, and anti-progressive, while triggering – not only in the media, but also amongst scholars – a preoccupation with ‘political Islam’ (pp.215-23). Thus, Islam was increasingly perceived in terms of (the fundamentalist varieties of) political Islam, with negligible attention paid to its cultural and/or religious aspects.

Examining Islam’s coverage on French television over a long period (1975-2005), Deltombe (2007, pp.11-14) contextualizes the evolution of an ‘imaginary’ Islam in the French media discourse over three stages: mid-1970s until the end of 1980s, where two incidents, namely the oil crisis and Iran’s revolution, incited media attention; the 1990s during which Khomeini’s Iran, which epitomized (the threat associated with) Islam throughout the 1980s, was replaced by Saddam’s Iraq and, later, by Islamism in Algeria; and, thirdly, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This constructed imaginary Islam, as Deltombe argues, is, on one hand, “an *evanescent* [I]slam, disappearing from the screens as suddenly as it had appeared, in accordance with the events that seem to have implicated it” (p.11, emphasis in original). On the other, it is also “a *partial* [I]slam, viewed through ‘the problems’ and crises that are not inextricably connected to it” (p.11). Tracing Islamophobia in France back to the Iranian Revolution and its aftermath, prior to which Islam was unbeknownst to the majority of public, Deltombe (2007) asserts that the Islamic revolution left an enduring mark on French viewers by introducing a new vocabulary that entailed Islamic notions i.e. ‘ayatollah’, ‘mullah’, ‘chador’, ‘Shia’ and ‘Sharia’ (p.19). Hence, Khomeini’s Iran turned rapidly into a

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<sup>92</sup> Some of the findings presented in Hafez’s anthology (2000) were part of a longitudinal research project called ‘The Image of the Middle East and Islam in German Press’ (Hafez, 2002).

<sup>93</sup>On the so-called ‘Soraya-Pressé’, see Hafez (2002, p.13).

force radically hostile to the West in general and France in particular. In other words, through media discourse, Tehran became the central gravity of a ‘Muslim world’ increasingly distant from the West. This, it should be added, was in stark contrast to the “very favorable” stance taken by French media toward the Iranian anti-American and anti-imperialist fervor on the eve of the Iranian Revolution, with occasional comparisons made, enthusiastically, to the French Revolution of 1789<sup>94</sup> (Tork Ladani, 2018, pp.247-48); for instance, the first long interview with Khomeini during his sojourn outside Paris appeared in *Le Monde*, wherein the newspaper lauded Iran’s liberation movement, led by the Ayatollah, as a key force behind the uprising. *Le Monde* even published an article entitled *Nous passons des années 1789* [We are passing through the 1789 years]<sup>95</sup>. The French newspaper’s coverage, as Nanquette (2017) argues, underwent a significant shift over time, from playing “a leading role in the positive representation of the Revolution” to portraying Iran, following the Hostage Crisis, the Iran-Iraq war, and the Rushdie Affair, as “a fanatical, terrorist country” (pp.58-9). Today, “*Le Monde* oscillates between extreme positive and negative representations, which correlate with the ability or failure to understand Iran in French terms [...]. French coverage of Iran is inclined to understand the Other according to well-known categories, insisting on elements that can be readily identified with” (Nanquette, 2017, p.60). Similarly, McAuliffe (2007) argues that the revolution and the ‘Westoxification’ promoted by Khomeini marked the beginning of a discursive shift in the media about Iran, from a secular to “the current quintessentially Islamic nation” (p.38). Over time, Iran has thus “become a coherent national fragment of neo-Orientalist discourse, in that its constructed Islamic homogeneity comes to be emblematic of the schism between ‘the West’ and ‘the (Islamic) Orient’” (p.38).

Iran received further media attention in the 1980s due to the eight-year war with Iraq<sup>96</sup>, followed by the colossal repercussions from the Rushdie affair (Chapter two, section 2.3), considered “[o]ne of the first instances of the confrontation of European media and public opinion with Islam” (Tsagarousianou, 2016, p.6). According to Deltombe (2007), the Rushdie affair – along with the first *affaire du foulard* [scarf controversy] in France – reconstructed televisual discourse by bringing the (French) ‘Muslim community’ to the forefront of media reporting (p.77). Analyzing the German media’s coverage of the affair, Hafez (2000a) shows how the print media reported the controversy from a human rights perspective, stressing the right to freedom of expression, while “decod[ing] the Islamic context in such a way that the idea of a primordial and overall antagonism between the

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<sup>94</sup> This initial enthusiasm was also shared by some French intellectuals, most notably Michel Foucault. See Scullion (1995) for an outline and critique.

<sup>95</sup> Hellot-Bellier (2007, p.711) cited in Tork Ladani (2018, p.248).

<sup>96</sup> For instance, Devictor (2018) identified a shift in French TV reporting of the conflict, from an initially scant coverage of a conventional and distant war to the depiction of an Islamic threat to France.

Islamic faith and Western human rights ideals was reinforced” (p.56). Coverage in German media was “often essentialist in nature, as it emphasized differences rather than existing commonalities” (p.56). As such, a significant part of the German elite press, Hafez maintains, “in a very rare coalition of ultra-conservative and liberal segments, expelled Islam and the Muslims from the world of civilization and virtually equated Islam with barbarianism” (p.55). Similarly, Poole (2000) noticed that the controversy continued eight years on to be topical in two British broadsheets from different political persuasions, “as though the Rushdie affair has come to symbolize the debate about freedom of speech in the press” (p.164). Poole further argues:

The fact that Muslims are continually associated with the issue of freedom of speech [...] illustrates the perceived threat to British liberal values and democracy from irrational, antiquated Muslims. The Rushdie affair has become an ongoing news story due to the Iranian *fatwa*.. and as a result of this, relationships with Iran [...]. Again, this suggests that the agenda of Muslims in Britain is being dictated by Muslims outside Britain, that Muslim values are impinging on British society as being a constant reminder of the global menace and Iranian threat to peace (Poole, 2000, p.165).

In a detailed analysis of the discursive representation<sup>97</sup> of Islam/Muslims in British broadsheets drawing on van Dijk’s Ideological Square, Richardson (2004) identified four ‘archetypal argumentative strategies’ often used by journalists “to depict ‘negative Muslim social space’” (p.75): “First, the military threat of Muslim countries; second, the threat of ‘Muslim political violence’ and extremism; third, the (internal) threat to democracy [...]; and finally, the social threat of Muslim gender equality” (p.75). In Iran’s case, as Richardson (2004) observed, the British media’s coverage “focuses predominantly on the ‘military threat’ Iran poses to other countries, the threat ‘Islam’ poses to the democratic stability of Iran and, to a lesser extent, on Iranian gender inequality” (p.232). Based on a systematic computer-generated comparison of a large dataset from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* spanning 35 years, Terman (2017) detected an overall tendency in U.S. media to report unevenly about (Muslim) women, whereby “Muslim women are considered newsworthy to the extent that they live in societies that violate their rights” (p.500). For instance, she noted 102 articles about women in Iran compared to 20 on Malaysia and argued that “Muslim women from oppressive countries display more prominently than those in relatively egalitarian societies (p.493).

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<sup>97</sup> Elsewhere, Richardson (2007) explains the development of his research project from a quantitative content analysis of patterns across texts to one “aimed at examining meaning *within* texts and relationships between these meanings and the wider processes of newspaper production and consumption” (p.20, emphasis in original).

### 3.4.2 Iran's image

*The U.S. Press and Iran: Foreign Policy and the Journalism of Deference* (Dorman & Farhang, 1987) remains one of the most insightful studies on Western media's depiction of (pre-revolution) Iran. Based on their examination of Iran's coverage in U.S. press (1951-1978), the authors argue that the shortcomings of American press coverage – stemming from the U.S. policy-makers' views and assumptions about Iran that remained predominantly unchallenged by journalists for twenty-five years – was to:

ignore the *politics* of the country. This failure was rooted in the assumption that the political aspirations of Iranians did not really matter. This was an assumption shaped and reinforced by the foreign policy establishment and was given credence by highly West-centered preconceptions and an internalized cold-war-oriented ideology. Implicit in such an assumption were the beliefs that the Iranian people were incapable of politics, that they were incapable of self-rule, and that they were incapable of an authentic desire for freedom (Dorman & Farhang, 1987, p.13, italics in original).

As such, U.S. coverage of uprisings leading to the revolution mostly disregarded – or misinterpreted – the *objective* conditions on the ground, namely the decades-long repression combined with rampant socio-economic problems, due to *subjective* factors related to the revolution itself, including its religious character and its antagonism to a pro-West regime, as well as to American journalism (pp.165-66). In other words, “the subjective motivational forces of the revolution clashed with the subjective internalized values of reporters”, which, in turn, was “reinforced with an ideological bias that filtered Iran's past and present through the lens of narrow American self-interest” (p.166). Similarly, by comparing U.S. media coverage of two civilian airplanes shut down by the military, namely a Korean Airlines jet shot by a Soviet fighter plane in 1983 and the U.S. downing of an Iranian plane in 1988, Robert Entman (1991) demonstrated two constructed realities, with the former incident depicted as a moral outrage and the latter as a technical problem (p.6).

Following the 9/11 attacks and U.S. President Bush's inclusion of Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' group, a growing number of studies attended to Iran's image in Western media. For example, based on a thematic analysis of 171 front pages in the *New York Times* (2001-2009), Jahedi and Abdullah (2012) identified the most recurring Iran-related themes as 'sponsorship of terrorism', 'nuclear threat', 'internal unrest', and 'post-election unrest in 2009' (pp.62-7). In his anecdotal book entitled *L'image de l'Iran à la Télévision Française* [Iran's Image on French Television], journalist-in-exile Jamshid Golmakani (2010) looked into reports/documentaries about Iran over a period spanning three decades (1978-2008). The author found that Iran's depiction has been predominantly standardized i.e. through perpetual images of Friday prayers or gatherings at the (Iran-Iraq war) martyrs' section in Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, both which, according to Golmakani, serve to evoke 'shock' based on their



Islamic character (p.41), or repeated images of ‘bearded Mullahs’ and ‘veiled women’ that, Golamakani argues, are intended to accentuate “the core of Iranian Islam”(p.17). Hence, Iran has been viewed and perceived as a negative Other through the lens of France’s own colonial past (p.218), therewith constructing an image that, in Golmakani’s concluding words, is “a case of serious disinformation” (p.219).

Some studies have focused on the Western media coverage of Iran’s presidential elections, notably the disputed election of 2009 and its aftermath (see e.g. Kamalipour’s anthology, 2010). More recently, Bowen (2015) applied CDA to examine the discursive shifts – associating Islam with moderation – and continuities in U.S. media before and after Rouhani’s win in 2013. Moreover, parallel to Iran’s much-publicized nuclear program, a large body of work from a variety of fields i.e. applied linguistics, media and communication studies, political science and international relations has attended to the coverage of the nuclear issue and its related topics (e.g. Ahmadian & Farahani, 2014; Amin, 2020; Atai & Mozaheb, 2013; Biswas, 2018; Doust & Barati, 2017; Ghane & Mahdavi-rad, 2016; Hosseinpour & Heidari Tabrizi, 2016; Izadi & Saghaye-Biria, 2007; Scherling, 2016; Shojaei et al., 2013; Sivandi Nasab & Dowlatabadi, 2016). The majority of these discourse analyses have examined American and/or British media<sup>98</sup>, with a small number comparing Iranian and Western media reporting of the nuclear dispute. For instance, in his book entitled *When Media Goes to War*, DiMaggio (2009) raises the questions at the outset whether the critical tone in the U.S. media’s Iran coverage appears systematically in news reporting and if Iran’s human rights issues and nuclear program are of primary concern<sup>99</sup>. By comparing elite American and British media, significant similarities were observed between the *Guardian* and *Washington Post*’s news reporting and the U.S. Iran policy: “Use of bellicose rhetoric casting Iran as a ‘threat’ or ‘danger’ to the United States and its allies, or references to Western ‘fear’ of Iran appeared 44 percent more often than language criticizing the ‘danger’ or ‘threats’ of the United States and its allies, or ‘fear’ of an allied attack on Iran”(pp.155-156). By contrast, *Guardian* editorials, op-eds, and commentaries distinguished themselves as “less parochial, less propagandistic, and more open to critical points of view” (p.157). In another study, Siegel and Barforoush (2013) analyzed a sample of six influential newspapers in the U.S. and the U.K. (2009-2012) and found parallels between the coverage of the nuclear dispute and that of the run-up to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Adopting DHA to thoroughly examine British and Iranian newspapers, KhosraviNik (2015) studied competing

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<sup>98</sup> Exceptions include the comparative study by Christensen (2011) on the representations of Iran and North Korea in editorials from elite American, British, and Danish newspapers, as well as a more recent study on Iran’s image and the reporting of the ‘Iran nuclear deal’ in leading Dutch newspapers by Kersemakers (2018).

<sup>99</sup> See chapter 5-‘Iran, Nuclear Weapons, and the Politics of Fear’, co-written with Paul Fasse (pp.133-64).

Self and Other constructions and (de)legitimations in the coverage of Iran's nuclear program and found that despite the liberal *Guardian's* "pluralist tendencies", that is, an attempt to include the voice of Other, its "reliance on certain diachronic (assumed) shared knowledge" is in line with that of the right-leaning *Times*. "This relatively invisible body of 'known issues' regarding Iran", KhosraviNik further argues, "associates the country with negative topics/news and the historical establishment of a seriously 'problematic', if not evil, state" (p.262).

Fewer scholars, by comparison, have attended to Western media representation(s) of Iran and Iranians. These studies have investigated the image of Iranian women in particular or Iranian society in general. For instance, through a critical textual analysis (verbal and visual) of U.S. print media, Roushanzamir (2004) observed the construction of 'a parallel universe of Iranian women' for the American audience: "In one, Iranian women are passively oppressed; in its twin, those women barely suppress their sexualized fantasies" (p.11). Hence, the Iranian woman "becomes an object of knowledge and fantasy, and through that object, Iran itself emerges as a gendered entity. Iran's "national character" of traditionalism, violence, terrorism, fanaticism, and sexual license/oppression, lies hidden behind a (the) veil that embodies the totality and fulfills the Orientalist imaginary of repressed desire" (p.11). Roushanzamir concludes that the 'strategic version of Iran (and, by extension, of Islam)' as constructed by the media, promotes, above all, the goals of U.S. media corporations and Washington's foreign policy (pp.11-12). This work parallels McAuliffe's (2007) research on the visual representation of Iran and Iranian women in Australian, British, and Canadian newspapers. Despite the diversity of the countries and media selected, the author noted convergence in the visual imagery applied to depict Iran/Iranians in both tabloids and broadsheets, by "deploying simplistic images of Iranian women in the chador standing in front of representations of the structures of repression of the Islamic theocracy in Iran" (pp.36-7). The author argues that the widespread use of images drawing on wider gender-related issues in Islam, unrelated to the theme of accompanied articles and often out of context, results in "a neo-Orientalist construction of a homogeneously Islamic Iran that appears to transcend historical variation" (p.38). Funke (2017, p.267) identified two forms of "Mythenbildung" in Western media's coverage of the Green Movement: "Damit sind bereits die zwei Deutungsmodelle benannt, die in der Mediale Diskussion die Charakterisierung der 'Grünen Bewegung' nachhaltig bestimmen sollten. Diese sind zum ersten das Thema der sog. 'Twitter Revolution' und zum zweiten der Blick auf die iranische Jugend, darunter insbesondere Frauen." By examining American and British news sites' coverage of Iran's 2009 election, Khan (2013) observed that the "visual framing of the Iranian feminism leaves

one with the impression as if there are only two types of women in Iran: The *progressive ones* [...] and the *conservative ones* [...]. The Iranian woman is framed as either the victim of a cruel social system or on the forefront of the pro-reform struggle (p.24 emphases added)<sup>100</sup>. Through a Critical Metaphor Analysis of U.S. media reporting of the 2009 events, Pérez-Sobrinó (2013) found that The Nation-As-Person metaphor reinforces the tropes that allow for the inclusion of pro-reform protestors in a (Western) ‘friendly Us’, while, simultaneously, rejecting the Iranian government as the ‘Evil Them’ (p.233).

Positioning above-stated polarizations within a broader Self/Other dialectic, two studies of thematic relevance to the present thesis, albeit different regarding scale, scope, and approach, have focused upon competing discourses on Iran (as political entity) and Iranians (as society) in Western media. Through a textual analysis of 509 articles published in two prominent U.S. magazines (between 1998 and 2009), Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013) noted that despite some shifts in the U.S. media portrayal of Iran(ians) over time, “the underlying ontological assumptions of these representations have remained remarkably durable” (p.53). In other words, the authors show that “the dominant representational discourse [...] depicts the political behavior of Iranians on the basis of essentialized notions of Persian and/or Islamic civilization, while very often emphasizing the taken for granted superiority of the West” (p.53). Accordingly, Fayyaz and Shirazi’s analysis reveals a dichotomous depiction of the ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ Iranian; that is, “a perceived clash of civilizations *within* Iran – on the one hand, there is Islam as embodied by the ruling clerical elite and their fundamentalist allies; on the other, the modern cosmopolitanism of ‘most’ of the Iranian people” (p.64, emphasis in original). More recently, Khodadadi and O’Donnell (2017) conducted a discourse analysis of 108 news articles published in leading Sunday broadsheets (between 2007 and 2011) along with 52 travel blogs and interviews with tourists to investigate competing discourses on Iran in the British society. They noted that while a discourse of ‘Iran-as-Polity’ centering round the nuclear issue, danger, terrorism, and hostility, dominates mainstream media narrative, a counter-discourse of ‘Iran-as-Society’ is developed by tourists following their visit to Iran. While Khodadadi and O’Donnell identify ‘Iran-as-Society’ as a tourist-generated discourse on modernity in some aspects of Iran and its people’s hospitality, Kersemakers (2018) defines ‘Iran-as-Society’ in her study as a counter-discourse to ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis by looking into similarities and compatibilities between two countries – Iran and the Netherlands – and their societies.

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<sup>100</sup> Likewise, observing the international coverage of the death of Neda Agha-Soltan during post-election unrest that was captured on cell phones and disseminated worldwide, Afshar (2010) identified three frames, namely ‘the victim’, ‘the passive observer’, and ‘the veiled/unveiled, almost white, modern Iranian woman’ (pp.243-46).

The literature review outlined above stresses the necessity asserted at the outset (Chapter One) to situate Western media representation of (conflict with) Iran today within the broader history of, on one hand, the country along with its complex internal socio-political changes, and its relations with the West (Chapter Two), on the other. Moreover, Iran-specific issues and events that have come to shape and influence (official, public) views and perceptions of, and sentiments about, Iran(ians) as well as scholarly inquiry into the country's prevailing image – as the Other – in the West should be considered in view of (1) mainstream Western (media, political) discourses about Islam and Muslims (particularly since 9/11), and (2) the mutual othering of the West in Iran – constructing the Self in opposition to a Western Other – since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Chapter Two, section 2.2). These factors pave the way for a more nuanced analysis and explication of the selected media's Iran coverage (Chapters Six and Seven) and their readers' reception thereof (Chapter Eight). Moreover, the data-oriented approach adopted in this study (Chapter Five) paints a more holistic picture of Iran's media portrayal, therewith filling a gap in empirical work that hitherto has placed a strong focus upon, and thus limited to, examining pre-defined Iran-specific topics/issues.

## 4. Chapter Four: Mainstream News Sites and Reader Comments

This chapter discusses the immediate and genre-specific contexts within which the mediated discourses under scrutiny in this study and the representations of Iran(ians) take place. In this vein, drawing on two distinct (and, at times, overlapping) strands of literature addressing the two communicative spaces, namely online media texts and attached comments, this chapter places foreign news reporting (Chapter Three) and the readers' consumption and responses within their respective complex settings that need to be considered when analyzing and interpreting the data. Given the period chosen for this study, which, as stated in Chapter One, encompasses pre- and post-election months in Iran in 2013, the main focus remains on the state of online journalism (research) at that time. The chapter concludes with contextualizing online discussions (in the form of comments) in Critical Discourse Studies along with stating some of the associated challenges.

### 4.1 News media in the digital age

The news environment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is shaped both by 'emerging transformations and contested continuities' (Meikle & Redden, 2011, p.1). One of the main reasons behind this transformation is attributed – positively or negatively – to the changing nature of technology and web-specific affordances that, combined with various forces and local conditions, could “lead to different outcomes” (Fenton, 2010, p.6). The implications of the internet and the new media for news production and consumption have been explored since the mid-1990s, and whilst ‘digital utopianism’ (Curran et al., 2013, p.881) has subsided, the following characteristics are widely agreed to distinguish the new mediascape from traditional media (Fenton, 2010, pp.7-11): (1) *speed and space*: One of the most cited strengths of online media is its global reach and its potential to “democratize political knowledge” (Humphrecht, 2016, p.2), boosted by the internet's speed. The unlimited space available online can expand the breadth of news coverage by virtue of archiving facilities, hyperlinks, regular updates, and multimedia formats. However, the emphasis on speed, as the most important currency, and on immediacy in news coverage, juxtaposed with fiercer commercial competition are argued to have translated into “speed it up and spread it thin” (Fenton, 2010, p.7), the rise of ‘churnalism’ and low quality of news output; (2) *multiplicity and polycentrality*: The new media can, potentially, offer a plurality of news providers as well as a proliferation of new platforms, enabling a horizontal, many-to-many form of information dissemination. While giving rise to quantity, this multiplicity (of voices and viewpoints) does not necessarily equate diversity. The “sheer abundance of news across a range of different media” is

criticized for serving as “nothing more than sophisticated marketing and the ever-increasing commodification of the news product”, which “leads us irredeemably down the path of tabloidization and infotainment” (Fenton, 2010, p.9). In other words: “More simply means more opportunities for the news market to sell its wares – in a manner that maximizes audiences (and hopefully profit) rather than public interest. Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment” (Fenton, 2010, p.9); and, finally, (3) *interactivity and participation*: The interactive and participatory nature of online environment allows users with access to internet and the right tools to engage with the news, making online news “thus open to a higher degree of contestation than is typical of traditional news media” (Fenton, 2010, p.10). This has, on one hand, given rise to citizen journalism and proliferation of blogs and participatory sites (e.g. Engesser, 2014), while also creating a space for self-publicity or populist ranting.

#### **4.2 Mainstream news sites: a review of scholarship**

A ‘moving target’ (Hanitzsch & Quandt, 2012, p.432), online journalism is evolving both as practice and as a research field. The complexity of summarizing and categorizing the volume of related research – theoretical and empirical – is best illustrated by the following quote:

To some extent the situation in online journalism [research, added] resembles Rumi’s parable of the elephant and the blind men: one touched the elephant’s trunk and said it is like a tree branch, the other touched its leg and found it was like a pillar, yet another touched its tail and thought it was like a rope. In a similar manner online journalism is approached in a somewhat fragmented manner and the key is to understand that we can at best have a partial understanding [...]. And to complicate things even further, the dynamic nature of online journalism precludes any firm conclusions, as it develops and evolves continuously (Siapera & Veglis, 2012, p.12).

Scholars have examined online journalism through different prisms. Based on the social study of computer-mediated communication, Boczkowski (1999) identified four key issues<sup>101</sup> and explicated their roles in the construction of online newspapers, “thus contributing to the analysis of the electronic version of a medium which has traditionally been the almost exclusive province of mass communication theorizing” (p.102). Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009, 2010) reviewed dominant modes of scholarly work on online news production and consumption, respectively: By examining five main research streams<sup>102</sup> regarding online news production since 2000, the authors observed “a tension between tradition and change” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p.562) amongst researchers and

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<sup>101</sup>The social consequences of the increased anonymity of interlocutors; the reconfiguration of territorially–and interest-based associations; the processes that mediate between the introduction of new artifacts and their social outcomes; and the mutual shaping of consumers and technologies (p.101).

<sup>102</sup> Historical context and market environment; the process of innovation; alterations in journalistic practices; challenges to established professional dynamics; and the role of user-generated content (p.562).

practitioners alike; whereas the former “oscillate between using existing concepts to look at new phenomena”, while acknowledging the need for theoretical renewal, the latter appear “to straddle the re-enactment of established forms and tinkering with alternative pathways”(p.562). These observations are echoed by the authors’ review of online news consumption research, whereby they found that “despite the growth and innovation in technology and site offers, online news consumption routines appear to be shaped to an important extent by consumption habits that characterize the traditional media landscape” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010, p.1093). This continuity, the authors maintain, is also characteristic of scholarly approaches, as they primarily rely upon traditional conceptual and methodological preferences<sup>103</sup>. Similarly, Siapera and Veglis (2012, p.10) argue that the breadth of empirical studies on online journalism – categorized into technology oriented, online news production, and online news consumption research – “may hide the dearth of theoretical work” in this field. The authors, therefore, add the dimension of theory by highlighting three strands of online journalism research, namely the sociology of journalism, grounded theory, and theories of technology and society (p.10). Based on a more recent review, Steensen and Ahva (2015, p.12), by contrast, found “an increasing variety of theoretical approaches” in (online) journalism studies, including approaches from technology and economics. The authors assert that despite “a move from empiricism to theoretical awareness in journalism studies since 2000”, grounded theory remains the most dominant approach. The results also indicate a “broad paradigmatic shift in journalism studies”, from political science to sociological perspectives (p.12).

#### 4.2.1 The enduring impact of media systems and journalistic cultures

The ‘new’ media has “led to radical restructuring, new working cultures, and new forms of journalism, while it created the conditions for a re-evaluation of the role of journalists” (Saltzis, 2012, p.462). While an accelerated news cycle, commercialization, and digitization are, to varying degrees, shared cross-nationally, they are also driven and shaped by a combination of cross-cutting (financial, technological, etc.) forces and common professional norms and practices in addition to variances in national media systems, political systems, and economies (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014, p.13). In other words, journalism is transitioning in response to ‘both external and internal factors’ (Nielsen & Kuhn, 2014, p.7).

In their oft-cited comparative study, Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggested three ideal types of *media systems* based on media market, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and

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<sup>103</sup>The authors identify three systematic limitations of scholarly approaches: the analytical distinction among types of media (print, broadcast, and online); the separate treatment of media features and social practices; and the propensity to focus, exclusively, either on extraordinary patterns or on ordinary ones (pp.1093-94).

the role of the state: the ‘Democratic Corporatist’ model (e.g. Germany); the ‘Liberal’ model (e.g. the U.K.); and the ‘Polarized Pluralist’ model (e.g. France)<sup>104</sup>. Closely related to *political parallelism*, “that is, the degree and nature of the links between the media and political parties or, more broadly, the extent to which the media system reflects the major political divisions in society” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.21), are *internal* and *external pluralism*:

*External pluralism* can be defined as pluralism achieved at the level of the media system as a whole, through the existence of a range of media outlets or organizations reflecting the points of view of different groups or tendencies in society. Systems characterized by external pluralism will obviously be considered to have a high level of political parallelism. The contrary term, *internal pluralism*, is defined as pluralism achieved within each individual media outlet or organization [...]. A system characterized by internal pluralism in this sense will have a low level of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp.29-30, italics in original).

In Hallin and Mancini’s typology, the Democratic Corporatist model is characterized by a moderate degree of external pluralism and “a legacy of commentary-oriented journalism” that is “mixed with a growing emphasis on neutral professionalism and information-oriented journalism”; the Liberal model is marked by low political parallelism and high internal pluralism (with the exception of the British press) as well as an information-oriented journalism, “with a bit stronger commentary tradition in Britain”; and the Polarized Pluralist model is defined by a strong emphasis on political life and external pluralism, and “a tradition of commentary-oriented or advocacy journalism” that exists more strongly than elsewhere in Europe (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp.73-5). Numerous studies have empirically examined the interplay of *media systems* and *news content* (see Hallin & Mancini, 2017 for a review). For instance, based on a longitudinal analysis of different styles of political news reporting – measured in terms of opinion-orientation, objectivity, and negativity – in 18 print outlets in 6 countries over a span of five decades, Umbricht and Esser (2014, p.214) found “clear convergence in the preference for opinionated stories in covering politics” that they assign to “a gradual blending of European influences (with a high appreciation for commentary) and American influences (with a growing appreciation for interpretation)”, but divergence regarding objectivity- and negativity-related reporting: while German press contains a ‘coexistence of news and views’, with more focus on rational, factual reporting (Esser & Umbricht, 2013, p.1003), the British press has, over time, aligned itself more with French papers concerning objectivity, thereby distancing itself from the U.S., and negativity, which is more prominent in systems characterized by high levels of political polarization

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<sup>104</sup> France and the U.K. are borderline cases; the former “is something of a mixed case between the Polarized Pluralist and Democratic Corporatist Models”, whereas the latter “is a mixed case between the Liberal and Democratic Corporatist Models” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.11). See also the four empirical types proposed, more recently, by Brüggemann et al. (2014).



and/or media commercialization (Umbricht & Esser, 2014, pp.214-15; see also Esser & Umbricht, 2014). Fewer scholars have also examined the impact of pre-existing variances in structures and practices on *online news* and, as will be shown (section 4.2.3.2), have found the output of news sites to be shaped by a combination of contextual factors, resulting in cross-national and cross-outlet differences within a given system, as well as by areas of convergence that unifies mainstream news sites (Benson et al., 2012; Boczkowski et al., 2011; Humprecht, 2016; Powers & Benson, 2014).

*Media cultures*, as ‘subcultures of the national political culture’ (Pfetsch, 2008, p.78) entail two dimensions, namely the journalists’ role definition as newsmakers in the political arena – which is “influenced not only by the media they work for but also by the socially and culturally defined expectations that dominate in a national news system”, leading to various reporting styles – and their orientation toward political institutions (Pfetsch, 2008, p.88). In this vein, global trends of homogenization and shared commercial concerns exist parallel to a ‘national filter’, with news outlets, as stated in Chapter Three (section 3.1.1.3), domesticating international coverage (Örnebring, 2009, p.11). Acknowledging variances within countries, studies have found cross-national similarities regarding certain aspects of journalism cultures<sup>105</sup> in terms of professional values and role perceptions i.e. detachment and non-involvement, acting as a watchdog of the political (and business) elite and providing political information, alongside differences concerning objectivism and separation of facts and opinion<sup>106</sup> (e.g. Hanitzsch, 2020; Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Thus, while news production is influenced by systemic conditions, journalism – as an autonomous force – is “as much shaped by internal values of the profession (‘agency’) as it is constrained by the outside environment (‘structure’)” (Umbricht & Esser, 2014, p.215). News coverage, studies show, is also influenced by ownership types. In their comparative study on the coverage of international conflict across 116 countries, Baum and Zhukov (2019) found that co-ownership homogenizes the scope (what is covered), the focus (proportion of ‘hard’/‘soft’ news), and diversity (breadth of topics) in newspapers while market forces, depending on the political system in which outlets operate, affect this homogenizing tendency.

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<sup>105</sup> Defined as “a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful” (Hanitzsch, 2007, p.369). While Hallin and Mancini do not explicitly discuss journalistic culture, their suggested dimensions of journalistic professionalism, namely autonomy, distinct professional norms, and public service orientation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp.34-6) are closely linked to the cultural aspects of journalism i.e. norms, values, and practices (Örnebring, 2009, pp.5-6).

<sup>106</sup> See the ‘Worlds of Journalism Study’ (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). For country reports on journalism culture in Britain, France, and Germany, see Thurman and Kunert (2016); Mercier et al. (2017); and Hanitzsch et al. (2016).

#### 4.2.2. Online journalism in Britain, France, and Germany

Internet and web-specific affordances have enabled new means of news gathering, producing, presenting, and distributing, and while this ‘new journalism’ – distinguishing itself from ‘old’ media – “is open to novices, lacks editorial control, can stem from anywhere (not just the newsroom), involves new writing techniques, functions in a network with fragmented audiences, is delivered at great speed, and is open and iterative” (Fenton, 2010, p.6), it has developed in different political, cultural, and economic settings, therewith following different trajectories. Countering the ‘doctrine of technological irrelevance’ (Curran et al., 2013, p.893), print-to-online changes should thus be understood within “the sociohistorical context of its moment of creation” (Benson et al., 2012, p.34).

Regarding online journalism in Britain, Saltzis (2012, pp.465-73) identifies several trends: a transition from *single* to *multimedia* resulting in internationalization of online news market, turning British news organizations into ‘global players’ (p.473; see also Thurman, 2007), and the adoption of different approaches to news production; changes in newsrooms i.e. merging (technically and editorially) previously separate digital and print newsrooms to avoid duplication and save additional costs; and changes in journalistic practices i.e. an increasing demand for ‘multiskilling’ (Saltzis, 2012, p.469). The impact of digital media has been mixed (Davis, 2014, pp.119-21): abundance of easily accessible information, emergence of political blogging and social networking sites, and an extended space for in-depth coverage/analysis are accompanied by additional workload, substitution of time-consuming traditional newsgathering routines with online news sourcing, and heavy reliance on ‘information subsidies’ (p.118) i.e. news wire material, plagiarized copy published by rival outlets and free content produced by public figures and citizen journalists, rendering news production “less researched and policy-focused, more opinion-driven, sensationalist, and personality-obsessed” (Davis, 2014, p.119).

With the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) alongside economic transformations in the press industry, media organizations are in constant search for viable business models. This involves the implementation of paid content strategies (e.g. paywalls) that Arrese (2016, p.1051) labels ‘retro-innovation’. The majority of news dailies and weeklies in France have adopted a paid model with limited free access (Lardeau, 2018). Based on their empirical study of 149 French news sites, Benghozi and Lyubareva (2013) identified three types of online business models, namely ‘minimally digital’, ‘pure players’, and ‘exploring leaders’. The last category, marked by “countless trial-and-error or iterative processes that online content providers undertake in order to test solutions and find what they hope would be an *ad hoc* model”, is exemplified by legacy media such as *Le Monde* that

strive to “transform their offer while maintaining a great wealth of editorialization and content” (p.6). Besides the monetizing the content, online journalism “has also led to a re-evaluation of working practices within newsrooms, including most notably an emphasis on the multi-functionality of journalists who now need to be able to work across different media platforms” (Kuhn, 2014, p.34). Some French newspapers, including *Le Monde*, have gradually integrated their digital and offline staff into one newsroom, while others opted for ‘reverse publishing’ and prioritized the web over their offline version (Kuhn, 2014, pp.34-5).

The German media system, marked by a diverse media landscape and a strong presence of public service broadcasters (also online), has been less disrupted by digital media compared to countries with equally high internet usage (Reinemann & Baugut, 2014; see also Hasebrink & Hölig, 2013). Based on a bi-national survey, Quandt et al. (2006) found that despite similarities between American and German online journalists in retaining aspects of their traditional role perceptions such as an emphasis on neutral reporting and high-quality journalism, the two groups varied concerning work patterns; German online journalists prefer a softer/less aggressive approach to reporting, rely more on internet as a search tool (see also Lünenborg & Berghofer, 2010), and are younger and less experienced compared to their American counterparts. Based on their literature review, Hanitzsch and Quandt (2012, p.441) concluded that online journalism in Germany has “a strong orientation toward quick and neutral information dissemination, with less importance given to watchdog and advocacy roles”, which can be attributed to generational divide and “the influence of a virtually immediate – and therefore event- and information-driven – production of news”. German news sites, moreover, rely heavily on the material produced by their parent medium and/or news agencies for their content (p.441).

#### 4.2.3. Foreign news coverage in the new news ecology

Internet, as the ‘most global medium’ (Berger, 2009, p.355), and the rise of digital media have led to the proliferation of new and alternative newsgatherers (e.g. bloggers and citizen journalists) who provide more and more information about the world that can be accessible instantaneously and ubiquitously. This, however, does not necessarily translate into providing more knowledge about foreign issues (e.g. Williams, 2014), nor into the public’s more consumption of news and politics (e.g. Aalberg et al., 2013). International journalism in an online age, it is argued, “remains steeped in a global perspective shaped by the legacy of colonialism”, marked by an enduring disparity in the flow of information, culture, and language, as well as the search for the familiar i.e. established media outlets and well-known stereotypes and representations (Williams, 2014, p.235). “Technology may change”, as

Williams (2014, p.233) states, “but the mindset that influences how technology is used and applied evolves more slowly”.

#### 4.2.3.1 Newsgathering and production

Studies have shown, as stated earlier, that the content offered on news sites strongly relies on search engines and online sources (Lünenborg & Berghofer, 2010), the material produced by the parent medium (Hanitzsch & Quandt, 2012), agency copy and press releases (Fenton, 2010; Redden & Witschge, 2010), and/or rival media outlets (Phillips, 2010). Scholars have found that the dominance of global news agencies such as Reuters, AP, and AFP, who set the agenda for national news sites as well as their audience, has intensified on the web (e.g. Paterson, 2007). The increasing self-referentiality and greater inter-media agenda-setting (Reinemann & Baugut, 2014) have rendered newsgathering “anchored to traditional news values and established hierarchies” (Fenton & Witschge, 2011, p.158). Rather than generating original stories/content, many journalists, pressed for time while having easier/quicker access to information on the web, use and repurpose the same material, engaging in ‘cannibalism’ (Phillips, 2010). Besides ‘cut and paste’ journalism (Fenton & Witschge, 2011, p.159), news organizations have incorporated new sources as well as newsgathering forms, including the new source-actors whom Couldry (2010) terms ‘writer-gatherers’; alternative news sources i.e. NGOs and ‘non-profit journalism’ (Otto & Meyer, 2012, p.212); social networks and eye-witness accounts – ‘citizen witnessing’ (Allan, 2012, p.331) – during crises and media events such as the BBC’s ‘UGC Hub’ (Allan & Thorsen, 2011), coverage of the 2009 post-election unrest in Iran (Meikle & Redden, 2011), widely dubbed the ‘Twitter Revolution’, and, more recently, the ‘Arab Spring’ protests (e.g. Bossio & Bebawi, 2013). In this vein, citizen-generated content has the potential to counter ‘helicopter journalism’, which is “the superficial reporting of events on the ground and weak contextual research” by media organizations “that is all too common given low levels of investment in correspondents” (Redden & Meikle, 2011, p.215). In their comparative study, Powers and Benson (2014) found that France (in print and more so online) integrates the most diverse mix of authors, with non-journalist individuals creating more than 18% of online material (compared to 2.4% in Denmark and 4.4% in U.S.), while observing differences between French outlets; journalist-authored content accounted for 95% of articles on *Le Figaro*’s website, whereas non-journalist authored content made up almost 27% of *Le Monde*’s articles. Thus, in addition to “an increased reliance on wire service copy (potentially standardizing and narrowing public discourse)”, Powers and Benson (2014, p.261) noted “an increased online use of non-journalistic views (and thus an expansion of the public sphere)”

in France – in line with previous studies indicating more emphasis on deliberation/civil society viewpoints alongside journalistic and elite voices in the French press (e.g. Benson & Hallin, 2007; Esser & Umbricht, 2014) –which tends “to accentuate its national press traditions” (Benson et al., 2012, p.32).

#### 4.2.3.2 Online news content

Two decades ago, Singer (2001) saw that online newspapers, irrespective of their (potential) geographic extension, were less likely to cover international news compared with their print counterparts. Based on their cross-national examination of 16 European countries, van der Wurff and Lauf (2005), by contrast, found print and online newspapers to generate similar amounts of international news, with domestic politics and economy dominating topics in both online and offline versions. Likewise, by content analyzing elite news sites in Britain, France, Germany (plus Russia and U.S.), Quandt (2008) noticed more emphasis on national politics and economy in online news reporting, followed by human-interest stories, international news, crime, sports, and culture. Despite this overall tendency – in line with traditional media – regarding topic categories, Quandt (2008, p.733) noticed nation-specific variances amongst websites: British sites, for instance, provided more human-interest stories and ‘social affairs’ news than others; German websites featured more news on economy, sports, and culture, thus offering “a varied spectrum of news, with a less-pronounced focus than the sites in other countries”; and French outlets primarily offered political-affairs news. Moreover, foreign news reporting was limited in scope, dominated (similar to print) by events of regional/national proximity, “the perceived relevance of nations, and the resulting construction of power relations” (Quandt, 2008, p.733) i.e. more EU-related topics in British, French, and German media, more Middle East coverage in American sites, and U.S.-related stories leading foreign news in British and German sites. Based on these observations, Quandt made the following conclusions: “Overall, we find that the World Wide Web is not as ‘global’ as we might believe, at least when it comes to news. The content is very much limited by the traditional, national context and the (expected) interests of the users” (Quandt, 2008, p.733). Others have confirmed convergences between online and traditional media regarding the scope of coverage allocated to countries (e.g. Wu, 2007), while observing the prominence of U.S, followed by other western countries, and an unequal distribution of international news flow on the web (e.g. Himelboim et al., 2010) that varies across regions and online news source types (e.g. Segev, 2017). National traits, relatedness, and events continue to remain decisive factors behind international news coverage online, with the ‘social aspect of relatedness’ (e.g. foreign population) being an important predictor in Europe

(Segev, 2016, p.214). The national prism of online news has been confirmed by other studies. Berger (2009, p.365), for example, noted that U.S. news sites tend to retain their traditional roles in cyberspace by “preferencing local and national news, domesticating news about other countries and reflecting imbalanced flows between First and Third World countries” (p.355). Moreover, Berger (2009, p.365) saw “an information universe”, wherein U.S. “news agenda and perspectives are disproportionately large”, with much of the rest of the world “experiencing the Internet as an international medium, albeit from a subordinate cultural and linguistic position” (p.355). Based on a comparative study of leading news sites in 9 countries across 4 continents, Curran et al. (2013) found 71% of online news to focus on the home country (slightly less than similarly nation-centered print and TV news), and by distinguishing stories with an exclusive international focus from domesticated foreign news that frame stories ‘within a national framework’ (p.887), noted that “approaching a quarter of all foreign news in the nine websites is explicitly related to national concerns” (p.889). Moreover, despite a shared dual focus on powerful nations and neighboring countries, Curran et al. (2013) noticed differences between more outward looking (internationalist) and insular websites, which the authors attributed to national differences and wider socio-political contexts. As for the reliance of news stories on elite sources (interviewed or quoted), the authors found that “the main body of online news is even more closely tied to the voices of authority than ‘legacy’ media” (p.886). This finding is in line with earlier research, indicating that the speed of (online) news production, “encourages constant return to tried and trusted voices (often of the elite)” (Redden & Witschge, 2010, p.176). The convergence of online and traditional news in terms of nation-centeredness and “the familiar gatekeeping practice of ‘officiating’ (news management and cueing)” (Livingston & Bennett, 2003, p.363) is, as Curran et al. (2013, p.881) argue, “due to the way in which leading media conglomerates have extended their hegemony across technologies”. While the nation-centered dynamic continues to influence foreign news coverage as strongly on the web as it does offline, some prestigious brands have aimed for a transnational reach via what Berger (2009, p.367) postulated over a decade ago, namely generating content “tailored more directly to audiences elsewhere”. In May 2013, the British site launched ‘Guardian Australia’ (Sweney, 2013), complementing ‘Guardian UK’ and ‘Guardian US’<sup>107</sup>. By comparing the site’s three digital editions, Murrell (2016) found local-created content, sourced and written by journalists in situ, to dominate ‘Editors’ Picks’ on the Australian and American versions (75% and 57%

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<sup>107</sup> In 2015, Guardian launched an international edition of its homepage (‘Guardian International’), designed for readers outside Australia, U.K., and U.S. to help the website “become a destination for readers living elsewhere, giving them the option to see a more global selection of stories when they visit the site” (Smith, 2015).

respectively), with a distinctly localized slant on certain themes i.e. asylum-seekers and indigenous issues ('Guardian Australia') and women's rights and access to abortion ('Guardian US'), while "keeping with the interests of the small 'l' liberal *Guardian* reader – the environment, politics and rights/surveillance" (p.17). As for international news, 'Guardian UK' provided the widest range of stories, produced by *Guardian's* bureaus and news agencies.

Despite the potential to create *more* as well as *more diverse* news on the web, studies have shown a high level of online content homogeneity – focusing on the same stories from the same angles – due to a mix of commercial, professional, and technological factors (see e.g. Boczkowski & de Santos, 2007; McChesney, 2013), turning online news environment into an 'echo chamber' (Benson, 2010, p.198). Redden and Witschge (2010), for instance, noted a lack of diversity regarding the range of, and perspective on, news stories within mainstream news spaces, reinforced by cross-media monitoring, heavy reliance on press releases and wire material, and lack of external links. The level of homogeneity – duplication/recycling of similar material (within and between sites) by recirculating images, quotes, and passages and reporting identical stories with similar judgements – varied by story/event as well as between tabloid and broadsheet coverage, the latter providing more original content thanks to specialist reporters and editors. While acknowledging the use of Web 2.0-enabled facilities that increase coverage depth and provide readers with the possibility to contextualize the stories through archive databases, supplementary material (e.g. internal links, additional/background information), and multimedia (e.g. picture galleries, videos, audios), Redden and Witschge (2010) concluded that "there is an abundance of news online, but the content of mainstream news outlets is largely the same, with different outlets – often with a very different ethos and editorial stance – using identical quotes, images, and very similar text" (p.184). In their cross-country study, Benson et al. (2012, p.34), however, observe that "[d]espite some decline in traditional news reporting, information is still the dominant genre online and certain forms less easily 'afforded' by print have in fact become more prevalent online [...]". While adding that despite a "print-online shift from international and domestic public affairs news to more light or sensationalistic news", which is more pronounced in some countries (e.g. U.S.) than others, there is "a slight increase in deliberation and opinion, as well as more diverse authorial voices online" that "provide grounds for cautious optimism". Informed by a media systems approach, Powers and Benson (2014) measured the extent of homogeneity in news content and form – in terms of genres, topics, and authors – across leading news outlets (print and online) in Denmark, France, and U.S., and found online media to increase external pluralism in the U.S., "where media markets are being

restructured to include more direct competition between agenda-setting news outlets at the national level” (p.246), while stark similarities remain between print and online editions in the French case due to economic and political factors. Powers and Benson (2014) argue that print-to-online increases in external pluralism “are often linked to a decline in international and governmental coverage” (p.261). The path-dependent influence (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009) of national/local contexts on online news content is confirmed by other studies. Benson et al. (2012), for instance, examined the impact of different media systems in shaping the print-to-online move in Denmark (Democratic Corporatist), France (Polarized Pluralist), and U.S. (Liberal), and found that despite an overall picture of online news that features “more advertising and more localized, light news, while at the same time opening up (if only slightly) toward more deliberation, more opinion, and more nonjournalistic voices” (p.32), national factors continue to remain relevant. A slight increase in deliberative genres was observed in the print-to-online move in all the three countries, whereas a decline in the proportion of ‘news’ and a rise in opinion-oriented journalism was more pronounced in France and the U.S.

In her study, Humprecht (2016) examined *news performance* of 48 online outlets from 6 countries based on a multi-level framework that links news content to contextual conditions at both systemic (*macro*) and organizational (*meso*) levels, including: the media systems’ characteristics measured against press inclusiveness (e.g. daily newspaper reach), political parallelism (e.g. separation of news and commentary, partisan influence, political bias), and journalistic professionalism, namely ‘internal absence’ (e.g. owner’s influence) and ‘external absence’ (e.g. influence by politicians/interest groups); ownership types and their impact on profit orientation, editorial mission (e.g. amount of news items written by own staff, firsthand observation and inquiry); and thematic focus (e.g. ratio of political/non-political news items) (p.51). Overall, analytical depth and hard news were found to be more prevalent in British sites, with topic diversity and critical distance being more frequent, respectively, in French and German news sites (p.164). As for individual outlets, Humprecht (2016, pp.140-50) made the following observations (Table 4.1): In the British context, with a media system characterized by relatively low press inclusiveness, low political parallelism, average journalistic professionalism and press subsidies, and high levels of investment in public broadcasting, *Guardian*’s website has a strong editorial mission, high advertising absence, and a focus on political information. By providing a high-level news performance, encompassing (in ascending order) hard news, topic diversity, critical distance, and analytical depth, *Guardian* can be considered “a typical representative of the independent ownership type, which combines editorial and financial goals” (p.149). Within France’s media system



marked by low press inclusiveness, high press subsidies and political parallelism, average journalistic professionalism – thus distinguishing the country from the ideal type of the Polarized Pluralist model – and high levels of investment in public media, the web edition of *Le Monde* has a strong editorial mission, relatively high advertising absence, and a limited focus on political information, leading the site to offer high analytical depth, average amount of hard news and critical distance, and a lower degree of topic diversity. In response to the recent crisis of the French press as well as to market pressures and commercialization, news sites including *Le Monde* offer “a mix of entertainment, service features, and non-political and political information” (p.158). Within German media system, characterized by high press inclusiveness and journalistic professionalism, high level of public broadcasting investment, and low levels of political parallelism and press subsidies, the web-based news outlet *Spiegel Online* has a strong editorial mission, average advertising absence and a limited information focus. Despite its limited topic diversity, Humprecht (2016, p.142) argues, the site offers high levels, in ascending order, of hard news, critical distance, and analytical depth.

<b>Countries/Media Systems</b>	<b>Britain</b> (liberal)	<b>France</b> (polarized-pluralist)	<b>Germany</b> (democratic-corporatist)
<b>Online news outlet</b>	theguardian.com	LeMonde.fr	Spiegel Online
<b>Ownership type</b>	Independent print outlet	Independent print outlet	Made-for-web/ standalone
<b>Analytical depth</b> explaining cause/history; change of perspectives; level of justification; analytical quality	high	high	high
<b>Critical distance</b> critical perspective toward elites/ actors responsible	high	average	high
<b>Hard news</b> political relevance i.e. societal actors, decision-making authorities, others; individual vs. societal relevance; impersonal/unemotional vs. emotional reporting	average	average	high
<b>Topic diversity</b> Diversity of topics i.e. government, public administration; foreign policy, international affairs, etc.	high	comparably lower	low

**Table 4.1 News performance of the online news sites selected for this study**  
Source: adapted from Humprecht (2016, p.75, pp.140-50)

The literature review outlined above shows the multifaceted nature of online news and stresses that a digital text “can rarely be considered in isolation through online media since it is surrounded by a number of significant political factors and discursive practices” (Kelsey, 2020, p.255). From a CDA approach, more recent studies have attended to such practices as

algorithms, their social power (e.g. Beer, 2017) and implications for generating news i.e. automated stories (e.g. Montal & Reich, 2017), as well.

### 4.3 User comments: reflections from the literature

Research on the relation between journalism and its audience is, paradoxically, ‘both classical and emerging’ (Loosen & Schmidt, 2016, p.4); classical in the sense that the audience “is (and has always been) a constitutive part of journalism, and is therefore inherently interwoven within every conception or theory of journalism”, and emerging, “as networked digital media have amplified the communicative forms which structure and reproduce it” (p.4). Like journalism practice itself, research on journalism-audience relations has been based upon traditional assumptions, “where the asymmetry between journalism and audience is a defining characteristic” (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012, p.869). Accordingly, two dominant conceptions of audience can be distinguished: *audience as recipients* and *audience as product* (pp.869-70). However, technological, organizational, and institutional changes have led to the emergence of a third conception, namely *audience as empowered networks* that are “not a disperse mass of people engaging in the appropriation of media content or being appropriated by the media industry, but rather actively and collaboratively producing and disseminating information with the help of networked digital media” (p.871).

The proliferation of UGC initiatives on news sites (Manosevitch & Tenenboim, 2017) and the influx of *vox populi* (Meikle & Redden, 2011, p.6) on the web have triggered a preponderance of scholarly work across different fields (see Boczkowski, 1999; Manosevitch & Tenenboim, 2017; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009, 2010; Siapera & Veglis, 2012; Steensen & Ahva, 2015 for reviews). With the exception of limited studies discussed later, two distinct strands of empirical work can be detected in the extant literature: those that investigate, from a top-down perspective, how media organizations make sense of, and enable, participatory practices i.e. user comments (‘producers’ side’), and those that examine how online users appropriate the opportunities afforded to them (‘users’ side’)<sup>108</sup>.

#### 4.3.1 The producers’ side

An extensive body of research has studied online comments within a broader discussion on UGC in order to examine (1) *types* of features available on news websites and (2) newsroom *perceptions* of, and *attitudes* towards, users’ participation.

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<sup>108</sup> Similarly, Almgren and Olsson (2015, pp.3-4) identify two dominant research streams, namely the ‘producer side of the story’ and the ‘prod-user side of the story’.

#### 4.3.1.1 Types of UGC features on news sites

Some studies have examined the participatory options made available on news sites and the degree to which they foster engagement. Chung (2008, pp.660-61), for instance, suggested the following typology of interactive features: those that characterize *medium interactivity* (user-to-system/content interactivity) and rely solely on what web-specific possibilities allow visitors to do i.e. the option to forward articles, and those representing *human interactivity* (user-to-user interactivity) that facilitate interpersonal communication i.e. message boards and chat functions. Observing interactivity on a continuum, with medium interactivity on the lower and human interactivity on the higher end of spectrum, Chung identified combinations of the two features, namely *medium/human* interactive features that enable visitors to customize news to their liking, and *human/medium* interactive features which “allow users to express their personal opinions” (p.666) i.e. ‘submit stories’/‘submit photos’ functions and Letters-to-editor<sup>109</sup>. Comparing the online versions of major tabloids and broadsheets in Sweden and the U.K., Jönsson and Örnebring (2011, p.131) presented the following taxonomy of UGC<sup>110</sup>, depending on participation level: features that involve a low level of participation and treat users as consumers i.e. personalization and customization features; those that require a medium level of participation that view readers as ‘prosumers’ i.e. the comment function; and features that entail a high participation level, addressing the audience as producers. The authors also examined the types of content that users were encouraged to generate, revealing that “users are mostly empowered to create popular culture-oriented content and personal/everyday life-oriented content rather than news/informational content” (p.140). These results resonate with other studies (Hermida, 2011a; Örnebring, 2008). For instance, through interviews with newsroom staff in Belgium, Paulussen and Ugille (2008, p.36) revealed that readers “are encouraged to submit pictures and personal stories destined for special human interest sections in the newspaper or on the website. Reader input is thus primarily associated with ‘faits divers’ or ‘small news’ rather than with supposed hard news”. Similarly, drawing on interviews with journalists and editors in 10 countries, Hermida (2011b, p.22) found that “hard news tended to remain the preserve of professional journalists”, with citizen participation limited to producing content on lifestyle topics such as culture and travel. Based on their overall results, Jönsson and Örnebring (2011) highlighted the political economy of UGC as follows:

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<sup>109</sup>A combination of user-to-medium and user-to-user interactivity features best benefit reader comments.

<sup>110</sup> In an earlier study, Örnebring (2008) classified “the opportunity to directly comment on different types of content” (p.774, emphasis in original) i.e. comments on news articles as customization features and comments on forums as content production features – a distinction not adopted by all scholars.

UGC provision in mainstream media to a great extent addresses users-as-consumers and is part of a context of consumption. Users-as-citizens are placed in a mostly reactive position ('We write, you read' becomes 'We write, you read and possibly comment') [...]. It can also be concluded that UGC often works as a self-legitimization tool for news organizations. To frame UGC as a democratic tool could be a branding strategy for creating and upholding a close relationship to the audience. Users are *identified* as consumers but *approached* as citizens (pp.140-41, emphases in original).

In their analysis of 12 British sites, Hermida and Thurman (2008) identified nine UGC initiatives and observed a "significant growth in three formats: 'Blogs', 'Comments on stories', and 'Have your says'" (p.346) within an 18-month period. In a comparative study, Domingo et al. (2008) identified three categories of participatory features on 16 news sites in 8 European countries and U.S.: news production-related spaces (features to submit, select, or prioritize content), commentary and debate spaces (e.g. comments and forums), and social networking features (p.335). By integrating these features into the five stages of news production, namely access/observation, selection/filtering, processing/editing, distribution, and interpretation, the authors noted that only the final stage of news interpretation was open to public participation – via comments below articles and/or forum spaces – and concluded that most online news sites perceive audience participation as "an opportunity for their readers to debate current events"(p.338). Likewise, Rebillard and Touboul (2010) examined the proportion of editorial space shared with users on the homepages of 4 leading news sites in Europe and America and found participatory opportunities to be "severely limited" (p.329). In a similar vein, the results from a two-year project on online journalism in Germany (Neuberger & Nuernbergk, 2010) showed that regarding user-generated features, readers' role was limited to posting comments on articles (final post-publication stage) and they were often encouraged to submit photos (initial information-gathering stage), leading the authors to conclude that "up to now, the audience has mainly been limited to a role they already had in traditional media" (p.329). Referring to an overall skepticism in Germany, Hanitzsch and Quandt (2012, p.441) argue that despite German media's early adoption of the internet for information dissemination, they "tend to be very cautious in their efforts to implement participative features of online communication, and still cling to 'tried and tested' working patterns, role conceptions, and definitions of the journalistic production process".

Besides describing UGC features on news sites, outlined above<sup>111</sup>, scholars have attended to contextual factors influencing the adoption of different participatory approaches and strategies. More than a decade ago, Domingo et al. (2008) called for further research into the

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<sup>111</sup> The categories mentioned here are among the most cited in the literature. Some scholars have proposed other typologies. For example, Manosevitch (2011, pp.438-39) classifies user comments as user-initiated (as opposed to editorial-initiated UGC e.g. 'most read' articles) and open-ended content (as opposed to close-ended content e.g. online polls).

impact of professional (newsroom routines, journalistic culture, ethical guidelines, etc.), market (newspaper size, ownership etc.), and social (media laws etc.) contexts on newsrooms' adoption of participatory opportunities. Since then, as will be shown, contextual factors shaping the news organizations' rationale concerning UGC have been the subject of myriad empirical investigations. "User agency in the age of digital media", as van Dijck (2009, p.55) pointed out, "can no longer be assessed from one exclusive disciplinary angle as the social, cultural, economic, technological and legal aspects of UGC sites are inextricably intertwined."

#### 4.3.1.2 Newsroom attitudes towards user participation

A large body of research has examined – based on ethnographies, interviews, and surveys – how media professionals perceive and make sense of participatory opportunities in general, and online comments, in particular (e.g. Chen & Pain, 2017; Chung, 2007; Nagar, 2011; Nielsen, 2014; Reich, 2011). Domingo (2008, p.681) referred to 'a myth of interactivity' that is "embedded in the mindset and discourses of online journalists", arguing that journalists working for traditional newspapers mainly perceived audience participation "as a problem to manage rather than a benefit for the news product" (p.689). Hermida and Thurman (2008) observed a significant expansion of UGC initiatives on leading British news sites, "despite editors' residual doubts about the contribution UGC can make to professionally edited publications" (p.353). Furthermore, the authors noted a shift towards the adoption of moderation mechanisms – full or reactive – due to concerns over brand protection, trust, and legal liabilities, concluding that mainstream news organizations "are shifting towards the retention of a traditional gate-keeping role towards UGC" (p.354). Based on interviews with editors from 9 British news websites, Thurman (2008) noted the influence of local (e.g. organizational and technical) conditions on the range and character of the adopted UGC initiatives. While cost was a key contingent factor, mainly due to (pre-)moderation practices, and amid concerns over quality, Thurman (2008) found that editors and journalists understood the benefits of user-authored content e.g. increasing circulation and secondary benefits such as providing source of, and content for, stories. Through interviews with newsroom staff in Belgium, Paulussen and Ugille (2008, pp.32-6) revealed the following factors influencing the implementation of UGC initiatives: organizational structures i.e. existing hierarchies – between print and online journalists, between IT staffers and editors, and between professional journalists and users – as well as technological infrastructure; work practices i.e. journalists' routines, the news production process, and use of content produced by users; and professional attitudes towards the user i.e. journalists' perceptions – as well as

concerns over the value and quality – of user-produced content. Similarly, Singer and Ashman (2009) found civility and credibility to be a cause for concern for *Guardian* journalists, as “journalists are struggling with how to ethically accommodate the opportunities for freedom and dialogue presented by UGC while safeguarding their credibility and sense of responsibility” (p.18). Another study that examined Slovenian online journalism revealed “a gap between technological incorporation of interactive features [...] and the realisation of interactivity as a new set of practices in newsrooms” (Oblak Črnič & Vobič ,2013, p.376). The authors argued that interactivity is a fulfilled reality merely in its technical sense, with online news media remaining ambivalent towards the idea of including users in the news production process. This ‘pseudo-interactive communication’ (Oblak Črnič & Vobič ,2013, p.377) echoes the results from other studies (Domingo et al., 2008; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011; Ollson & Svensson, 2012). Journalists, it is argued, deem user input more suitable for the post-content creation stage where they could serve as the ‘watchdog on the watchdog’ (Singer, 2011a, p.125). Audiences are thus viewed as ‘active recipients of the news’; as ‘sources of information’, including breaking news and hyperlocal content; and as ‘members of an online community’ (Hermida, 2011b, p.27).

Some scholars have examined the economic implications of UGC (e.g. Olsson, &Svensson, 2012; Paulussen, 2011; van Dijck, 2009). Based on interviews with journalists and editors in 10 Western countries, Vujnovic (2011, p.143) identified three perceived economic benefits of UGC: building brand loyalty, boosting website traffic, and remaining competitive – which the author terms the ‘bandwagon effect’ (p.148). Similarly, drawing on interviews with journalists and editors in Israel and the U.K., Nagar (2011, p.117) found commercial pressure as the principal reason behind adopting the comment feature. Additional monetizing strategies, resulting from newspapers’ dual function (public role/market success), prompts the adoption of UGC for its “attractive content that strengthens the newspaper brand” and its function “as a form of ‘free’ labour” (Jönsson & Örnebring, 2011, p.129). Audience participation can, conversely, also be seen as imposing additional costs and required resources due to moderation or other oversight practices (Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012; Thurman, 2008).

Others have examined the legal and ethical implications of participatory journalism. Based on interviews with journalists in 10 countries, Singer (2011a, pp.128-30) identified two main ethical issues, namely the difficulty of ascertaining the accuracy of user-composed content and the abusive nature of many contributions. The author also found defamation and copyright issues amongst the legal trepidations expressed by journalists (pp.131-32). In order to address these concerns, online newspapers have adopted a number of mechanisms: overt

ethical and legal guidelines (netiquette rules) on their websites (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011; Witschge, 2008); in-house moderating mechanisms, including pre- or post-moderation – a more hands-off approach (Singer 2011a, pp.133-4); outsourcing (Reich 2011, p.111); prior registration, which creates a ‘reinhibition effect’ by countering the ‘disinhibition effect’ of online anonymity (Reich 2011, p.109); ‘crowdsource’ (Paulussen, 2011, p.70); and comments deletion (Boberg et al., 2018). Online newspapers have also allocated some level of responsibility to users themselves by assigning a collaborative role: ‘users as guardians of quality’ (Heinonen, 2011, p.42). This approach “provides a rare case in which users are allowed into the selection or filtering stage of news production” (Reich 2011, p.111). For instance, based on a sample of newspaper sites in the U.S., Singer (2014) noticed various gatekeeping opportunities available to users i.e. report abuse and/or rate comments/commenters, which the author termed ‘secondary gatekeeping’.

One corpus of research has focused specifically upon newsroom perceptions of online comments. Based on interviews with journalists at 25 leading newspaper websites in 10 countries, Reich (2011, p.103) noted a general ambivalence, with some interviewees considering the feature ‘a necessary evil’: vital to attract readers, while suffering from poor quality. Journalists acknowledge the commercial value of user comments (e.g. increasing traffic, strengthening loyalty) and “their ability to serve as an additional rating system, or at least as proof that a story resonates with audience members” (p.104). Comments can also assist journalists with providing story ideas and material as well as identifying errors and typos, which Reich (2011) calls the ‘human capital provided by readers’ (p.105). Based on a national survey of large- and mid-size newspapers in the U.S., Santana (2011) found that despite general qualms about comments, the majority of reporters obtain story ideas and re-examine the newsworthiness of a topic on the basis of readers’ feedback. “In this way”, Santana (2011) argues, “online forums represent an entirely new opinion pipeline not seen in the letter-to-the-editors section of the printed newspaper” (p.77). Likewise, Nagar (2011) noted that while the main agenda at news organizations remains the product of real events, organizational goals, and professional practices, “public preferences as reflected through comments [...] are slowly infiltrating the news-making process” (p.129). With journalists viewing comments as ‘a barometer for public agenda’, Nagar (2011) argues, “these information cues of issue salience [comments’ volume as an indicator for the article’s success and readers’ interest, added] are now visible to both editors and journalists to a larger extent than they used to be in the traditional media” (p.132).

Yet, comments also pose a twofold challenge, as Reich (2011) states, stemming mostly from their perceived low quality: comments “not infrequently contain defamation,

incitement, abusive content, and even racism and hate speech” (p.103). This, in turn, could instigate a commercial side effect by deterring other users and/or staining the organization’s reputation and perceived legitimacy. The low quality of comments, in editors’ view, “diminishes the authority of editorial content and undermines the credibility of the news site, hence the newspaper” (Nagar, 2011, p.122). Based on a nationwide survey of more than 500 respondents in the U.S., Nielsen (2014) found that whilst journalists strongly supported the possibility for readers to post comments, they disliked the anonymity of commenters. Moreover, the author noted that norms and conceptions of expertise led journalists to disregard users’ feedback and prevented them from engaging with readers. Based on their analysis of accountability practices<sup>112</sup> in news sites across 13 countries, Domingo and Heikkilä (2012) also indicated that despite the widespread adoption of practices fostering ‘responsiveness’ such as commenting, journalists from Arab countries, Europe, and the U.S. “share a tendency of *not* responding publicly to comments on their news sites”, which “often results from perceiving online discussions as being too crude or uncivil” (p.279, emphasis in original). However, a more recent study, based on in-depth interviews with 34 journalists from web-only news sites, shows “a shift toward journalists embracing commenting and seeing reading comments and responding to them as an essential part of their job” (Chen & Pain, 2017, p.887). While a third of the sample resisted this transition, in line with previous findings, the role of comments – particularly uncivil ones – is, according to Chen and Pain (2017), “becoming more normalized into journalistic routines” (p.887).

The abovementioned studies provide insights into the *complex* and somewhat *paradoxical* development of participatory journalism, as evident by the increasing adoption of UGC features on news sites, juxtaposed with newsrooms’ general ambivalence vis-à-vis user participation, shared beyond cultural specificities and national idiosyncrasies. While these empirical works have focused on the media professionals’ attitudes towards UGC, based on ethnographies or journalists’ self-reported accounts, fewer scholars have added nuances to journalist-audience relations by integrating users’ perceptions of participatory opportunities, with special attention paid to the comment feature (e.g. Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; Canter, 2013; da Silva, 2015; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Nagar, 2011; Reader, 2012; Schmidt & Loosen, 2015). By incorporating users’ perspectives in their research, these studies shed light on the areas of (in-)congruence between expectations and practices of both journalists and users, which Loosen and Schmidt (2012, p.867) conceptualize as ‘inclusion

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<sup>112</sup> The authors propose the following typology for online media accountability practices: practices before the act of publication (actor transparency); practices during the act of publication (production transparency), and practices after the act of publication (responsiveness) (pp.275-76).



distance'<sup>113</sup>. Combining newsroom interviews with reader surveys, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011) examined the perception of comments' quality from various stakeholder perspectives – editors, reporters, moderators, *and* users – and its impact on users' comment-reading as well as journalists' information-gathering behavior. Their findings suggest that while journalists and users alike have concerns over the quality of online discourse, anonymity was considered among newsroom staff as the main reason to blame for the low quality, whereas it was viewed among a significant number of users as a decisive factor behind their usage of the function. In another study, Reader (2012) conducted a textual analysis of 6 high-profile journalistic essays about the anonymity of online comments alongside the 927 attached responses and found that “journalists and audiences have very different conceptualizations about ‘civility’ and the role of anonymity in civil discourse” (p.495). This ‘basic point of disconnect’, the author argues, is evident by the fact that “when it comes to audience feedback, many journalists may prefer quality over quantity, but many of those who use such forums seem willing to tolerate substandard writing and vitriol if it encourages broader public participation” (p.505). Canter (2013) content analyzed comment threads – in terms of interaction with online peers or reaction to the article – in two British local news websites, coupled with newsroom observation and interviews with journalists, revealing that “a gap existed between the actual content of comments and what journalists’ perceived comments contained” (p.607): journalists deemed most comments off-topic, whereas the author’s findings suggested otherwise. Moreover, while some reporters believed that the same people – ‘armchair experts’ (quoting a reporter, p.610) – commented on all articles irrespective of the topic, findings showed that different users commented on different stories depending on their interest. In their study, Bergström and Wadbring (2015) analyzed attitudes towards comments from the perspectives of the public *and* journalists in Sweden. Measuring the attitudes based on two dimensions, namely the value of user contributions and the question of editorial involvement, the authors observed, on one hand, that journalists are less positive about comments and more critical of their quality than the average person (p.147), and, on the other, ‘something of a paradox’ amongst the public, whereby a “majority consider reader comments to be of relatively high value and of making online news more interesting. But a majority also view reader comments as having low-quality content” (p.143).

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<sup>113</sup> Loosen and Schmidt (2012, pp.874-77) propose a ‘heuristic model of inclusion’ by distinguishing inclusion performance from inclusion expectations: the former entails professional routines and structures (among journalists) and the reception of journalistic content and participatory practices (among the audience). The latter involves role perceptions and images of the audience (among journalists) and motivations for participation and assumptions about its potential influence (among the audience). The authors analyze the discrepancy in both groups’ practices and expectations by operationalizing the notions of inclusion level and inclusion distance, respectively (p.878). The former refers to the degree of congruence between journalists’ and audience’s performance/practices, whereas the latter refers to the level of (in-)congruence between the expectations of the two groups.

In sum, participatory journalism is situated in ‘an overall strategy for innovation’ (Paulussen 2011, p.60), encompassing economic and journalistic incentives, which, in turn, are affected by individual factors and organizational structures. Heinonen (2011, p.53) explains the underlying reason behind the journalists’ general ambivalence based on ‘a dominant occupational ideology or culture among journalists’, whereby “outside forces are kept largely at bay by the self-referential nature of news work, which draws primarily on arguments based on values shared among journalistic insiders”. The author concludes that “how journalists see themselves shapes how they see users, as well as how they see the relationships between those inside and outside the newsroom” (p.53). Other studies have confirmed the substantial role of professional self-image in framing audience inclusion (e.g. Krumsvik, 2018; Loosen, 2015; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012; Schmidt & Loosen, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2013). In this respect, Domingo (2011, p.86) distinguishes two dominant approaches amongst online news outlets to managing user contributions: participatory journalism *as playground*, whereby newspapers create distinct sections – beyond comment spaces – for user content with loose moderation, and participatory journalism *as source*, a strategy that embeds UGC in existing newsroom practices, with user input feeding news production and involving a stricter moderation. Domingo (2011) explicates the tension underlying both approaches based on the way journalists define themselves and their product in relation to their audience: “Elite newspapers see their role as constructing news narratives for the record; the work of professionals at these outlets is regarded especially highly. This self-perception creates a context in which there is little room for a dialogical news-production relationship with the audience” (p.88).

#### 4.3.2 The Users’ side

Regarding users’ side, research has hitherto focused, albeit by varying degrees, on the following aspects: (1) *who* the commenters are; (2) *how/to what extent* they make use of the commenting feature and *why*; and (3) *what* they say (comments’ content). The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of each of these distinct and, at times, overlapping aspects.

##### 4.3.2.1 Users’ profile

Some studies have sought to map the demographic and political characteristics of the people behind comments. Based on a survey of Swedish online news users, Bergström (2008) observed a strong correlation between commenting on articles and the overall habit of internet usage, with younger (aged 15-29 years) and tech-savvy users constituting the most frequent commenters. In addition to this generational gap, the study also found “a distinction between an educated elite and a majority of less educated people” (p.76), that is, a gap

between a small group of well-educated users who are more eager to produce their own content (e.g. writing blogs) and those with a lower education level who are primarily interested in giving feedback on journalistic content (e.g. commenting). By contrast, drawing on a web-based survey of British and Israeli participants, Nagar (2011) noted that while younger people may have better internet skills, users aged 44 and above appear more committed to online opinion expression and more likely to comment. In addition, people who use news sites as their main news source seem to be more engaged in commenting. The majority of respondents in Nagar's study was well-educated (with college or graduate degree) and reported having above-average income. Concerning the political profile of commenters, Chung (2008) noted that men, people who consider online news as a credible source of information, and politically engaged individuals – 'movers and shakers of their communities' (p.673) – were generally the most likely to use online 'human interactive' features. Nagar (2011) also found a strong correspondence between offline political engagement and online opinion expression, with users' online political behavior representing "an extension of their day-to-day participation patterns" (p.71).

Some scholars have examined the characteristics of people who exclusively read the news articles, those who read articles as well as the attached comments without posting themselves, and those who write comments (e.g. Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Friemel & Dötsch, 2015; Nagar, 2011; Springer et al., 2015). These groups have been categorized respectively as 'non-users', 'lurkers', and 'commenters', depending on their active/passive levels of participation (Springer et al., 2015, pp.799-800). Drawing on an online survey among the users of 8 major newspapers in Switzerland, Friemel and Dötsch (2015) found substantial differences in terms of age, gender, and political orientation between readers and writers of comments; whereas the former seem to be generally younger than the average news site user, the latter are more often men aged between 35 and 54. In addition, commenters more frequently tend to be on the right of the left-right political spectrum compared to comment readers. Similarly, other studies have also observed the rise of populist discourse in/through comment sections, regardless of the country examined (e.g. Groshek & Engelbert, 2013; Salgado, 2018). As Groshek and Engelbert (2013, p.184) state, "political populism and online media uses are two interdependent trends that are central features in rapidly evolving socio-political landscapes".

#### 4.3.2.2 Users' commenting practices: how, to what extent, and why?

Concerning the ways users appropriate comment sections, scholars have addressed the following issues: online comments as part of a broader discussion on UGC and participatory

journalism (discussed in the previous section); users' news consumption patterns/preferences; factors affecting the quantity of posts; and users' perceptions/motivations. Several studies have examined readers' *commenting patterns* within the broader context of participatory practices on news sites, reaching contradictory results. For instance, Bergström (2008) noted an overall reluctance of Swedish readers to generate content on legacy news sites, with the few who posted comments considering the feature rather as part of a creative leisure-time activity than an opportunity to exercise their democratic rights. The generally low level of interest in contributing content on news sites has been confirmed by some studies (e.g. Chung, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005; de La Poype & Sood, 2012). More recently, however, Bergström and Wadbring (2015, p.147) observed a growing acceptance and a "relatively strong support among the public for reader comments as part of the online news context" in Sweden. Likewise, Singer (2009) found comments to be both substantial, concerning the level of responses, and substantive, with the majority getting involved on matters related to national politics/issues (p.491). The high level of public interest in commenting has been confirmed by some studies (e.g. Collins & Nerlich, 2015; Freund, 2011; Reich, 2011).

As for users' *news preferences*, studies have explored the connection between journalistic content (story topic) and commenting patterns, yielding inconclusive findings, as demonstrated by two opposing streams in the literature: the first suggests that readers favor non-public affairs stories<sup>114</sup> whereas the second indicates that users prefer public-affairs content. For example, a survey of local British editors suggested that "while economy and election stories attracted some interest, user preferences leaned heavily toward coverage of quirkiness, sport, crime and death – plus a smattering of sex" (Singer, 2011b, p.634). By contrast, based on the statements of 600 online users from Israel and U.K., Nagar (2011, p.53) found that most users posted comments on issues/events pertaining to national, social, and political news. The author also noted that whereas the majority of Israeli users mentioned posting more frequently on national news, social issues seemed to be the most commented-on theme amongst British users. In another study on differences between British tabloid and broadsheet websites regarding the most commented-on themes, Richardson and Stanyer (2011) found that readers of both types of media commented more often on substantive issues than on human-interest or lifestyle stories. Examining *SPON*'s discussion forum, Boberg et al. (2018, p.62) saw that users "engaged heavily with political topics". In her

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<sup>114</sup> In their cross-national analysis, Deuze et al. (2007) noted that users were both encouraged and willing to produce soft news content: "while 'hard news', and especially politics, is still regarded as too controversial to be opened to the involvement of news users as 'producers' [...] 'soft' news still appears to dominate [users' participation, added], suggesting that many people contribute...out of a frustration with the rather uniform, institutional, and gendered (as it privileges conflict, threats and problems) focus of traditional, mainstream 'hard' news" (p.334).

study, Canter (2013) noticed that both hard news and humorous stories accounted for the most commented-on articles. “The public it seems”, she concluded, wishes “to be informed and entertained and both are motivating factors for participation” (p.617). Thurman and Walters (2013) examined Live blogging on the *Guardian* site and found that public affairs-related Live Blogs (classified as ‘News’ and ‘Series/Subject’) such as Politics Live and Middle East Live were more popular amongst readers compared to Live Blogs covering sports and soft news-related topics. The authors concluded that the format could increase readers’ inclination to participate and that Live Blogging “is [...] shifting readers’ online news consumption preferences away from non- public-affairs- to public-affairs-oriented news” (p.99). Based on a cross-national examination of comments on the websites of five quality newspapers in Europe and U.S., Ruiz et al. (2011, p.13) indicated that “politics (in some cases with connection to economy) was the most discussed topic”, with the exception of sports news on then Guardian.co.uk and stories covering social themes on ElPaís.com being the most commented-on during the studied period. In another comparative study on websites in Brazil, China, and the U.S., Shoemaker et al. (2010) saw that despite some differences i.e. more popularity of news items with elements of social change among readers in China and the U.S., readers from all sites were “interested in the odd and unusual events that are unexpected or that startle” (p.67).

Besides elucidating users’ (thematic) news preferences, studies have also delved into factors that influence *levels of participation* and *interactivity* within comment sections. Concerning the number of comments, “their very volume constitutes an element of interest and a subject for analysis” (Palacios 2012, p.136). Accordingly, studies have sought to explicate the reasons behind why articles sometimes elicit up to hundreds of posts as opposed to those who trigger few, if any, reaction. For example, by examining comments on *Al Jazeera*’s Arabic website, Abdul-Mageed (2008) noticed that the day of the week and the position of news stories on the website affects commenting patterns. Moreover, he found a strong correlation between the most covered themes in news stories (‘politics’, ‘military and political violence’, ‘foreign relations’) and the most commented-on articles, concluding that commenting was significantly influenced by both the website’s layout – the salience given to some stories – and the thematic coverage of news. In another study, Tsagkias et al. (2009, pp.2-3) found that textual and semantic features such as the particularity of topics, persons, locations, and organizations covered in a story combined with using specific, rather than general, terms for these entities can predict the volume of comments more effectively compared to formal features such as the article’s length. A more recent study that integrated structural (e.g. news release time, number of words, pictures/videos, etc.), content (e.g.

subjective opinion, positivity/negativity, controversial news, etc.), and usage features such as social media recommendations, reported the “superiority of social media recommendation over structural and content features in explaining the number of comments” on news sites (Liu et al., 2015, p.772). Based on an analysis of selected news sites in Germany, Weber (2012a) found that the more the news event involves one’s own social group (e.g. one’s country), the more controversial it is, and the higher the associated damages are, the more likely it is to garner comments. By contrast, unexpected news, particularly when presented in a purely factual style, as opposed to commentary and opinion pieces, receive fewer comments. Elsewhere, Weber (2012b) noticed that while news factors including ‘damage’ and ‘controversy’ increase the number of comments by German users on both domestic- and international-related stories, status and proximity of the reported country affect the frequency of comments in international news coverage, that is, more comments are expected regarding countries that hold a high status – international power and prosperity – and, at the same time, close proximity to Germany. In the absence of status, comments are more directed at events in more distant and dissimilar nations. Weber (2014), therefore, concluded that Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) taxonomy, mentioned in Chapter Three (section 3.1.1.1), can be extended to online comments.

Few scholars have added nuance by distinguishing the types of interactive features that users employ to engage with the news (different appropriation of technological affordances), while considering contextual variations (changes in socio-political landscape) and concurrently examining the participatory opportunities available to users and their own preferences. Based on a longitudinal study of the two practices of clicking and commenting on articles published in an Israeli website, Tenenboim and Cohen (2015) found that sensational and curiosity-arousing topics were among the most clicked-on articles, whereas social/political and controversial topics constituted the most commented-on pieces. The authors offer a new perspective regarding the “controversy” surrounding audiences’ news preferences (p.198), as evident in the ambiguous results from empirical studies, by arguing that “different types of content often generate different *expressions* of interest: consumption versus discussion” (p.199, emphasis in original). The authors maintain that while a specific news story may be widely read, it might not necessarily be extensively discussed. Whereas “clicking enables self-experience with news, especially when it comes to sensational stories, commenting has a role in constructing a social/group identity through discussions of political/social issues” (p.214). In another study, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2012) investigated the impact of topics and changes in socio-political contexts by examining the

thematic composition<sup>115</sup> of the most e-mailed, clicked, and commented-on articles during times of routine and heightened political activity such as national election or nationwide crisis, and saw the prevalence of public affairs-related news among the most commented articles – compared to most clicked and most emailed – during the former period that intensified in the course of the latter. In their book entitled *The News Gap*, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) examined the divergence between the content choices of journalists and readers through a wide-ranging comparative study of 20 leading news sites in 7 countries across 3 regions. The authors found that the gap, operationalized as the difference between the most newsworthy and the most clicked/e-mailed/commented-on articles, was more influenced by contextual, technological, interpretive, and experiential factors than geographic and ideological variations across regions and outlets (pp.141-46). Integrating the impact of storytelling formats into their analysis, the authors found that while users tend to click more on interesting non-public-affairs stories presented in a straight-news format, they prefer to comment more on high-profile and controversial public-affairs stories narrated in either straight-news or commentary/opinion style (pp.135-36). In their study, Almgren and Olsson (2015) compared the extent to which readers are encouraged (or allowed) to comment with the degree to which they choose to post comments across various news categories – which the authors describe as ‘negotiations’ (p.3). By content analyzing over 1000 articles on the affiliated website of one of Sweden’s largest newspapers, the authors noted a somewhat ‘paradoxical relationship’ between what news the users are allowed to comment on and what news categories they actually prefer to give feedback to (p.8). While users prefer to post comments on articles covering real-world issues, including politics and healthcare, the editorial preference “mainly steers users’ participatory practices towards news categories such as entertainment and art or sports and club activities” (Almgren & Olsson, 2015, p.8).

Concerning the users’ *motivations* for posting comments, scholars have either focused on comments’ characteristics or drawn on surveys. Based on a content analysis of comments in the politics section of *Spiegel Online*, Freund (2011) noticed the overriding interest of users in expressing their views on the issues covered in news stories – rather than the article itself – as well as criticizing the political elite. The comment sections, Freund states, “primarily seem to provide an access point to public debate. The ‘open mike’ function is what matters most” (p.34). Nagar (2011, pp.57-9) identified five motivations for commenting, the most prominent of which was to use the feature as “a tool for opinion expression” on issues of public concern, with some using the opportunity to “vent” and “release some steam” (p.58), followed by a desire to exchange and share knowledge, post on matters perceived to be

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<sup>115</sup> Whether the main subject(s) in the article include public affairs (politics, economics, and international topics) or non-public affairs (entertainment, sports, crime, weather etc.) issues (p.16).

important ('issue salience'), discuss politics and respond to/provoke others ('sociability'), and seek empowerment as citizens along with a belief in the ability to persuade others. Similarly, Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011, pp.5-6) found 'personal identity' – the desire to vent or express an opinion/ sentiment – as the main reason behind writing comments, followed by other motives: 'information-centric' (e.g. asking or answering questions), sharing first-hand experience, adding information (e.g. facts, background, links, etc.); 'social interaction' (e.g. sympathizing); and, finally, 'entertainment' motives such as enjoying debates with others or injecting humor into the discussion. Mitchelstein (2011) studied the nature of online political talk in two contexts, namely online newspapers and blogs, and found that "[w]hereas participating in blogs was mostly linked to discussion and socialization motives, posting comments in online newspapers was usually associated with self-expression needs" (p.2014) such as publicizing one's opinion and blowing off steam. Based on interviews with people behind the comments that contained hate speech, Erjavec and Kovačič (2012, p.899) identified the following categories: 'soldiers' and 'believers', who share the same motive and characteristics, and 'players' and 'watchdogs', who share similar traits, with the former engaging in online debate for entertainment purposes, and the latter seeking to draw attention to social injustice. Springer et al. (2015) examined motives/inhibitors among German-speaking users and noted that commenters are primarily fueled by social-interactive motives –that is, more socially than deliberately motivated to participate in online discussion – whereas comment readers are driven by both cognitive and entertainment intentions. Based on a survey of more than 500 U.S. participants, Wu and Atkin (2017) found 'narcissism' and 'agreeableness' as key personality predictors for commenting. Additional motivating/inhibiting factors identified in other studies are: perceived relevance and prior knowledge i.e. having an opinion on a particular issue (Weber, 2014); perceived (low) quality of online discussion (e.g. Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; da Silva, 2015; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Springer et al., 2015); and website-specific rules and restrictions i.e. the need to register or subscribe to comment (e.g. Ruiz et al., 2011; Webber, 2012b).

#### 4.3.2.3 The content of online comments

The research conducted, to date, on the content of comments can broadly be divided alongside two areas of foci: 1) empirical studies that have examined the normative valence of online discourse and 2) those that have analyzed comment spaces either as 'venues of online opinion expression' (Aharony 2012, p.840) in order to gauge public sentiment on a specific topic/issue, or as a (potential) space for expressing alternative viewpoints.



#### 4.3.2.3.1 The deliberative quality of comments

Numerous studies have assessed the quality of online discussion based on the textual characteristics of comments and the level of interactivity among discussants – measured against a set of (pre-)defined ‘deliberative’ criteria<sup>116</sup>. The findings paint a somewhat ambiguous picture. For example, Singer (2009) found that comment sections, during national election, can both perform a bridging function by serving as an ‘open networked environment’ (p.492) that accommodates geographically-dispersed users who gather to get involved in political debates as well as a bonding function by serving as a channel for social interaction and community formation. Manosevitch and Walker (2009) examined the deliberative quality of online comments on opinion pages of two U.S. regional newspapers and found that user inputs encompassed analytic and social processes essential to fostering public deliberation. By contrast, Freund (2011) reported that while many *Spiegel Online* readers used the commenting function, the majority of posts were declarative (one-way) without reacting to, nor interacting with, each other. In other words, “people choose to ‘discuss’ an article individually, rather than together with other readers” (p.28). Similarly, Richardson and Stanyer (2011, p.1000) saw that posting comments on tabloid and broadsheet sites “seemed the preserve of the blindly opinionated, who used the opportunity to voice their own hobby horse issues”. In their analysis of the quality of online debate in five leading news websites in Europe and U.S., Ruiz et al. (2011) found two models of discussion, namely ‘communities of debate’ (e.g. *Guardian*) and ‘homogeneous communities’ (e.g. *Le Monde*). By analyzing the quality of debates on articles about climate change in British tabloid and broadsheet news sites, Nagar (2011) found, to her surprise, that the quality score of (tabloid) *Daily Mail* users was on average higher than that of (broadsheet) *Guardian* readers, which, she ascribes to the difference between the two sites regarding the level of interaction among participants; the substantially higher degree of exchange among *Guardian* users, also observed in other studies (e.g. Richardson & Stanyer, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011), was replete with comments often drifting off-topic. Moreover, Nagar argued that “the high level of interactions show[sic] that a by-product of the feature is informal political talk among users” (p.102). Based on a corpus-driven analysis of the same topic – climate change debate – on the same website (*Guardian*), Collins and Nerlich (2015, p.205), on the contrary, found “some evidence of deliberation in online discussion threads”, notwithstanding the presence of incivility and other aspects of online discourse that discouraged multiple viewpoints. Strandberg and Berg (2013) examined 300 comments on a Finnish newspaper website and found that while the majority of posts stayed on-topic and addressed the issue(s) covered in

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<sup>116</sup> See Coleman and Moss (2012) for a review of online deliberation research.

the article, the level of interaction among readers was shallow. The authors concluded that comments “function as a mix of both platforms for democratic conversation and virtual soapboxes” (p.145).

Other studies, still, show an inconsistent picture concerning the discourse quality of comments. Online debates are “routinely found to be uncivil, beset by affectively charged contributors and not conducive to the sharing of arguments and shifting of preferences” (Coleman & Moss, 2012, p.6). Researchers have often remarked the prevalence of flaming (Papacharissi, 2004) or other elements of incivility (e.g. da Silva, 2015) and impoliteness (e.g. Neurauter-Kessels, 2011); trolling (Cheng et al., 2017), cyberbullying (e.g. Festl & Quandt, 2017); disjointed discourse due to irrelevant posts (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Nagar, 2011; Zamith & Lewis, 2014) and a ‘superficial level of discourse’ among participants who do not dedicate time to articulating more thoughtful comments (Aharony, 2012, p.841); threadjacking (Myers, 2010, p.264) and monopolization of discussion by few individuals (e.g. Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002), therewith “ostensibly homogenizing debates”(Zamith & Lewis, 2014, p.5). Additionally, comments have frequently been described as aggressive, abusive, and exhibiting extreme/populistic views (e.g. Festl & Quandt, 2017; Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Loke 2012, 2013; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011; Reich, 2011), in other words, what Quandt (2018) labels ‘dark participation’. These results, however, are countered by positive observations that indicate online comments’ sophisticated argument structures (e.g. Collins & Nerlich, 2015, p.204), keen interest in political discussion in addition to a widening of the discussants’ repertoire of arguments, introducing them to new perspectives (e.g. Manosevitch, 2011; Manosevitch & Walker, 2009; Schuth et al., 2007; Singer, 2009).

The quality of contributions in terms of language use and the level of interactivity can either be attributed to users themselves or pegged to the commenting feature’s characteristics. In other words, the deliberative quality of online discourse (or lack thereof) should be understood within the broader context of various social and technical practices. Coleman and Moss (2012, pp.7-8) refer to the diverse techniques/strategies adopted by news sites, including moderation mechanisms, user anonymity, and the feature’s structural design as ‘technologies of discursive order’. Upon investigation, the claims surrounding the impact of these formal features on online deliberation (discussed below) are highly contested. Concerning moderation practices, Ruiz et al. (2011) maintain that while the quality of online debate seems to be more influenced by the relationship between media and political systems, different moderation strategies appear to have no direct influence on the dynamics of users’ comments (p.21). By contrast, Mitchelstein (2011) noted the impact of moderating practices

across online forums, concluding that “online discussion should not be characterized as a single phenomenon, either conducive or deleterious to democratic dialogue, but as a multifaceted practice that varies according to participants’ uses of the medium and facilitators’ practices of moderation” (p.2026). As for the social consequences of anonymity (Boczkowski,1999, p.101), proponents of the so-called ‘Reduced-Cues’ model argue that anonymity in computer-mediated communication (CMC) “is associated with a series of behavioral outcomes that distinguish these communication practices from those that take place face-to-face, such as less inhibited expressions and higher and more egalitarian participation patterns” (Boczkowski, 1999, p.104). Scholars have found, on one hand, that anonymity enables users to “express their opinion on potentially controversial issues” (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012, p.15); “free[s] the audience from public scrutiny and judgment that limits opinion expression” (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012, p.314); and “offers a safe haven from the ‘watchful eye’ of the state, encouraging more honest expression of opinion”(Douai & Nofal, 2012, p.269). On the other hand, online anonymity “keeps us from assessing the impact and social value of our words” (Papacharissi, 2002, p.16): in the absence of status cues and social context, “users have less face at stake and consequently less face to lose [...] since their ‘real-life’ identity remains largely hidden” (Neurauter-Kessels, 2011, p.195). Moreover, anonymity is implicated in verbal attacks and other forms of incivility (e.g. da Silva, 2015), abuse (e.g. Neurauter-Kessels, 2011) or bigotry, racism and hate speech (e.g. Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012; Hughey & Daniels,2013) by providing “a space uninhibited by political correctness [...] yield[ing] a certain level of freedom to reveal what would never be tolerated in public today” (Loke, 2012, p.237). Strandberg and Berg (2013) found anonymity to have “both a beneficial and adverse impact” on online debates. By comparing online and face-to-face deliberation, Tucey (2010) noted an overall lower quality of anonymous discussions, replete with flaming and disrespect, due to participants’ diluted sense of responsibility. In a similar vein, Nagar (2011) argued that ‘partial anonymity’ i.e. mandatory registration on the websites of *Guardian* and *Daily Mail* and ‘partial identification’ i.e. user profiles on *Guardian* “seem to diminish users’ perceptions of anonymity and function as quality control mechanisms that encourage communicative discipline and elevate the level of discourse” (p.101). In other words, “identifiability seems to amplify users’ sense of accountability which leads to higher quality of opinion expression” (p.101). Based on an online experiment in Finland, Strandberg and Berg (2015), however, noticed the weak impact of participants’ identifiability (known or anonymous) on discussion quality and the strong influence of temporality, with asynchronous discussions bringing about a more positive effect. Other scholars have also highlighted the role of the temporal

aspect of discursive practices and the overall impact of design features (e.g. Michailidou et al., 2014; Papacharissi, 2009). Neurauter-Kessels (2011, p.193) argues that medium characteristics such as asynchrony and the non-linearity of communication affect turn-taking amongst online participants. Freelon (2015, p.776) describes the impact of distinct ‘discourse architectures’ as “packages of technological characteristics that work together to enable and constrain different norms of democracy” on online debates. By analyzing political discussion in two online platforms, namely Twitter hashtags and newspaper comments, the author found that comment features within each discussion space facilitates specific patterns of communication norms. In their research on the online platforms of four opinion-leading German news sites, Esau et al. (2017) found platform design i.e. news forum, news website, and Facebook page as a decisive factor behind the deliberative quality of online discussions on heated topics/issues (e.g. ‘Refugee Crisis’, military engagement in Syria).

As Freelon (2015) states, research on online political discussion has primarily been dominated by normative assessment of ‘deliberativeness’, with regular reference to Habermas’s (1962/1989) public sphere. Overly formalized conceptions of deliberation, according to Coleman and Moss (2012, p.6), lead to “privileging certain forms of talk” by “dismissing as ‘non-deliberative’ modes of expression, forms of position-stating, and demonstrations of affect” that can serve to subordinate individuals/groups (p.11). Accordingly, Freelon (2015, p.775) proposes a multi-norm framework as “a means of understanding the various types of ‘non-deliberative’ communications that have been dismissed as worthless or unproductive by deliberation-centric researchers”. He points out two main areas of normative assessment in online political communication research, namely ‘online deliberation’ and ‘selective exposure’, arguing that the scholars’ “overwhelming focus on deliberation as the sole norm of relevance ignores other equally valid standards of political behavior that may prove more prevalent online” (Freelon, 2015, p.774).

#### 4.3.2.3.2 What online users *actually* say

In addition to studies reviewed above that have focused on the ‘quality’ of online discourse, measured against the normative standards of deliberation, scholars have attended to the content of comments in order to (1) grasp public opinion on issues of public interest (e.g. Brossoie et al., 2012; Gilbert, 2013; Henrich & Holmes 2011, 2013; KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017; Loke, 2013; Paprota, 2017; Park et al., 2012; Sweeting et al., 2017), or (2) assess online comment sections as alternative (or counter-) spaces (e.g. Dorostkar & Preisinger, 2017; Douai & Nofal, 2012; Erjavec & Kovačić, 2012; Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Milioni et al., 2012; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2017).

Some scholars have inspected comment sections in order to gain a deeper insight into public opinion on matters pertaining to controversial/sensitive social and political issues. While acknowledging the limitations associated with the comments' representativeness and generalizability, given the fact that not everyone visits the news sites under study, not all readers post on articles, and not all comments are published due to moderation practices, these studies maintain that online comments "serve as a gauge of public opinion that is immediate, spontaneous and (presumably) honest"<sup>117</sup> (Henrich & Holmes, 2011, p.2) and help uncover the 'discordance' between public perception and official expectations regarding issues of public concern (p.2). Furthermore, they constitute a 'unique data source' that assists in better understanding "how public decisions are made and beliefs shaped" (Henrich & Holmes, 2013, p.1). Comment sections can influence the way people make sense of the news and their social environment. Based on a study of how online users, when exposed to peers, adjust their own opinion as well as their perception of social reality, Lee and Jang (2010, p.843) noted that people tend to perceive the general opinion climate more from fellow posters than from the news position itself. Moreover, comments provide an invaluable insight into 'lay talk' (Koteyko et al., 2013, p.74). For instance, through examining British tabloid readers' posts on articles about climate change, Koteyko et al. (2013) observed the main discursive strategies adopted in climate-skeptic arguments and the way they were (re)produced and debated within their web-based context.

Others have studied media-enabled comment sections as alternative public spaces that contest official (elite, institutional) discourses. Here, scholarship can be divided in two sub-areas: investigating user agency through online posts by examining whether they raise new issues diverging from journalistic viewpoints; and analyzing comments as 'counterpublic spaces' (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p.465). Research has shown that comments can constitute an integral part of media coverage during a major crisis (e.g. Swine Flu outbreak) by providing counter-arguments that challenge the media's agenda-setting role (Karlsson, 2010, p.212). Studies also demonstrate "the promise of online reader posts to bring additional views into public discourse on pressing social, cultural and political issues" (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012, p.314). For example, in the context of a racially charged controversy in the U.S., comments were found to exhibit more balance, in terms of both the range and tone of opinions, compared to letters to editor. Furthermore, online posts contested traditional

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<sup>117</sup> "In contrast [to much social science research, added], data derived from comments are entirely participant driven and can include content unexpected by the researchers that is valuable in that it reveals the issues that matter to the commenters; people engage unsolicited in commenting so we can presume that the topics on which they write are important to them [...] comments reflect not only the writers' ideas about a particular news article but of the wider 'story' circulating in public discourse and, as such, they provide insight into public opinion about an issue in its entirety" (Henrich & Holmes, 2011, p.2).

institutions more often than reader letters did. In this vein, users' posts expand the public sphere and, at the same time, challenge the media's gatekeeping function (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012, p.314). By content analyzing more than 4,000 comments on two controversial topics, namely the Swiss minaret ban and the Ground Zero Mosque on the websites of *Al Arabiya* and *Al Jazeera*, Douai and Nofal (2012) found that despite substantial differences between the readers' responses on the two sites, users contested the two media's dominant frames and that comment sections enabled Arab citizens "to circumvent and challenge traditional and authoritarian controls" (p.266). By contrast, some scholars have pointed out the readers' limited use of the comment option in assuming an agenda-setting role (e.g. introducing new topics) or a gatekeeping function (e.g. providing original information). In their research on online discourse about nuclear energy in leading French news websites, de La Poype and Sood (2012) found the dialogue in comment sections to be dominated by mainstream media frames, with a small number of discussants using the space to express broader opinions on the topic. In addition, the authors observed 'episodic spikes' (p.43) and a discontinuity in public debates instigated by the news agenda. Milioni et al. (2012) analyzed readers' reactions to stories about immigration on Greek news sites and found that while commenters challenged journalistic viewpoints, user engagement in terms of raising new issues – besides those present in the article – as well as providing original information remained low. The authors concluded that while journalists "tend to steer audience participation, as they effectively tell them *what to discuss about*" (p.41, emphasis in original), readers tend to retain their traditional role of opinion expression on public issues without interfering with core journalistic practices. Scholars have also investigated extremism in comment sections – a phenomenon that is facilitated by online anonymity and lack of social cues in the digital space. For example, Erjavec and Kovačič (2012) combined a discourse analysis of user comments on Slovenian news sites with (online) interviews with people behind the posts and explained the frequency of online hate speech on the basis of nationalist and cultural tendencies, a low level of political culture, and Slovenians' general disenchantment with politics (pp.916-17). "This political abstinence", the authors state, "is partly canalized in the interactive environment of web comments, where the possibility of expressing discontent is more efficient because it is easy to express oneself and because every voice counts, and that it can be expressed often, daily, or several times a day" (p.917). Other scholars attribute the prevalence of populist views in the counter-public space afforded by comments sections to people whose voice may not be equally represented in mainstream media, particularly left-leaning news sites (Friemel & Dötsch, 2015; Milioni et al., 2012; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). By comparing the stances taken by journalists and

commenters on immigration in Greece, Milioni et al. (2012), for example, found that while the former generally took a pro-immigration position, the majority of the latter expressed negative views on the topic.

Some of the studies stated above as well as few others have examined articles *and* the corresponding comments, that is, the two elements of this (new) hybrid text (e.g. Gilbert, 2013; Milioni et al., 2012; Muñiz et al., 2015; Pinto-Coelho et al., 2017; Papadouka et al., 2016; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). Toepfl and Piwoni (2015), for instance, studied the two ‘communicative spaces’ by combining a qualitative analysis of *mainstream media discourse* with a quantitative content analysis of *user comments*. This approach, the authors argue, “is thus based on the assumption that structural features of the content posted to comment sections on a specific issue can only be fully understood in connection with an analysis of the structural features of mass media discourse on that issue” (p.468). Later, Toepfl and Piwoni (2017) investigated the structural commonalities between counter- and dominant publics i.e. mainstream news coverage (at article and website levels) and comments.

#### 4.3.2.4 CDA 2.0: contextualizing comments and othering online

The empirical studies outlined in this chapter highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of online comments, with the feature being influenced by, and contingent upon, myriad content- and context-specific factors involving individual choices and practices, interactional dynamics among discussants, news texts’ content elements, and web-specific characteristics i.e. the function’s design/structure and its technical-interactive features. Comments should thus be considered in view of their immediate and wider contexts (Dorostkar & Preisinger, 2017; Witschge, 2008). As Manosevitch and Tenenboim (2017, p.744) urge: “Several key factors affect the quality of UGC, specifically issue topic and socio-political context, but more research is needed to scrutinize other factors that may come into play” (p.744).

As stated in the beginning (Chapter One, section 1.2.1), the reader “is not without power, having a constructive role to play in ‘finding’ the values and beliefs” embedded in news language (Fowler, 1991, p.46), as “they ‘know’ the significance of the various journalistic codes already, through living within the society which has moulded the institution of the Press, and through habitual exposure to the discourse”. In this vein, “readers ‘read in’ – a more active process than ‘reading off’ – the ideology which shapes the newspaper’s representation of reality” (Fowler, 1991, p.43). Web 2.0-based media and online affordances have facilitated a range of “discursive spaces to individuals and groups who may not have traditionally had access to public media fora” (Milani & Johnson, 2010, p.6). A main characteristic of participatory web is mix of genres, meaning that “[i]nstead of the specific

genre forms and unidirectionality of textual practices in traditional (mass) media, users now deal with a wide variety of textual genres almost simultaneously” (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016, p.209). Hence, a socially-oriented approach such as CDA cannot remain oblivious to changes arising from continuous growth and popularity of digitally-mediated communication and the impact of participatory web across social and political realms. The ‘media-based citizen discourses’ (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.2) forged by mainstream news sites’ comment sections are intrinsically relevant to CDA, since: they constitute a domain within which official discourse(s) related, for instance, to Self and Other (see Chapter Three, section 3.2) are consumed and reproduced, challenged or resisted; they also reflect and reconstruct power relations established in society i.e. exclusion of, and prejudice against, marginalized/disadvantaged outgroups (Vaahensalo, 2021) as well as expose different power dynamics and structures in the (anonymous) online sphere (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014); and, in addition, provide scholars with an opportunity to examine how “the alternative discourses are managed and negotiated with respect to the legal and other requirements regulating the involvement of the readers”, discussed earlier in this chapter, in a discursive space “that is managed by the media channels themselves” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.5).

Comments have been studied to uncover diverse forms of othering and ideological in- and outgroup constructions in mediated public spaces (e.g. Chovanec, 2017; Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012; Gilbert, 2013; Goss, 2007; KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; Paprota, 2017; Witschge, 2008). Lien (2016), for instance, examined Self and Other presentations among Norwegian posters on articles about the so-called ‘Refugee Crisis’ in 2015, and noted that recurring themes, inspired by official narrative, justified fear of refugees “through well-established Western discourse, typically related to the portrayal of migrants and refugees as the ‘Other’” (Lien, 2016, ii). Fielder and Catalano (2017) examined readers’ reactions to a story about the rising number of Romanian and Bulgarian workers in the U.K. published on the website of the conservative *The Telegraph* and, drawing on the Discourse-Historical approach, identified various othering strategies used (or appropriated) in rightwing populist discourse, demonstrating “how a discussion forum, specifically reader responses to a news article, constitutes a domain of identity articulation in which self and other are established, enforced and reinforced” (p.208). Othering discourses online, as these authors and others note, can be expressed “in less subtle ways” compared with media texts by means of “politically incorrect sentiments, trolling and flaming” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.5), ranging from explicitly racist posts and biased/prejudicial views to more covert and subtle ways i.e. through humor (e.g. Hughey & Daniels, 2013).



Notwithstanding above-stated and other studies, web-based material remains a comparatively less explored data source in Critical Discourse Studies (e.g. Dehghan & Ali, 2015; Dorostkar & Preisinger, 2017; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; Mautner, 2005). The main reasons behind less empirical work on computer-mediated discourse are twofold: CDA's adoption of a top-down approach that focuses primarily on 'elite discourse' i.e. media and political discourse. Thus, despite their claim to welcome and incorporate observational research, CDA scholars<sup>118</sup> – with exceptions particularly among DHA practitioners – have mostly delved into institutional texts (Dehghan & Ali, 2015; KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016). In other words:

“...there is still a strong tendency to focus on powerful, top-down texts and discourses of symbolic elites e.g. mass media. Mass media in general and print media in particular have been traditional sites for CDA investigation under the (rightly held) assumption that impact of mass mediated discourses on society is a legitimate scholarly research focus. In fact, the preoccupation with (discursive) power is an integral part of CDA in its goal to account for processes of production, distribution and consumption of texts” (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014, p.756).

The second reason behind this 'relative web-averseness' (Mautner, 2005, p.811) relates to the theoretical and methodological challenges associated with web-based data<sup>119</sup>, including issues pertaining to traits that distinguish 'new' from 'traditional' media such as size of the web, multiplicity of voices online and the messy, non-linear ways of audience participation (Grabill & Pigg, 2012), the dynamic and ephemeral quality of web-based data, and issues connected with textuality, interactivity and multimodality (Mautner, 2005, pp.814-20); the flow of online news (Dehghan & Ali, 2015; Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010; Kautsky & Widholm, 2008); and a-historicity (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016). Despite these challenges, also encountered in this research and elaborated in Chapter Five, this study was determined to include UGC (namely comments) within the analysis of Iran's discursive representation, in tune with “the recent appeal by scholars working within the paradigm of critical discourse studies for the need to integrate the fragmented discourses of public and private spheres” (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.5), in an attempt, moreover, to unveil (competing) othering types and practices within a media-enabled online space, “where people negotiate

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<sup>118</sup> See, for example: Androutsopoulos' (2008) online ethnography of German websites of hip-hop and diaspora groups; Dorostkar and Preisinger's (2017) examination of racism in the forums of the Austrian *derStandard.at*; Kautsky and Widholm's (2008) examination of the fluidity of online news texts; Koteyko et al. (2013); DHA applied by KhosraviNik and Zia (2014), KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh (2017) to explore how national(ist) identities are (re)constructed through online discursive practices on participatory web platforms; Törnberg and Törnberg's (2016) study on the representation of Islam and Muslims in social media discourse between 2000 and 2013 in Sweden; Paprota's (2017) research on the representation of Eastern Europeans in the comment sections of two British news sites; Witschge's (2008) study of political discussion on immigration in online forums in the Netherlands; and Wodak and Wright's (2006) analysis of EU's discussion forum (*Futurum*).

<sup>119</sup> For a more thorough discussion on theoretical and methodological challenges of applying CDA to computer-mediated discourse, see KhosraviNik and Unger (2016); KhosraviNik and Zia (2014); Dehghan and Ali (2015).

hierarchies, positions of power and the identities that settle into them” (Vaahensalo, 2021, p.230). While online readers’ responses may be triggered by a given article’s topic/content, they contain a personal aspect (e.g. individual background, life experience, worldview) based on which in- and outgroups are formed and negotiated in the discussion forums. Given the plurality of interlocutors in such spaces, self-identification and othering become interpersonal and interactional, with ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ constructed and understood in a variety of ways. In other words, individuals hold “various [O]thers”, as they “are engaged in multiple relations with others, thus creating and contributing to a constant interaction and exchange in views and narratives, all of which shape resulting behaviour and actions in one way or another” (Buitrago, 2012, xv). Since intersubjectivity, mentioned in Chapter Three (section 3.2), “is a process of sharing experiences and emotions” (Vaahensalo, 2021, p.230), it is invariably reflected in news sites’ comment sections, whereby comments are posted in reaction to the attached text as well as to fellow posters, the latter which allows participants to voice their personal take on each other’s stance and the overall topic. The identities shaped in these online spaces vary and, based on the distinction made by Blackledge (2005, pp.36-8), include ‘non-negotiable’ and ‘negotiable’ identity options, with the former containing identities that are assumed/accepted and the latter those that are contested/reconstructed which can be formed by means of new positioning and presentation of Us and Them.

## 5. Chapter Five: Research Method and Design

Based on the two previous chapters' (theoretical and empirical) discussions and in line with the eclectic approach advocated by CDA, this chapter begins with presenting the methodological framework and the main analytical tools/categories adopted and used in this study. Research questions are presented next, followed by outlining the rationale and description of the chosen news websites and the data collection, selection, and analysis processes. The chapter ends with indicating the limitations and challenges related to the material(s) examined as well as to the analysis/interpretation processes, some of which are connected with general concerns and challenges pertaining to web-based material (stated in Chapter Four), CDA (stated in Chapter Three), and how some were addressed.

### 5.1 Methodological framework

The concept of 'Ideological Square', developed by van Dijk (1998) and discussed in Chapter Three (section 3.3.3.1), that is central to discursive othering in mediated discourses (Chapter Three, section 3.2; Chapter Four, section 4.3.2.4) and particularly relevant to this study, is deconstructed and operationalized using the analytical categories proposed by the Discourse-Historical approach (Chapter Three, section 3.3.4) and with recourse to useful tools and concepts from other CDA frameworks. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995a; 1995b) three-layered model, which was mentioned in the beginning (Chapter One, section 1.3) and guides the overall approach to CDA in this study<sup>120</sup>, Koller (2012, p.19) argues that a critical analysis of collective identity<sup>121</sup> should include *describing* the texts' linguistic features and *interpreting* them by considering the discourse practice and social context. In other words, three interrelated levels of discourse should be taken into account: the micro-level involving a detailed analysis of the *text* (*what* collective identities are constructed and *how*); the meso-level that entails the analysis of *discourse practice context* i.e. production, distribution, reception (*who* is involved in practices around the text, and in what role?); and the macro-level that takes the broader context i.e. political, socio-cultural, and economic conditions into account (*what* social factors influence the text and the discourse practice?). In a similar vein, Richardson (2007) thoroughly applied Fairclough's (1995a; 1995b) three-tier model in his examination of news discourse and proposes the following levels of analysis: *textual analysis* that "doesn't simply involve looking at the linguistic form and content of texts" (Richardson,

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<sup>120</sup> To operationalize this model, this thesis was guided and informed by detailed studies from KhosraviNik (2015) and Richardson (2007) as well as the frameworks proposed by Koller (2012) and Witschge (2008).

<sup>121</sup> Koller (2012, p.20) conceptualizes 'collective identities' as "socio-cognitive representations, which are held by people who identify as members of a group. They are further theorized as being constructed, negotiated and changed through discursive interaction within and between groups".

2007, p.38), but also these elements “*in relation to* their direct or indirect involvement in reproducing or resisting the systems of ideology and social power” (p.39, italics in original); *discursive practices*, or “the processes through which journalists produce texts, and readers use and understand them” (Richardson, 2007, p.75), namely how readers are conceptualized (e.g. as consumer or commodity), professional practices (e.g. ethics and objectivity), organizational practices (e.g. news agenda and news values) (Richardson, 2007, pp.75-113); and, finally, *social practices* that include “the relationships between journalism and the wider social world” with regard to “their economic practices, political practices and ideological practices” (Richardson, 2007, p.147). “These social *forces* and *sources*, as Richardson (2004, xxi, italics in original) argues, “frame the way(s) in which journalists interact with and report” diverse issues/topics.

As for reader comments, with language viewed as ‘situated practice’ (Barton & Lee, 2013, p.3), the context in which non-institutional online discourse forged in comment sections is embedded is of significance, “not least because of the constant change, the constant learning and the fluidity of texts. A crucial part of the context of texts online is locating them in the practices of their creation and use” (Barton & Lee, 2013, p.11). Witschge (2008, p.75) points out that the analysis of online discourse, ‘as a communicative event’, should consider the immediate context in which it is produced and consumed/interpreted (discourse practice) as well as the broader socio-cultural/political context (social practice). That is, the above-stated interrelated levels concerning media texts should also be borne in mind when analyzing comments. This involves individual reasons and motivations for commenting (*micro* level); the organizational context, including existing rules and restrictions such as mandatory registration (*meso* level); and the broader cultural/social/political context (*macro* level)<sup>122</sup> (Engesser, 2010 cited in Weber, 2012b, pp.220-22).

### 5.1.1 Textual analysis

The first level is a detailed reading of the texts. Given the eclectic nature of CDA (Chapter Three, section 3.3), there is no best-equipped toolkit, that is, “no single agreed-upon way of ‘doing’ CDA” (Reynolds, 2019, p.49), and, as such, practitioners of this approach often select and combine analytical concepts and tools set out by various frameworks depending on their topic, research question, and the material being examined. The present thesis, as stated before, applies some of the main categories proposed by DHA and, in addition, draws on other analytical concepts, discursive tools, and linguistic techniques/mechanisms (e.g.

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<sup>122</sup>“Die Systematisierung des Forschungsstandes erfolgt auf Basis des Modells von Engesser [...] der die Bestimmungsfaktoren medialer Partizipation auf drei Ebenen verortet: Mikro- bzw. Individualebene, Makroebene (politisches System und Kultur) und Mesoebene (Medienorganisation)” (Weber 2012b, p.220).

Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2004, 2007; van Dijk, 1998; van Leeuwen, 1996) that are both useful and relevant to this research.

#### 5.1.1.1 Topics

The first step in examining texts involves the analysis of ‘semantic macrostructures’, that is, “global meanings, topics or themes” (van Dijk, 2009, p.68) that “language users constitute in discourse production and comprehension, and the ‘gist’ that is best recalled by them” (van Dijk, 2001, p.102). Regarded as comprising the most essential information of news discourse in addition to one that readers will likely remember the most (van Dijk, 2009, p.68), semantic macrostructures are typically expressed in headlines, leads, and/or teasers (article summary), given that news articles are hierarchically “structured like an inverted pyramid, whereby the facts/points deemed to be most important are located at the top in the headline, leading down in importance through the story lead, the first paragraph and so on to the bottom” (Richardson, 2004, p.46). In accord with Ideological Square, it is expected that information which foregrounds Our positive aspects and Their negative ones – or backgrounds Our negative aspects and Their positive ones – to “be construed as important or topical macro-information, and vice versa” (van Dijk, 1998, p.42). The choice behind which discourse topic(s) should (not) be included in news texts thus serves as ‘a major gate-keeping process’ (KhosraviNik, 2010a, p.61). As for online comments and similar to focus group dynamics (Krzyżanowski, 2008), two categories of discourse topics, namely ‘primary topics’ and ‘secondary topics’, can be distinguished; the former is “put (‘given’) by the moderators” – or, in this case, relates to content of media-generated texts – and the latter is “developed by the participants” themselves (Krzyżanowski, 2008, p.170).

#### 5.1.1.2 Discursive strategies

The process of identifying discourse(s), as CDS scholars acknowledge, is not an easy task, since “a ‘discourse’ always depends on the discourse analyst’s perspective” and, as an object of investigation, “is not a closed unit, but a dynamic semiotic entity that is open to reinterpretation and continuation” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.89). In order to systematically investigate the discursive construction of identities and uncover the strategies used for positive Self- and negative Other-presentations (Wodak, 2009, p.40), DHA proposes five analytical tools/categories defined as *discursive strategies*. By ‘strategy’, Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p.94) denote “a more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal”. Similar to the categories selected and applied by Reisigl and Wodak (2009) in their study on discourses about climate change, and those used in other studies (e.g. KhosraviNik &

Sarkhoh, 2017; Paprota, 2017), the analytical tools primarily applied in this thesis for examining articles and their comments include reference/nomination, predication, and argumentation<sup>123</sup>.

#### 5.1.1.2.1 Referential and predicational strategies

Analyzing these strategies helps reveal ‘lexical items’, which may “generally or contextually express values or norms” (van Dijk, 1998, p.31), and ‘ideological categories’ i.e. “membership criteria, activities, goals, values, and crucial group resources” (p.62) employed in texts and integral to discursive Us/Them bifurcation. *Referential strategies* involve the way(s) in which social actors – or objects and events – are named and labelled in texts, that is, discursively constructed and represented, for instance, by establishing in- and outgroups (Wodak, 2009, p.40). “The manner in which social actors are named”, as Richardson (2007) explains, “identifies not only the group(s) that they are associated with (or at least the groups that the speaker/writer *wants* them to be associated with it can also signal the relationship between the namer and the named” (p.49, emphasis in original). In this respect, the analytical categories defined by van Leeuwen (1996) for scrutinizing the representation of social actors have shown to be particularly useful (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2010a; Paprota, 2017; Richardson, 2004; Richardson, 2007). This proposed system network or ‘array of choices’<sup>124</sup> (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.34) entails linguistic mechanisms such as ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’, the latter which, a salient area of inquiry in Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), is implemented by means of suppression (e.g. deletion of actors/actions) or backgrounding (p.39) in order for such representations to “suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended” (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.38). Other techniques that either were deemed relevant to this research and chosen a priori for investigation or those stemming from the material itself include: ‘association’/‘dissociation’; ‘genericization’/‘specification’; ‘individualization’ and ‘assimilation’, with the latter realized through aggregation (quantifying social actors as group) or collectivization; and, finally, ‘nomination’ or ‘categorization’ by means of identification (who social actors are) and functionalization (what they do), all which, where necessary, will be further elaborated.

Social actors – or objects and events – are labelled along with their discursive qualification, namely (stereotypical) “evaluative attributions of negative and positive traits in the linguistic form of implicit or explicit predicates” (Wodak, 2009, p.42). These *predicational strategies* can, amongst others, take the shape of nouns, adjectives, and prepositional phrases (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.94) or realized through rhetorical tropes

<sup>123</sup> The two strategies of ‘perspectivization’ and ‘intensification’ were not applied.

<sup>124</sup> See van Leeuwen (1996, p.66) for the 21 categories through which social actors can be represented.

such as metaphors and hyperbole (Richardson, 2007, pp.64-74). In addition to associating features and characteristics, included are also the actions “attributed to the actors (for both in or out-groups) and mentioned in the text against the variety of choices available” (KhosraviNik, 2010a, p.64). This is realized by incorporating various processes/mechanisms, including modality and quotation patterns (e.g. Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2007) and/or through the sentences’ ‘syntactic structure’ (van Dijk, 1998, p.33) i.e. active/passive constructions that foreground (emphasize) or background (de-emphasize) the agency of actors/actions associated with (the constructed) Us and Them.

#### 5.1.1.2.2 Argumentation strategies

Positive and negative attributions are justified by means of the argumentative schema used. The analysis of argumentation in discourse entails detecting the strategies employed by text producers in order to persuade the audience. These ‘modes of persuasion’ (Richardson, 2007, p.159) can either be deductive or inductive. In the former’s case, “something is asserted in a number of statements, and from these statements there follows a valid conclusion” (p.161). The latter includes arguments whereby “specific cases are drawn upon to support a general conclusion” (p.162), and can take three forms, namely ‘symptomatic’, ‘comparative’, or ‘causal’ argumentation (Richardson, 2007, pp.162-5). These ‘modes of proof’ have “corresponding fallacies – fallacies that ‘kick in’ when they are used incorrectly” (Richardson, 2007, p.167) and can be *ethotic* (e.g. ‘the fallacy of abuse of authority’), *pathotic* (e.g. ‘the bandwagon fallacy’ that appeals to what the masses think or believe), and *logical* (e.g. ‘the fallacy of hasty/overgeneralization’) fallacies (Richardson, 2007, pp.167-70). Another fallacy is *pars pro toto*, meaning ‘a part standing for the whole’ (Wodak, 2009, p.42). The analysis of argumentation structure and ‘persuasive rhetoric’ (Wodak, 2009, p.42) in Self/Other constructions and related *topoi* constitute an essential part of DHA (KhosraviNik, 2015). Topoi “belong to the obligatory, either explicit or inferable premises” and are “content-related warrants or ‘conclusion rules’ which connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim” (Wodak, 2001b, p.74). Together – and at times overlapping – with legitimation strategies<sup>125</sup>, topoi “serve to substantiate legitimation/de-legitimation attempts” in discourse. Topoi often function on the basis of a taken-for-granted warrant (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.112) but can also “be made explicit as conditional or causal paraphrases such as ‘if x, then y’ or ‘y, because x’” (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 110). Various studies, conducted by DHA scholars and practitioners alike, have listed a number of

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<sup>125</sup> Wodak (2017, p.42), drawing on the taxonomy developed by van Leeuwen (2008), lists three types of legitimation strategies: ‘authorisation legitimation’, ‘rationalisation legitimation’, and ‘moralisation legitimation’.

topoi reportedly deriving from the data without ample clarification as to how they were detected and, in fact, why they constitute ‘topoi’. Examples, among many, include the topos of ‘constructing the hero’ in *The Discourse of Politics in Action* (Wodak, 2009, pp.179-80) or the topos of ‘the EU as a Babel Tower’ (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p.154). This lack of transparency along with the ensuing confusion has also been pointed out by some critics<sup>126</sup> (e.g. Žagar, 2010). The present research draws on the list of argument schemes proposed and detailed by Wodak (2001). Table 5.1 presents the most frequent topoi emerging from the articles selected for in-depth analysis (explained later) and their attached comments, with their content- and context-dependent variations stated where applicable.

<b>Topos</b>	<b>Warrant</b>
Topos of (dis)advantage	If an action from a specific point of view is (not) useful, then one should (not) perform it.
Topos of danger/threat	If there are dangers/threats, one should do something against them.
Topos of responsibility	If a state/group is responsible for the emergence of a specific problem, it should act to find solutions.
Topos of burden	If a state is burdened by a specific problem, it should act to diminish it.
Topos of law/right	If a law or norm prescribes (or forbids) a specific action, the action must be performed (or omitted).
Topos of justice/human rights/democracy	If a political action or decision does (not) conform to human rights or humanitarian/democratic values, one should (not) perform it.
Topos of reality	Because reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be taken.
Topos of history (as teacher)	Because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should (not) perform a specific action.
Topos of culture/religion	Because the culture/religion of a specific group of people is as it is, specific problems arise in specific situations.
Topos of number	If the numbers prove a specific topos, a specific action should (not) be performed.

**Table 5.1 Recurrent topoi in articles and comments**

Source: adopted and adapted from Wodak (2001, pp.74-77)

### 5.1.2 Discursive practices

One of the main characteristics of CDA in general and DHA in particular, as stated in Chapter Three (section 3.3.4), is that it is a strongly ‘context-dependent approach’ (Wodak, 2008, p.13). As such, the description of results is accompanied by interpretation and explication by contextualizing the findings and connecting them with the relevant context of “the analyzed discursive data” (Reisigl, 2008, p.101). Thus, the second level of analysis,

<sup>126</sup> “Maybe there are several different lists? If so, who constructs them? When, where, and, especially, for what purpose and how? Is there a kind of grid, conceptual or in some other way epistemological and/or methodological, that helps us/them to do that? If so, where can we find this grid? And how was it conceptually constructed? And if there is no such grid, how do we get all these different lists of topoi? (...) Are they universal, just general, or maybe only contingent? Judging from the lists we have just seen, there are no rules or criteria; the only methodological precept seems to be: ‘anything goes!’” (Žagar, 2010, p.8)



which “remains the most underdeveloped” (Richardson, 2007, p.39) in CDA-oriented research, is interpretive and entails taking various factors influencing foreign news coverage in addition to online news production/consumption and content – outlined in the two preceding chapters – into account. In this vein, Richardson (2007) suggests attending in particular to the *‘linguistic style’* adopted by media (pp.95-100) and *‘intertextuality’*. Intertextuality, as mentioned already (Chapter Three, section 3.3), is based on the premise that texts are neither produced nor consumed in isolation and, as such, cannot be viewed in isolation. In other words, “[a] single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader, and so forth” (Fairclough, 1989, p.54 cited in Baker et al., 2008, p.283). Intertextuality in news discourse can be external by referring to ‘a running story’ (Richardson, 2007, pp.100-101) or internal by incorporating quotations and reported speech (pp.101-106). Another type of intertextuality, Fowler (1991) points out, is the text’s *genre*, as each genre “employs certain textual strategies which cue readers to expect a particular kind of discursive experience, a particular view on some specialized portion of the represented world” (p.227). As for discursive practices related to processes of media texts’ ‘consumption and interpretation’ (Richardson, 2007, p.75), this study attends to audience interpretation through comments, therewith filling extant research gap concerning a much less explored domain in CDS as mentioned in the previous chapter.

### 5.1.3 Social practices

The third level of analysis strives to interpret and explicate the results by situating them within the broader cultural, social, and political contexts in which the mediated discourses examined are embedded, assuming “a dialectical relationship between society and journalism” (Richardson, 2007, p.114) whilst taking, among others, ‘ideological practices’, that is, “the circulation of ideas, representations and portrayals of social reality” (p.134) into account. With regard to the present study, this would entail considering the historical and political context of the Iran-West relations (Chapter Two), the (socio-cultural, practical, ideological, etc.) forces and practices influencing Western media coverage and representation of Iran/the foreign Other (Chapter Three) on one hand, and the reception of (online) news (Chapter Four), on the other.

## 5.2 Research questions

The two main objectives of this study, as stated in the beginning, were to examine how Iran was depicted in some of Europe’s leading news sites and their comment sections during a decisive period in terms of the country’s foreign and domestic outlook. As such, this study

aims to fill a void in comparative research, on one hand, on Iran's image – that is, its state *and* society – which, with the exception of scant empirical studies (Chapter Three, section 3.4), has primarily been restricted to political topics and hitherto focused mainly on event- and issue-specific coverage i.e. the nuclear dispute, mostly in U.S. and/or British media, by investigating representation(s) of Iran(ians) through a cross-national analysis. On the other hand, by examining reader posts and interpretations, this study fills a gap in empirical CDS on audience reception in general, and public perceptions of Iran, in particular. In this vein, this research aims to provide enriching insights into both the similarities/differences amongst European media in their Iran coverage as well as between Self and Other constructions in top-down media and bottom-up user-generated texts. To investigate this 'sequence of public discourse fragments' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.38), this study sought to answer three questions formulated as follows:

RQ1: *What were the salient topics and recurring themes in selected European media's Iran coverage during a decisive period in 2013?*

RQ2: *How was the Other/Iran constructed in mainstream media discourse?*

RQ3: *How was the Other/Iran constructed in online public discourse?*

To address these questions, prominent European news sites were examined over a period of fourth months – between mid-April and mid-August – that preceded and followed Iran's presidential election in June 2013 which, as mentioned in Chapter One, was crucial due to its significance both at national and international levels. In other words, the studied timeframe, as Reynolds (2019, p.57) describes, was a period "during which knowledge about a specific topic appears to be growing or changing".

### **5.3 Data and procedures**

The empirical material for this study was collected from selected 'branded websites' (Nielsen, 2013, p.77) chosen based on four criteria: (1) all three, to varying degrees, allowed comments on (many of) their articles; (2) all three were amongst the top news sites in their respective countries regarding the number of unique visitors at the time of this study (popularity and market leadership); (3) all three, more or less, are/were regarded as being oriented toward 'quality' journalism; and (4) all three, to varying degrees, are/were considered 'liberal'(political leaning and ideological stance).

#### **5.3.1 Selected news sites**

As stated in Chapters One and Four (Table 4.1), the three media examined in this research are *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and former *Spiegel Online* (*SPON*). These sites, as noted above, are

considered opinion-leading – and among the most important – online news media in their respective countries and often chosen in comparative studies (e.g. Humprecht, 2016; Michailidou et al., 2014; Quandt, 2008; Singer et al., 2011). A brief description of each site and its characteristics – during data sampling and corpus-building – is provided below.

#### 5.3.1.1 theguardian.com

The online edition of the opinion-leading British daily, widely considered one of U.K.’s most influential broadsheets and owned – alongside its Sunday sister paper *Observer* – by the Guardian Media Group, the British quality site was “the world’s third most read newspaper website” in 2012 (Guardian Press Office, 2012). In July 2013, *Guardian*’s website, with 67.4% of unique browsers outside the U.K. (O’Brien, 2014), moved from [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) to [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com), that is, “a new global domain” reflecting an “evolution from a national print newspaper based only in the UK [...] to a leading global news and media brand with an ever-growing worldwide audience of tens of millions accessing Guardian journalism every minute of every day” (Cordrey, 2013). Besides publishing almost the entire content from both *Guardian* and *Observer* papers online, the *Guardian* news site contains web-only content such as weblogs – all which is accessible for free. One of its most popular sections is ‘Comment is free’ (CiF) – now called ‘Guardian Opinion’ – launched in 2006 and named after the famous dictum<sup>127</sup> of then Manchester Guardian editor C. P. Scott in 1921 (Singer & Ashman, 2009), that contains the majority of comment and opinion pieces, print and web-only, from staff and guest writers i.e. *Guardian/Observer* editorials, columns, and op-eds (*The Guardian*, 2016). Pursuing its “quest to become the world’s leading liberal voice” (Guardian News & Media, 2010), *Guardian* is widely known as ‘Britain’s most left-wing newspaper’ (YouGov, 2017), also reflected by its readership’s left-leaning tendency (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.131).

*Guardian*’s website is also known for actively engaging with its readers (Paprotta, 2017). To post comments, readers are required to register and open an account/a user profile (Nagar, 2011). *Guardian* moderators “reactively or post-moderate” most comment threads, with the exception of “certain special series or articles which may contain extremely sensitive content, such as Blogging the Qur’an”<sup>128</sup>. Moreover, *Guardian* readers can apply to join the moderation team. Not all items published on the news site are open to comments and, over years, user participation on certain topics has been increasingly restricted (Quandt, 2018).

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<sup>127</sup> “Comment is free, but facts are sacred”

<sup>128</sup> Available on the website’s FAQ section. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/community-faqs>

### 5.3.1.2 Le Monde.fr

The digital edition affiliated with one of France’s leading broadsheet dailies and one of four ‘elite opinion formers’ in the country (Kuhn, 2014, p.32) as well as ‘an international reference paper’ (De Cock & Du Pont, 2016, p.129), the French quality news site was the second most read online news media in France in 2013 (Newman & Levy, 2013), with over 2 million unique monthly visitors (Chrisafis, 2013). *Le Monde*’s site offers a mix of free and paid content, with the latter encompassing in-depth and exclusive articles, analysis, and archive material placed behind a paywall<sup>129</sup> (Chrisafis, 2013). In addition to publishing most articles from its legacy outlet, Le Monde.fr contains web-only content and other items from Groupe Le Monde. The French news site also hosts an extensive collection of specialist blogs and ‘chronicles’ written by paying subscribers (Benson, 2010; Domingo et al., 2008, p.337). In this respect, according to Benson (2010, p.194): “Certainly, there is an upper-middle class, professional bias to the non-journalistic voices (paralleling the newspapers’ readership) that tend to be permitted inside the journalistic tent”. In terms of political orientation, *Le Monde* is widely considered ‘centre-left’ (Eurotopics, 2020a) and “has the image of being leftist and progressive in its editorial choices” (De Cock & Du Pont, 2016, p.111).

Le Monde.fr pre-moderates comments and outsources moderation to a company abiding by the same criteria as the French outlet’s newsroom (Ruiz et al., 2011). While the French site’s blogposts are open to commenting for (registered) users, all other articles can be commented on only by paying subscribers (de La Poype & Sood, 2012; Ruiz et al., 2011).

### 5.3.1.3 Spiegel Online

Self-described ‘Deutschlands führende Nachrichtenseite’, *SPON* was launched in 1994 as the first online newsmagazine worldwide. With 10.56 million users per month (*Der Spiegel*, 2014), it was the second most visited news site<sup>130</sup> in Germany in 2013, after *Bild.de* (Newman & Levy, 2013). In addition, according to PMG Presse-Monitor GmbH, “wurde SPIEGEL ONLINE im Jahr 2013 mit 930 Nennungen häufiger zitiert als jedes andere Online-Medium in Deutschland” (cited in *Der Spiegel*, 2014). Prior to merging with the printed *Spiegel* in 2019, *SPON* had a separate and independent editorial staff (Humprecht, 2016; Schäffner, 2005) and published a mix of original content by its editorial team, selected articles from *Der Spiegel*, items from news agencies as well as content from Spiegel Gruppe i.e. the monthly *Manager Magazin* – all which could be read without cost<sup>131</sup>. The outlet’s

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<sup>129</sup> To access paywalled-content, I subscribed to Le Monde for the whole duration of this research.

<sup>130</sup> Spiegel International, the news site’s English version launched in 2004, was not consulted for this study.

<sup>131</sup> The sampled timeframe pre-dates the Spiegel+ subscription model.

news style is known for its mix of high-quality, serious news and ‘tabloidese’ (Richardson, 2007, p.96), to which it partly owes its success/popularity whilst also being subjected to criticism (e.g. Bönisch, 2004). In fact, being entertaining is part of the German news site’s slogan: ‘schnell, aktuell, präzise, hintergründig und unterhaltsam’. Nonetheless, a survey-based ranking of the German outlets’ journalistic quality showed that *Spiegel Online* (alongside *Tagesschau.de*) was ranked first with regard to news sites, which is, due in part, to the differing criteria when assessing the quality of online news i.e. up-to-date-ness (Wellbrock, 2011). Studies have also highlighted the inter-media agenda-setting role of *Spiegel Online* in elite circles (e.g. Reinemann & Baugut, 2014). The German then web-only outlet is considered ‘linksliberal’ (Eurotopics, 2020b).

*SPON* has ‘the largest online forum’ in Germany (Boberg et al., 2018) with mandatory registration. Although the comment section is mostly post-moderated, a study conducted by Boberg et al. (2018) found that over one-third of comments were rejected post-publication by community managers. Also, not all items are open to commenting. According to Kriesel (2017), discussion threads on controversial topics such as the Middle East conflict and ‘refugee crisis’ were closed on almost 30% of related articles published by the news outlet.

### 5.3.2 Data collection

To obtain the empirical material for this study, the three websites’ search engines were used every day during the four-month period for items containing key words ‘Iran(ian)’/ ‘Persia(n)’ in *Guardian* and their equivalents in *Le Monde* and *SPON*. Excluding liveblogs (*Guardian*, *Le Monde*) and video clips/pictures, all items retrieved were stored and differentiated based on whether they had the searched key terms in their headline, sub-head/sur-head, or teaser. Hence, a distinction was made between Iran stories and articles mentioning/referring to Iran, be it briefly or at length. This classification served a three-fold purpose: (1) to allow for a quantitative comparison amongst the selected media regarding the number/focus of stories published about Iran in each news site over the sampled period; (2) acknowledge the importance attached to discourse topics and their location in texts in CDS (section 5.1.1.1 of this chapter) which could foreground/background (positive, negative) information about Us and Them; and (3) to prepare the ground for “subsequent delineation of the ‘smaller’ corpus” (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p.82) for detailed qualitative analysis later on (discussed below).

Given the specific characteristics and challenges associated with web-based data (Chapter Four, section 4.3.2.4), namely the ‘liquidity of online news’ (Karlsson & Strömbäck, 2010) and the ‘a-historicity of the web’ (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2016, p.209), as sites and their content undergo constant change, all collected articles were manually compiled using, among

others, some of the methods suggested by Karlsson and Strömbäck (2010) such as PDF files and screenshots. Accordingly, the content of items mentioning Iran was copy-pasted and – along with their link – saved in separate Word documents named after publication date and gathered in three folders corresponding to the sites. In order to preserve the structure/format of Iran stories and allow for further reading and analysis in the event they were removed from the site, for instance, in the case of several *Guardian* items – including one selected for detailed analysis – by news agencies (e.g. Reuters) for copyright reasons, every Iran story was saved as a PDF. Moreover, comments attached to these stories were saved as a PDF in *Guardian* and *SPON*. In the case of *Le Monde*, comments accompanying items that appeared in the French site’s blogs could automatically be saved as a PDF and printed alongside the article. As for items published elsewhere on the French website, the attached comments were captured using screenshots and subsequently saved in a separate Word document. The reason behind taking screenshots instead of copy-pasting the comments was that the former allowed for capturing sub-threads, namely reacting to posts by other commenters. Amid changes to the sites of *Le Monde* and *SPON* (after its rebranding in 2020), comments on blogposts in the former and older articles in the latter are no longer accessible. In addition to helping preserve online content (articles and posts), the stories’ format or the comment sections’ interactive dynamics (e.g. ‘likes’ by peers in *Guardian*), and access items that might get lost and become irretrievable, saving texts and compiling them systematically in a folder/document also allows for key term searches – when examining the material later – that assist in detecting collocation patterns (e.g. which actors/issues often co-occur) and discursive strategies such as nomination (section 5.1.1.2 of this chapter) in media- and user-generated texts as well as tracing regular commenters in each site regarding the latter.

### 5.3.3 Data selection and analysis

Following “the triangulatory collection and ‘creation’ of discursive data” (Reisigl, 2008, p.100) described above, the next step involved the process of analysis. In view of the main objectives of this research set forth in Chapter One and the questions formulated above, the two-level procedure proposed within DHA and applied by Krzyżanowski (2010), encompassing (entry-level) *thematic analysis* and *in-depth analysis*, was deemed particularly useful. The former was conducted to answer the first research question by providing a quantitative overview as well as helping identify dominant topics/issues and recurring themes in the three media’s coverage of Iran along with their similarities/differences. The latter was implemented afterwards to respond to the second and third questions by thoroughly

investigating the discursive strategies and linguistic means used, respectively, in articles and comments through which the Self and Other/Iran were constructed and (re)presented.

*Thematic analysis* entails identifying the discourse topics or ‘semantic macrostructures’ (section 5.1.1.1 of this chapter) “by way of inductive analysis i.e. by means of decoding the meaning of text passages – usually taking place via several thorough readings – and then ordering them into lists of key themes and sub-themes” (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p.81). At this stage, the corpus consisted of *all* the articles gathered (N=1092), including items *about* and *mentioning* Iran (discussed further in Chapter Six, section 6.1), that were closely examined and manually coded. Regarding Iran stories: First, each article was categorized based on its subject area. Next, its main topic was defined. Then, related theme(s) and sub-theme(s) were identified. This can be exemplified as follows:

foreign affairs > Syrian crisis > fear of Iran-Hezbollah nexus > Sunni-Shia rift

This was “largely facilitated by the existence of headlines and by a rather clear top-down semantic hierarchy of the texts” (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p.82), that is, in accord with the ‘inverted pyramid’ stated earlier and considering the important role of headlines as “the most powerful persuasive and auto-promotional tool used to attract” readers (Caldas-Coulthard, 1996, p.257) and convey ‘the gist’ of the story (van Dijk, 2001, p.102), especially given the limited time that readers on average spend on news on the web (PRC, 2010). Given the fact that the content of media texts and their chosen headlines (e.g. by a copy- or non-specialist editor) could differ in terms of emphasis and issue salience (Andrew, 2007; Bell, 1998; Macgilchrist, 2011, p.192), the lead paragraph was also considered besides the article’s title/sub-head. If a story about Iran contained several discourse topics/themes, it was coded after the one located earlier in the text. In addition, if an Iran story appeared, for instance, in a news site’s Culture rubric but accentuated issues pertaining to artistic freedom in Iran, it was categorized under ‘domestic affairs’, as ‘human rights’ (‘freedom of expression’), and not ‘culture’. Articles referring to Iran were coded based on the context in which Iran was cited; for example, if a story on Syria referred to Iran’s nuclear program, it was classified under ‘nuclear issue’ and not ‘Syrian crisis’. All items were read multiple times in order to detect – besides offering a quantitative overview of recurring themes – common intra- and inter-site patterns or potential counter-discursive strategies (Macgilchrist, 2011, pp.186-199). In this vein, the thematic analysis phase also allows for identifying the less frequent linguistic patterns and ‘resistant discourses’ (Baker et al., 2008, p.283) that would otherwise have been neglected and overshadowed by the more dominant and ‘powerful discourses’ represented in the small data set examined in most CDS (Baker et al., 2008; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016).

The descriptive findings are situated in immediate and wider contexts, as stated earlier, while bearing in mind factors influencing news selection and treatment such as news values; the medium's political stance, linguistic style, and website's features; general trends in foreign news reporting/Iran's coverage; and the broader socio-political context.

Based on the results from the entry-level thematic analysis (Chapter Six), a smaller corpus was built for the next step, namely *in-depth analysis*. In the words of Wodak and Meyer (2016, p.21): "If a crude distinction were to be made between 'text-extending' and 'text-reducing' methods of analysis, then CDS, on account of their focus on distinct formal properties and the associated compression of texts during analysis, might be characterized as 'text-reducing'". This involved 'downsizing' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; 2016) Iran-related stories (N=416) according to a mixture of specific criteria established a priori, namely the number of comments, and those adopted after thematic analysis (e.g. topic/issue salience) in keeping with this study's objectives and questions on one hand, while minimizing the risk of bias and 'cherry-picking' in CDS (Chapter Three, section 3.3.5) on the other. In terms of 'representativity', defined by Reisigl and Wodak (2016, p.61) as "the ability of a random sample to mirror the structure of the totality of data", while some CDA practitioners choose to combine qualitative analysis with quantitative methods such as content analysis or corpus linguistics, "[m]any discourse studies do not rely on such a statistical criterion of 'representativity'. Rather, they refer to 'representative data' in the sense of 'typical cases' within a more or less well-defined corpus" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.61). Similarly, the corpus established for detailed analysis in this study, which includes 58 articles, is comprised of a sample of items intended to be representative of the corresponding news sites at the time and their reporting on Iran during the specific sampled period. This selection process which also involved attending to article genres, authors, etc., is elaborated further in Chapter Seven (section 7.1). In-depth analysis entails "subsequent examination of the structures of discourse located 'deeper' than its aforementioned contents. In itself, in-depth analysis is primarily argumentation-oriented [...]" (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p.83). This process involved a detailed reading of the sampled texts, while drawing, amongst others, on the discursive strategies and devices mentioned earlier that were chosen for the analytical framework adopted in this study (section 5.1.1). Similar to thematic analysis, the findings were situated in the discursive and social practices at play (sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3).

Lastly, to address the third question and analyze bottom-up Self/Other constructions, comments posted on the sampled articles (N=4,731) during the observed period – in the case of *Guardian*, commenting is normally open for up to three days once the article is published, with some closed sooner due to the high volume of posts – were thoroughly examined



(discussed in Chapter Eight, section 8.1). This involved detecting primary and secondary topics, as suggested by Krzyżanowski (2008) and stated earlier in this chapter (section 5.1.1.1), followed by adopting DHA-proposed analytical categories (nomination, predication, argumentation) in line with the in-depth analysis of media texts and as operationalized by others (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017; KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014; Paprota, 2017). Similar to these studies, usernames are anonymized and, with the exception of *Le Monde* (discussed below), comments are quoted verbatim – without inserting [sic] – and with no changes in spelling and/or punctuation. The coding was conducted manually by re-reading and closely analyzing all comment threads while attending in particular to earlier posts and those that triggered notable ‘stance-taking’ (Barton & Lee, 2013, pp.86-106) from peers i.e. numerically higher ‘likes’ or sub-threads with most responses.

#### **5.4 Data analysis challenges and limitations**

Before moving on to the next chapters and presenting the results, it is worth revealing in advance the shortcomings and complications related to examining the (nature of) empirical material(s) investigated in this study as well as the main challenges faced during the processes of data analysis and interpretation.

In line with similar CDA-inspired research projects on online media that opt for “simply doing CDS on the materials (which happen to be) on the Internet” (KhosraviNik, 2020, p.3), this thesis focused on the verbal (written) elements of media-generated texts without taking their audio/visual components into consideration, despite the role of multimodality – a key characteristic of Web 2.0, as stated in the beginning of this thesis (Chapter One, section 1.2) – in online news reporting, and while acknowledging both the news values of stories that contain a striking image/video (Chapter Three, section 3.1.1.1) and their impact on capturing the readers’ attention and potentially triggering reaction (Chapter Four, section 4.3.2.2). By the same token, another quality of Web 2.0, namely intertextuality by means of inserting (external, internal) hyperlinks in articles, was not amply attended to.

Another issue pertains to translation and analysis/interpretation challenges in cross-cultural, cross-language qualitative research, with English remaining ‘the hegemonic language of global academia’ (Sarkhoh & KhosraviNik, 2020), and the majority of CDS being “performed monolingually, primarily on English texts” (Munday, 2007, p.198). Given the individual stance of the translator – in this case, the researcher – and the potential ‘ideological mediation’, which, as Munday (2007, p.197) argues, “may arise both from the conscious strategy of the translator but also, and perhaps more interestingly cognitively, from less conscious translation choices at the lexicogrammatical level that pertain to the

translator's unique experience" (p.213) of the languages being studied, CDA scholars working on multilingual data usually incorporate both the translated and original versions in their analysis for comparison and transparency (e.g. Krzyżanowski, 2010; Wodak, 2009). Likewise, the translated excerpts cited in in-depth analysis parts of this thesis (Chapters Seven and Eight) are accompanied by their French version in footnotes. Similar to the attempt made by KhosraviNik (2015), this study sought "to provide a readable and reasonably natural (and neutral) English version for the purpose of understanding the content and strategies", while keeping the forms in the translated texts, aside from syntax (word order), as close to the original language as possible (p.137). For a non-professional translator/non-linguist researcher, this task proved more challenging in the context of comments due in part to micro-level features of 'language online' (Barton & Lee, 2013, p.6) in addition to common colloquialism, frequent usage of idiomatic/metaphoric expressions and the associated problem of recontextualizing meaning (Sarkhoh & KhosraviNik, 2020, pp.10-11) when translating, in this case, French posts into English. While these issues have already – and, as the last cited study shows, very recently – been raised, an additional problem encountered, and made aware, in this study was a literal translation of French comments while preserving typographic/orthographic features (e.g. acronyms, respelling) and errors. To simplify the process, *Le Monde's* user comments were translated similar to its articles (stated above) and, in line with other studies (e.g. KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017; Molek-Kozakowska, 2017), irrespective of 'linguistic infelicities' (Chovanec, 2017, p.242) whereas comments in *Guardian* and *SPON* were quoted verbatim.

A detailed analysis of the texts' linguistic elements, however, does not necessarily lead to 'cultural translation'<sup>132</sup>. As such, decoding other language(s) poses added challenge in cross-cultural qualitative research, as subtle cultural codes and nuances embedded in textual expressions may not be captured by the researcher (Choi et al., 2012), who, in this case is a non-native examining media texts along with their respective 'linguistic communities' (Chovanec, 2017, p.238) in three foreign languages and situated in three socio-cultural and political contexts. Regarding news articles, this issue could, to some extent, be addressed in this research by attending to reader interpretation(s) and *their* 'decoding' (Hall, 1980) of media texts, therewith assisting the researcher with deciphering (non-)linguistic cues that would otherwise have been neglected.

Finally, and related to the points above, is the researcher's stance/point of view in analysis and interpretation. "The researcher", as Barton and Lee (2013, p.103) point out, "is always standing somewhere, and there is no neutral point to stand from where the phenomenon can

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<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Buden et al. (2009) for a definition and critique.

be viewed”. Even though the importance of assuming a self-reflective stance during the entire research process is emphasized as being central to qualitative research in general, and CDS in particular (Chapter Three, section 3.3), many CDA practitioners fail to make transparent their (personal) relation to, and individual (political, ideological) position on, the subject matter being investigated. While many CDS have centered on media/journalists’ “perceptions of ‘the world’, its nations and peoples” that “inform not only the manner in which articles are written, but also the *gaze* and *selection* of articles” (Richardson, 2004, p.45, emphases in original), the researcher’s own ‘gaze’ – be it conscious or not – has, by comparison, been much less (overtly) conveyed. Dominant Western narratives on Iran resonate strongly with Iranians who, like me, have a secular upbringing, a (financially) privileged and urban background, and to varying degrees, are unsympathetic to the Islamic Republic and its foreign/domestic policies. At the same time, I, like many inside Iran and in the diaspora, am opposed to the stringent sanctions, having suffered from their impact first-hand, and to future attack against Iran. Since the aim of this research, as stressed at the outset, was to examine the ‘regime(s) of truth’ (Foucault, 1980) at play regarding representations of Iran, its comparative nature, on one hand, allowed for gaining insight into cross-national discourses about Iran – and Iran-specific issues and events – along with their similarities or differences, and, on the other hand, assisted with identifying competing or alternative discourses and omissions. The ‘inductively oriented’ DHA (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.18) was deemed the most suitable approach to be adopted in this study by virtue of its feasibility – especially for non-linguists – as well as its systematic, step-by-step approach and useful analytical tools. However, as mentioned in Chapter Three (section 3.3.5), CDS are criticized due in part to emphasizing the researcher’s partial interpretation, while “downplaying or even overlooking the variability in the reception of a particular text on the part of different audiences” (Milani & Johnson, 2010, p.5. This issue has been addressed in this thesis by examining audience interpretations in cross-cultural settings that allowed for comparing/contrasting the analyst’s single interpretation of media-generated texts, based on personal (in)sensitivities coupled with intimate knowledge and understanding about the complexities of Iranian society, with the ‘culture-specific or ideology-specific readings’ (Schäffner, 2005, p.165) and different interpretations of online readers.

## 6. Chapter Six: Dominant topics and themes in Iran coverage

Addressing the first research question, this chapter presents the salient topics and recurring themes elicited from the entry-level thematic analysis (Chapter Five, section 5.3.3) of the selected media's reporting on (conflict with) Iran in 2013 alongside similarities/differences between as well as within the three news sites.

### 6.1 Overview of the corpora

During the sampled four-month period, 1092 total articles were published in the three outlets, with 416 (38%) *Iran-related* stories highlighting Iran in the headline, sub-head/sur-title and/or teaser and 676 (62%) *side-note*<sup>133</sup> items mentioning Iran in body text. The latter, which constitutes 47% of pieces retrieved from *Le Monde* and almost 60% and over 70% of those compiled from *SPON* and *Guardian*, ranges from strong focus (e.g. Tehran's role in Syria) to: passing references (e.g. Persian carpets, Iranian refugees); listing Iran alongside others randomly or based on geographic proximity (e.g. world rankings); naming Iran, singled out or combined with certain states to exemplify illiberal regimes (e.g. "societies such as China, Russia, Iran and other Islamic states decided that they needed to control how their citizens communicated") or the world's top hotspots/vexing issues, with the nuclear conflict stated expressly or inferred contextually; and, finally, lumping Iran with implicitly assumed 'rogue states' or unfavorable actors (e.g. "transactions on behalf of Mexican drug lords, terrorists and customers in Cuba, Iran, Libya, Sudan and Burma"). By dint of repetition throughout the corpora, these side-note remarks, as will be shown, reinforce and perpetuate dominant discourses and perceptions about Persia/Iran.

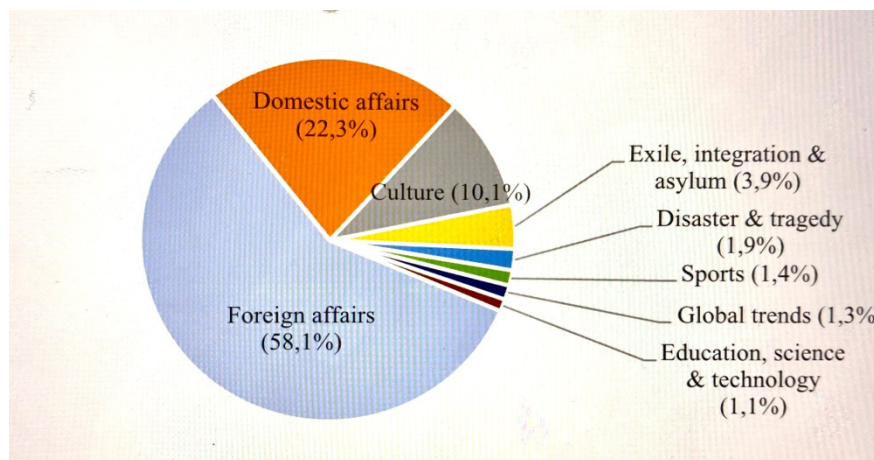
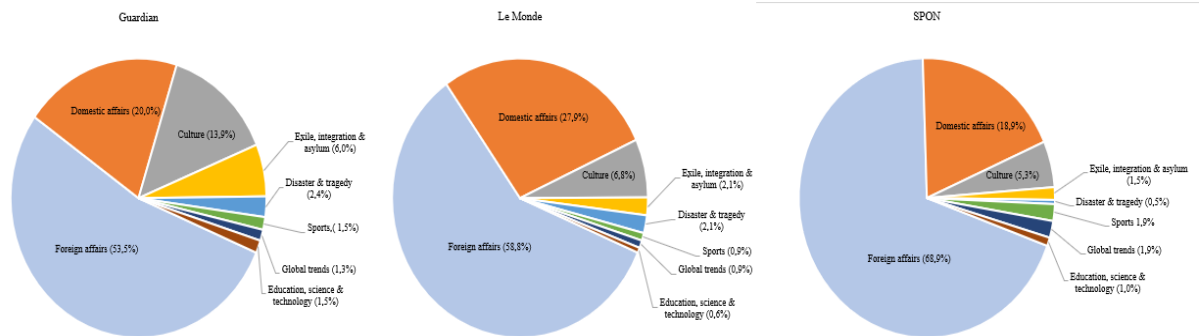


Figure 6.1 Share of total articles per topic area in all news sites (%)

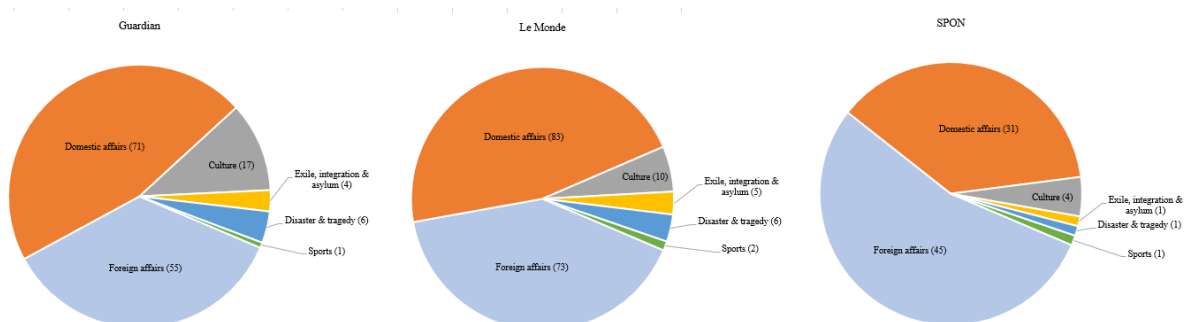
<sup>133</sup> This term was borrowed from Siegel and Barforoush (2013).

The British corpus was the most sizeable, publishing 546 pieces (50% of total articles), followed by the French corpus with 340 (31%) and the German corpus with 206 items (19%). Yielding 634 pieces, ‘foreign affairs’ constituted 58% of all articles (Figure 6.1). By a wide margin, ‘domestic affairs’ came second, garnering 243 items (22%), and ‘culture’ came third with 110 items, accounting for 10% of total articles. Other topic categories, namely ‘exile/integration/asylum’, ‘disaster and tragedy’, ‘sports’, ‘global trends’, and ‘education/science/technology’ together made up over 9% of all articles.



**Figure 6.2 Share of total articles per topic area in each news site (%)**

As Figure 6.2 indicates, about 69% of total items collected from *SPON* dealt with international issues involving Iran, followed by almost 59% and over 53% of those from *Le Monde* and *Guardian*, respectively. Furthermore, over a quarter of all articles published in the French site, followed by 20% and nearly 19% of those in the British and German outlets addressed domestic matters inside Iran. The surprisingly high share of culture-specific items/remarks, especially in French and more so British outlets, accounting for nearly 14% of total articles published in *Guardian*, followed by almost 7% of those in *Le Monde* and slightly above 5% in *SPON* contradicts earlier studies on Western media’s Middle East/Iran coverage (Hafez 2000b, 2002; Jahedi & Abdullah, 2012; Khodadadi & O’Donnell, 2017).

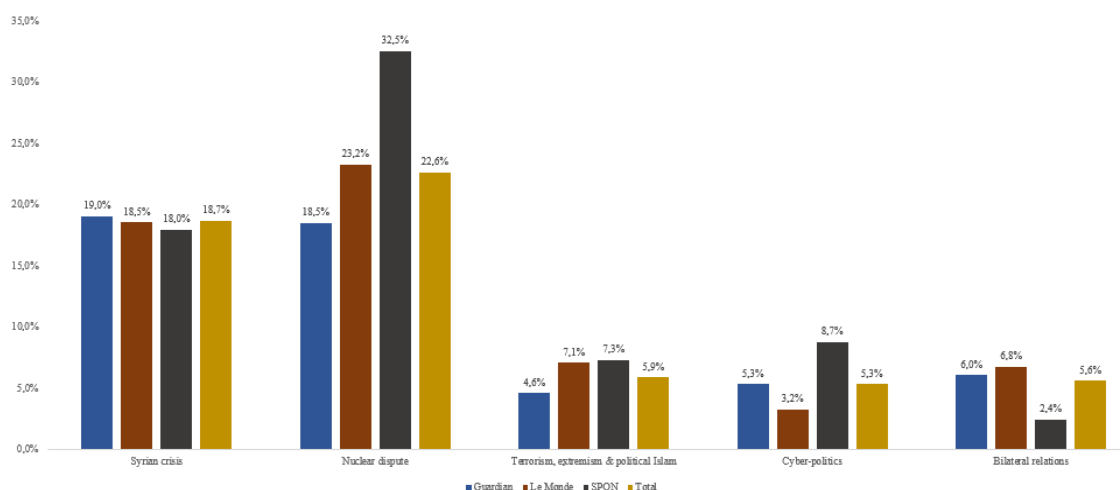


**Figure 6.3 Number of Iran-related articles per topic area in each news site**

As for Iran-related items, *Le Monde* outnumbered its British (N=154) and, by a larger margin, German (N=83) counterparts with 179 articles. From these 416 stories published about Iran, ‘domestic affairs’ garnered 185 items – with Iranian politics yielding additional reporting amid the presidential election – followed, in descending order, by ‘foreign affairs’ (N=173), ‘culture’ (N=31), ‘disaster and tragedy’ (N=13), ‘exile/integration/asylum’ (N=10), and ‘sports’ (N=4). While domestic matters and events dominated Iran-related stories in both *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, regional and global issues/conflicts involving Iran constituted over half of those in *SPON* (Figure 6.3). In addition, whereas *Le Monde* published more Iran-related stories pertaining to foreign and domestic affairs than others, *Guardian* led with most pieces on Iranian art/culture, society, and daily life. The remainder of this chapter discusses subject areas and main topics/issues emerging from Iran-related *and* side-note items (listed in Appendix One) along with the key themes and sub-themes therein. The results, as stated in Chapter Five (section 5.3.3), are then placed in their immediate and broader settings, namely (online) news production (Chapter Four), common trends in foreign news reporting and the representation of Other (Chapter Three), as well as the wider socio-political context within which media texts and discursive practices are embedded (Chapter Two).

## 6.2 Salient topics and recurring themes

### 6.2.1 Foreign affairs



**Figure 6.4 Breakdown of total articles per news site in the ‘foreign affairs’ category (%)**

In the foreign affairs category, the nuclear conflict that continues to keep Iran in international spotlight dominated with 247 items – to wit, over 22% of total articles – 101 of which were published in *Guardian*, followed by 79 articles in *Le Monde* and 67 in *SPON*. The Syrian

war, another point of contention between Tehran and the West who back opposing sides, came second with 204 items, that is, over 18% of total articles, with *Guardian* and *Le Monde* yielding half and over a quarter, respectively. Other issues were terrorism/extremism/political Islam (almost 6% of total articles), constituting over 7% of total items in French and German outlets, as well as cyber-politics and bilateral ties (over 5% of total articles each), with the former accounting for about 9% of all items in *SPON* and the latter 6% and nearly 7% of those in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* successively (Figure 6.4). Positioning these sub-categories in relation to all the articles retrieved from each outlet that address/mention international issues involving Iran, the Syrian crisis constituted the largest share of foreign affairs-related items in the British corpus, followed closely by the nuclear dispute and, by a wide margin, bilateral relations; the nuclear conflict accounted for the highest share of items in the French and German corpora, followed by Syria (both sites), terrorism/extremism/political Islam (*Le Monde*) and cyber-politics (*SPON*). The 634 articles subsumed under this category consisted of 173 Iran-related as well as 461 side-note items that refer (briefly or at length) to Iran, more than half of which (237) was published in *Guardian*.

Each of the following sections begins with a quantitative overview of the share of Iran stories pertaining to the topic/issue at hand in relation to all the articles published in each news site on that matter in particular and during this period in total. As such, besides demonstrating the salience of certain issues in the three site's Iran coverage, the range of topics or contexts within which mentions of Iran and Iran-specific matters were prevalent is illustrated.

#### 6.2.1.1 Syrian crisis

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Syrian crisis	5	104	11	63	6	37	22	204
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	3.2%	19%	6.1%	18%	7.2%	17%	5.2%	18.6%

**Table 6.1 Breakdown of articles in the 'Syrian crisis' sub-category**

Within the copious coverage devoted to Syria during this period, Iran's growing role in the ongoing multi-sided war was reported extensively, constituting 19% of total articles in *Guardian*, followed closely by 18% and 17% of those in *Le Monde* and *SPON* (Table 6.1). This includes mentioning Iran, in passing or at greater length, in 182 side-note items, over half of which was published in *Guardian*, and highlighting Iranian involvement in 5% of Iran-related stories, with *Le Monde* accounting for half. *Backing a brutal regime* was a

recurring theme across news, analysis, and opinion pieces referring to Tehran's unwavering support for Bashar Assad, notwithstanding the Syrian government's atrocities and amidst allegations that it used chemical weapons. For example, a *Guardian* news article headlined 'Syrian regime accused of **new massacre**'<sup>134</sup> contained the following sub-head: "Anti-Assad groups report 350 people killed in Damascus countryside, **but Russia and Iran express support for regime**"<sup>135</sup>. In the same vein, (financial, military, political) aid from Iran and other pro-Assad states, namely Russia and, to a lesser degree, China as well as the Iran-backed Lebanese Hezbollah often concurred with the Syrian regime's callousness, therewith accentuating the complicity of Assad's allies in the brutality on the ground<sup>136</sup>. Against this backdrop, Iran's bid alongside Syria for the Human Rights Council, reported in *Le Monde*, was described as "highly inappropriate [...] given their egregious human rights records and their collaboration to suppress the Syrian people's democratic aspirations", citing U.S. ambassador to the UN, with the eventuality considered "a new record for lunacy at the UN", quoting the Israeli ambassador<sup>137</sup>.

*Fear of the Iran-Hezbollah nexus and its destabilizing role* united myriad of items, especially once leader Hassan Nasrallah publicized the Lebanese group's involvement in Syria and after the battle of Qusair, a strategic victory for the Syrian army owing largely to the Shia militia. Amid Iran and Hezbollah's mounting influence in Syria, the so-called 'axis of resistance' alliance was, in addition to fueling the war and atrocities, widely regarded as a disconcerting dynamic that morphs Syria into a regional battleground, *exacerbating sectarian schisms* parallel to *escalating the Iran-Israel shadow war*, and, furthermore, into a wider international conflict. Accordingly, the three media allotted space to contemplate whether the West should arm the Syrian rebels<sup>138</sup> (with London and Paris in favor) and if Iran should be

<sup>134</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all emphases (bolds, italics, underlines) have been added.

<sup>135</sup> 'Syrian regime accused of new massacre' (G22.04a).

<sup>136</sup> e.g. 'Syria is being destroyed while Assad displays remarkable staying power' (G01.05a), 'Iran's foreign minister fuels war of words over Syria' (G01.05b), 'Syria: the ugly choice ahead' (G10.05a), 'Syrian regime used sarin against opposition at least twice, says Cameron' (G14.06a), 'Syria and the G8: lost in translation' (G18.06a), 'Help Syria now. Tomorrow it may be too late' (G10.07a), 'Rape and domestic violence follow Syrian women into refugee camps' (G25.07a), 'Comment Bachar Al-Assad reprend la main en Syrie' (LM20.05), 'A Damas, la pointe de l'avancée rebelle - 2/5' (LM27.05a), "Pourquoi les alliés de la rébellion syrienne ne lui livrent-ils pas d'armes? Voilà la question!" (LM30.05a), 'Intellectuels, aidez les Syriens!' (LM06.07a), 'Les Etats-Unis prônent un renforcement des sanctions contre l'Iran' (LM16.07a), 'Téhéran prône une "trêve complète" des rebelles syriens pendant le ramadan' (LM16.07b), 'Initiative von USA und Russland: Warum die Syrien-Konferenz scheitern wird' (SPON08.05), "'Wir verdammen Chemiewaffen". Irans Außenminister Ali Akbar Salehi über den Bürgerkrieg in Syrien, Teherans Atomprogramm und die anstehende Präsidentenwahl' (Der Spiegel 20/2013), 'Aufstand gegen Assad: Iran warnt vor Giftgaseinsatz im Syrien-Krieg' (SPON11.05a), 'Treffen der "Freunde Syriens": Zum Scheitern verurteilt' (SPON23.06a), 'Hilfe für Assad: China, Iran und Russland päppeln Syriens Wirtschaft' (SPON28.06a).

<sup>137</sup> 'Iran et Syrie candidats au Conseil des droits de l'homme de l'ONU' (LM12.07a).

<sup>138</sup> The selected period pre-dates the surge of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Daesh.



allowed to attend then-anticipated Geneva conference on Syria<sup>139</sup> (with France initially opposed). The regional threat attributed to Iran and Hezbollah's expanding presence in Syria was, moreover, substantiated via regular remarks about their anti-Israel stance. Amid growing fear of an all-out war between Iran and Israel, particularly following the latter's airstrikes in Syria, the perceived threat from Iran to Israel, ascribed to Tehran using Syria as a weapons transit route for its proxies and, more broadly, to its nuclear program, was often incorporated as background/additional information. For instance, a news piece co-written by *Guardian's* diplomatic editor and Jerusalem correspondent described the main target of the said airstrikes in May as "Fateh-110 missiles, a solid-fuelled Iranian weapon" with high accuracy that is "far more effective than anything in Hezbollah's existing arsenal", quoting a senior Israeli official, while invoking the danger of 'Persian imperialism/Iranian expansionism' by adding: "Its Farsi name means 'conqueror'"<sup>140</sup>. Listing "Iran's drive towards nuclear weapons" among Israel's "pressing challenges", a retired senior general at Israel Defense Forces justified the airstrikes in an op-ed on the ground that "[a]fter Iran itself, its client Hezbollah is Israel's most dangerous foe"<sup>141</sup>. This was in line with common evaluative attributes and explicit predicates (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.94; 2016, p.33) i.e. "Israels Erzfeind Iran" in *SPON* and often associating Iran with other "israelfeindliche Gruppen"<sup>142</sup>. "Recent Israeli raids", an editorial in *Le Monde* argued, "were intended to demonstrate that the Jewish state would uphold 'its' red lines" and were thus "a message addressed as much to Tehran as to Washington: 'If the red lines on Iranian nuclear program

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<sup>139</sup> e.g. 'Hezbollah is helping Assad fight Syria uprising, says Hassan Nasrallah' (G30.04a), 'Syria: massacres of Sunni families reported in Assad's heartland' (G04.05), 'Syria: civil war turns regional crisis' (G05.05a), 'William Hague seeks to change arms embargo on Syria' (G20.05a), 'Syria: no place for back-seat drivers' (G20.05b), 'Syria war becoming 'Balkanised' as Hezbollah moves in on key town' (G30.05a), 'Syria is a potent mix of popular uprising and religious animosity' (G04.06a), 'The case for arming Syrian rebels' (G18.06b), 'Syria is not alone in its descent into sectarianism' (G27.06), 'Syrian Sunnis fear Assad regime wants to "ethnically cleanse" Alawite heartland' (G22.07a), 'Syria: life in the rebel strongholds' (G14.08), 'Paris refuse la présence de l'Iran à la conférence internationale sur la Syrie' (LM17.05a), 'J'ai vu des soldats syriens ouvrir le feu sur des camionnettes chargées de femmes et d'enfants' (LM28.05a), 'Faut-il armer les rebelles syriens?' (LM29.05a), 'La Syrie passe sous contrôle de l'Iran et du Hezbollah' (LM07.06a), 'Syrie: Fabius appelle à arrêter la progression des forces d'Assad' (LM12.06a), 'La France envisage d'armer les rebelles syriens' (LM13.06a), 'Syrie: l'inaction ou le choix du chaos' (LM18.06a), 'Les Occidentaux doivent enfin armer les démocrates syriens' (LM25.06), 'Gilles Kepel: "Trop de djihad tue le djihad"' (LM11.07a), 'Schwere Kämpfe in Kusair: Hisbollah drängt auf Sieg in Syrien' (SPON25.05a), 'EU-Position zum Syrien-Krieg: Europas Zwergenpolitik' (SPON28.05), 'Allianz mit Assad: Hisbollah jagt syrische Rebellen nach Norden' (SPON08.06), 'Krieg in Syrien: Kämpfe zwischen Rebellen und Dschihadisten eskalieren' (SPON13.07a), 'Rebellen in Syrien: Die Schlagkraft der neuen Waffen' (SPON25.07a), 'Erfahrungen mit radikalen Schiiten: Herzlich, Ihre Hisbollah!' (SPON25.07b).

<sup>140</sup> 'Syria accuses Israel of declaring war after further air strikes' (G06.05a).

<sup>141</sup> 'Israel's real target is not Syria but Hezbollah' (G07.05a).

<sup>142</sup> e.g. 'Explosionen in Damaskus: Israel feuert Raketen auf Syrien' (SPON05.05a), 'Israelischer Angriff auf Damaskus: "Die Region ist am Siedepunkt"' (SPON05.05b), 'Luftschläge in Syrien: Iran sucht Freiwillige für den Kampf gegen Israel' (SPON07.05a), 'Zwischenfall auf den Golanhöhen: Israels Militärchef warnt Syrien vor Krieg' (SPON21.05a).

are no better upheld than those on chemical weapons in Syria, we will deal with it”<sup>143</sup>. Another *Le Monde* article headlined ‘Mr. Hollande talks to France’s Jews about “anti-Semitism, Iran and secularism”<sup>144</sup> contained a sub-section headed ‘Iran and Hezbollah’, where the French president was quoted as stressing the “*pressing and urgent need to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon*”, warning, further, with hyperbole: “*It’s not only Israel that is threatened, it’s the entire region that would turn upside down by Iran’s possible accession to a nuclear weapon* [italics in original]”. This dominant discursive strategy that links Iran and Hezbollah’s hostility toward Israel with the (existential) threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran, therewith legitimizing recent/future Israeli attacks as ‘preemptive’ actions, was contested in two pieces published in *Guardian*’s CiF section: the first, written by then-columnist and prominent critic of U.S. media and politics Glenn Greenwald<sup>145</sup>, pointed out *the West’s “moral relativism”* based on which “Israel and the US (and its dictatorial allies in Riyadh and Doha) have the absolute right to bomb other countries or arm rebels in those countries if they perceive doing so is necessary to stop a threat but Iran and Syria (and other countries disobedient to US dictates) do not”, in addition to Western bias in favor of Israel, who “sits on a massive pile of nuclear weapons while refusing UN demands to permit any international inspection of it”<sup>146</sup>. The second, authored by then-columnist and associate editor Seumas Milne, likewise questioned *inconsistencies in the West’s Middle East policy* as well as *Israel’s self-defense argument and the legality* of the said raids that “were of course immediately supported by the US and British governments”, which, as he asserted, indicated Israel’s intervention in Syria<sup>147</sup>.

The gist of Milne’s article, as the headline suggests, that “[i]t is Syria’s role as the pivot of Iranian influence across the Middle East that has turned the Syrian war into a potential regional conflagration” relates to a third, intertwined theme, namely *the danger of Iran’s regional sway*. Referring to the wider conflict between Islamic Republic and the West/allies, this theme reconstructs and substantiates the ‘Iran Threat’ to regional stability and global peace through explicit or implicit assumptions about Tehran’s (aggressive) hegemonic quest and ideological stance coupled with its (apocalyptic) nuclear ambitions<sup>148</sup>. In an analysis

<sup>143</sup> ‘Syrie: le renoncement occidental’ (LM09.05a).

<sup>144</sup> ‘M.Hollande parle "d'antisémitisme, d'Iran et de laïcité" aux juifs de France’ (LM02.06a).

<sup>145</sup> His column ‘Glenn Greenwald on security and liberty’ was “[a] critical, campaigning column on vital issues of civil rights, freedom of information and justice – and their enemies”. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/glenn-greenwald-security-liberty>

<sup>146</sup> ‘Israeli bombing of Syria and moral relativism’ (G06.05b).

<sup>147</sup> ‘The west and its allies cynically bleed Syria to weaken Iran’ (G07.05b).

<sup>148</sup> e.g. ‘US considers Syria policy as John Kerry seeks ways to help civil war rebels’ (G12.06a), ‘En visite au Qatar, M. Hollande accentue la pression sur Damas’ (LM24.06a), “‘Europa muss mitziehen’: Der ehemalige Saudi-Arabischer Geheimdienstchef Prinz Turki Bin Faisal über die Strategie seines Landes im Syrien-Konflikt und die Macht Irans’ (Der Spiegel, 25/2013), ‘Krieg in Syrien: Saudi-Arabien will Flugabwehrraketen an Rebellen liefern’ (SPON17.06a).

entitled ‘Fear of Iran forces the West to further mobilize against the Assad regime’<sup>149</sup>, *Le Monde*’s special correspondent Yves-Michel Riols stated that Iran’s “preponderant role” in Syria “fuels Western fears over the stability of the region that would result from Tehran’s grip on this key Middle East country”, using causal argumentation (Richardson, 2007, p.164). Countering this overlapping theme that intersects with enduring discourses and perceptions about Islamic Republic’s ‘malign’ intentions/behavior and reinforces the negative image of a belligerent Other, investigative journalist Nafeez Ahmed broached another aspect to the Syrian crisis in his Earth insight blog; branding U.S., Israel, and other actors “hardly honest brokers”, Ahmed linked the (civil) war’s international dimension “[b]ehind the façade of humanitarian concern” to *geopolitical rivalries* and the attempt to thwart an Iran-brokered gas pipeline, concluding that “conflict’s future continues to be at the mercy of rival foreign geopolitical interests in dominating the energy corridors of the Middle East and North Africa”<sup>150</sup>.

#### 6.2.1.2 Nuclear issue

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Nuclear issue	40	101	48	79	29	67	117	247
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	25.9%	18.5%	26.8%	23.2%	34.9%	32.5%	28.1%	22.6%

**Table 6.2 Breakdown of articles in the ‘nuclear issue’ sub-category**

Besides numerous items on Syria, and elsewhere across the corpora, that invoked (the conflict over) Iran’s nuclear program, myriad articles attended specifically to the ongoing row, constituting almost 35% of Iran-related stories in *SPON* and over a quarter of those in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* each (Table 6.2). Along with 117 pieces – to wit, 28% of total articles about Iran during this time – that dealt with the contentious issue, 130 side-note items, 61 of which were published in *Guardian*, followed by 38 in *SPON* and 31 in *Le Monde*, either mentioned the issue explicitly or listed Iran, with its nuclear pursuit implied, among the most vexing geopolitical problems facing the world. Through repetition, the Iranian nuclear program was, as examples below show, depicted as a major ‘bone of contention’, ‘crisis’, and ‘threat’ – that needed to be urgently dealt with – and Iran, by association, as a ‘hotspot’ and a ‘crisis-laden’ or ‘suspicion-inducing’ place:

<sup>149</sup> ‘La peur de l’Iran pousse les Occidentaux à se mobiliser davantage contre le régime Assad’ (LM14.06a).

<sup>150</sup> ‘Peak oil, climate change and pipeline geopolitics driving Syria conflict’ (G13.05a).

A more co-operative Kremlin might help the White House with its pressing international problems – the war in Syria, the US military draw-down in Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear programme. (G01.08a)

Meanwhile the west – with Egypt and Syria on its plate, unreconciled fears over Iran, real concerns over North Korea, and fractiousness in its relations with Russia – will be working out ways to re-engage with Zimbabwe by Christmas. (G12.08a)

The sum of the two groups' [China/Russia and the West/U.S.] economic interests is what is known as the multipolar world. As powerless [it is] to stop the Syrian tragedy as [it is] to curb the progress of Iran's nuclear program or North Korea's nuclear blackmail. (LM25.04a)

Nicolas Sarkozy would have preferred to offer his views on current hot topics: The Euro crisis, Islam and the West, Iran, Syria, the growing power of Brazil, India, and China. (LM26.04a)

The meeting on Friday will take place between John Kerry and Chuck Hagel on the American side and Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoygu on the Russian side [...]. [U.S. State Department spokeswoman] has specified that Syria, the new nuclear disarmament treaty Start, Afghanistan, Iran will equally be on the agenda.

Included amongst other points of contention is indeed Iran and its controversial nuclear program. (LM06.08a)

“Alle, die in ein Flugzeug steigen, kommen ins Fadenkreuz”, kritisiert Jan-Philipp Albrecht, Justizexperte der Grünen im EU-Parlament, “und sei es, weil man einen ausländisch klingenden Namen hat oder in Länder wie Iran reist”. (SPON23.04a)

Wichtigste Themen des Treffens [between President Obama and Chancellor Merkel] sind die aktuellen Krisenherde Syrien und Iran, die Lage in der Türkei, das geplante Freihandelsabkommen zwischen den USA und der Europäischen Union sowie das Internet-Spähprogramm Prism des amerikanischen Geheimdienstes NSA. (SPON19.06a)

Es ist ein Abend, an dem es nicht nur um die aktuellen Felder der Außenpolitik geht - vom jüngsten Besuch des US-Präsidenten über den Syrienkrieg, die Lage im Iran, in der Türkei. Westerwelle spricht auch über seine Rolle als Minister - und sein einstiges Ende als Parteichef. (SPON20.06a)

In addition to these oft-repeated side-note remarks that singled out or listed Iran alongside other global challenges and conflict zones (especially Syria), the overriding theme of *Iranian (nuclear) threat* united many items. These articles encompass news pieces that announced latest advances in Iran's nuclear/military capabilities, ranging from items in all sites that cited IAEA reports and the nuclear watchdog's reiterated concerns/criticism over its nuclear-related activities<sup>151</sup>, therewith perpetuating the common trope of 'Iranian defiance/intransigence' (see also Bowen, 2015; KhosraviNik, 2015; Siegel & Barforoush, 2013), to news in *Le Monde* about Iran's suspected uranium deal with other countries<sup>152</sup> and claims by exiled Iranian opposition groups about a hitherto undisclosed nuclear facility<sup>153</sup>,

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<sup>151</sup> 'Nuclear watchdog raises Iranian plutonium concerns' (G22.05a), 'L'Iran a accéléré l'installation de centrifugeuses modernes, selon l'AIEA' (LM22.05a), 'Nucléaire: bras de fer entre l'AIEA et l'Iran' (LM03.06a), 'Bericht der Atombehörde: Iran baut sein Atomprogramm mit neuer Technik aus' (SPON22.05), 'Nuklearprogramm: Atombehörde kritisiert Iran scharf' (SPON03.06a).

<sup>152</sup> 'Le Zimbabwe dément tout contrat de livraison d'uranium à l'Iran' (LM11.08).

<sup>153</sup> 'Iran: des opposants dévoilent un nouveau site secret du projet nucléaire' (LM11.07b).

therewith denoting the clandestine nature of Tehran's program and propagating the stereotypical image of 'unreliable Iranians'. Moreover, in an interview with *Le Monde*, published in May under a hyperbolic headline containing a direct quote from then French foreign minister, Fabius declared: "The Syrian cauldron alongside the Iranian nuclear program – and the two are indeed linked – is the greatest current threat to peace"<sup>154</sup>. The French website also re-published, the day after IAEA's quarterly report, an article from 2012 that casted doubt over the nuclear-related progress regularly aggrandized by Iran's outgoing president<sup>155</sup> and a more alarmist piece from 2007, following the disqualification of a prominent pro-reform presidential candidate in Iran (discussed later), which cited then-U.S. vice president's warning against "the Iranian threat"<sup>156</sup>. *Le Monde*, it should be stated, regularly re-publishes/updates its archived items it deems relevant to, or essential background information for, the topic/issue at hand. Juxtaposing the perceived threat in tandem with skepticism was also visible in a *SPON* article published in the science section that announces, with derision, the launch of an Iranian space monitoring center, indicating U.S. "Argwohn", who "befürchten ebenso wie ihre Alliierten in der Region, dass die Station auch für militärische Zwecke, etwa zur Steuerung von Mittelstreckenraketen eingesetzt werden kann", whilst, simultaneously, casting doubt over the achievements boasted by (unreliable) Iranian officials: "Immer wieder war von Durchbrüchen die Rede, die von unabhängiger Seite nie überprüft werden konnten"<sup>157</sup>. Iran and North Korea's (covert) cooperation, the two (pariah) states' nuclear ambitions, and their vote alongside Syria – another 'bad' actor and U.S.-designated 'state of concern' – against the UN's Arms Trade Treaty were also mentioned in some items<sup>158</sup>. The 'rogue' nuclear duo, furthermore, co-occurred in few articles in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* that challenged U.S. foreign policy and Washington's "favorite boogeymen"<sup>159</sup>. The planned delivery of S-300 missiles from (equally unreliable) Russia to

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<sup>154</sup> 'Laurent Fabius: la Syrie et l'Iran constituent "la plus grande menace contre la paix"' (LM09.05b).

<sup>155</sup> 'La propagande d'Ahmadinejad sur le nucléaire iranien' (LM23.05a).

<sup>156</sup> 'Dick Cheney ferait pression sur le renseignement américain pour qu'il confirme la menace iranienne' (LM11.06a).

<sup>157</sup> 'Aufrüstung: Iran weiht Station zur Weltraumbeobachtung ein' (SPON09.06a).

<sup>158</sup> e.g. 'North Korea sanctions delaying nuclear programme, says UN report' (G15.05a), 'World's top weapons exporters unite to sign historic UN arms treaty' (G03.06a), 'UK signs deal to control global arms trade' (G03.06b), 'Barack Obama's Berlin speech – full text' (G19.06a), 'North Korea's shadowy arms trade' (G18.07a), 'Le désarmement, haute priorité d'Obama' (LM22.05b), 'Chine, Inde et Pakistan continuent de renforcer leur arsenal nucléaire' (LM03.06b), 'Premier pas à l'ONU pour "moraliser" le commerce international des armes' (LM03.06c), 'François Hollande veut que le Japon intègre le Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU' (LM07.06b), 'Barack Obama, président des drones' (LM18.06a), 'Jahresbericht: Amnesty prangert Europas Asylpolitik an' (SPON23.05a), 'US-Analyse zu Nordkorea: Kims Langstreckenraketen angeblich einsatzbereit' (SPON31.05a), 'Jahresbericht zur Rüstung: Atommächte erneuern ihre Arsenale' (SPON03.06b), 'Weltweite Mindeststandards: Deutschland unterzeichnet neuen Waffenhandelsvertrag' (SPON04.06a), 'Abwehrsystem für USA und Europa: Pentagon-Sparpläne reißen Loch in Raketenschutzschirm' (SPON24.06).

<sup>159</sup> e.g. 'Comedy gold: Rob Newman's History of Oil' (G03.05a), 'Drone attacks continue, the FBI killed an unarmed witness, and Obama aides cash in' (G02.06a), 'Julian Assange: "L'avancée des technologies de l'information annonce la fin de la vie privée"' (LM07.06c).

Iran – cancelled in 2010 amid UN sanctions and at the behest of U.S. and Israel – was also recalled as background information in several side-note pieces<sup>160</sup>.

Closely related to the said theme – *Iranian nuclear threat* – is *Western deterrence against Iran's potential aggression and/or access to a nuclear weapon*. Accordingly, the reasons behind the measures undertaken by the West (e.g. Britain, Germany, U.S.) and their allies, including arms/military cooperation – to ‘curb’ or ‘deter’ Iran’s nuclear and regional activities as well as Israel and the Gulf states’ self-defense against possible threat from Iran – were expressly stated or inferred<sup>161</sup> through “implicit or explicit assumption” and “appeal to the audience’s beliefs or preferences” (Richardson, 2004, p.64). While some *Guardian* and *SPON* items problematized their respective countries’ arms trade with undemocratic Gulf states, (the necessity of) such measures against Iran were taken for granted by relying on a ‘common-sense’ understanding shared with readers about an inherently hostile Other i.e. its regime’s repression at home and aggression abroad<sup>162</sup>. Also included were several side-note pieces that referred to debates surrounding whether Obama’s red line on chemical weapons use in Syria should be enforced and what message this (in)action would signal to Iran (and North Korea)<sup>163</sup>.

*Iran's high-stakes election and its implications for nuclear standoff* yielded, as expected, considerable reporting and commentary particularly in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*. While the three media’s election coverage encompassed, to varying degrees, news, analysis, and opinion pieces on Iran’s domestic outlook (examined later), the Iran-West relations and the election outcome’s prospects for Tehran’s foreign policy – viz. position on Syria and especially nuclear diplomacy – remained the prime focus of the outlets’ election reporting. This involved *pre-election pessimism* whilst contemplating the ‘worst-case scenario’ that then-nuclear negotiator and hardliner candidate Saeed Jalili, who took the most

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<sup>160</sup> e.g. ‘Israel in Moscow talks to halt supply of missiles to Syrian regime’ (G29.05a), ‘Israël veut convaincre Vladimir Poutine de ne pas livrer des missiles à Damas’ (LM14.05a), ‘La livraison attendue de missiles S-300 à la Syrie provoque une montée de la tension en Israël’ (LM29.05b), ‘Lieferung von Raketensystem: Russland will Assads Flugabwehr stärken’ (SPON09.05a), ‘Raketenabwehr: USA warnen Russland vor Rüstungsdeal mit Syrien’ (SPON09.05b), ‘Möglicher Waffendeal mit Syrien: Das russische Raketen-Rätsel’ (SPON11.05b).

<sup>161</sup> ‘Chuck Hagel: arms deal sending “clear signal” to Iran over nuclear programme’ (G21.04a), ‘UK cuddles up to Gulf states - hidden dangers ahead’ (G29.04a), ‘UK sends underwater drones to Gulf for anti-mines exercise’ (G.02.05), ‘Barack Obama is running out of time to end Middle East dithering’ (G07.05c), ‘Typhoon jets deal with Oman helps boost UK arms exports’ (G20.06a), ‘Bradley Manning trial: what we know from the leaked WikiLeaks documents’ (G30.07a), ‘Nucléaire iranien: un arsenal de pointe américain promis à Israël’ (LM23.04a), ‘La "super-bombe" anti-bunker du Pentagone contre l'Iran’ (LM03.05a), ‘Proche-Orient: la nouvelle stratégie d' Obama’ (LM29.07), ‘Panzerdeal mit Emirat: Krauss-Maffei liefert "Leopard 2" nach Katar’ (SPON18.04a), ‘Waffen für Israel und Saudis: USA planen riesigen Rüstungsdeal im Nahen Osten’ (SPON19.04), ‘Hightech-Bomben gegen Iran: Amerika stärkt seine Bunkerbrecher’ (SPON03.05a), ‘Obamas Atomwaffen-Vorstoß: Moskau fürchtet um seine Großmachtstellung’ (SPON19.06b).

<sup>162</sup> ‘UAE and Britain: credibility gulf’ (G28.04a), ‘Building an empire through arms’ (G17.07a), ‘Umstrittener Rüstungsdeal: Berlin genehmigt Verkauf von 164 Panzern nach Indonesien’ (SPON07.05b).

<sup>163</sup> e.g. ‘Armes chimiques en Syrie: Israël joue avec le feu’ (LM02.05a), ‘Vorwürfe aus Israel: Nato beunruhigt über möglichen Chemiewaffen-Einsatz in Syrien’ (SPON23.04b), ‘Obama und der Syrien-Konflikt: Der verdruckste Oberbefehlshaber’ (SPON30.04), ‘Syriens Bürgerkrieg: Die USA greifen ein’ (SPON14.06a).

uncompromising line vis-à-vis the West, becomes the next Iranian president<sup>164</sup>, and, by contrast, a sense of *cautious optimism after the election of Hassan Rouhani*, Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator during Khatami’s presidency (Chapter Two, section 2.5.2). In other words, similar to U.S. media (Biswas, 2018; Bowen, 2015), the three outlets’ pre- and post-election coverage underwent a discursive shift: the president-elect cleric was praised as ‘moderate’, ‘Western-educated’ – while at times, as Biswas (2018, p.338) also noted, “[e]voking well-worn glamorous renditions of East meets West tropes” – and ‘a seasoned diplomat’, under whose tenure as nuclear envoy Iran agreed to temporarily suspend its nuclear enrichment activities, with a mandate, in stark contrast to his predecessor, to engage constructively with the West and show more nuclear transparency. *Guardian* editorialized that “we are now in a better position to tackle the nuclear issue”, which it credited to “the shrewdness of the Iranian electorate, not the threats and sanctions of the west”<sup>165</sup>. *Le Monde* and *SPON* labelled Rouhani ‘the diplomatic Mullah’<sup>166</sup> and ‘Hoffnungsträger im Atomstreit’<sup>167</sup>. This optimism was, however, expressed with concomitant reservations about the Supreme Leader’s role as Iran’s ultimate decision-maker and Rouhani’s insistence on Iran’s nuclear rights<sup>168</sup>. Both *Guardian* (discussed below) and *Le Monde* allocated room for analysis/commentary on post-election Iran and the future of the nuclear dossier. *Le Monde*, for example, hosted a debate entitled ‘Iran: towards a new nuclear deal?’<sup>169</sup> with guest contributors writing about options ahead for Iran’s Supreme Leader, the U.S., France – both as key member of the negotiating team and its economic interests as one of Iran’s top trading partners – and Israel<sup>170</sup> in addition to a “less burdensome climate” for future talks with Rouhani, “a technocrat who, despite his turban, handles diplomatic language with more dexterity and avoids undue

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<sup>164</sup> e.g. ‘Iran's election: a domesticated affair that could make waves far from home’ (G22.05b), ‘Iran election: Saeed Jalili offers little to solve country's mounting problems’ (G28.05a), ‘Iranian election: do the Revolutionary Guards have a candidate?’ (G03.06c), ‘Iran elections: the world hopes for change, but is likely to be disappointed’ (G14.06b), ‘Qui succédera à Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?’ (LM26.04b), ‘Les poids lourds Jalili et Rafsandjani dans la course présidentielle en Iran’ (LM11.05a), ‘Tagesvorschau: Was Freitag wichtig wird’ (SPON13.06a), ‘Präsidentchaftskandidat Dschalili: Ein neuer Hardliner will Iran regieren’ (SPON14.06b).

<sup>165</sup> ‘Middle East: a wall of difficulties’ (G18.07b).

<sup>166</sup> ‘Hassan Rohani, le mollah diplomate’ (LM17.06a).

<sup>167</sup> ‘Iran's neuer Präsident Rohani: Hoffnungsträger im Atomstreit’ (SPON15.06a).

<sup>168</sup> e.g. ‘Hassan Rouhani: key negotiator’ (G15.06a), ‘Hassan Rouhani's election as Iranian president met by cautious optimism’ (G16.06a), ‘Iranian president-elect Hassan Rouhani pledges path of moderation’ (G17.06a), ‘Iranian president-elect Rouhani promises better relations with west’ (G17.06b), ‘Iran's president-elect calls his election victory a mandate for change’ (G29.06a), ‘Hassan Rouhani sworn in as president of Iran, urging moderation and respect’ (G04.08a), ‘Rohani salue "la victoire de la modération sur l'extrémisme"' (LM15.06a), ‘En Iran, le président Rohani entre en fonctions’ (LM03.08a), ‘Hassan Rohani se dit prêt à des "négociations sérieuses" sur le nucléaire iranien’ (LM07.08), ‘Tagesvorschau: Was Montag wichtig wird’ (SPON16.06a), ‘Neuer Präsident Rohani: Iran will Atom-Gespräche mit dem Westen wieder aufnehmen’ (SPON06.08a).

<sup>169</sup> ‘Iran: vers une nouvelle donne nucléaire?’ (LM04.07).

<sup>170</sup> ‘Iran: une diplomatie de l'atome relancée’ (LM03.07b), ‘Barack Obama devrait réitérer son message d'ouverture à Téhéran’ (LM03.07c), ‘Iran: la France a des intérêts à défendre’ (LM03.07d), ‘Iran: Israël restera pragmatique et prudent’ (LM03.07e).

provocation”<sup>171</sup>. Other items included a piece by *Le Monde*’s editorial director entitled ‘President’s bomb and turban’ on Rouhani’s “golden CV” in post-revolution Iran and his credibility in- and outside the country to lead the nuclear negotiations, “if he wishes to”<sup>172</sup>; an op-ed by a former member of the European troika delegation recalling the opportunity missed by both sides during the talks in which he had participated (2003-2006)<sup>173</sup>, and an op-ed in which the president of the French Institute for Strategic Analysis (IFAS) called for Iran’s inclusion in all future talks on the Middle East (e.g. Syria), arguing: “Claiming to keep Iran outside this dialogue would be a diplomatic mistake of arrogant naivety. All direct and indirect parties should be given a seat”<sup>174</sup>. In addition to reporting the statements/actions of their political elite and examining the outlook on easing tensions between their countries – while sometimes equating the Self, as the next chapter shows, to the ‘West’, ‘international community’, or the ‘world’ – and Iran, the three media (mainly *Guardian* and *SPON*) focused on *the Iran-U.S. conflict and hope for rapprochement* and direct talks between the two<sup>175</sup>. Besides numerous side-note remarks across the corpora, *the Iran-Israel conflict* was also highlighted in several articles (mainly *Le Monde* and *SPON*) about Israel’s response to election outcome as well as news and follow-ups on Rouhani’s misquoted comments about Israel<sup>176</sup>, the latter which should be considered, *inter alia*, against the backdrop of the precedent set by Ahmadinejad and his controversial remarks throughout his presidency.

Several items (mostly *SPON*) announced *toughening/easing of U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iran and/or Tehran’s reaction*<sup>177</sup>. In this vein, Washington’s decision to relax sanctions prior

<sup>171</sup> ‘Un climat moins pesant pour négocier sur le nucléaire’ (LM03.07f).

<sup>172</sup> ‘Iran: la bombe et le turban du président’ (LM19.07a).

<sup>173</sup> ‘Nucléaire iranien: revenir à l’esprit de compromis de 2003 est-il possible?’ (LM01.08a).

<sup>174</sup> ‘L’Iran doit être intégré à toute discussion sur l’avenir du Moyen-Orient’ (LM13.08).

<sup>175</sup> e.g. ‘White House says Tehran must “heed will of people” on Rouhani victory’ (G15.06b), ‘UK snubs Iranian president’s inauguration’ (G24.07a), ‘UK open to improving London-Tehran ties, says William Hague’ (G31.07a), ‘White House extends olive branch as Iran president Rouhani inaugurated’ (G04.08b), ‘Iran ready to talk if US shows ‘goodwill’, says new president’ (G06.08a), ‘David Cameron writes to Iran’s new president in attempt to mend relations’ (G07.08), ‘La communauté internationale prête à travailler avec Rouhani, Israël maintient la pression’ (LM15.06b), ‘Iran: le maintien du nucléaire au prix d’une d’entente constructive avec le monde’ (LM29.06), ‘Iran: l’Occident boude l’investiture du nouveau président Hassan Rohani’ (LM25.07a), ‘Atomstreit: USA wollen offenbar mit Irans Führung verhandeln’ (SPON13.07b), ‘Geste des guten Willens: Iran lädt USA und EU zu Präsidenten-Vereidigung’ (SPON21.07a), ‘Irans neuer Präsident: Deutsche Politiker sind gespannt auf Rohani’ (SPON03.08a).

<sup>176</sup> ‘Iran president-elect Rouhani’s misquotes prompt Netanyahu reaction’ (G02.08), ‘Israël menace de nouveau d’intervenir en Iran’ (LM14.07), ‘Les déclarations du président iranien sur Israël auraient été mal rapportées’ (LM02.08), ‘Polémique autour de déclarations du président iranien sur Israël’ (LM03.08b), ‘Atomstreit mit Iran: Israel setzt Wahlsieger Rohani unter Druck’ (SPON16.06a), ‘Hassan Rohani: Irans neuer Präsident wettert gegen Israel’ (SPON02.08a), ‘Neuer Präsident Rohani: Iranische Medien korrigieren umstrittenes Israel-Zitat’ (SPON02.08b), ‘Irans neuer Präsident: Rohani vereidigt - Ahmadinedschad tritt ab’ (SPON04.08a), ‘Reaktion auf Rohani-Rede: Netanjahu will Druck auf Iran erhöhen’ (SPON07.08).

<sup>177</sup> ‘Iran condemns tougher US oil sanctions bill passed by House’ (G01.08b), ‘Obama approuve un renforcement des sanctions contre l’Iran’ (LM03.06d), ‘L’Etat américain autorise l’exportation d’équipements médicaux vers l’Iran malgré les sanctions’ (LM26.07a), ‘Streit über Atomprogramm: Samsung sperrt App Store für Iraner’ (SPON26.04), ‘Streit um Atomprogramm: USA verschärfen Sanktionen gegen Irans Ölindustrie’ (SPON01.06), ‘Streit über Atomprogramm: USA verhängen neue Sanktionen gegen Iran’ (SPON04.06b), ‘Vor



to the election by allowing American companies to sell mobile phones and other technology was reported in all three outlets<sup>178</sup>; while *Le Monde* and *SPON* attributed the main reason behind the U.S. move to boosting personal communication – given state-led restrictions and the suppression of free speech/dissent in Iran – amongst Iranians and with the outside world, the latter argued: “Die Aktion hat einen politischen Hintergrund: Sie soll vor den Präsidentschaftswahlen die Meinungsfreiheit stärken [...]. Da die iranische Regierung die Bürger des Landes zum Schweigen bringen wollte, indem sie Kommunikationswege abschnitt, wollten die Vereinigten Staaten den Iranern dabei helfen, ihr Recht auf freie Meinungsäußerung auszuüben”. Incorporating additional information that was omitted/missing in both French and German texts, *Guardian* contextualized the U.S. decision and its timing to “boost aid to Iranian dissidents” by referring to “what [Washington] sees as growing Iranian interference in Syria” and the U.S. State Department’s latest global terrorism report, according to which “Iran’s state sponsorship of terrorism and Hezbollah’s terrorist activity have reached a tempo unseen since the 1990s”. In addition, some news, analysis and opinion pieces (mostly *Guardian* and *Le Monde*) discussed/mentioned *impact of sanctions on Iranian economy and living standard or Iran’s domestic and nuclear policy*<sup>179</sup>. Whereas *SPON* took sanctions-related developments – and their necessity – at face value or referred to their overall impact on Iranian economy and society as background information, *Guardian* and *Le Monde* dedicated more room and included a variety of voices i.e. ‘regular’ Iranians (examined later) or politicians/observers offering a range of views. This included a letter, published exclusively by *Guardian* and subsequently reported in *Le Monde*, from leading opposition figures and political prisoners inside Iran to Obama, urging the U.S. president to seize the “last chance” for détente after Rouhani’s victory and end the “crippling” economic sanctions<sup>180</sup>; analysis and opinion items in *Le Monde*, including a commentary by Reuters’ Breakingviews European editor who weighed the pros and cons of European sanctions against Turkey and Iran, with the latter becoming “less evil” following Rouhani’s win<sup>181</sup>, an op-ed co-written by a French philosopher and an Iranian author urging an end to sanctions,

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Rohani's Amtsantritt: US-Repräsentantenhaus beschließt neue Iran-Sanktionen’ (SPON01.08), ‘Irans neuer Präsident: Rohani kündigt Kampf gegen Sanktionen an’ (SPON03.08b).

<sup>178</sup> ‘US to boost aid to Iranian dissidents as countries jostle over Syria peace talks’ (G30.05b), ‘Iran: les Etats-Unis lèvent des sanctions pour faciliter l'accès au Web’ (LM30.05b), ‘USA lockern Sanktionen: Iraner dürfen Smartphones kaufen’ (SPON31.05b).

<sup>179</sup> ‘Sanctions in Iran have had an impact on its nuclear stance’ (G22.04b), ‘L'Iran englué dans le marasme économique par les sanctions américaines’ (LM07.06d), ‘Des sanctions aux effets dévastateurs’ (LM09.06a), ‘En Iran, l'élection d'Hassan Rohani, fruit des sanctions’ (LM17.06b), ‘Folgen des Embargos: Iran stockt Öltanker-Flotte auf’ (SPON06.08b).

<sup>180</sup> ‘Iranian political prisoners' plea to Barack Obama: the full letter’ (G08.08a), ‘Iran's political prisoners plead with Obama to end 'crippling' US sanctions’ (G08.08b), ‘Iran: 55 prisonniers politiques demandent à Obama de dialoguer avec l'Iran’ (LM09.08).

<sup>181</sup> ‘Iran, Turquie et sanctions européennes’ (LM21.06a).

whence “the people bear the costs, not the leaders”<sup>182</sup>, an interview with Israel’s minister of intelligence and strategic affairs who insisted: “Pressure [on Iran] should not be eased”<sup>183</sup>; and a piece from Glenn Greenwald in *Guardian* where he cited a then-newly published bipartisan report that “surprisingly, and quite cogently, calls into serious question the wisdom of the sanctions regime imposed” by Washington, adding that “Obama must rely far less on bluster, threats and sanctions – none of which is likely to achieve anything – and instead do far more to engage the Iranians and find a negotiated settlement to the multiple issues between the two countries”<sup>184</sup>. Also included were a handful of items published in the news sites’ political, economic, and legal rubrics that reported/mentioned *violations of Iran-related sanctions/embargo* by, and penalties subjected to, British, French, and German financial institutions/companies and other persons/entities<sup>185</sup> as well as articles (mostly *Guardian*) that referred in passing to *Iran’s sanctions-circumventing measures*, with Iran singled out or lumped with other (adversarial) illiberal states and/or criminal actors involved in illegal transactions/money laundering i.e. Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, Syria, terrorist groups, and the Mexican drug cartel<sup>186</sup>. On one hand, these items serve, as one news piece in *SPON* formulates, as “Musterbeispiel, **wie trickreich Teheran Verbote umgeht**”<sup>187</sup>, using a ‘symptomatic argument’ in which “an individual example is taken to illustrate a wider pattern” (Richardson, 2007, p.162), therewith evoking (further) mistrust and suspicion towards the ‘cunning/unreliable Iran’, and, on the other, associate Iran with transnational crime and corruption, denoting the illicit/evasive nature of its activities. Also, a limited number of financial or business-related pieces in *Le Monde* and *SPON* – from *Manager Magazin* – referred to the political risk of foreign investment in (countries like) Iran

<sup>182</sup> “Arrêtons sanctions et embargo contre l’Iran” (LM12.08).

<sup>183</sup> “Il ne faut pas alléger la pression sur l’Iran” (LM06.08a).

<sup>184</sup> ‘US torture “indisputable”, CNN’s humiliation, and Iran sanctions’ (G18.04a).

<sup>185</sup> e.g. ‘Glencore traded with Iranian supplier to nuclear programme’ (G21.04b), ‘Glencore and Trafigura “may have supplied Iran’s nuclear programme”’ (G23.05a), ‘Petrol price rigging inquiry contacts oil traders’ (G20.06b), ‘Marc Rich: controversial commodities trader and former fugitive dies aged 78’ (G26.06), ‘Contrats gaziers en Iran: le parquet veut un procès pour Total’ (LM29.05c), ‘Contrats iraniens: Total risque la correctionnelle’ (LM30.05c), ‘Contrats gaziers en Iran: rien “d’illégal”, selon le PDG de Total’ (LM02.06b), ‘Marc Rich: mort d’un pirate’ (LM27.05a), ‘Vereinte Nationen: Glencore könnte Iran-Sanktionen umgangen haben’ (SPON23.05b), ‘Bestechungsvorwürfe in USA: Ölmulti Total muss 400 Millionen Strafe zahlen’ (SPON29.05), ‘Glencore-Gründer: Rohstoff-Milliardär Marc Rich ist tot’ (SPON26.06), ‘Olympia in Peking: Bauriese BHP Billiton droht Strafe wegen Korruption’ (SPON16.08a).

<sup>186</sup> e.g. ‘War and Peace at Standard Chartered ...’ (G05.05b), ‘Court papers chart breakdown of Saudi princes’ relations with business partner’ (G16.05a), ‘HSBC faces court threat as deal on money laundering charges stalls’ (G23.05b), ‘David Cameron faces battle at G8 over anti-corruption deal for firms’ (G08.06a), ‘Offshore Leaks app puts secret users of tax havens in the public eye’ (G15.06c), ‘L’affaire Liberty Reserve révèle les liens entre monnaies virtuelles et criminalité’ (LM29.05d), ‘La difficile lutte contre le blanchiment au sein des banques’ (LM18.07).

<sup>187</sup> ‘Verstoß gegen Handelsembargo: Deutsche Exporteure wegen Iran-Deals vor Gericht’ (SPON25.07c).

and Syria<sup>188</sup> or discussed/mentioned the *impact of sanctions on French and German companies*<sup>189</sup>; that is, Iran's top European trading partners (Chapter Two).

Regarding the three media's coverage of the nuclear issue, *Guardian* distinguished itself from *Le Monde* and *SPON* during the studied period in four distinct ways: (1) contrary to the alarmist and fear-mongering language in which Iran's nuclear program is conflated with a weapons program via "explicit or co-textual reference" (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.226), adopted sometimes in *Guardian*'s op-eds/commentaries and regularly employed in news or analysis items of its French and German counterparts, the British site's news reports refrained from characterizing the Iranian program as a 'nuclear *weapons* program'. In fact, the deliberate avoidance of this "faith based" (DiMaggio, 2009, p.294) conflation was made explicit via occasional correction/clarification remarks below some articles, in line with *Guardian*'s editorial policy and transparent corrections (Thurman & Walters, 2013), informing readers, loosely paraphrasing, that "this article was amended to refer to 'Iran's nuclear program' instead of its 'nuclear weapons program'"<sup>190</sup>; (2) unlike *Guardian*'s news articles, most items in *SPON* and, to a lesser degree, *Le Monde* – excluding the analysis and opinion pieces cited earlier – that offered an event- and elite-oriented reporting of Iran's nuclear program and the statements/actions of their respective political elite or those of the U.S., Israel, and (post-election) Iran, the British website's CiF section offered a wider array of views/perspectives from columnists, regular commentators, and guest writers. The latter range from former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who opined with ambivalence that "maybe the new president [Rouhani] wishes to try to bring his country to agreement with the world on Iran's nuclear weapons ambition. Maybe he doesn't", while warning that "[w]e can't afford a nuclear-armed Iran"<sup>191</sup>, to prominent U.S.-critic Noam Chomsky, who labeled (conflict with) Iran "a Western obsession"<sup>192</sup>. This enabled pluralistic platform featuring op-eds, columns, and editorials provided competing (and, at times, counter-) discourses on Iran and its nuclear policy by offering historical/political context to Iran-West tensions at the time via allusions to foreign interference in Iranian affairs and the ensuing mistrust, implicating both Iran and the West (notably U.S.) in the nuclear deadlock, calling out the West/allies' nuclear hypocrisy or

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<sup>188</sup> 'Goldman sieht jede zehnte Mine in Gefahr' (MM03.05).

<sup>189</sup> e.g. 'Ce que les sanctions contre l'Iran coûtent à la France' (LM17.06c), 'La bonne tenue des ventes de PSA en Chine ne compense pas l'arrêt des livraisons en Iran' (LM09.07a), 'PSA et Renault ont les yeux rivés sur l'Asie, où tout reste à faire' (LM12.07b), 'Renault a souffert au 1er semestre en raison de l'arrêt de ses activités iraniennes' (LM26.07b), 'Milliardenlasten bedrohen Deutsche Bank' (MM30.04), 'Autobauer bescheren Leoni mehr Umsatz' (MM13.08).

<sup>190</sup> e.g. 'Glencore traded with Iranian supplier to nuclear programme' (G21.04b), 'Supreme court quashes Iran bank sanctions and criticises secret hearings' (G19.06b).

<sup>191</sup> 'Democracy doesn't on its own mean effective government' (G06.07a).

<sup>192</sup> 'How to destroy the future' (G04.06b).

challenging the U.K./U.S. Iran policy<sup>193</sup> i.e. “the anti-Iranian cancer that has affected American policy in the Middle East since the axis-of-evil speech”, as *Guardian*’s columnist wrote<sup>194</sup>; (3) unlike *Le Monde* and *SPON*, Iran was cited in few *Guardian* stories about Britain’s nuclear program that either invoked Iran’s “potential threat”, quoting the defense secretary<sup>195</sup>, to legitimize the Trident nuclear submarine’s renewal as ‘deterrent’, or, conversely, questioned the legality of possible American/Israeli military action against Iran, citing the former UN chief weapons inspector<sup>196</sup>, which is typically normalized in mainstream Western media (e.g. Richardson, 2004, pp.102-7), and (4) while Iran’s right under the NPT to develop peaceful nuclear energy was categorically absent in *SPON*’s coverage and stated briefly in an op-ed in *Le Monde*<sup>197</sup>, it was raised occasionally in *Guardian* commentaries and foregrounded in one op-ed<sup>198</sup>.

### 6.2.1.3 Terrorism, Islamist extremism, and political Islam

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Terrorism/extremism/Islam	7	25	7	24	5	15	19	64
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	4.5%	4.6%	4%	7.1%	6%	7.3%	4.5%	5.9%

**Table 6.3 Breakdown of articles in ‘terrorism, extremism & political Islam’ sub-category**

Constituting nearly 6% of total articles whilst highlighted in over 4% of Iran-related stories (Table 6.3), this category encompasses items/remarks about Tehran’s suspected involvement in terror(ist) acts overseas, support for radical Islamist groups, and (regional impact of) political Islam/fundamentalism in Iran. Accordingly, *state-sponsorship of terrorism* was a recurring theme via passing references to Iran-linked “alleged espionage rings” across the Gulf<sup>199</sup> and follow-ups on the disappearance of an Iran-born British businessman in *Guardian*<sup>200</sup> as well as news in *Le Monde* and especially *SPON* about sentences against individuals involved in apparent state-backed terrorist attacks, namely life in prison for two

<sup>193</sup> In addition to the previously-cited piece headlined ‘Israeli bombing of Syria and moral relativism’ (G.06.05), other items include: ‘Iran: an opportunity to be seized’ (G17.06c), ‘Iran: the west needs to forge a more nuanced relationship with the new regime’ (G23.06a), ‘New President Hassan Rouhani makes the unimaginable imaginable for Iran’ (G03.08), ‘Iran: enter a pragmatist’ (G04.08c), ‘Iran and the US can work it out – but mutual respect is key’ (G09.08a).

<sup>194</sup> ‘Iran has changed course. Now the US must do the same’ (G16.06b).

<sup>195</sup> ‘Trident downgrade would be reckless, say Tories on eve of Lib Dem review’ (G15.07a).

<sup>196</sup> ‘Hans Blix urges Britain to relinquish Trident nuclear programme’ (G26.05).

<sup>197</sup> the previously-stated piece entitled ‘Un climat moins pesant pour négocier sur le nucléaire’ (LM03.07f).

<sup>198</sup> ‘Iran has a right to peaceful nuclear enrichment’ (G06.06a).

<sup>199</sup> ‘UAE sentences ‘coup plotters’ to jail’ (G02.07a).

<sup>200</sup> ‘Case of man who went missing in Dubai raises questions over UK-Iran links’ (G15.07b), ‘Scotland Yard counter-terrorism unit investigate Dubai abduction’ (G09.08b).

Iranians, accused by Israel of plotting against its citizens, over terror-related charges in Kenya<sup>201</sup>, a 25-year prison term for an Iranian-American accused by the U.S. of plotting to kill the Saudi ambassador<sup>202</sup>, accusations made by an Argentine prosecutor that Iran has established terrorist networks throughout Latin America<sup>203</sup>, and the latest U.S. State Department's annual global terrorism report, according to which Iran "sei der Weltweit größte Terror-Unterstützer"<sup>204</sup>.

Various items attended/referred to *Iran's relations with non-state militant groups*, namely the Taliban, Hamas, al-Qaida, and Hezbollah. Examples include the historic trip of the Afghan insurgents to Iran "for a meeting likely to worry both Washington and Kabul"<sup>205</sup>, the worsening ties between Tehran and the Palestinian Hamas at the time over the former's role in Syria<sup>206</sup>, and the terror plot in Canada, thwarted just a week after the Boston Marathon Bombing. Regarding the latter, the suspects' alleged link to "al-Qaida elements in Iran", briefly mentioned in *SPON* without further elaboration<sup>207</sup>, was tackled in more detail by both *Guardian* and *Le Monde* via follow-ups and inclusion of expert voices. Initially stressing the supposed ties in the sub-head, *Guardian* referred to the relation between al-Qaida and Tehran further down the text as "fractious in the past", followed instantly by a quote from a CIA veteran claiming that "al-Qaida has had a clandestine presence in Iran since at least 2001 and that neither the terror group nor Tehran speak openly about it"<sup>208</sup>. By contrast, an Islamic extremism expert asserted in an analysis that "the claim of aid from al-Qaida in Iran for a plot in the west is new" and "there is no evidence of a working relationship between the Iranian state and al-Qaida or its various offshoots"<sup>209</sup>. It is also noteworthy that in what seems to be an attempt to contextualize – or perhaps explicate – the terror plot on Canadian soil and its purported link to Iran, all *Guardian* articles alluded to the severed ties between Tehran and Ottawa since 2012, with some citing then-Canadian foreign minister who, at the time, branded Iran "the most significant threat to global peace and security in the world today"<sup>210</sup>.

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<sup>201</sup> 'Deux Iraniens condamnés au Kenya pour préparation d'attentats' (LM06.05), 'Kenia: Lebenslange Strafen für Iraner wegen Terrorplänen' (SPON06.05).

<sup>202</sup> 'Prozess in New York: Höchststrafe für Mordkomplott gegen Saudi-Botschafter' (SPON30.05a).

<sup>203</sup> 'Vorwürfe aus Argentinien: Iran soll Terrornetz in Südamerika aufgebaut haben' (SPON30.05b).

<sup>204</sup> 'Bericht des Außenministeriums: USA prangern Iran als Terror-Unterstützer an' (SPON31.05c).

<sup>205</sup> 'Afghan Taliban send delegation to Iran' (G03.06d).

<sup>206</sup> e.g. 'Egypt's coup does not bode well for Palestinians' (G10.07b), 'Egypt's upheaval makes waves across region' (G12.07a), 'Why I'm (somewhat) optimistic about the latest Israel-Palestine peace talks' (G01.08c), 'Israël se réjouit discrètement de l'échec des Frères musulmans' (LM08.07a), 'Le Hamas plus isolé que jamais sur la scène internationale' (LM19.07b), 'Wirtschaft in Gaza: Geschlossene Schmuggler-Tunnel könnten Hamas ruinieren' (SPON29.07).

<sup>207</sup> 'Festnahmen: Kanadische Polizei deckt Anschlagpläne auf' (SPON22.04).

<sup>208</sup> 'Two arrested in Canada over alleged passenger train terrorist plot' (G23.04a), 'Canada terror plot suspects due in court over attempt to derail train' (G23.04b).

<sup>209</sup> 'What is the relationship between Iran and al-Qaida?' (G23.04c).

<sup>210</sup> e.g. 'Suspect in alleged Canadian terror plot claims charges "based on appearances"' (G23.04d).

*Le Monde*, likewise, initially accentuated Iran's ties to al-Qaida in its coverage<sup>211</sup>. An expert on jihadist networks, however, described the relation in an interview as "complicated", arguing that while "**both have been allies in their fight against the West since 2001**" and "Iranian authorities have always blown hot and cold, making use of allowing free passage and expelling al-Qaida-linked combatants as per their needs", there will never be a strategic alliance between the two, "who neither share the same interests nor the same ideology"<sup>212</sup>. One can surmise that *Le Monde*'s editorial decision to re-publish (on April 26) a news piece from 2012 announcing Iran's willingness to cooperate with the Thai police – in identifying its nationals suspected to have been involved in the Bangkok blasts<sup>213</sup> – is connected to the French outlet's preoccupation at the time with the said terror plot in Canada and/or the Boston Marathon Bombing. Moreover, all three news sites reported the EU's push and subsequent decision, backed by the Big Three, to designate the armed wing of Hezbollah – amid the group's growing involvement in Syria and shortly after the aforementioned Battle of Qusair – as a terrorist organization, and Tehran's condemnation. As discussed earlier, the three media's prevailing depiction of the 'Party of God' in their coverage of Syria can be encapsulated, borrowing the words of *Guardian*'s Middle East editor, as "a sworn enemy of Israel and the US, a loyal ally of Iran and a partner of the Syrian military in its attempts to crush the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad"<sup>214</sup>. In light of EU's designation, the Iran-Hezbollah axis was not only linked to atrocities in Syria and hostility to the West/allies, but also explicitly to terrorism. Whether or not Hezbollah should be classified as a terrorist organization was tackled in a *Guardian* debate involving Israel's minister of justice and a senior Lebanese lecturer at London Metropolitan University: The former, in favor of the decision, maintained that "[n]o democratic nation in the world could reasonably define an armed militia as a 'political party'", whereas the latter argued that attempts to label the group terrorist "are not only futile, but fly in the face of the facts of this movement and its history. Like all genuine resistance movements, the Lebanese resistance, led by Hezbollah, was born as a reaction to occupation"<sup>215</sup>. An editorial in *Le Monde* described EU's designation as "a somewhat paradoxical stance", stating that "paralyzed in Syria, Europe decides to hit the armed wing of the Lebanese party Hezbollah, one of the main political forces in the land of cedars. As if a measure affecting Lebanon would offset policy vacuum in Syria"<sup>216</sup>. Besides neutral terms such as 'group', 'party', and 'organization', Hezbollah was often characterized

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<sup>211</sup> 'Le Canada déjoue un projet d'attentat dirigé par Al-Qaida' (LM22.04a).

<sup>212</sup> 'Les liens complexes entre Al-Qaida et l'Iran' (LM25.04b).

<sup>213</sup> 'Bangkok: l'Iran offre son aide pour identifier les responsables des attaques' (LM26.04c).

<sup>214</sup> 'Iran: EU blacklisting of Hezbollah serves Israeli interests' (G23.07a).

<sup>215</sup> 'Should the EU designate Hezbollah a terrorist organisation?' (G22.07c).

<sup>216</sup> 'L'Europe, le Hezbollah et le martyre de la Syrie' (LM23.07c).

as ‘loyal/staunch ally of Iran’, ‘Iranian-backed Shia militia’, ‘Shia Islamist group’, ‘radical Islamic militia’, ‘Shia movement’, ‘Israel-hostile’, and, less commonly, overtly labelled a ‘terrorist’ entity<sup>217</sup>. Collocating Iran with Hezbollah, prevalent in all three outlets within their coverage of Syria (and elsewhere), should hence be considered in view of both the EU’s ruling during the studied period as well as mainstream discourses and public views of Hezbollah in the West.

Finally, this category contains items (especially *Le Monde*) that discussed/referred to *political Islam’s trajectory in Iran and its regional implications*. Accordingly, the 1979 Revolution, which incorporated a politicized vision of Islam into the core of the Iranian state, is regarded as one of the most “decisive global convulsions” shaping today’s multipolar world<sup>218</sup> and the origin of the Shia-Sunni schism in its modern form<sup>219</sup>. As part of a debate entitled ‘the crisis of political Islam’ hosted in *Le Monde*<sup>220</sup>, with an introductory extract where the French news site declared that “the project to build a society governed by the precepts of Islam is in the midst of crisis, from Tunisia to Iran”, adding: “Iranian fundamentalist regime is standing firm despite a stifled opposition”, the Paris-based former deputy minister of foreign affairs in Iran (1979) opined: “The dream of political Islam, which has fueled the largest component of militancy in the Muslim world for over a century, has turned into a nightmare for the ruling elite who burn moral and religious values as the main propellant for their authoritarian machinery. Iran today dreams only of putting an end to this nightmare to safeguard both its religious piety and political survival”<sup>221</sup>. With the Iranian Revolution widely regarded as a disconcerting precedent, Iran is singled out or collocated with other ‘bad examples’ as *a cautionary tale of politicized Islam/Islamic fundamentalism*. In this vein, some items invoked the danger of “an Iran-induced Islamization” or a theocracy resembling “a Sunni version of Iran” in various contexts, notably in the coverage of Egypt amid the country’s political upheaval during the summer of 2013<sup>222</sup>. Closely related is *Iran’s*

<sup>217</sup> e.g. ‘EU resists Hezbollah ban but lists armed wing as terrorist group’ (G22.07b), ‘L’UE envisage des sanctions contre l’aile militaire du Hezbollah’ (LM22.07), ‘Le Hezbollah classé organisation terroriste par l’UE’ (LM23.07a), ‘Hezbollah : Téhéran dénonce la décision de l’UE’ (LM23.07b), ‘Le Hezbollah revendique une attaque contre des soldats israéliens’ (LM14.08a), ‘Entscheidung in Brüssel: EU setzt Hisbollah-Miliz auf Terrorliste’ (SPON22.07a), ‘Hisbollah auf EU-Terrorliste: “Was in Brüssel gesagt wird, existiert für uns nicht”’ (SPON22.07b), ‘Aufnahme auf Terrorliste: Iran verurteilt Hisbollah-Ächtung der EU scharf’ (SPON23.07), ‘Außenspiegel: Europas Probleme mit der Hisbollah’ (SPON26.07).

<sup>218</sup> ‘Strange Rebels: 1979 and the Birth of the 21st Century by Christian Caryl – review’ (G25.07b).

<sup>219</sup> e.g. ‘Printemps arabe: “Tout ça pour ça!”’ (LM18.04a), ‘Chiïtes-sunnites, guerres ouvertes’ (LM22.05c), ‘Changer de régime à Damas ne réglera rien’ (LM28.05b).

<sup>220</sup> ‘L’islam politique est-il dans l’impasse?’ (LM11.07c), ‘Les convulsions de l’islam politique’ (LM12.07c).

<sup>221</sup> ‘A Téhéran, l’ère de l’utopie fondamentaliste et révolutionnaire est finie’ (LM10.07a).

<sup>222</sup> e.g. ‘Libya: tensions between government and militias come to a head’ (G13.06a), ‘Protesters across Egypt call for Mohamed Morsi to go’ (G30.06a), ‘Disaster in Egypt has been delayed, not averted’ (G06.08b), ‘Les islamistes turcs font davantage preuve d’incompétence que de dogmatisme’ (LM10.07b), ‘Aserbaïdschan: Ein Oscar-Preisträger kämpft ums Präsidentenamt’ (SPON27.07a), ‘Staatskrise in Ägypten: Kampf um Arabiens Zukunft’ (SPON03.07), ‘Unruhen in Ägypten: Die Fanatiker werden verlieren’ (SPON06.07a).

*regional ambitions and its 'Shia Crescent'* across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>223</sup>. Accordingly, Tehran's regional aims and actions – in addition to what was discussed in Syria's coverage – were depicted as an aggressive quest for hegemony and (ideological) expansionism that are both threatening and destabilizing, therewith further invoking the danger of Iran's 'malign activities'. Examples include a *Guardian* news piece where the former British prime minister was quoted as lambasting Tehran's regional conduct, claiming that "the Islamic republic" is "not just trying to acquire nuclear weapons, it's trying to export an ideology and an extremism around the region", while adding that he "would be 100% more optimistic about the speed with which the region could change if that Iranian regime weren't there"<sup>224</sup>; an *Observer* editorial, published on the eve of widespread protests in Egypt demanding President Morsi's resignation, warning that "these clashes may presage, and precipitate, a more general, anarchic breaking", while adding: "Nothing could please more the bloodied criminals of Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime, justly disowned by Egypt's leadership. Nothing might encourage more the pernicious, anti-democratic regional conspiracies of Iran's clerical conservatives, nor more dismay aspiring democrats from Libya to Bahrain"<sup>225</sup>; a news piece in *Le Monde* quoting the former Lebanese prime minister who stated: "*Hezbollah is serving Syria and Iran to the detriment of the Lebanese people* [italics in original]"<sup>226</sup>, and a column authored by the French newspaper's editorial director and headlined 'The big Arab upheaval' where Alain Frachon posited that in the post-Arab Spring "Middle Eastern maelstrom", the Islamic Republic has assumed "an important part" and "is not immune to the great Arab turmoil"<sup>227</sup>.

Challenging the prevailing discourses outlined above which, via stories/remarks subsumed under this category as well as in other contexts (e.g. Syria) across the corpora, associate Iran with terrorism, Islamist extremism or fanaticism, a handful of opinion articles/commentaries in *Guardian* conveyed alternative or counter-narratives. These 'dissenting articles' (Richardson, 2004, p.178), written mostly by (Muslim) guest contributors in the CiF section or Glenn Greenwald in his column, *examined the rise of anti-Muslim racism* i.e. collective

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<sup>223</sup> e.g. 'Egypt open to tourists who drink booze and wear bikinis, says tourism minister' (G05.05c), 'Kabul University spawns next generation of freedom fighters' (G27.05a), 'MoD accused of risking soldiers' lives by silencing generals' (G19.07a), 'How Taliban brought new terror to Pakistan's Killer Mountain' (G23.07b), 'La rivalité sunnites-chiites au Pakistan, un des défis du futur premier ministre' (LM10.05), 'Au Yémen, la politique antiterroriste des Etats-Unis nourrit le ressentiment' (LM21.05a), 'L'armée, en première ligne des divisions qui déchirent le Liban' (LM09.07b), 'Le Liban dans la crainte d'une nouvelle guerre civile' (LM11.07d), 'L'Algérie, médusée, regarde son président prendre le café à Paris' (LM17.07a), 'Bahreïn tente d'empêcher des manifestations inspirées de l'Egypte' (LM14.08b), 'Einheimische Helfer der Bundeswehr: In Afghanistan bedroht - in Deutschland unerwünscht' (SPON16.04a).

<sup>224</sup> 'Tony Blair calls for west to intervene in Syria conflict' (G15.06d).

<sup>225</sup> 'Egypt: a revolution on the brink of self-destruction' (G29.06b).

<sup>226</sup> 'Syrie: Michel Sleimane demande au Hezbollah de rentrer au Liban' (LM20.06).

<sup>227</sup> 'Le Grand chambardement arabe' (LM11.07e).



blame and scapegoating in the wake of terrorist attacks in the West<sup>228</sup>, *contextualized anti-Americanism* in places such as Iran, where “Iranians who took over the US embassy in 1979 cited decades of brutal tyranny from the US-implanted-and-enabled Shah”<sup>229</sup>, or *deconstructed the notion of ‘terrorism’*, applied selectively to denote acts of violence perpetrated by opponents of Western (namely U.S.) foreign policy whilst exempting those of the West or its allied states/groups: “The brutal sanctions regime imposed by the west on Iraq and Iran, which kills large numbers of people, clearly has the intent of terrorizing the population into changing its governments’ policies and even the government itself”<sup>230</sup>.

#### 6.2.1.4 Cyber-politics

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Cyber-politics	3	29	5	11	4	18	12	58
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	1.9%	5.3%	2.7%	3.2%	4.8%	8.7%	2.8%	5.3%

**Table 6.4 Breakdown of articles in ‘cyber-politics’ sub-category**

This category, which constitutes over 5% of total and almost 3% of Iran-related items (Table 6.4), includes news about cyberattacks from Iran and Washington’s measures to counter *Iran’s mounting cyber threat*. A previous high-profile attack on Saudi Arabia’s state oil company, largely attributed to Iran, and equal concerns over cyberattacks from North Korea, raised occasionally in *Guardian* and more often in *SPON*, were also incorporated as additional/background information<sup>231</sup>. Moreover, the Stuxnet malware – first uncovered in 2010 and widely believed to have been developed and deployed by U.S. in tandem with Israel – that infiltrated Iran’s nuclear facilities and sabotaged uranium centrifuges was stated in these texts, and elsewhere<sup>232</sup>, as *cyberattack against Iran aimed at thwarting its nuclear ambitions*. Thus, while cyberattacks suspected to have been perpetrated by Iran were, by dint of quoting American and/or Israeli officials, reported as ‘offensive’ activities, the above-

<sup>228</sup> ‘The Boston bombing produces familiar and revealing reactions’ (G16.04a), ‘The special dread of terrorism for Muslims in the west’ (G23.04e), ‘40 days after Boston bombing: we must stop radical jihad’ (G25.05).

<sup>229</sup> ‘The same motive for anti-US “terrorism” is cited over and over’ (G24.04a).

<sup>230</sup> ‘Was the London killing of a British soldier “terrorism”?’ (G23.05c).

<sup>231</sup> e.g. ‘Obama heads for US-China summit with high hopes for progress’ (G06.06b), ‘US assisting Middle Eastern allies against cyber threats from Iran’ (G09.06a), ‘Les Etats-Unis accusent l’Iran de cyberattaques’ (LM27.05b), ‘Hacker-Angriff: USA warnen vor Cyber-Sabotage bei Energiekonzernen’(SPON13.05), ‘Angriffe auf US-Firmen: Hacker hatten Zugang zu Pipeline-Steuerung’ (25.05b), ‘Spähprogramm: US-Geheimdienstchef schimpft über Prism-Enthüllung’ (SPON09.06b), ‘Cyberwar: USA rüsten Verbündete gegen Hackerattacken aus Iran auf’ (SPON09.06c).

<sup>232</sup> e.g. ‘Is Armageddon on the cyber horizon?’ (G17.05b), ‘Is the smart grid putting the UK at risk?’ (G20.05c), ‘La cyberguerre, nouvel enjeu des armées’ (LM13.07).

stated cyber weapon – the first of its kind – against Iran was depicted as a sophisticated and targeted ‘defensive’ operation with the purpose of hindering Iran’s dreaded nuclear intentions and making the world safer<sup>233</sup>. *The (il)legality of the said attack/international law and Iran’s sovereignty* were raised in few *Guardian* news<sup>234</sup> and opinion pieces, including an op-ed by the Wikileaks co-founder in which Julian Assange proclaimed that viruses such as Stuxnet “herald a new era of highly complex weaponised software made by powerful states to attack weaker states. Their aggressive first-strike use on Iran is determined to undermine Iranian efforts at national sovereignty, a prospect that is anathema to US and Israeli interests in the region.”<sup>235</sup>

In light of the National Security Agency (NSA) spying scandal that broke in early June, all three outlets especially *Guardian* – the first, alongside *Washington Post*, to reveal the existence of NSA’s Prism program – allotted ample room to discussing the issues of cybersurveillance and cyberespionage. In this context, the reasons behind Iran being the country where the largest amount of intelligence was found to have been gathered were either taken for granted, assuming a ‘common-sense’ knowledge shared with readers about the self-evident facts regarding *an adversarial Other* or ascribed expressly to Tehran being at odds with U.S. (and allies) over the nuclear issue and other areas of contention<sup>236</sup>. More startling for the examined media was subjecting friendly states, including their own, indiscriminately to the same type of surveillance as Iran (alongside China, Russia, and Pakistan)<sup>237</sup>: in other words, putting Us/European nations, as the following excerpts show, on a par with nations like Iran:

While US surveillance laws do restrict access to the private details of American citizens, in their treatment of foreigners’ personal data they do not distinguish between allies and enemies. They can treat information regarding **British citizens** like that of **North Koreans, Syrians or Iranians**. (G25.06a, G25.06b)

Merkel könnte fragen, wie es kommt, dass **Europas Wirtschaftsmacht Nummer eins ähnlich ungeniert abgeschöpft wird wie die lupenreinen Autokratien China und Iran** [...]. Sie könnte auch

<sup>233</sup> e.g. ‘Former US general James Cartwright named in Stuxnet leak inquiry’ (G28.06a), ‘Un ex-général américain soupçonné de fuites sur le virus Stuxnet’ (LM28.06a), ‘Etats-Unis: un ex-général soupçonné de fuites sur une cyberattaque contre l’Iran’ (LM28.06b), ‘Ermittlungen der US-Justiz: Vier-Sterne-General soll Stuxnet-Programm verraten haben’ (SPON28.06b).

<sup>234</sup> ‘Obama faces hypocrisy charges at China summit after data mining revelations’ (G07.07).

<sup>235</sup> ‘How cryptography is a key weapon in the fight against empire states’ (G09.07a).

<sup>236</sup> e.g. ‘NSA spying scandal: what we have learned’ (G10.06a), ‘Boundless Informant: the NSA’s secret tool to track global surveillance data’ (G11.06a), ‘XKeyscore: NSA tool collects “nearly everything a user does on the internet”’ (G31.07b), ‘Espionnage américain: le point sur les dernières révélations’ (LM01.07), ‘XKeyscore, l’outil de la NSA pour examiner “quasiment tout ce que fait un individu sur le Web”’ (LM31.07), ‘Überblick: Was über den US-Geheimdienst NSA durchgesickert ist’ (SPON10.06), ‘NSA-System XKeyscore: Die Infrastruktur der totalen Überwachung’ (SPON31.07), ‘Pläne der Bundesregierung: Wie ein No-Spy-Abkommen aussehen könnte’ (SPON13.08a).

<sup>237</sup> e.g. ‘La NSA a aussi surveillé le Brésil, Snowden fait part de ses craintes’ (LM08.07b), ‘Geheimdienst-Lauschgriff: NSA spähte auch Brasilien massiv aus’ (SPON07.07). ‘US-Geheimdienst: NSA führt Deutschland als Spionageziel’ (SPON10.08).

fragen, warum die NSA kein Land Europas stärker überwacht als **den treuen Verbündeten Deutschland**. (Der Spiegel 25/2013)

Contrary to this central in- and outgroup construction based on the presumed and taken-for-granted trustworthiness of the Self and suspicion of the (rogue, dangerous) Other which, as the first excerpt above shows, facilitates the fallacy of guilt by association (suspicious leaders = suspicious nation), a handful of *Guardian* op-eds, columns, and blogposts offered competing or alternative arguments: the consequences of the NSA spying amid *a growing 'Muslim/Arab equals suspicion' mindset*<sup>238</sup>; historical allusions to *surveillance/intelligence (mis)used by American and British governments* “in subverting and overthrowing foreign governments, from Iran to Chile, or in attacking civil rights at home, during the cold war and since 9/11”<sup>239</sup>; and *Western hypocrisy* in view of the Prism scandal, which “reveals how western democracies no longer have the moral high ground over intrusive web-watchers such as Russia, China, Iran, or Azerbaijan, targets of Anglo-American-European condemnation of poor human rights records on the ground and online”<sup>240</sup>. Despite the writer’s intention to point out the West’s double standard in the latter article, this line of argumentation establishes a dichotomous ‘liberal Us’ versus ‘repressive Them’ category that further reinforces the dominant image associated with (countries like) Iran.

Besides cyberthreat/cyberespionage, included in this category were also limited articles on cyber diplomacy. The news about the opening of Israel’s virtual embassy on Twitter to Gulf states was reported in *Le Monde* and *SPON*, wherein both recount a similar U.S. initiative in 2011 to launch a virtual embassy to Iran. *Le Monde* described Israel’s move as an attempt to boost dialogue with the Gulf monarchs with whom it shares “a mutual concern”, namely Iran. Recalling Washington’s initiative, *SPON* referred to Iran’s subsequent ban on the website, having accused the Jewish lobby in the U.S. of being behind the plan<sup>241</sup>. Unlike these and numerous other items that highlight the enmity between Iran and Israel, the French site published a story in June on its front page about the ‘Israel-Loves-Iran’ Facebook campaign (launched in 2012), describing the grassroot initiative and its participants on both sides as “agents of change”<sup>242</sup>.

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<sup>238</sup> ‘If your name is Ahmed or Fatima, you live in fear of NSA surveillance’ (G19.06c).

<sup>239</sup> ‘NSA and GCHQ: mass surveillance is about power as much as privacy’ (G11.06b).

<sup>240</sup> ‘Human rights on the internet: online, you have rights too’ (G17.07b).

<sup>241</sup> ‘Israël ouvre une ambassade virtuelle dans le Golfe’ (LM27.07), ‘Diplomatie auf Twitter: Israel eröffnet virtuelle Botschaft für Golfstaaten’ (SPON24.07).

<sup>242</sup> ‘Sur Facebook, Israël aime l'Iran’ (LM21.06b).

### 6.2.1.5 Bilateral relations

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Bilateral relations	-	33	2	23	1	5	3	61
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	-	6%	1.1%	6.8%	1.2%	2.4%	0.7%	5.6%

**Table 6.5 Breakdown of articles in the ‘bilateral relations’ sub-category**

In addition to numerous items involving Iran and other social actors that attend/refer to the nuclear dispute or Tehran’s foreign policy/activity, several articles (mainly *Guardian* and *Le Monde*) reported or mentioned (other aspects of) relations between Iran and some states. Constituting over 5% of total articles (Table 6.5), these mostly side-note items pointed out trade and/or strong ties with China<sup>243</sup> and Venezuela<sup>244</sup>; arms supply to South Sudan<sup>245</sup>; influence in neighboring countries i.e. complicity in Afghanistan’s political corruption<sup>246</sup>, historical references – mostly in items about Assad’s use of sarin – to the Iran-Iraq war and the use of chemical weapons by Saddam<sup>247</sup> and, according to one piece from *Guardian*’s senior reporter, also by Iran<sup>248</sup>, deep-seated rivalry and current ties with Turkey<sup>249</sup>; and relations with other countries in the MENA region, including “cordial relations” with Qatar<sup>250</sup> and Tehran’s reaction to Egypt’s upheaval and the overthrow of Morsi, the first Egyptian head of state to have visited Iran since the two countries broke off diplomatic ties in 1979<sup>251</sup>. Besides these limited items on *South-South ties* that foregrounded Tehran’s close relations with (other) illiberal states and the West’s (namely U.S.) adversaries, Iran’s isolation on the international scene, and tensions with – or meddling in – countries in the

<sup>243</sup> ‘Les voitures chinoises à la conquête du monde pour mieux se vendre chez elles’ (LM21.04).

<sup>244</sup> ‘US calls for Venezuela election recount after narrow win for Nicolás Maduro’ (G17.04a), ‘Mangelwirtschaft in Venezuela: Im Land des Knappen Klopapiers’ (SPON04.08b).

<sup>245</sup> ‘South Sudan: challenge of disarming a nation when no one trusts the state’ (G04.07a).

<sup>246</sup> ‘Afghanistan’s web of intrigue is a poor basis on which to rebuild a nation’ (G29.04b), ‘Le chef de cabinet d’Hamid Karzaï accusé d’être payé par l’Iran’ (LM29.04a), ‘CIA-Dollars für Afghanistan: Geistergeld in Tüten’ (SPON29.04).

<sup>247</sup> e.g. ‘Chemical weapons: inspection time in Syria’ (G26.04a), ‘Golden oil of Iraqi Kurdistan raises tensions with Baghdad’ (G10.06b), ‘David Kelly: An end to the conspiracy theories?’ (G04.07b), ‘Un négociant néerlandais condamné à indemniser les victimes de Saddam Hussein’ (LM24.04), ‘Gaz moutarde, sarin ou VX: des armes chimiques interdites’ (LM01.05).

<sup>248</sup> ‘Claims that Syria has used sarin gas should be treated with caution’ (G25.04a).

<sup>249</sup> e.g. ‘Istanbul park protests sow the seeds of a Turkish spring’ (G31.05a), ‘The view from Taksim Square: why is Turkey now in turmoil?’ (03.06e), ‘Turquie et Etats-Unis resserrent leurs liens’ (LM14.05b), ‘Turquie: un “effet ricochet” des tensions politiques sur l’économie?’ (LM06.06a), ‘Le miracle du Bosphore attendra’ (LM26.06).

<sup>250</sup> ‘Qatar’s emir Sheikh Hamad to hand power to son, crown prince Tamim’ (G24.06).

<sup>251</sup> e.g. ‘Egypt: global outcry steps up pressure on US to suspend aid to military’ (G15.08a), ‘Egypte: comment Mohamed Morsi a perdu le pouvoir’ (LM04.07a), ‘Le coup de force en Egypte provoque une onde de choc dans toute la région’ (LM05.07), ‘Réactions internationales mesurées après les tirs de l’armée égyptienne’ (LM08.07c).

region, a number of articles addressed/referred to aspects of *Iran-U.K.* and *Iran-U.S.* relations beyond the nuclear issue. The former ranges from historical allusions to key (mostly conflict-laden) events in British-Iranian relations outlined in Chapter Two i.e. the British-backed coup in Iran (1953); the siege of the Iranian embassy in London (1980); the British Museum's loan of the Cyrus Cylinder (2010); and storming of the British embassy in Tehran (2011) in *Guardian* as well as 'soft' news i.e. Iranian media's coverage of the British royal baby, with "Tehran's take on the event" reported as "somewhat different from that of the rest of the world's media", portraying Iran as an abnormal state, to more alarmist items in *Le Monde* about London's arms exports to "sensitive countries", namely Iran and Syria<sup>252</sup>. The latter, likewise, entails historical references i.e. the Iran-Contra affair, cited mostly in the context of the aforesaid NSA scandal, the U.S. shutdown of an Iranian passenger flight (1988), and limited articles/remarks about the US-Iran conflict over divergent interests in the Middle East or their ongoing Claims Tribunal in the Hague<sup>253</sup>.

#### 6.2.1.6 Summary

While acknowledging the news values of timeliness and conflict – which in Iran's case is with elite We-group nations – and its (real, potential) relevance to, and impact on, Us and Our allies, the three outlets' Iran-related stories in the international category, both in terms of volume and substance, along with prevalent side-note remarks highlight the nuclear crisis or other bones of contention with the West/partners, Tehran's destructive activity abroad and ties to (other) illiberal/adversarial states (of concern) or extremist groups. As such, Iran is during the studied period consistently tethered to negativizing topics involving war/violence, (regional, international) conflicts/crises, terror(ism) and extremism, hostility and enmity, and therewith projected as a geopolitical hotspot/conundrum (*Iran's threat to global peace and regional security*). This framework within which news is predominantly selected and reported about Iran's international (mis)conduct is largely premised upon longstanding discourses about Iran and a preconceived 'peaceful Us versus hostile Them' polarization, echoing Western elite narratives, which sustains and further reinforces the prevailing image of an inherently hostile and unreliable actor. While all three media (re)construct and

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<sup>252</sup> 'Drones on the doorstep' (G28.04b), 'Where are they now? Five female faces who disappeared from our screens' (G15.05b), 'British Museum has best spring ever' (G25.06c), 'Prince of Cambridge's parents present him to the world at first photocall' (G24.07b), 'Royal baby: how the rest of the world covered the story' (G26.07a), 'Le Royaume-Uni vend du matériel militaire à la Syrie et à l'Iran' (LM17.07b), 'Londres cesse de livrer des équipements militaires à l'Égypte' (LM19.07c).

<sup>253</sup> e.g. 'Robert Redford on America: 'Certain things have got lost' (G22.05c), 'Domestic dissent can change US foreign policy for the better' (G17.06d), 'The US must not bear silent witness to another crackdown in Bahrain' (G12.08b), 'If Obama wanted an 'open debate' on NSA spying, why thwart one for so long?' (G13.08), 'Le spectre des robots tueurs' (LM18.06c), 'Fall Snowden und die US-Medien: Gleichschritt der Mitläufer' (SPON15.07a), USA gegen Iran in Den Haag: Das Milliarden-Dollar-Tribunal' (SPON12.08).

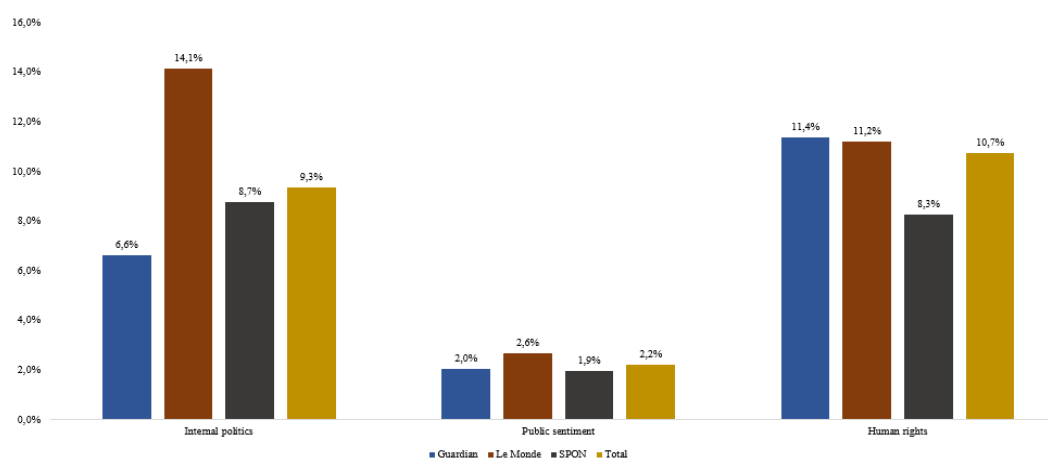
perpetuate this in- and outgroup construction in accord with the Ideological Square through macro-strategies of positive Self and, as Chapter Seven shows, especially negative Other presentations in their reporting of contentious areas between the ‘international community’ and the isolated (outcast/outlaw) Islamic Republic, the examined British and French news sites adopt a more balanced approach: Unlike *SPON*, whose Iran coverage relied heavily upon current events and official views of the West/allies (especially the U.S. and Israel), drawing on an essentialized Friend-Enemy scheme, *Guardian* and *Le Monde* provided in-depth and analytical pieces in addition to a wider range of views through expert interviews, hosted debates, and opinion pieces/commentaries. This is evident in the two legacy media’s attempt to offer a more nuanced assessment of: Iran’s foreign/nuclear policies and strategic interests; reasons behind the nuclear standoff beyond oft-evoked tropes of Iranian ‘deceit’ and ‘intransigence’; the legitimacy and human costs of punitive sanctions; Iran’s regional friends and foes while, unlike *SPON*, incorporating relevant background information and diverse perspectives to avoid “the reduction in complexity in the coverage of conflict abroad” (Poole, 2020, p.476); and the controversy surrounding the Iran-al-Qaida link that should be situated within an ongoing discourse, especially in Washington<sup>254</sup>, bearing resemblance to claims about the alleged alliance between Saddam’s Iraq and al-Qaida, one of the main reasons “employed to support the standpoint ‘we should go to war’” almost two decades ago (Richardson, 2007, pp.188-9). *Guardian*, moreover, occasionally challenges mainstream Western discourses on Iran (Chapter Two, section 2.6) or dominant perceptions and clichés about its foreign policy, namely reviving Persian imperialism, aggressive quest for exporting the revolution and ideological expansionism and/or its ruling elite’s zealotry (see Perthes, 2010, p.96) in its blogs, columns, and op-eds. This includes evoking Iran’s rights and concerns as a ‘normal’ state actor and the security threat posed by U.S./allies; contesting the Western-led international status quo i.e. British/American Middle East policy and the West’s “differential treatment” (Siegel & Barforoush, 2013, p.20) towards allied states; providing politico-historical context to Iran-West relations and the impact of foreign interference – real or imagined – and geopolitical dynamics i.e. U.S. invasions of neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq on Iran’s nuclear policy and regional activity; and, finally, criticizing what Shohat and Stam (2014) label ‘Eurocentric *ethics*’ that is “nonreciprocal”, as “it demands of others what it does not itself perform. It places the West as moral arbiter, preaching nuclear nonproliferation [...] and other values that the West has practiced intermittently at best” (p.364, italics in original).

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<sup>254</sup> For a more recent account, see Hirsch (2019).

Besides the above-stated representational continuities that primarily depict Iran as a shared problem or common threat (nuclear or otherwise), a discursive shift, similar to that expressed by the elite and observers in the West at the time, was noted after Rouhani’s unexpected win in all three media. With Rouhani’s election widely considered as offering a glimmer of hope and heralding a moderate Iran, the news sites’ (mostly) favorable post-election coverage entails, as the next chapter elaborates, a shift away from the predominantly essentializing ‘rational Us vs. irrational Them’ dichotomy to depicting a more rational, albeit (still) untrustworthy, Other.

## 6.2.2 Domestic affairs



**Figure 6.5 Breakdown of total articles per news site in the ‘domestic affairs’ category (%)**

In the domestic affairs category, human rights yielded 117 items, that is, nearly 11% of total articles (Figure 6.5), more than half of which was published in *Guardian* (N=62), followed by 38 and 17 items in *Le Monde* and *SPON* respectively. Iranian politics came second with 102 pieces – to wit, over 9% of total articles – 48 of which were published in the French website, followed, successively, by 36 and 18 pieces in British and German outlets. Public sentiment came third with 24 items (2% of total articles), almost half of which was published in *Guardian*, followed closely by *Le Monde* and just 4 stories in *SPON*. The 243 items subsumed under this category included 185 Iran stories and 58 side-note items, with the latter mainly involving human rights issues/abuses and referring (mostly in passing) to Iran, singled out or listed alongside others, to exemplify repressive regimes, 38 of which were published in *Guardian*.

### 6.2.2.1 Internal politics

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Internal politics	35	36	48	48	18	18	101	102
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	22.7%	6.6%	26.8%	14.1%	21.6%	8.7%	24.2%	9.3%

**Table 6.6 Breakdown of articles in the ‘internal politics’ sub-category**

This cluster contains news, analysis, and opinion articles on Iran’s presidential election i.e. the candidates’ profiles, presidential debates, and outcome. As Table 6.6 indicates, domestic politics and election-related coverage constituted nearly a quarter of all Iran-related articles (N=101) published during this time, with *Le Monde* accounting for almost half. Much like the socio-political environment surrounding the event itself, *the specter of 2009 unrest* hovered over the three media’s election coverage, with Ahmadinejad’s widely suspected fraudulent re-election, the fate of Green Movement leaders Mousavi and Karroubi placed under indefinite house arrest<sup>255</sup>, and the brutal post-election crackdown regularly evoked to serve as context or to predict Iran’s political direction. In addition to the burden of this immediate history, which all three media depicted as an indication of Islamic Republic’s growing vulnerability and legitimacy crisis, amid mounting tensions between Tehran and the West over Syria and the nuclear file, the news sites (as stated earlier) reported this high-stakes event and its domestic outlook in conjunction with its wider implications for Iran’s nuclear and regional policies. In other words, the three media’s pre-election coverage encompassed two parallel discourses: *fear of worsening oppression at home* and *escalating confrontation abroad*. In this vein, the last-minute entry of ex-president Rafsanjani, backed by reformists and amid a rift with the Supreme Leader, into what would otherwise have been a lackluster presidential race, and his subsequent disqualification yielded news and analysis, particularly in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*<sup>256</sup>. The decision of the watchdog Guardian Council to

<sup>255</sup> One side-note item in *Guardian* also refers to this: ‘A glimpse into Guantánamo Bay’s library’ (G03.05b).

<sup>256</sup> e.g. ‘Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani appears to rule out candidacy for Iranian election’ (G17.04b), ‘Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to stand in Iran presidential election’ (G11.05), ‘Iran prepares for high-stakes presidential election’ (G13.05b), ‘Iran’s presidential elections thrown into doubt by last-minute entries’ (G14.05a), ‘Iran election: Rafsanjani defends decision to stand as his “national duty”’ (G16.05b), ‘Iran election: Rafsanjani blocked from running for president’ (G21.05a), ‘Iran elections: Khomeini daughter attacks Rafsanjani exclusion’ (G22.05d), ‘Présidentielle iranienne: Rafsanjani et Mashaie s’inscrivent in extremis avant la clôture’ (LM11.05b), ‘M. Rafsanjani entre en lice pour l’élection présidentielle iranienne’ (LM13.05a), ‘Iran: l’ancien président Rafsanjani disqualifié pour la présidentielle’ (LM21.05b), ‘Présidentielle en Iran: M. Rafsanjani condamné à rester dans les coulisses’ (LM22.05d), ‘La famille de l’imam Khomeyni critique la disqualification de M. Rafsanjani’ (LM23.05b), ‘Le pouvoir iranien durement critiqué pour son “ignorance” par M. Rafsanjani’ (LM25.05a), ‘Präsidentenwahl in Iran: Der Pistazienkönig fordert Chameneis Getreue heraus’ (SPON11.05c), ‘Entscheidung des Wächterrats: Rafsandschani darf nicht zur Iran-Wahl antreten’ (SPON21.05b).



have one of Islamic Republic's founding fathers barred from poll was considered in a *Guardian* editorial as tantamount to a *fait accompli* foreboding the path paved in favor of the widely presumed front-runner; a staunch anti-West Principlist and the Leader's "anointed" candidate<sup>257</sup>. "In the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran", *Le Monde* despondently editorialized, Rafsanjani's sidelining "will remain a milestone: on this day, [Iran] became a dictatorial regime like others – monolithic. One clan seeks to single-handedly retain all power. This is bad news, notably for the future of the nuclear dossier"<sup>258</sup>. Accordingly, several news and analysis pieces in *Le Monde* referred, thenceforth, to the (s)election as "engineered" ("*verrouillée*") whilst considering the Supreme Leader the country's ultimate 'winner'<sup>259</sup>. Against this ominous observation, the first-round victory of Rouhani took the examined media by surprise, juxtaposed with a sense of relief. The centrist cleric, whose profile had hitherto received less attention besides scant remarks – excluding few *Guardian* pieces on his track record in the Islamic Republic and his nuclear negotiating credentials<sup>260</sup> – compared with (legacy of) Ahmadinejad or his hardline opponents alongside the prospective directions of their domestic and, to a greater extent, foreign policy<sup>261</sup>, came into spotlight after securing endorsement from pro-reform and opposition figures inside the country<sup>262</sup>. Following the election of Rouhani, whose campaign platform of 'prudence, moderation, and hope' stood in stark contrast to his predecessor's belligerent stance, *Guardian* declared that Iran was "on the brink of an extraordinary political transformation"<sup>263</sup>, describing Rouhani's victory as "a welcome surprise for many reformists, who are desperate to break back into

<sup>257</sup> 'Iran's presidential election: clearing the path' (G21.05b).

<sup>258</sup> 'Iran: de la République islamique à la dictature d'un clan' (LM23.05c).

<sup>259</sup> 'En Iran, le Guide verrouille l'élection présidentielle' (LM22.05e), 'Iran: comment organiser une présidentielle sans surprise' (LM22.05f), 'Iran: entre les mains du Guide' (LM11.06b), 'Iran: un scrutin verrouillé par le Guide suprême' (LM12.06b).

<sup>260</sup> e.g. 'Could former nuclear negotiator help bring Iran in from the cold?' (G24.04b), 'Hassan Rowhani: lone cleric injects life into the race for Iran's presidency' (G07.06a).

<sup>261</sup> e.g. 'Ahmadinejad's ally could pose new challenge to Iran's ruling clergy' (G23.04f), 'Who's afraid of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?' (G01.05c), 'Iran's electoral elegance: the style evolution of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad' (G07.05d), 'Iranian elections: economy still centre stage as candidates rehash old themes' (G08.05), 'Iran in a flutter over Ghalibaf and yellow as a campaign colour' (G09.05b), 'Iran's president faces sanctions over breaking election rules' (G12.05a), 'Iran's election contenders' (G13.05c), 'Iran election: why Tehran mayor's popularity may harm his chances' (G29.05b), 'Iran's Saeed Jalili: anointed successor or convenient bogeyman?' (G12.06b), 'Iran: le président sortant et son dauphin maudit font campagne' (LM16.04a), 'Iran: la critique virulente du bilan économique d'Ahmadinejad à la télévision nationale' (LM18.04b), 'Les pasdarans, une milice au coeur du régime' (LM11.05c), 'Présidentielle en Iran: le dauphin de M. Ahmadinejad éliminé par le clergé' (LM22.05g), 'Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, la chute d'un illuminé' (LM13.06c), 'Iran: Wächterrat will Ahmadinedschad vor Gericht stellen' (SPON13.05b), 'Wahlkampf in Iran: Der Twitter-Hardliner' (SPON17.05a), 'Wahlkampf in Iran: Der Hipster unter den Hardlinern' (SPON26.05). 'Iran Scharfmacher: Ahmadinedschad zum Schlichter ernannt' (SPON05.08a).

<sup>262</sup> e.g. 'Iran elections: former presidents endorse moderate Hassan Rouhani' (G11.06c), 'Hassan Rohani, le religieux modéré choisi par les réformateurs' (LM12.06c), 'Präsidentenschaftswahl in Iran: Kandidat Rouhani lässt die Reformer hoffen' (SPON11.06a).

<sup>263</sup> 'Iran: Hassan Rouhani wins presidential election' (G15.06e).

mainstream Iranian politics after eight years of Ahmadinejad’s hardline presidency”<sup>264</sup> and characterizing the president-elect as an “‘ultimate insider’ who holds key to a more moderate Iran”<sup>265</sup>. The British website also renamed its Iran-specific blog – ‘Iran blog’ by then-staff journalist Saeed Kamali Dehghan – shortly after Rouhani’s win by removing the sub-head ‘inside the crisis’ (added in 2009) altogether. Similarly, *Le Monde* announced the victory of “moderate Hassan Rouhani”<sup>266</sup> whose election “signifies, above all, a room to breathe more easily for the middle class”<sup>267</sup>, and proclaimed the president-elect “a ‘sheikh of hope’ and an establishment figure”<sup>268</sup> – the former being in line with the epithets given by Iranian press – and as someone who is “adept, tenacious, and holds inside knowledge of the regime’s security apparatus”<sup>269</sup>. Likewise, Rouhani’s lead in initial results was announced in *SPON* as “gute Nachrichten für Irans Liberale”<sup>270</sup> and “der moderateste Kandidat” was declared after his win as “Hoffnungsträger derer, die sich eine offenerere Atmosphäre wünschen”<sup>271</sup>. While cautiously welcoming the results, the three media pointed out Rouhani’s restricted power, referring to the Supreme Leader’s role and the hard-liners’ grip on Iranian politics<sup>272</sup>.

The election also provided an occasion for the three media to offer more insight into Iran’s complex political system beyond such labels as ‘Islamic/Iranian regime’ (all three websites) or value-laden clichéd terms i.e. ‘Mullahs/Mullah regime’ which were more common in *Le Monde* and *SPON*’s reporting and appeared in several op-eds in *Guardian*. Besides referring, as additional/background information, to the vetting process of Guardian Council – a body composed of six clergymen and six jurists – and Iranian constitution, *SPON* focused on *the nature of elections* in Iran and the role of Ayatollah Khamenei in domestic and foreign affairs<sup>273</sup> as well as *systematic corruption*: the former includes a *Spiegel* essay on the Supreme Leader that branded the election “nicht die erste Lüge des Regimes” and “eine Scheindemokratie”, concluding that “Manipulation und Lüge gehören zum politischen Geschäft. Überall. Doch ein System, das keine abweichende Meinung zulässt, wird gemeinhin Diktatur genannt – und eine Wahl, die keine ist, Camouflage”<sup>274</sup>; occasional references to presidential elections as “das einzige halbwegs demokratische Element in der

<sup>264</sup> ‘Iranian cleric Hassan Rouhani elected as president’ (G15.06f).

<sup>265</sup> ‘Hassan Rouhani, “ultimate insider” who holds key to a more moderate Iran’ (G20.06c).

<sup>266</sup> ‘Le modéré Hassan Rohani remporte la présidentielle en Iran’ (LM15.06c).

<sup>267</sup> ‘Iran: un réformateur au pouvoir’ (LM15.06d).

<sup>268</sup> ‘Rohani: la presse iranienne salue un "cheikh de l'espoir" et un homme d'appareil’ (LM16.06a).

<sup>269</sup> ‘Le chat persan est retombé sur ses pattes’ (LM19.06).

<sup>270</sup> ‘Vorsprung für Rohani: Wahl der Hoffnung für Irans Liberale’ (SPON15.06b).

<sup>271</sup> ‘Neuer Regierungschef: Gemäßigter Rohani gewinnt Irans Präsidentenwahl’ (SPON15.06c).

<sup>272</sup> e.g. ‘Iran’s parliament approves 15 of Hassan Rouhani’s 18 cabinet ministers’ (G15.08b), ‘Le nouveau président iranien reçoit ses premières menaces des ultra-conservateurs’ (LM01.08b), ‘Iran: des futurs ministres modérés attaqués par les conservateurs’ (LM06.08c), ‘Le Parlement iranien approuve la majorité du gouvernement Rohani’ (LM15.08), ‘Irans neuer Präsident: Rohanis begrenzte Macht’ (SPON17.06b).

<sup>273</sup> e.g. ‘Iran-Abstimmung: Wahlkampf-Tipps vom Ajatollah’ (SPON25.04).

<sup>274</sup> ‘Die Angst des Ajatollah’ (Der Spiegel 23/2013).

Islamischen Republik”<sup>275</sup>; and citing U.S. concerns over the fairness or transparency of Iranian elections<sup>276</sup>. The latter involves an article on the Supreme Leader’s billion-dollar conglomerate in which the author argued that in “vielen autoritären Regimen”, namely (Muslim-majority) Iran, Syria, and Tunisia, “Korruption gehört zum System”<sup>277</sup>. The article’s headline, it should be added, that labelled Khamenei ‘Bling-Bling-Ajatollah’ is consistent with the stylistic choice adopted by *SPON* to characterize *some* Iranian political figures (e.g. ‘Twitter-Hardliner’, ‘Hipster unter den Hardlinern’, ‘Pistazienkönig’), which can either be interpreted as part of the German outlet’s specific reporting style and colloquial language (Schäffner, 2005, p.161) with the intention to report serious, political content in a humorous or more light tone/manner and its tendency towards infotainment (Bönisch, 2004) or, rather, as a derogatory and de-legitimizing strategy. By comparison, both *Le Monde* and *Guardian* examined Iran’s political system in greater depth. Complementing news and analysis pieces by guest writers or staff such as French-Iranian journalist and Iran correspondent Ghazal Golshiri and Christophe Ayad, *Le Monde*’s specialist on Iran and the Arab World, the French website’s Iran-specific blog called ‘Iran news’ (*Nouvelles d’Iran*) – by Iranian journalist Parisa Keyhani and editorial controlled<sup>278</sup> – provides regular ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news about Iranian politics and society that are sometimes incorporated via hyperlinks into the staff’s texts. Announcing the launch of the ‘Iran news’ blog on its front page in January 2012, *Le Monde* stated: “Parisa Keyhani’s blog offers a glimpse of a country beyond news headlines. It offers a decryption of local political life, debates, and conflicts at the heart of its political class using Iranian media and unofficial sources”<sup>279</sup>. In addition to these and other items that sought to provide a more nuanced picture of *conflict and power inside Iran* beyond the simplistic reformists-versus-conservatives paradigm<sup>280</sup>, *Le Monde* attended in particular to the ‘Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist’ (ولایت فقیهه) doctrine and the hybrid nature of Iran’s political system that blends republican and theocratic elements deriving from Islamic Republic’s attempt to fuse divine and popular sovereignties<sup>281</sup>. The French outlet’s comparatively greater focus on *Islam’s position in Iranian polity and society* – in addition to

<sup>275</sup> e.g. ‘Ahmadinedschad-Nachfolge: Hunderte Iraner wollen Präsident werden’ (SPON16.05).

<sup>276</sup> ‘Präsidentenwahl in Iran: Moderater Kandidat Rohani führt mit großem Vorsprung’ (SPON15.06d).

<sup>277</sup> ‘Korruption in Iran: Der Bling-Bling-Ajatollah’ (SPON13.05c).

<sup>278</sup> *Le Monde* (2012). ‘A ne pas manquer sur le Monde.fr’ [Not to be missed on Monde.fr]. Retrieved from: [https://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2012/01/25/a-ne-pas-manquer-sur-le-monde-fr\\_1634278\\_3208.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/a-la-une/article/2012/01/25/a-ne-pas-manquer-sur-le-monde-fr_1634278_3208.html)

<sup>279</sup> e.g. ‘Présidentielle iranienne: la critique du pouvoir passe par la télévision nationale’ (LM30.05d), ‘Iran: le débat présidentiel s’est transformé en questions pour un champion’ (LM01.06), ‘En Iran, la question nucléaire met le feu au débat électoral’ (LM10.06).

<sup>280</sup> e.g. ‘Ceux qui défient le pouvoir en Iran’ (LM06.06b), ‘En Iran, la présidentielle expose les divisions dans le camp conservateur’ (LM13.06b).

<sup>281</sup> e.g. ‘République islamique ou régime islamique autoritaire: deux conceptions s’affrontent’ (LM06.06c), ‘Iran: la présidentielle sous contrôle’ (LM09.06b), ‘Iran: une théocratie de moins en moins religieuse’ (LM11.06c).

the trajectory of political Islam in Iran and its wider regional implications discussed in preceding sections – can be ascribed to the generally strong attention devoted by media in France to what De Cock and Du Pont (2016) term ‘external Islam’ which, according to the authors, is both linked to the principle of French secularism (*laïcité*) and France’s own colonial past (pp.118-20). Attaching importance to Iran’s elections<sup>282</sup>, *Guardian* items, ranging from news reports and commentary pieces by regular staff and guest writers to ‘Iran blog’ posts and Tehran Bureau (Chapter Three, section 3.1.1.5) contributions sought likewise to represent *intricacies of Iran’s political system*. This includes news pieces which, citing international human rights NGOs, mentioned the “authoritarian nature of those who hold power in Tehran”<sup>283</sup>; guest writers who opined that the 2013 election presented the ruling establishment with a “dilemma”, whereby it sought to both secure its survival and (re)gain popular legitimacy<sup>284</sup>; editorials that pointed out: “However far elections in Iran fail the basic test of being free and fair, they are not, paradoxically foregone conclusions”<sup>285</sup>; and guest posts contesting the conventional wisdom that the Supreme Leader holds absolute power in Iran or that he had engineered the 2013 election<sup>286</sup>.

#### 6.2.2.2 Public sentiment

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Public sentiment	11	11	9	9	4	4	24	24
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	7.1%	2%	5%	2.6%	4.8%	1.9%	5.7%	2.2%

**Table 6.7 Breakdown of articles in ‘public sentiment’ sub-category**

Besides Iranian politics, the three websites reported to a lesser degree about Iranian society and public sentiment inside Iran in the weeks leading up to and following the election, with *Guardian* devoting more space (7% of its Iran stories) than others (Table 6.7). Accordingly, the overriding themes of *distress, defiance, and cautious hope* unify these items during the studied period. In addition to regular stories about Iran in its ‘World news’, ‘Politics’ and other sections, Kamali Dehghan’s Iran blog, and Niknejad’s Tehran Bureau, *Guardian* invited (Iran-based) readers prior to the election to (anonymously) submit their photos, videos or texts via its then-newly launched GuardianWitness – the website’s UGC section

<sup>282</sup> ‘Iranian presidential elections 2013: the essential guide’ (G13.05d).

<sup>283</sup> e.g. ‘Iran presidential election: second round forecast after late flurry at polls’ (G14.06c).

<sup>284</sup> ‘Iran elections: there’s room for surprise, but the system will win out’ (G14.06d).

<sup>285</sup> ‘Iran: vote early, and vote often’(G12.06c).

<sup>286</sup> ‘Iran: how ‘Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s candidate’ lost the election’ (G04.07c).

that closed in 2018 – to be used in staff articles and provide “as many different perspectives on the country as possible”<sup>287</sup>. Through first-person narrative and/or reflecting man-on-the-street viewpoints, several Tehran Bureau posts emphasized the *shared senses of fear, pessimism, and apathy* across diverse socio-economic strata of Iranian society, with popular grievances ascribed to the 2009 disputed election and its violent aftermath, the crippling economy due to sanctions coupled with internal corruption/mismanagement, and Ahmadinejad’s tumultuous eight-year presidency. Despite a visible attempt to incorporate a variety of local voices in terms of age, gender, education, political views, and city of residence, these and other stories by *Guardian*’s staff or guest writers, with exceptions<sup>288</sup>, foregrounded anti-government/anti-regime sentiments of mostly young ‘progressive’ urbanites along with their disillusionment and democratic aspirations<sup>289</sup>.

Following Rouhani’s victory, a sense of *cautious optimism amongst Iranians* – similar to that of the elite and observers in the West – was pronounced in some articles<sup>290</sup>, excluding a Tehran Bureau opinion piece in which the author lambasted post-election celebrations in Iran, considering him/herself as part of a “minority who had not voted because they do not believe in gradual reform within a militaristic theocracy, and because they are unwilling to trade the long-term interests of the Iranian people for skin-deep change”<sup>291</sup>. While pre-election skepticism, with Iranian youth oscillating between the choices to stay or leave the country, and post-election optimism were also accentuated in *Le Monde*’s blogposts and reports by regular staff and/or on-the-scene correspondents<sup>292</sup>, few articles, namely an updated piece from 2009 and a feature on the clergy in Qom (center of Iran’s Shia scholarship) focused, with marked distancing, on other segments of Iranian society<sup>293</sup> that are usually absent from Western media reporting: “Die Anhänger und Anhängerinnen des Regimes erscheinen nur als gesichtlose Masse” (Wiedemann, 2018, p.57). In addition, pre-election protests with the crowd chanting “Death to Dictator” (the Supreme Leader) and

<sup>287</sup> Kamali Dehghan, S. (2013). ‘Iran: your stories’. 21 May. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/21/iran-elections-your-stories-video>

<sup>288</sup> ‘Vote for Ahmadinejad’s successor divides weary Iranians’ (G17.05a), ‘Iran after Ahmadinejad: rising inequality and crippling sanctions’ (G18.06c).

<sup>289</sup> ‘Iranian elections: “Opposition? There is no such word here”’ (G20.05d), ‘Iran elections: “I don’t know if I will vote or not”’ (G11.06d), ‘To vote or not to vote? Iranians wary after revolts and uprisings turn sour’ (G12.06d), ‘Iran elections: “wherever Rouhani speaks there’s a frenzy”’ (G13.06b), ‘Iranians go to polls after spirited end to presidential campaign’ (G14.06e).

<sup>290</sup> ‘Iranians vote for change, however gradual’ (G16.06c), ‘Iranians express cautious optimism after Hassan Rouhani’s victory’ (G18.06d), ‘Small signs of change in Iran as Hassan Rouhani’s inauguration approaches’ (G26.07b).

<sup>291</sup> “Celebrating Rouhani’s victory in Iran makes a mockery of green movement” (G12.07b).

<sup>292</sup> ‘En Iran, du dilemme du départ au choix du retour’ (LM30.04), ‘Les derniers feux de la campagne sont numériques’ (LM13.06d), ‘Après une campagne verrouillée, les Iraniens se sont rendus nombreux aux urnes’ (LM14.06b), ‘L’Iran se réveille’ (LM16.06b), ‘Iran: “Ali Khamenei a enfin compris qu’il faut nous écouter”’ (LM17.06d).

<sup>293</sup> ‘Deux foules déterminées se font face dans les rues et sur les places de Téhéran’ (LM07.06e), ‘Vingt-quatre heures chez les mollahs’ (LM15.06e).

“Free Mousavi and Karoubi” – highly reminiscent of 2009 – were reported in *Le Monde* and *SPON*<sup>294</sup> in order, perhaps, to indicate the Green Movement’s endurance or prepare for the unexpected that lies ahead. Similarly, post-victory celebrations on the streets of Tehran and other cities, following the qualification of Iran’s national football team for the World Cup, was reported in *Le Monde*’s Iran blog, highlighting political slogans chanted in solidarity with Green Movement leaders<sup>295</sup>. Other *SPON* items include two guest posts on the use of humor amongst Iranians as a means to defy clerical leaders in the absence of free speech and a general sense of hopelessness amongst Tehrani youth in addition to one article by *SPON*’s journalist, who regularly writes about Iran, on Rouhani’s victory and the parallel surge of hope, according to interviewed observers, inside Iran and in the West<sup>296</sup>.

### 6.2.2.3 Human Rights

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Human rights	25	62	26	38	9	17	60	117
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	16.2%	11.4%	14.5%	11.2%	10.8%	8.3%	14.4%	10.7%

**Table 6.8 Breakdown of articles in the ‘human rights’ sub-category**

This category contains abundant items that attended (or referred) to human rights in Iran, with a strong focus on *freedom of expression/belief and the right to dissent*. Constituting more than 16% of *Guardian*’s Iran-related stories, followed by over 14% and nearly 11% of those respectively in *Le Monde* and *SPON*, human rights issues/abuses were foregrounded in more than 14% of total articles about Iran (N=60) and mentioned in 57 side-note items, 37 of which were published in *Guardian* (Table 6.8). Included were pieces on *web censorship/monitoring*, i.e. news in *SPON* that U.S.-made web surveillance devices that can be (mis)used to filter websites and monitor journalists/dissidents were detected in Syria, Iran, and Sudan; that is, in countries “in denen die Geräte gar nicht stehen dürften”<sup>297</sup> as well as articles which, consistent with the Reporters Without Borders’ list (released in March), lumped Iran with ‘equally oppressive regimes’ i.e. China, Russia, and North Korea or (less

<sup>294</sup> ‘Les obsèques de l’ayatollah Taheri tournent à la contestation’ (LM08.06), ‘Trauerfeier in Isfahan: Zehntausende Iraner demonstrieren gegen das Regime’ (SPON05.06).

<sup>295</sup> ‘Les Iraniens fêtent la qualification au Mondial de football’ (LM18.06d).

<sup>296</sup> ‘Iranischer Wahlkampfspott: Und happs, weg ist der Ajatollah’ (SPON12.06a), ‘Jugend in Iran: Es gibt keine dunklere Farbe als Schwarz’ (SPON14.08), ‘Rohanis Triumph: Iraner bejubeln ihren neuen Präsidenten’ (SPON16.06b).

<sup>297</sup> ‘Netzwerkausrüster BlueCoat: Iran und Sudan filtern und schnüffeln mit US-Technik’ (SPON10.07).

commonly) ‘other Islamic countries’ as *archetypal enemies of Internet*<sup>298</sup>. In this vein, while considering the possibility that Iran’s so-called ‘halal Internet’ project (announced in 2011) “is merely a hoax”, the plan, if enacted, was in an article published in *Guardian*’s technology section, foreboded to “surpass the ‘great firewall of China’ as the single most extreme version of information censorship in history”<sup>299</sup>. Closely related is *press freedom*, encompassing news pieces (mostly *Guardian*) that reported or mentioned detention/ill-treatment of local or foreign journalists<sup>300</sup> as well as side-note remarks that named Iran among *top liberticides worldwide*, especially in coverage of the Gezi Park protests and the subsequent unrest during the summer of 2013 in Turkey, a country “with an even worse record than China or Iran for jailing journalists”<sup>301</sup>. “The protests”, *Guardian*’s Europe editor wrote, “come at an awkward time for the US which is trying to convince the international community that governments in Syria and Iran do not respect the rights of their citizens while the Turkish-backed rebels in Syria represent a more democratic alternative”<sup>302</sup>. The notorious modesty-related censorship on Iranian state TV was also reported in both *Le Monde*<sup>303</sup> and *Guardian* and *Le Monde*<sup>304</sup>.

*Artistic freedom* was another recurrent theme, referring to existing threats to creative freedom in (places such as) Iran or the specific challenges facing (mostly prominent) artists residing in Iran or forced into exile<sup>305</sup>. These news, interviews, and human-interest stories, more prevalent in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, especially during the film festivals held in France i.e. Cannes and Cinema(s) d’Iran, depicted Iranian artists as victims of state repression, resistant in face of red lines and other obstacles – also ascribed, on rare occasions, to

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<sup>298</sup> e.g. ‘Edward Snowden’s not the story. The fate of the internet is’ (G28.07a), ‘Pirate Bay launches own PirateBrowser to evade ISP filesharing blocks’ (G12.08c), ‘La police japonaise recommande le blocage du réseau TOR’ (LM23.04b), ‘Les microblogs, nouveau “champ de bataille” pour l’armée chinoise’ (LM11.06d), ‘Tor-Router zum Selberbauen: Internet-Tarnkappe für 65 Euro’ (SPON02.07), ‘Angriff auf Anonymisierungsdienst: Schadsoftware enttarnt angeblich Tor-Nutzer’ (SPON05.08b).

<sup>299</sup> ‘Web censorship: the net is closing in’ (G23.04g).

<sup>300</sup> e.g. ‘Iranian website editor arrested’ (G07.05e), ‘John Oliver: a very British coup’ (G07.06b), ‘Jon Stewart makes surprise appearance on Egyptian chat show’ (G22.06a), ‘BBC global news audience grows to record 256m’ (G25.06d), ‘Iranian journalist held in solitary’ (G24.07c), ‘NSA-Affäre: “Bild” erhöht Risiko für Entführungsoffer’ (SPON13.08b).

<sup>301</sup> e.g. ‘Turkish protesters could temper hubris of an increasingly imperious Erdogan’ (G03.06f), ‘La liberté de la presse toujours en danger’(LM03.05b), ‘Guerre des clans au sommet de l’Etat turc’ (LM28.05c), ‘Kritik an Erdogan: Minister nennt Promi-Vorwürfe “Volksverhetzung”’(SPON27.07b). ‘PRESSEFREIHEIT: “Alle haben Angst”’ (Der Spiegel 24/2013).

<sup>302</sup> ‘Turkish protests: John Kerry voices concern over police use of force’ (G04.06c).

<sup>303</sup> The French site, it should be added, gave additional attention to Iran’s ‘televised schizophrenia’ [‘Schizophrenie télévisée’] in its visual Portfolio section.

<sup>304</sup> ‘Iranian hardliners apoplectic over Shakira Confederations cup shot’ (G03.07b), ‘CABARET - La robe de Shakira trouble les intégristes iraniens’ (LM04.07).

<sup>305</sup> e.g. ‘Atiq Rahimi: “In Iran just as well as in Afghanistan, in actual fact, words defy tyranny”’ (G22.05e), ‘Jafar Panahi defies ban to appear at film festival via Skype’ (G04.07d), ‘Iran listens for Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, the lost voice of Ramadan’ (G10.07c), ‘Mana Neyestani en quatre dates’ (LM26.04d), ‘Fini de rire’ (LM04.05), ‘Les veilleurs du 7e art’ (LM17.05b), ‘100 000 Dollar für meinen Kopf’ (Der Spiegel 19/2013a), ‘Ein Rest Gefahr bleibt’ (Der Spiegel 19/2013b).

sanctions<sup>306</sup> – and defiant forces against Iranian authorities<sup>307</sup>. Unlike these stories that placed emphasis upon top-down systematic suppression of Iranian artists, *Guardian* reported the controversy surrounding the visit by one of Iran’s (in)famous exiled directors to Israel – the first such by a well-known Iranian figure since 1979 – that sparked an outcry in Iran, not only from officials, but also from a “group of Iranian intellectuals, among them opposition figures” who “expressed regret that he had not joined a boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel”<sup>308</sup>. Moreover, while the three media’s human rights discourse regarding Iran revolved primarily around state-led restrictions on freedom of expression and dissent, therewith appealing to the readers’ empathy for the struggle and resilience of mostly dissident individuals, the complex relations between free speech and deep-seated religious/societal sensitivities were mentioned in few instances through a Eurocentric ‘West and the Rest’ bifurcation (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p.2): in other words, placing a homogenous ‘Muslim world’ against the secular ‘West’ (see Baker et al., 2013b). One such example is a *Guardian* piece on the Mohammed Cartoon Controversy that recalled the aftermath as follows: “Dozens were killed in weeks of protests that included violent attacks against Danish missions in Syria, Iran, Afghanistan and Lebanon. Tiny Denmark found itself on a collision course with the Muslim world – something [Danish Muslim leader] Akkari now regrets”<sup>309</sup>.

Several articles (mostly *Guardian* and *Le Monde*) addressed *women’s plight and resistance in Iran*, referring to the systematic misogyny and gender inequality<sup>310</sup> as well as young women’s initiatives to combat societal and/or state-imposed barriers by resorting to alternative sports i.e. parkour and martial arts<sup>311</sup>. These stories emphasized the link between the popularity of such activities and women’s empowerment against political and cultural barriers, as evident in a piece by *Guardian*’s dance critic, who described the flourishing parkour and underground dance scene amongst Iranian women as a “fast, free expressive form of movement that is both a symbolic and practical act of defiance against a culture

<sup>306</sup> e.g. ‘Asghar Farhadi: “Je veux vivre en Iran”’ (LM17.05c).

<sup>307</sup> ‘Iranian film-maker Mania Akbari: “Cinema threatens the government”’ (G15.07c), ‘A Cannes, Mohammad Rasoulof affronte directement la censure iranienne’ (LM25.05b), ‘Le cinéma iranien, un "bulldozer puissant”’ (LM27.06b), ‘Critiques persanes: il n’y a pas qu’à Paris qu’on se dispute autour du cinéma’ (LM27.06c), ‘A Téhéran, trois cinéastes qui ont choisi de rester racontent’ (LM27.06d), ‘Les artistes de Téhéran réclament la réouverture de la Maison du cinéma’ (LM19.07d), ‘Filmfestspiele von Cannes: Ein schlechtes Jahr für Kleintiere’ (SPON24.05).

<sup>308</sup> ‘Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf defends Israel visit after outcry’ (G16.07a).

<sup>309</sup> ‘Ahmad Akkari, Danish Muslim: I was wrong to damn Muhammad cartoons’ (G09.08c).

<sup>310</sup> ‘Twenty-first-century suffragettes: what would you fight for now?’ (G03.06g), ‘Iranian swimmer Elham Asghari: “My 20km record has been held hostage”’ (G05.07a), ‘La justice iranienne condamne un homme à être grimpé en femme et exhibé’ (LM22.04b), ‘Iran: un record de natation invalidé pour tenue "pas assez conforme à la charia”’ (LM02.07a), ‘En Iran: pas de maillot, pas de record’ (LM19.07e), ‘Rekordschwimmerin in Iran: Gegen die Strömung und das Regime’ (SPON06.07b).

<sup>311</sup> ‘Parkour life: Iranian women get physical’ (G10.06c), ‘YAMAKASI - Les Iraniennes se mettent au "parkour”’ (LM22.05i), ‘Iran: une championne de kung-fu au pays du puritanisme’ (LM14.06e).



where young women are regularly and aggressively harassed on the street”<sup>312</sup>. Besides such news values as identification (personalization, emotions) and consonance (expectedness, stereotype) (Schulz, 1982 cited in O’Neill & Harcup, 2020, p.217), the three outlets’ selection and subsequent treatment of these and other stories involving (mostly young and/or prominent) Iranian women inside Iran or in exile should be situated within: (1) an archetypal argumentative strategy commonly used by Western journalists that Richardson (2004) calls ‘the social threat of Muslim gender inequality’ (pp.89-93); and (2) a tendency in Western media to report about women in Muslim countries through the prism of confirmation bias, whereby stories mostly revolve “around the specific issue of women’s rights and gender discrimination at the expense of other topics” (Terman, 2017, p.490), whereas stories on women in non-Muslim societies cover a wider range of issues. Contrary to these stories, one post in *Guardian’s* ‘The women’s blog’ announced an online exhibition featuring interviews with “female Muslim leaders, such as Dr Shirin Ebadi from Iran, the first Muslim woman to win a Nobel peace prize” alongside others while stressing the necessity to consider the diversity of Muslim women worldwide<sup>313</sup>.

With the memory of the previous election and the ensuing turmoil casting, as stated earlier, an enormous shadow, all three sites regularly evoked *violent suppression of protests and dissent in 2009* in their coverage of Iran’s 2013 election – and elsewhere<sup>314</sup>. Besides referring routinely to the 2009 crackdown to provide context, some articles concentrated specifically on *the fate of Green Movement*, including news and features about renowned Iranian (female) human rights lawyers<sup>315</sup> and personal accounts depicting the life of political activists and journalists during “four years of struggle under the shadow of arrests, beatings and torture” inside Iran<sup>316</sup>, or their “new life” abroad<sup>317</sup>. In this vein, *Le Monde* republished an op-ed from 2009 by a French-Iranian sociologist, who opined at the time that “[t]he profound crisis that the Islamist state is facing shows the outrage of a society that aspires to free itself from the yoke of autocracy [...]. This crisis is the manifestation of a new civic identity. It is antithetical to a despotic state’s constitution under the aegis of Islam”, while predicting that “[t]he movement, even if repressed and weakened, will endure and the regime

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<sup>312</sup> ‘Freedom of movement: dancing Egypt’s revolution’ (G10.07d).

<sup>313</sup> ‘Muslima exhibition: interviews and art by Muslim women’ (G20.05e).

<sup>314</sup> e.g. ‘Internetting: a user’s guide #13 – A shoe that led to a revolution’ (G23.05d), ‘Iran elections: death of Neda Agha-Soltan haunts voters’ (G13.06d), ‘From Trafalgar to Taksim, the politics of the square puts the wind up power’ (G12.06e), ‘Europe must condemn Erdoğan, but without hubris or illusions’ (G12.06f), ‘Reaktionen im Nahen Osten: Ägyptens Nachbarn und ihre Heuchelei’ (SPON16.08b).

<sup>315</sup> ‘Le club des Nob(elles)’ (LM16.06c), ‘Iran: permission de sortie de quatre jours accordée à l’avocate Nasrin Sotoudeh’ (LM24.06b).

<sup>316</sup> ‘Green Movement activists live in fear as Iran’s presidential election nears’ (G17.05c).

<sup>317</sup> ‘Irans Exilanten: Das neue Leben der Grünen Bewegung’ (SPON14.06c).

will not escape unscathed”<sup>318</sup>. Few articles, it should be added, also alluded to rights abuses in pre-revolution Iran and the pro-West Shah’s brutality towards dissidents<sup>319</sup>. All three outlets, moreover, reported about *the government’s intensifying clampdown on the ground and online in the lead-up to the election*, namely internet filtering and “politically motivated” phishing attacks on Iranian Gmail users, widely perceived by the selected media as the state’s intention to, once again, “sway” the election<sup>320</sup>; a new wave of arrests targeting dissidents and pro-reform supporters<sup>321</sup>; and severe restrictions on (domestic and foreign) media coverage in addition to harassment of journalists and/or their families<sup>322</sup>. Pre-election crackdown was, on one hand, ascribed to the regime’s nervousness and concerns over any repeat of the 2009 unrest and, on the other hand, linked to Iran’s overall human rights record. Coinciding with the new wave of arrests/intimidations, *Guardian* launched a database of 870 prisoners of conscience – including activists, women rights’ campaigners, artists, students, and members of ethnic/religious minorities – “that catalogues the extent of repression by the Iranian authorities”<sup>323</sup>. Summarizing Amnesty International’s latest report on Iran, *SPON* highlighted the “[w]illkürliche Verhaftungen, unfaire Prozesse, Folter” against, above all, activists, trade unionists, and journalists, and labels the repression, quoting the NGO’s MENA director, “[e]inen skandalöser Versuch, Kritiker zum Schweigen zu bringen”<sup>324</sup>. Bearing in mind the previous election and its aftermath whilst anticipating a likely repeat of mass protests, *Le Monde* published, a fortnight before the election, a mini-guide provided by three Iranians for others inside the country to gain access to Facebook, banned since 2009<sup>325</sup>. Furthermore, in line with the discursive shift discussed earlier, the three media expressed *cautious hope for improvement in Iran’s human rights* after Rouhani’s win. While *SPON* expressed this optimism in conjunction with Iran’s foreign policy outlook, the other two websites allocated more space to evaluate the prospect of Rouhani’s election for civil and political rights in Iran. *Le Monde* announced a “semi-awakening” of Iranian civil society<sup>326</sup> and *Guardian* reported that the president-elect “has expressed relatively progressive views

<sup>318</sup> ‘La crise en Iran révèle la tumultueuse naissance d’une société libre, par Fährad Khosrokhavar’ (LM06.06d).

<sup>319</sup> e.g. ‘Isaac and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic by David Cauté – review’ (G20.06d), “‘En 1973, nous étions au moins aussi grognons qu’aujourd’hui” (LM28.07).

<sup>320</sup> ‘Iran accused of using online censorship and hacking to sway presidential poll’ (G31.05b), ‘Gmail accounts in Iran hacked, says Google’ (G13.06c), ‘Vols de mots de passe Google avant la présidentielle en Iran’ (LM13.06e), ‘Vor der Wahl: Massiver Angriff auf iranische Gmail-Nutzer’ (SPON13.06b).

<sup>321</sup> e.g. ‘Iranian police arrest supporters of reformist presidential candidate’ (G02.06b), ‘En Iran, censure et prison pour les opposants à l’approche de la présidentielle’ (LM21.05c).

<sup>322</sup> e.g. ‘Iran imposes severe restrictions on media election coverage’ (G12.06g), ‘Présidentielle en Iran: les patrons de la censure posent leurs conditions’ (LM26.04e), ‘Des proches des équipes de la BBC en Iran menacées’ (LM14.06d).

<sup>323</sup> ‘Iran cracks down on activists in runup to election’ (G21.05c).

<sup>324</sup> ‘Menschenrechtsbericht zu Iran: Das nervöse Regime’ (SPON12.06b).

<sup>325</sup> ‘Petit guide pour se connecter à Facebook à l’usage des Iraniens’ (LM12.06d).

<sup>326</sup> ‘Les indices d’un “semi-réveil” de la société civile iranienne’ (LM03.08c).

about civil liberties, freedom of expression and the internet”, highlighting web censorship and the mandatory Hijab<sup>327</sup>, describing the reformist agenda upon which he campaigned as “ambitious”<sup>328</sup>. In this context, Iran’s decision in July to launch a national email service was reported twice in *Guardian*: Citing unnamed independent experts, Kamali Dehghan voiced doubt over the project’s materialization, given Rouhani’s “softer line on censorship”, whereas the site’s Technology blog contributor expressed ambivalence towards Rouhani’s ultimate stance on the matter<sup>329</sup>.

Other stories/remarks in this category included news about *executions in Iran*, listing the country as second (to China) in use of death penalty, and a personal account on the summary execution of political prisoners in 1980s, one of “Iran’s darkest moments”<sup>330</sup>. Closely related is *state-sanctioned homophobia* in Iran, where homosexuality could be punishable by death<sup>331</sup>, and comparing other countries’ poor record concerning LGBTQ rights to that of Iran i.e. news and follow-ups on the latest video by the Russian punk band Pussy Riot in which they likened Vladimir Putin – after he signed into law an anti-gay legislation – to an “ayatollah in Iran”<sup>332</sup>. *Persecution of ethnic/religious minorities* is another issue that mainly *Guardian* dealt with i.e. an op-ed pleading for an end to long prison terms for leaders of the Bahá’í community<sup>333</sup> and a blogpost citing U.S. State Department’s annual religious freedom report, according to which Iran and several other countries stood out as particularly intolerant: “Antisemitism was noted in Hungary, Greece, Argentina and France”, *Guardian*’s feature writer reported, “as well as **the more obvious Middle Eastern suspects**”<sup>334</sup>, naming Egypt and Ahmadinejad’s Iran. Besides occasional remarks about the latter’s controversial views<sup>335</sup>, freedom of religion in modern-day Iran is also historicized via allusions to ancient Persia, as exemplified in the excerpt from a piece by *Guardian*’s columnist: “Nonetheless, especially on the feat of Purim, when Jews celebrate their deliverance from destruction, I was painfully aware that gentle assimilation was as much a threat to Jewish identity as ancient

<sup>327</sup> ‘Iran’s president signals softer line on web censorship and Islamic dress code’ (G02.07b).

<sup>328</sup> ‘Iranian president’s reformist agenda: “One cannot live in a quarantine”’ (G26.07c).

<sup>329</sup> ‘Iran launches “national email service”’ (G09.07b), ‘Iran to provide citizens with official state email addresses’ (G09.07c).

<sup>330</sup> e.g. ‘Hinrichtung: Iran hängt angebliche Spione’ (SPON19.05), ‘Peine de mort: l’obsession des abolitionnistes’ (LM16.07c), ‘Sahar Delijani: “I had to tell my family’s story of the Iranian executions”’ (G06.07b), ‘Children of the Jacaranda Tree by Sahar Delijani – review’ (G12.07c), ‘Your weekend reading: hoaxes and imitations, and a 12ft tall Mr Darcy’ (G14.07a).

<sup>331</sup> e.g. ‘Archbishop of Canterbury uses first address to warn of sexual revolution’ (06.07c), ‘Gay rights around the world: the best and worst countries for equality’ (G30.07b).

<sup>332</sup> e.g. ‘Anti-Homosexuellen-Gesetz in Russland: Duma schürt den Schwulenhass’ (SPON11.06b), ‘Pussy Riot target Russian oil industry in new music video’ (G16.07a), ‘Pussy Riot’s Maria Alyokhina refused parole’ (G25.07c).

<sup>333</sup> ‘Iran must free the Bahá’í leaders who have been jailed for five years too many’ (G14.05b).

<sup>334</sup> ‘Why we’ll never have total religious freedom’ (G21.05d).

<sup>335</sup> e.g. ‘Channel 4 to air daily Muslim call to prayer during Ramadan’ (G02.07c).

**Persian plots and their evil modern equivalents**<sup>336</sup>. By drawing a comparison/analogy (Richardson, 2007, p.163) while invoking history (van Dijk, 1998, pp.60-1) and the classical Orientalist cliché of ‘wily’ Persians (see Tharoor, 2015), the writer raised the continuous threat of Iranian anti-Semitism. Another example is a review of Handel’s classical oratorio Esther<sup>337</sup> based on the biblical story “that of the Jewish queen to the Persian king Assuerus, who saves her people from the genocidal impulses of the malicious Haman by successfully pleading her cause before her husband”. While, during the period scrutinized, anti-Semitism in Iran was either personified by Ahmadinejad or expressed/implicit within the context of Tehran’s antipathy to Israel in the three media’s coverage of Iran’s nuclear program and regional behavior, one long feature story in *Le Monde* by Pascale Bourgaux<sup>338</sup> offered a rare glimpse, albeit with ambivalence, into the conditions under which Iran’s Jewish community live<sup>339</sup>. In a sub-section headed ‘The art of Persian dialectic’, mirroring the deeply-entrenched othering of ‘indirect/insincere Persians’ in Western imagination (Chapter Two, section 2.1), where the chairman of Tehran’s Jewish Committee is quoted as asserting: “*In Iran, freedom of expression does exist*” [italics in original], Bourgaux construes the (unexpectedly) favorable remark as follows: “Like most of his co-religionists, [Sameyah] is aware that his freedom has a price: prudence, if not silence. So, he proceeds cautiously with topics as delicate as the much-publicized Holocaust denial of ultraconservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad”, and concluded the article with: “Not easy being Jewish on Persian soil”. Besides these items that attended, or referred succinctly<sup>340</sup>, to concrete rights issues, several side-note pieces, as shown in other contexts, singled out or grouped Iran with other ‘usual suspects’, viz. U.S. adversaries, or Middle East’s conflict areas to *exemplify authoritarian rule*:

**In the UK we are a long way from Iran’s repressive regime**, but the present government’s proposals on reforming legal aid [...] will have **us catching up with the regime in Tehran in no time**. (G23.05e)

During a Senate confirmation hearing this week, [U.S. nominee for envoy to UN] Power promised to stand up against “**repressive regimes**” and said that meant “contesting the crackdown on civil society being carried out in countries like Cuba, Iran, Russia, and Venezuela”. (G20.07a)

The man [Venezuelan president-elect Maduro], who for a long time was the Commander’s [Hugo Chavez] foreign minister, coats his remarks with everything that made “Chavism” radical: a tough policy toward an opposition that contests his election, multiple allusions to Bolivarian revolutionary movement, a pernickety sovereignism and an anti-American stance that assumes rapprochement with **authoritarian regimes, from Iran to Gaddafi’s Libya**. (LM02.05b)

<sup>336</sup> ‘Assimilation has often been successful, but the ghosts of the past can haunt you’ (G10.05b).

<sup>337</sup> ‘Esther-review’ (G28.04c)

<sup>338</sup> Belgian journalist who regularly collaborates with *Le Monde* and covers Iran for ‘TV5’ and ‘France 24’.

<sup>339</sup> ‘Etre juif en terre persane’ (LM03.05c).

<sup>340</sup> ‘Male rape: the last human rights taboo?’ (G25.06e).

Forget the setbacks of the “Arab Spring”, the Syrian tragedy, the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate, the crushed hope for democracy in Iran and recurrent bombings in Iraq. There is only one good news at the moment in the Middle East: the Kurdish issue is making progress in the right direction. (LM22.05h)

On a much smaller scale, some items in *Le Monde* and more so in *Guardian* pointed out *Western hypocrisy in promoting democracy and defending human rights* by incorporating historical references i.e. the 1953 coup orchestrated by the CIA/British intelligence against Iran’s first democratically-elected prime minister (Chapter Two, section 2.2) and the Western-backed Shah’s brutality or, contrary to the dominant discursive strategy in all three media which, by placing the burden on the Other, hold Iran accountable for the necessity – and ensuing consequences – of draconian measures, *blame international sanctions for their negative impact on Iranian society, the civilians’ socio-economic rights and right to health.* Besides these contextualizing remarks as well as those cited in other categories, the three media’s human rights discourse with regard to Iran places, as stated earlier, considerable emphasis upon its theocratic regime’s threat to civil and political freedoms or project Iran, through frequent ‘naming and shaming’, as the embodiment of (Islamic) despotism, corresponding to Western foreign policy narratives while evoking resonance with the negative image and perceptions that readers (are expected to) already have about an ‘evil’ Other. This imagery was, on occasion, contested in *Guardian* by implying or underlining the Self/West’s exceptionalism and discrepancies therewith, as excerpts below – in addition to side-notes mentioned elsewhere – from two columnists demonstrate:

Meanwhile, one writer tries...to depict [acclaimed British physicist] Hawking as a hypocrite for having visited Iran and China [while boycotting Israel], but that claim is quickly and thoroughly destroyed by commenters in the comment section: one of the things about the internet I love most. (G09.05a)

Of course Britain must do business with Kazakhstan, but it need not give the regime its political blessing in addition. And if Kazakhstan why not Iran, a country whose democratic credentials are far more robust? Why does Cameron’s trip not include equally oil-rich Tehran? The answer is simple. The ayatollahs failed to hire that mercenary of modern diplomacy, Tony Blair. (G01.07)

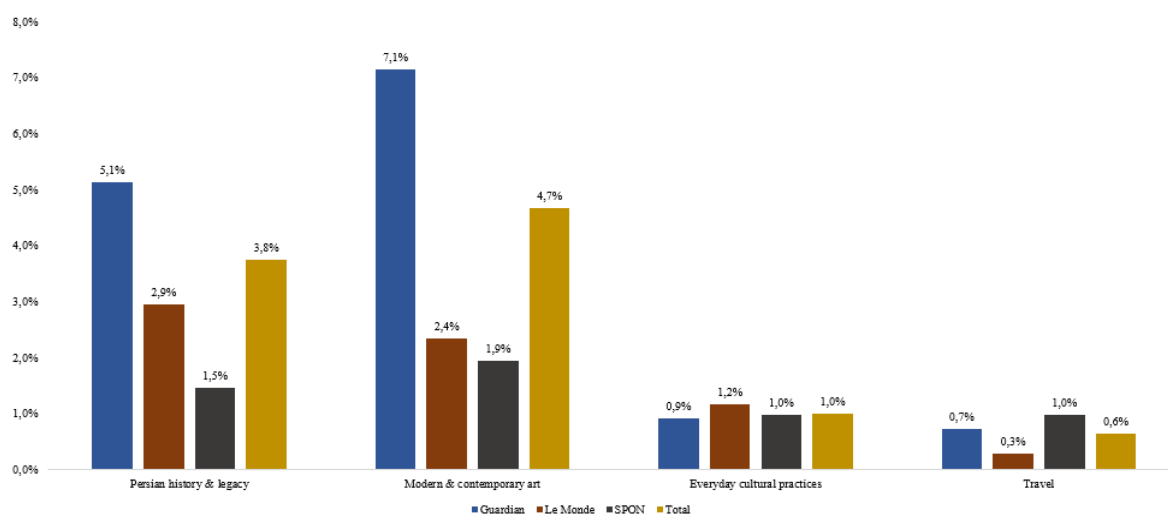
#### 6.2.2.4 Summary

Conflict-oriented topics and issues at the international level are, as the main themes elicited from the ‘domestic affairs’ category indicate, paralleled by stories/remarks about internal tensions involving the Iranian regime’s legitimacy crisis, factional rivalries, popular discontent, and human rights (*Iranian regime’s threat to democracy and individual rights*) during the examined period. Accordingly, Islamic Republic is, with exceptions in *Guardian*, predominantly depicted not only as a threat to, and a cautionary tale for, democratic aspirations abroad, as previously shown in the Syrian context and Tehran’s regional activity,

but also as a threat to democracy and (civil, political) liberties at home. While acknowledging Iran's abysmal human rights record, the quantity of stories/remarks pertaining to rights abuses in Iran during this time should be, on one hand, considered in view of the 2009 turmoil and the three media's projection (particularly *Guardian* and *Le Monde*) of a likely repeat in 2013 and, on the other hand, situated within a "selective and often politicized focus of human rights agendas and reporting", as Rai (2015, p.485) maintains, that features in Western media's foreign news coverage and "tends to spotlight a handful of states [...], with violations in other parts of the world remaining under the radar". As such, all three media construct and perpetuate a binary depiction of Our protection/promotion of human rights and Their gross violations via the amount and content of stories that foreground rights abuses/issues in Iran or the democratic deficit of its theocratic system, and repeated side-notes that single out or lump Iran with other illiberal states, especially Syria – perhaps due partly to the media's strong focus at the time on the ongoing crisis – as well as China and Russia; to wit, top U.S. adversaries. Much fewer in number, some items in *Le Monde* and *Guardian* allude to the West's negative impact on the century-long quest for democracy in Iran in the past and its rights situation at present. Countering mainstream discourses, the British outlet also, on occasion, challenges the West's (especially U.S. and U.K.) moral superiority, double standards, and their instrumentalization of human rights based on geopolitical and strategic interests. Moreover, while all three media, to varying degrees, evoke the simplistic 'good reformists/bad conservatives' dichotomy, which, since Khatami has shaped European perceptions and (official, media) discourses (see Reissner, 2006; Richardson, 2004, pp.98-102) about the inner workings of Iran's politics (Chapter Two, section 2.6), the British and French news sites tend to provide a more balanced reporting of Iranian polity and society. This involves more in-depth analysis of Iran's political system compared to *SPON* and the inclusion of different segments of Iranian society that are omitted in the German outlet's coverage.

Next to a coverage dominated by a 'politico-centered view' (Hafez, 2000b, p.186) and a handful of key themes centering round international and domestic crises and conflict-laden topics/issues that constitute 80% of total articles (N=877) and 86% of Iran stories (N=358), the news sites, to varying degrees, also published stories or items containing remarks about Iran in other subject areas, as discussed below.

## 6.2.3 Culture



**Figure 6.6 Breakdown of total articles per news site in the 'culture' category**

Culture-specific articles and remarks during this period involved, in descending order: modern and contemporary art; Persian heritage and history; daily life and cultural practices, and travel (Figure 6.6).

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Culture	17	76	10	23	4	11	31	110
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	11%	13.9%	5.5%	6.8%	4.8%	5.3%	7.4%	10.1%

**Table 6.9 Breakdown of articles in the 'culture' category**

Yielding 110 items, ancient and modern culture<sup>341</sup> constitute the third largest share – after foreign and domestic affairs – of total articles retrieved from the three sites over this period, accounting for 11% of Iran stories in *Guardian*, followed by 5.5% and less than 5% of those in *Le Monde* and *SPON* (Table 6.9). Included in this category are 79 side-notes, 59 of which were published in the British site, and 31 stories that make up over 7% of all Iran-related stories, with *Guardian* producing more than half and outnumbering both its French and, by a larger margin, German counterparts. The 4 culture-specific items collected from *SPON*, it should be added, included one piece from *Der Spiegel*. *Persian cultural heritage/history* was mainly broached in *Guardian*'s Life & Style and Culture sections or its Iran blog via passing remarks to Persian carpets/gardens<sup>342</sup>, culinary/ingredients<sup>343</sup>, and language/classical

<sup>341</sup> Culture, here, denotes both 'an activity' and a group's 'way of life'. See Rothman (2014).

<sup>342</sup> e.g. 'Flower power: 100 years of the Chelsea Flower Show' (G13.05e), 'Eric Clapton – review' (G22.05f), 'Vermeer and Music: The Art of Love and Leisure – review' (G23.06b), 'From the Observer archive, 15 July

literature, with the latter encompassing allusions to Persian sayings<sup>344</sup> and poetry<sup>345</sup> that resonates with the (secular) West in its mocking of the clergy's hypocrisy, in addition to one piece on Iranian mythology<sup>346</sup>. Also included were news in *SPON* and *Le Monde* about the (re)inscription of Iran's cultural sites on the Paris-based UNESCO's World Heritage list and brief remarks to Iran's intangible cultural heritage i.e. carpet-weaving skills<sup>347</sup>. Furthermore, historical references were on occasion made to Oriental culture in *Guardian*'s culture-specific or other side-note items to ancient biblical stories, worship of deities in pre-Islamic Iran, Persian inventions, legal system, and invasions<sup>348</sup>, mirroring what Hafez (2000b, p.186) terms 'a conservative Christian-Occidental perspective' that perpetuate further an East/West divide. Challenging this Eurocentric dialectic (Shohat & Stam, 2014, pp.2-3), *Guardian*'s chief culture writer outlined prevailing approaches to ancient history (e.g. Greco-Persian wars) in a feature and advocated instead a "story of interconnectedness and hybridity, rather than isolation and exceptionalism", wherein the "ancient Greek world is being recast from an isolated entity to one of many hybrid cultures in Africa and in the East"<sup>349</sup>.

*Contemporary art and culture by – or about – Iranians* were covered, to varying degrees, in the three media. *Modern literature* entails few pieces in *Guardian* and *SPON* that attended/referred to books by writers of Iranian descent and literary works with Iranian (historical or fictional) characters. The former includes a review in *SPON* of a debut novel<sup>350</sup> about post-revolution Iran and twin sisters Saba and Mahtab, with one immigrating to U.S. and the other staying in Iran. Drawing on a range of Orientalist clichés and tired tropes, *SPON*'s culture writer encapsulated the sisters' fates via 'antithesis', a common method used in *SPON*'s Iran coverage (discussed further in Chapter Seven), that is, "the positioning of individuals, groups, ideologies, etc. in opposition to each other in an argument in order to highlight their 'differences' for rhetorical effect" (Richardson, 2004, p.81). This, in turn, enables the fallacious argument from part to whole, and therewith constructs and represents a

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1962: In praise of a thoroughly modern home' (G14.07b), 'Underbelly arts festival 2013 – review' (G05.08), 'Distinktion de luxe' (Der Spiegel 8/2013).

<sup>343</sup> e.g. 'A Persian picnic' (G29.06c), 'Ferment to be: Yotam Ottolenghi's kashk recipes' (G19.07b), 'Wine: can't escape from sauvignon blanc? Yes, you can' (G20.07b), 'Meatballs – the global favourite' (G31.07c), 'Du champagne, Pierre Geronimi fait des sorbets' (LM06.07b), 'Augenblick: Fallobst' (SPON13.08c).

<sup>344</sup> e.g. 'Viggo Mortensen interview: "If I think a film's beyond me – that's a good sign"' (G28.05b).

<sup>345</sup> 'Turkish composer and pianist convicted of blasphemy on Twitter' (G16.04b), 'Le pianiste turc Fazil Say condamné pour "insulte aux valeurs religieuses"' (LM16.04b).

<sup>346</sup> 'Epic Iranian tale gets intimate upgrade' (G11.07a).

<sup>347</sup> e.g. 'Uno-Kulturorganisation: Unesco kürt Kasseler Herkules zum Welterbe' (SPON23.06b), 'La citadelle iranienne de Bam retirée des sites en péril par l'Unesco' (LM18.06e), 'Le pain allemand part à la conquête de l'Unesco' (LM10.07c).

<sup>348</sup> e.g. 'Mes Aynak: Afghanistan's Buddhist buried treasure faces destruction' (G31.05c), 'Why cash is making a comeback' (G11.06e), 'David Cameron was red-faced. But was he angry?' (G04.06d), 'How to Read a Graveyard by Peter Stanford – review' (G03.05c).

<sup>349</sup> 'Ancient Greece, the Middle East and an ancient cultural internet' (G11.07b).

<sup>350</sup> 'Zwilling-Roman: Die Schwester, die im Kopf lebt' (SPON15.07b).



‘primitive/backward’ Other/Iran, typified by women’s veiling – note the dehumanizing metaphor – and their victimhood/subordination, as the reverse image of ‘modern and liberal’ Self/West, where Oriental women can (finally) have agency/free will:

Mahtab geht nach Harvard. Mahtab lernt einen Jungen kennen, der Lacrosse spielt und blonde Haare auf den Armen hat. Mahtab verlässt den Jungen, weil sich in den USA keine Frau einem Mann unterordnen muss. Mahtabs Leben ist ein verzerrtes Spiegelbild von Sabas eigenem Leben in dem iranischen Dorf, in dem die Frauen mit ihren dunklen Umhängen wie Krähen aussehen und Saba einen Mann heiraten muss, der fast so alt ist wie ihr Vater, statt auf eine Universität zu gehen.

Items in *Guardian* included news about a much-hyped religio-historical account<sup>351</sup> and a critique of negative reactions to the genre of so-called ‘misery memoirs’, wherein the guest writer slams what she sees as a double standard against Muslim women authors (especially Iranians) when they “write about suffering in Islamic states”, while acknowledging “the uncomfortable reality..that the western publishing world is fascinated by such tales of female suffering and misery”<sup>352</sup>. The latter – Western literature with Iranians figures – included characters as varied as “an eccentric Persian poet and oil-trader”<sup>353</sup> and a female refugee in the U.K. who “teaches..about the ruthlessness of survival”<sup>354</sup>. The small number of *Music*-related pieces in *Guardian* contained brief references to recent past, namely the electroacoustic composition commissioned by the Shah<sup>355</sup>, and present, i.e. Iranian musicians at international festivals<sup>356</sup>, and one article in *Le Monde* that recalls Israel’s controversial entry at Eurovision Song Contest 2007, with the song’s lyrics referring to a “demon”, widely interpreted to have hinted at Iran<sup>357</sup>. Persian traditional music was broached in two *Guardian* pieces related to music consumption in Iran and artistic freedom, the latter which was subsumed under the ‘human rights’ category. Equally limited in number, *Theater*-related items included one in *Guardian* that briefly mentioned Iranians on stage alongside other nationals, one in *Le Monde* that singled out the Iranian embassy as one of the diplomatic missions in Africa who subsidize their own country’s artistic work the most, and one from *Spiegel* about a play by a German-Iranian writer on second-generation immigrants<sup>358</sup>. *Modern and contemporary art* i.e. Pop art, Plastic arts, and sculpture – by artists residing

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<sup>351</sup> ‘Zealot by Reza Aslan rushed into print after Fox News controversy’ (G31.07d).

<sup>352</sup> ‘Misery memoirs: why is it different for Muslim women?’ (G18.04b).

<sup>353</sup> ‘The Trade Secret by Robert Newman – review’ (G07.06c).

<sup>354</sup> ‘Meeting the English by Kate Clanchy – review’ (G25.04b).

<sup>355</sup> ‘A guide to Iannis Xenakis’s music’ (G23.04h).

<sup>356</sup> e.g. ‘Womad 2013: Rokia Traore, Arrested Development and more - day two review’ (G28.07b).

<sup>357</sup> ‘Eurovision: la facette politique du disco européen’ (LM18.05).

<sup>358</sup> ‘How do you put the Kite Runner on stage?’ (G14.05c), ‘La promesse fragile du théâtre africain’ (LM03.07g), ‘Fremd im eigenen Land’ (Der Spiegel 5/2013).

inside Iran or in diaspora – were likewise reported/cited in few articles<sup>359</sup>. Conversely, by virtue of its global recognition, *Iranian cinema* generally receives more attention in Western media than other aspects of Iran’s vibrant art/culture scene. Singled out or listed alongside others, Iranian films or internationally-acclaimed directors were mentioned in several *Guardian* articles<sup>360</sup>. Moreover, parallel to the Cannes Film Festival in the summer of 2013, the three websites, particularly *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, reported, reviewed, and cited ‘The Past’, the French-Iranian Palme d’or contender directed by Oscar-winning Asghar Farhadi<sup>361</sup>. Recent films by other notable Iranian filmmakers, a British-Iranian drama about the experience of exile, and the program of the annual Iranian film festival in Los Angeles were stories that only *Guardian* reported<sup>362</sup>. The British news site also published two pieces citing Hollywood blockbusters about Iran, namely the “Iran hostage crisis thriller” *Argo* and the controversial *300*<sup>363</sup> (see Chapter Two, section 2.1). It is worth reminding that items appearing in the three sites’ culture sections that foregrounded artistic freedom/dissent and accentuated – or politicized – the struggle of artists based in Iran or forced into exile were subsumed under the ‘human rights’ category.

*Quotidian life/cultural practices* received scant attention, with just two side-note articles in *SPON* on cross-cultural differences that listed Iran alongside others<sup>364</sup>; a handful of items in *Guardian* that attended or referred to the sense of home/belonging evoked by Persian cuisine in the diaspora<sup>365</sup>, and personal accounts by Tehran Bureau contributors on the decline of religious observance<sup>366</sup> and daily acts of defiance through lifestyle and consumption choices<sup>367</sup> in the Iranian capital; a profile feature in *Le Monde* on the quasi obsession of disenchanting Iranian youth with American culture<sup>368</sup> and three blogposts by one

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<sup>359</sup> ‘Asia Pacific’s art market comes of age’ (G16.07c), ‘Les tombeaux d’Iran de la photographe Azadeh Akhlaghi’ (LM13.06f), ‘Der Logiker’ (Der Spiegel 6/2013).

<sup>360</sup> e.g. ‘1963: from the Stones to Dr Strangelove, a year of social and cultural upheaval’ (G07.05f), ‘Mark Cousins: the kids stay in the picture’ (G20.05f), ‘Edinburgh gives top award to experimental documentary Leviathan’ (G28.06b).

<sup>361</sup> e.g. ‘Cannes 2013 lineup: a programme of heavy-hitters and unexpected gems’ (G18.04c), ‘Cannes 2013: The Past – review’ (G17.05d), ‘Sydney film festival: 10 things to see and do’ (G05.06), ‘Cannes: les films en lice pour la Palme d’or dévoilés’ (LM18.04c), ‘“Le Passé”: aller de l’avant, malgré les pesanteurs’ (LM13.05c), ‘Cannes-Hit “Le Passé”: Heimatlos in Paris’ (SPON17.05b).

<sup>362</sup> e.g. ‘Iranian film-maker Mohammad Shirvani takes aim at weighty issues’ (G23.04i), ‘Prophet boosting: the Muhammad films taking on interest in Islam’ (G23.05f), ‘Like Someone in Love – review’ (G23.06c), ‘I Am Nasrine – review’ (G13.06e), ‘UCLA’s Iranian cinema festival highlights depth and diversity’ (G31.07e).

<sup>363</sup> e.g. ‘George Clooney and Grant Heslov to reunite with *Argo* journo on new film’ (G26.04b), ‘A teacher’s graduation wish: remember the value of face-to-face interaction’ (G12.05b).

<sup>364</sup> ‘Schönheitsideal bei den Karo-Batak: Liebe auf großem Fuß’ (SPON03.06c), ‘Datenlese: Darüber streitet die Wikipedia’ (SPON21.07b).

<sup>365</sup> ‘Family life: Hen-house holiday, Morris mynah and Subzi kuku’ (G18.05), ‘Taste of Iran: Lari kebab recipe’ (G21.05e).

<sup>366</sup> ‘Tehran during Ramadan: “nobody is really in the spirit”’ (G26.07d).

<sup>367</sup> ‘Iran Standard Time: Close encounter of the inebriated kind’ (G30.04b), ‘Iranians pump up the volume for banned tunes’ (G07.05g).

<sup>368</sup> ‘Le coin d’Amérique de Peyman, jeune Iranien désœuvré’ (LM13.06g).

author on Mashhad (Iran's holy city), with topics ranging from pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Reza (8<sup>th</sup> of Twelver Shias), described as “an intense moment for Iranians whether they feel close to the religious regime or not”, as “the love for Imam Reza transcends both generational and political divides”<sup>369</sup>, to arranged marriage and the rise of veganism in times of sanctions and economic hardship<sup>370</sup>, with the former introducing the traditional Persian wedding courtship (*Khastegari*) and the latter declaring: “In a country where the theocratic regime instrumentalizes Islam for political purposes, state religion no longer meets the spiritual aspirations of Iranians, who, more and more, are turning to mild forms of esoterism such as yoga or veganism”<sup>371</sup>. Equally limited in number were *Travel*-related articles, including few in *Guardian* that introduced the Parsi café culture in Mumbai – a centuries-old tradition founded by the Zoroastrian émigré from Iran – and two Iranian brothers behind one of the first travel documentaries, plus a piece announcing “a new look at Iran”, with Rouhani's election heralded as a potentially new era for Iran's tourism<sup>372</sup>; one article in *Le Monde* with the punned headline ‘Iran, [the] touristic time bomb’ that encouraged visiting Iran amid “the much tarnished image plaguing the country”<sup>373</sup>; and two items in *SPON*, namely one on tourism in Iraq that referred briefly to visitors from neighboring Iran and a piece by an editor at *SPON*'s travel section – and bylined under a pseudonym – that recounted the author's couch-surfing experience in Iran<sup>374</sup>. Despite an effort, more visible in *Le Monde* and *Guardian*, to present diverse aspects of Iranian culture/everyday life, certain societal traits and trends feature in most items i.e. rise in secularism, pro-West sentiment, and Western lifestyle that, on one hand, are antithetical to Iranian theocracy in addition to the prevalent portrayal of Iran in the West through its religious dimension – also, by association, to enduring images and perceptions of an anti-American/anti-Western nation – and, on the other hand, (are expected to) evoke resonance and familiarity with readers. Drawing, to varying degrees, on the ‘religious-versus-secular’ and/or ‘conservative-versus-progressive’ schema, these stories that seek to provide a window into a ‘hidden’ Iran by highlighting the paradoxes of its society along with most items on public opinion stated earlier, which are

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<sup>369</sup> ‘Machad, capitale de la photo retouchée’ (LM12.06e).

<sup>370</sup> ‘En Iran, mariages arrangés au temps des sanctions’ (LM11.06e), ‘En Iran, la "sainte capitale de la viande" découvre le "vegan"’ (LM14.06f).

<sup>371</sup> On the occasion of the election, the French news site also presented a series of photos headed ‘Scenes of daily life in Tehran’ in its aforesaid visual Portfolio section to emphasize this state/society divide by illustrating how “[Tehran] residents are divided between the influence of Western culture and the omnipresence of a state religion that controls TV, covers Hollywood actresses or bans domestic dogs”.

<sup>372</sup> ‘Mumbai's Parsi cafe culture’ (G10.05c), ‘How two Iranian brothers created one of the world's first travel documentaries’ (G26.07e), ‘Travel news: new flights to Sicily, posh loos at Glasto, and anyone for a tennis trip?’ (G21.06).

<sup>373</sup> ‘L’Iran, bombe touristique à retardement’ (LM13.05b).

<sup>374</sup> ‘Arbil im Nordirak: Zitadelle der Zukunft’ (SPON01.07a), ‘Couchsurfing in Iran: Herzlichkeit und Horror’ (G12.06c).

political in nature, reproduce and propagate a more or less simplistic ‘good/bad’ binary, confirming earlier works on Western media’s depiction of Iranians/Muslims (Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013; Pérez-Sobrino, 2013; Shooman, 2014).

#### 6.2.4 Exile, integration, and asylum

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Exile/integration/asylum	4	33	5	7	1	3	10	43
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	2.6%	6%	2.8%	2.1 %	1.2%	1.5%	2.1%	3.9 %

**Table 6.10 Breakdown of articles in the ‘exile, integration & asylum’ category**

This cluster contains stories or remarks about three types of Iranians abroad, namely *exiled political opposition groups*, *the diaspora*, and *refugees/asylum seekers*. Included are items in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*<sup>375</sup> reporting the statements or actions of prominent anti-regime groups and figures outside Iran, with the French website devoting attention to Iran’s monarchy-in exile and more so the MEK, given the latter’s decades-long residence in France (Chapter Two, section 2.3) and despite its wide unpopularity inside Iran. Several other stories in *Le Monde* subsumed elsewhere based on their topic also reported/mentioned the MEK<sup>376</sup>. These articles, notwithstanding their modest share of Iran-related stories during this period, should be considered in view of the exiled opposition’s salience in Iran’s revolutionary trajectory and its substantial support, at the time, from both the Western elite<sup>377</sup> and media (Chapters Two and Three). Juxtaposing these stories with the (majority of) items discussed earlier on dissident individuals in exile and popular discontent inside Iran, it becomes apparent that all three media, to varying degrees, tend to privilege critical Iranian voices expressing anti-government/anti-regime sentiments. While no stories on exiled Iranian opposition were published in *SPON* during this time, it is worth stating that the German outlet dedicated a thematic page to ‘Opposition in Iran’ containing news and features on (anti-regime) protests/resistance in- and outside Iran.

<sup>375</sup> ‘Iran opposition figures unite to condemn election as a charade’ (G28.05c), ‘Iran: "Nous préconisons la désobéissance civile", déclare Reza Pahlavi’ (LM29.04b), ‘Show à l’américaine pour les Moudjahidine du peuple’ (LM23.06a), ‘Iran: que reste-t-il de l’opposition à l’étranger?’ (LM23.06b).

<sup>376</sup> ‘Bangkok: l’Iran offre son aide pour identifier les responsables des attaques’ (LM26.04c), ‘En Iran, la "sainte capitale de la viande" découvre le "vegan"' (LM14.06f), ‘Iran: des opposants dévoilent un nouveau site secret du projet nucléaire’ (LM11.07b).

<sup>377</sup> For a more recent account, and critique, of MEK’s support from the Trump administration, see Hasan (2017).

The second group, Iranian immigrants/people of Iranian heritage, was foregrounded in one international story in *Le Monde*, namely a feature on ‘Tehrangeles’<sup>378</sup> – a popular portmanteau referring to the unparalleled capital of Iranian diasporic community – and briefly stated in domestic coverage i.e. a handful of human-interest stories in *Guardian* that mentioned Iranian individuals<sup>379</sup> (e.g. abusive male partner, father of an intercultural household) and a *SPON* piece on the so-called ‘optional model’ in German nationality law, which named Iran alongside Syria and Morocco as countries that disallow citizenship renunciation<sup>380</sup>. It should be reminded that features on/interviews with Iranians abroad, who either are prominent artists/activists or, by virtue of residing in the selected media’s respective countries (or U.S.), are more visible and/or accessible sources, were subsumed elsewhere based on the item’s subject area and focus i.e. culture, human rights, etc.

More significant in number were news and commentary on the plight of refugees/asylum seekers, with Iranian nationals singled out or grouped with others in various contexts, ranging from Greece’s mistreatment of asylum seekers<sup>381</sup> to the dire conditions of refugees in Britain<sup>382</sup> and especially Australia – sometimes incorporating personal stories of Iranians forced to flee ethnic/religious or political persecution. The latter’s draconian policies i.e. transferring asylum seekers to, and their subsequent living situation at, the notorious offshore detention centers on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island and Nauru, Indonesia’s decision to toughen visas for Iranians who used the country as transit to reach Australia by boat, the Australian Department of Immigration’s advertising campaign that sought to deter people, including Afghans and Iranians, from seeking asylum in the country, and politicians’ claim that many Iranians, who, at the time, comprised a large cohort of asylum seekers in Australia, were not ‘genuine refugees’ but ‘economic migrants’, were reported and discussed more in *Guardian*<sup>383</sup>. With many of these local-specific items appearing in then-newly launched

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<sup>378</sup> ‘Los Angeles, l’autre capitale de l’Iran’ (LM06.06e).

<sup>379</sup> e.g. ‘How one survivor of child sexual exploitation is making a difference’ (G22.05g), ‘Woolwich attack witness Ingrid Loyau-Kennett: “I feel like a fraud”’ (G27.05b).

<sup>380</sup> ‘Optionszwang für Zuwanderer-Kinder: Wer zögert, verliert den deutschen Pass’ (SPON03.05c).

<sup>381</sup> ‘Streit um Löhne: Grieche schießt auf Dutzende Migranten’ (SPON18.04b).

<sup>382</sup> ‘Legal aid residency tests “will leave migrant children destitute”’ (G02.06c), ‘Asylum seekers: nowhere boys’ (G22.06b).

<sup>383</sup> e.g. ‘No advantage, no work, dwindling hope: the asylum seeker’s lot’ (G27.05c), ‘Privatisation agenda locks Australia into failure’ (G28.05d), ‘Bob Carr accused of “blanket assumption” about asylum seekers’ (G02.07d), ‘Yudhoyono and Rudd announce regional meeting on people smuggling’ (G05.07b), ‘Will Australia erode or build trust with Iran?’ (G15.07d), ‘Indonesia agrees to toughen Iranian visa rules after request from Rudd’ (G18.07c), ‘Kevin Rudd warned over “questionable” legality of immediate deportations’ (G18.07d), ‘Immigration department launches ad campaign to back asylum policy’ (G19.07c), ‘Is Australia’s new asylum policy the harshest in its history?’ (G19.07d), ‘Manus Island: a troubled history’ (G19.07e), ‘Nauru riot: 125 asylum seekers arrested’ (G21.07), ‘Release of footage of distressed asylum seekers angers advocates’ (G22.07d), ‘Picture wars: don’t be fooled by the government’s asylum propaganda’ (G08.08c), ‘Asylum seekers: Labor and Coalition policies compared’ (G16.08), ‘Le premier bateau’ (LM20.07), ‘L’Australie offre des récompenses pour la capture de passeurs de migrants’ (LM21.07), ‘Unruhen auf Nauru: Asylbewerber revoltieren in australischem Flüchtlingslager’ (SPON20.07).

Guardian Australia edition (see Murrell, 2016), the British news site allotted additional space to covering the Australian asylum policy ahead of the country’s upcoming federal election.

### 6.2.5 Disaster and tragedy

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Disaster & tragedy	6	13	6	7	1	1	13	21
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	3.8%	2.4%	3.3%	2.1%	1.2%	0.5%	3.1%	1.9%

**Table 6.11 Breakdown of articles in the ‘disaster & tragedy’ category**

This category encompasses news about natural or man-made disasters/accidents affecting Iran or Iranian nationals and death of notable figures. The major earthquake that struck the southeast of Iran in mid-April was covered in all websites, with follow-ups in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*. Besides the fact that the 7.8- magnitude earthquake was Iran’s most powerful over the past decades and sent tremors across the Gulf region and India, the quake – which, despite initial fears of soaring death toll, claimed one life in Iran and dozens in neighboring Pakistan – was reported in view of their frequency in Iran, the latest occurring just a week earlier, with the memory of the 2003 Bam earthquake (Chapter Two, section 2.5.4.1.1) looming large, and amid concerns over possible damages to Iran’s nuclear facilities<sup>384</sup>. Contradicting official Iranian and Russian statements that the Bushehr nuclear plant remained intact<sup>385</sup>, *Le Monde* reported in June, citing anonymous diplomatic sources, that recent earthquakes inflicted damage on Iran’s nuclear power plant, rendering existing concerns of (rival) neighbors i.e. Saudi Arabia “more pressing”<sup>386</sup>. Washington’s aid offer and Iran’s subsequent rejection were also reported in *Le Monde*: “Despite tensions with Tehran, suspected of seeking the atomic bomb, U.S. offered assistance to them as well as to Pakistan”<sup>387</sup>. Thus, besides such news values as event intensity and magnitude in addition to casualty/material damage estimates common in disaster reporting, (conflict over) Iran’s nuclear program was raised in all articles, but one<sup>388</sup>. By contrast, (possible damages to) Pakistan’s nuclear facilities were not broached in any of these articles. Other stories included

<sup>384</sup> e.g. ‘7.8-magnitude earthquake hits near Iran-Pakistan border’ (G16.04c), ‘Rescuers head to site of earthquake near Iran-Pakistan border’ (G17.04c), ‘Le séisme en Iran a fait 34 morts au Pakistan’ (LM16.04c), ‘Tote und Verletzte: Heftiges Erdbeben erschüttert Iran und Pakistan’ (SPON16.04b).

<sup>385</sup> ‘Téhéran dément tout "problème" dans sa centrale nucléaire’ (LM11.06f).

<sup>386</sup> ‘La centrale nucléaire iranienne endommagée par des séismes’ (LM04.06).

<sup>387</sup> ‘Séisme: Washington et l’ONU proposent leur aide à l’Iran et au Pakistan’ (LM17.04a), ‘Un violent séisme en Iran sème la panique du golfe Persique jusqu’en Inde’ (LM17.04b).

<sup>388</sup> ‘Iran earthquake leaves thousands homeless in neighbouring Pakistan’ (G17.04d).

reports, mostly in *Guardian*, of deadly vessel incidents involving Iranian asylum seekers on their way to Australia<sup>389</sup>. The case of missing Iranian climbers in Pakistan<sup>390</sup> and a blast killing Iranian pilgrims in Iraq<sup>391</sup> were also news that only *Guardian* reported.

#### 6.2.6 Sports

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Sports	1	8	2	3	1	4	4	15
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	<b>0.6%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>1.1%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>1.2%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>

**Table 6.12 Breakdown of articles in the ‘sports’ category**

This category includes limited items/remarks about Iran or Iranian athletes at world championships i.e. track and field, men’s shot, and tennis as well as the qualification of Team Melli for the 2014 World Cup<sup>392</sup>. Besides sports-related references, Iran’s ancient past and present were cited in some articles, such as the Athenian victory over the Persians (known as the Battle of Marathon)<sup>393</sup>, listing Iran’s women’s football team amongst global players who wear eccentric “headgear”<sup>394</sup>, and allusions to Iranian leaders, in a more or less digressive form, as the following excerpt from a *Spiegel* reportage on wrestling shows: “Machthaber wie Wladimir Putin und Mahmud Ahmadinedschad, Sport-Idole wie Mark Spitz und Franz Beckenbauer, sie alle gaben sich als Fans des Mattenkampfs zu erkennen”<sup>395</sup>.

<sup>389</sup> e.g. ‘Australian coastguard finds 13 bodies after boat sinks off Christmas Island’ (G09.06b), ‘Asylum seeker advocates raise concerns over time taken to mount boat rescues’ (G15.07e), ‘Tony Abbott challenges Rudd to recall parliament over asylum seeker crisis’ (G17.07c), ‘Three feared drowned after asylum seekers’ boat sinks off Indonesia’ (G24.07d), ‘Kevin Rudd: boat sinking underlines need for asylum policy overhaul’ (G24.07e), ‘Un bateau de clandestins en route vers l’Australie coule au large de l’Indonésie’ (LM24.07).

<sup>390</sup> ‘Fears grow for missing Iranian climbers after search called off’ (G24.07f).

<sup>391</sup> e.g. ‘Iraq car bombs kill five people and injure 20’ (G08.06b).

<sup>392</sup> ‘Iran and South Korea qualify for 2014 World Cup as Uzbekistan miss out’ (G.18.06e), ‘Australie, Iran et Corée du Sud se qualifient pour le Mondial 2014’ (LM18.06f), ‘Entre fleurs et “larmes de sang”, la Corée du Sud et l’Iran se disputent un billet pour le Brésil’ (LM18.06g), ‘Iran und Südkorea qualifizieren sich für WM 2014’ (SPON18.06).

<sup>393</sup> ‘On the eve of the London Marathon, I’m ready for the biblical task ahead’ (G20.04a), ‘Going the distance: the mile, the marathon and the 10-miler’ (G26.07f).

<sup>394</sup> ‘Which footballers have played in a hat?’ (G19.06d).

<sup>395</sup> ‘Im Schwitzkasten’ (Der Spiegel 22/2013).

## 6.2.7 Global trends

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Global trends	-	7	-	3	-	4	-	14
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	-	1.3%	-	0.9%	-	1.9%	-	1.3 %

**Table 6.13 Breakdown of articles in the ‘global trends’ category**

This small cluster comprises side-note items on global development or health/environmental issues that listed Iran, mostly in passing, with other countries. Examples range from Google’s global outreach, the Global Peace Index, a UNHCR report, a WHO study on tobacco taxation and smoking behavior, and water scarcity/food security to world’s top gas-exporting and shark-catching countries<sup>396</sup>. Also included is BBC’s latest Country Rating Poll naming Iran, once again, as the least favorably-viewed, which *Le Monde* and *SPON* reported<sup>397</sup>. While, in most of these pieces, Iran was listed randomly or due to geographic proximity alongside others, it was in some instances, as also shown in other categories, lumped with certain states based on their mutually perceived and implicitly assumed ‘rogue’ status in line with U.S. foreign policy. One such example is a *SPON* news article that encapsulated the U.S. State Department’s annual human trafficking report with a lead reading as follows:

Washington - Das US-Außenministerium wirft China und Russland vor, sich zu wenig für den Kampf gegen Menschenhandel einzusetzen. Beide Länder rutschten mit Usbekistan in **die schlechteste Kategorie** einer Beobachtungsliste mit 188 Regierungen - und finden sich dort gemeinsam mit Ländern wie Nordkorea, Syrien oder Iran wieder. (SPON20.06b)

By comparison, while also highlighting China and Russia in their headline/sub-head, neither of the two items published on the said report in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* cited Iran.

<sup>396</sup> ‘The future according to Mr Google’ (G20.04b), ‘Global peace index 2013: the full list’ (G11.06f), ‘UN warns of worst refugee crisis in nearly 20 years’ (G19.06e), ‘Uno-Bericht: 45 Millionen Menschen sind weltweit auf der Flucht’ (SPON19.06c), ‘WHO-Studie: Hohe Tabaksteuern retten Millionen Leben’ (SPON01.07b). “The real threat to our future is peak water” (G06.07d), ‘La révolution du gaz et du pétrole de schiste a bouleversé la donne dans le monde de l’énergie’ (LM02.07), ‘Indonésie, Inde et Espagne en tête des plus gros pêcheurs de requins’ (LM30.07).

<sup>397</sup> ‘L’Allemagne, pays le plus apprécié au monde, selon un sondage de la BBC’ (LM23.05d), ‘BBC-Studie: Deutschland hat weltweit den besten Ruf’ (SPON23.05c).



## 6.2.8 Education, science, and technology

	Guardian		Le Monde		SPON		3 websites	
	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total	Iran-related	total
Education/science/technology	-	8	-	2	-	2	-	12
Number of articles	154	546	179	340	83	206	416	1092
%	-	1.5%	-	0.6%	-	1%	-	1.1 %

**Table 6.14 Breakdown of articles in ‘education, science and technology’ category**

This category contains limited side-note items in *Guardian*’s Datablog that listed Iran in global rankings i.e. top universities, gender gap at school, and internet usage<sup>398</sup> as well as those that briefly mentioned Iranian students/tutors in Britain<sup>399</sup>, competitors at technology tournaments<sup>400</sup>, and inventors<sup>401</sup>. Passing references in *Le Monde* and *SPON* include list of awardees at Monde Académie’s graduate program, daily life of international students in Germany, and an interview with a German-Iranian student, who fled Iran as a child with his family, about German private universities<sup>402</sup>. Besides these scant remarks, Iran-related stories appearing in the Science and Technology rubrics of the three outlets revolved primarily around its military/nuclear capabilities and cyber activities, framed as a threat to the West/allies or as state-led restrictions and tools for domestic repression, and, as such, were subsumed elsewhere.

## 6.3 Discussion

The empirical results presented in this chapter confirm some of the main findings of prior studies that, while taking the media’s propensity to report negativizing stories into account, have noted a predominantly conflictual representation of Islam and the Middle East/Iran in Western media (e.g. Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Baker et al., 2013a; Deltombe, 2007; Hafez, 2000b, 2002; Jahedi & Abdullah, 2012; Khodadadi & O’Donnell, 2017). Associating Iran consistently with international topics, issues, and events involving (regional, global) conflicts/war, terror(ism) and extremism, violence and enmity, the three outlets’ Iran coverage during the studied period indicates a strong “framework of interpretation” similar to that observed in Western media’s reporting on Islam (Poole, 2016, pp.26-35; Poole, 2020,

<sup>398</sup> ‘World’s top 100 universities under 50: ranked by Times Higher Education’ (G20.06e), ‘Malala Yousafzai and girls’ access to education- get the data’ (G12.07d), ‘Guinea: country profile in numbers’ (G30.07c).

<sup>399</sup> ‘16 tutors, seven parents and two pupils on the private tutoring boom’ (G26.04c), ‘The great Grayson Perry frock competition’ (08.07).

<sup>400</sup> ‘Robot football players compete in RoboCup tournament’ (G30.06b).

<sup>401</sup> ‘Earth houses give pupils refuge from Heathrow noise’ (G22.04c).

<sup>402</sup> ‘Les lauréats de la première promotion du Monde Académie’ (LM07.06f), ‘Schnaps für Lucifer’ (UniSpiegel 3/2013), ‘Kritik an Privatuni: “Eine Elite von naiven Automaten”’ (SPON01.05).

pp.475-7). This framework is typified by: common collocates across the corpora, with *Iran(ian)* frequently co-occurring with conflict-laden terms such as ‘crisis’ and ‘threat’; listing Iran repeatedly in side-note items amongst – therewith sensitizing and constantly reminding readers of – the world’s most vexing challenges, geopolitical hotspots, implicitly assumed ‘rogue’ states, a “cast of villains” (Richardson, 2004, p.70), or singling out Iran as a major source of concern for the West/allies; the substantial coverage devoted to the nuclear issue and Iranian activity abroad particularly in the Syrian context at the time and/or Tehran’s network of militant proxies; and, finally, foregrounding other contentious areas between Iran and ‘international community’. This “division and rejection” process involving a (political, social, cultural etc.) ‘space’ constructed in contraposition to one’s own (Richardson, 2004, p.69), whilst shared in its “*polarized evaluation of Us and Them*” (van Dijk, 1998, p.63 italics in original) among the three media in terms of topic selection and treatment, exhibits nation-specific variances, namely *Le Monde*’s preoccupation with (political) Islam’s role in Iranian polity/society and its regional implications (e.g. in former French colonies) or media-specific traits, namely the liberal *Guardian*’s stronger focus on democratic values/civil liberties, and *SPON*’s evaluative characterization of actors in keeping with the German news site’s linguistic style, which can be attributed to the outlet’s policy/ethos and its underlying political/ideological assumptions (Richardson, 2007, pp.95-100).

Whereas all three media’s news and numerically higher ‘fact-oriented subgenres’ (Reisigl, 2008, p.106), both in terms of amount and substance, reflect and propagate elite views and official assumptions in the West about Iran’s place on the international stage by portraying Iran as a – if not *the* – great threat to regional stability and global security, some debates, interviews, analysis/opinion/commentary pieces (*Guardian, Le Monde*), and editorials (*Guardian*) offer a more nuanced assessment of Iran’s role in world affairs by providing context or incorporating a variety of voices and perspectives. This observation confirms previous works on *Guardian*’s coverage of Iran’s nuclear program (DiMaggio, 2009; KhosraviNik, 2015). Also Included are items, much fewer in number, by staff and guest writers (mostly *Guardian*) that convey alternative discourses, whereby Iran’s rights and security concerns as a ‘normal’ state, Western hypocrisy, and a critique of international status quo are occasionally evoked. This internal pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and the competing discourses, including ‘unmentionables’ (van Dijk, 1998, p.60), that it offers contradict what Khodadadi and O’Donnell (2017, p.62) saw as “the British newspapers’ slavish reproduction of what was in effect a USA agenda, their uncritical endorsement of the UK Government’s position in relation to that, and above all the absence of any attempt to produce a more balanced and complex understanding of Iran”. These items that counter

dominant representations and contest the prevailing macro-strategy of othering Iran serve a dual purpose: to (1) deconstruct mainstream Western views and long-lasting clichés about Iran i.e. its (nuclear) threat, inherent hostility and continued belligerence, support for extremism/terrorism, theocratic despotism; and/or (2) use Iran or Iran-specific matters and events as cases to challenge the Western-led international order or exemplify the West's inconsistencies in the past and at present. Whereas the online versions of the observed French and especially British legacy outlets allocate *some* room for debate, in-depth analysis, or differing views, *SPON*'s Iran coverage was confined to a primarily (current) event- and elite-oriented reporting. While taking into account German (online) media's emphasis, according to the extant literature (Chapter Four, section 4.2), on journalistic objectivity and factual reporting (e.g. Esser & Umbricht, 2013; Hanitzsch & Quandt, 2012; Hanitzsch et al., 2016; Quandt et al., 2006), the amount of analysis/commentary devoted in comparison to side-note stories on Syria published over this period suggests that *SPON*'s perceptions and coverage of Iran were, by and large, premised upon preconceived notions corresponding to official Western (American/Israeli) narratives and underlying sentiments about an adversarial Other – an *enfant terrible* – and its dangerous/destructive role in world affairs. This is evident from the German outlet's unequivocal position vis-à-vis Iran (and Israel) and its proclivity to take the Iran Threat, necessity of punitive sanctions, and Tehran's ties to terrorism/extremism at face value. Bearing in mind the Islamic Republic's non-recognition of, and enmity toward, Israel in addition to the immediate context within which articles were published during this period, namely an eight-year presidency in Iran marked by highly controversial remarks, the news angle in all *SPON*'s stories on Iran (as state actor) and a notable absence of diverging views are indicative of what Hafez (2000a, p.53) refers to as “the mingling of domestic and foreign issues”, and manifested in a biased reporting in favor of Israel. Be it the outlet's editorial position, its code of conduct or individual stance/restraint, and in line with German foreign policy – “Diese historische Verantwortung Deutschlands ist Teil der Staatsräson meines Landes”, as formulated by then-Chancellor Merkel at her 2008 speech to the Knesset, cited in Chapter Two, section 2.5.4.3 – and what is deemed acceptable public opinion in Germany, *SPON*'s Iran coverage accommodates no room for any criticism of the state of Israel. This is in stark contrast to *Guardian*, widely seen as among a handful of mainstream outlets critical of Israel – and accused by some of anti-Israel bias or ‘Israel-bashing’ as critics put it – whose (notable) columnists and guest writers occasionally bring forth alternative perspectives on Iran and Israel. As such, *SPON*'s prevalent decontextualization (Poole, 2016) and low level of analytical depth with regard to Iran contradicts the findings of Humprecht (2016), outlined in Chapter Four (see Table 4.1), indicating the impact of the topic at hand

upon the results of empirical research on (online) news output (e.g. Benson et al., 2012; Powers & Benson, 2014; Umbricht & Esser, 2014; Quandt, 2008), and a reminder of Livingston and Bennett's (2003) warning, two decades ago, against "a risk of overgeneralizing about the sweep of trends" within a complex mediascape "that seems to vary from local to national, elite press to tabloids, cable to broadcast, and *even* across topics or issues" (p.367, emphasis added). As for the amount of coverage devoted to Iran, with *Le Monde* yielding more than twice as many Iran stories as *SPON* during the examined timeframe, the present study confirms what Hafez (2000b, p.196) observed in German press coverage of the Middle East: while both France and Germany were among Iran's top trading partners in 2013 (Chapter Two, Table 2.1), "political and cultural factors as well as a fascination with conflicts with a marked international dimension" rather than national economic interests continue to influence the quantity – besides content – of output in German media concerning certain MENA countries such as Iran.

Conflict-oriented stories in international context are paralleled – within the above-stated "framework of interpretation" – by foregrounding domestic tensions, namely the Islamic Republic's legitimacy crisis, inter-factional rivalries, a deepening People-versus-Regime cleavage, and human rights issues. Much like the socio-political environment surrounding the 2013 election, the bitter memory of 2009 loomed large over the three media's election reporting, with previous unrest and violent crackdown often conjured up in articles in order to provide context or, by drawing parallels with pre-election protests and state-led restrictions in summer of 2013, to project Iran's political direction. Against this backdrop, Rouhani's win prompted a discursive shift in the examined media, with cautious hope for constructive engagement abroad, juxtaposed with greater respect for civil/political rights at home (particularly in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*), replacing the sense of foreboding that marked pre-election news stories in all three sites and commentary/editorials in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*. Besides the space and effort dedicated in British and French sites to providing more insight into Iran's political system beyond the simplistic '(good) reformists/(bad) conservatives' paradigm (Reissner, 2006; Richardson, 2004), Iran is, with exceptions in *Guardian*, depicted in accord with its dominant image and 'common-sense' view shared with intended readers as the archetypal repressive state through frequent evaluative labels i.e. "(Mullah) regime", recurrent side-note remarks that pick Iran to exemplify illiberal regimes, 'name and shame' the country amongst the world's worst rights abusers, or list Iranian nationals among asylum seekers fleeing ethnic/religious persecution (mostly *Guardian*) in addition to the amount of items that personalize exiled Iranians and/or highlight lack of freedom of expression, repression of dissent, and women's issues inside Iran. As for the selection and reporting of

stories involving Iranian women, the relative diversity noted over this period concerning the inclusion of female actors and voices/sources in the three sites' Iran coverage, especially *Le Monde* and more so *Guardian*, the latter which echoes other studies and the high(er) representation of female Muslim actors in left-leaning British newspapers (e.g. Mertens, 2016b), however, does not engender pluralism and diversity in terms of scope of coverage. In other words, these stories' newsworthiness, as stated earlier in this chapter (section 6.2.2.3), is premised upon confirming pre-existing stereotypes and highlighting (young) Iranian women's victimization by, or resistance to, top-down discriminatory/repressive policies in Iran. In this vein, German journalist Wiedemann (2018, pp.61-2) writes: "Wer über Frauen im Iran spricht, muss mit einer Klage über ihre Unterdrückung beginnen – das ist ein ungeschriebenes Gesetz der Medienwelt". By the same token, interviews and features involving Iranian women living abroad, including in the three media's respective countries, include individuals all who share certain traits such as being secular, forced into exile, and critical of the Islamic Republic.

The election, moreover, served as an occasion for the three media (especially *Guardian* and *Le Monde*) to gauge public sentiment and Iranian society's mood. With more stories published in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, the two outlets include a much wider variety of local voices from different walks of life. Accordingly, whereas sentiments of political apathy, defiance, and post-election cautious hope – with the latter bearing comparison with that expressed at the time by journalists and Western elite/observers – unite the majority of stories about ordinary Iranians during this period, *Guardian* and *Le Monde* mention on occasion other segments of Iranian society whose profiles and voices are usually backgrounded and granted less space/attention in mainstream Western media compared with the hyper-visible (young) middle-class cosmopolitan urbanites, especially Tehranis. "Ein beträchtlicher Teil der iranischen Gesellschaft", as German Journalist Wiedemann (2018, p.57) also argues, that "bleibt für die westlichen Medien *Terra incognita*": regime sympathizers, members of the Basij paramilitary, the clergy, and residents in rural areas. Categorically absent in *SPON*'s reporting, pro-regime voices are, however, either outnumbered by opposing views or cited towards the end in the text (*Guardian*), positioned within urban-versus-rural and progressive-versus-conservative schema (*Guardian, Le Monde*), or reported with ambivalence and clear journalistic distance (*Le Monde*).

Next to a coverage adhering to, and dominated by, conventional news factors/values and (stereo)typical Iran-specific themes involving international and domestic crises/issues, with conflicts/war and (religious) violence, internal political friction, state-society schism, human rights abuses, and disaster/tragedy together accounting for over 87% of Iran stories over this

period, the results also show diversity in subject areas, as the share of items that attend/refer to Iranian art and culture (e.g. cuisine, literature, Iranian cinema and film festivals, diasporic living) or mention Iran in other categories in *Le Monde* and especially *Guardian* demonstrate. This is more apparent in the British outlet which arguably “has one of the most commanding online news sites” (Siapera, 2012, p.167). Included are (non-political) stories that address daily life and social issues in the three news sites – to varying degrees. This was offered mostly in limited (guest) articles in *SPON* and more so in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, notably their Iran-specific and other blogs and by regular (Iranian) writers or contributors inside Iran/in diaspora, with the aim of shedding light on certain aspects of everyday realities deemed less known/odd/relatable to their (intended) readers. As such, the inductive thematic analysis revealed unexpected diversity in subjects related and referring to Iran in French and more so British outlets, an unforeseen observation that contradicts the findings of the scant data-driven research conducted thus far on Iran, which can partly be ascribed to the genre of data and type of media examined in these studies; Jahedi and Abdullah (2012), for instance, analyzed front-page news articles about Iran in the *New York Times* whereas Khodadadi and O’Donnell (2017) looked into the articles published in the Sunday editions of four British broadsheets, noting that Iran stories “originated without exception from the political and international sections” of the selected newspapers and that “no articles relating to Iran were identified in any other section, such as Leisure or Tourism” (p.55). This reflection from a period spanning three years (2007-2011) stands in stark contrast to what was observed in this thesis in terms of blogposts and articles published over a limited timeframe – which intersected with a major Iran-related news event – in various sections of *Guardian* that either attended or referred to Persian/Iranian art and culture i.e. carpets/gardens, cuisine, (classical, modern) literature, Iranian cinema and film festivals, society, quotidian life, and diasporic living. The extent to which this discrepancy can be attributed to *Guardian*’s website which, according to Siapera (2012, p.167), “has more categories by far than any of the other forms” (e.g. Culture, Life & Style, and their subcategories), its made-for-web content (e.g. Iran-specific and other blogs), its decision to host Tehran Bureau three months prior to the studied period (see Chapter Three, section 3.1.1.5) “to open a window on life in the Islamic republic” (Soal, 2013), and is, indeed, indicative of more topical diversity in online news media in certain cases, contrary to what some studies have noticed (Chapter Four, section 4.2.3.2), requires further scrutiny. However, beneath the observed diversity in topics in quantitative terms, it becomes clear upon closer inspection that what seems to render social stories on Iran newsworthy is (cultural, social, religious) conflictual dynamics between Iranian people and the Islamic Republic or within the Iranian society itself. All stories that deal with Iranian

society/individuals during this period strive, above all, to humanize/familiarize regular Iranian people, deconstruct a monolithic view of Iran(ians), and offer a more balanced depiction of a nation marked by an overwhelmingly negative and politicized image in the West. As such, the present study noted ‘Iran-as-society’, which Khodadadi and O’Donnell (2017) identified as an alternative discourse conveyed only in travel blogs and by interviewed tourists that stood in contrast to what the authors termed the British broadsheets’ prevailing ‘Iran-as-polity’ narrative, not as a *counter-discourse* – which implies an Either/Or logical fallacy – per se, but, rather, as a *complementary* one. While acknowledging the news values of (likely) conflict – between ordinary Iranians and their leaders, which should be situated within the “historical schism between people and rulers in Iran and the legacy of popular uprisings of the Iranian people against despotic regimes during the past 100 years” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.149) – on one hand, and the level of state repression in Iran combined with the haunting memory of 2009 and ensuing disenchantment of a considerable segment of society, on the other, the three media’s conspicuous preoccupation with critical and dissenting voices in- and outside Iran could, at best, be ascribed to an effort to *dissociate* ordinary Iranians from their leaders and their country’s (internal, international) political issues and negative image; that is, to *unveil* and (re)present the ‘real’ Iran, albeit through a more or less simplistic and polarizing ‘good-versus-bad Iranian’ binary, which, as the next chapter elaborates, is much more palpable in *SPON*, by aligning the Iranians’ ideals and democratic aspirations with those of (Western) readers, and, at worst, to the media’s own predispositions and/or wishful thinking, namely (hope for) regime change from within. Although some items from Iran-born writers contain added nuance and context regarding the issue at hand (as the next chapter shows), the choice and selection of the story as well as its angle seem to be dictated by a prevailing topic agenda and discourse.

## **7. Chapter Seven: Self and Other in media texts**

This chapter seeks to answer the second question, namely how Self and Other are discursively constructed in the three media's coverage of Iran. It begins with explaining the corpus-building procedure for in-depth analysis. As such, in line with the overall approach adopted in this research (Chapters One and Five) and informed by the literature outlined in Chapter Four, it contextualizes comments posted on the three outlets' Iran stories by relating them to their immediate and broader settings. Based on these observations and in view of the dominant topics and recurring themes elucidated in Chapter Six, the criteria according to which some articles were selected will be discussed. The remainder of the chapter presents the key findings elicited from an in-depth analysis of the sampled texts, drawing on the methodological framework outlined in Chapter Five (section 5.1) and using the analytical concepts, tools, and categories adopted therein.

### **7.1 Building the corpus for in-depth analysis**

As stated in Chapter Five (section 5.3.3), the quantity of comments was initially, and prior to thematic analysis, set as the main criterion based on which some articles about Iran were to be selected for detailed analysis. A comparison between salient topics and issues in Iran's coverage and number of posts (N=10,683) on all Iran stories (N=416) reveals several points (Table 7.1): First, there is a clear correlation, consistent with previous studies (e.g. Abdul-Mageed, 2008; Boberg et al., 2018), between the media's thematic coverage and the readers' thematic preference. This is evident in five out of six most covered and commented-on topics/issues and, namely 'Syrian crisis', 'nuclear issue', 'internal politics', 'human rights', and 'public sentiment'. Second, the bulk of comments is focused on public-affairs subjects (e.g. domestic politics, international affairs), confirming others (e.g. Boberg et al., 2018; Nagar, 2011; Ruiz et al., 2011), which, as Boczkowski & Mitchelstein (2013) argue, intensifies in times of major political events (e.g. elections), leading to "reduction or disappearance of the thematic gap between what is supplied and what is demanded" (p.83). Third, a gap exists between online readers' strong interest in, and engagement with, political topics and the media's attention to non-public-affairs and human-interest stories, also noted in some studies (e.g. Almgren & Olsson, 2015; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011). For instance, the 31 culture-related items on art, daily life, cuisine, and travel received 272 comments altogether whereas the 12 news articles related to cyber-politics that contain cyberwarfare attracted 471 comments.



Topics/Themes	Nr. of articles (descending)	Topic	Nr. of comments (descending)
1.Nuclear issue	117	1.Nuclear issue	5,544
2.Internal politics	101	2.Internal politics	1,388
3.Human rights	60	3.Syrian crisis	905
4.Culture (art, daily life, cuisine, travel)	31	4.Human rights	887
5.Public sentiment	24	5.Public sentiment	767
6.Syrian crisis	22	6.Cyber-politics	471
7.Terrorism/extremism/political Islam	19	7.Culture (daily life, travel, art, cuisine)	272
8.Disaster & tragedy	13	8.Terrorism/extremism/political Islam	211
9.Cyber-politics	12	9.Exile, integration & asylum	171
10.Exile, integration & asylum	10	10.Bilateral relations	46
11.Sport	4	11.Sports	15
12.Bilateral relations	3	12.Disaster & tragedy	6

**Table 7.1 Salient and most commented-on topics/issues in Iran coverage**

As Table 7.2 shows, differences and similarities are apparent across the news sites. In terms of volume, *Guardian* yielded, by a large margin, the highest number of comments compared to its German and especially French counterparts, accounting for over 60% of comments on all Iran-related stories in the three sites. This is despite the fact that *Le Monde* published more stories about Iran than the other two outlets during the examined period. In addition, while ‘foreign affairs’ news triggered the largest number of comments in both *Guardian* and *SPON*, ‘domestic affairs’ attracted more posts than other categories in *Le Monde*. The top five most commented-on topics and issues in the three sites, in decreasing order, were as follows: ‘nuclear issue’, ‘human rights’, ‘internal politics’, ‘public sentiment’ and ‘Syrian crisis’ (in *Guardian*); ‘nuclear issue’, ‘internal politics’, ‘public sentiment’, ‘human rights’, and ‘Syrian crisis’ (in *Le Monde*); ‘nuclear issue’, ‘internal politics’, ‘Syrian crisis’, ‘cyber-politics’, and ‘terrorism/extremism/political Islam’ (in *SPON*). While these most commented-on topics/issues are, to some extent, influenced by the three media’s thematic coverage and ‘gatekeeping restrictions’ (Almgren & Olsson, 2015, p.5), traditional news factors (e.g. negativity, conflict/crisis, violence, timeliness), as Weber (2014, p.953) noted, “also influence selectivity on this new stage of news diffusion (selective participation) and affect the interactivity of users’ communication”. For example, the number of posts in response to articles dealing with the nuclear dispute in *Guardian* constituted over 60% of all comments on the British site’s Iran-related items and less than 40% of total comments posted on articles about Iran published in the three sites combined. By contrast, culture-related articles yielded comparatively less posts in *Guardian*, notwithstanding the relatively high share of these items in the British site’s Iran reporting. Although this observation confirms some studies (e.g. Richardson & Stanyer, 2011), a distinction should be made between the types of stories included in this category; the 14 items on modern/contemporary art, cuisine, and travel were

numerically higher but received much fewer comments (N=64) compared to three blogposts on daily life (N=122), indicating a gap during the examined period between the British news site's attention to culture-specific topics and its readers' interest in quotidian social matters with an angle that involves a (political or non-political) conflict between the state and society or within the society.

Topics/Themes	G	LM	SPON	Total Nr. of Articles	G	LM	SPON	Total Nr. of Comments
<b>Foreign affairs</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>4,725</b>	<b>547</b>	<b>1,905</b>	<b>7,177</b>
Nuclear issue	40	48	29	117	4,209	381	954	5,544
Syrian crisis	5	11	6	22	395	99	411	905
Terrorism, extremism & political Islam	7	7	5	19	-	24	187	211
Cyber-politics	3	5	4	12	121	36	314	471
Bilateral relations	-	2	1	3	-	7	39	46
<b>Domestic affairs</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>185</b>	<b>1,703</b>	<b>703</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>3,042</b>
Internal politics	35	48	18	101	598	353	437	1,388
Human rights	25	26	9	60	621	165	101	887
Public sentiment	11	9	4	24	484	185	98	767
<b>Culture</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>Exile, integration &amp; asylum</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Disaster &amp; tragedy</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Sports</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>179</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>6,675</b>	<b>1,337</b>	<b>2,671</b>	<b>10,683</b>

**Table 7.2 Salient and most commented-on topics/issues in Iran coverage per news site**

Before elaborating the corpus-building procedure for in-depth analysis, some additional observations should be offered. The comments' volume discussed and shown above must be viewed while bearing in mind the immediate and wider contextual factors. This involves the constraints placed by the media in terms of the space made available to users for posting comments which, during the sampled period, was restricted the most in the British site. From 154 items published on Iran in *Guardian's* website, 64 (41%) were not open to comment. This restriction, which Almgren and Olsson (2015, p.5) term 'spacekeeping', mainly concerned news reports as well as a handful of news analysis/features and was mostly observable – besides all stories pertaining to disaster and tragedy – in the two categories of foreign and domestic affairs, with 28 items in each disabling the comment feature. The former includes news pieces, in descending order, on 'nuclear issue', 'terrorism/extremism/political Islam' (all stories), 'Syrian crisis', and 'cyber-politics'. The latter involved items, in decreasing order, on 'internal politics', 'human rights', and 'public sentiment'. By contrast, users were allowed to post on all articles related to 'culture' and 'sports'. These "lightweight news" categories, as Almgren and Olsson (2015, p.9) term, are

perceived by the media as a “safe” area regarding user participation compared with hard news that could potentially provoke heated debates. In *Le Monde*, nearly all stories were open to comment, and, as for *SPON*, excluding stories pertaining to disaster and tragedy, content published from *Der Spiegel*, and one news piece on Ahmadinejad<sup>403</sup> that could be due to the German outlet’s general policy to disallow posts in the ‘Justizberichterstattung’ news category (Kriesel, 2017), all other articles were comment-enabled.

With the number of comments pre-determined as the main criterion for selecting articles, the 20 most commented-on items in each site were identified and compiled in a list, revealing insightful patterns in terms of both cross-national similarities as well as national- and website-specific variances. Most of these articles in all three news sites dealt with political topics/issues, both international – especially in *Guardian* with 16 items and *SPON* with 13 – and domestic. This included, for example: ‘Syrian crisis’ (1 in *Guardian*, 1 in *Le Monde*, 3 in *SPON*); ‘nuclear issue’ (15 in *Guardian*, 8 in *Le Monde*, 7 in *SPON*); ‘internal politics’ (1 in *Guardian*, 4 in *Le Monde*, 5 in *SPON*); and ‘public sentiment’ (1 in *Guardian*, 2 in *Le Monde*, 1 in *SPON*). Several stories related to human rights (e.g. persecution of ethnic/religious minorities, mistreatment of political prisoners, media censorship, women’s issues) also yielded a substantial number of posts in all (particularly British and French) sites (2 in *Guardian*, 4 in *Le Monde*, 1 in *SPON*).

Regarding media-specific tendencies, the majority of *Guardian*’s most commented-on articles (13 items) were published in its popular CiF section (see Chapter Five, section 5.3.1.1), encompassing columns, op-eds, and *Guardian/Observer* editorials. Besides their placement on the news site, some of these (controversial) articles were written by well-known – not just to *Guardian* readers – columnists such as: associate editor Seumas Milne, known as standing “on the far left of the Labour Party” (Popham, 1997); veteran war reporter Jonathan Steele, who was a member of the *Guardian*’s cables team that examined Wikileaks documents; and Glenn Greenwald (cited in Chapter Six), all whom are prominent and vocal critics of Western (namely U.S.) politics. In fact, the latter’s piece headlined ‘US torture “indisputable”, CNN’s humiliation, and Iran sanctions’ triggered 1,601 comments, that is, less than a quarter of all the posts on *Guardian*’s Iran stories combined. This ‘star appeal’ effect resembles what Richardson and Stanyer (2011, p.992) noticed with regard to the concentration of tabloid readers’ comments on articles by certain journalists. In addition to these opinion/commentary pieces which, confirming prior studies (e.g. Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013; Weber, 2012a), prompt reader reaction due in part to their genre and style, several items appearing in the British website’s ‘World News’ section and Iran-related

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<sup>403</sup> ‘Iran: Wächterrat will Ahmadinedschad vor Gericht stellen’

blog also yielded considerable commenting. These items included news reports and features on the Iran-Israel conflict, Iran-U.K. relations, domestic politics/society – written by Jon Snow, the acclaimed Channel 4 news anchor – and human-interest stories, namely women’s issues. In the case of *Le Monde*, 12 out of the 20 most commented-on pieces were items published in its ‘Iran news’ and other blogs (e.g. Big Browser). This observation, also noted in other studies (e.g. Ruiz et al., 2011), could partly be ascribed to the French site’s strict policy, mentioned in Chapter Five (section 5.3.1.2), of limiting the comment feature on its print and original content (excluding blogposts) to paying subscribers. As for non-blogpost items, the most commented-on (free or paywalled) articles appeared in the ‘International’ and ‘Proche-Orient’ rubrics and entailed a mix of news reports, news features/analysis, interviews, and op-eds – with the news story on Rouhani’s misquoted remarks about Israel attracting the highest number of comments (75 posts) during this period. In fact, most of *Le Monde*’s articles that yielded a relatively high number of reader comments involved the Iran-Israel conflict in the context of the nuclear issue. By comparison, articles dealing with the nuclear dispute that triggered a large number of comments in both *Guardian* and *SPON* focused on Iran-U.S. relations. This could be attributed to national-specific variances i.e. online users’ different interests/attitudes in France compared to Germany/the U.K. as well as media-specific factors such as news sites’ thematic coverage and the salience assigned to the (role of) U.S. within both British and German outlets’ reporting of Iran, in general, and of the nuclear issue, in particular, as stated in Chapter Six (section 6.2.1.2) and observed in previous studies (e.g. Quandt, 2008; Segev & Blondheim, 2013). In the case of *SPON*, 16 out of the 20 most commented-on articles were mainly news reports and a handful of features published under the site’s ‘Politik’ rubric in addition to several in ‘Netzwelt’ and ‘Wirtschaft’ sections. Compared with their French counterparts and in the absence – at the time of this study – of restrictions as strict as those in place on the British site in terms of posting on news reports, *SPON* users engaged with a broader range of political topics/issues which, besides those in common with the other sites, encompassed terrorism (1 article, 121 posts) and Iran/U.S. cyberwarfare (2 articles, 184 and 66 posts each). In addition to hard, political affairs-related news, the list of most commented-on articles in *SPON* included two human-interest stories, namely one related to women’s issues – a story also reported in British and French sites and discussed below – and one in the ‘culture’ (travel) category, written, as stated in Chapter Six (section 6.2.3), by *SPON*’s travel editor and published under a sensational headline<sup>404</sup>. It is also worth reminding that visible comments (and their number) on articles in *Le Monde* and

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<sup>404</sup> ‘Couchsurfing in Iran: Herzlichkeit und Horror’

*SPON* are those that have been published – and not deleted by moderators and community managers<sup>405</sup>.

Based on above-stated observations and in view of this study's objectives and questions, the following selection criteria for in-depth analysis were established: (1) items discussing Iran or Iran-related topics/issues in their body text (and not just in the title/sub-head); (2) a genre-specific sampling that corresponds to, and is representative of, the discourses conveyed in the three news sites' Iran coverage and, accordingly, consists – besides news stories – of blogposts (*Guardian, Le Monde*), op-eds/commentaries (*Guardian, Le Monde*), and editorials (*Guardian*), the latter which were considered additionally on account of their importance as 'the voice of the newspaper' and because they "illustrate a discourse of institutional power in the sense that it emanates from, and in turn helps construct, the newspaper's claimed authority" (Fowler, 1991, p.221); (3) a mix of hard, political news and human-interest stories to analyze in detail the representations of Iran and its society in line with this study's purpose and holistic approach; and (4) taking into account the three media's thematic coverage and issue salience discussed in the previous chapter, on one hand, and the amount of commenting on different topics/issues (discussed above), on the other. On the basis of these criteria and to facilitate cross-media comparison, specific articles were chosen as follows: Given the centrality of the Ideological Square and discursive othering to this research, stories on Iran's influence in Syria and the nuclear conflict were selected from international news category. These items were published before and after Rouhani's election, feature diverse viewpoints and competing (or alternative) discourses, some were among the news sites' list of most commented-on articles stated earlier, and others were added, since they addressed bilateral relations between Iran and the media's respective countries. Included were also 'parallel articles' (Paprotta, 2017, p.186) covering the same topic i.e. Rouhani's remark on Israel which, in both *Guardian* and *Le Monde* triggered a significant amount of posts. As such, *SPON*'s related news report and follow-up were added for comparison. Regarding Iranian society/people, given the three media's dominant state-versus-society narrative (discussed in Chapter Six), a range of stories, published before and after Rouhani's election, that covered public sentiment, daily life, the youth, and women's issues were selected from the three news sites' different sections and in accord with the voices privileged as well as the importance given to certain topics/issues in each site, some of which were also among the most commented-on articles. This included, for example, a parallel story about an Iranian (female) swimmer that was covered and triggered a large number of comments in all three sites. This story, it should be added, was reported twice in *Le Monde*; one in its Iran-related blog and

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<sup>405</sup> In *Guardian*, removed comments are not deleted and replaced with a standard message (Chapter Eight).

one in its ‘Sport’ section, both which were examined. As for other articles selected from *Le Monde*, items were chosen that received minimum 2 posts<sup>406</sup> to account for interactivity amongst commenters. Table 7.3 shows the number of articles sampled from each news site along with the number of comments (listed in Appendix Two). These 58 articles embody the three media’s Iran story – in other words, are ‘typical’ of the news sites’ items produced about Iran – at the time, encompassing and corresponding to some of the main international and domestic topics and issues in the country’s coverage (e.g. Syrian crisis, nuclear dispute, democracy and human rights, women, the youth, etc.) detected in thematic analysis (Chapter Six), and therewith paint a holistic picture of Iran’s representation as state and as society, allowing for inter-media comparison while incorporating different genres (e.g. news piece, feature, interview, editorials or other opinion formats) and competing or counter-discourses offered in the news sites as well as attending to the number of attached comments.

News sites	Number of articles	Number of comments
G	20	2,966
LM	21	666
SPON	17	1,099
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>4,731</b>

**Table 7.3 Number of articles selected per news site for detailed analysis and number of comments**

The remainder of this chapter presents the key findings stemming from in-depth analysis of these texts, drawing on the discursive – namely referential, predicational, and argumentation – strategies set out in the Discourse-Historical approach, as outlined in Chapter Five (section 5.1) and applied by KhosraviNik (2015), while, in addition, using other analytical categories, discursive tools, and linguistic realizations (Chapter Five, section 5.1.1). The results from this detailed textual analysis, as with thematic analysis in Chapter Six, are presented and discussed, bearing in mind the sampled articles’ immediate and wider context, that is, the discursive and social practices at play (Chapter Five, sections 5.1.2 and 5.1.3).

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<sup>406</sup> The number of comments stated below *Le Monde*’s articles does not include posters’ responses to each other in sub-threads. I have included these when indicating the number of posts per article.

## 7.2 Referential strategies

### 7.2.1 The Self

Regarding naming options and references to the Self, three main categories were detected in the sampled texts: The Self as a political entity/geographical space, the Self as a geopolitical bloc, and the Self as a Western-centric collective.

#### 7.2.1.1 The Self as a political entity/geographical space

Assuming the role of an observant third party, the three outlets use neutral and diplomatic references to their respective countries that are sometimes grouped together (alongside U.S.) in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*. More prevalent in British and French texts, these nomination/referential choices are made with journalistic distance when reporting about bilateral issues between their countries and Iran or in the context of multilateral conflicts i.e. the nuclear row and especially Syria amid Paris and London's push during this period to lift an EU embargo and arm the Syrian rebels. While both *Guardian* and *Le Monde* regularly use proper noun for their countries or the capital city for government metonymy (excerpts 1,2), *SPON*'s reference to the political Self concerning (disputes with) Iran is mostly through assimilation techniques via *collectivization* (van Leeuwen,1996, p.48), as subsequent sections show. Political elite and experts/observers from the three media's respective countries (or elsewhere) are likewise sourced and quoted while maintaining distance. Deixis (Fowler, 1991, pp.63-4) i.e. personal pronouns 'I' and 'we' also appear occasionally in the sampled texts through reported speech and quoted sources (excerpts 3, 4) in addition to some blog- and guest posts, op-eds/commentaries, and editorials. In few instances, the Self is also referred to as a geographical space (excerpts 5, 6).

- (1) **UK** open to improving **London-Tehran** ties, says William Hague (headline, G31.07)
- (2) **London, Berlin and Paris** preoccupied with the nuclear issue and Syria<sup>407</sup> (sub-section heading, LM15.06a)
- (3) "*As far as **we** are concerned, in any case, **we** don't want Iran*". French Foreign Ministry Spokesman Phillip Lalliot announced **France**'s position on Wednesday, May 17. Namely, that **Paris** does not want Iran to participate at the planned international conference on Syria.<sup>408</sup> (LM17.05, italics in original)
- (4) Bundesaußenminister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) sagte der dpa: "**Ich** glaube, dass mit der Amtsübernahme von Herrn Rohani eine Chance verbunden ist. (SPON03.08)

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<sup>407</sup> Londres, Berlin et Paris préoccupés par le nucléaire et la Syrie

<sup>408</sup> "*En ce qui nous concerne, en tous les cas, [nous ne voulons] pas l'Iran.*" Le porte-parole du ministère français des affaires étrangères, Philippe Lalliot, a donné la position de la France, vendredi 17 mai. A savoir que Paris ne veut pas que l'Iran participe à la conférence internationale en projet sur la Syrie.

(5) Kermanshahi und Mirza haben sich in **Berlin** eine neue Heimat aufgebaut. (SPON14.06)

(6) From their [Iranian people] expressions of joy, **we from Paris** only see these videos, photos, and accounts reported on social networking sites.<sup>409</sup> (LM16.06).

### 7.2.1.2 The Self as a geopolitical bloc

The second category refers to the Self as a bloc on opposite side of Iran, using metonymies and geopolitical anthroponyms (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.43) i.e. Europe(ans) and the EU or, more specifically, the P5+1 Group<sup>410</sup>. While *Guardian* and *Le Monde* often incorporate ‘the EU’ – which mainly implies the key states involved in the nuclear dossier, namely the two media’s respective countries – as the Self, sometimes co-occurring with the U.S. (and, less frequently, the UN), *SPON*’s ingroup construction of a geopolitical Self concerning the nuclear issue is, excluding one article (SPON03.08), confined to the P5+1 group of major powers.

(7) “Diplomacy involves meeting with people with whom you disagree. **The UK** should be working with **other EU countries** to engage with the new Iranian President, while maintaining peaceful pressure through sanctions,” he [Douglas Alexander MP] said. (G24.07)

(8) [...], **the European chief diplomat** [Catherine Ashton], who leads the negotiations with Iran on behalf of **the "5+1" group** (the U.S., Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany), said she was “*firmly committed to working with the new Iranian leadership towards a swift diplomatic solution to the nuclear question.*”<sup>411</sup> (LM15.06a, italics in original)

(9) Hassan Rouhani was, between 2003 and 2005, Tehran’s chief nuclear negotiator. He never ceased, back then, to seek compromise with his **European counterparts**<sup>412</sup> [...]. (LM15.06b)

(10) Die Gespräche des Landes mit **der sogenannten 5+1-Gruppe**, zu der die Vetomächte im Uno-Sicherheitsrat und Deutschland gehören, waren zuletzt ins Stocken geraten. (SPON06.08, SPON07.08)

### 7.2.1.3 The Self as a Eurotropic<sup>413</sup> collective

The third referential category discursively constructs Us as a collectivized ingroup/concept by adopting the terms ‘the West’ and ‘the international community’ or, less commonly, ‘the world’. Accordingly, the pervasive usage of ‘the West’ – and its related compounds – as the

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<sup>409</sup> De leurs manifestations de joie, nous ne voyons depuis Paris que ces vidéos, ces photos et ces récits rapportés sur les réseaux sociaux.

<sup>410</sup> also known as E3+3 (see Chapter Two).

<sup>411</sup> [...], la chef de la diplomatie européenne, qui dirige les négociations avec l'Iran au nom du groupe des "5+1" (Etats-Unis, Russie, Chine, France, Grande-Bretagne et Allemagne), s'est dite "*fermement déterminée à travailler avec les nouveaux dirigeants iraniens en vue d'une solution diplomatique rapide à la question nucléaire*".

<sup>412</sup> Hassan Rohani a été, entre 2003 et 2005, le chef négociateur de Téhéran pour le dossier nucléaire. Il n'a eu de cesse, alors, de chercher le compromis avec ses interlocuteurs européens [...].

<sup>413</sup> This term was borrowed from Shohat and Stam (2014) who coined ‘Eurotropic’ to draw attention to “an orientation rather than a continent, a tendency to turn toward the West as an ideal Platonic Sun, much as phototropic plants turn toward the literal sun for their sustenance” (p.364).



Self in all three media denotes a value-laden *collective identity* established in relation to the Other on two levels: first, positioning a powerful We-group and Iran on opposing sides, as excerpts below show:

- (11) Hassan Rouhani's victory in the Iranian election is truly stunning. It opens a window of hope for an easing of tension between Iran and the west on the strained nuclear file [...]. (G16.06a)
- (12) Westerners are concerned about the growing weight of Iran and Hezbollah on the side of Bashar Assad's regime<sup>414</sup> (sub-head, LM13.06b)
- (13) Neuer Präsident Rohani: Iran will Atom-Gespräche mit dem Westen wieder aufnehmen (headline, SPON06.08)

While these frequent references solidify “the consensual image” (Fowler, 1991, p.49) of the Self as a homogeneous We-group, some items from *Le Monde* and more so *Guardian* point out divergences/disunity in policies and interests of Western countries, with a focus on their own and/or the U.S.:

- (14) At the heart of the conflict between Iran and the west is the US's unwillingness to accept Iran's independence in foreign and domestic policies. (G16.06a)
- (15) The mixed messages emanating from Tehran have deepened divisions in the west over how to respond to the dawning of the Rouhani age. **The UK government** has opted not to send officials to the inauguration [...]. (G26.07)
- (16) **France** is contemplating delivering arms to the Syrian rebels to avoid the military destruction of forces hostile to Bashar Assad's regime that would irrevocably ruin the chances of bringing both parties to the negotiating table at an international conference that **Western countries** are trying to organize in Geneva in July.<sup>415</sup> (lead, LM13.06b)

Furthermore, whilst assuming a collective identity, not all ingroup members are presented in a positive light. Some op-eds/commentaries and editorials in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* use deictic pronouns to dissociate the Self from certain Western leaders or, more generally, Western powers. The editorial ‘we’ in excerpt 17, which “claims solidarity by invoking consensus” (Fowler, 1991, p.212), demarcates the Self from the Bush-Blair alliance. In the same vein, the consensual ‘we’ is used by *Guardian*'s columnist (excerpt 18). However, the pronoun ‘we’ appealed to, several times, in *Le Monde*'s op-ed (excerpt 19) is employed more vaguely; while distinguishing the Self from ‘the West’/‘Western countries’ – connoting those involved in nuclear talks – and their policy vis-à-vis Iran, it remains ambiguous as to whether the writers' intended addressees included in the constructed ‘we’ and the possessive pronoun

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<sup>414</sup> Les Occidentaux s'inquiètent du poids croissant de l'Iran et du Hezbollah au côté du régime de Bachar Al-Assad.

<sup>415</sup> La France envisage de livrer des armes à la rébellion syrienne pour éviter un écrasement militaire des forces hostiles au régime de Bachar Al-Assad qui ruinerait définitivement les chances d'amener les deux parties autour de la table des négociations, lors d'une conférence internationale que les pays occidentaux tentent d'organiser à Genève, en juillet.

‘our’ are co-citizens of ‘the free world’, “collected in moral or social, rather than geographical/political terms” (Fowler, 1991, p.49), and/or their leaders:

- (17) **Bush and Blair** saw Iran in terms of black and white. We need a different engagement (sub-head, *Observer* editorial entitled ‘Iran: the west needs to forge a more nuanced relationship with the new regime, G23.06)
- (18) When the last moderate president, Mohammad Khatami, was in power, **the George W Bush administration** foolishly invented "an axis of evil" and claimed Iran was part of it. Today **we** have a new chance to turn the page. (G16.06a)
- (19) In recent years, in the West, **we** weren’t on the streets of Iran, **we** weren’t the Iranians. **We** forgot the Iranian people and concentrated on other things: Ahmadinejad, the nuclear program, and that’s all. **We** entered a game and, alas, set aside our responsibility.<sup>416</sup>  
[...]  
The West has decided to wage war against the Iranian regime, regardless. But we can’t close our eyes to the damages incurred by this “clean” war.<sup>417</sup> (LM12.08)

Second, on a smaller scale, the three media use ‘the West’ as a notion – or a point of reference – against which Iran and its (cultural, societal, political) features and characteristics are described, depicted, compared to those of Ours, and evaluated (based on perceived affinity or distance) accordingly; in other words, the four key functions of ‘the West’, as a concept or idea in contraposition to ‘the Rest’, detected by Stuart Hall (1992, p.186). In this vein, ‘West(ern)’ is applied, more often in *Guardian*’s texts, as an attribution – that is, a predicational strategy – to establish an Us/Them dichotomy (excerpts 20, 21) on one hand, and for *both* positive Self and Other presentations (excerpts 22-25), with the latter involving attribution of a positive quality to Rouhani – his knowledge of, and ability to communicate with, Us – as well as discursively dissociating Iranians from their leaders and turning (pro-Western) Iranian people into ‘a friendly/familiar’ Them, on the other:

- (20) **From a western point of view**, it can be difficult to understand why the Iranian state might view Akbari’s films as such an existential challenge. (G15.07)
- (21) Herzlichkeit und Horror, die gleichzeitige Allgegenwärtigkeit von beidem ist für **westliche Besucher** schwer zu begreifen. (SPON12.06)
- (22) He [Rouhani] is a seasoned diplomat who knows the west. Under him, Iran suspended enrichment and allowed international inspectors in. (*Guardian* editorial, G17.06)
- (23) He [Rouhani] prides himself on having a better understanding of the West.<sup>418</sup> (interview with Israel’s Minister of Intelligence and Strategic Affairs, LM06.08)

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<sup>416</sup> Ces dernières années, en Occident, nous n’étions pas dans les rues d’Iran, nous n’étions pas des Iraniens. Nous avons oublié le peuple iranien et nous nous sommes concentrés sur d’autres choses: Ahmadinejad, le programme nucléaire, et c’est tout.

Nous sommes entrés dans un jeu et, hélas, nous avons laissé de côté notre responsabilité.

<sup>417</sup> L’Occident a décidé de déclarer la guerre au régime iranien, soit. Mais nous ne pouvons pas fermer les yeux devant les dégâts causés par cette guerre "propre".

<sup>418</sup> Il se targue d’avoir une meilleure compréhension de l’Occident.

- (24) The country is spectacular, the people are approachable, friendly and remain westward-looking. [...] In short, they are people the west used to and should still do business with. (G16.06b)
- (25) If boys can practice “parkour” “*on the streets, as it’s meant to be*”, “*girls choose places where there are less people, like beaches or natural parks*”, explains Gilda. At stake is fear of the police or *Basijis*, the militiamen who supposedly are guardians of virtue, who accuse them of imitating **Western lifestyles**.<sup>419</sup> (LM22.05, italics in original)

Closely related is ‘international community’, a notion which, as Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn (2009) explain, can be used as a legitimation and/or demarcation device: in line with its normative framework and recognized international law, the term can (de-)legitimize political actors/actions and, moreover, “apply urgency to a matter” (p.75); a collective concept, it can also serve an exclusionary purpose through discursive constructions of in- and outgroups, leading to “a paradoxical situation in which actors are *morally* excluded from the community while *legally and structurally* still being part of it” (p.76, emphases added). The three media, to varying degrees, use ‘international community’ in order to denote a broad We-group which, irrespective of differences amongst members, is united by a shared concern over a problematic state. Excluding an *Observer* editorial (excerpt 26), the compound appears in *Guardian* only through *internal intertextuality* (Richardson, 2007, pp. 101-6), namely reported speech (e.g. excerpts 27, 28):

- (26) Ahmadinejad's economic mismanagement has delivered an official 30% inflation rate, a series of diplomatic own goals, an impasse with the international community and backbreaking sanctions. (G23.06)
- (27) “Rouhani has a real task ahead. He has to balance the politics inside Iran while at the same time trying to bring Iran into the mainstream of the international community,” [chairman of the British-Iran parliamentary group] Wallace said. (G26.07)
- (28) “The Foreign Secretary [William Hague] reiterated the need for urgent progress to resolve the international community's concerns about Iran's nuclear programme,” a foreign office statement said. (G31.07)

Contrary to this discursive strategy of self-identification and concomitant othering that places the Self (a global community) and Iran (an expelled outcast) in binary oppositions, one news piece, with a sub-head citing the White House’s statement that called upon the new Iranian president to lead his country towards meeting its “*international obligations*”, includes Iran as part of this constructed international group in its concluding paragraph:

- (29) The last round of talks between Iran and the wider international community over the issue broke down in April, with seemingly little progress. (G04.08b)

<sup>419</sup> Si les garçons peuvent pratiquer le "parkour" "*dans les rues, comme c'est censé se faire*", "*les filles choisissent des lieux où il y a moins de monde, comme les plages ou les parcs naturels*", explique Gilda. En cause, la peur de la police ou des *bassidjis*, miliciens supposés être les gardiens de la vertu, qui les accusent de copier les modes occidentales.

Compared with *Guardian*, equating Self with ‘international community’ – besides through official remarks and quoted sources – is more common in *Le Monde* and *SPON*’s reporting:

- (30) **The international community** should be reminded of the inefficiency of its “sanctions” that are only targeting Iranian people.<sup>420</sup> (LM12.08)
- (31) French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius urged **the international community** on Wednesday, June 12, to stop the progression of the Syrian regime’s troops, backed by Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, towards Aleppo [...].<sup>421</sup> (LM12.06)
- (32) *“**The international community’s expectations of Iran are high, especially with regard to its nuclear program and its involvement in Syria. We are ready to work on these with the new president**”, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius added in a statement, praising “Iranian people’s unwavering aspiration to democracy.”*<sup>422</sup> (LM15.06a, italics in original).

The French website’s interchangeable use of Self and ‘international community’ is conducted visibly in one case: The last excerpt cited above comes from an article headlined ‘International community ready to work with Rouhani, Israel maintains pressure’ that is embedded via an internal hyperlink named “‘France ready to work” with the new Iranian president’ into another news piece<sup>423</sup>. Furthermore, besides official statements from the White House, the EU foreign policy chief, Paris/London, and Israel, the stated article (LM15.06a) contains a quote from the Syrian Opposition Coalition whom Paris – the first in Europe – recognized in 2012 as the Syrian people’s sole legitimate representative. The ‘international community’ is thus evoked in the said news piece, echoing France’s official position at the time, as a euphemism for a constructed We-group encompassing ‘Us and Our favored regional actors’.

*SPON*, likewise, refers regularly to ‘international community’ as the Self in its news reporting:

- (33) **Deutsche Politiker hoffen** vor allem auf ein baldiges Einlenken im Streit um die atomare Bewaffnung Irans. **Zentrale Forderung der internationalen Gemeinschaft** ist, dass Teheran darauf verzichtet, hochangereichertes Uran zu produzieren, das faktisch waffenfähig wäre. (SPON03.08)

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<sup>420</sup> Il faut rappeler à la communauté internationale l'inefficacité de ses “sanctions”, qui ne visent que le peuple iranien.

<sup>421</sup> Le chef de la diplomatie française, Laurent Fabius, a demandé mercredi 12 juin à la communauté internationale d'arrêter la progression vers Alep des troupes du régime syrien, soutenues par l'Iran et le Hezbollah libanais [...].

<sup>422</sup> “*Les attentes de la communauté internationale à l'égard de l'Iran sont fortes, notamment sur son programme nucléaire et son engagement en Syrie. Nous sommes prêts à y travailler avec le nouveau président*”, a renchérit dans un communiqué le chef de la diplomatie française, Laurent Fabius, saluant “*l'inébranlable aspiration à la démocratie du peuple iranien*”.

<sup>423</sup> ‘Rohani salue “la victoire de la modération sur l'extrémisme”’.

- (34) Zwar liegt die Entscheidung über Irans Atomprogramm bei Ajatollah Ali Chamenei [...]. Doch der Präsident hat erheblichen Einfluss darauf, in welcher Atmosphäre und welchem Ton die Verhandlungen mit der internationalen Gemeinschaft stattfinden. (SPON13.07)
- (35) **Der internationalen Gemeinschaft** ist Rohani im Atomstreit bekannt. Der 64-Jährige war 2003 bis 2005 Irans Chefunterhändler und stimmte einem Anreicherungsstopp zu (SPON15.06a)

In one news piece, the term is recontextualized through a direct quote from Rouhani's speech during his first press conference and reproduced as follows:

- (36) "Wir sind jedenfalls bereit, diesbezüglich alle Bedenken der internationalen Gemeinschaft auszuräumen", sagte der Präsident. (SPON06.08)

In his actual remarks<sup>424</sup>, however, Rouhani evokes Iran's (nuclear) *rights* under international law and refers to "the concerns of both sides". The term 'international community' is only used by the U.S. State Department spokeswoman, also quoted further down in the article, who describes Rouhani's election as "eine Gelegenheit für Iran, schnell zu handeln, um die tiefe Sorge der internationalen Gemeinschaft über das Atomprogramm zu zerstreuen", while referring to Iran's *responsibility* to meet "seine internationalen Verpflichtungen". Quotations, Reisigl and Wodak (2009, p.90) argue, are "de- and re-contextualized, i.e. newly framed" and "can partly acquire new meanings in the specific context of press coverage". These new assigned meanings, as excerpt 36 demonstrates, entail a process "of invoking and perpetuating the assumptions and 'old knowledge' repertoire of the new context" (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.123), therewith corresponding to *SPON*'s macro discourse.

Finally, taking the Self *pars pro toto* (Wodak, 2009, p.42) for the whole world is apparent in several *Guardian* items and one instance in *Le Monde* and *SPON* each:

- (37) The stakes are certainly high – for the Islamic Republic and perhaps the world. (G13.05)
- (38) [Then-nuclear negotiator] Jalili took a battering for his hardline positions in the latest round of talks this spring with the permanent five members of the security council, though the toughest attack came not from Rouhani but from Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister, who said that interacting with the world was better than defying it. (G16.06a)
- (39) He [Rouhani] will also seek to change Iran's relations with the world. (G16.06b)
- (40) A dictatorial regime has decided to maltreat its population. This leaves **the entire world** indifferent.<sup>425</sup> (LM12.08)
- (41) **Die Welt** blickt mit großen Erwartungen auf den neuen iranischen Präsidenten. (SPON02.08a)

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<sup>424</sup> "We are prepared, seriously and without wasting time, to enter negotiations which are serious and substantive with the other side" and "If the other party is also prepared like we are, then I am confident that the concerns of both sides will be removed through negotiations within a period which will not be very long" (George & Torbati, 2013).

<sup>425</sup> Un régime dictatorial a décidé de malmener sa population. Cela laisse indifférent le monde entier.

Contrary to this referential strategy that conceptualizes the Self as the entire world, outside of which Iran stands, a news feature in *Guardian* applies the term as “an inclusive space” (Krzyżanowski, 2010, p.164):

(42) Rouhani's impact on Iran's relations with the rest of the world is even harder to predict. (G26.07)

## 7.2.2 Iran

With regard to Iran, three prevailing nomination/referential categories were identified in the sampled texts: Iran as a political entity/geographical space, Iran as Rouhani, and Iran as people.

### 7.2.2.1 Iran as a political entity/geographical space

References to Iran as a political entity can be divided into two main groups: those referring to Iran as a state and those to its political system (polity). The first and most prevalent group of references to Iran, as state/actor, in all three media entails neutral and diplomatic terms i.e. ‘Iran’ and the toponym ‘Tehran’, the latter which appears across the articles either to refer to the entire country, using *pars pro toto* synecdoches (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p.94), or as a metonym for the government, which in some cases is used to dissociate Iranian people from the officialdom (excerpt 43). More common in *Le Monde* and appearing once in *Guardian*, ‘the Iranians’ – sometimes combined with deictic distancing pronouns such as ‘they’– is also incorporated through official remarks in mostly conflict-laden contexts (excerpts 44-46).

(43) Indem dieses Mal offenbar kein massiver Wahlbetrug begangen wird, belässt Teheran den Iranern die Hoffnung, dass ihre Stimme zählt. (SPON15.06b)

(44) “**The Iranians** must be prevented from developing that capacity to build a nuclear weapon and deliver it,” he [U.S. defense secretary] told reporters on his plane. (G21.04)

(45) The battle of Qusair has demonstrated that “*Bashar’s regime can’t sustain itself without the massive support of **the Iranians***”, highlights a diplomat<sup>426</sup>. (LM13.06b, italics in original)

(46) There may be a diplomatic solution if **the Iranians** understand that **they** have no choice but [to decide] between the destruction of **their** economy and **their** nuclear program. In this case, **they**’ve shown it during the presidential election, **they** will choose to save **their** economy. But we mustn’t ease pressure.<sup>427</sup> (interview with Israel’s Minister of Intelligence and Strategic Affairs, LM06.08)

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<sup>426</sup> La bataille de Qoussair a démontré que “*le régime de Bachar ne peut se maintenir sans l’appui massif des Iraniens*”, souligne un diplomate.

<sup>427</sup> Il peut y avoir un règlement diplomatique si les Iraniens comprennent qu'ils n'ont le choix qu'entre la destruction de leur économie et leur programme nucléaire. Dans ce cas, ils l'ont montré lors de l'élection présidentielle, ils choisiront de sauver leur économie. Mais il ne faut pas alléger la pression.

The nomination group regarding Iran's ruling system ranges from neutral references i.e. 'the Iranian government' (G22.04), 'the (political) system' (G13.05), 'the (Iranian) state' (G10.06, G15.07), '(top) Iranian leaders' (LM02.08), 'the clergy' (LM11.06a), '(new) Iranian leadership' (LM15.06a), 'das Establishment' (SPON14.06), 'Irans politisches System' (SPON15.06b), 'die iranische Führung/Irans Führung' (SPON13.07), and 'die Regierung' (SPON14.08) to more evaluative referential and predicational choices in several items such as 'a dictatorial regime/theocracy' (LM12.08) in *Le Monde's* news and opinion articles and value-laden religious markers in *SPON's* news pieces and guest posts i.e. 'das Ajatollah-System' (SPON15.06b), '[die] Gewaltherrschaft der Mullahs' (SPON12.06) as well as one news article (SPON07.05) in which where the name 'Iran' in the title is replaced by 'Mullahs' in the URL address inserted below the text ,and a travel story (SPON12.06) with the accompanying photo gallery captioned 'Reisen im Reich der Mullahs'. Besides these instances, a common reference to Iran's political system in the three news sites – as already stated in the previous chapter – is the negatively connotated 'regime', which, according to *Guardian* and *Observer* style guide<sup>428</sup>, "can be used to describe a government widely regarded as authoritarian". While using 'the (Iranian) regime' to encapsulate – and, in van Leeuwen's terms (1996, p.58), *appraise* – Iran's ruling system is common across the sampled texts, 'new regime' appears in the title of the *Observer* editorial (G23.06) when referring to President-elect Rouhani's new government. Moreover, although the loaded term appears in various contexts/items with positive or negative valence in all three sites, it features in some cases in *SPON* involving foreign or domestic conflict-ridden issues in order to further delegitimize the indicated position/action of Iranian leadership:

- (47) Der Krieg in Syrien sei kein sunnitisch-schiitischer Konflikt, sondern ein Kampf zwischen den "Gegnern und Unterstützern der Zionisten", heißt es in dem Aufruf. So bezeichnet **das iranische Regime** Israel. (SPON07.05)
- (48) **Das iranische Regime** veranstaltet seit Jahrzehnten den Kuds-Tag. (SPON02.08b)
- (49) Die 32-Jährige zieht es aufs offene Meer, sie jagt Freiwasserrekorde. Ihr Problem: Asghari ist Iranerin und hat seit vergangenem Monat reichlich Ärger mit **dem Regime in Teheran**. (SPON06.07)
- (50) **Das Regime** verschärfte die Repression. Auch Unbeteiligte konnten plötzlich zu Verfolgten werden wie etwa Neda Soltani, die mit der Getöteten verwechselt wurde.  
[...]  
Der kurdische Iraner war **dem Regime** als engagierter Menschenrechtler bekannt. Einer seiner Freunde wurde hingerichtet. (SPON14.06)

In addition to the occasional loaded/pejorative religious markers stated above, a sub-group of references to Iran's political establishment emphasizes its theocratic character. While Iran is

<sup>428</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-r>

in some instances (excerpts 51, 52) mentioned by its official title (Islamic Republic of Iran), the country is regularly referred to in the three news sites – especially *Guardian* and *SPON* – as ‘the Islamic Republic’. Depending on the context of its appearance (all sites) or whether ‘republic’ is capitalized or lowercased (*Guardian*), the noun phrase is applied to denote the whole state or (the *nature* of) the Iranian government (excerpts 53-55), and, in the op-ed in *Le Monde*, to refer both to Iran as a state and a theocratic entity as distinct from its ordinary citizens (excerpt 56).

- (51) The election of Hassan Rouhani, a 64-year-old cleric, to the presidency of **the Islamic republic of Iran** leaves many people around the world with more questions than answers. (*Observer* editorial, G23.06)
- (52) Newly elected to the presidency of **the Islamic Republic of Iran**, moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani is awaited on the nuclear and Syria files.<sup>429</sup> (LM15.06a)
- (53) Slightly above and behind him are the unmistakably baleful features of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini – a reminder that the political system of the Islamic Republic he founded back in 1979 remains as complex and opaque as ever. (G13.05)
- (54) In a letter sent to President Barack Obama, 76 senators demanded tougher economic punishment for **Iran** until **the Islamic republic** scales back its nuclear ambitions. (G04.08b)
- (55) Er [Rouhani] gehörte zu den frühen Anhängern von Ajatollah Ruhollah Chomeini, dem Gründer der Islamischen Republik. Auch ist er Mitglied im Expertenrat, der den Revolutionsführer, der wichtigste Mann in der **Islamischen Republik**, bestimmt. (SPON15.06a)
- (56) It's not the Islamic Republic who suffers the consequences of this embargo, it's millions of citizens who pay the price.<sup>430</sup>  
[...]  
The policy that is waged against the Islamic Republic of Iran is a policy against its population.<sup>431</sup> (op-ed, LM12.08)

This referential pattern is also observable in items focusing on social restrictions and/or women's issues (excerpts 57-59). In this vein, the Islamic character of Iran's political system is foregrounded and stressed in these instances as well as through referential/predicational choices in other articles i.e. ‘the religious establishment’ (G15.07) and ‘Iran's theocratic leaders’ (G16.06b) or negative connotations attached to Sharia (Islamic law) that is enforced in Iran (LM02.07, LM19.07, SPON14.08).

- (57) The outdoor sport, a fast-paced hybrid of gymnastics and martial arts, seems designed to get you out of a fix quickly, which perhaps explains its appeal to young Iranians, whose social lives in the strict Islamic republic often require considerable agility. (G10.06)

<sup>429</sup> Fraîchement élu à la présidence de la République islamique d'Iran, le religieux modéré Hassan Rohani est attendu sur les dossiers du nucléaire et de la Syrie.

<sup>430</sup> Ce n'est pas la République islamique qui subit les conséquences de ces embargos, ce sont des millions d'habitants qui en paient les frais.

<sup>431</sup> La politique qui est menée contre la République islamique d'Iran est une politique contre sa population.



(58) Teheran - Männer und Frauen tanzen ausgelassen auf der Straße zu iranischer Popmusik, zusammen, mitten auf der Straße. Eigentlich ist das in der Islamischen Republik verboten. (lead, SPON16.06)

(59) 20 Kilometer im offenen Meer, in einem kiloschweren Ganzkörpergewand. Die Leistung von Elham Asghari ist beachtlich, doch die pruden Islamwächter in Iran wollen sie nicht anerkennen. (teaser, SPON06.07)

Finally, Iran is mentioned as a geographical space in several items from *Le Monde*'s Iran-specific blog or by (guest) writers in *Guardian* and *SPON*:

(60) Wir sitzen im Kellerraum einer spartanisch eingerichteten Shisha-Bar in **Tabris im Nordwesten Irans.** (SPON12.06)

#### 7.2.2.2 Iran as Rouhani

The second referential category – naming options and concurrent attributions – constructs Rouhani as the personification of moderation in post-Ahmadinejad Iran and bearer of hope both for the Iranian people and the nuclear talks. Besides proper name and neutral/official references i.e. ‘(Hassan) Rouhani’ or ‘Iran’s (new) president’, Rouhani is characterized as ‘a (veteran) pragmatist’ (G26.07, G04.08a), ‘(more) centrist’ (G13.05, G04.08a), ‘moderate (cleric)’ (G17.06, G15.07, G04.08b, LM15.06c, LM16.06, LM19.07, SPON16.06, SPON14.08), and ‘reformist’ (G24.07, LM15.06b) throughout the texts and in one guest post in *SPON* from a journalist of Iranian descent described enthusiastically – albeit erroneously – as ‘Oppositionskandidat’ (SPON14.08). The German outlet also uses modifiers such as ‘der moderateste (unter den Kandidaten)’ (SPON14.06, SPON15.06b) and ‘[der] als moderat (und pragmatisch) geltende’ (SPON03.08), with the former suggesting that Rouhani is considered, by the journalist, as the most moderate relative to his conservative and hardline rivals and the latter used as a distancing strategy, with the author relying on his qualification by others. This strategy was also used in two news pieces in *Le Monde* (LM15.06a, LM02.08). Besides referring regularly to his track record as former chief nuclear negotiator (e.g. excerpts 9, 22, 35), Rouhani’s clerical status is often mentioned in the sampled texts. This is in stark contrast to what Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013, p.61) noted in U.S. media’s depiction of Khatami in a way as if he “is himself not a cleric, or stands outside of the political establishment”, with his religious title, alongside Rafsanjani’s, being “completely obscured”. Moreover, while Rouhani is occasionally labeled ‘Mullah’ (mainly *Le Monde*), as Chapter Six showed (section 6.2.1.2), this loaded term was only used twice in two of the articles selected from *SPON* (SPON07.05, SPON12.06) to denote the entirety of the Iranian regime or “the more institutionally powerful, unelected hardline elements of the political elite” (Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013, p.60). In addition to foregrounding his clerical qualification, the president-elect is in instances i.e. the *Observer* editorial titled “in the form of honorification” (van Leeuwen,

1996, p.53) as ‘Dr Rouhani’ (G23.06). Represented as *pars pro toto* for the country and the embodiment of a (more) rational Iran, Rouhani is often compared through *rhetorical contrasts* (van Dijk, 1998, p.60) with his predecessor (especially in *Guardian* and *SPON*) via honorifics solely used for the former in *Guardian* (excerpts 61, 62) and negative qualities attributed to the latter in all three sites (excerpts 63-65). References to Ahmadinejad across the sampled articles vary from proper noun and mostly neutral/official choices i.e. ‘(Mahmoud) Ahmadinejad’ or ‘the (outgoing) president’ to more evaluative or emotive descriptions in some news, analysis and opinion pieces i.e. ‘hardline predecessor’ (G04.08b), ‘the abrasive populist Khamenei anointed in 2005’ (G13.05), ‘Populist’ (SPON15.06a), and ‘a loathsome figure’<sup>432</sup> (LM12.08).

- (61) Unlike his confrontational predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mr Rouhani is a consensus builder. (*Guardian* editorial, G17.06)
- (62) To distance himself from his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mr Rouhani promised a government of wisdom and hope. (*Guardian* editorial, G04.08a)
- (63) In a statement marking the formal handing over of power to **the moderate cleric** from his hardline predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the White House congratulated the Iranian people for “making their voices heard” and calling for “change”. (G04.08b)
- (64) **Moderate Hassan Rouhani** won the Iranian presidential election, bringing an end to eight years of conservative executive power, Iran’s Interior Ministry announced on Saturday, June 15<sup>433</sup>. (LM15.06b, LM15.06c)
- (65) Nach dem Populisten Ahmadinedschad ist nun wieder **ein hochrangiger Geistlicher** iranischer Präsident. (SPON15.06a)

### 7.2.2.3 Iran as people

As for ordinary Iranians, three referential strategies – based on van Leeuwen’s (1996) taxonomy – are discernible in the examined texts: *assimilation* by ways of aggregation and collectivization, *categorization* through identification (*who* the social actors *are*) and functionalization (*what* they *do*), and *nomination*. The first group includes collective terms such as ‘the crowd(s)’ and ‘the (Iranian) population/people’, the latter which is applied both by journalists and in quoted sources/official remarks (excerpts 19, 24, 32, 56). ‘Iranians’ occurs in the sampled texts as well, with the contexts eliciting sympathy/praise (excerpts 19, 43, 66-69), excluding one piece in *SPON* (excerpt 70), as opposed to the alarm its usage as a geopolitical anthroponym often arouses (see section 7.2.2.1). Other forms of assimilation by plurality include ‘Iranian voters’, ‘(Iranian) women’, ‘young women (in Iran)’ in the three

<sup>432</sup> un personnage abominable

<sup>433</sup> Le modéré Hassan Rohani a remporté l’élection présidentielle iranienne, mettant un terme à huit années de pouvoir exécutif conservateur, a annoncé samedi 15 juin le ministre iranien de l’intérieur.

sites, ‘Jugend in Iran’ and ‘young Iranians’ in *SPON* and *Le Monde*, and ‘political prisoners’ in *Guardian* and *SPON*. Aggregation techniques i.e. ‘thousands of people’ (G05.07), ‘a majority of Iranians’ (LM15.06b), and ‘Viele Jugendliche’ (SPON14.08) are also frequently used in this referential group.

(66) **Iranians** vote for change, however gradual (headline, G16.06b)

(67) As if too much religion has vaccinated the **Iranians** against its public observance.<sup>434</sup> (LM11.06a)

(68) **Iraner** zählen zu den gastfreundlichsten Menschen der Erde. (teaser, SPON12.06)

(69) “Rohanis Sieg ist ein Erdbeben”, sagte der deutsch-iranische Grünen- Politiker Omid Nouripour SPIEGEL ONLINE [...]. “Es ist unglaublich, wie sich **die Iraner** einfach nicht haben frustrieren lassen und zur Wahl gegangen sind.” (SPON15.06b)

(70) Der Syrien-Aufruf appelliert auch an religiöse Gefühle, um **die Iraner** zu mobilisieren. Man müsse schiitische Heiligtümer verteidigen. (SPON07.05)

The second and third referential groups are often combined together and appear in the sampled news and human-interest stories on (young) Iranians and in other items through quoted sources. While ordinary Iranians are often foregrounded and individualized – in other words, humanized – by being named and/or categorized based on their age, gender, and/or occupation, security agencies and authorities are, with exceptions in *Le Monde* (discussed later), predominantly backgrounded, collectivized or *genericized* (van Leeuwen, 1996, pp.46-8) and, therewith represented as a homogenous outgroup – consistent with the referential strategies used for Iran’s political system stated earlier – by means of generic terms i.e. ‘(police) officers’, ‘riot police’, the ‘Basij’, and ‘official(s)/authorities’ (excerpts 71,72). This also involves, in some instances, the distancing pronoun ‘They’ through quoted individuals (excerpt 73) as well as expressions containing a negative semantic load (Mautner, 2008, p.38) such as ‘Sittenpolizei’ (excerpt 74). Through *appraisement* (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.58), that is, assigning positive qualities to ordinary Iranians or attributions that trigger compassion/pity, juxtaposed with evaluative or negative traits to Iranian authorities, the three media consistently differentiate Iranian people from the authorities. Hence, these “chosen referential strategies”, as Richardson (2007) points out, do not merely “project meaning and social values onto the referent, they also establish coherence relations with the way that *other* social actors are referred to and represented” (p.50, emphasis in original).

(71) **The 39-year-old actor, writer and director** is not in the UK by choice. During production of her latest film [...], members of her crew were arrested by **Iranian authorities** for supposedly filming without official permission. (G15.07)

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<sup>434</sup> Comme si trop de religion avait vacciné les Iraniens contre sa pratique publique.

- (72) All that is left for **him** to do is to keep a low profile so as not to be detected by **the authorities**.<sup>435</sup> (LM13.06a)
- (73) "If **we** do not participate then **they** [the regime] will have the majority and will get on with **their** agenda," warns Mohammad, 25. (G13.05)
- (74) **Junge Pärchen** ohne Trauschein können wegen der islamischen Gesetze und **der strengen Sittenpolizei** nach einem Date in einem Café auf einer Polizeiwache landen.  
[...]  
All das erlebt auch **der Computerspezialist Behsad**. (SPON14.08)

## 7.3 Predicational and argumentation strategies

### 7.3.1 The Self

Regarding the Self, while the three media, albeit to varying degrees, use predicational and argumentation strategies in their Iran coverage in order to justify the attribution of positive qualities/actions to Us, legitimating the Self is mostly substantiated through de-legitimizing the Other. This is especially evident in *SPON*'s coverage of (conflicts involving) Iran, as will be shown, with the Self's rightfulness and rationality presupposed and implied, whereas instances of explicit positive Self-presentation appear in both *Guardian* and *Le Monde* with respect to different topics/issues. Examples of positive Self-presentation in sampled French texts through quotes/statements from (French) politicians and in the writer's own wording include passages below from the French foreign minister's interview with *Le Monde* (LM09.05), stated in Chapter Six (section 6.2.1.2), and a news piece (LM13.06b). In the former case and in response to the question about France's 'wait-and-see approach' on Syria at the time, Fabius uses hyperbole and draws on the topoi of humanitarianism and number to accentuate the severity of the crisis and, furthermore, uses causal argumentation following the 'rule of three' (Richardson, 2007, p.173) persuasion tactic to connect the war in Syria with the entire region's destabilization "[i]f the conflict is not brought to a halt", therewith stressing the necessity (for Us) to act and Our (moral) obligation:

- (75) LM: Regarding Syria, major crisis in the most troubled region on the planet, is Paris not taking a wait-and-see approach?<sup>436</sup>

F: The Syrian tragedy, if it continues, **might be the worst humanitarian and political catastrophe of the dawn of this century**. The dead, the injured, the displaced, [and] refugees number hundreds of thousands in Syria or in neighboring countries. **If the conflict is not brought to a halt, it's the break up of the country that looms, the sectarian ultra-radicalization of both camps, [and] the destabilization of every component of this already explosive region**<sup>437</sup>.

<sup>435</sup> Tout ce qu'il lui reste à faire, c'est de garder un profil bas pour ne pas être repéré par les autorités.

<sup>436</sup> Sur la Syrie, crise majeure dans la région la plus troublée de la planète, la France n'a-t-elle pas une position attentiste?

<sup>437</sup> La tragédie syrienne, si elle se poursuit, peut être la pire catastrophe humanitaire et politique de ce début de siècle. Les morts, les blessés, les déplacés, les réfugiés se chiffrent par centaines de milliers en Syrie ou dans les

Based on this argumentation, Fabius announces France's intention "to pursue a four-pronged approach" that indicates Our preference for non-violence, Our support for the 'good guys', and Our sensible approach, all which serve to substantiate Our reasonable course of action while adding a sense of urgency by foregrounding the Other's negative action:

(76) First, to continue pushing for a political solution [...].<sup>438</sup>

The second decision is that we're going to increase our support for the moderate opposition, the Syrian National Coalition [...].<sup>439</sup>

The third decision is to discuss arms embargo with our European partners. On one hand, there's no question that resistance fighters and civilians continue to be bombarded: they are legitimately demanding the means of protecting themselves. On the other hand, we can't supply them with weapons that might fall into the hands of the regime or terrorist movements.<sup>440</sup>

Finally, we are in the process of completing our investigation and action plans concerning the possibility of chemical weapons use by Assad. **We must move and move fast.**<sup>441</sup>

In the latter case, a news piece headlined 'France contemplates arming the Syrian rebels', the West is contrasted with Russia and Iran (topoi of comparison and difference) and depicted as a sensible, patient We-group:

(77) This intensified discussion over arms delivery marks a shift in the cautious positions taken thus far by Western countries. While Russia and Iran are openly engaged militarily alongside the Syrian regime, Washington, London and Paris have hesitated about the way forward for two years, dreading to get themselves involved in another conflict after interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.<sup>442</sup>

Other instances of explicit positive Self-presentation in *Le Monde* and *Guardian* – as well as cases, including in *SPON*, which can be construed as such – that resemble Santini's (2010, p.473) observation of positive connotation of the EU (e.g. 'Our good faith', etc.) in official European discourses on Iran's nuclear file (see Chapter Two, section 2.6) will be discussed where relevant. In addition, as will be shown, Self-presentation in some *Guardian* texts also entails criticizing Us and attributing negative qualities and actions to the Western We-group, as reflected in the British site's referential choices stated earlier (section 7.2.1.3).

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pays voisins. Si on ne porte pas un coup d'arrêt au conflit, c'est l'éclatement du pays qui se profile, l'ultra-radicalisation sectaire des deux camps, la déstabilisation de toutes les composantes de cette zone déjà éruptive.

<sup>438</sup> Nous entendons poursuivre selon quatre orientations. D'abord, continuer de pousser une solution politique

<sup>439</sup> Deuxième décision, nous allons augmenter notre soutien envers l'opposition modérée, la Coalition nationale syrienne [...]

<sup>440</sup> Troisième décision, discuter avec nos partenaires européens de l'embargo sur les armes. D'un côté, il n'est pas question que les résistants et les civils continuent d'être bombardés: ils demandent légitimement les moyens de se protéger. De l'autre, on ne peut pas leur fournir d'armements susceptibles de tomber dans les mains du régime ou de mouvements terroristes.

<sup>441</sup> Enfin, nous sommes en train de préciser nos enquêtes et nos plans d'action face à la possibilité d'utilisation par Assad d'armes chimiques. Il faut bouger et bouger vite.

<sup>442</sup> Cette accélération du débat sur les livraisons d'armes marque une évolution par rapport aux positions prudentes défendues jusqu'à présent par les pays occidentaux. Alors que la Russie et l'Iran sont ouvertement engagés militairement auprès du régime syrien, Washington, Londres et Paris hésitent sur la marche à suivre depuis deux ans, redoutant de s'impliquer dans un autre conflit après les interventions en Afghanistan, en Irak et en Libye.

### 7.3.2 The Other/Iran

With respect to Other-presentation, all three media deploy a larger number of predicational categories wherein various topoi (see Chapter Five, Table 5.1 for details) are drawn upon to represent and (de-)legitimate Iran as a state actor. The next sections elaborate at length the main predicational strategies used in the sampled articles, some of which were identified in the preceding thematic analysis and mentioned in Chapter Six, along with the argumentative schemes adopted to justify in- and outgroup constructions and/or substantiate the attribution of (positive, negative) traits to the Other.

#### 7.3.2.1 Their malign presence in Syria

In all three media, with exceptions in *Guardian*, Iran's growing involvement in Syria's multi-sided war is predominantly depicted during the examined timeframe as unwarranted interference that is destructive (to Syria), destabilizing (for the region), and threatening (to Us/Our partners). The main predicational themes in the texts about/referring to Syria, with some variances among the three outlets, through which Iran is repeatedly othered and delegitimated entail: siding with a callous regime, association with other 'bad' actors i.e. Russia and extremist groups (notably Hezbollah), exacerbating other conflicts in the region and posing a threat to regional stability, all which are discussed below.

##### 7.3.2.1.1 *Their alliance with the 'bad guys' / Our siding with the 'good guys'*

As stated in Chapter Six (section 6.2.1.1), Iran is often *associated*, in van Leeuwen's (1996) terms, with the Syrian regime and other pro-Assad foreign actors. This is realized in two ways: First, through 'parataxis' (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.50), that is, placing social actors, namely Syria and Iran – alongside Hezbollah, Russia and, less so, China – side by side, as examples below show (see also excerpts 12, 31):

(78) The raids follow the public declaration by Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah last week that his fighters are supporting government forces inside Syria – which are also backed by **Iran, Russia and China**. (G07.05)

(79) Aleppo is all at once the next target of **Syrian forces, Hezbollah, and the Iranians**, says Laurent Fabius, who wants a re-balancing of power in favor of the insurgents.<sup>443</sup> (sub-head, LM12.06)

(80) Hilfe für Assad: **China, Iran und Russland** päppeln Syriens Wirtschaft (headline, SPON28.06)

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<sup>443</sup> Alep est la prochaine cible à la fois des forces syriennes, du Hezbollah, des Iraniens, indique Laurent Fabius, qui veut un rééquilibrage des forces en faveur des insurgés.

Second, Iran and these actors are associated, especially in items sampled from *Le Monde* and *SPON*, to form a negative outgroup on the opposite side of the West/allies – and the Syrian people – by means of “a cohesive chain” (Mautner, 2008, p.43) established throughout the text. This outgroup construction involves linking Iran and other pro-Assad actors to negative actions perpetrated in Syria, namely war crimes committed by the Syrian forces (e.g. use of chemical weapons, killing of civilians/rebels) or assigning negative qualities to the Syrian government. These references range from proper noun or neutral terms i.e. ‘Assad’/‘Syrian forces’ (all sites) to value-laden/emotive descriptions that mostly appear in the analysis and opinion pieces selected from *Guardian* and more so *Le Monde* as well as *SPON*’s overall coverage in line with the German’s outlet’s reporting style that mixes factual and evaluative vocabulary (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.1). Examples include: ‘the Assad regime’ (G07.05); ‘the (Syrian) regime’ (LM09.05, LM17.05, LM20.05, LM07.06, LM12.06, LM13.06b), ‘the Syrian dictator’ (LM07.06); ‘das Assad-Regime’ (SPON07.05), ‘[d]ie Armee von Diktator Baschar al-Assad’ (SPON08.06), ‘[d]as Regime von Diktator Baschar al-Assad’ (SPON28.06). By comparison, the Syrian group supported by the West at the time is mostly legitimated and referred to across the sampled articles in generic/neutral terms such as ‘(Syrian) rebels’ (G07.05, LM20.05, LM13.06a, SPON08.06, SPON28.08); ‘the (Syrian) opposition’ (G07.05, LM20.05, LM12.06, LM13.06b, SPON08.06); ‘the (Syrian) resistance’ (LM12.06, LM13.06b), or, more specifically, nominated as the Paris-backed ‘Syrian National/Opposition Coalition’ in some items in *Le Monde* (LM09.05, LM17.05, LM20.05, LM15.06a). Other instances whereby France’s favored group is legitimated or its support justified in the French texts involve the news piece (LM15.06a) cited before (section 7.2.1.3) in which the group – unlike Iran – is positioned within the ‘international community’ and an op-ed entitled ‘Syria falls under control of Iran and Hezbollah’ (LM07.06), written by a French historian after the battle of Qusair (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1.1). As excerpt 81 show, the author draws on topos of justice/human rights, referring to worsening repression in Syria in the aftermath of the aforesaid battle and the Syrian army’s strategic win, in an ominous tone that activates alarm (topos of danger/threat), and based thereupon portrays (recognition of) forces preferred by Us/ the West as the sole solution to the Syrian tragedy:

(81) Such shift in repression, which looms equally over the fronts of Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, fuels an escalation in the horror inflicted upon Syrians. It reduces to pure fiction the "legitimacy" that Bashar Assad boasts about, with the support of Vladimir Putin. It condemns in advance every diplomatic "breakthrough" under the auspices of the UN so long as the Syrian resistance is not finally recognized as the repository of national sovereignty.<sup>444</sup>

<sup>444</sup> Un tel transfert de la charge de la répression, qui s'annonce également sur les fronts de Damas, de Homs et d'Alep, alimente une escalade dans l'horreur infligée aux Syriens. Il réduit à une pure fiction la "légitimité" dont se targue Bachar Al-Assad, avec le soutien de Vladimir Poutine. Il condamne par avance toute "percée"

Moreover, the legitimizing function that reference to elite sources in media texts serves (Mautner, 2008, p.42) can also be extended to non-elite actors, who are relied on as sources during wartime and thus given legitimacy and credibility. Excerpt 82 illustrates this point:

(82) Insgesamt sind bei den Kämpfen ums Land nach Schätzungen der Rebellen mittlerweile mehr als 100,000 Menschen gestorben. (SPON28.06)

Within this predicational category, attribution of negative qualities/actions to Iran (and Syria) serves, in addition to negative Other-presentation, as a Self-legitimizing strategy in some texts by means of which (current, future) actions of the Western We-group are justified and depicted as reasonable, legitimate, and/or necessary. Examples include a piece in Tehran Bureau (see Chapter Three, section 3.1.1.5) published in *Guardian* and a news article from *Le Monde*. In the former, as excerpt 83 shows, the Obama administration's contemplation of arming the rebel forces is described as U.S. 'intervention' intended to help the rebels defend themselves against the Assad regime. Contrary to this positive Self-presentation denoting Our sensible approach and Our power (topos of authority), Iran's stance on Syria and its accusations of the rebels' use of chemical weapons are downplayed by the writer, whose wording throughout the text and the distancing strategy adopted here ('has sought to take the high moral ground') hint at his reservations and can thus be interpreted as the writer's personal opinion that, given its siding with Assad (among other things), Iran is in no position to feign moral superiority or claim the moral high ground. In the latter, as excerpt 84 shows, France's pondering over arming the rebels is reported as Our vital and consequential course of action in reaction to the unpleasant situation unfolding on the ground:

(83) With debate growing in Washington over possible US intervention to protect rebels against the forces of President Bashar al Assad, [Iran's Foreign Minister] Salehi, quoted in the semi-official ISNA news agency, has sought to take the high moral ground by implying it is the rebels who might be using chemical warfare. (G01.05)

(84) France is considering delivering arms to the Syrian rebels in order to avoid the military destruction of the forces hostile to Bashar Assad's regime that would irrevocably ruin the chances of bringing both parties to negotiating table at an international conference that Western countries are trying to organize in Geneva in July.<sup>445</sup> (LM13.06b)

Other examples in the examined French texts include the quotes below from Fabius that were cited in a news article headlined 'Syria: Fabius calls for halting the advance of Assad forces'

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diplomatique sous l'égide de l'ONU, tant que la résistance syrienne n'a pas été enfin reconnue comme dépositaire de la souveraineté nationale.

<sup>445</sup> La France envisage de livrer des armes à la rébellion syrienne pour éviter un écrasement militaire des forces hostiles au régime de Bachar Al-Assad qui ruinerait définitivement les chances d'amener les deux parties autour de la table des négociations, lors d'une conférence internationale que les pays occidentaux tentent d'organiser à Genève, en juillet.



(LM12.06). In both quotes, France's push for arming the rebels is justified and portrayed as a (moral) necessity by referring in the former (excerpt 85) to the war crime presumably committed by Assad 'in an outrageous manner' (topos of danger), and the need for the Syrian resistance to defend itself against such aggression (topos of reality) in the latter (excerpt 86). Moreover, Fabius' emphases on the need for 'a political solution' and one to abide by 'the European regulation', serves as positive Self-presentation to substantiate Our penchant for non-violence and Our lawfulness:

- (85) *Bashar [...] has used chemical weapons in an outrageous manner*, he [Fabius] insisted. *We must stop him because, if there is no re-balancing on the ground, there won't be a peace conference as the opposition will refuse to come. **Yet, we need a political solution.***"<sup>446</sup>
- (86) While insisting that "*in order for [Syrian] resistance fighters to be able to defend themselves, they must have weapons*", Laurent Fabius added: "*We have to comply with the **European regulation** which says that powerful weapons can be delivered from August 1<sup>st</sup> onwards. For the moment, we haven't decided yet.*"<sup>447</sup> (LM12.06, italics in original)

It should be added that negative qualities/actions are ascribed in some instances to rebels as well, with this attribution made in passing (excerpt 87) or downplayed by drawing an analogy with the regime's atrocities. The latter is exemplified by the fallacious argument (Richardson, 2007, p.170) adopted in an analysis piece written by Christophe Ayad, *Le Monde's* specialist on Iran/the Arab World, through which the rebels' 'isolated' crime is relativized and juxtaposed with the regime's 'daily cruelty for more than two years':

- (87) Radikale unter den Assad-Gegnern haben wiederholt Übergriffe auf Schiiten verübt. (SPON07.05)
- (88) Just as the recent case of the rebel engaging in cannibalism on the corpse of a government soldier in the region of Homs severely tarnished the image of the rebellion. Never mind that the incident is isolated and is **at least as bad as** the government's daily cruelty for more than two years.<sup>448</sup> (LM20.05)

### 7.3.2.1.2 *Their destabilizing/destructive role in the region*

Besides accentuating its support for Syria's regime, Iran often co-occurs with radical militant actors, namely Hamas and more so Hezbollah, and, accordingly, is routinely associated with Islamism/terrorism. As noted already in the previous chapter (section 6.2.1.3), the referential

<sup>446</sup> "Bachar [...] a utilisé de façon scandaleuse les armes chimiques, a-t-il insisté. Il faut qu'on l'arrête parce que, s'il n'y a pas de rééquilibrage sur le terrain, il n'y aura pas de conférence de la paix à Genève car l'opposition n'acceptera pas d'y venir. Or il faut une solution politique."

<sup>447</sup> Tout en plaidant pour "que les résistants [syriens] puissent se défendre, qu'ils disposent d'armes", Laurent Fabius a ajouté: "Il nous faut respecter la réglementation européenne qui dit que c'est à partir du 1<sup>er</sup> août que des armes puissantes peuvent être données. Pour le moment, nous n'avons pas encore décidé."

<sup>448</sup> Tout comme l'affaire récente du rebelle se livrant à un acte de cannibalisme sur le cadavre d'un soldat gouvernemental dans la région d'Homs a gravement entaché l'image de la rébellion. Peu importe si l'incident est isolé et n'a rien à envier à la cruauté quotidienne du pouvoir depuis plus de deux ans...

strategies applied, and the qualities attributed, to characterize Hezbollah range from neutral choices i.e. ‘die (libanesische) Hisbollah’ (SPON07.05) to more evaluative ones. In the texts sampled particularly from *Le Monde* and *SPON*, the Lebanese group, with one exception (discussed below) is often de-legitimated and represented via identification, in which “social actors are defined, not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they, more or less permanently, or unavoidably are” (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.54), accompanied by negative appraisements denoting Islamist extremism and/or hostility to Israel. Examples include: ‘the Lebanese Shia Hezbollah’ (LM02.08), ‘the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hezbollah’ (LM13.06a), ‘Shia shock troops’ (LM07.06); ‘die Schiitenmiliz’ (SPON08.06), ‘die Milizen der libanesischen Schiitenorganisation’ (SPON02.08a; SPON02.08b), and ‘israelfeindliche Gruppen’ (SPON07.05).

One of the recurring predicational strategies uniting most articles that cover/mention Syria is that of Hezbollah’s open involvement in the conflict – at the behest of Iran – and its regional repercussions. In this vein, the Iran-Hezbollah nexus is widely depicted not just as destructive to Syria(ns) by fueling the war but also dangerous for the entire region by intensifying tensions and other regional conflicts. This includes foregrounding Hezbollah’s offensive against rebel forces (e.g. excerpt 89) and escalation of sectarian divides (excerpts 90, 91):

(89) Nach dem Sieg in Kusair nimmt Hisbollah die Verfolgung von syrischen Rebellen auf. Das zeigt: Die Schiitenmiliz will den Einsatz an der Seite der Assad-Truppen im Bürgerkrieg offenbar ausweiten - wohl auch, weil Iran Druck macht. (teaser, SPON08.06)

(90) It [Rouhani’s election] opens a window of hope for an easing of tension between Iran and the west on the strained nuclear file but also on the more urgent issue – the self-destructive **clash between Shia and Sunni Islam** that is killing thousands in Syria and Iraq and threatens the entire Middle East region. (G16.06a)

(91) Before Sunni jihadis start flocking into Syria, Iran must realise what is at stake – and back down. **Posing as a champion of the Shia** is one thing; fighting a war with Sunni Arabs is another – and it is not a fight Iran will win. (*Guardian* editorial, G17.06)

As evident in the last two excerpts from *Guardian*, the multi-sided Syrian war (and Shia-Sunni sectarianism in the Middle East) is portrayed in some texts as being driven by theology (topos of religion). In fact, the author of the op-ed in *Le Monde* mentioned above (LM07.06) traces the growing involvement of (Shia) Iran and Hezbollah in Syria to Shia eschatology and constructs an apocalyptic scenario (topoi of religion and danger), mirroring the assertions<sup>449</sup> made by the late neoconservative scholar Bernard Lewis who envisioned an attack by Iran on U.S., Israel, and Islam’s other enemies to accelerate the return of Mahdi (the twelfth Imam):

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<sup>449</sup> "Ahmadinejad and his group clearly believe, and I don't doubt the sincerity of their belief, that we are now entering an apocalyptic age, which will result in the triumph of their messianic figure," alluding to the twelfth Imam, Mahdi (see, for example, Lappin, 2007).

(92) This dispossession of the Syrian regime in favor of its Shia allies goes hand in hand with a messianic drift the consequences of which in the short and medium term could not be underestimated. The Shia eschatology, in fact, accords pride of place to Syria in its grand narrative of the end of time. It is there where the hidden Imam, Mahdi, returns to defeat Sufyani, the malevolent figure that guises as Islam only to corrupt it.<sup>450</sup> (LM20.05)

Contrary to depicting the Syrian crisis along the lines of religion, Ayad argues in his analysis mentioned earlier (LM20.05) that Bashar Assad exploited the Shia-Sunni divide from the start of the unrest for his political gain (topos of advantage):

(93) The task of restructuring the Syrian army led by Iran has paid off. Guided and advised by Iranian instructors, supplied by just-in-time weapons by Russia, it [the army] has embarked on a major offensive for the past two months, the logic of which becomes more and more apparent: to clear and securitize a backbone of a "purposive country" stretching from Damascus to Latakia on the Mediterranean coast. This axis connects the capital to the Alawite state, the principal stronghold of a regime that played the sectarianism card to the max from the beginning of the unrest.<sup>451</sup>

Another predicational strategy applied in some French and German texts to de-legitimize the involvement of Iran (and Hezbollah) in Syria is that of escalating conflict with, and growing threat to, Israel. Examples include a news piece in *SPON* announcing 'Iran sucht Freiwillige für den Kampf gegen Israel' (SPON07.05) and the above-mentioned op-ed in *Le Monde* (LM20.05). The former, written by Raniah Salloum who regularly reports on Iran, contains a sub-section headed 'Syrien ist Teherans Waffenlieferant für israelfeindliche Gruppen', where the writer combines topos of threat with topos of authority (e.g. a UN report) to substantiate the illegality of Iran's threatening activity towards Israel (excerpt 94). In the latter, akin to the apocalyptic scenario stated earlier, the guest writer draws on topos of religion to substantiate the intrinsic threat that Iran, along with other Shia-majority states, poses to Israel:

(94) Für Teheran ist Syrien unter Baschar al-Assad quasi Umschlagplatz, um israelfeindliche Gruppen aufzurüsten. Nahezu alle illegalen iranischen Waffenlieferungen für die palästinensische Hamas oder die libanesische Hisbollah liefen bisher über Syrien, so ein Uno-Bericht 2011.

(95) Hezbollah, since 2006, laid claim to the assistance of Mahdi in the "divine Victory" achieved, in its view, over Israel. The following year, at the Iranian Cultural Center of Damascus, I bought pamphlets prophetizing the "grand battle" in Syria, where the army of believers would come

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<sup>450</sup> Cette dépossession du régime syrien au profit de ses alliés chiites s'accompagne d'une dérive messianique dont les conséquences à court et moyen terme ne sauraient être sous-estimées. L'eschatologie chiite accorde en effet une place de choix à la Syrie dans son grand récit de la fin des temps. C'est là que l'imam caché, le Mahdi, reviendra pour y terrasser le Sofyani, la figure maléfique qui se pare des habits de l'islam pour mieux le pervertir.

<sup>451</sup> Le travail de restructuration de l'armée syrienne mené par l'Iran porte ses fruits. Encadrée et conseillée par des instructeurs iraniens, approvisionnée en armes à flux tendu par la Russie, elle s'est lancée depuis deux mois dans une grande offensive dont la logique apparaît de plus en plus clairement : dégager et sécuriser une épine dorsale du "pays utile" allant de Damas à Lattaquié, sur la côte méditerranéenne. Cet axe relie la capitale au pays alaouite, principal fief d'un régime qui a joué à fond la carte du confessionnalisme depuis le début des troubles.

together from Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, to fight the "wrong Muslims" risen up against Assad, before leaving to conquer Jerusalem.<sup>452</sup>

### 7.3.2.1.3 *Their dangerous regional influence*

Another predicational strategy that pervades the sampled texts and intersects with the themes discussed above is that of the danger posed by Iran's growing influence. As such, Iran's role in Syria is (explicitly, implicitly) linked to its hegemonic aspirations, with Iran represented as poised to dominate Middle East and (further) threaten regional peace and stability. Western fears over Iran's mounting presence in Syria are sometimes linked to the themes stated earlier or unambiguously connected with the Iranian nuclear threat discussed later in this chapter. In excerpt 96, for instance, Iran's presence in Syria is de-legitimated by foregrounding the concerns of other (rival) regional states, Lebanon's destabilization, and potential escalation of tensions with U.S. and its regional allies:

(96) The battle of Qusair has shown that "Bashar's regime cannot sustain itself without the massive support of the Iranians", a diplomat underlines. Such entrenchment of Tehran raises fears over a shift in balance of forces in the region that excessively worries the Turkish and Israeli neighbors. It also risks destabilizing Lebanon further and could neither leave the Saudis nor their key American ally indifferent.<sup>453</sup> (LM13.06b)

In many cases, however, the reasons behind Iran's regional threat and why its role in Syria is to be dreaded or dissuaded are mainly presupposed and inferred. In such cases, the articles use a deductive argument structure called an *enthymeme* whereby "the conclusion follows the assertions", with readers relied upon to fill the missing/omitted premise(s) (Richardson, 2007, p.161). This occurs in official remarks as well as the writer's wording. As KhosraviNik (2015) points out, "a repertoire of assumptions helps to position and frame the current synchronic news/themes as extensions to an already established body of negative shared knowledge regarding Iran and its political system, aspirations and recent history in the way that it has been viewed in the West" (pp.223-4). Hence, 'Iran's growing influence' or its 'growing presence in Syria' communicate a message of 'menace', based on "a repertoire of old knowledge – in this case what you (the readership) and us (the paper) both know about Iran already" (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.228) which triggers alarm (topos of danger/threat) and,

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<sup>452</sup> Le Hezbollah avait revendiqué, dès 2006, l'assistance du Mahdi dans la "Victoire divine" remportée, selon lui, contre Israël. J'avais acquis l'année suivante, au Centre culturel iranien de Damas, des brochures prophétisant la "grande bataille" en Syrie, où se rejoindraient les armées des fidèles venus du Liban, d'Irak et d'Irak, pour combattre ensemble les "faux musulmans" soulevés contre Assad, avant de partir à la conquête de Jérusalem.

<sup>453</sup> La bataille de Qoussair a démontré que "le régime de Bachar ne peut se maintenir sans l'appui massif des Iraniens", souligne un diplomate. Un tel enracinement de Téhéran fait redouter un bouleversement de l'équilibre des forces dans la région qui inquiète au plus haut point les voisins turcs et israéliens. Il risque aussi de déstabiliser encore davantage le Liban et ne pourra laisser indifférent les Saoudiens, ni leur principal allié américain.

besides substantiating the Iranian Threat, serves to legitimate and justify Our decisions and actions. Examples from the three media include excerpts below (also excerpt 12, 31):

- (97) Looking around the Middle East, it is not easy to be an optimist. Fires are raging everywhere. Iran's Revolutionary Guards – despite Mr Rouhani's protestations that Iran was looking to ease tensions – are up to their necks in Syria and in maintaining a physical link with Hezbollah, which they train and arm. In negotiating with Iran, a vision unimpeded by wishful thinking is essential [...]. (*Guardian* editorial, 04.08a)
- (98)"The Syrian crisis, by contagion, affects the entire area. There's an issue of regional stability, we cannot see a country [Iran] that represents a threat to this stability to take part in this conference, [Foreign Ministry Spokesman] Mr. Lalliot added.<sup>454</sup> (LM17.05)
- (99)"Der Einsatz der Hisbollah soll die syrische Opposition zwingen, sich auf eine politische Lösung einzulassen", sagt Imad Salamey, Politikwissenschaftler an der Lebanese American University in Beirut. Die ganze Region stehe am Ende eines Zeitalters. Die von den Kolonialherren hinterlassenen Landesgrenzen seien in Auflösung begriffen. "Derzeit entsteht eine neue politische Ordnung im Nahen Osten. Der Kampf der Hisbollah in Syrien soll sicherstellen, dass Iran darin eine tragende Rolle spielen wird." (SPON08.06)

#### 7.3.2.1.4 *The West's wrongdoings and inconsistencies*

While Syria's coverage in the sampled texts – and the three media's overall reporting – is mostly in accord with Ideological Square, few articles in *Guardian*, as stated in the previous chapter, contested the prevailing strategies of positive Self- and negative Other-presentations shown above. One such example, as mentioned already (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1.1), is the column (G07.05) written by Seumas Milne and published in the British site's CiF section, wherein *Guardian's* associate editor combines a number of counter-discursive strategies that serve to de-legitimize the West/allies and expose inconsistencies in Western policies: First, to connect Israel's then-recent airstrikes in Syria with the decades-long occupation of Golan Heights (topos of history) to accentuate the continuity in Israel's illegitimate actions, while questioning the international legality of such raids and the oft-evoked trope of Israel's right to self-defense (topos of right/law) by pointing out discrepancies in the West's Middle East policy (topoi of comparison and difference):

- (100) Since Israel has illegally occupied Syria's Golan Heights for 46 years, perhaps the legitimacy of a few more air raids hardly merited serious consideration. But it's only necessary to consider what the western reaction would have been if Syria, let alone Iran, had launched such an attack on Israel – or one of the Arab regimes currently arming the Syrian rebels – to realise how little these positions have to do with international legality, equity or rights of self-defence.

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<sup>454</sup> "La crise syrienne, par contagion, touche toute la zone. Il y a un enjeu de stabilité régionale, on voit mal qu'un pays [l'Iran] qui représente une menace pour cette stabilité participe à cette conférence", a ajouté M. Lalliot.

And second, to legitimate Their/Iran's partners, namely Hezbollah, by representing the Lebanese group through functionalization as 'the Lebanese Shia resistance movement and governing party', and, conversely, associate Syrian groups that the West was contemplating to arm, with terrorism by characterizing them as social actors that "include Jabhat al-Nusra, which now controls swaths of rebel-held territory and has declared allegiance to al-Qaida". Another predicational strategy adopted by Milne to criticize the West and de-legitimize its favored groups in Syria at the time is to foreground the alleged use of chemical weapons by the rebels, citing UN's 'strong concrete suspicions' (topos of authority) to lend credence to these allegations, and U.S. whitewashing of the rebels, as excerpt 101 shows:

(101) That effort came unstuck this week when the UN investigator Carla Del Ponte reported that there were "strong concrete suspicions" that Syrian rebels had themselves used the nerve gas sarin. The claim was hurriedly downplayed by the US [...]

### 7.3.2.2 Their nuclear menace

The three media use various referential strategies to describe, assess or speculate Iran's nuclear-related capability/intentions, ranging from neutral compounds i.e. Iran's 'nuclear program/research' or, more precisely, 'enrichment (of uranium)', to references that construct a crisis i.e. 'the (nuclear) dispute/stalemate' or activate alarm i.e. Iran's 'nuclear ambitions'. Accordingly, the most common *lexical items* (van Dijk, 1998, p.31) in sampled texts contain neutral terms such as (Iran's/Iranian/its) nuclear 'program(me)', 'activity', and 'policy', followed closely by more evaluative phrases that depict the program as a serious dilemma. In *Guardian*, this includes such formulations as 'the Iranian nuclear problem' (G06.06), 'the issue of Tehran's nuclear dossier' (G31.07), 'Iran's nuclear confrontation with the west', (G13.05), and 'an impasse with the international community' (G23.06). Examples in *Le Monde* involve 'the Iranian question' (LM12.06, LM13.06b), 'its controversial nuclear program' (LM14.07), and 'the thorny nuclear dossier'<sup>455</sup> (LM06.08). In *SPON*, examples entail '(die) Atomfrage' (SPON03.08), '(sein) umstrittenes Nuklearprogramm' (SPON06.08, SPON07.08), and the oft-used '(der festgefahrene) Atomstreit' (SPON15.06a, SPON16.06, SPON13.07, SPON03.08, SPON06.08). Besides these repeated conflict-laden terms, more reconciliatory choices also appear on occasion, especially in *Guardian* and *SPON*: '(nuclear) negotiations' (G22.04, G06.06, G04.08b, LM15.06a), 'nuclear talks' (G13.05, G24.07), 'nuclear bargain' (G06.06), 'die Atomgespräche mit Iran' (SPON13.07), and 'die Atomverhandlungen mit dem Westen' (SPON 06.08, SPON07.08).

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<sup>455</sup> l' épineux dossier nucléaire

### 7.3.2.2.1 *Their non-peaceful activities/intentions*

In addition to the prevalent above-stated referential choices that depict – and negativize – Their program as a problem, a main group of predicational and argumentation strategies pervading the texts represents – and de-legitimizes – Their program as a threat, drawing on a range of topoi. This is realized via: (1) explicit references to Iran/its nuclear activity as ‘threat’ or triggering a perception, and therewith communicating a message, of ‘threat’ “*only* because of the already existing networks of knowledge regarding Iran and what it represents (and bring to mind) to an average Western audience” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.228, emphasis in original); (2) recurrent collocations of Iran/its program and ‘weapon’/‘bomb’ denoting the possible military dimension of its activity; and (3) indicating international concerns and U.S./European/Israeli fears or suspicions about Tehran’s hidden motives. This *strategy of polarization* (van Dijk, 1998, p.33) (re)constructs and reinforces a dichotomy, with Iran placed, by dint of its nuclear threat, in contraposition to a presumed rational and peaceful Us:

(102) "The bottom line is that **Iran is a threat, a real threat**," said Hagel, who arrived in Israel on Sunday on his first visit to Israel as [U.S.] defence secretary.

[...]

Israel has repeatedly voiced its impatience with the pace of diplomatic efforts to curb Iran's enrichment of uranium, saying they should be coupled with a credible military threat. Both Israel and the United States have said all options remain on the table when it comes to dealing with **any nuclear threat**. (G21.04)

(103) There is even greater caution in the west about the possibility of a better relationship with Tehran and perhaps even a deal to defuse the long and dangerous standoff over **Iran's nuclear aspirations**. (G26.07)

(104) In a letter sent to President Barack Obama, 76 senators demanded tougher economic punishment for Iran until the Islamic republic scales back **its nuclear ambitions**. It also urged Obama to keep all options on the table, while keeping the door open to diplomacy. (G04.08b)

Characterizing Iran/its program in *Guardian* as ‘threat’ is either stated unambiguously through quoted officials and the We-group’s negative assessment of Their program (excerpt 102) or realized by frequently invoking danger through vague notions such as ‘ambitions’ and ‘aspirations’ (excerpts 103, 104). These imprecise terms, when used in the context of Iran’s nuclear intentions and against the backdrop of current and longstanding discourses and perceptions about an irrational and inherently hostile Other (Chapter Two, sections 2.2 and 2.6), raise alarm and insinuate the Islamic Republic’s dangerous pursuit of nuclear weapons, therewith rendering its dissuasion by Us, in any possible way, crucial. Iran is also mentioned in some instances, with its nuclear menace assumed implicitly based on its much-publicized program that has dominated news headlines and kept the country as a running story for almost two decades, through *enthymematic arguments* (Richardson, 2004, p.78) and with

recourse to the readers' 'common-sense' knowledge about Iran. In the earlier piece by Milne, published under the headline 'The west and its allies cynically bleed Syria to weaken Iran'(G07.05), the writer argues:

- (105) If they were genuinely interested in saving lives – instead of neutralising Syria to undermine Iran – western leaders would be using their leverage with the rebels' regional sponsors to negotiate a political settlement that would allow Syrians to determine their own future.

Despite the text's critical tone and Milne's criticism of Israel and Western leaders' Middle East policy, the reasons behind *why* the West seeks – or needs – 'to weaken' and 'undermine' Iran and its quest, like rival states, for regional hegemony remain unsaid and are instead taken at face value based on a presupposed understanding about Iran shared with the British news site's readers. Similarly, in another piece, the *Guardian* editorial (G17.06) opens with the following lead:

- (106) Amid the storm clouds thickening and darkening over Syria, there was one shaft of sunlight at the weekend: the election of a moderate cleric as Iran's president. Whether it is because of the west's bungled intervention in Iraq, or simply the law of unintended consequences, Iran's influence has indisputably grown. Today its decisions affect Arab lives from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates, from the Turkish border to the Gulf. Of all the options available to the US in trying to roll back this power – punitive sanctions, military confrontation or arming the Gulf states – negotiation is still the most attractive. In Hassan Rouhani, a partner for negotiation may have finally arrived.

While welcoming Rouhani's election ('one shaft of sunlight', 'a partner for negotiation'), this passage combines a number of topoi to (re)construct and substantiate the Iran Threat without overtly referring to its nuclear program: First, Iran's growing regional influence is presented as an outcome, which is partly blamed on the West for its mistake in Iraq, that is both undesired and alarming (topoi of burden/consequence and danger/threat); second, the necessity "to roll back this power" is deemed too obvious and self-explanatory to warrant further justification (topos of reality); and third, the range of 'options available to the US' is stated, which can be regarded as positive Self-presentation denoting Our clout/conviction to counter Their menace, with diplomacy *still* considered the most desirable (topoi of authority and 'pro bono nobis'<sup>456</sup>). In this vein, the danger ascribed to Iran's rising power in the region is interdiscursively linked to its perceived nuclear threat, the latter which can be inferred from the (deterrence) 'options' listed, without explicit mention of the nuclear issue. It is in the next paragraph that direct references to Iran's 'stand over nuclear fuel' and 'nuclear policy' are made. Furthermore, the need to deal with the challenge posed by Iran's so-called Shia Crescent to the Self/West and its risk to 'Arab lives' – note the sympathy-arousing

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<sup>456</sup> 'to the advantage of us', a sub-type of the topos of advantage/usefulness (Wodak, 2001b, p.74). Also Included are social actors positioned in the We-group i.e. Our allies.



referential choice – is presupposed. As Richardson (2007, p.63) explains, a *presupposition* “is a taken-for-granted, implicit claim embedded within the explicit meaning of a text or utterance” and is expressed by discourse markers such as ‘*all the options available*’ and ‘*trying to roll back*’ in the excerpt above.

Within this category that projects Iran/its program as threat, a common predicational strategy in *Guardian*’s texts is to indicate the We-group’s assertions about Tehran’s nuclear intentions and capabilities. Hedged and mitigated, these concerns/allegations (re)produce and espouse the threat theme in two interrelated ways: by (a) routinely associating the Iranian nuclear program with ‘warhead’ or ‘weapons’, and (b) propagating official U.S./European/Israeli claims and suspicions of Iran’s hidden motives and therewith reinforcing the image of an untrustworthy Other. These statements are always expressed in conjunction with Iran’s counter claims and insistence on the peaceful nature of its program, which – when compared with their occasional absence in *Le Monde* and *SPON* – suggests the British outlet’s general policy to incorporate such disclaimers/counterpoints and include stances of both sides of the conflict, a characteristic feature of the genre of liberal news reporting (Blackledge, 2005, p.137):

(107) **Iran denies Western allegations** that it is seeking to develop the capability to build nuclear weapons, **saying its atomic activities are aimed at generating electricity**. (G21.04)

(108) The US has long believed that Iran has been working to develop nuclear weapons. **Iran insists its program is for peaceful energy and research purposes only**. (G04.08b)

Compared to *Guardian*, associating Iran’s nuclear program with (atomic) bomb through “co-textual juxtaposition” (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.226) is more common in both French and German texts. In items selected from *Le Monde*, Iran/its program is presented as (imminent) threat in journalistic reporting and especially official U.S./French/Israeli pronouncements, which is substantiated, sometimes with hyperbole, either by referring explicitly to ‘Iranian threat’ or by collocating Iran and bomb while using topos of reality via modal truth claims i.e. ‘is’, ‘will’, ‘building’. Truth modality, Fowler (1991, p.85) explains, is adopted to express one’s level of commitment to what is being stated or to predict the degree of its occurrence’s likelihood. A common feature of official remarks, these “unquestioned assertions” have “the characteristic modality of authoritarian discourse” (p.127) and, as excerpts below show, activate the topos of danger/threat by claiming that Iran *is* (moving towards) building a bomb:

(109) Upon arrival in Jerusalem on April 21, American Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel confirmed that this U.S. arms sales to Israel was a “*very clear signal to Iran*”. [...] The regional tour of

Mr. Hagel – after Israel, he visits Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates – is clearly marked by Iranian and Syrian threats.<sup>457</sup> (LM23.04, italics in original)

(110) **The Iranian nuclear program is the most acute problem of our time because, if Iran ends up obtaining the bomb, it will not be one or five bombs, like North Korea, it will be dozens, if not hundreds.**<sup>458</sup> (interview with Israel's Minister of Intelligence and Strategic Affairs, LM06.08)

(111) “...*There's a new president in Iran. He criticizes his predecessor for having been a wolf in wolf's clothing. His strategy is to be a wolf in sheep's clothing: smiling while building the bomb.*”<sup>459</sup>

[...]

According to the Israeli prime minister, Iran possesses approximately 190 kilograms of uranium enriched to 20% out of the 250 kilograms necessary to build a bomb.<sup>460</sup> (LM14.07, italics in original)

In the interview cited earlier (section 7.3.1) wherein the french foreign minister branded Iran (alongside Syria) ‘the greatest current threat to peace’ (LM09.05), Fabius was asked *when* Iran “can acquire a nuclear weapon” – with such pursuit presupposed and triggered by a ‘wh-question’ (Richardson, 2007, p.63), without contemplating *if* it intends to do so – to which he responded: “Not before the Iranian election in June”. Equating the Self with ‘international community’, Fabius, moreover, used necessity-modalities (‘we have to...’) that “limit the negative actions of the authorities of the We-group” (van Dijk, 1998, p.32), as positive Self-presentation to legitimize Our options, including military action, to curb Their (atomic) threat; a threat that the French foreign minister termed during the interview and was conspicuously foregrounded in the headline. Consistent with this concomitant positive Self- and negative Other-presentation, Fabius added that of all the options ‘on the table’, the ‘desirable’ one remains negotiations, therewith denoting Our preference for a peaceful solution/diplomacy:

(112) LM: What is the Iranians’ level of engagement on the side of the Syrian regime?<sup>461</sup>

F: Considerable. There exists also a certain connection between **the Iranian nuclear question** and the clashes in Syria. If the international community isn't capable of stopping a movement in which Assad's men are powerfully supported by the Iranians, what will our credibility be to ensure that Iran doesn't acquire a nuclear weapon?<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>457</sup>En arrivant à Jérusalem, dimanche 21 avril, le secrétaire américain à la défense, Chuck Hagel, a reconnu que ce contrat de vente d'armes américaines à Israël était un “*signal très clair pour l'Iran*”. [...] La tournée régionale de M. Hagel – après Israël, il se rend en Jordanie, en Arabie saoudite et dans les Emirats arabes unis – est clairement placée sous le signe des menaces iranienne et syrienne.

<sup>458</sup> Le programme nucléaire iranien est le problème le plus aigu de notre temps car, si l'Iran finit par avoir la bombe, il ne s'agira pas d'une bombe ou de cinq, comme la Corée du Nord, il s'agira de dizaines, voire de centaines.

<sup>459</sup> “...*Il y a un nouveau président en Iran. Il critique son prédécesseur pour avoir été un loup déguisé en loup. Sa stratégie est d'être un loup déguisé en mouton: de sourire tout en fabriquant la bombe.*”

<sup>460</sup> Selon le premier ministre israélien, l'Iran dispose d'environ 190 kilogrammes d'uranium enrichi à 20 %, sur les 250 kilogrammes nécessaires à la fabrication d'une bombe.

<sup>461</sup> Quel est le niveau d'engagement des Iraniens aux côtés du régime syrien?

<sup>462</sup> Considérable. Il existe d'ailleurs une certaine relation entre la question du nucléaire iranien et les affrontements en Syrie. Si la communauté internationale n'est pas capable d'arrêter un mouvement dans lequel

LM: In what time frame do you think Iran can acquire a nuclear weapon?<sup>463</sup>

F: Not before the Iranian election in June. [...] Iran can very well use civilian nuclear energy but can't acquire the atomic bomb. In order to prevent it, we have to negotiate and impose sanctions.<sup>464</sup>

LM: And in the event of failure?<sup>465</sup>

F: All options are on the table, but the desirable option is for the negotiation to succeed.<sup>466</sup>

In another interview on [TV channel] France 2 a month later, Fabius reiterated some of these points, namely linking Iran's mounting involvement in Syria to its nuclear ambitions and the necessity to deter both (topos of reality), which were incorporated in two news texts on Syria: in the first, the quote is followed by stating Western suspicions about Iran's nuclear deception and clandestine activities ('under the guise of' its civilian program) as background information. The second article ascribes France's "diplomatic urgency" – the decision to arm the Syrian rebels – to "the fear of Iran", combining the topoi of danger/threat, burden/consequence, and urgency, with the quote cited immediately thereafter. As such, Iran's nuclear threat is invoked and connected to Syria/regional stability to substantiate and legitimize Our sensible course of action in reaction to, and necessitated by, Their dangerous/threatening activities:

(113) *"Behind the Syrian question, there's the Iranian question, Mr. Fabius continued. If we're not capable of preventing Iran from taking control over Syria, what credibility will we have in demanding that it doesn't acquire a nuclear weapon? So, it's all connected."* **Westerners suspect Iran of seeking to acquire a nuclear weapon under the guise of its civilian nuclear program.**<sup>467</sup> (LM12.06, italics in original)

(114) **This diplomatic urgency is also dictated by the fear of Iran.** *"Behind the Syrian question, there's the Iranian question", Mr. Fabius stated on France 2 on Wednesday. "If we're not capable of preventing Iran from taking control over Syria, he asserted, what credibility will we have in demanding that it doesn't acquire a nuclear weapon?"<sup>468</sup> (LM13.06b, italics in original)*

In *SPON*'s texts, portraying Iran/its program as a threat, besides through occasional negativizing or alarm-raising predicates such as 'das umstrittene Nuklearvorhaben'

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les hommes d'Assad sont soutenus puissamment par les Iraniens, quelle sera notre crédibilité pour assurer que l'Iran ne se dotera pas de l'arme nucléaire?

<sup>463</sup> A quel horizon pensez-vous que l'Iran puisse se doter de l'arme nucléaire?

<sup>464</sup> Pas avant les élections iraniennes de juin. Nous sommes totalement hostiles à la dissémination nucléaire. Si l'Iran se dote de l'arme nucléaire, d'autres en feraient de même dans cette région. L'Iran peut parfaitement utiliser le nucléaire civil, mais pas acquérir la bombe atomique. Pour l'éviter, il faut négocier et sanctionner.

<sup>465</sup> Et en cas d'échec?

<sup>466</sup> Toutes les options sont sur la table, mais l'option souhaitable est que la négociation réussisse.

<sup>467</sup> *"Derrière la question syrienne, il y a la question iranienne, a poursuivi M. Fabius. Si on n'est pas capables d'empêcher l'Iran de prendre la main sur la Syrie, quelle crédibilité aura-t-on en exigeant qu'elle n'ait pas l'arme atomique? Donc, tout est lié."* Les Occidentaux soupçonnent l'Iran de vouloir se doter de l'arme nucléaire sous couvert de son programme atomique civil.

<sup>468</sup> Cette urgence diplomatique est aussi dictée par la crainte de l'Iran. *"Derrière la question syrienne, il y a la question iranienne"*, a déclaré M. Fabius, mercredi sur France 2. *"Si l'on n'est pas capable d'empêcher l'Iran de prendre la main sur la Syrie, a-t-il affirmé, quelle crédibilité aura-t-on en exigeant qu'elle n'ait pas l'arme atomique?"*

(SPON07.08) and ‘die atomare Bewaffnung Irans’ (excerpt 33), is mostly realized by indicating international/official demands from Iran or mentioning Western fears/suspicious over the country’s weapons-related activities. Hedged and mitigated, the latter statements, which are sometimes co-texted with Iran’s insistence that its nuclear research is intended for peaceful purposes, heighten a sense of dread by associating the program with (atomic) bomb/weapons and Iran with deceit – note the recurring phrase ‘unter dem Deckmantel der friedlichen Nutzung’ and the hedging adjective ‘angeblich’ – or, in some instances, serve to give credence to the Self/West’s incredulity and distrust through *causal argumentation* i.e. Iran’s non-cooperation with IAEA (excerpt 118). In the latter case, a “causal relation is indicated in an argument by terms that refer to consequences or outcomes” (Richardson, 2007, p.164) that perpetuates Our negative perceptions about Their stealth and secrecy by employing the topos of authority (e.g. the UN agency).

- (115) Zentrale Forderung der internationalen Gemeinschaft ist, dass Teheran darauf verzichtet, hochangereichertes Uran zu produzieren, das **faktisch waffenfähig wäre.** (SPON03.08)
- (116) Der Westen verdächtigt Iran, **unter dem Deckmantel** der friedlichen Nutzung **insgeheim am Bau von Atomwaffen zu arbeiten.** Die Gespräche des Landes mit der sogenannten 5+1-Gruppe, zu der die Vetomächte im Uno-Sicherheitsrat und Deutschland gehören, waren zuletzt ins Stocken geraten. (SPON06.08)
- (117) Der Westen verdächtigt Iran, **unter dem Deckmantel** der friedlichen Nutzung **heimlich am Bau von Atomwaffen zu arbeiten.** [...] **Iran bestreitet die Vorwürfe.** Die Gespräche des Landes mit der sogenannten 5+1-Gruppe, zu der die Vetomächte im Uno-Sicherheitsrat und Deutschland gehören, waren zuletzt ins Stocken geraten. (SPON07.08)
- (118) Iran beharrt darauf, dass sein Kernforschungsprogramm allein zivilen Zwecken diene und gegensätzliche Behauptungen ausländischer Geheimdienste falsch seien. Der Westen fürchtet, dass Teheran **unter dem Deckmantel angeblich** friedlicher Nutzung am Bau einer **Atombombe arbeitet.** Weil Iran nicht ausreichend mit den IAEA-Kontrolleuren zusammenarbeitet, kann die Uno-Behörde das auch nicht mehr ausschließen. (SPON13.07)

Another discursive pattern in the texts sampled from *SPON* that signifies the German outlet’s overall reservations/misgivings about the Iranian nuclear program is *local semantic moves* or *disclaimers* (van Dijk, 1998, pp.39-40), namely inserting implicatures (‘although’, ‘but’, etc.) when stating President-elect Rouhani’s position on the nuclear issue. Somewhat ambivalent, these repeated – and sometimes copy-pasted – observations underline Rouhani’s pledge to better engage with the Self/West in tandem with his vow to preserve Iran’s nuclear activity, incorporated as contrastive ideas and thus presented as mutually exclusive. In some cases, this presupposed positive/negative juxtaposition, as excerpt 121 shows, invokes the topos of danger by means of a negativizing predicational strategy (‘umstritten’) combined with

referring, as added information that is assumed to *further* raise red flags, to uranium enrichment through indirect reported speech and using the presupposition trigger ‘auch’.

- (119) Rohani hält daran fest, dass Iran ein Recht auf ein ziviles Atomprogramm habe. Allerdings will er auf Dialog setzen. (SPON15.06a, SPON13.07)
- (120) Rohani hält **zwar** fest an dem Prinzip, dass Iran ein Recht auf ein ziviles Atomprogramm habe, erklärt sich **aber** verhandlungsbereit, um eine Lockerung der harschen Wirtschaftssanktionen zu erreichen. (SPON16.06)
- (121) Rohani machte **zugleich** klar, dass Iran **sein umstrittenes Nuklearprogramm** fortsetzen wird. "Das friedliche Atomprogramm Irans ist eine nationale Angelegenheit", sagte der Geistliche. "Wir werden die Rechte des iranischen Volkes nicht aufgeben." Dazu gehöre **auch** die Urananreicherung. (SPON06.08)

#### 7.3.2.2.2 *Their nuclear threat to regional stability*

Intersecting with the predicational category discussed above is the danger of a nuclear-capable Iran to regional security and stability. In line with what was discussed earlier in the three media's Syria coverage, this predicational group serves to substantiate Iran's threatening/destabilizing role and activity in the region. In *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, this danger is ascribed to the potential threat posed by an already belligerent Iran, should it possess nuclear weapons, to regional rivals, notably Our allies, which goes unsupported and relies on readers themselves to fill the missing details, or to the fear that a nuclear-armed Iran would precipitate a cascade of proliferation in the Middle East:

- (122) After Israel, Hagel will visit Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. His trip comes amid **mounting concerns about regional stability due to Iran's nuclear programme**, the rocky transition to civilian rule in Egypt and the civil war in Syria. (G21.04)
- (123) The orders receiving the White House imprimatur involve strategic military capabilities for Israel, but also for Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, three states **threatened to varying degrees by Iranian projects.**<sup>469</sup> (LM23.04)
- (124) We are completely opposed to nuclear proliferation. **If Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, others in the region would do the same.** (interview with the French foreign minister, LM09.05)

#### 7.3.2.2.2.1 *Their threat to Israel*

Included in this predicational category, which partly overlaps with what was mentioned in the Syrian context, is the Iran-Israel conflict and the issue of the latter's security. As excerpts below show, Iran's (nuclear) threat to Israel is either stated explicitly in the selected texts via reported speech i.e. direct and indirect quotes from U.S./Israeli officials, in writers' own

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<sup>469</sup> Les commandes ayant reçu l'imprimatur de la Maison Blanche concernant des capacités militaires stratégiques au profit d'Israël, mais aussi de l'Arabie saoudite et des Emirats, trois Etats menacés à des degrés divers par les projets iraniens.

words or assumed and inferred through enthymematic arguments, drawing on the topos of danger/threat. As such, the presence of a possible U.S./Israeli military option on the table is taken at face value (topos of reality), with the need to intervene in the future justified by invoking the Iranian threat and/or Israel's right to self-defense or legitimized through the use of truth and obligation modality (Fowler, 1991, pp.85-7; Richardson, 2007, pp.59-62) or necessity-modalities i.e. 'will', 'must', and 'should'. These "deontic expressions" are therefore adopted "to denote the 'necessity', 'need' and 'urgency' of actions" (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.231) that We might be compelled to undertake, with Israel included in Western ingroup, in response to Their threat (topoi of threat/danger, right, 'pro bono nobis'):

- (125) Asked about renewed debate in the Israeli media that Israel might have to strike Iran by itself, [U.S. defense secretary] Hagel said "every sovereign nation has the right to defend itself and protect itself".  
"Iran presents a threat in its nuclear programme and Israel will make the decisions that Israel must make to protect itself and defend itself," he said. (G21.04)
- (126) Mr. Hagel has alternately blown hot and cold during his visit to Jerusalem, stressing that the military option against Iran should be the "*last resort*", while acknowledging that it is up to Israel to decide, as a "*sovereign nation*", if it should launch an offensive against Tehran or not.<sup>470</sup> (LM23.04, italics in original)
- (127) Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned on Sunday, July 14, on American TV that Israel could take military action against the Iranian nuclear program before the U.S., calling new president Hassan Rouhani a "*wolf in sheep's clothing*".<sup>471</sup> (lead, LM14.07, italics in original)
- (128) Iran vergräbt seine Atomanlagen teils tief unter der Erde - zu tief für die Bomben der USA. Deshalb hat das Pentagon seine bunkerbrechenden Bomben weiterentwickelt. Die Waffensysteme sollen vor allem den Verbündeten Israel beruhigen. (teaser)  
 [...]
 Das US-Militär tut derzeit alles, um den Verbündeten Israel zu beruhigen. Dort ist die Sorge über das iranische Atomprogramm unvermindert groß, auch wenn es in dem Dauerkonflikt zuletzt eher ruhig geblieben war. (SPON03.05a)
- (129) Teheran - Israel fühlt sich von dem iranischen Atomprogramm massiv bedroht. Ministerpräsident Benjamin Netanjahu hat davor gewarnt, Iran mehr Freiraum beim Atomprogramm zu geben. (lead, SPON07.08)

Accordingly, the three media's news stories about, or containing reference to, the Iran-Israel conflict draw on the Friend-Enemy scheme to legitimize Our (reluctant) use of force and/or Our (inevitable) hostile action, relying primarily on official U.S./Israeli sources and privileging their views, including those of the U.S. Defense Secretary (*Guardian, Le Monde*);

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<sup>470</sup> M. Hagel a soufflé alternativement le chaud et le froid au cours de sa visite à Jérusalem, soulignant que l'option militaire contre l'Iran devait être le "*recours ultime*", tout en reconnaissant que c'est à Israël de décider, en tant que "*nation souveraine*", s'il doit ou non se lancer dans une offensive contre Téhéran.

<sup>471</sup> Le premier ministre israélien, Benyamin Nétanyahou, a averti dimanche 14 juillet sur une télévision américaine qu'Israël pourrait intervenir militairement contre le programme nucléaire iranien avant les Etats-Unis, qualifiant le nouveau président Hassan Rohani de "*loup déguisé en mouton*".

Pentagon and State Department spokesmen (*SPON*); the Israeli Prime Minister, Defense Minister, or IDF chief of staff (*Le Monde*, *SPON*), with Iran's claim of peaceful nuclear intentions mentioned briefly as counterpoint in *Guardian* and *SPON* (G21.04, SPON07.08). In some instances, the three media also point out international concerns about Israel's decision to launch a unilateral attack which, in *Guardian*'s news piece, is ascribed to its potential regional consequences, using and combining the topoi of disadvantage and danger (excerpt 130), or serves as positive Self-presentation in *Le Monde* and *SPON*, indicating Our preference for a non-military solution to this conflict (excerpts 132,133). In the *Guardian* editorial, as excerpt 131 shows, concerns surrounding a future strike on Iran are expressed while obfuscating the responsibility of Israel and/or the U.S. through agent deletion by means of *suppression* (radical exclusion) in the case of the former, with “no reference to the social actor(s) in question anywhere in the text”, and *backgrounding* regarding the latter whereby “the excluded social actors may not be mentioned in relation to a given activity, but they are mentioned elsewhere in the text” (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.39). However, absent from the three media's reporting about the Iran-Israel enmity in the texts sampled for detailed analysis are: (1) the fact that Israel itself is a non-signatory to the NPT; (2) questions on the international legality of a U.S./Israeli strike and Iranian sovereignty; and (3) the potential human cost of such an attack. Hence, while the three media refer occasionally to existing concerns over a future military action against Iran, which is sometimes downplayed by being described as a targeted attack on nuclear facilities, they obscure – and therewith normalize – the U.S./Israel military threat to Iran. This implicit acceptance is also expressed through presupposition triggers, namely ‘before the U.S.’ (excerpt 127), ‘accelerating the planning of an attack’ (excerpt 132), and the definite article (Richardson, 2007, p. 63) i.e. ‘the military option against Iran’ (excerpt 126) and ‘die Bomben der USA’ (excerpt 128) that presuppose the existence of – and need for – such option in the former or such (bunker-buster) bombs to reach Iran's deeply-buried facilities in the latter.

(130) Such talk [Israel's threat to attack] **has raised international concern** of a possible unilateral strike on Iran that **could lead to wider Middle Eastern war**. (G21.04)

(131) But an appreciation of how much worse this could get if another Gulf war were to be sparked by an attack on Iran's nuclear installation is also needed. If a deal is there to be done with Iran, it should be seized. (*Guardian* editorial, G04.08a)

(132) But, aware of **this risk**, the U.S. administration has strongly insisted that its decision to supply the Jewish state with advanced weapons should not be interpreted as a tacit consent to **accelerating the planning of an attack on Iran**.<sup>472</sup> (LM23.04)

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<sup>472</sup> Mais, consciente de ce risque, l'administration américaine a beaucoup insisté pour que sa décision de fournir des armements sophistiqués à l'Etat juif ne soit pas interprétée comme un accord tacite à une accélération de la planification d'une attaque de l'Iran.

- (133) Israels Ministerpräsident warnte vor den Konsequenzen, sollte der Druck auf Iran tatsächlich gelockert werden: "Dann werden sie den Weg bis zum Ende gehen", sagte Netanjahu. Israel sieht sich durch das iranische Atomprogramm in seiner Existenz bedroht. Mit seinen Kriegsdrohungen gegen Iran hat Netanjahu in der Vergangenheit **nicht nur die US-Regierung mehrfach brüskiert, sondern auch bei anderen Verbündeten - darunter auch Deutschland - für Irritationen gesorgt.** (SPON07.08)

On a smaller scale, another predicational strategy in some items from *Le Monde* and *SPON* that substantiates Iran's existential threat to Israel is to mention the Iranian leadership's anti-Semitism/anti-Israel stance. Against the backdrop of Ahmadinejad's controversial remarks and his bellicose rhetoric against Israel, both news sites occasionally point out, as context, Islamic Republic's ideological hostility toward Israel and Tehran's links to militant Islamist groups i.e. Hamas and Hezbollah. This was mostly observed in the two outlets' news and follow-ups on Rouhani's misquoted remarks about Israel, with Tehran's non-recognition of Israel rephrased and reiterated in three of the news pieces selected from *SPON* (SPON02.08a, SPON02.08b, SPON03.08) and juxtaposed with the new Iranian president's conciliatory tone. By way of comparison, *Guardian's* single news piece on the said incident focuses mainly on how the president-elect's remarks were falsified by an Iranian news agency and quotes the Israeli prime minister's reaction, saying "A country that threatens to destroy Israel must not be allowed weapons of mass destruction", in its last paragraph.

- (134) **Tehran does not recognize Israel's existence** and Iranian officials brand the Jewish state "*illegitimate Zionist regime*". Iran also poses as the champion of Palestinian rights alongside the Lebanese Shia Hezbollah and Syria, another point of friction with the West.<sup>473</sup> **The denial of the Holocaust and Israel's right to exist are regularly affirmed by the Iranian leadership**, including Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In the course of his two terms, Mr. Ahmadinejad repeated on numerous occasions that Israel should be "*eliminated*".<sup>474</sup> (LM02.08, italics in original)
- (135) Nach seiner Wahl im Juni hatte Rohani versöhnliche Töne gegenüber dem Westen angeschlagen. "Die Zeit des Extremismus muss zu Ende gehen", erklärte der Geistliche. Im Nahostkonflikt wird unter ihm keine grundlegende Kursänderung erwartet. Die Nichtanerkennung des Staates Israel gehört in Iran zur außenpolitischen Doktrin. [...]  
Gleiche gilt für **finanzielle und militärische Unterstützung für die im Gaza-Streifen herrschende radikalislamische Hamas-Organisation und die Milizen der libanesischen Schiitenorganisation Hisbollah.** (SPON02.08a, SPON02.08b)

#### 7.3.2.2.3 *Their (return to) rationality*

As stated in Chapter Six (sections 6.2.1.2 and 6.2.2.1), Rouhani's election was, in line with the mood at the time in the West, greeted with optimism in all three news sites concerning

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<sup>473</sup> Téhéran ne reconnaît pas l'existence d'Israël et les responsables iraniens qualifient l'Etat hébreu de "*régime sioniste illégitime*". L'Iran se pose aussi en défenseur des droits des Palestiniens, aux côtés du Hezbollah chiite libanais et de la Syrie, un autre point de friction avec l'Occident.

<sup>474</sup> La négation de l'Holocauste et le déni du droit d'Israël à l'existence sont régulièrement affirmés par les principaux dirigeants iraniens, dont le Guide suprême iranien, Ali Khamenei. Durant ses deux mandats, M. Ahmadinejad a répété maintes fois qu'Israël serait "*éliminé*".



the trajectory of Iran’s domestic and foreign policy issues, notably the nuclear dossier. As the referential strategies in the sampled texts already showed (section 7.2.2.2), Rouhani was, by and large, portrayed as embodying a more moderate and rational Iran and predisposed to diplomacy and compromise, owing both to his personality and past experience as a consensus-builder (topos of history). In this respect, the positive qualities assigned to Rouhani were predicated on his conciliatory style/tone that stood in stark contrast to his predecessor and, less so, the Supreme Leader (topoi of comparison and difference) in addition to his willingness to resolve the impasse with the Western We-group and show greater transparency on Iran’s nuclear program. Referring, as noted earlier, to Rouhani’s familiarity with the West as a reassuring quality (excerpt 22), which simultaneously functions as positive Self-presentation (see section 7.2.1.3), the *Guardian* editorial (G17.06) declared his win “an opportunity to be seized” that was also emphasized in its headline. “In Rouhani”, Channel 4’s Jon Snow wrote, “Iran has secured a president who will, at the very least, be less verbally aggressive and abusive than Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the outgoing leader” (G16.06b). In *Le Monde*, the word ‘flexibility’ (*souplesse*) preceded by the modifier ‘more’ (*plus de*) was employed several times to indicate Rouhani’s conciliatory attitude toward the West (especially U.S.) and contrasted with Ahmadinejad and Khamenei (excerpts 136,137):

(136) Deemed **more flexible** than his predecessor, the new Iranian president is awaited on the nuclear and Syria files.<sup>475</sup> (sub-head)

[...]

Successor of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he **promised more flexibility in dialogue with the West** during his campaign. Direct talks with the U.S., Iran’s historical enemy, have notably been raised.<sup>476</sup> (LM15.06a)

(137) While representing the Supreme Leader at the Supreme National Security Council, Mr. Rouhani, 64, **advocates more flexibility in dialogue with the West**, a dialogue that he led between 2003 and 2005 under Khatami presidency. During his campaign, he raised the possibility of direct talks with the U.S., Iran’s historical enemy.<sup>477</sup> (LM15.06c)

Similar to the British and French sites, *SPON* welcomed Rouhani’s election on account of his non-ideological approach, track record, and preparedness to better engage and compromise with the Self/West, therewith rendering Our expectations of Them to ease the tensions high:

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<sup>475</sup> Réputé plus souple que son prédécesseur, le nouveau président iranien est attendu sur les dossiers du nucléaire et de la Syrie.

<sup>476</sup> Successeur de Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, il a promis pendant sa campagne plus de souplesse dans le dialogue avec l'Occident. Des discussions directes avec les Etats-Unis, ennemi historique de l'Iran, avaient notamment été évoquées.

<sup>477</sup> Tout en étant le représentant du guide suprême Ali Khamenei au Conseil suprême de la sécurité nationale, M. Rohani, 64 ans, prône plus de souplesse dans le dialogue avec l'Occident, un dialogue qu'il avait dirigé entre 2003 et 2005 sous la présidence Khatami. Durant la campagne, il a évoqué de possibles discussions directes avec les Etats-Unis, ennemi historique de l'Iran.

(138) Der gemäßigte Hassan Rohani hat die Wahlen in Iran gewonnen. Im festgefahrenen Atomstreit scheint nun endlich ein Neustart möglich: **Der neue Präsident ist bereit, Kompromisse einzugehen mit dem Westen.** (teaser)

[...]

Mit Rohani zieht **ein anderer Stil** ins Präsidenschaftsamt ein. [...] Rohani zeichnet sich durch **seine rhetorische Gewandtheit und einen versöhnlichen Ton** aus. Er ist **kein Ideologe.** (SPON15.06a)

(139) **Er verkörpert die Hoffnung auf einen Wandel in Iran:** Vor der Amtseinführung des neuen Präsidenten Rohani sind die Erwartungen deutscher Politiker an den als moderat geltenden Kleriker groß - vor allem im Atomstreit. [...] (teaser, SPON03.08)

#### 7.3.2.2.4 *Their (inherent) untrustworthiness/Our generosity and goodwill*

The optimism stirred and the potential opportunity for change induced by Rouhani's election was reported in tandem with caution in the sampled texts due to qualms about presidents' limited room for maneuvering in Iranian politics, with the Supreme Leader having the final say in all state affairs, which was pointed out in several items especially from *Guardian* and *SPON* (G13.05, G17.06, G23.06, LM15.06b, SPON15.06a, SPON16.06, SPON13.07, SPON03.08), as well as suspicions/skepticism of Rouhani and his motivations. Despite the post-election shift in the three media's discursive construction of Iran from an *irrational* to a rational Other, with Rouhani viewed and depicted as Iran's new voice of reason, misgivings were expressed about his (nuclear) intentions and regime's bad faith or aim to opt for a more deceptive/manipulative 'smile diplomacy'. Subjecting post-election Iran to scrutiny/the trust deficit in Iran is visible in a *Guardian* news report entitled 'UK snubs Iranian president's inauguration' (excerpt 140) reporting Tehran's invitation of world leaders to the inauguration ceremony. A news feature (excerpt 141) uses the phrase 'charm offensive' to describe the gestures of the new president/his team towards the West, the reasons behind which ascribed, in the writers' words and the (expert) source quoted, to solving Iran's economic problems and (seducing the West to) ease the sanctions. Alluding to Rouhani's role in bringing about the first nuclear agreement between Iran and the West – which, as said before, is often evoked in texts as a token of his moderation – and Washington's rejection, a *Guardian* editorial (excerpt 142) casts suspicion on 'Iran's motives'. Despite denouncing the U.S. refusal of Tehran's initiative, the passage reflects and perpetuates lasting perceptions and deep sentiments in the West about Iran's presupposed untrustworthiness via *external intertextuality* (Richardson, 2007, pp.100-1), made evident by the use of the presupposition trigger 'again':

(140)The global invitation has been widely seen as **an Iranian attempt to use the election of Rouhani, a reformist and former nuclear negotiator, as an opportunity to loosen the isolation the west has tried to impose on Iran.** (G24.07)

(141) The foreign ministry even mounted something of a charm offensive in the direction of the UK, seen in ruling circles as Iran's third worst adversary. On the occasion of the birth of Prince George, the ministry spokesman Abbas Araghchi, a UK-educated fluent English speaker, offered congratulations to the Queen and the Prince of Wales.

[...]

"The conservatives seem to think that Rouhani's election will change international perceptions overnight," [professor at St Andrews University] Ansari said. "But if they think that a smiling Rouhani will get sanctions lifted and everything will be hunky dory without giving something substantial to the west, they may be surprised." (G26.07)

(142) As chief nuclear negotiator under President Mohammad Khatami, Iran agreed for the first time to stop enriching uranium and allowed more international scrutiny of the Iranian programme. **Again, the interpretation of Iran's motives for suspending enrichment is a matter of debate**, but the fact is it happened and failed to achieve a reciprocal move from the then Bush administration. (*Guardian* editorial, G04.08a)

Dismissing Rouhani's diplomatic overtures as a ploy to lure or dupe the West, Netanyahu characterized Iran's president-elect 'a wolf in sheep's clothing' – unlike Ahmadinejad whom he labelled 'a wolf in wolf's clothing' – that was quoted, as excerpt 127 showed, in the sub-head of a news piece selected from *Le Monde* as well as its lead and the caption of the accompanying photograph. In addition to stating Netanyahu's warning against Iran's nuclear deceit concocted by a president who will keep "smiling while building the bomb" (excerpt 111), an anonymous Israeli official is quoted in a sub-section headed 'Iran could make a new offer'<sup>478</sup> as further cautioning against Iran's ongoing deception:

(143) An Israeli official has meanwhile cautioned that Iran could try to make an offer with major powers who are to hold a meeting on Tuesday about its controversial nuclear program.<sup>479</sup>

[...]

"It's an insignificant concession", the Israeli official told AFP on the condition of anonymity, estimating that this would constitute "another example of the deliberate policy of the Iranian regime that seeks to deceive the international community".<sup>480</sup> (LM14.07, italics in original)

Reiterating Netanyahu's description of Rouhani in an interview with *Le Monde* (LM06.08), Israel's Minister for Strategic Affairs Yuval Steinitz responds to the question on Rouhani's flexibility in the past as Iran's chief negotiator by presenting the president-elect's record as evidence to demonstrate his skillful deception and manipulative role in Tehran's decision to suspend uranium enrichment as a temporary concession, which Steinitz ascribes to Iran's fear at the time of becoming U.S. President Bush's next target after Iraq, whilst masking Tehran's fierce determination to pursue its nuclear drive:

(144) LM: In the past, Mr. Rouhani has shown flexibility by suspending the nuclear program...<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> L'Iran pourrait faire une nouvelle offre

<sup>479</sup> Un responsable israélien a averti, dans le même temps, que l'Iran pourrait essayer de faire une offre aux grandes puissances qui doivent tenir mardi une réunion sur son programme nucléaire controversé.

<sup>480</sup> "C'est une concession insignifiante", a déclaré à l'AFP le responsable israélien sous couvert d'anonymat, estimant que cela constituerait un "autre exemple de la politique délibérée du régime iranien qui cherche à tromper la communauté internationale".

<sup>481</sup> Par le passé, M. Rohani a su faire montre de souplesse en suspendant le programme nucléaire...

S: **Rouhani presents himself** as a master of diplomacy and rhetoric. He prides himself on having a better understanding of the West. During the campaign, he criticized Ahmadinejad because the latter emerged as a wolf in wolf's clothing, whereas he [Rouhani] **boasts about being a wolf in sheep's clothing**. In 2003, he had the uranium enrichment activities halted, as he thought that the Americans, after having invaded Iraq, were able to bomb Iran. But, the entire period, he accelerated the building of infrastructure to resume the nuclear program with renewed vigor in due course, which Iran eventually did in 2005. Mr. Rouhani doesn't conceal it: he's very proud of this episode.<sup>482</sup>

Furthermore, in reaction to the president's misreported comments on Israel two days ahead of his inauguration, Netanyahu declared that the "real face" of Rouhani "has been exposed earlier than expected", which was cited in all outlets (G02.08, LM02.08, SPON02.08a, SPON02.08b). Absent in these (quoted and interviewed) official statements that constantly assail Rouhani's – and, by association, Iran's – trustworthiness as well as from the three media's reporting is the historical fact that Israel once considered Rouhani 'a trustworthy moderate' and sought "U.S. support for the Rouhani-led [moderate] group" in Iran during the Reagan administration, sparking a covert scheme that came to be popularized as the Iran-Contra affair/scandal (see von Rennenkampff, 2021).

Whilst also attributing positive traits to Rouhani and welcoming his election, *SPON*'s reporting occasionally exhibits ambivalence towards the president-elect, also reflected in its referential and predicational strategies mentioned earlier. Examples include two news stories credited to Christoph Sydow, *SPON*'s late foreign editor, and news agencies. The first article published Rouhani's remarks on Israel that were repudiated by Iranian state media on the same day and reported in a follow-up (SPON02.08b). Assuming *SPON* readers' negative feelings towards Ahmadinejad, the teaser (article summary) draws a comparison/analogy (Richardson, 2007, pp.163-4) between Rouhani and his controversial predecessor (topoi of comparison and similarity) and therewith transfers the (shared) old knowledge about the latter's traditional anti-Israel/anti-Semitic slurs onto the new president (excerpt 145). The second piece reported Rouhani's first press conference and is entitled 'Neuer Präsident Rohani: Iran will Atom-Gespräche mit dem Westen wieder aufnehmen', which, given the chosen headline and after years of Ahmadinejad's belligerent rhetoric, could at first glance be considered a positively valenced news story. However, the teaser encapsulates the speech with palpable misgivings about, and skepticism of, Rouhani and his pledge to offer more

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<sup>482</sup> Rohani se présente comme le maître de la diplomatie et de la rhétorique. Il se targue d'avoir une meilleure compréhension de l'Occident. Pendant la campagne, il a critiqué Ahmadinejad parce que ce dernier est apparu comme un loup dans la bergerie, tandis que lui se vante d'être capable de passer pour un agneau. En 2003, il a fait arrêter les activités de préenrichissement de l'uranium parce qu'il pensait que les Américains, après avoir envahi l'Irak, étaient capables de bombardier l'Iran. Mais, pendant toute cette période, il a accéléré la construction d'infrastructures pour pouvoir reprendre le programme nucléaire de plus belle le moment voulu, ce que l'Iran a fini par faire en 2005. M. Rohani en s'en cache pas: il est très fier de cet épisode.

transparency in addition to triggering alarm by indicating his persistence in maintaining Iran's nuclear program (excerpt 146):

(145) Irans künftiger Präsident Rohani **knüpft an die Tradition seines Vorgängers an. Wie vorher Mahmud Ahmadinedschad hetzt nun er gegen Israel.** Der dortige Regierungschef Netanjahu reagiert empört. (teaser, SPON02.08a)

(146) In seiner ersten Pressekonferenz als iranischer Präsident hat sich Hassan Rohani von seinem Vorgänger Mahmud Ahmadinedschad abgesetzt - zumindest rhetorisch. Vage stellt er mehr Transparenz in Aussicht, in der Sache bleibt er jedoch hart: Iran will sein Atomprogramm fortsetzen. (teaser, SPON06.08)

Amidst suspicions about Rouhani/Iran, an intertwining discursive strategy, especially in *Guardian* and *SPON*, is to place responsibility onto Iran to prove itself. In other words, although Rouhani's election was reported as heralding a new era of hope for the country and the nuclear saga, with the Other *finally* coming to its senses, Iran is depicted as the side responsible for building trust and dispelling Our (self-evident) suspicions. This strategy, which can also be viewed as positive Self-presentation denoting Our rationality par excellence and Our power (topos of authority), is noticeable in journalistic reporting and more so the remarks from quoted We-group officials. In this respect, Our openness to dialogue and diplomacy depends on Their demonstrable (change in) behavior. This wait-and-see attitude – echoing the approach adopted in the West at the time – is paralleled by portraying the We-group as the reasonable and generous side that is prepared to show goodwill. This involves demonstrating Our readiness to engage and willingness to give Rouhani a chance or 'a grace period' during the transition of power:

(147) The UK's foreign secretary, William Hague, said last week that Britain is ready to step up contacts with Iranian officials. But the Foreign Office spokeswoman said **the normalisation of bilateral diplomatic ties would ultimately depend on reliable Iranian assurances of the safety of British diplomats, and "in major part" on progress in multilateral nuclear negotiations.** (G24.07)

(148) Rouhani has pledged to follow a "path of moderation" and promised greater openness over Iran's nuclear program. The White House **appears willing to give the president a chance to put those pledges into action.** (G04.08b)

(149) Die erneuten Gespräche wollen die USA laut "Wall Street Journal" auch dazu nutzen, **die Linie des neuen iranischen Präsidenten abzutasten.** (SPON13.07)

(150) Bundesaußenminister Guido Westerwelle (FDP) sagte der dpa: "Ich glaube, dass mit der Amtsübernahme von Herrn Rohani eine Chance verbunden ist. Aber wir werden ihn und seine Regierung anhand der Taten bewerten und nicht an Worten messen." Entscheidend sei für Westerwelle, dass der Iran auf eine atomare Bewaffnung **"nachprüfbar"** verzichtet.

[...]

Die US-Regierung hatte bereits vergangene Woche deutlich gemacht, dass sie Rohani **eine Schonfrist gewähren will** - und eine vom US-Repräsentantenhaus geforderte Verschärfung der Sanktionen zunächst verhindern will. (SPON03.08)

#### 7.3.2.2.5 *Their dangerous motives/ Our reasonable approach and sensible actions*

Closely related is to explicitly or implicitly blame Iran for the current crisis and the ensuing consequences, namely deadlocked negotiations (topos of disadvantage to all) and harsh sanctions (topos of disadvantage to them), and, as such, holding Iran responsible for acting to find a peaceful solution to the problem (topos of responsibility). Evoking – and speaking for – the ‘international community’, this discursive strategy that appears in statements from quoted British/German politicians or U.S. officials portrays Iran as the isolated Other – due to its own (mis)behavior – on the opposite side of a coalition of states united against a common threat. In this respect, Rouhani’s election is represented as providing an opportunity for Iran to change its conduct by addressing the shared concerns of the collective We-group as well as complying with its international obligations, and, in so doing, re-join this club of rational states (topoi of urgency, responsibility, and ‘pro bono publico’<sup>483</sup>).

(151) In his phone conversation with Iran's foreign minister [...], Hague also raised the issue of Tehran's nuclear dossier which is the subject of an international dispute and talks over it is currently at stalemate.

"The Foreign Secretary **reiterated the need for urgent progress to resolve the international community's concerns about Iran's nuclear programme,**" said a foreign office statement. (G31.07)

(152) "Wir hoffen, dass er [Rouhani] und sein neues Team **substantiell auf die internationale Gemeinschaft eingehen, um eine diplomatische Lösung für Irans Atomprogramm zu erreichen**. Und wir werden sehen, was passiert", sagte Marie Harf, stellvertretende Sprecherin des US-Außenministeriums am Donnerstag in Washington. (SPON03.08)

(153) **Trotzdem gebe es Schritte, die Iran tun müsse, um seine internationalen Verpflichtungen zu erfüllen und eine friedliche Lösung in diesem Konflikt zu finden**, so [U.S. State Department spokeswoman] Psaki weiter. "Jetzt ist Iran an der Reihe, zu handeln." (SPON06.08)

This predicational/argumentative theme is more apparent in the context of nuclear-related sanctions. Besides two op-eds in British (G22.04) and French (LM12.08) news sites that focus upon their impact on Iranian nuclear policy and society, sanctions were mentioned in 11 articles from *Guardian*, 4 items from *Le Monde* and 7 from *SPON*. Regarding referential choices, the texts use a range of neutral terms and emotive or evaluative descriptions: ‘punitive’ (G17.06), ‘backbreaking’ (G23.06) or ‘draconian’ (G23.06, G26.07) sanctions; ‘such cruelty’<sup>484</sup> (LM12.08), ‘increasingly tough sanctions’<sup>485</sup> (LM15.06b), ‘(die) harten’ (SPON15.06b) and ‘(die) harschen’ (SPON15.06a, SPON16.06, SPON13.07) Wirtschaftssanktionen. Consistent with the Ideological Square, the sampled pieces adopt a number of discursive practices to construct an Us-Them polarization. This includes

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<sup>483</sup> ‘to the advantage of all’, a sub-type of the topos of advantage/usefulness (Wodak, 2001b, p.74).

<sup>484</sup> une telle cruauté

<sup>485</sup> des sanctions de plus en plus dures

propositions and “the *syntactic structure* of the sentence expressing such propositions” (van Dijk, 1998, p.33, italics in original) that de-emphasize the agency of We-group members through *backgrounding* or *suppression*, the latter realized as adjectives (van Leeuwen, 1996, p.40), with actors responsible not being specified and inferred through the authors’ reliance on prior/existing knowledge shared with readers. In this vein, while some items refer specifically to U.S. sanctions (G04.08a,G04.08b, G17.06, G26.07, SPON03.08, SPON07.08), EU oil sanctions (G22.04), U.S./European sanctions (G26.07), U.S./EU/UN sanctions (LM15.06b) or ‘western sanctions’ (G16.06b), a common reference in the selected articles is ‘*international* sanctions’ (G21.04,G30.04,G13.05, G16.06a, LM14.07, LM12.08, SPON03.08, SPON06.08). As such, they are depicted as a collective, legitimate policy on behalf of a global community against a misbehaving Other. Another strategy in several articles from *Guardian* and *SPON* to de-emphasize or downplay Our negative action is reporting sanctions as punitive measures targeted at Iran’s leadership and not its people, mirroring the joint and individual statements of European political and business leaders cited in Chapter Two<sup>486</sup>. Examples include: ‘the west’s economic war with the Islamic Republic’ (G30.04) and “die internationalen Sanktionen, die wegen des Nuklearprogramms gegen Teheran in Kraft sind” (SPON06.08).

As the last above-stated example shows, sanctions are regularly legitimized as Our necessary measures enforced to thwart Their nuclear threat. In this respect, they are presented, either through remarks by quoted and interviewed politicians or in writers’ own words, as the We-group’s appropriate approach in defusing a crisis/averting danger by opting for an (implicitly or explicitly) assumed peaceful alternative to military force. In other words: acting for the ‘common good’ to secure global peace. This Self-legitimation – and often concurrent de-legitimation of the Other – is substantiated by combining the topoi of threat, ‘pro bono nobis’, and authority, the latter which is in few instances also combined with the topos of law i.e. Security Council resolutions:

(154)But Hagel added the United States and other countries believe **there is still time for diplomacy and tough international sanctions to have an impact.**

"The military option is one option that remains on the table, must remain on the table," he said. "But military options, I think most of us feel, should be the last option." (G21.04)

(155)The US and EU have placed severe trade and financial restrictions on Tehran to try to persuade it to curb its nuclear programme, which Iran insists is for peaceful purposes, but the west believes is intended to provide the capacity for making a nuclear warhead. (G24.07)

(156) It is essential that the message sent to the Iranians be clear. The lifting of sanctions will follow real progress on the ground. **If they insist on their program, sanctions will be tightened.**

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<sup>486</sup> See the comments of EU leaders, French President Sarkozy, and Daimler’s former chief executive.

**What we ask for is nothing more than the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions:** stopping enrichment, the transfer of already enriched uranium stockpile out of Iran and halting the construction of Arak reactor.<sup>487</sup> (interview with Israel's Minister of Intelligence and Strategic Affairs, LM06.08)

(157) Zurzeit unterliegt Iran **wegen des Atomstreits** strengen internationalen Wirtschaftssanktionen. Deren Lockerung hält Westermächte für "noch zu früh". (SPON03.08)

(158) **Der Westen verdächtigt Iran**, unter dem Deckmantel der friedlichen Nutzung heimlich am Bau von Atomwaffen zu arbeiten. Zuletzt hatten 76 US-Senatoren in einem Brief an Präsident Barack Obama härtere Sanktionen gegen Iran gefordert. (SPON07.08)

The reasons behind imposed sanctions are either broadly ascribed to the nuclear row, Iran's ambiguous motives/suspected program and the perceived threat to Us/allies (G21.04, G22.04, G13.05, G17.06, G04.08a, LM09.05, SPON15.06b, SPON16.06, SPON03.08, SPON06.08, SPON07.08) or, less so, to the uncompromising nuclear negotiating team under Ahmadinejad (LM16.06b) and his provocations (G16.06a, G23.06) in particular. Furthermore, in some *Guardian* news and opinion pieces, the legitimization of Our measures is done through positive Self-predications that depict Our warranted measures – besides their presumed usefulness for Us in deterring a presupposed threat – as also beneficial to Them; that is to say, bringing about a win-win situation that is advantageous to all (topos of 'pro bono publico'). This includes the consequential influence of stringent sanctions on Iranian behavior/decisions and diplomatic efforts as well as Rouhani's election. Employing the topos of history (as teacher), the writer argues in an op-ed that economic coercion provided a needed 'incentive' to force Iran's leadership, "a calculating and a rational regime", into changing its stance/behavior and thus prevented the likely collapse of nuclear talks (excerpt 159). Advocating coercive diplomacy (see Chapter Two, section 2.6) is similarly evident in the statement from the Labour party's shadow foreign secretary quoted in a news story (excerpt 160), which also serves as positive Self-presentation indicating Our commitment to peaceful means/a diplomatic resolution. In addition, the election of Rouhani – and Iran's moderation – is in several *Guardian* articles credited to the West's political/economic pressures on Iran. This causal link is established in an analysis co-written by *Guardian*'s staff journalist Kamali Dehghan and world affairs editor Borger (excerpt 161) through *transformed indirect quotation*, whereby reporting clauses i.e. 'said' are substituted with mental-state verbs such as 'believes' (Richardson, 2007, pp.104-5), and the inclusion of local voices in the feature written by Channel 4's Jon Snow (excerpt 162):

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<sup>487</sup> Il est essentiel que le message envoyé aux Iraniens soit clair. La levée des sanctions suivra les progrès réellement enregistrés sur le terrain. S'ils persistent dans leur programme, les sanctions seront alourdies. Ce que nous demandons n'est rien d'autre que l'application des résolutions du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU: l'arrêt de l'enrichissement, le transfert hors d'Iran de tout le stock d'uranium déjà enrichi et l'arrêt de la construction du réacteur d'Arak.



(159)Had it not been for the sanctions, the Iranian government would have had little incentive to change its strategy of the 2010 and 2011 negotiations with the P5+1, which focused solely on its own demands. This could have led to the eventual breakdown of the diplomatic process. (G22.04)

(160)“Diplomacy involves meeting with people with whom you disagree. The UK should be working with other EU countries to engage with the new Iranian President, while maintaining peaceful pressure through sanctions.” he [Douglas Alexander MP] said. (G24.07)

(161)But optimists hope that the intense economic pressures on Iran – amplified by severe US and European sanctions – that helped carry Rouhani to victory will drive the regime towards a historic compromise. (G26.07)

(162) So why did more than 18 million Iranians vote for him? "The economy," a taxi driver said. "Sanctions," said a woman in a black hijab and chador [...]. "We can't carry on with inflation like this, I won't be able to live." (G16.06b, italics in original)

This theory, however, was challenged in a *Guardian* editorial entitled ‘Iran: enter a pragmatist’ (G04.08a) in line with the stance of the left-wing British newspaper stated briefly in Chapter Six (section 6.2.1.2) and also expressed in another editorial about current issues in the Middle East<sup>488</sup> that attributed Rouhani’s win to ‘the shrewdness’ of Iranian voters. Consistent with the argumentative – and persuasive – character of its genre (Fowler, 1991, p.211), the editorial voice (excerpt 163) rejects the popular view by affirming that it “could not be more ill-judged”, and adopts the metaphor ‘yoke’ (symbolizing oppression) to further accentuate the burden of punitive sanctions on Iran(ians):

(163)There is a current of thought in US and EU policy-making circles that regards the emergence of a moderate in Mr Rouhani as the product of international pressure and of sanctions. Ratchet the sanctions up further, as the US House of Representatives has just attempted to do, and Iran will bend a little further, or so this theory goes. It could not be more ill-judged. The anti-sanctions movement in Iran is broadly based. The movement comprises reformists and conservatives alike, and in seeking to lift the sanctions yoke, Mr Rouhani is speaking for everyone in Iran.

While stricter new measures proposed/approved in the U.S. during this time were criticized in the above-stated editorial (‘the belligerence of Congress’), a *Guardian* news piece (‘hawkish calls in Washington for tougher sanctions on Tehran’, G04.08b), and the analysis above that cites a joint letter published on The Hill’s congressional blog, stating: “The House must not snuff out hopes for Iranian moderation before Rouhani even gets a chance” (G26.07), the rationale behind (and the morality of) the sanctions already in place remained unquestioned in all three media’s sampled news/opinion items – excluding an op-ed in *Le Monde* discussed below that disproves the sanctions’ moral permissibility and collective punishment. While the ramifications of existing sanctions on Iranian economy and society are routinely raised in the texts as additional/background information i.e. a tenfold rise in the

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<sup>488</sup> ‘Middle East: a wall of difficulties’ (G18.07b).

price of bowel cancer drugs, as Jon Snow reports (G16.06b), or, more generally, their “devastating effect on national morale as well as its health and wealth”, as articulated in the *Observer* editorial (G23.06), the negative impact of sanctions is presented as the unintended consequences of the necessary policy tool adopted by the We-group in accord with Eurocentric discourse that “minimizes the West’s oppressive practices by regarding them as contingent, accidental, exceptional” (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p.3). As such, the harmful effects of sanctions on the health and well-being of ordinary citizens are linked to, and (in)directly blamed on, Iran’s leadership (mainly *Guardian* and *SPON*), the easing of which being dependent upon Iranian behavior:

- (164)**Only reformists dare to say openly that bread-and-butter problems are linked inextricably to foreign policy.** "Iranians feel that if there can be better relations with the west things will improve economically at home," argues Mohamed Karoubi [son of opposition leader Mehdi under house arrest]. "The people are under heavy pressure. They are suffering from a shortage of medicines. Everyone has problems because of the sanctions." (G13.05)
- (165)**Sanctions have had a devastating effect on Iranian lives and the economy.** Ahmadinejad, who came to power claiming to be able to do more for Iran's poorest people, was exposed as a failure, whereas Rouhani pointed out that in the several years when he was chief nuclear negotiator the issue was not taken to the security council. (G16.06a)
- (166)Der Geistliche hofft darauf, eine Lockerung der harschen Wirtschaftssanktionen herauszuhandeln, **die der iranischen Bevölkerung zu schaffen machen.** (SPON15.06a, SPON13.07)

#### 7.3.2.2.6 *Our obligations*

In addition to routinely pointing out the West’s expectations of Rouhani or mentioning Iran’s obligations, a predicational strategy in a small number of articles shifts the onus onto the (powerful) We-group. Visible in journalistic reporting (*SPON*), quoted sources (*Le Monde* and *SPON*), and especially opinion pieces, namely editorials (*Guardian*), this strategy involves indicating the appropriate course(s) of action that the West ought to take towards Iran after Rouhani’s election and in view of the opportunity it presented. In the case of *Guardian* and *Observer* editorials, this strategy is implemented by means of modal verbs and adverbs, a characteristic feature of opinion genres (Fowler, 1991; Richardson, 2007), including truth (‘will’, ‘clearly’) and obligation modals (‘must’) as well as intertextuality i.e. format/genre and using metaphors/allusion (Fowler, 1991, pp. 227-8). Unlike the argumentation lines discussed earlier that place blame or responsibility onto Rouhani/Iran for (resolving) the nuclear row and (easing of) sanctions, a *Guardian* editorial, as the passage below shows, refers to mutual commitment from both sides (Iran and U.S.), with the lifting of sanctions not only being contingent upon “the evidence of Iranian moves towards a

solution”, but also on “political will” and “the spending of political capital” in Washington. While conveying *desirability*, a modality that “is explicit in a range of evaluative adjectives and adverbs” (Fowler, 1991, p.87), regarding Obama’s expressed willingness to engage with the new Iranian president (‘good’), the editorial also points out the pressure facing the American president from Congress and the additional political capital required to overcome congressional resistance:

(167)Whether or not Mr Rouhani succeeds does not depend solely on competing power centres in Iran. [...] Starting to lift the sanctions will require more than just the evidence of Iranian moves towards a solution to the question of nuclear enrichment. It will need political will, and the spending of political capital. The White House reaction, which said that Tehran would find a willing partner in the US should it choose to engage, was good, but Barack Obama has also to overcome the belligerence of Congress. While the White House did not like the house's bill, it did not spend time in trying to amend it. (*Guardian* editorial, G04.08a)

Another *Guardian* editorial (excerpt 168) evokes a sense of urgency, using the ‘ticking clock’ metaphor, to stress that time is running out for nuclear diplomacy with Iran (topos of urgency) which, given the choice of metaphor (‘Iran’s ticking *nuclear* clock’), could also be interpreted as insinuating the countdown to Iran building a nuclear weapon (topos of danger/threat). While affirming that Rouhani’s election signifies “an opportunity to unwind” the current stalemate and/or Iran’s nuclear quest, the editorial lists U.S./allies’ courses of action i.e. lifting sanctions, respecting Iran’s sovereignty rights – regarding the inspection of nuclear facilities – and its inclusion in Syria talks, using the modal auxiliary ‘must’ that is “a crucial word in editorials, claiming that the source has the right to specify obligations” (Fowler, 1991, p.211). Appealing to the consensual ‘we’, the *Observer* editorial (excerpt 169) employs a recommendation speech act (‘what we now need’), a recurring feature of opinion pieces that carries a normative implication (van Dijk, 1998, p.51), to indicate the approach that We, in “the ‘inclusive sense’, referring to the community of values that the newspaper claims to express” (Fowler, 1991, p.212), should adopt in order not only to help Them, namely the Iranian president and people, but also to preserve world peace (topos of advantage to all). This proposed approach stands in contrast to Bush and Blair’s ‘good’/‘evil’ dichotomy and, as such, is assumed to resonate with the *Weltbild* of the British site’s intended left-liberal readers:

(168)**Mr Rouhani clearly represents an opportunity to unwind Iran's ticking nuclear clock. But the US and its allies must also learn important lessons from years of stalemate. The draconian sanctions need to be reversible: for Mr Rouhani to be able to make concessions, he must be able to go back to his people with tangible economic gains. Iran's sovereignty must be respected, including that which relates to properly monitored civil nuclear power, and it must also be engaged in a growing non-nuclear agenda, principally Syria. (*Guardian* editorial, G17.06)**

(169) To the Bush/Blair administrations, Iran was easy to paint in the colours of good and of evil. **What we now need is a more nuanced, sophisticated and informed engagement if we want to help the new Iranian president help himself and his people and save the world from another futile and deadly road to war.** (*Observer* editorial, G23.06)

As for the French and German news sites, this predicational strategy, which is realized in journalists' words or quoted sources, stresses the pivotal role of reciprocal steps from Obama in reaching an Iran-U.S. détente (*Le Monde*) and the importance of giving Rouhani/Iran a chance (*SPON*). The latter, as stated in previous sections, serves as positive Self-presentation denoting Our clout (topos of authority) and sensible/generous approach i.e. *rewarding* Iran for altering its behavior by allowing the use of nuclear energy for civilian purposes or the easing of sanctions (topos of advantage to them/Iran). Furthermore, the nuclear conflict is linked to Iran's human rights situation, as excerpt 172 shows and elaborated later, echoing the key issue areas in the EU's Iran policy during the years of (critical and comprehensive) dialogue outlined in Chapter Two (section 2.4). This is conducted by emphasizing Our (moral) duty to pressure Their government and Our concerns about Their people (topoi of human rights/justice and advantage to them/Iranians), while, at the same time, indicating the Self's good reputation (Our positive properties):

(170) In U.S., analysts and "think tanks" have already begun to weigh the chances of resuming dialogue, even reconciliation, with Iran that this surprise victory of Hassan Rouhani offers. "*Foreign policy and the nuclear dossier are not in the president's hands, but the Supreme Leader's*", many have recalled. "**Everything will depend on [Barack] Obama's attitude and his capacity to match [Hassan] Rouhani's efforts**", estimated, for his part, Trita Parsi, founder of the National Iranian American Council and author of several books on Iranian foreign policy.<sup>489</sup> (LM15.06b, italics in original)

(171) Was das Verhältnis mit dem Westen angeht, setzt er auf Pragmatismus und geschickte Diplomatie. Von Rohani könnten neue Impulse ausgehen für den festgefahrenen Atomstreit, **wenn die internationale Gemeinschaft sich auf ihn einlässt.** (SPON15.06a)

(172) Omid Nouripour, sicherheitspolitischer Sprecher der Grünen- Bundestagsfraktion, sagte der Zeitung: "Wir müssen dafür sorgen, dass der Iran, wenn er ernstzunehmende Zugeständnisse macht, dafür auch **durch die friedliche Nutzung der Atomkraft oder das Lockern von Sanktionen belohnt wird.**" So sei ein echter wirtschaftlicher Aufschwung für die Menschen des Landes zu erreichen. "Zugleich sollte Deutschland seinen guten Ruf auch unter der iranischen Bevölkerung nutzen, um **Druck auf den neuen Präsidenten Rohani für Verbesserungen der Menschenrechtsslage im Land zu machen.**" (SPON03.08)

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<sup>489</sup> Aux Etats-Unis, analystes et "cercles de réflexion" ont déjà commencé à soupeser les chances d'une reprise du dialogue, voire d'une réconciliation avec l'Iran qu'offre cette victoire surprise de Hassan Rohani. "*La politique étrangère et le dossier nucléaire ne sont pas dans les mains du président, mais du guide suprême*", ont-ils été nombreux à rappeler. "*Tout va dépendre de l'attitude de [Barack] Obama et de sa capacité à accompagner les efforts de [Hassan] Rohani*", a estimé pour sa part Trita Parsi, fondateur du Conseil national irano-américain et auteur de plusieurs ouvrages sur la politique étrangère iranienne.

### 7.3.2.2.7 *Their nuclear rights and good actions/Our missteps and bad actions*

As noted in Chapter Six (section 6.2.1.2), Iran's right to enrich uranium was categorically absent in items collected from *SPON*, stated briefly in one op-ed from *Le Monde*, and raised on occasion in *Guardian*, including in two op-eds and one column appearing in the site's CiF section that were selected for in-depth analysis. The first, penned by Meir Javedanfar, an Iranian-Israeli analyst who writes guest posts on Iran and Iran-Israel relations, was published before the presidential election and headlined 'Sanctions in Iran have had an impact on its nuclear stance' (G22.04). Recalling prior nuclear talks in 2010 and 2011, the author contends that Iran's negotiating team "refused to even address confidence-building proposals made by the P5+1" and instead "demand[ed] that existing sanctions be lifted and that the P5+1 recognise Iran's right to enrich uranium." In this vein, the right to enrich is cited as part of Iranian demands and assertions while omitting its recognition under the NPT. The second, co-written by the authors of *A Dangerous Delusion: Why the Iranian Nuclear Threat is a Myth*<sup>490</sup>, was likewise published prior to – and in anticipation of – the election and entitled 'Iran has a right to peaceful nuclear enrichment' (G06.06). Besides accentuating this right in the headline, the op-ed points out that "Iran has an 'inalienable right' to develop peaceful nuclear power under article 4.1 of the non-proliferation treaty, which it signed in 1968". Moreover, the positive attribute 'peaceful', preceded by a possessive pronoun, is used twice in the article when referring to Iran's program ('its peaceful programme', its programme of peaceful nuclear enrichment'). The third, written by *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Steele, was published after Rouhani's win and refers in its body text to "Iran's rights under the non-proliferation treaty to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes" (G16.06a). In the absence of this topos of law/right, references to Iran's nuclear right in items sampled from both *Le Monde* and *SPON* appear only in (direct and indirect) reported speech, namely Rouhani's remarks and position, with journalistic distance. Without explicit mention of Iran's right, *granting* enrichment is stated in some cases (e.g. excerpts 172,173) where ingroup politicians are quoted as an indication of Us keeping Our side of the bargain to Their advantage (topos of 'pro bono eorum'<sup>491</sup>), denoting Our power (topos of authority) and reasonable approach – willingness to allow Iran to enrich under strict conditions – that is contingent upon Their verifiable deeds:

- (173) Auch CDU-Außenpolitiker Ruprecht Polenz sagte der "Neuen Osnabrücker Zeitung": "Wir sollten uns auf eine Linie hinbewegen, dass der Iran unter bestimmten Voraussetzungen Uran bis zu fünf Prozent anreichern darf, wenn er daraus nachweislich keine Waffen herstellt." (SPON03.08)

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<sup>490</sup> This book was not consulted for the present thesis. For a review, see Lamont (2013).

<sup>491</sup> 'to the advantage of them', a sub-type of the topos of advantage/usefulness (Wodak, 2001b, p.74).

Criticizing the West, that is to say emphasizing the We-group's negative aspects/actions, and, by contrast, providing positive or contextualizing information about Them, is another line of argumentation in *Guardian*. In this context, foregrounding the West's double standards, as shown in the case of Syria (section 7.3.2.1.4) and also stated in the previous chapter, features occasionally across diverse topics. One such example is the news piece by Gareth Smyth, Tehran Bureau's contributing journalist. Combining the topoi of history and comparison to state Iran's stand towards WMDs in the past and at present, Smyth places the words "principled" and "hypocrisy" in strategic quotation (Richardson, 2007, p.102) to specify the respective stances taken by Iran and the West. Using quotation marks, Richardson (2004) argues, "demonstrates not only the constructive role of the reporter in the story but also the ideological stake which journalists have in *disavowing* such a role" (p.45, emphasis in original). Considering the overall critical tone of the article regarding Iran's role in Syria, on one hand, and given the referential (Our 'atomic *weapons*' versus Their 'nuclear *technology*') and predicational choices, namely the West's double-standard policy on chemical warfare and Tehran's refusal to use such weapons (although having itself been a victim thereof) on the other, the use of scare quotes in this case could be construed either as a distancing strategy adopted by the writer to maintain objectivity or, conversely, to convey his skepticism about, and insinuate the ironic/disputed nature of, the stated terms/notions:

(174) Salehi's description of the military use of chemicals as a "red line" reflects **Tehran's long-standing tendency to take a "principled" stand over such weapons, which it refused to employ in the 1980-88 war with Iraq** although they were dropped on Iranian soldiers by the forces of Saddam Hussein.

This in turn enables Iran **to highlight the "hypocrisy" of western countries over their supply of chemicals to Saddam at that time;** and, in today's world, **to highlight the "hypocrisy" of the US, British and French in maintaining atomic weapons while demanding Tehran curtail its own use of nuclear technology** which it insists is only for civilian purposes. (G01.05)

Closely related is pointing out the Self/West's missteps or bad faith. In the context of bilateral issues, the British government's decision to decline Tehran's invitation of foreign dignitaries, for the first time, to the swearing-in of the new president drew condemnation from the Labour party as being "both a misjudgment and a missed opportunity" that was cited and rephrased in several *Guardian* articles (G24.07, G26.07, G31.07). An editorial likewise expressed regret, stating "it is a pity that from Europe only [former EU foreign policy chief] Javier Solana chose to take the offer up" (G04.08a). In the op-ed quoted above on Iran's nuclear rights (G06.06), the writers refer to "the most comprehensive and important offer" made by Tehran in 2005 that "could have solved the nuclear standoff between Iran and the west once and for all", which was rejected by European powers bowing to Washington's

diktat under then-President Bush in opposing Iran's demand to have enrichment continue on its soil (see Chapter Two, section 2.5.2). Combining the topoi of history and law/right, the authors contradict the Ideological Square, whereby "good acts will usually be self-attributed to Ourselves (or our allies) and bad acts other-attributed to the Others (or their allies)" (van Dijk, 1998, p.43), by blaming Washington's inflexibility at the time and European compliance for the failure of nuclear talks in lieu of resorting to the common trope of 'Iranian intransigence'. Despite "faults on both sides", the authors add, the West's unwillingness to recognize Iran's rights precludes further progress in nuclear diplomacy with Tehran:

(175) Hassan Rouhani headed Iran's nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005. It was during his term of office that **Iran made an extraordinary offer that could have solved the nuclear standoff between Iran and the west once and for all**. At a meeting in the Quai d'Orsay [...] on 23 March 2005, **Iran unveiled the most comprehensive and important offer it has ever made**.

[...]

The offer, however, was rejected out of hand, and there is no doubt why. Acting on instructions from the US, the European negotiators were determined not to "tolerate even the operation of even one centrifuge in Iran". **Though there are faults on both sides, this refusal to acknowledge Iran's right to peaceful enrichment remains the most fundamental stumbling block to any resolution of the nuclear argument.**

In a similar vein, *Guardian's* columnist refers in his above-stated piece headlined 'Iran has changed course. Now the US must do the same' (G16.06a) to a proposal made by the Iranian foreign minister the year before, offering to secularize and turn the fatwa issued by Khamenei in 2003 – banning the production and use of any form of WMD – into a binding document which, as Steele argues, "would give much greater force to Iran's longstanding denial of interest in having a nuclear weapon", that was disregarded in the West. This, it should be noted, was the only article in the sampled corpus that mentioned the nuclear fatwa. On the contrary, as already shown, the Supreme Leader's role in Iranian politics and his hardline stance vis-à-vis Rouhani's, were repeatedly reiterated in the texts. Further down the article, Steele indicates: "At the heart of the conflict between Iran and the west is the US's unwillingness to accept Iran's independence in foreign and domestic policies", therewith recognizing Iran as an independent and sovereign state. This seemingly self-evident recognition of Iran as a rational, 'normal' actor should be considered against the backdrop of the persistent 'Iran-as-rogue' narrative in the U.S. since the 1980s (Rouhi, 2019) and viewing the Islamic Republic as an illegitimate entity (Leverett & Leverett, 2013). Instead of evoking the prevailing image of a hostile/belligerent Other, Steele foregrounds U.S. hostility toward Iran, with its "government [being] constantly demonised, and its intentions deliberately put under suspicion", and, moreover, places the two states' mutual distrust in historical context, drawing on the topoi of history:

(176)The psychological wounds of having US diplomats taken hostage in 1979 have not been allowed to heal, while on the Iranian side the US and British role in toppling their government in 1953 has also not been forgiven.

### 7.3.2.3 Their threat to democracy and human rights

Another recurring group of predicational and argumentation strategies for negative Other-presentation in the sampled articles is that of foregrounding Iran's undemocratic system and human rights issues. This discourse topic (see Chapter Five, section 5.1.1.1) that constitutes the texts' main topic/issue or is raised in the body involves attributing negative qualities to Iran's political system, also reflected in the three media's referential choices (section 7.2.2.1), and entails characterizing Iran/Islamic Republic as a system that "remains as complex and opaque as ever" (G13.05), "although not democratic, has since its inception in 1979 had a representative form of government" (G23.06), and 'a system as tightly controlled as Iran's'<sup>492</sup> (LM15.06b). Also included, as noted in Chapter Six (section 6.2.2.3), are regular references to the previous election, subsequent violent suppression, and fate of the opposition and Green Movement. While Iranian people are mostly collectivized and aggregated in these cases, they are also individualized (and functionalized) in some instances:

(177)**Kaveh Kermanshahi** wurde im Zuge der Repressionswelle nach den Wahlen vom Sicherheitsapparat einbestellt und verhaftet. **Der kurdische Iraner** war dem Regime als **engagierter Menschenrechtler** bekannt. Einer seiner Freunde wurde hingerichtet. (SPON14.06)

Following Rouhani's win and in line with the intersecting discursive themes identified by Santini (2010) in official (international, European) documents on Iranian nuclear dossier, discussed in Chapter Two (section 2.6), the nuclear question is occasionally linked to human rights-related matters. This interdiscursivity is realized through politicians' remarks and quoted sources or in the writers' own reporting. As such, in several items especially from the liberal *Guardian*, the nuclear question is listed alongside political and social freedoms in Iran when assessing the prospects of Rouhani's election, after having campaigned on a platform of 'prudence and moderation', amid the high hopes pinned on him for greater freedom inside Iran and breaking the nuclear impasse abroad (topos of 'pro bono publico'). This entails attending in particular to women's issues, morality-related restrictions (e.g. dress code), and free speech/press freedom:

(178) Rouhani's senior aide told me that the new president wanted to "**improve women's rights and ease the dress code**". He has **also** pledged to **end the current stalemate over Iran's nuclear programme**. (G16.06b)

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<sup>492</sup> un système aussi verouillé que celui de l'Iran



(179) If his first press conference was anything to go by he has more good news to impart, **committing himself to liberalisation of the press, lifting the restrictions on trade unions and a determination to find a compromise over the nuclear issue.** (*Observer* editorial, G23.06)

(180) **Innenpolitisch erhoffen sich die Iraner, dass Rohani ihnen mehr Freiheiten und Spielraum zugesteht** wie etwa vor Mahmud Ahmadinedschad unter dem Präsidenten Mohammed Chatami, dem Rohani nahesteht.

Unter der achtjährigen Präsidentschaft von Mahmud Ahmadinedschad war das politische Klima in Iran immer repressiver geworden. Die unter Chatami aufblühende Zivilgesellschaft wurde zurückgestutzt, viele Nichtregierungsorganisationen, Zeitschriften und Zeitungen geschlossen. Auf der Straße hielten Sittenwächter junge Iraner und Iranerinnen an und überprüften, ob sie sich ordnungsgemäß kleideten.

[...]

**Auch außenpolitisch will Rohani versöhnlichere Töne anstimmen.** Er könnte die Atmosphäre verändern, in der die Verhandlungen über das iranische Atomprogramm stattfinden. (SPON16.06)

(181) For now, the arrival of a moderate president after eight years of rule under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad means, above all, more room to breathe for the middle class, **stifled by both international sanctions and the regime's repressive policy regarding morality and freedom of expression.**<sup>493</sup> (LM15.06b)

The lack of freedom in Iran is sometimes substantiated through personal accounts by (local) news subjects or quoted sources, drawing on topos of witness (a subset of topos of authority):

(182) *"In Iran, we live in a prison, and to get out of it we have to do the military service...and me, I don't want it. So I stay in prison."*<sup>494</sup> (LM13.06a, italics in original)

(183) *"Wir leben in einem System der Angst, wo einem für Sex vor der Ehe die Todesstrafe droht", sagt Karim.* (SPON12.06)

The topos of witness is also used in some *Guardian* texts by (Western) writers after their visit to Iran to evince the state of repression or social restrictions first-hand which, in turn, serves to depict Iran as a dangerous and unsafe place (topos of danger). One example is the passage below (excerpt 184) from the aforementioned piece by Channel 4's Jon Snow – the only U.K. journalist who covered the election on the ground – and the second is an article (excerpt 185) by an anonymous writer and published on the British site's Iran-specific blog as part of Tehran Bureau's 'Iran Standard Time' series that aims to provide "personal looks at life in the Islamic Republic today":

(184) Indeed, many within the security apparatus do not like foreign journalists being here at all. They resent the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance for giving visas to me and my team. Last Tuesday, while working on a story about the effect of western sanctions on healthcare, we were

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<sup>493</sup> Dans l'immédiat, l'arrivée d'un président modéré après huit ans de règne de Mahmoud Ahmadinejad signifie surtout une possibilité de respirer davantage pour les classes moyennes, étouffées à la fois par les sanctions internationales mais aussi par la politique répressive du régime en matière de mœurs et de libertés d'expression.

<sup>494</sup> "En Iran, on vit dans une prison, et pour en sortir, il faut faire le service militaire... et moi je n'en ai pas envie. Alors je reste en prison."

arrested outside a pharmacy [...]. The eight young plainclothed zealots from the Revolutionary Guard refused to identify themselves but they made it clear who they were. [...] (G16.06b)

(185) If we are taken [into custody for drinking alcohol], his car will be impounded, we will spend the weekend in a communal cell before being ushered in front of a judge who will, at best, give us a hefty fine or, at worst, give us lashes. In theory, on a third count, a judge can issue a death sentence, but this is diminishingly rare in modern Iran. (G30.04)

As the last excerpt above and those cited before show, pointing out social restrictions and prohibiting (Islamic) laws and regulations constitute a major predicational strategy in the three media's Iran coverage. Included are also examples below from *Guardian* and *SPON*:

(186) As millions of jubilant Iranians poured on to the streets to celebrate Iran's qualification for the 2014 World Cup days after the election, **the police tolerated public music, dancing and slogans chanted in favour of imprisoned opposition leaders, which would have been suppressed only days before.** (G26.07)

(187) **Zumal strenge Regeln** das Leben in Iran mitunter stark einschränken: **Wegen der islamischen Vorschriften** gibt es keine Kneipen oder Discotheken, in Restaurants gilt absolutes Alkoholverbot. Frauen müssen in der Öffentlichkeit Mantel und Schleier tragen, um alle Körperkonturen zu verdecken. (SPON14.08)

Given the clear overlap of these issues and Iranian society (especially women and the youth), other predicational categories that draw on topos of democracy/human rights to de-legitimize the Iranian state, and, by contrast, arouse sympathy/admiration for – or establish a sense of familiarity with – ordinary people, are discussed further in conjunction with the three media's representation of ordinary Iranians (section 7.3.3) to avoid repetition. It should be added that although the examined media's discourse on democracy, human rights, and (social, political) freedoms in Iran is mainly reliant upon negative Other-presentation, with positive traits of the Self (e.g. Our democratic system, Our free society) presupposed, there are few instances of implicit positive Self-presentation in some texts that place Us (in the West) in contraposition to Them, as was evident in their referential choices (e.g. excerpts 20 and 21). Besides these examples that are based on the (Western) writer's own observation, there are cases in which the West and Iran are compared and contrasted through the remarks by the news subjects:

(188) "The U.S. is for me a means of escape. This country represents the exact opposite of Iran. The culture, the way of thinking, even the metric system is different".<sup>495</sup> (LM13.06a, italics in original)

(189) Als die Iranerin das erste Mal einen deutschen Weihnachtsmarkt besuchte, brach sie in Tränen aus. "Die Menschen waren so unbeschwert. Sie konnten einfach glücklich sein. Ihnen gehörte die Straße, der öffentliche Raum", sagt Mirza. "Ich musste daran denken, dass in Iran Menschen auf der Straße geschlagen und verfolgt werden." Kermanshahi sagt: "Es gibt in

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<sup>495</sup> "Les États-Unis sont pour moi un moyen d'évasion. Ce pays représente l'exact opposé de l'Iran. La culture, la façon de penser, même le système métrique est différent".

Deutschland so viele Freiheiten. Manchmal habe ich den Eindruck, dass wir jungen Iraner dies mehr zu schätzen wissen als junge Deutsche, weil wir schon so lange und hart dafür kämpfen und diese Freiheiten trotzdem nicht haben. " (SPON12.06)

Moreover, there are a handful of instances in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* whereby while the central premise of dominant discourse – Iran is undemocratic and unfree – remains unquestioned, negative actions are *also* (in)directly assigned to the Western We-group. This includes the quote below that was incorporated in a *Guardian* analysis and alludes to the hypocrisy of the West:

(190) Ben Wallace, Conservative chairman of the British-Iran parliamentary group, also voiced concern that western mis-steps could undermine the new president. “Rouhani has a real task ahead. [...] “The danger for him and for peace is if the US and the UK move the goalposts and are seen to be hypocritical in support of repressive Sunni regimes yet tough on the Shia nation of Iran”. (G26.07)

More explicitly and in the context of sanctions, the Iranian society is depicted in two articles from *Le Monde*, namely the analysis cited earlier (excerpt 181) and the op-ed mentioned before (section 7.3.2.2.5), as the victim of negative actions ascribed to *both* the ingroup (Our politicians) and the outgroup (Their leaders). Of the articles sampled from the three media, only the latter, co-authored by an Iran-born writer and a French philosopher, assesses nuclear-related sanctions from a human rights perspective and their threat to citizens’ right to health/well-being (topoi of justice and humanitarianism). In their condemnation of the West’s policy toward Iran, the authors construct a dichotomy between Us (we in the West) and Them (‘a dictatorial regime’), on one hand, and between the doubly victimized Iranian people and ‘their (bad) regime’, on the other. Triggering pity and sympathy, the writers align Iranians with the Self by dint of their suffering from negative actions of both Western powers and a mutual enemy, therewith perpetuating ‘a (freedom loving) people versus (evil) regime’ binary, mirroring the “Manichean dichotic view” (Reissner, 2003, p.83) of former U.S. and French presidents Bush<sup>496</sup> and Sarkozy<sup>497</sup>:

(191) A dictatorial regime has decided to maltreat its population. This leaves the entire world indifferent. Not only has nothing been done to prevent or impede these oppressions, but also whatever has been undertaken these past years by the West has ended up putting even

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<sup>496</sup> “To the people of Iran: You are rich in culture and talent. You have a right to live under a government that listens to your wishes, respects your talents, and allows you to build better lives for your families. Unfortunately, your government denies you these opportunities [...]. The day will come when the people of Iran have a government that embraces liberty and justice, and Iran joins the community of free nations” (White House, 2008).

<sup>497</sup> “How is it that a people such as the Iranian people - one of the world's greatest peoples, one of the world's oldest civilisations, sophisticated, cultured, open - have the misfortune of being represented as they are today by some of their leaders?” (BBC, 2008).

more pressure on the Iranians' shoulders. Thus, we can say that Iranians have been hit twice: by their regime and by international sanctions.<sup>498</sup> (LM12.08, emphases added)

### 7.3.3 The Iranian people/culture

As for ordinary Iranians, the three media adopt a number of predicational categories, some of which were stated in Chapter Six, along with argumentative schemes to represent the Iranian society/people. This depiction, as will be discussed, does not correspond to straightforward in- and outgroup constructions within the Ideological Square, as was the case with the three sites' representation of Iran as a political entity/state actor. In other words, with exceptions in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, Iranians are, on one hand, predominantly dissociated from (and contrasted with) Iran's political establishment – constructed as the Other – and portrayed as having a close affinity with Us (in the West), on the other. There are, to a lesser extent, also references to Iranian culture and history in the sampled texts which, as will be shown, contain positive, neutral, or negative attributions.

#### 7.3.3.1 The state-versus-society divide

As noted in Chapter Six (section 6.3), all three media, by varying degrees, tend to highlight a deepening divide between the Iranian state and the people. In most items sampled from the three sites for in-depth analysis, this cleavage is reported in the context of people's aspiration for democracy and (basic) rights, the dissatisfaction of the youth, and the resilience of (young) women.

##### 7.3.3.1.1 *The freedom-loving, democracy-seeking people*

One of the most prevalent predicational themes in the sampled texts is that of depicting ordinary Iranians as ('good') freedom-loving people yearning for democracy, at home and in exile, who have fallen victim to a ('bad') repressive theocracy. Next to referential choices stated earlier in this chapter (sections 7.2.2.1 and 7.2.2.3) and regularly foregrounding human rights violations mentioned in the preceding section, this dichotomous depiction is realized by routinely placing Iranian people, through quotes or in writers' words, as a genericized and collectivized group in opposition to the Iranian state, as evident in the passage from the op-ed cited above (excerpt 191). A people/state bifurcation is likewise constructed in the French foreign minister's statement after Rouhani's win (excerpt 32) and that of the White House reported in *Guardian* – and also cited in French (LM15.06a) and German (SPON16.06) news

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<sup>498</sup> Un régime dictatorial a décidé de malmenager sa population. Cela laisse indifférent le monde entier. Non seulement rien n'est fait pour empêcher ou ralentir ces oppressions, mais, en plus, tout ce qui a été entrepris ces dernières années par l'Occident a fini par mettre encore plus de pression sur les épaules des Iraniens. Ainsi, nous pouvons dire que les Iraniens ont été doublement frappés: par leur régime et par les sanctions internationales.

sites – which described the result “*a call by the Iranian people for change*” and “*an opportunity for Iran to act quickly*” (excerpt 192), bearing resemblance to the concerns expressed on previous occasions by both U.S. presidents Obama<sup>499</sup> and Bush<sup>500</sup>. Thus, a demarcation is made between (brave) Iranians and Their leaders, on one hand, and Us – Our presupposed promotion of democratic values/human rights, Our concerns about well-being of ordinary citizens – and Them, on the other, thereby functioning as a twofold *strategy of polarization* (van Dijk, 1998, p.33). Evoking the notion – and speaking on behalf – of the ‘international community’, the statement, moreover, excludes Iran, the isolated Other, from a discursively constructed We-group united by members who hold the moral high ground and share “deep concerns” over the nuclear problem. In this vein, the burden of responsibility is placed on Rouhani to both secure “a better life” for Iranians (topoi of justice and humanitarianism) and “act quickly to resolve” the nuclear row (topos of urgency):

- (192) The White House statement said: "We note that President Rouhani recognised his election represented a call by the Iranian people for change, and we hope the new Iranian government will heed the will of the voters by making choices that will lead to a better life for the Iranian people. The inauguration of President Rouhani presents an opportunity for Iran to act quickly to resolve the international community's deep concerns over Iran's nuclear program." (G04.08b)

This reaction from the Obama administration that was reported by *Guardian*'s Washington correspondent – and also highlighted in the headline – as extending an “olive branch” elicited criticism from the newspaper's columnist for being “full of hasty blunders. It patronised Iranian voters by saying they showed ‘courage in making their voices heard’ and was rude in urging Rouhani to ‘heed the will of the Iranian people’” (G16.06a).

A closely related predicational theme in selected articles published after Rouhani's victory is that of depicting the election result as an indication of Iranian society's rationality (excerpt 193), disapproval of the Ahmadinejad administration's nuclear policy (excerpt 194), and preference for moderation (excerpt 195):

- (193) The clear message from the majority of the Iranian electorate is that they prefer his more rational approach. (G16.06a)

- (194) In fact, by giving him their vote, a majority of Iranians condemn the nuclear stubbornness of the outgoing team, which has provoked increasingly tough sanctions on behalf of the U.S.,

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<sup>499</sup> Next to mentioning Iran's regional and nuclear activities, the latter which “is one of the greatest global concerns we face”, the Obama administration added: “We are equally disturbed by the regime's ongoing campaign of repression against its own people” (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

<sup>500</sup> In his State of the Union Address, known as the Axis-of-Evil Speech, Bush declared: “Iran aggressively pursues these weapons [of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom” (White House, 2002).

the EU, and, to a lesser extent, the UN, and has led the country into a devastating economic crisis in employment and purchasing power.<sup>501</sup> (LM15.06b)

- (195) Die Bevölkerung erteilt mit ihren Stimmen den Rechtskonservativen aus dem Sicherheitsapparat eine Absage. "Die politische Debatte findet jetzt in der Mitte statt", sagte [Iran-Experte am französischen Forschungsinstitut Centre national de la recherche scientifique] Hourcade. (SPON15.06b)

The state/society binary also serves to substantiate the illegitimacy of the Iranian theocracy, especially with reference to the 2009 election and uprising. Accordingly, the Iranian society is, similar to excerpts above and as examples below show, often collectivized or aggregated in order to accentuate the wide unpopularity of the Islamic Republic, drawing on the topos of appealing to the majority, a subset of topos of authority, with the following conclusion rule: "Because a certain belief/attitude is held by the majority, it is thus correct and valid".

- (196) "This election is necessary to boost the self-confidence of the regime in nuclear talks, in dealings with the outside world and to prove to **Iranians** that **the regime** is solid and in control," says a veteran analyst. (G13.05)
- (197) The order issued to the security forces by Ali Khamenei to suppress the protestors in June 2009 culminated in breaking the link between **the clergy** - at least its fraction that is involved in running the country - **and a large part of the population.** For the first time, slogans were directly aimed at the Supreme Leader. Several months later, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri was buried in Qom in an atmosphere of unrest. But, assuming it knows that it is detested, the Shia clergy can not dissociate itself from a regime that has ensured its fortune.<sup>502</sup> (LM11.6a)
- (198) Die Proteste 2009 waren ein Debakel für das Ajatollah-System. Sie warfen international die Frage auf, inwiefern **das Regime** tatsächlich Rückhalt in **der Bevölkerung** genoss. (SPON15.06b)
- (199) Viele Möglichkeiten, ihre Situation zu verändern, haben die unzufriedenen Jugendlichen nicht. Bei der Präsidentenwahl im Juni ließen sie ihren Frust heraus: **Die absolute Mehrheit der Wähler unter 25 Jahren wählte gegen das Establishment** und stimmte für den Oppositionskandidaten Hassan Rohani. (SPON14.08)

When the Iranian people are personalized and individualized, be it as news subjects or quoted sources, although all three media tend to privilege voices who are critical of Iran's political system, some differences are noticeable among the news sites: While *SPON* foregrounds the (educated) youth and, as will be shown below, their grievances, both French and British sites incorporate a much wider variety of local voices from different ages and backgrounds in their

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<sup>501</sup> De fait, en lui donnant leurs voix, une majorité d'Iraniens condamnent l'entêtement nucléaire de l'équipe sortante, qui a provoqué des sanctions de plus en plus dure de la part des Etats-Unis, de l'Union européenne et dans une moindre mesure des Nations-Unies, et conduit le pays dans une crise économique dévastatrice pour l'emploi et le pouvoir d'achat.

<sup>502</sup> L'ordre donné aux forces de sécurité par Ali Khamenei de réprimer les manifestants en juin 2009 a achevé de casser le lien entre le clergé - du moins sa fraction impliquée dans la gestion du pays - et une bonne partie de la population. Pour la première fois, des slogans ont visé directement le Guide suprême. Quelques mois plus tard, le grand ayatollah Montazeri était enterré à Qom dans une ambiance d'émeute. Mais, s'il se sait détesté, le clergé chiite ne peut pas se désolidariser d'un régime qui a assuré sa fortune.

stories. Examples include: an article in *Le Monde* (LM11.06b) on pre-wedding traditions in Iran and the Iranian families' financial difficulties in times of economic pressure exacerbated by sanctions, wherein the main focus is not (directly) placed on a state-society divide, but on the divisions within society between generations, social classes, and people's mindset in the more progressive capital and conservative cities (e.g. Mashhad); and an analysis in *Guardian* (G13.05) written by Ian Black, then-Middle East editor, prior to the presidential election, in which a member of the Basij is quoted (excerpt 200). While acknowledging the presence of 'many' in Iran who still support the leadership, which, it should be reminded, is omitted in *SPON*'s overall Iran coverage during this period and stated in several *Le Monde* articles that were not selected for detailed analysis (see Chapter Six, section 6.3), it is worth adding that this quote, inserted in the long text's last paragraph, was outnumbered by 12 quoted experts/observers and local people from different ages, professions, and backgrounds who were critical (or skeptical) of the Iranian leadership.

- (200) Individual choices count, with many still influenced by, and fiercely loyal to, Khomeini's vision. "Look, the main thing at stake is the protection of the regime from foreign influence," said Mohammad, an engineer with the paramilitary Basij.  
 "When I vote, my main priority is to help contribute to a strong base of support for the revolution and the supreme leader, and then I vote for whoever I believe is the most fitting candidate."

#### 7.3.3.1.2 *The young and the hopeless*

Another major predicational theme in the three media's coverage of Iranian society/ordinary people entails an emphasis upon disenchantment with Iran's political system, widespread skepticism of change, and modest hope for betterment amongst Iranians, notably the youth:

- (201) Yet beneath the officially orchestrated enthusiasm there is a sense of apathy – not least because of the bitter memories of how the protests that erupted after the announcement of Ahmadinejad's 2009 victory were ruthlessly crushed. (G13.05)
- (202) Apolitical, he has no faith in the future and expects nothing of the upcoming elections. Like numerous young Iranians, he is convinced that things are not about to change.<sup>503</sup> (LM13.06a)
- (203) Die drei sind besorgt über das negative Bild, das durch ihre Regierung im Ausland entsteht, auch nach der Wahl am kommenden Freitag erwarten sie kaum eine Verbesserung. (SPON12.06)
- (204) Unter den Jugendlichen in Iran kursiert ein persisches Sprichwort: "Es gibt keine dunklere Farbe als Schwarz". Was sie damit ausdrücken wollen, ist klar: ihre Hoffnungslosigkeit und die Tatsache, dass es nicht viel schlimmer werden kann. [...] (lead, SPON14.08)

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<sup>503</sup> Apolitique, il n'a pas foi en l'avenir et n'attend rien des prochaines élections. Comme bon nombre de jeunes Iraniens, il est convaincu que les choses ne sont pas près de changer.

In addition to political stagnation, the discontent of the Iranian youth is ascribed to economic (e.g. high unemployment rate, rise in living costs, sanctions) and social (e.g. state-imposed restrictions) factors (e.g. excerpts 57, 58, 74, 187). A closely related sub-theme that appears in *Le Monde* and *SPON*'s texts is that of young Iranians' frustration with, and desperate wish to get away from, existing (economic, social, political) hardships and pressures. Whether expressed through personal remarks from news subjects and other quoted individuals or accentuated by means of collectivization and aggregation (topos of number), young people, notably (educated) urbanites, are portrayed as sad and hopeless, devoid of a future in Iran, and left with little choice but to move abroad (principally U.S. or Europe):

- (205) One day, when he was 24, he **wanted to escape**, not just through television. He decides to illegally pass the border with Turkey to reach Europe. Without a word to anyone. It could not be worse than Iran, he thought.<sup>504</sup> (LM13.06a)
- (206) Samira **will so schnell wie möglich weg aus Iran, will Spaß haben, Freiheiten genießen, Partys feiern.** (SPON12.06)
- (207) **Viele Jugendliche, die es sich leisten können, versuchen, das Land zu verlassen.** Doch im Westen werden nicht alle glücklich. Die 23-jährige Haleh zum Beispiel lebt in Toronto. [...] Vielen anderen Iranern geht es genauso, aber trotz gesellschaftlicher Probleme wollen sie oft nicht zurück. "Lieber unglücklich als perspektivlos", sagt Haleh. (SPON14.08)

Besides routinely stressing the strong desire – and desperation – of young Iranians to leave the country and the realities of everyday life behind, the necessity for young activists to flee Iran, against their will, for political motives is foregrounded in two stories from *Guardian* (see excerpt 71) and *SPON*:

- (208) Wenn die beiden erzählen, wen sie wo kennen, scheint es, als ob nahezu eine ganze Generation iranischer Aktivisten 2009 ins Ausland flüchten musste. (SPON14.06)

#### 7.3.3.1.3 *The resilient women*

As for Iranian women, the main predicational/argumentation strategies used in the sampled articles, which were emblematic of women-related stories pertaining to Iran published in the three news sites during this period, involve pointing out the challenges and limitations facing (young) Iranian women and highlighting their resistance and resilience. Besides regular references in the texts from all three media to social restrictions and strict (Islamic) laws in Iran, as previously shown (e.g. see excerpts 58, 180, 181, 186), some items (*Guardian* and *SPON*) refer to gender segregation enforced in public spaces or judiciary and discriminatory laws against women (*SPON*) in Iran:

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<sup>504</sup> Un jour, alors qu'il avait 24 ans, il a voulu s'évader, plus seulement par la biais de la télévision. Il décide de passer illégalement la frontière avec la Turquie pour rejoindre l'Europe. Sans prévenir personne. Cela ne pouvait pas être pire que l'Iran, pensait-il.



- (209) Women in Iran, who make up 60% of graduates, have never had so much to feel angry about, with the state increasing gender segregation at university, among other changes. (G10.06)
- (210) Women in Iran can use public swimming pools at gender-segregated times, or women-only sections, but sports officials are reluctant to allow them into open waters. (G05.07)
- (211) Frauen dürfen in Iran zwar durchaus schwimmen gehen, allerdings nur geschlechtergetrennt. Sportschwimmerinnen können nur an ausgewählten Wettkämpfen teilnehmen. (SPON06.07)
- (212) [...] In Iran hat die Aussage einer Frau vor Gericht nur halb so viel Gewicht wie die eines Mannes. Das Schmerzensgeld, das einem Mann zusteht, wenn er durch einen Unfall zeugungsunfähig wird, ist höher, als wenn eine Frau ihr Leben verliert. (SPON12.06)

The dress code for women, as stated earlier (excerpts 178, 187), also features in the examined texts, with wearing Hijab mostly depicted as a compulsory rule/an obligation imposed upon (young) Iranian women against their will and, hence, not an individual choice. This is further substantiated through personal remarks by – and the accompanying photo of – female news subjects living abroad or quoted locals:

- (213) Parkour's popularity among young women in Iran is soaring, despite the bulkier clothing and head coverings Islamic dress codes require them to wear. (G10.06)
- (214) Another difference, due to their veil, female "parkour" fans move less quickly than boys and are more likely to bump into each other and fall. *"But what **choice** do we have ?"*, wonders Gilda.<sup>505</sup> (LM22.05, italics in original)
- (215) "Ich hoffe, dass das politische Klima nach der Wahl wieder offener wird", sagt Mirza. Dann würde sie zurückkehren, auch wenn dies für sie bedeuten würde, dass sie in der Öffentlichkeit den Schleier tragen muss und abends nicht allein losziehen kann, um tanzen zu gehen. **"So wie ich jetzt bin, bin ich komplett verboten"**, sagt sie und lacht. (SPON14.06)

Furthermore, the veil is, on occasion, used as a signifier to distinguish 'types' of women in Iran. While (explicit descriptions of) veiled women are absent in the stories selected from *Le Monde* and *SPON*, two articles in *Guardian* describe and contrast the appearances of Iranian women. The first is written by Iranian-American journalist Azadeh Moaveni and published in the British site's 'The women's blog' (excerpt 216) and the second is the piece by Jon Snow (excerpt 216), both which specify women's clothing to denote their social class – residents of 'north Tehran', where the capital's affluent neighborhoods are – and, in addition, position them within dichotomous traditional/conservative and modern/progressive schema.

- (216) What's striking about parkour's appeal among Iranian women is the sheer breadth of the trend. It's not being led by **the reed thin, Fendi-clad women of north Tehran**, but **girls in trainers and practical headscarves (*maghnaeh*) from Lahijan to Shiraz**. Parkour's punchiness seems to resonate among Iranian women, who in recent years have also taken up martial arts in record numbers. (G10.06, italics in original)

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<sup>505</sup> Autre différence, à cause de leur voile, les amatrices de "parkour" bougent moins vite que les garçons, et risquent plus facilement de s'accrocher et de tomber. *"Mais quel choix avons-nous ?"*, se demande Gilda.

- (217) "I don't believe a word of it," said **a well-dressed woman in north Tehran** when asked about her vote. "I didn't vote. They are all conservatives, they are all the same," she added.  
 [...]
   
 So why did more than 18 million Iranians vote for him? [...] "Sanctions," said **a woman in a black hijab and chador** (the full-length cloak worn by Iranian women). "We can't carry on with inflation like this, I won't be able to live." (G16.06b, italics in original)

Next to pointing out issues related to gender inequality and discrimination by means of which women are depicted as victims of the Iranian state, or, in one case, the masculine culture and social mores amongst Iranian men (G10.06), the three media foreground young Iranian women's fight for their rights and their acts of defiance, as excerpts below show:

- (218) Nooshin, a councillor for Iran's welfare organisation in the city of Hamedan, says she has seen women's awareness of their own physical capabilities shifting. "Do you think it's coincidence that more women are taking karate and kung-fu classes? Women, especially young women, are learning about their rights and fighting back." (G10.06)
- (219) Cancer, arrests and exile from Tehran haven't stopped Mania Akbari from making her politicised, potent films. Tom Seymour meets **Iran's iron lady** (sub-head, G15.07)
- (220) Und die Gesetze sind erheblich strenger für Frauen, allein heute bricht Niloufar mindestens vier. Sie nimmt draußen ihr Kopftuch ab (verboten), singt (verboten), später im Auto raucht sie eine Zigarette (für Frauen in der Öffentlichkeit verboten). Und sie lässt Gäste bei ihrer Familie schlafen, die sie im Internet bei Couchsurfing kennenlernt, in meinem Fall sogar einen männlichen (streng verboten). (SPON12.06)

The voice and agency granted to young Iranian women is evident in a parallel story on Elham Asghari, an Iranian swimmer, which, as stated in the beginning of this chapter (section 7.1), was covered in all three news sites. While the three media foreground her plight, namely having broken a record that was not recognized by the officials, in tandem with her endeavor to expose and fight against the injustice inflicted, there are differences in terms of inclusion and omission in the selected media's coverage; The *Guardian* article (G05.07), an exclusive interview with Asghari, is published under a headline that is a direct quote from the swimmer and is accompanied by a sub-head that accentuates her perseverance with "battling Iranian authorities who denied her a record over 'un-Islamic attire'", using strategic quotation to indicate the contentious nature of the reason given by Iranian officials. Moreover, the article, written by (male) journalist Saeed Kamali Dehghan, names and cites two supportive men in Asghari's life and career advancement, namely her father and her manager, in an attempt, perhaps, to inform (British) readers and challenge common stereotypes associated with gender-related obstacles and patriarchy/misogyny in Muslim societies.

Both articles published on this story in *Le Monde*, viz. the piece (LM02.07) by Parisa Keyhani on her Iran-specific blog (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.1) and the article (LM19.07) by *Le Monde's* Iran correspondent Ghazal Golshiri that appeared in the site's 'Sport' section,

highlight (non-compliance with) Sharia in their headline (excerpt 221) and sub-head (excerpt 222), respectively:

(221) Iran: swimming record declared null due to (swim)suit "not compliant enough with the Sharia"

(222) For lack of a swimsuit compliant with the Sharia, swimming champion Elham Asghari saw her record invalidated. An injustice that has mobilized the Internet.<sup>506</sup>

In both cases, non-compliance with the Islamic law in Iran is reported speech, incorporated through direct quotation in the former and *transformed indirect quotation* (Richardson, 2007, p.104) in the latter, from the deputy minister for women's affairs, who is included in the two French texts' reporting and omitted in those of *Guardian* and *SPON*. This is one of the rare instances whereby Iranian officials – as the Other – are not collectivized/genericized, as is common in the three media's reporting, as also reflected in their referential choices (section 7.2.2.3), which could in part be due to the two (female) journalists' attempt to stress the fact that women's rights in Iran could *also* be violated by *women* (who are part of the system):

(223) As she came out of water, they told her that the deputy minister of women's affairs and sports, Marzieh Akbarabadi, had refused to register her record on the pretext that her attire was not "*compliant enough with the Sharia*".<sup>507</sup> (LM02.07, italics in original)

(224) Behind this "arbitrary" decision, a woman: Marzieh Akbarabadi, deputy minister of women's affairs and sports in the Ahmadinejad administration. Once she returned to Tehran, Elham Asghari rushes to her office to convince her to validate her record. To no avail. "*She advised me to change sport. But could a professional swimmer become a high-level tennis player?*", asks the young woman in an interview, end of June, with the reformist newspaper *Bahar*.<sup>508</sup> (LM19.07, italics in original)

Whereas *Guardian* and *Le Monde* present Asghari's battle with (relevant) authorities as a protest against injustice, *SPON* depicts the issue as one young woman's fight against the Iranian establishment. Headlined 'Gegen die Strömung und das Regime' (SPON06.07) and published in the German site's thematic page 'Opposition in Iran' mentioned in Chapter Six (section 6.2.4), the text recontextualizes Asghari's interview with *Guardian*. While also stressing her fight for justice, similar to the British site, and, in addition, using antithesis ('die

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<sup>506</sup> Faute d'une tenue de bain conforme à la charia, la championne de natation Elham Asghari a vu son record invalidé. Une injustice qui a mobilisé la Toile.

<sup>507</sup> En sortant de l'eau, on lui a annoncé que la sous-ministre des affaires des femmes et du sport, Marzieh Akbarabadi, avait refusé d'enregistrer son record, prétextant que sa tenue n'était pas "*assez conforme à la charia*".

<sup>508</sup> Derrière cette décision "arbitraire", une femme : Marzieh Akbarabadi, sous-ministre des affaires des femmes et du sport du gouvernement Ahmadinejad. Une fois rentrée à Téhéran, Elham Asghari se précipite dans son bureau pour la convaincre de valider son record. En vain. "*Elle m'a conseillé de changer de discipline sportive. Mais un nageur professionnel pourrait-il devenir un joueur de tennis de haut niveau ?*", s'interroge la jeune femme dans un entretien accordé fin juin au journal réformateur *Bahar*.

junge Frau’ versus ‘die pruden Islamwächter’) for contrasting effect in the teaser (excerpt 225), *SPON*’s reporting, as apparent from the chosen title and reiterated in the lead (excerpt 226), places the emphasis upon the swimmer’s conflict with the Iranian regime in its entirety:

(225) 20 Kilometer im offenen Meer, in einem kiloschweren Ganzkörpergewand. Die Leistung von Elham Asghari ist beachtlich, doch die pruden Islamwächter in Iran wollen sie nicht anerkennen. Jetzt Kämpft die junge Frau im Netz für ihre Rechte.

(226)[...] Die 32-Jährige zieht es aufs offene Meer, sie jagt Freiwasserrekorde. Ihr Problem: Asghari ist Iranerin und hat seit vergangenem Monat reichlich Ärger mit dem Regime in Teheran.

Furthermore, unlike *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, *SPON*’s story does not mention any individual other than the news subject. Despite their differences, all three media, in one way or another, foreground the association between the female swimmer’s unfair predicament and Islam, which invokes the fallacy from part to whole, whereby “the iniquitous social position of many (Muslim) women or the negative acts against women by ‘Muslims’ are uncontroversially ascribed to being carried out by *Islam* – either ‘in the name of...’ or ‘sanctioned by...’” (Richardson, 2004, p.90, italics in original), which, as the next chapter shows, resonates with many posts in all three sites’ comment sections.

#### 7.3.3.2 Similarities with Us (in the West)

Next to highlighting a state/society divide, through which ordinary Iranians are depicted as being similar to, or resonating with, the Self by dint of their quest for freedom, democracy, and rights as well as their opposition or resistance to a mutual Other, an overlapping predicational strategy in sampled articles is that of establishing a close resemblance between the Self – including intended readers – and the Iranian people. This is realized by ascribing certain qualities/actions to Iranians that serve as positive presentation and entails aligning the hopes and aspirations of Iranians with sentiments (excerpt 227) and values in the West, also implied and inferred in sections above, and, moreover, indicating an affinity to Us by foregrounding the Iranian people’s admiration for, and openness to, the West, as earlier examples (excerpts 24, 25, 205-207) already showed. Besides stressing (young) Iranians’ pro-West sentiments, some texts point out their ‘Western’ lifestyle i.e. women’s clothing in all sites or drinking alcohol in *Guardian* and more so *SPON*, that serves to depict (young) Iranians as modern/progressive and, at the same time, functions as (implicit, explicit) positive *Self*-presentation. Also included in this category is highlighting young Iranians’ familiarity and fascination (or even obsession) with American culture in some texts from *Le Monde* and *SPON* (excerpts 228, 229):

- (227) Hope is tempered by caution both among Iranians and in the west, where some see an opportunity to repair relations (sub-head, G26.07)
- (228) An effigy of Barack Obama, baseball bats and gloves, an imposing American football helmet, a map of U.S., no less imposing. No doubt we are indeed...in Tehran. And, more precisely, in the room of Peyman. A mini museum in the glory of America, his American corner.<sup>509</sup> (lead, LM13.06a)
- (229) Gestern habe ich meinen Flug nach Isfahan storniert, um mit Samira und ihrer Schwester spontan ein paar Tage durch den Westen Irans zu reisen. Das Ersatz-Kulturprogramm besteht aus "The Exorcist" und Longdrinks aus der Hölle, aber vermutlich ist das ein authentischeres Reiseerlebnis als jede Besichtigungstour. (SPON12.06)

In the same vein and to further familiarize Iranians and make them more relatable to readers, some British and German texts refer to their respective country in order to show the similarity/compatibility between Iranians and the Self:

- (230) But her features are rivetingly human: pitiless, potent studies of domestic strife, and of the fight for happiness – and domination – in sexual relationships. Take off their headscarves and Akbari's women could be social workers in Sheffield or hairdressers in south London, talking wearily about the struggle of working motherhood and love eroded by intimacy. (G15.07)
- (231) Wenn er die Sprache könnte, würde er es auch in Deutschland versuchen, er mag Philipp Lahm und Bastian Schweinsteiger, bewundert das Land für seine Effizienz und Gastfreundlichkeit. (SPON12.06)

Another predicational sub-theme in *Le Monde* and *SPON* is that of stating Iran's secular shift and a lack of religious observance amongst Iranians, which is expected to strike a chord with the two media's target readers:

- (232) Iran is the country in the Middle East where mosques are the emptiest on Friday at the time of the major weekly prayer. In the first - and only one to date - modern Islamic theocracy, this paradox marks a resounding failure. As if too much religion has vaccinated the Iranians against its public observance.<sup>510</sup> (lead, LM11.06a)
- (233) Er kann mit diesem System nichts anfangen, hat keinen einzigen Freund, der streng muslimisch lebt. (SPON12.06)

### 7.3.3.3 Iranian culture and social dynamics

Besides its people, there are also references to the culture of Iran in some texts that include Iranian hospitality (SPON12.06), etiquette, namely *taarof*, defined as “a traditional exchange

<sup>509</sup> Une poupée à l'effigie de Barack Obama, des battes et des gants de base-ball, un imposant casque de football américain, une carte des États-Unis non moins imposante. Pas de doute nous sommes bien... à Téhéran. Et plus précisément dans la chambre de Peyman. Mini-musée à la gloire de l'Amérique, son coin d'Amérique.

<sup>510</sup> L'Iran est le pays du Moyen-Orient où les mosquées sont les plus vides le vendredi à l'heure de la grande prière hebdomadaire. Dans la première - et seule à ce jour - théocratie islamique contemporaine, ce paradoxe signe un échec patent. Comme si trop de religion avait vacciné les Iraniens contre sa pratique publique.

of blandishments unique to Iran” (G30.04), and the traditional Iranian wedding courtship described as follows:

- (234) His parents have therefore organized several *khastegari* for him, these formal meetings with a potential spouse and her family, during which others (fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts) talk more than the two young people who would want to unite. The *khastegari* ? It’s the almost mandatory step of an Iranian marriage.<sup>511</sup> (LM11.06b)

There are also references to family life and intergenerational relations or conflicts (between tradition and modernity), addressed in two articles from *Le Monde* (excerpts 234, 235) and mentioned in passing in two items from *SPON*:

- (235) At almost 30, Peyman still lives with his parents in a middle-class neighborhood in Tehran, a situation far from exceptional in a country where the majority of kids do not leave the family nest until after getting married.<sup>512</sup> (LM13.06a)
- (236) Seine Eltern allerdings seien sehr konservativ, die dürfen nicht erfahren, dass er raucht und Alkohol trinkt. (SPON12.06)
- (237) Beide leben noch bei ihren Eltern, die Strikt gegen eine Beziehung ohne Trauschein sind. (SPON14.08)

Furthermore, some texts refer to social dynamics in Iran, namely wealth and social position in *Le Monde* (excerpt 238) and societal problems such as violence and harassment against women and the lack of legal protection (*Guardian*), and crime and drug addiction (*SPON*):

- (238) There are, for example, in Iran, like elsewhere, families who have experienced the days of glory before the Revolution, even under the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925), but are left without money. Their kids, particularly sons, make privileged targets to marry for the newly rich families who want a bit of luster on top of money.<sup>513</sup> (LM11.06b)
- (239) The context is the bullying culture and street violence that women face under the country's Islamic government, whose discriminatory laws make seeking legal recourse for domestic violence almost pointless. (G10.06)
- (240) "Da hinten gibt es ein paar Händler, die nur Diebesgut verkaufen", sagt Samira und deutet in einen offenen Innenhof. "Aber geh lieber nicht zu nah ran, da liegen Spritzen von Heroinsüchtigen auf dem Boden." Nur wenige Meter trennen orientalische Marktplatz-Romantik und soziales Elend. (SPON12.06)

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<sup>511</sup> Ses parents lui ont donc organisé plusieurs *khastegari*, ces rencontres formelles avec une épouse possible et sa famille, lors desquelles les autres (pères, mères, oncles et tantes) parlent davantage que les deux jeunes gens qu'ils aimeraient unir. Le *khastegari* ? C'est l'étape presque obligatoire d'un mariage iranien.

<sup>512</sup> A presque 30 ans, Peyman vit toujours chez ses parents, dans un quartier de classe moyenne à Téhéran, une situation loin d'être exceptionnelle dans un pays où la plupart des enfants ne quittent le nid familial qu'après le mariage.

<sup>513</sup> Il y a par exemple, en Iran, comme ailleurs, des familles ayant connu des heures de gloire avant la Révolution, voire sous la dynastie kadjar (1785-1925) mais qui se retrouvent désargentées. Leurs enfants, en particulier les garçons, font des cibles privilégiées à épouser pour les familles nouvellement enrichies, qui veulent un peu de lustre en plus de l'argent.

Finally, there are two instances in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* whereby cultural idiosyncrasies of Iran(ians) are pointed out (topos of culture). While the former constitutes explicit negative Other-presentation, using the ‘rule of three’ rhetorical technique to list unfavorable qualities assigned to Iran, the latter can only be construed as such when considered in view of its intended readers and the social stigma associated with consanguinity in the West.

(241) And yet beyond the bugs in hotel rooms, the arrests, and strange people taking photographs wherever you go, there is something continuously absorbing and intriguing about Iran that renders the paranoia it provokes entirely bearable. (G16.06b)

(242) In Iran, marriage between cousins is permitted.<sup>514</sup> (LM11.06b)

#### 7.4 Discussion

This chapter presented the various discursive strategies deployed in the articles sampled from the three media to represent the Self and Other/Iran(ians). Regarding nomination/referential choices, one notes the prevalent usage of ‘the West’ when referring to the Self in all three news sites and Self-identification as the ‘international community’ mostly in the French and German corpora in the context of bilateral/multilateral issues involving Iran. The former is “as much an idea as a fact of geography” (Hall, 1992, p.186) through the prism of which a West(ern)/non-West(ern) binary is constructed and perpetuated in and through media. As “a ‘system of representation’ – a ‘regime of truth’”, this discourse, according to Hall (1992), “continues to inflect the language of the West, its image of itself and ‘others’, its sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, its practices and relations of power towards the Rest [...]. So, far from being a ‘formation’ of the past, and of only historical interest, the discourse of the ‘the West and the Rest’ is alive and well in the modern world” (p.225). Within this dichotomous portrayal, the Self is constructed as a (powerful, rational, modern) We-group in contraposition to an (unreliable, threatening, illiberal) Other. Concerning the latter, Wiedemann (2018, p.29) defines ‘international community’ as one of post-Cold War’s “neue hegemoniale Begriffe, die als unideologisch daherkommen, aber in Wirklichkeit hochideologisch sind”, arguing: “Derjenige, über den sich die [internationale] Gemeinschaft sorgt, ist stets der Outlaw. Und wir, die Leser wie die Journalisten, sind Teil einer großen, edlen Gemeinschaft der Guten” (p.29). Within this constructed global order, tensions with Iran are viewed in Huntingtonian terms and Iran, the ‘bad’ actor/hostile Other, is discursively excluded from a (homogeneous, reasonable) We-group, including the writers and intended readers, united by a shared concern over a problematic state, and, as such, depicted as an outcast. Another pattern of othering (and de-legitimation) is evident in the regular usage of evaluative references – in addition to

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<sup>514</sup> En Iran, le mariage entre cousins est autorisé.

frequent neutral choices – to Iran and its political system. This involves the oft-used loaded term ‘regime’ (all sites), value-laden religious markers (mostly *SPON*) corresponding to what Said (1997, p.28) describes as “a limited series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world”, and quite often referring to Iran as ‘Islamic Republic’ (all sites). Besides arguably “revealing underlying sentiments about Iran” through repetition across the studied texts in the latter case, as Siegel and Barforoush (2013, p.34) have also pointed out<sup>515</sup>, this referential pattern is observable in items/instances with a thematic focus on state-imposed social restrictions and/or women’s issues. In this vein, by emphasizing the Islamic nature of the (repressive actions of) Iranian political system, these and referential/predicational choices in other articles serve as the basis of a discursive othering, whereby the negative Other is constructed by two simultaneous processes of differentiation: contrasting Iranian theocracy – and, by association, Islam – with a presupposed positive perception of a liberal, secular Self, on one hand, and establishing a state/people dichotomy and therewith projecting and reinforcing the image of a divided Iran, on the other.

As for predicational and argumentation strategies adopted in the texts to present and evaluate the Self and Other, this study confirms Koller (2009) in the sense that the core principles of the Ideological Square (Chapter Three, section 3.3.3.1) need not be applied correspondingly and are not quantitatively matched in representing social actors. In other words, negative Other-presentation is much more pronounced in the three media than positive Self-presentation. There are, however, variances in terms of topics/issues covered, on one hand, and among the outlets, on the other. War reporting, as Richardson (2007, p.179) argues, “describes conflict in a radically polarized way – as a struggle between the ‘good guys and the bad guys’ and in black and white”. The three media’s coverage of Syria during the examined period – which pre-dates the surge of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Daesh – was mostly consistent with official Western narratives and corresponding to in- and outgroup polarizations within the Ideological Square, whereby “*We* are associated with positive values such as democracy, rationality and non-violence, and *They* with dictatorship, violence and irrationality” (van Dijk, 1998, p.58, emphases in original). This includes cases of (explicit) positive Self-presentation and/or justification in sampled French texts, amid France’s push during this time to arm the Syrian rebels. Concerning the nuclear dispute and similar to KhosraviNik (2015), Self-legitimation in the three examined media is

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<sup>515</sup> Compared to the frequency with which this phrase is used interchangeably for Iran, Siegel and Barforoush (2013, p.34) noted that “though the formal name of Pakistan is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan it is rarely if ever referred to”, in the newspapers they examined, “as the ‘Islamic republic’.” It should, however, also be borne in mind that while Iran is a self-declared Islamic Republic since 1979, with a hybrid political system/constitution that combines democratic and theocratic elements, whether Pakistan was envisioned as an Islamic or a secular state by its founder Jinnah is still debated. See, for example, Shams (2013).



mostly predicated on de-legitimizing the Other, especially in *SPON* whose overall coverage of Iranian (foreign, domestic) politics relies upon negative Other-presentation, with the rationality/rightfulness of the Self presupposed. In comparison, there are instances of Self-legitimation in French and British articles that, to some extent, are similar to official European discourses that Santini (2010) detected (see Chapter Two, section 2.6 for details). There are, however, also instances in *Le Monde* and more so *Guardian* of negative Self-presentation or positive Other-presentation (*Guardian*) that contest the Ideological Square. Furthermore, as stated in Chapter Six (section 6.2.2.3) and elaborated in this chapter, the three media's human rights discourse regarding Iran, with exceptions in *Le Monde* and *Guardian*, foregrounds and places a strong emphasis on the threat posed by Iranian theocracy to civil and political rights (Their bad properties/actions). Counter to this move and consistent with Ideological Square, the selected texts de-emphasize/mitigate Our negative actions, as evident in the context of sanctions, whereby the resultant pain inflicted on Iranian society is depicted as the unintentional outcome of Our otherwise necessary/reasonable measures. Next to this prevalent negative Other-presentation, there are few instances of positive Self-presentation in *Guardian* and *SPON* as well as a handful in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* whereby negative traits/actions are also assigned to the West, which, as the next chapter shows, is a recurring strategy to de-legitimize the West in all three news sites' comment sections.

All in all, in-depth analysis of the discursive strategies deployed in the three European media's coverage of Iran, as state actor, reveal the (re)production of a hegemonic discourse about an (antagonistic) Other and its presumed place on the international scene based on preconceived notions and a taken-for-granted understanding shared with target readers, corroborating the "framework of interpretation" deriving from salient topics and recurring themes identified in the entry-level thematic analysis (Chapter Six, section 6.3). Within this framework, a central theme uniting the three media's overall coverage of Iran is the Iran Threat – nuclear, regional or internal – that promulgates an Us-versus-Them binary depiction. This is evident in the context of Syria whereby Iran's negative actions and the regional repercussions thereof are constantly accentuated whereas the political, strategic reason(s) behind Iran's support of Assad are absent from the three media's reporting. In the nuclear context, the reason(s) why Iran's program is a threat and should be dissuaded, are quite often deemed unnecessary to be stated and, instead, assumed and presupposed. As such, the "perception of a threat from Iran" to Us and Our allies "necessarily requires a pre-established construction of a country as dangerous, hostile and unfriendly" (KhosraviNik, 2015, p.224). The literature review outlined in Chapter Three (section 3.4) further stressed

the point made at the outset (Chapter One, section 1.3) that *current* media depiction of Iran and its conflicts with the West should not be viewed and perceived in an episodic vacuum; rather, situated within: (1) discourses and perceptions of major Iran-specific ‘media events’ (Poole, 2016, p.26), notably the revolution, its aftermath (e.g. the hostage crisis, the Rushdie affair, etc.), and the ensuing – and enduring – sentiments toward Iran combined with wider discursive practices and representations of Islam/Middle East, especially post-9/11; and (2) two levels of macro-context (Amin, 2020, p.223), namely the socio-political context of Iran (domestic) and the politico-historical context of its relations with the West (international) discussed in Chapter Two. In this vein, it is worth stating that while the prevailing othering of the Iranian state/Islamic Republic in the three news sites examined for this study could *partly* be rooted in/ascribed to Orientalism – defined by Said (1978) as “a style of thought” in addition to a “corporate institution for dealing with the Orient” (pp.2-3) – and Orientalist stereotypes, including Their ‘threat’, ‘irrationality’, and ‘untrustworthiness’ as opposed to Our ‘peaceful intentions’ and (taken-for-granted) ‘rationality’/‘reasonableness’, the representation of Iran in mainstream Western media today ought to be viewed while bearing in mind the paradigm shift of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Iran along with its intersubjective othering, mentioned in Chapter Two (section 2.2), or, in KhosraviNik’s (2015) words, “a kind of ‘reversed Orientalism’ (Occidentalism) when dealing with the West”, which “is *also* bound to maintain sharp dichotomies of Self and Other in adversarial terms” (p.266, emphasis added). This contextualization enables a more nuanced and context-aware explication of Western media’s Iran coverage, compared to some oft-cited studies on the reporting of Iran’s nuclear threat (e.g. Izadi & Saghaye-Biria, 2007; Richardson, 2004), and the audiences’ reception and interpretation by avoiding sweeping generalizations.

Despite the persistence of this “framework of interpretation”, some opinion and commentary articles by columnists and guest writers in *Guardian* contested the Ideological Square and did not concur with the dominant dichotomization in the coverage of (conflicts with) Iran. These articles, which, it should be reminded, formed a minority among the items published during this period (Chapter Six), sought to contextualize ongoing (bilateral, multilateral) issues with Iran, highlight Their rights/good actions or accentuate Our inconsistency/wrongdoing. While the space allocated to these occasional ‘cracks in the hegemony’ (Richardson, 2007, p.209) can partly be assigned to the British paper’s political/ideological leaning and its ongoing “quest to become the world's leading liberal voice” (Guardian News & Media, 2010), it should also be considered in view of the general attempt by media – including that of the said outlet – to create a commonsense understanding shared with their *real* readers, whom, as Fowler (1991) argues, they *construct*, and are thus “implicated in the discursive articulation

of values and beliefs” (p.232, emphases in original). The piece by Seumas Milne, *Guardian*’s then-associate editor and known for his criticism of the West (notably U.S.), is a case in point; Notwithstanding his recourse to his target readers’ commonsense and the unquestioned (nuclear, regional) threat posed by Iran, Milne’s counter-discursive strategies, namely challenging dominant reasonings/justifications behind, and providing alternative explanations for, Western leaders’ Middle East policy (e.g. self-interest, hypocrisy) while emphasizing the negative actions/properties of Us/Our allies (e.g. characterizing the West’s favored groups in Syria at the time as ‘terrorist’ and calling into question Israel’s oft-evoked ‘right to self-defense’ argument), as Chapter Eight elaborates, strongly resonate with the anti-imperialism/anti-Americanism discourse of typical *Guardian* left-liberal readers and their frequent condemnation of Western/U.S. bullying and sense of moral superiority.

Unlike the representation of Iran as a political entity or state actor, the three media’s portrayal of the Iranian society/people does not accord with categorical in- and outgroup constructions that constitute the Ideological Square. In other words, while divergence and constructing differences, between the Self and Other, shape the basis of the former, the latter is mostly established based on convergence and (constructed) similarities. This is realized, as noted in prior studies outlined in Chapter Three and also in the preceding thematic analysis of the selection and treatment of Iran-specific stories by examined media (with exceptions in the British and French news sites), through placing the Iranian people in contraposition to the Iranian state. This “framework of interpretation”, stated in Chapter Six (section 6.3), entails differentiating and dissociating Iranians from the political establishment, juxtaposed with likening Iranian people to Us (in the West) by virtue of their hopes and aspirations (mirroring what We have), their openness (to Us and Our ways of living), and (shared) humanity. In order to dismantle the militarized image associated with Iran as well as the enduring perceptions of an anti-West/anti-American hostile nation, the three media draw on “familiarizing the unfamiliar”, a domestication strategy detected by others (Joye, 2015) and discussed in the context of foreign news domestication (Chapter Three, section 3.1.1.3), by means of ascribing certain qualities/actions to ordinary Iranians to highlight the (assumed or explicitly stated) compatibility between the Iranian society and that of Ours, as also noted elsewhere (e.g. Kersemakers, 2018), thereby turning Iranians (notably women and youth) into Our ‘friends’ or ‘friendly strangers’. Notwithstanding the prevalence of this ‘good’/‘bad’ binary depiction in the studied corpora that serves to pit a modern Iran against a conservative/fanatical one, confirming others (e.g. Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013; Funke, 2017; Pérez-Sobrino, 2013), this study also noticed instances of negative Other-presentation with regard to Iranian culture/people (*Guardian* and *Le Monde*), social problems (*Guardian* and

*SPON*), and societal divisions/conflicts, including gender (in)equality and the dominant male culture (*Guardian*) or generations gap and the more conservative/traditional segments of Iranian society (*Le Monde* and *SPON*).

The state/society dichotomy features in some items by journalists and guest writers of Iranian origin as well. While showing, as Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013, p.65) noticed in the U.S. context, how deeply-entrenched this reductive good-versus-bad narrative has become in Western media's Iran Story and, as will be discussed in Chapter Eight, also in public perceptions of Iran(ians) in the West, several factors that reinforce and perpetuate this discourse should be acknowledged: (1) the journalists' individual/occupational socialization in Western countries such as those of the European media selected for this study and shaped by national-specific (cultural, societal, historical, etc.) considerations; (2) the aim to offer an 'insider' perspective in response to unfavorable views and perceptions of Iran (or Muslims) in their respective countries, using, as noted in nonfiction graphic novels, "their 'double' culture and the cultural power that comes with it to differentiate between the Islamic regime and the Iranians themselves" (Nanquette, 2013, p.79) and to show that "Iranians are more like *you* than you think, that they are *also* the victims of Islamic fundamentalism and theocracy" (p.83, emphases added); (3) the prevalent fear amongst many Iranian journalists of being castigated as regime 'apologist'/'sympathizer'; (4) the media's own political and/or ideological underpinnings along with a tendency to privilege certain voices; and, closely related, (5) the discursive practices connected with the media's role in both mirroring and fostering "the prevailing values of a society in a particular historical context" (Fowler, 1991, p.222). Concerning the latter, Wiedemann (2018) maintains: "Diaspora-Iraner dürfen die Berichterstattung zu Iran prägen, weil sie wie das Medien-Wir gegen die Islamische Republik sind [...]. Migrantische Sichtweisen [...] sind unerwünscht, sobald sie das vorherrschende Narrativ fundamental in Frage zu stellen drohen oder es schlicht ignorieren" (pp.192-93).

Intersecting with this state-versus-people binary depiction, a prevalent discursive practice is to (over)romanticize the notion of 'resistance', especially amongst urban youth, which has been critiqued by some scholars who likewise witnessed "a strong tendency" by observers in the West "to focus on social phenomena that are interpreted as acts of resistance to and rebellion against the political establishment and the moral order it espouses" (Olszewska, 2013, p.842). While Iranians are granted agency – and young women, empowerment – by dint of their resistance in all three sites (e.g. stories on parkour women in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*), the 'agency-as-opposition' trope is evident across *SPON*'s articles. Whereas both the British and French sites add nuance and incorporate a wider variety of (local) voices, be it pro-regime (*Guardian*) or those of individuals from different ages, cities, and backgrounds

(*Le Monde*), *SPON*'s coverage of Iran/Iranian people (notably the youth) is limited to an 'antithetical representation' (Richardson, 2004, p. 81) of Iran(ians), which, in line with the German outlet's style and tendency towards tabloidization (Chapter Five, section 5.3.1.3), is apparent from the prevalent value-laden referential choices, sensationalist headlines (e.g. 'Couchsurfing in Iran: Herzlichkeit und Horror'), simplification of a parallel story on a young woman – compared to the details included in articles from the other two sites – in addition to its placement on the site's Iran Opposition-related page, and the framing of young people's vote in the election (e.g. excerpt 199). In other words, while some British and French texts strive to capture the complexities of, and contrasts/divisions within, the Iranian society, *SPON* paints a rather simplistic and superficial picture; that of a country of unhappy, good (namely similar to Us) people victimized by, and opposed to, an evil state.

## 8. Chapter Eight: Self and Other representations in comment sections

This chapter seeks to answer the third research question, namely how Self and Other are discursively constructed in comment sections. It starts by providing a qualitative overview of the three news sites' discussion forums and proceeds with presenting the main findings deriving from a thorough analysis of these bottom-up discursive spaces, using, as with the attached media texts in the previous chapter, the analytical tools stated in Chapter Five.

### 8.1 Overview of the corpora

The material examined consists of 4,731 posts on 58 articles (see Chapter Seven, Table 7.3 for details) and includes comments that were (allowed to be) published in the three news sites. As stated before, the three sites adopt different moderation mechanisms (Chapter Five, section 5.3.1). In the case of *Guardian*, removed comments are neither deleted nor viewable and, instead, substituted with a standard message informing readers that the post did not comply with the news site's community standards/guidelines. In few instances, the post and username are deleted altogether, which can be due to the user's decision to de-activate their account. While both British and French news sites enable registered users to directly respond to other comments, with their replies indented and visible under the original post, replies in *SPON*'s discussion forum were exhibited in a chronologic manner that "makes it difficult for readers [...] to identify the original comment, which sometimes is listed several pages ahead", as noted by others (Michailidou et al., 2014, p.124), and thus "risk getting lost in the flow of the thread". This structural deficit in *Spiegel.de*'s design is particularly noticeable regarding articles that yield a large number of comments, with the space between the original post and response(s) to it sometimes spanning over 10 pages, thereby exerting a negative impact on the comments' deliberative quality (Chapter Four, section 4.3.2.3.1) and rendering (keeping track of) interactivity in the forum complicated. By way of comparison, *Guardian* posts can be sorted by 'oldest'/'newest' and, moreover, displayed as 'collapsed'/'expanded' threads or 'unthreaded'. These features are especially useful when following the discursive sequence in exchanges amongst discussants which, as also observed in prior studies (e.g. Nagar, 2011; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011), are substantially high in the British news site. Consistent with Ruiz et al. (2011), *Guardian*'s comment section is marked by a higher level of argumentation compared with that of *Le Monde* in which "very few users contribute more than one comment" (p.18). However, it should be added that while this observation can be confirmed in this study with regard to the majority of posts (by paying subscribers) on

articles produced by the French news site or published from its legacy outlet, there is a relatively higher level of argumentation amongst (registered) users to its blogposts, some of whom also comment regularly on articles related to Iran/the Middle East. Regular posters appear in the forums of the British and German sites as well, with some *Guardian* and *SPON* commenters copy-pasting their (long) posts on several articles. Besides responding to their peers, other forms of reaction and user engagement enabled by the three news sites during the studied period included ‘recommend’ (*Guardian*), ‘cite’ (*SPON*) or ‘report abuse’ (*Le Monde*), the latter which was added after the data collection phase. Furthermore, contrary to some studies reporting that *Guardian* “actively engages in communication with registered readers” (Paprotta, 2017, p.186), the level of interaction observed in this study between the British news site and posters was limited and involved marking few posts as ‘Guardian pick’ or occasional clarification given by the staff journalist/guest writer of the attached article to questions/issues raised in the comment section.

Given the nature of this research and the necessity to consider “the data that is manageable for qualitative detailed textual analysis” (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014, p764), on one hand, and the substantial quantity of responses to some articles in *Guardian* (Chapter Seven, section 7.1), on the other, while all posts attached to the selected articles were thoroughly read and comment sections were examined in their entirety, a closer attention was paid to posts that received many ‘recommends’ and/or triggered a (polemical) debate and a sizeable discussion thread. This was carried out while bearing in mind the British site’s characteristics and Iran-related discourse topics that are brought up in comment threads. In other words: keeping in mind the context and topic of the data at hand (KhosraviNik, 2010a).

## **8.2 Primary and secondary discourse topics**

As for primary and secondary topics (Chapter Five, section 5.1.1.1), the former (in)directly relate to, and are consistent with, the topic/content of the attached texts discussed extensively in the preceding chapter, whereas the latter are raised by commenters themselves or emerge in reaction to other posts and thus are influenced by the dynamics and exchanges in the comment sections and/or within the threads. Primary topics such as Iran’s role in Syria, the nuclear program, Iran-West relations, the Iran-Israel conflict, Rouhani’s election, democracy/human rights in Iran, and (challenges facing) Iranian women and the youth that correspond to the accompanying text account for secondary topics in other contexts (e.g. pointing out Iran’s nuclear threat below an article on Iranian society). Other secondary topics that surface, to varying degrees, in the three news sites’ online discussions and, same as in other studies (e.g. KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017), were manually investigated, include:

U.S./world politics, Western politicians, Western imperialism/hegemony, NATO<sup>516</sup>, history of Iran-West relations, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran's foreign relations, Iran's regional activity, Iran's support for terrorism, Islam(ism)/Muslims, Israel, Israel's nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Holocaust, (criticizing) media, the history/culture/people of Iran, errors in other posts (e.g. correcting spelling mistakes in *Le Monde*; clarifying that it is 'im' Iran and not 'in' Iran in *SPON*) or, on occasion, in the attached article, etc.

Regarding contradictory findings in the extant literature on commenting patterns (outlined in Chapter Four, section 4.3.2.2), this study observed a predominantly superficial reading of attached articles by discussants in all three news sites, excluding a few who read the entire text and cite passages from its body, with most readers reacting to, and commenting on, the article's main topic or issue(s) highlighted in the headline, sub-head/teaser, or its lead. As such, this study confirms the findings of the Pew Research Center (PRC, 2010) with respect to the limited time online users spend on reading the news. Furthermore, while this study is consistent with Freund's (2011) results that indicate posters' interest in the overall topic/issue covered rather than the actual article, it also noticed a strong tendency amongst users to address the points and issues raised by fellow commenters in the forums.

### **8.3 Referential, predicational, and argumentation strategies**

In keeping with in-depth analysis of media texts in Chapter Seven and inspired by Paprota (2017), the next sections present the main discursive strategies (nomination, predication, argumentation) deployed in the three sites' comment sections to construct and depict the Self and Other, with attention paid to analytical tools and linguistic means stated in Chapter Five (section 5.1.1.2.1) i.e. van Leeuwen's (1996) approach to social actors' representation. Due to limited space and given the plurality of interlocutors and diversity of Self- and Other-identifications in online forums, nomination/referential choices in comment sections are not discussed separately, as was the case with accompanying articles (Chapter Seven, section 7.2), and elaborated instead in the context of predicational and argumentation strategies adopted. Unless deemed relevant, usernames are, similar to others (e.g. de La Poype & Sood, 2012; Paprota, 2017), not indicated when quoting posts which, as stated in Chapter Five (section 5.4), are, with the exception of passages translated from *Le Monde*, left unchanged, irrespective of grammatical/typographical errors. The remainder of this chapter discusses representations of Iran – as 'state' and 'people' – in discussion forums and how they concur with/differ from those of Islam/Muslims. These strategies are discussed in line with the chronological order presented in the previous chapter, namely Iran's role on the international

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<sup>516</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty Organization



scene, Iran's domestic issues (e.g. democracy and human rights), and Iranian society/culture. The most recurring strategies outlined in each section reproduce dominant media discourses about Iran, echoing and perpetuating mainstream portrayal of Iran(ians) or, conversely, challenge prevailing discourses and bring forth competing or alternative perspectives about Iran (and the West).

### 8.3.1 *The “hate besotted Mad Mullahs of Iran”*

One of the most prominent themes permeating the three sites' forums is the nature/character of Iranian leadership, with Iran/the Islamic Republic routinely depicted as ideology-driven, fanatical, and irrational in keeping with longstanding views and narratives in the West about what can be termed as the persistent myth of 'Mad Iranian Mullahs', an enduring image ingrained deeply in Western (elite, public) discourses and perceptions of Iran over the past four decades (see Chapter Two, section 2.6; Chapter Three, section 3.4). While some Iranian officials i.e. President-elect Rouhani, Khamenei, and more so Ahmadinejad are frequently named, with the latter two often negatively appraised by posters, Iran's leadership is repeatedly collectivized and equated with 'Mullahs'/'Ayatollahs'; to wit, “the consummate ‘bad’ Iranians who cannot be reconciled with modern civilization” (Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013, p.60). Examples of these prevalent referential/predicational choices that usually contain loaded and evaluative language are abundant and encompass slangs and pejorative terms/labels, value-laden and Orientalist/cliché-ridden construals, or attribution of physical traits/negative descriptions, including: ‘theocratic bullies’ (G16.06b), ‘a group of turbaned gangsters’ (G06.06), ‘bearded men’ (LM09.05), ‘religious mafia’<sup>517</sup> (LM16.06c), ‘eine klerikale gewaltbereite Clique’ (SPON14.06), ‘eine quasi-diktatorische Führungsclique islamistischer Eiferer’ (SPON15.06a), ‘the corrupt mullahs’ (G16.06a), the ‘Mullah regime’ (LM02.08, LM12.08, SPON12.06), ‘Mullah-Führung’ (SPON06.07), ‘ein mullah Staat’ (SPON16.06), ‘der Gottesstaat’ (SPON12.06, SPON14.08), der ‘Teufelsstaat’ (SPON14.08), ‘a medieval theocracy’ (G13.05), ‘Medieval Iranians’ (LM02.08), ‘nut jobs who run Iran’ (G02.08), ‘fanatical madmen’ (G04.08b), ‘lunatics’<sup>518</sup> (LM02.07), ‘diese verrückten Mullahs’ (SPON14.08), ‘dieses Terror-Regime’ (SPON12.06), or occasional derogatory neologisms “created through blending two existing words” (Richardson, 2007, p.69) i.e. ‘a hereditary mullarchy’<sup>519</sup> (LM16.06). These ubiquitous religious associations that are akin to what Fayyaz and Shirazi (2013, p.60) noticed in mainstream U.S. media, whereby “the fundamental character of the Iranian regime is represented as clerical, and can be used

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<sup>517</sup> la mafia religieuse

<sup>518</sup> des fous

<sup>519</sup> une mollarchie héréditaire

interchangeably with the state, or even Iran”, serve to discredit, de-legitimate, and vilify Iran as a radical, backward, and abnormal entity and a pariah state on the international stage.

Besides ‘fanatical Mullahs’, another persistent Western trope that recurs in forums and is perpetuated by many is ‘cult of martyrdom’ – and its association with the notion of jihad – in Shia Iran, both which contribute to assessing Iran’s foreign policy as being dictated by religious fundamentalism/irrationalism. This, in tandem with pointing out, while often using a hyperbolic and alarmist rhetoric, Iran’s apocalyptic quest for nuclear weapons intent on attacking the West or exterminating Israel, its sponsorship of terrorism and links to Islamist militant groups and/or presence in Syria, lead to constantly depicting Iran as a regional and global threat (topos of danger/threat). Consistent with Ideological Square and similar to (most of) the attached articles (Chapter Seven, section 7.4), these posts accentuate Their negative traits/actions more than emphasize Our/the West’s positive qualities, with the former addressing issues foregrounded or mentioned in the texts in addition to raising Iran-specific topics/themes detected in the entry-level thematic analysis (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1), and the latter implied or deemed self-evident. Examples include the two posts below from *Guardian*, written in response to the op-ed headlined ‘Iran has a right to peaceful nuclear enrichment’ which, as stated in preceding chapters (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1.2; Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.7), was one from a handful of articles reporting on, or referring to, Iran’s “inalienable right” to enrich uranium, according to the NPT. While both comments construct the irrational (Oriental) Other, with Our rationality presupposed, and activate alarm by envisioning a nightmarish scenario, should the ‘Mullahs’ acquire nuclear weapons, the second post cites a passage from the text and links the threat of (a nuclear-armed) Iran to Israel – with ‘peaceful’ applied sarcastically to mock the text and its description of the Iranian nuclear program – to that of its hegemonic expansionism in the region, an issue raised in some articles on Syria or the nuclear dispute (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2) and, it should be reminded, a recurring theme in Iran-related and side-note items as well (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1.3):

- (1) If the nuclear bombs are in the hands of Mullahs who believe they can use them because God told them to do it, it should scare us. In a society run by Imams, you do not expect reason or self interest to be part of decisions taken. (G06.06)
- (2) *This was a reasonable demand, since Iran has an “inalienable right” to develop peaceful nuclear power under article 4.1 of the non-proliferation treaty, which it signed in 1968. Indeed. Many...people think that Iran has an “inalienable right” to develop peaceful nuclear power under article 4.1 of the non-proliferation treaty so that it can develop peaceful nuclear devices to destroy Israel. And Israel will not be the only target of the hate besotted Mad Mullahs of Iran.*  
**All Sunni Islam must come under their domination.**(G06.06, bold/italics in original)

Sarcasm is also used in excerpt 3, posted below the *Guardian* editorial headlined ‘Iran: an opportunity to be seized’ in agreement with another poster who is perceived to not endorse the liberal agenda promoted by the British paper and its typical left-wing readers (discussed later), which is expressed via oxymorons juxtaposing ‘peaceful’ with ‘weapons program’ and ‘bomb’ to denote the writer’s suspicions about Iran’s intentions. Highlighting the fanatical, irrational character of its leadership (‘the Mad Mullahs’) and regional aggression, thereby presenting the Other as an unreliable actor, the post discursively excludes Iran from a presupposed sensible Self positioned in the ‘community of nations’ and ‘civilized world’, the return to which for the pariah state is contingent upon its ‘deeds’ and behavior (topos of responsibility):

- (3) @AtillaTheHun – *Words are cheap. Let’s see if Iran stops funding terrorist gangs, pulls its troops out of Syria, comes clean about its nuclear weapons program, and apologizes for its threats to destroy Israel.*

Sounds like (Guardian) heresy to me.

BUT. 100% right. Deeds are what are needed before Iran is welcomed back into the community of nations. I don’t know if Hassan Rouhani is a socket-puppet for the Mad Mullahs or not. I don’t have enough information. However, if the peaceful nuclear weapons program to make a peaceful bomb was cancelled and Iran withdrew from Syria and Lebanon, this would convince me that Iran has discontinued the Ahmadinejad path.

And is prepared to pay the price for normalization with the civilized world. Hopefully, removing the Mad Mullahs from their stranglehold of the political process in Iran will follow. Hopefully. (G17.06, italics in original)

Innate suspicion of Iran and its nuclear motives is palpable in countless posts before and after Rouhani’s election, with Iran’s untrustworthiness taken as a given or reinforced in British and German forums via regular references to its lack of transparency/ clandestine activities, non-compliance with obligations under the NPT (topos of right/law) or non-cooperation with the UN Watchdog (topos of authority), similar to – albeit stated more explicitly than – the attached texts (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.4), with IAEA cited more often in *SPON*. The amalgamation of a deep distrust to, and fear of, religious fundamentalism and an aggressive (regime in) Iran intent on building a bomb (topoi of reality, danger/threat) conveyed in such posts, many of which constitute a long and impassioned diatribe listing Iranian threats to Us/Our allies, serves to justify the actions or options of the Self/West (e.g. sanctions, military means) to deal with a hostile Other and curb its dangerous pursuit. Examples include the two comments below from *SPON*: The first, as with excerpt 3, outcasts Iran from the ‘Staatengemeinschaft’, constructed as a conciliatory We-group, and by foregrounding the Iran Threat (nuclear, to Israel, in Syria) and applying the proverbial saying “You Reap what You Sow”, hold the Iranian regime solely accountable in the event of war (topos of responsibility). The second, written to denounce what the poster views as prejudicial anti-

Americanism in the German forum, portrays Iran as fanatical/irrational and a threat (topos of danger/threat) that warrants immediate U.S. military action:

- (4) [...] Wer ungeniert seine internationale Verpflichtungen verletzt, seine Nachbarstaaten bedroht, [...] mit den Hilfstruppen der Hisbollah einen asymmetrischen Krieg gegen die israelische Zivilbevölkerung führt, den Schlächter von Damaskus an der Macht zu halten versucht, den Juden ihr Selbstbestimmungsrecht abspricht und unverhohlen die Beseitigung Israel propagiert und Nuklearwaffen anstrebt [...] der darf sich am Ende nicht wundern, wenn nach Artikel 51 diese Staaten mit militärischen Mitteln ihr Recht auf Selbstverteidigung wahrnehmen werden. Iran hat die Wahl, die umfassenden Kooperationsangebote der Staatengemeinschaft anzunehmen und Iran aus der selbstverschuldeten Isolation zu führen oder den Krieg zu ernten, den das Regime seit über dreißig Jahren sät. (SPON15.06a)
- (5) auf die Nerven gehen mir die gutmenschlichen Amerikakritiker, die den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht sehen können weil sie nicht sehen wollen: ein despotischer, menschenverachtender und genozidaler Tyrannenstaat namens Iran entwickelt Nuklearwaffen unter dem durchsichtigen Alibi der Energiesicherheit [...] und obendrein huldigt es einem messianischen Märtyrerkult. Meiner Ansicht nach kann man nicht früh genug ihnen mit einigen gutgezielten MOPs<sup>520</sup> diese Waffen aus der Hand schlagen. (SPON03.05)

A common theme discussed/conjured up regularly in forums, as evident in posts cited above, is that of depicting Iran as being hell-bent on destroying Israel. The perceived existential threat *already* posed by the Islamic Republic (alongside its proxies) to the Jewish state and the specter of a nuclear-armed Iran are substantiated in many posts through one or a mixture of following discursive strategies: regular allusions to Iranian officials, notably Ahmadinejad and his inflammatory remarks promulgated by the media during his two terms and widely interpreted as incitement to genocide against Israel/Jewish people (topos of danger/threat); using Israel's 'right to self-defense' argument (topos of right/law) and incorporating the victim narrative, sometimes drawing on topos of history (as teacher), and thus rendering Israel's nuclear arsenal crucial to its security – while considering Iran's nuclear aspirations unwarranted – and use of force in (anticipatory) self-defense faced with (existing, looming) threats morally justifiable:

- (6) Don't forget that Iranian leaders are, in addition, Holocaust deniers and regularly organize international symposia aimed at denying the Shoah...<sup>521</sup>  
In case of ignorance, I recommend Ahmadinejad's interview where he talks about Zionism.<sup>522</sup> (LM02.08)
- (7) Psychologically, Israel was created after the massacre of 6 million Jews so that it never happens again and the nuclear weapon is nothing but the prolongation of this wish, especially when its neighbors declare that they want to wipe this state, which has no more inhabitants

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<sup>520</sup> Massive Ordnance Penetrator (a bunker buster bomb)

<sup>521</sup> N'oubliez pas que les dirigeants iraniens sont par ailleurs négationnistes et organisent régulièrement des colloques internationaux qui visent à nier la shoah...

<sup>522</sup> Quand à l'inculture, je vous recommande l'interview d'Ahmadinejad lorsqu'il parle du sionisme.

than half of a city like Paris, **off the map**. Could this weapon in the hands of Iranians have the same justification?<sup>523</sup> (LM06.08)

- (8) Israel bombardiert nicht irgendwelche friedliebenden Länder, sondern gezielt gefährliche Waffen, die man an Terrororganisationen liefern will **um Israel auszulöschen**. Dazu haben sie moralisch jedes Recht um die eigene Bevölkerung zu schützen. Israel hat niemals gezielt Zivilisten angegriffen. Im Gegensatz zu seinen Feinden. Wenn Sie Israel dieses Recht absprechen wollen, zeigt das nur Ihre wahre Gesinnung. (SPON07.05)

A number of posts in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* call out the inconsistency in ‘singling out’ Israel by advocating punitive measures, namely Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), against the Jewish state while opposing sanctions on Iran. Excerpt 9 is one such example from the French site whereby the poster refers to the hypocrisy in the selective and unfair endorsement of BDS by drawing a comparison between reactions to international treatments of Iran(ians) and Israel(is) (topos of justice), while legitimating Iran-related sanctions on the premise that it is “building the atomic bomb” (topos of danger/threat) and would only stop due to their impact on Iranian society – in other words, a necessity for the greater good (topos of advantage):

- (9) Those who request the end of boycott against Iran, with its consequences on the population, support the BDS campaign against Israel. This boycott is demanded not only in economic and political areas, but also academic, cultural and sport [fields]. Are there two definitions of the term “peoples”, the good and the bad? Who can believe for one second that Iran is not in the process of building the atomic bomb? Won’t its leaders abandon it, no matter how much it costs the Iranians?<sup>524</sup> (LM12.08)

Another recurring theme pervading forums, as evident in some posts cited above, is Iran’s influence in Syria, corresponding to the three media’s extensive coverage of the war at the time (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1.1). Whether singularized or listed alongside other issues in Iran-West conflict or Iran’s unfavorable actions, numerous comments foreground Tehran’s immoral stance on Syria by aiding and abetting a brutal regime, exacerbating the war, and threatening regional stability, similar to what is (c)overtly argued in most of the attached articles (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.1). Adopting a binary approach to the multilateral conflict, that is, a polarization between ‘heroes’/‘victims’ and ‘villains’, these posts portray Iran as an accomplice to war crimes/crimes against humanity and, moreover, often list Iran along with Hezbollah – and, by association, terrorism – as well as Russia, another ‘bad guy’:

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<sup>523</sup> Psychologiquement israel a ete cree apres le massacre de 6 millions de juifs pour que cela n arrive plus jamais et l’arme nucleaire n est que le prolongement de cette volonte surtout qd ses voisins declarent vouloir rayer cet etat de la carte qui ne compte pas plus d habitants que la moitie d une ville comme Paris Est-ce que cette arme dans les mains des iraniens pourrait avoir la meme justification ?

<sup>524</sup> Ceux qui demandent la fin du boycott contre l’Iran, avec ses conséquences sur la population, soutiennent la campagne BDS contre Israel. Ce boycott est demandé non seulement dans les domaines économique et politique, mais aussi universitaire, culturel et sportif. Y aurait-il deux définitions du mot “peuples”, les bons et les mauvais? Qui peut croire un instant que l’Iran n’est pas en train de fabriquer la bombe atomique? Ses dirigeants n’y renonceront pas, quoi qu’il en coûte aux iraniens?

(10) **Armes Syrien und arme Leute, die an Demokratie denken...**

Assad war und ist ein übler Diktator. Dank der Hisbollah - ein weltweit sehr verzweigtes Terrornetzwerk - und dem Iran bleibt er im Amt. Die Russen haben dazu sicher auch ihren Beitrag geleistet. [...] (SPON08.06, bold in original)

- (11) Na ja, man ermordet Zivilisten zu Zehntausenden und verhaftet und foltert sie zu Hunderttausenden. "Aufopferungsvoll" ist vielleicht nicht das richtige Wort für dieses Vorgehen der Assadisten und seiner radikal islamistischen Hezbollah Verbündeten und den ausländischen iranischen Söldner, die der Tyrann von Damaskus auf seine eigene Bewölkerung schießen lässt, weil er aus Macht- und Geldgier nicht auf den erputschten Familienthron verzichten möchte. (SPON28.06)

Furthermore, throughout the corpora, several posts (mainly in *SPON*) employ the fallacy of false analogy (Richardson, 2007, p.170) to draw parallels between Iran/Islamic Republic and Hitler or the Nazi regime (topos of history), a comparison, it is worth reminding, that bears resemblance to remarks made by some Western politicians, including Angela Merkel (Chapter Two, section 2.5.4.3), over the years. Invoking Godwin's law<sup>525</sup>, these analogies, also drawn apropos democracy/human rights in Iran (discussed later), serve to demonize the Other by depicting it as (the ultimate) evil, convey a sense of foreboding, and/or justify Western course of action. Examples include comments below from *SPON* and *Le Monde*, with the former written to a story on aggrieved Iranian youth headlined 'Jugend in Iran: Es gibt keine dunklere Farbe als Schwarz', and the latter in reaction to the op-ed urging an end to sanctions against Iran(ians). Allusions to the Nazi regime are, on occasion, derided by other posters in British and French sites via reciprocal comparisons with the West or by calling out the adage (e.g. excerpt 13):

- (12)[...] Das Terror-Regime im Iran muss buchstäblich verhungern. Sie müssen vor ihrer A-Bombe sitzen, diese anbeten wie Allah und hungern. Dann werden selbst die dümmsten Muslim-Schafe aufwachen und fragen wer ihnen den Pelz bzw. das Fell geschoren hat. So war es doch in Deutschland bis 1945 auch. (SPON14.08)

- (13) Should we not have waged war on the Nazi regime because the German people suffered as well as + the leaders of this regime from this war? The reasoning of this text is poor: of course, in an international confrontation, there are always those who are [put] at risk and those who are protected. Nonetheless, should we never face an ordeal, even if nuclear apocalypse is at stake, on the ground that it would initially harm + the vulnerable in the targeted country ?<sup>526</sup>

-Bravo! Godwin's point of the day goes to you...<sup>527</sup> (LM12.08)

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<sup>525</sup> Created in 1990 by Mike Godwin, the rule reads as follows: "As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1." (Ohlheiser, 2017)

<sup>526</sup> Est-ce qu'il aurait fallu ne pas faire la guerre au régime nazi parce que le peuple allemand a souffert bien + de cette guerre que les dirigeants de ce régime ? L'argumentaire de ce texte est indigent : bien sûr, dans une confrontation internationale, il y a toujours ceux qui sont exposés et ceux qui sont protégés. Pour autant, faut-il ne jamais entrer dans une épreuve de force, même si l'apocalypse nucléaire est en jeu, sous prétexte que ça va d'abord nuire aux + vulnérable du pays visé ?

<sup>527</sup> Bravo! Le point Godwin du jour est pour vous...

While numerous comments within this theme – the Mad Mullahs – engage in negative Other-presentation and demonization, with rationality and righteousness of the Self/West assumed and/or inferred, there are instances of explicit positive Self-presentation in various contexts, whereby favorable qualities are attributed to the Western ingroup, in line with those implied or expressed by journalists or through quoted We-group officials in the articles (Chapter Seven, sections 7.3.2.2.4 and 7.3.2.2.5). Examples include excerpts 14 and 15 from *SPON*, with the former presenting Europe’s restraint in Syria at the time as law-abiding and principled, unlike Assad’s intervening allies, and the latter stressing the need for Iran to prove itself – capitalizing ‘Taten’ for emphasis – while highlighting Our (undeserved and prone-to-be-exploited) patient and sensible approach – “[u]nsere Toleranz und guter Wille” – in the ongoing nuclear dispute. More common in references to Syria and overlapping with online debates on Islam discussed later, Our (secular) Western values are, moreover, placed in opposition to Their (violent, backward) culture (e.g. excerpts 16 and 17):

- (14)[...] Die Frage die sich stellt ist ob Europa sich auch wie die Hisbollah, der Iran und Russland sich in diesen Konflikt einmischen sollte.  
Und meine Antwort ist: Nein !  
Nein, weil es eben keine eindeutige Angelegenheit ist und es keinen rechtlichen Rahmen gibt der uns ein einschreiten ermöglichen. Das ist eben der Nachteil wenn man sich Gesetzen und Werten beugt. Und oftmals erweist sich dieser Nachteil dann doch als Vorteil....(SPON08.06)
- (15)[...]Dennoch sollte man der Iran ausschließlich nach TATEN und nicht blossen Lippenbekenntnissen beurteilen und ggf. von Sanktionen ausnehmen. Anders versteht diese Mentalität nicht. Unsere Toleranz und guter Wille wird uns dort als Schwäche ausgelegt. Daher nur Erleichterungen Zug um Gegenzug. (SPON02.08a)
- (16)I hope that [French President] F. Hollande does not “rush” to the aid of “rebels” who, in a dictatorship, would only replace another dictatorship: that of their Islamist fundamentalism, enemy of democratic values that are ours.<sup>528</sup> (LM13.06a)
- (17)Lieber einen Diktator unterstützen der zumindest einigermaßen westliche Vorstellungen hat als ein Land wieder ins religiöse Mittelalter fallen zu lassen, finde ich gut. (SPON28.06)

### 8.3.2 “*And we are continuously told that Iran is the threat to world peace!*”

Parallel and in stark contrast to countless comments intent on de-legitimizing the Other/Iran – and fear-mongering – exemplified above, numerous posts contest representational processes in the Ideological Square by accentuating positive or contextualizing information about the Other/Iran or negative traits of Us/the West (and allies). These comments portray Iran’s foreign policy as pragmatic and Iran as a rational nation-state acting in defense of its

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<sup>528</sup> J’espère que F. Hollande ne va pas “foncer” au secours de “rebelles” qui, à une dictature, ne feraient que substituer une autre dictature: celle de leur fondamentalisme islamiste, ennemi des valeurs démocratiques qui sont les nôtres.

rights/interests and, as will be shown, include input from Iranian discussants. Using various counter-discursive strategies, these posts, which often criticize – or lambast – the accompanying text (or the media in general) and/or others in the forum, aim to foreground or expose the following: (1) Iran’s right to enrich uranium/its peaceful nuclear activity. Contrary to what is affirmed or implied in most articles, with exceptions in *Guardian* (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.7), in terms of the Iranian nuclear menace, be it the intention to build a bomb or flagrant defiance and intransigence, such posts in the British and German forums contain negation (‘Iran is *not* developing nuclear weapons’), based mostly on U.S./Israeli intelligence (topos of authority) and sometimes with a link to an external source (e.g. *Financial Times Deutschland* in excerpt 18) as proof; state Iran’s right to enrichment under the NPT (topos of right/law) and point out what is considered discriminatory treatment of Iran compared to other non-nuclear-weapon states (e.g. excerpt 19); and/or lend legitimacy to distrust and suspicion of international monitoring/inspections on the Iranian side, a point of criticism often leveled at Iran especially by *SPON* discussants – also in some *SPON* texts (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.1) – and indicated as Iran’s surreptitious activity and disregard for/violation of international law, through citing U.S. wrongdoing in the past i.e. the high-profile case involving the CIA infiltration of the United Nations Special Commission in Iraq in the 1990s (excerpt 20):

**(18) Liebe SPON-Redaktion**

Alle US-Geheimdienste sind der Meinung, dass der Iran nicht an eine Atombombe baut. Das müsste Ihnen bekannt sein. Siehe <http://m.ftd.de/finanzen/maerkte/:iranisches-nuklearprogramm-us-Geheimdienste-wollen-von-Atombombe-nichts-wissen/60173751.html> (SPON13.07, bold in original)

**(19) Natürlich hat Iran das Recht auf Urananreicherung**

Lesen Sie bitte vorher den Atomwaffensperrvertrag, bevor sie solche fehlinfo verbreiten. Der Begriff “Anreicherung” kommt nicht vor, aber von Verbot der Urananreicherung steht da erst recht nichts. Warum dürfen andere NPT-Mitglieder dann bitteschön Uran anreichern? Iran muss seine Anlagen sogar erst 180 Tage nach Beginn der Urananreicherung anmelden. Kein Lang wird von der IAEA mehr inspiziert als Iran. Raten Sie mal, warum andere Staaten sich nicht einmal halb so intensiv inspizieren lassen? (SPON06.08, bold in original)

**(20) Man darf an Iran keine unerfüllbaren Forderungen richten**

[...]

Was die Kontrollen angeht, da hält sich der Iran an der Atomwaffensperrvertrag. Dass der Iran nicht jede militärische Einrichtung auf der Wunschliste der IAEA kontrollieren lassen möchte (und auch nicht muss!!), ist nachvollziehbar, nachdem die USA solche Kontrolleinrichtungen munter für Spionage missbraucht hatten (Link unten). Allegations of CIA infiltration of UNSCOM... [...] (SPON06.08, bold in original)

Included among posts that present Iran’s nuclear pursuit as peaceful, rightful, and/or vital, are several from Iranians – as evident by their username – in *Guardian*, who justify Iran’s



nuclear program through eliciting sentiments of nationalism and chauvinism. One such example is a comment by ‘Iraandoost’ [Iran lover], a regular poster, who, in agreement with a passage from the British newspaper’s editorial, declaring “Mr Rouhani's warning that Iran's stand over nuclear fuel must not come at the cost of its economy plainly won the backing of a broad swath of Iranian opinion”, describes the program as “much needed” and “peaceful” in addition to referring to the purported popularity of its (non-military) development among *all* Iranians (topos of appeal to the masses). In portraying the nuclear program as a matter of national right/pride, the user excludes certain Iranians, namely opposition-in-exile, from a constructed ingroup:

- (21) Indeed. No matter who was elected or gets elected, the much needed peaceful nuclear program is not up for negotiation with anyone. The rest of the world has to accept that **the entire Iranian population is behind this program** no matter how much they are with or against the establishment in Iran (apart from some non Iranians and exiled MEK terrorists). (G17.06)

The legitimation of Iran/its nuclear activity is often coupled with criticism of Us/the West. In this vein, a prevalent counter-discursive strategy applied, especially by *Guardian* posters, is that of contextualizing the nuclear conflict between Iran and the West, similar to some of the British site’s articles (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.7), which contains referring to the wider geopolitical context of the Middle East, the power dynamics at play as well as interests and security concerns – including those of Iran. These posts, many of which reflect a standard repertoire of anti-imperialist discourse, depict Iran as being coerced against its rights by Western arrogance and bullying while emphasizing (implications of) U.S. hegemony in the Middle East and its threat to Iran. As such, Iran’s nuclear pursuit, peaceful or otherwise, is justified – in fact, rendered essential – to establish a balance of military power and legitimated as a lawful right to self-defense for a weak nation faced with powerful adversaries. Examples include the three posts below from *Guardian*, with the first written in response to the op-ed headlined ‘Sanctions in Iran have had an impact on its nuclear stance’, and the other two posted below the aforesaid op-ed entitled ‘Iran has a right to peaceful nuclear enrichment’:

- (22) [...] But the whole matter is very simple. **Iran took a principled, consistent and just stance** that she wants her rights (like all other countries) under the terms of NPT to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes [...]. The “International Community” aka the Imperialists demanded that Iran stop ALL enrichment and dismantle all its facilities. But Iran was no pushover, but valiantly remained steadfast on her principled and just stance in spite of much provocation and threats of military actions. [...] (G22.04)
- (23) But, of course apologists for western hegemony only ask this question of Iran. I’d go further and say that Iran has the right, even the duty, to acquire nuclear weapons, given that it is surrounded by US military bases, the US occupies two countries on either side of Iran, has

declared war (together with its local Rotweiler Israel) on Iran with sanctions, cyber attacks, assassinations, propaganda war, and diplomatic onslaught.

**And we are continuously told that Iran is the threat to world peace!** (G06.06)

(24) **Iran has the right to unpeaceful nuclear enrichment too - just like we did in the 1950s when the Soviet Union looked threatening.** Given that Iran is surrounded by states which have been invaded and occupied by the US and its allies, any Iranian leader who wasn't pursuing nuclear weapons would be remiss in his duties.

The solution is to stop threatening Iran and take away their need to have these weapons. Getting rid of our own WMD at the same time would be a good thing too. (G06.06)

Intersecting with the above-stated argumentation is (2) Western hypocrisy over nuclear policy. This involves repeated calls in the British and German forums for nuclear-armed Westgroup states to relinquish their nuclear weapons, as shown in excerpt 24, with U.S. often singled out in both sites (e.g. excerpt 25) and sometimes named along with the U.K. in *Guardian*:

(25) [...] Der "Club" der Nuklearwaffen-Besitzer, also Staaten die den Atomwaffensperrvertrag im Gegensatz zu Iran nicht unterzeichnet haben - - allen voran die USA, also das Land, das am meisten Atomwaffen besitzt und sie als einziger Staat auch bereits eingesetzt hat - - sollten klugerweise lieber mit gutem Beispiel vorangehen und mit der (übrigens auch von Iran) vorgeschlagenen atomaren Abrüstung beginnen.

**Es ist nämlich nicht gerade konstruktiv, Doppelmoral zu betreiben und mit zweierlei Maß zu messen.**

Es ist endlich an der Zeit, dass die USA im eigenen Interesse aufhören sich als "Weltpolizist" auszuspielen und anderen Staaten etwa diktieren zu wollen. Und vergessen wir auch nicht: Spätestens seit der Irak-Lüge ist die US-Außenpolitik sowieso leider sehr Unglaubwürdig geworden. (SPON16.06)

As for the French corpus, there is neither mention nor criticism of France's nuclear arsenal – the world's third largest – or that of other nuclear-armed nations. However, Israel's nuclear ambiguity/exceptionalism recurs in a large number of posts, similar to British and German counterparts. Listed occasionally alongside India and Pakistan but mostly set apart, Israel's "open secret" (Borger, 2014) nuclear arsenal is insinuated in some comments (e.g. excerpt 26) to acknowledge *another* state in the region deemed non-compliant with international law, or asserted in other posts, based on which Western inconsistency and double standard are called out or Iran/its nuclear program is legitimated through de-legitimizing Israel, drawing, in some cases, on history (e.g. the Iran-Iraq war in excerpt 27) to present the former as victim – and therewith its (nuclear) weapons justified – and the latter as aggressor:

(26) Leider hat ein anderes Land in der Region schon ein Präzedenzfall im nichtbeachten einer Sicherheitsratsresolution geschaffen. Falls die UNO nicht in die Willkür abgedriftet ist, kann der Iran mit Verweis auf diesen Präzedenzfall eine Neubewertung fordern. Im schlimmsten Fall könnte er das Befolgen der Resolution auch Jahrzehnte hinauszögern. (SPON06.08)

(27) Solange Israel nicht dem Atomwaffensperrvertrag beitrifft muss man auf garnichts hören was aus Israel kommt. Das kranke an dieser Diskussion ist wie erfolgreich Israel es schafft diese ganze Situation derart zu verzerren das Israel immer als das Opfer wahrgenommen wird.

Dabei hat Israel schon lange Zeit seine Unschuld verloren. Der Iran hat jedes Recht sich zu bewaffnen wie er es für richtig hält, denn dem Iran ist niemand zur Hilfe gekommen als der Irak versucht hat es zu unterwerfen. Bei dieser Diskussion kommt man nur weiter wenn man alle Standpunkte ehrlich beleuchtet. Die Iraner mussten nämlich auch erfahren wie es ist, wenn man vergast werden soll. (SPON07.08)

A closely related issue that is regularly raised by British and more so French discussants is the (respective) media's silence on, or censorship of, Israeli nuclear weapons and what is construed as media bias in favor of the Jewish state. The perceived lack of audacity on the part of the French paper – or the public – to broach the taboo subject is often indicated by the verb 'oser' [to dare] (e.g. excerpts 28, 29). Turning a blind eye on Israel's possession of WMD is usually brought up in conjunction with media's refusal to cover another reiterated subject of criticism in the forums, namely Israeli aggression against the Palestinians (e.g. excerpts 30, 31):

(28) Who will dare to address the Israeli nuclear issue?<sup>529</sup>

[...]

-@SU: I don't know who will dare to address the Israeli nuclear weapon issue but it is my understanding that **Le Monde paper will never dare to do it.** Yet, to solve a problem, it is necessary to raise the real questions and not settle for expressing regret that there will be a conflict.<sup>530</sup> (LM14.08)

(29) Interview with an Israeli official on the topic of nuclear weapon in the Middle East. How have Le Monde journalists **dared** not to ask him a single question on the Israeli nuclear arsenal? Amateurism (sidestepping the essential!) or the will to influence French public opinion to make it accept France's anti-Iranian policy? **The unsaid of Le Monde are deafening.**<sup>531</sup> (LM06.08)

(30) The journalists who interviewed [Foreign Minister] Fabius have "forgotten" to bring up the Israeli occupation-colonization and Israeli nuclear weapon. **This complacency** allows Fabius to utter his hawkish rants by presenting Syria (in the midst of civil war!) and Iran as "the biggest threat to Peace".<sup>532</sup> (LM09.05)

(31) **The sheer hypocrisy of Israeli Journalists writing about Iran** is truly astounding when Israel is known to be a nuclear power that refuse the UN's own agency or the rest of the world from knowing the full extent of their own weapons development, especially as unlike Iran it already has a long and bloody history of aggression. (G22.04)

Accusations of Israeli crimes, including occupation, annexation, and settlements that also emerge in all three sites as a secondary discourse topic in relation to democracy/human rights

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<sup>529</sup> Qui osera poser la question du nucléaire israélien?

<sup>530</sup> @SU: Je ne sais pas qui osera poser la question de l'arme nucléaire israélienne mais je crois comprendre que le journal Le Monde n'osera jamais le faire. Pourtant, pour résoudre un conflit, il faut soulever les vraies questions et non se contenter de se désoler de ce qu'il y ait un conflit.

<sup>531</sup> Interview d'un responsable israélien au sujet de l'arme nucléaire au Moyen-Orient. Comment les journalistes du Monde ont-ils osé ne pas lui poser la moindre question sur l'arsenal nucléaire israélien? Amateurisme (passer à coté de l'essentiel!) ou volonté de conditionner l'opinion publique française pour lui faire accepter la politique anti-iranienne de la France? Les non-dits du Monde sont assourdissants.

<sup>532</sup> Les journalistes qui ont interviewé Fabius ont "oublié" d'évoquer l'occupation-colonisation israélienne et l'arme nucléaire israélienne. Cette complaisance permet à Fabius d'énoncer ses élucubrations bellicistes en présentant la Syrie (en pleine guerre civile!) et l'Iran comme la "plus grande menace contre la Paix".

(discussed later), frequently contain the terms ‘colonization’, and ‘apartheid’ – a widely-drawn parallel with South Africa – in British and French commentaries. Besides denouncing the media, criticism of Israel is expressed in many posts in tandem with condemning the West/Our politicians for their complicity with the Jewish state and their threat, by dint of unequivocal support for Israel, to (regional, global) peace and stability:

(32) It should be a lesson to us all, that our political class is not interested in negotiated peace, or a nuclear weapons-free Middle East (the elephant in the room is, of course, the non-NPT signing, nuclear weapons possessing Israel); in fact our political class is willing to promote any opportunistic policy which may ramp up tensions and the possibility of insecurity in the world considerably.[...](G22.04)

(33) In the name of stability, France is going to war in Syria. A bizarre way to act on behalf of France who supports the permanent destabilization of the Middle East by the militarized, occupying, colonizing, ethno-religious Israeli state and possessor of nuclear weapon.<sup>533</sup> (LM13.06)

Overlapping partly with the themes mentioned above is (3) hostility towards Iran. Numerous posts in the three sites (especially *Le Monde* and more so *Guardian*) contest the prevailing image of Iran as a belligerent Other by depicting the country as the victim of aggression from the Self/West. Pursued by liberals and progressives, especially in *Guardian*, these recurring comments condemn Western imperialism i.e. colonialism, expansionism, and intervention, with the West (notably U.S. and U.K.) constructed as the in- or outgroup, and, in line with the proverbial “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” and informed by a binary worldview consisting of the exploiting First World and the exploited Third World, remain sympathetic to the perceived ‘underdog’. The anti-imperialism emerging in forums (especially *Guardian*’s) contains anti-military sentiments, disdain for (and resentment of) NATO, criticism of the (Western) elite and the status quo, and anti-Americanism – a typical left-wing leitmotif. Many such posts place the Iran-West conflict in historical context, referring to pivotal events, some of which were detailed in Chapter Two, notably the 1953 CIA-led coup (section 2.2), as a glaring example of foreign intervention, or the Iran-Iraq war and Western support for Saddam. These oft-cited historical references, which are routinely linked to the current state of affairs (e.g. sanctions and military threat), serve to depict the oil-rich country as the victim of malevolent Western (namely British/American) intentions driven by imperialist ambitions in past and at present. It should also be added that such references appear more often in *Guardian*, corresponding to their more frequent mention in the British site’s Iran-related or side-note articles (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.3), including one by

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<sup>533</sup> Au nom de la stabilité, la France va faire la guerre en Syrie. Curieuse façon de faire de la part de la France qui soutient la déstabilisation permanente du Moyen-Orient par l’Etat israélien militarisé, occupant, colonisateur, ethnico-religieux et détenteur de l’arme nucléaire.

*Guardian's* columnist (G16.06a) sampled for in-depth analysis (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.6). Excerpt 34 is the quintessential *Guardian* post within this theme:

- (34) Given that Britain overthrew the democratic Iranian leader in 1953 after he had the temerity of actually working for his nation's self interest by nationalising Iran's oil. Add to that the whole world, including the UK and US, but not exclusively, arming Saddam during the unprovoked attack of Saddam on Iran which left nearly a million Iranians dead in the late 80s early 90s. Allied to that crippling sanctions cheerled by the UK and USA for Iran having the gall to want civil nuclear energy which have not allowed Iranian firms even the most basic banking international facilities that has seen its currency inflate terribly, wreaking awful consequences including a lack of access to life saving medicines for more complex health needs.
- I don't think its Iran that has a desperate need to change its immoral bullying colonial mindset.** (G13.05, bold in original)

The notion of Iranian aggression is also challenged in French and German forums, with several posters also bringing up the aforesaid events and/or blaming the Self (e.g. excerpt 35), while others dismiss Iranian hostility via negation ('Iran is *not* the belligerent party') and/or negative reciprocity (e.g. 'The West/U.S. and allies are the hostile ones') i.e. excerpt 36. Besides pointing out the historical precedent set by U.S. interference, with the coup in Iran listed occasionally alongside U.S. involvement in toppling past governments in Latin America or the MENA region, Washington's policy of regime change in Iran is raised in several *Guardian* and *SPON* posts to indicate ongoing American hostility towards Iran. Excerpt 37, which is part of a long post, is one such example, whereby the commenter approaches the Iran-U.S. conflict from the Iranian perspective, that is, being branded as constituting an 'axis of evil' despite its then-President Khatami's condemnation of 9/11 attacks as well as its military and intelligence support to the U.S. in 2001 to remove the Taliban in Afghanistan.

- (35) Let us recall, for those who haven't followed, that **Iran IS the gravely aggressed country**, by USA and MI6, since Mossadegh, that Iran is a great country, [with] cultivated, hard-working, intelligent people, and that aggressors of Iran are America and its parasitical petromonarchies, where we find ourselves, as if by chance, but it's no coincidence, Sarkozy. I'm just saying, no judgement. Only to call a spade a spade, it's, anyway, the minimum.<sup>534</sup> (LM23.04)
- (36) Now, we clearly see, Iran remains a warmongering theocracy. And to think that we, in good faith, believed in change.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>534</sup> Rappelons donc, pour ceux qui n'ont pas suivi, que l'Iran EST le pays gravement agressé, par les USA et le MI6, depuis Mossadegh, que l'Iran est un grand pays, des gens cultivés, travailleurs, intelligents et que les agresseurs de l'Iran sont l'Amérique et ces pétromonarchies parasites, où nous retrouvons, comme par hasard, mais ce n'est pas un hasard, Sarkozy. Je dis ça comme ça, c'est pas un jugement. Juste pour appeler un chat un chat, c'est quand même le minimum.

<sup>535</sup> Maintenant, on y voit clair. L'Iran reste une théocratie guerrière. Et dire que nous avons cru de bonne foi au changement.

-Really, I wonder whether it's bad faith or widespread dumbing down of the media that is responsible for this type of discourse...Someone should explain to me **when or how Iran is or would have been a “warmongering” country? And by the same token explain to me what, then, the EU, Israel, and much of European countries are...**<sup>536</sup> (LM02.08)

- (37) **Die Iraner fühlen sich auch von vielen Staaten der Region, inklusive Israel bedroht. Insbesondere weil die USA überall in der Region ihre Militärstützpunkte hat und einen Regime-Change des Irans anstrebt.** Betrachten wir das Problem ausnahmsweise aus der iranischen Sichtweise: [...]. (SPON15.06a)

As evident in excerpt 37, a recurring issue – also within this theme – is (criticism of) Israel. In an attempt to undermine fears of the Iranian Threat and portray Iran not as a source, but rather the target, of aggression, numerous posts in all sites present Israel as a – if not *the* – real threat to regional stability and global peace. Besides assertions similar to those made in posts cited earlier, the anti-Zionist/anti-Israel discourse, more prevalent in the left-liberal context of the British news site, is sometimes conveyed while displaying a sense of being pressurized into exercising self-censorship so as not to be considered offensive or labeled anti-Semitic, drawing on the topos of political (in)correctness, a variation of topos of authority that Dorostkar and Preisinger (2017, p.15), too, witnessed as a common argumentation strategy adopted in online discourse. The conclusion rule of this topos is as follows: “Because certain statements are seen as politically incorrect/racist/fascist, certain factual problems in our society cannot or can only inadequately be articulated and thus also solved.” The emphasis placed on the supposed taboo against criticizing the Jewish state (e.g. excerpts 38, 39) often includes rhetorical maneuvering such as distinguishing anti-Zionism from anti-Semitism and distancing oneself from the latter, vulgar language, and expletives. In addition, a handful of comments in *SPON* use the topos of national guilt, which can be regarded as a subset of topos of political (in)correctness, to stress the free-speech issue – for the German ingroup – and the right (or lack thereof) to condemn Israel (e.g. excerpt 40):

- (38) Likewise, **don't accuse me of prejudice.** Israel is the main trouble causer in the region so I think it very reasonable to bring it up. Or is there some special clause that states we can't mention Israel? (G16.06b)
- (39) [...] It's these kinds of articles that are the reason why Israel and Zionists get away with their crimes.  
What the hell is wrong with saying Israel should be removed?[...] So Israel is allowed to steal other people's land, yet no one is ever allowed to just say “f\*\*\* Israel”? [...] (G02.08, italics in original)
- (40) [...] Was die Israelis da machen war ein unprovocierter Überfall auf ihr Nachbarland - wieder einmal. Und bei der UN, in Deutschland und Europa gibt es wieder einmal keinen

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<sup>536</sup> Vraiment je me demande si c'est la mauvaise foi ou un abrutissement médiatique généralisé qui est responsable de ce genre de discours...Il faudrait que l'on m'explique quand ou comment l'Iran est ou aurait été un pays “guerrier”? Et par la même occasion que l'on m'explique ce que sont donc les E.U, Israel et une bonne partie des pays européens...

**Aufschrei, nicht einmal eine Beschwerde**, geschweige denn ein Einbestellen des israelischen Botschafters in Berlin. Stattdessen bemüht sich unsere Regierung endlich die Hisbollah als terroristische Vereinigung auf die rote Liste zu bekommen. Das ist schändlich und feige. **Aber nach Merkels Treueschwur sind wir Deutsche in einer unseligen Nibelungentreue gegenüber diesem Staat verhaftet.** [...] (SPON07.05)

Criticism and de-legitimation of Israel is sometimes conveyed through explicit anti-Semitic rhetoric i.e. rejecting Israel's right to exist in *Guardian*, as in excerpt 39, and invoking (c)covert tropes/stereotypes, notably 'Jewish money', 'Jewish control' (over media and global affairs) in *SPON* and more so *Guardian*, some of which are occasionally called out by peers. Examples from the German site include the two posts below, with the former blaming Israel of sabotaging peace between Iran and the U.S. through the influence of American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on U.S. politics in addition to Israel's aspirations for domination, and the latter referring to the role of (pro-Israel) money in the U.S. and branding Israel as a warmonger:

(41) [...] Ein Friede zwischen diesen beiden Staaten wäre schon längst möglich gewesen. Warum in all den Jahren nichts passiert ist und der Iran ständig dämonisiert wird, ist einzig und allein Israel zu verdanken. Israel und seine einflussreiche Lobby versuchen in Washington seit Jahrzehnten einen Frieden mit allen Mitteln zu verhindern. Der militärisch von den USA subventionierte Staat **Israel möchte die Kontrolle über den Nahen Osten behalten.** [...] Darum wird auch bei der nächsten Verhandlung einmal mehr nichts Gescheites rauskommen. Schade. (SPON13.07)

(42) **Wie immer man es sieht**

Eines ist jedenfalls klar: Die USA outen sich auch hier wieder also Vasall Israels. [...] Verfolgt man die US-Politik der vergangenen Jahrzehnte, wird deutlich, wer in den USA wirklich das Sagen hat. Es regiert das große Geld, wer es kontrolliert weiß auch, wer die Kriegstreiber sind. [...] (SPON03.05, bold in original)

While Iran is often victimized and the West villainized in such posts, several comments assign agency to Iran by legitimating (and romanticizing) Islamic Revolution as a progressive liberation movement and/or depict Iran today as a force resisting to, and defiant, of Western imperialism and bullying. This discourse of praising Iran's resistance stands in contrast to that of condemning Iran's defiance, bearing resemblance to the (post-)revolutionary discourse in Iran that contains anti-Westernism and Third-Worldism (KhosraviNik, 2015). Also conveyed in few posts by Iranian discussants, these comments emphasize self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Examples include the two posts below from *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, with the former endorsing and the latter contesting others in the forum:

(43) Very well said. **The single most important aspect of Iran is that it is the only most important country that has been able to set itself free from the criminal hold of Western imperialism and monopoly capitalism in the recent decades and continues to successfully, keep the aggressors at bay so far since the revolution in 1979.** They successfully severed the most of the important tentacles of economic, political, social and

cultural network through which monopoly capitalism controls and bleeds the human and natural resources of the countries around the world. [...] Whether based on religion or not; **this is a progressive revolution because of its anti-imperialist nature. It is vital not only for the people of Iran, but also for all the working people of the whole world. It must be preserved and fostered by all freedom loving people.** All interference by the imperialists through the so-called “colour revolution” in Iran must be defeated and Iranian peoples’ democracy be preserved. (G13.05)

- (44) If you really think that IRAN «will change» according to your wishes to serve your neo-imperialist desires, you’re mistaken..**After all this technological and military advancement, including nuclear, you can go prepare yourself tea while waiting for Iran to go back to the banana republic state under the command of the British and Americans.** Iran will change, yes, but to serve its people in the best way against the greed of major European and Anglo-American vampires.<sup>537</sup> (LM16.06)

The revolution is also represented as a positive outcome by a presumably Iranian poster in *SPON*, who criticizes the distorted image of Islamic Republic in Western media and juxtaposes (an underdeveloped) Iran under the Shah with (a progressive) Iran today:

- (45) Wer die Wahrheit wissen will, darf nicht Spiegel lesen. [...] Seit 30 Jahren versuchen westliche Medien wo sie nur können den Iran schlecht zu reden damit niemand erfährt wie fortgeschritten das Land geworden ist und der Eindruck von einem unterentwickelten Land entsteht. [...] **Vor der islamischen Revolution war der Iran wirtschaftlich und wissenschaftlich aber auch politisch praktisch bedeutungslos.** Der Iran war allenfalls bekannt für seine Teppiche und Pistazien. **Heute ist der Iran an der Schwelle zu einer Weltmacht.** [...] (SPON14.08)

And (4) Iran’s constructive role in Syria. Counter to dominant discourse in the three media at the time (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.1) and numerous posts that (partly) blame Iran for the Syrian humanitarian crisis, scorn its involvement in the conflict – as yet another destructive Iranian policy – and accentuate its destabilizing implications for the region, a significant number of comments seek to highlight favorable aspects of Iran’s stance on Syria. One of the most repeated assertions by discussants in all three sites during this period is Assad’s widespread popularity, according to polls or election results (topos of appeal to majority). In this vein, Iran’s support – and that of other pro-Assad foreign actors – is presented as endorsing a popular, legitimate government, which is often stated in tandem with repudiating what is widely viewed as distorted media portrayal of the war juxtaposed with discrediting the Western-backed opposition or deploring the West and its regional partners:

- (46) I would say those who have declared themselves the champions of ‘war on terror’ have lost all credibility and prestige for supporting terrorists in Syria. **Iran on the other hand supports the legitimate government of Syria and supports peaceful transition of**

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<sup>537</sup> Si vous croyez vraiment que l’IRAN «va changer» selon vos désirs pour servir vos envies néo-impérialistes, vous vous trompez..après toute cette avancée technologique et militaire, nucléaire inclus, vous pouvez aller vous préparer un thé en attendant que l’Iran retourne à l’état de république bananière sous le commandement des Anglais et des Etasuniens. L’Iran va changer oui mais pour servir à son peuple de la meilleure façon face à la convoitise des grands vampires européens et anglo-américains.



government in that country. Many polls suggest that majority of people in Syria support the current government. [...]. (G13.07)

- (47) [...] Ach ja, worüber die SPON Redaktion natürlich nicht berichtet ist, dass Saudi-Arabien ebenfalls völlig fanatisierte junge Männer als Märtyrer nach Syrien schickt. Die unterstützten nämlich wirklich eine von außen eingedrungene und von totalitären Regimen (Saudi-Arabien, Katar, Türkei, Israel) angeheuerte terroristische Gruppe. **Was die iranische Regierung hier tut ist eine offizielle und gewählte Regierung zu stützen. Und ja, es wurde gewählt. Die Wahlen wurden nur von der “Opposition” und unseren Medien boykottiert.** Passt eben nicht ins Bild der pösen Assad und seine Clique. (SPON07.05)

This includes referring to or citing official sources, most notably a then-recent report by NATO (topos of authority) announcing that Assad is “winning the war for Syrians’ hearts and minds”, to rebut the attached text and/or refute calls in the forum – in line with those in the West at the time – for arming rebels, frequently presented, as excerpt 49 shows, as a moral necessity in view of the humanitarian emergency while building a sense of foreboding concerning the future of Syria, amid the involvement of Iran and other Syrian allies (topos of danger/threat):

- (48) *“The data, relayed to NATO over the last month, asserted that 70 percent of Syrians support the Assad regime. Another 20 percent were deemed neutral and the remaining 10 percent expressed support for the rebels.”*

*Worldtribune, 31.05.2013*

D.h., überwältigende Mehrheit steht hinter und für die syrische Regierung. China, Iran und Russland sind also nicht nur legitime Handelspartner, sondern wichtige Unterstützer im Kampf gegen den Terrorismus. Der wiederum von den USA massiv forciert wird. [...] (SPON28.06, bold/italics in original)

- (49) We have to stop finding excuses not to do anything! [...]. Nothing stands in the way of asking allied Arab countries to supply these arms and pay them [rebels] in three months. If we keep waiting, it will be too late. Assad, Hezbollah and the Iranians will massacre dissidents until the last, even if it means obliterating Aleppo. Gas attack. Shelling towns by air, massacre on the ground by fresh troops of Hezbollah and [Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] Pasdaran. All will be good for the regime.<sup>538</sup>  
-to pc, you read English? If not, use google translate: <http://www.worldtribune.com/2013/05/31/nato-data-assad-winning-the-war-for-syrians-hearts-and-minds/> It says, according to NATO reports, 70% of Syrian population support Bashar and do not want the rebels, that 20% are neutral and only 10% support the rebels. Tell me, do you think that a minority can and should impose itself unto a large majority? [...] <sup>539</sup>  
(LM12.06)

Another positive quality ascribed to Assad by some posters (especially in *Le Monde* and *SPON*) is that of portraying his (secular) government as the savior of Syrian minority groups:

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<sup>538</sup> Il faut cesser de chercher des prétextes pour ne rien faire! [...]. Rien n’empêche de demander aux pays arabes alliés de fournir ces armes et de les leur payer dans trois mois. Si l’on attend encore, il sera trop tard. Assad, le Hezbollah et les iraniens vont massacrer les opposants jusqu’au dernier, quitte à raser Alep. Gaz de combats, pilonnages des villes par avion, massacre au sol par les troupes fraîches du Hezbollah et des Pasdarans. Tout sera bon pour le régime.

<sup>539</sup> à pc, tu lis l’anglais? sinon, utilise google traduction: <http://www.worldtribune.com/2013/05/31/nato-data-assad-winning-the-war-for-syrians-hearts-and-minds/> ça dit que selon des rapports de l’otan, 70% de la population syrienne soutient bachar et ne veut pas des rebelles, que 20% n’ont pas d’avis et que seul 10% soutiennent la rébellion Dit moi, pense tu qu’une minorité puisse et doive s’imposer à une large majorité?

(50) **wenigstens**

Wird es heute wie auch in der Zukunft noch Menschen geben, die hinter dem stehen, wofür auch Assad steht! Er steht für die minderheiten.. [...] (SPON08.06, bold in original)

Furthermore, as some excerpts above show, an overlapping and recurring line of argumentation in favor of Iran (and other Assad allies) is that of de-legitimizing the Syrian rebels/opposition. This involves highlighting their unpopularity – as opposed to Bashar Assad – amongst the local population, frequent negative/loaded labels (e.g. ‘gangs’, ‘terrorists’, ‘Islamists’, ‘Jihadists’, etc.) and loaded referential/predicational choices such as ‘NATO’s terrorist front’(G07.05) or references that often convey skepticism, derision, or disapproval such as using scare quotes i.e. ‘the “rebels” (a propaganda term that should be replaced with “insurgents”)’ (G07.05) or the pre-modifier ‘so-called’, and, finally, foregrounding the atrocities perpetrated by the Western-backed groups, as the two posts below from *Le Monde* demonstrate. The first, written with sarcasm in reaction to another, contains a link to a story published on the French site a few days earlier about the rebels’ execution of a 15-year-old boy for blasphemy. Likewise, the second comment points out the undemocratic (namely barbaric and irrational) nature of the rebels, branded as ‘insurgents’, and their widespread crimes (topos of number), warning, moreover, against “dominant propaganda in France”:

(51) We have to stop contemplating and act very soon. The massacre is happening! The Syrian “pacifist” propaganda is in full swing while the Russians, Iranians and Hezbollah do the dirty work.<sup>540</sup>

-“Iranians and Hezbollah do the dirty work”: that’s the right term: [http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/06/10/un-jeune-Syrien-execute-par-des-rebelles-pour-blaspheme\\_3426912\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/06/10/un-jeune-Syrien-execute-par-des-rebelles-pour-blaspheme_3426912_3218.html)<sup>541</sup> (LM13.06a)

(52) The more time passes, the stronger Assad gets. Because the population sees the destructive barbarity and the extermination lunacy of Islamist insurgency. There are no democratic rebels, we are told a load of baloney. Of the tens of thousands of victims, a large part is attributable to the insurgents. Let us be clear-headed, let us not listen to dominant propaganda in France which aligns itself with Qatar’s directive.<sup>542</sup> (LM20.05)

Similar to excerpt 52, Western propaganda is called out by many posters in all three sites, with Western media depiction (whitewashing) of the opposition, backed by the ‘Friends of Syria’ alliance – to wit, the West and Gulf Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar – often described as biased and agenda-driven. Examples include a poster’s rhetorical question

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<sup>540</sup> Il faut cesser d’envisager et agir très vite. Le massacre est en cours ! La propagande “pacifiste” syrienne tourne à plein régime, pendant que les russes les iraniens et le Hezbollah font le sale boulot.

<sup>541</sup> “les iraniens et le Hezbollah font le sale boulot”: c’est le terme approprié: [http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/06/10/un-jeune-Syrien-execute-par-des-rebelles-pour-blaspheme\\_3426912\\_3218.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/06/10/un-jeune-Syrien-execute-par-des-rebelles-pour-blaspheme_3426912_3218.html) (LM13.06a)

<sup>542</sup> Plus le temps passe et plus Assad se renforce. Parce que la population voit la barbarie destructrice et la folie exterminatrice de la rébellion islamiste. Il n’y en a pas de rébellion démocrate, on nous raconte des bobards. Sur les dizaines de milliers de victimes, une bonne partie est à mettre sur le compte des insurgés. Soyons lucides, n’écoutons pas la propagande dominante en France qui s’aligne sur la directive du Qatar.

in *Le Monde* regarding the influence of (rebel-backing) states in the Middle East on Western media (excerpt 53); criticism directed by a presumably regular *SPON* reader at the German outlet – the text at hand and one of its journalists who often writes about Syria and Iran – for its biased reporting (perceived as endorsement) of anti-Assad armed groups (excerpt 54); and a post in agreement with the accompanying piece by *Guardian*'s columnist, which foregrounded the wrongdoing and bad faith of the Western We-group (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.1.4), that calls for non-intervention and restraint in Syria (excerpt 55):

(53) Why do Western media support the rebels? Are they subsidized by Middle East countries?<sup>543</sup> (LM20.05)

(54) **Soso, dabei ist dieser Artikel doch gar nicht von Frau Salloum**

Aber es wird trotzdem wieder von "die Aufständischen nach Norden zu treiben."

Aufständischen anstatt von NATO bezahlten und ausgebildeten Söldnern und Terroristen gesprochen. Ich bin ja mal gespannt, wann dieses Propagandagejaule bei SPON aufhört und mal die Wirklichkeit berichtet wird. (SPON08.06, bold in original)

(55) @TheGreatRonRafferty - The very first article by "The Guardian" which 1. Takes into account the fact most readers support Assad, or at the very least do not support the free syrian army or any idea of outside intervention. 2. The Guardian, are actually watching and listening for change. Its not a full admission of being wrong, they still want Assad to be seen as equally as "wrong" but the very fact they even published this article, after months and months of pro [Free Syrian Army] fsa propaganda, proves those in charge at The Guardian, are actually watching and listening for a change. This must be applauded, I urge other newspapers, such as the free syrian army mouthpiece "The Mail" to also abandon their support for these reckless terrorists destroying Syria. Give the children of Syria a chance for life. They deserve it. (G07.05)

Similarly, media's depiction of Hezbollah's role in Syria is contested by several commenters in all three sites, with positive qualities such as combatting terrorism/extremism on the ground and protecting Syrian minorities (alongside Assad) repeatedly ascribed to the Lebanese group in forums, standing in contrast to the dominant portrayal of Hezbollah – and, by association, Iran – in attached texts (Chapter Seven, sections 7.3.2.1 and 7.3.2.2), with exceptions such as the aforesaid piece from *Guardian*, as well as the three media's overall coverage of the Shia militia and its regional activities (Chapter Six, sections 6.2.1.1 and 6.2.1.3):

(56) Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict is widely caricatured and instrumentalized in this column for partisan purposes. It's an insult to the Syrian Arab Army [...] that fights against the Wahabo-Takfiris on the frontline every day, and has been for two years. Hezbollah is there to protect Shia or Christian minorities [...]. Over 20000 foreigners are waging Jihad in Syria<sup>544</sup> (LM07.06)

<sup>543</sup> Pourquoi les médias occidentaux soutiennent-ils les rebelles? Sont-ils subventionnés par des pays du moyen orient?

<sup>544</sup> L'implication du Hezbollah dans le conflit est largement caricaturé and instrumentalisé à des fins partisans dans cette chronique. C'est une insulte à l'armée Arabe Syrienne [...] qui se bat chaque jour contre les wahhabo

(57) **Scheinheiliger Artikel**

Die Hisbollah hilft dabei, Syrien zu befrieden und Millionen Flüchtlingen die Heimkehr zu ermöglichen. Was gibt es dagegen einzuwenden? Die schmeißen die Terrorbanden aus Syrien raus, die von Saudi-Arabien, Quatar und der Türkei unterstützt werden. (SPON08.06, bold in original)

With the blame shifted from the Syrian regime onto the West/partners and the opposition, Iran and other Syrian allies are presented as ‘the lesser of two evils’ or, in fact, the preferred option to the Western-backed coalition (excerpts 58, 59). This, in few instances, is also stated by commenters (mainly *Le Monde*) who Self-identify as Syrian (e.g. excerpt 60):

(58) **ein höchst einseitiger Bericht**

Haben die Redakteure bei SPON in den letzten zwei Jahren noch nicht mitbekommen das die gesamte Islamistische Internationale gegen Syrien zu Felde zieht. Gebilligt, bezahlt und unterstützt von der westlichen Wertegemeinschaft. Aber der Iran ist ein Schurkenstaat weil er der syrisch arabischen Armee hilft. Journalismus sollte doch ausgewogener sein und Medien sollten sich nicht zum propagandasprachhor von Militärbündnissen machen lassen. Schade! (SPON07.05, bold in original)

(59) **Es ist gut zu wissen, dass Russland, China und der Iran das Land in seinem schweren Kampf gegen die islamistischen Terroristen und ihren Hintermänner nicht im Stich lassen.** Das tun sie nicht aus Altruismus, sondern aus wohlverstandem Eigeninteresse. Für den Iran geht es in Syrien um Sein oder Nichtsein. Wenn die NATO-GCC-Al Kaida-Allianz mit Damaskus fertig ist, steht als nächstes Ziel Teheran auf der Agenda. [...] (SPON28.06)

(60) **Like millions of Syrians, I prefer a Syria under the influence of Iran and Hezbollah a thousand times more than under the extremist jihadist Salafists of [Saudi] Arabia and Qatar.**  
<sup>545</sup> Long live Syria, long live Iran.<sup>546</sup> (LM07.06)

8.3.3 “*a semi-fascist theocracy run by a cabal of religious cranks and cynical opportunists*”

Another salient theme in the three sites’ online discussions is the state of democracy/human rights in Iran that constitutes a primary or emerges as a secondary discourse topic. Besides the pervasive religious associations mentioned earlier and other negative labels/descriptions that oftentimes highlight the autocratic nature of Iran/Islamic Republic i.e. ‘the Iran dictatorial system’ (G17.06), ‘a totalitarian dictatorship’/‘Iranian dictatorship’<sup>547</sup> (LM16.06), or ‘durchgeknallt(er) Diktator’/ dies(er) durchgeknallt(e) extremisch(e) Diktator’ (SPON03.05), amid Iran’s election and corresponding to the topic/content of the articles, numerous posts emphasize the undemocratic character of Iran’s political system and its presidential election process in particular. This involves referring regularly to the 2009 election, its highly-contested result and wide allegations of fraud, the violent aftermath, the fate of Green Movement, and the erosion of the regime’s domestic legitimacy, similar to

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takfiriste en première ligne et cela depuis plus de deux ans. L’Hisbollah est là pour assurer la protection des minorités chiites ou chrétiennes [...]. plus de 20000 étrangers font le Djihad en Syrie

<sup>545</sup> Comme des millions de Syriens, je préfère mille fois une Syrie sous influence de l’Iran et le Hezbollah que sous les extrémistes jihadistes salafistes de l’Arabie et du Qatar.

<sup>546</sup> Vive la Syrie, vive l’Iran.

<sup>547</sup> une dictature totalitaire/la dictature iranienne

stories and background information offered in the three media's reporting of Iran during this period (Chapters Six and Seven). This is sometimes conveyed through the usage of stereotypes i.e. irrationality of Iranian leadership (excerpt 61) or by drawing analogies with (previous, current) authoritarian regimes, as in excerpt 62 which adopts a metaphor to delegitimize Iran's sham/show elections:

(61) What hope for Iran when we celebrate the election of a moderate, meaning – in all probability – only slightly less deranged than the alternatives? (G16.06a)

(62) [...] **this is all smoke and mirror.** the new guy is part of the system that's why he was allowed to stand. soviet union was run like this same as N Korea today. this election was a sham like all the other elections in iran. there is no future in iran long as the mullahs are in power. (G16.06b)

Regarding the latter and similar to posts cited in section 8.3.1, several comments draw an analogy between the Islamic Republic and the Nazi regime:

(63) Basically, it's just business as usual then. Doesn't really matter who the Iranian president is as long as 'I speak to God' Adolf Khamenei is holding the strings. (G24.07)

(64) [...] Das System ist menschenverachtend, diktatorisch und faschistoid. Die Kandidaten unterscheiden sich in ihren grundauffassungen wie ein Nazi vom anderen Nazi. Die Kandidaten sind schwarz, tiefschwarz, peschschwarz und solche, die auch im dunklesten Kohlenkeller keinen Schatten werfen.  
Sollte man "Wahlen" im Iran nicht in Anführungszeichen setzen? Diese sogenannten Wahlen sind weder frei, fair und transparent noch hat das iranische Volk wichtige grundlegende politische Rechte. [...] (SPON15.06b)

In addition to, and overlapping with, accentuating Iran's opaque and authoritarian system, a recurring strategy within this theme is to highlight human rights abuses in Iran. Whether posted in reaction to the attached text or to other commenters, be it in agreement with the issue raised, or, conversely, refuting what is perceived as the media/text's pro-Iran content (more often in *Guardian* and *SPON*) or the pro-Iran propaganda and blame-the-West (notably U.S.) agenda pursued in forums by (Iranian, non-Iranian) apologists for the regime (in *SPON* and more so *Guardian*), these posts, written primarily to express one's standpoint, sometimes contain secondhand accounts (e.g. 'the Iranians I known...') and intertextual content such as links to other news sources or NGO reports to substantiate their claim. Hence, these comments repeatedly produce and polarize a 'good'/'evil' dichotomy, splitting the world into (modern, civilized) Us – implied or explicitly stated – and (repressive, illiberal) Them:

(65) [...] It [Iran] is a **semi-fascist theocracy run by a cabal of religious cranks and cynical opportunists** that maintains power by the ruthless use of force against all opposition. It imposes a draconian legal and social system that persecutes minorities, relegates women to

the role of chattel's and enforces vicious punishments for "crimes" that are not even regarded as such in **the civilised world**.

[...]

**This is NOT a normal state** and its pointless writing as if it is. (G06.06)

As also evident in the post above, the three sites' comments place a strong emphasis on a select number of rights areas, namely political opposition and dissent, freedom of speech/expression, capital punishment, women's rights (in all sites), and (ethnic, religious, sexual) minorities (mostly in *Guardian* and *SPON*), either singled out or listed together, with the latter sometimes following the 'rule of three' (Richardson, 2007, p.173) rhetorical tactic that is meant to make the argument put forth more effective/persuasive. While some of these issues are, more or less, consistent with the topics addressed or mentioned by varying degrees in side-note and Iran-related items in the three media over this period (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.3; Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.3), a tendency noted in studies on Western media's coverage of Islam/Muslims as well (Poole, 2000; Richardson, 2004; Terman, 2017), the extent to which certain problems are constantly foregrounded and given primacy in all three sites' comment sections is rather conspicuous and not dissimilar to what Shooman (2014, pp.158-60) identifies as 'Instrumentalisierung von Menschenrechten' in Islamophobic discourses on German blogs. "Eine wichtige Legitimierungsstrategie auf Islamfeindliche Webseiten", Shooman argues, that "stellt das Anknüpfen an egalitäre Argumentationen dar" by means of which "[d]ie antimuslimische Aversion wird mit dem Engagement für Menschenrechte und dem Schutz von Frauen oder Homosexuellen gerechtfertigt" (p.158). In Iran's case, next to oppression of women and mistreatment of homosexuals that are frequently conjured up in discussion forums, with the latter raised to a greater degree in *Guardian* and *SPON*, persecution of ethnic/religious minorities, particularly Jews and the Bahá'ís (*Guardian*, *SPON*) and/or Christians (all sites) is routinely brought up especially in British and German corpora. Although such posts, particularly those that mention the situation of Jews and homosexuals in Iran, can partly be viewed as reaction to, and against the backdrop of, Ahmadinejad's controversial and much-publicized anti-Semitic/anti-Israel and homophobic<sup>548</sup> remarks, they tend to share a noticeable pattern of othering that constructs and projects Iran as a dangerous country and a state – or, in rare cases, nation – that symbolizes (Islamic) brutality and incivility. This reiterated pattern is manifested in one of two ways: (1) by invoking the topoi of comparison and difference to (c)overly substantiate Our (moral, cultural) superiority and Their inferiority. These posts, which occasionally contain secondhand accounts and draw on the topos of witness, a subset of topos

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<sup>548</sup> For example, claiming: "In Iran, we don't have homosexuals. In Iran we don't have this phenomenon. I don't know who has told you we have it", during his controversial speech at Columbia University in 2007.

of authority, to give expertise/lend credibility to their writer, as noticed elsewhere (Molek-Kozakowska, 2017, p.173), activate the topos of danger/threat and represent Iran as an unsafe place not just for its own citizens, but also for those who (dare to) visit Iran:

(66) @CyrusP- I have very good Iranian friends who came here after the upheavals of 1979, they still holiday and visit family in Iran, one thing's for certain they wouldn't want to return on permanent basis and for all our faults at least we don't hang people because of their sexual orientation. [...] (G13.05)

(67) Tell you what;  
Pop over to Iran for a bit and try expressing views that do not chime with local norms; perhaps say you are Jewish or possibly gay or a baha'i and see what happens.  
Then, assuming that you are still alive and not in jail for an extended sentence for crimes against God, travel to the USA and gob off on anything under the sun. [...] (G06.06)

(68) Stellen Sie sich mal einen Nachmittag vor den Kölner Dom und halten ein Schild hoch "Gott existiert nicht".  
Und dann versuchen Sie das Gleiche nochmal in Teheran. (SPON15.06b)

And (2) regular references to 'lashing', 'stoning' or 'hanging from cranes' in a manner that is strikingly in tune with what Edward Said (1978, p.60) describes as a "morbid fascination with 'Islamic punishment'" in the West. As such, through *pathotic arguments* (Richardson, 2007, p.160) and their related fallacies, including "scare tactics – often involving exaggeration and hyperbole – and sentimental appeals" (p.168) in order to trigger shock, anger, or repulsion, the negative traits/actions of the (Oriental) Other are constantly highlighted, while the superiority of the (modern, liberal) Self/West is mostly presupposed as given. In this vein, Iran, as state actor, is repeatedly portrayed as barbaric and repressive in these comments that sometimes also list the country alongside other (Muslim-majority) states:

(69) A moderate, in Iran, is no doubt the one who only picks one rock, instead of two, to **stone the adulterous woman**...We aren't out of the woods, with these clergymen [still] in power...<sup>549</sup> (LM15.06c)

(70) Warum trauen Sie ausgerechnet dem Staat "annähernd demokratische Strukturen" zu, der **Schwule an Baukränen aufhängt?**  
Warum trauen Sie ausgerechnet dem Staat "annähernd demokratische Strukturen" zu, der **Frauen steinigt?**  
Warum trauen Sie ausgerechnet dem Staat "annähernd demokratische Strukturen" zu, der **kleine Kinder zum hass auf Juden erzieht?**  
Vielleicht sollten Sie sich das noch einmal fragen – Sinn macht es nämlich nicht... (SPON06.07)

(71) Ob Bahrain, Katar, Saudi Arabien, Iran oder Libanon – vollkommen egal. Dort herrschen überall menschenverachtende Regime, die insbesondere Homosexuelle töten, Frauen brachial unterdrücken und Kinder massiv mit antijüdischem Hass indoktrinieren. (SPON06.07)

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<sup>549</sup> Un modéré, en Iran, cela doit sans doute être celui qui ne prend qu'une pierre dans sa main, au lieu de deux, pour lapider la femme adultère... On n'est pas sortis de l'auberge avec ces religieux au pouvoir...

It should be added that while hostility towards Jews – besides prevalent allusions to Iranian officials (notably Ahmadinejad) and/or Iran’s enmity towards Israel in all three news sites – is frequently raised by *Guardian* and *SPON* commenters, Iran’s anti-Semitism is broached from different angles in the two sites’ discussion forums: *Guardian* posters tend to emphasize, to a greater degree, the (life-threatening) danger facing Jews, Iranian or otherwise, inside Iran, which is ascribed to state-sponsored actions. In the case of *SPON*, while Jews, albeit less frequently than the Bahá’ís or Christians, are mentioned in some posts as a persecuted minority (e.g. excerpt 72) which, similar to posts in *Guardian*, serves to highlight religious intolerance in Iran, discussions on (threat of) Iranian anti-Semitism revolve primarily around its threat to Israel, its leadership’s presumed genocidal intentions, and the regime’s anti-Semitic policies, namely ‘indoctrinating children with hatred against Jews’, an issue that, as the two excerpts quoted above show, is regularly raised by *SPON* commenters.

(72)[...] Im Iran mag die Polizei Touristen gegenüber freundlich und entspannt sein, der Bevölkerung gegenüber ist sie es nicht. Und schon gar nicht ist sie es gegenüber der regimekritischen, der weiblichen, der jüdischen und der christlichen Bevölkerung und den Bahai. (SPON12.06)

While the nature and actions of the Iranian state are blamed for human rights abuses in the majority of these posts, few comments in *Guardian* and *SPON* ascribe rights issues/violent acts to the general populace or the culture of Iran, drawing on the topos of religion/culture. In other words, while rights-related issues/violations are primarily presented in the bulk of posts as the result of (political) top-down decisions by a repressive theocratic regime, echoing the dominant human rights discourse in the texts sampled from the three media (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.3), several comments depict these problems as belonging to illiberal socio-cultural norms, values, and practices. One such example is the first post below (excerpt 73) that uses sarcasm as an othering device, similar to opponents of the ‘Religion of Peace’ argument in debates on Islam and Muslim immigration/integration, while referring to an external (Israeli) news source as proof. The adjective ‘another’ is indicative of the poster’s belief that the cited incident is not an isolated one, but symptomatic of a broader trend and a continuous pattern of what is insinuated as an inherent Iranian hostility towards Jews. In the second example (excerpt 74), the poster invokes the fallacy of hasty (over-)generalization by assigning the negative actions listed – to eclipse or contest the positive trait of ‘hospitality’ attributed to Iranians in attached article as well as by some commenters – to Iranian culture, echoing the form of reasoning “typical of racist discourse”, according to Richardson (2007, p.170), “in which the characteristics [or actions] of a part are incorrectly transferred to the whole”. While both these posts invite readers to infer and deduce an association between the



stated negative acts/qualities and Islam, this connection is explicitly established and articulated in the third example (excerpt 75), drawing on topos of religion, that constructs an Us/Them dichotomy using prejudicial stereotypes and a condescending tone. By committing the logical fallacy of hasty (over-)generalization, the comment, moreover, represents Iranians, specifically young men, and by extension *all* Muslim men, as both sexist and homophobic, mirroring Shooman's (2014) findings and what was stated earlier.

- (73) Yet another naughty, peace-loving Iranian attacks Jews:  
<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4371381,00.html> Paris: Iranian assaults rabbi, son with knife  
 Father, son attacked near synagogue after morning prayer. Police arrest Iran-born man said to be mentally unstable, looking into possibility assault was of anti-Semitic nature. (G21.04)
- (74) Die Menschen dort können noch so gastfreundlich sein, wenn eine 8.000 Jahre alte Kultur darin endet, daß Frauen wegen Nichteinhaltung der Kleiderordnung mit Peitschenhiebe öffentlich bestraft werden können, Teenies auf der straße gehängt werden können, Dissidenten in Gefängnisse gefoltert werden, dann pfeiff ich auf solch einen hohen Kulturstand und menschenunfreundlichen Zivilisationsgrad. [...] (SPON12.06)
- (75) Ohne Moos nix los, so ist es auch in Deutschland und ich wage zu bezweifeln, dass die iranischen Jugendlichen und besonders die jungen Männer freien Verhältnisse wie in Deutschland haben wollen. Denn als man lebt man ganz gut im Islam, wenn man die Frauen knechten kann und darf und rundum bedient wird. Keine Regierungsform kann sich auf Dauer halten, wenn es nicht genug Nutzniesser, Mitläufer und Verteidiger gibt. Was der gemeine Iraner von Schwulen und Lesben hält, so bedarf es nicht viel Vorstellungskraft. [...] (SPON14.08)

Moreover, democracy/human rights is brought up in a significant number of posts, which similar to those cited earlier (section 8.3.1) contain a usually long tirade of criticism, throughout the three corpora (especially *Guardian* and *SPON*) to *further* de-legitimate and incriminate Iran and its actions in various international contexts i.e. nuclear dispute, conflict with Israel, and war in Syria. As such, Iran's democratic credentials and/or rights record are raised and frequently mentioned alongside other issues to cite *another* reason why it is an illegitimate state. In and through these posts, Iran is consistently depicted as a dangerous entity in addition to an unreliable actor in international matters. The first *Guardian* post below (excerpt 76), for instance, lists a number of human rights abuses in Iran and combines the brutality of the regime with its fanaticism, irrationality, and nuclear threat. As such, rights violations are stated to further demonize the Other and portray Iran as abnormal, untrustworthy, and threatening (topos of danger/threat). In other words, while Iran's irrational regime awaits the reappearance of Mahdi, the twelfth Imam, the world awaits an "improbable but certainly not impossible" nuclear apocalypse. Adopting a hyperbolic rhetoric, another post from *Guardian* (excerpt 77) similarly activates alarm and threat by drawing on history and listing the crimes committed by 'the Ayatollah regime' at home and

abroad since its inception, including, inter alia, execution of homosexuals/stoning of women, use of child soldiers in the war with Iraq, and complicity in ongoing atrocities in Syria, coupled with its sponsorship of terrorism and threat to Israel, to substantiate the Islamic Republic's image as "the world's most dangerous regime" *even before* acquiring nuclear weapons, and forebodes a catastrophe, should Iran "use the world's most dangerous weapons":

(76) It's **not just the brutality**; (the complete suppression of any conception of women's rights, or the fact that gays have been publically lynched for heavens sake, or that it executes children, or publishes rape victims, and so on...) but **its flagrant support of international terrorism**, and **the irrational nature of the regime** (such as the awaiting of 12th Imam Mahd's return) in which it values things above its national self-preservation, **the threat of a nuclear Islamic Republic of Iran** adopting this arrangement is improbable but certainly not impossible.

After all, they tried to execute the diplomat of a foreign state in Washington DC. (G06.06)

(77) [...] From the beginning, the Ayatollah regime has broken every international rule and flouted every norm. It has **seized embassies**, targeted diplomats and **sent its own children through mine fields**. It **hangs gays and stones women**. It **supports Assad's brutal slaughter** of the Syrian people. **Iran is the world's foremost sponsor of terror**. [...] Iran accuses the American government of orchestrating 9/11, and it denies the Holocaust. Iran **brazenly calls for Israel's destruction**, and they work for its destruction - each day, every day. [...] This is how Iran behaves today, without nuclear weapons. Think of how they will behave tomorrow, with nuclear weapons. Iran will be even more reckless and far more dangerous. Responsible leaders should not bet the security of their countries on the belief that the world's most dangerous regime won't use the world's most dangerous weapons. (G04.08a)

Besides de-legitimizing the Other, some posts lend legitimacy to the Self/West and justify the Western We-group's mistrust towards, or course of action against, Iran. Examples include comments below from *Guardian* and *SPON*: The first justifies U.S. support for Israel, using antithesis to place the latter in opposition to Iran and stress the stark differences between the two while employing 'the only democracy in the Middle East' trope often evoked in debates on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The second one connects the Iranian regime's repression of its people with Iran's atomic threat and danger to Israel in order to render increasing punitive measures i.e. toughening sanctions essential (topos of urgency/necessity). Written to counter what the poster views as the hypocrisy of anti-Americanism endorsed by some in the forum, the third comment similarly justifies a future U.S. military action against Iran on the grounds of its ability to stop/prevent the extremists in Iran:

(78) [...] America also continues to support Israel, the one country in the region where all are equal, freedom of expression reigns, and liberty, democracy, and happiness are the founding principles rather than hate, sectarian violence, poverty, misogyny, homophobia, and religious intolerance [...]. (G21.04)

(79) **was gibt's Neues aus Teheran ?**

Nichts: ein Ayatollah ist wie der andere:

fanatisch, religiös verbohrt, israelfeindlich, bis hin zum Wunsch, den Staat Israel zu vernichten, atombomben “geil”, diktatorisch repressive gegenüber der eigenen Bevölkerung (sonst gäbe es keine iranischen Asylbewerber).

Restriktionen gegenüber dem Iran müssen verschärft werden, damit man dort begreift, dass man mit dem Westen nicht Katz und Maus spielen kann. [...] (SPON03.08, bold in original)

(80) **Scheinheilig**

Was sollen den die ganzen scheinheiligen Kommentare hier. Wie lange soll sich der Westen den noch von diesem durchgeknallten extremistischen Diktator an der Nase herumfühlen lassen? Ich schlafe auf jeden Fall ruhiger mit dem Wissen, dass die USA notfalls auch technisch dazu in der Lage ist, einen bevorstehenden Amoklauf dieses Extremisten zu unterbinden. (SPON03.05, bold in original)

Another example is the comment below which was posted in response to the statement made by France’s then foreign minister in the above-stated interview with *Le Monde* during which he branded both Iran and Syria “the greatest current threat to peace”. Here, religious freedom in (Islamic) Iran is brought up and contrasted with that in (secular) Syria and the favorable situation of Christians in that country – an issue brought up in several posts as stated before (section 8.3.2). Iranian leaders are then depicted by means of Orientalist stereotypes and the writer’s chosen referential/predicational strategies as intolerant and backward, against (the likes of) whom the poster warns, should Assad fall, given the threat they would pose to Syria’s religious minorities (topoi of human rights and danger/threat):

(81) Iran yes, Syria certainly not ! There exists a circumstantial alliance between the two countries but there is nothing in common between, on one hand, **Medieval Iranians who stem from the Muslim Brotherhood movement** and the Ba’athist Syrian regime with secular roots, on the other. Syria protects its religious minorities, notably Christians, who will be the first to bear the brunt of Assad’s fall and the accession to power of bearded men who still think they’re in the 8th century! Ah Fabius!...<sup>550</sup>(LM09.05)

#### 8.3.4 ‘Iran is not as bad as x’/ ‘What about...?’

Parallel and counter to rampant comments exemplified above that deploy the topoi of democracy/human rights as an othering strategy in accord with Ideological Square, namely positive Self- and more so negative Other-presentations, numerous posts in the three news sites contest dominant (Western) views and discourses on democracy and rights in Iran. Challenging the Ideological Square by foregrounding positive qualities of Them and more so emphasizing negative qualities of Us/the West and Our/Western partners, these comments intend to expose the following points: (1) Iran is far better than – or not as bad as – other (rival) states in the region, notably Western allies. Comments that draw on this argumentation

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<sup>550</sup> L’Iran oui, la Syrie certainement pas. Il s’agit entre les deux pays d’une alliance de circonstance mais il n’y a rien de commun entre les Moyenâgeux iraniens, issus de la mouvance des frères Musulmans d’un côté et le régime syrien baasiste, aux racines laïque de l’autre. La Syrie protège ses minorités religieuses, notamment chrétiennes, qui seront les premières à faire les frais de la chute d’Assad et de l’accession au pouvoir des Barbus qui se croient encore au VIIIème siècle ! Ah Fabius !...

strategy in diverging contexts (e.g. Syria, nuclear issue, domestic politics, and society) routinely compare Iran with the Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar – both which were mentioned repeatedly in the news at the time and, as previous comments showed, also in discussion forums due to their growing involvement in Syria by supporting the rebels – using oft-evoked concerns in debates on Iran/Islam i.e. democracy, women (notably right to drive), and religious freedom as points of reference. These posts, which are written in reaction to the article or aim to dismiss the points raised by fellow commenters, sometimes entail personal anecdotes (e.g. excerpt 83), rely on expert opinion (e.g. a French historian in excerpt 84), or contain links to (Iranian) news sources (e.g. excerpt 85) to add more credibility to their argumentation. Besides comparing Iran with other Muslim-majority states, with the former assigned positive qualities or its negative traits relativized and predicated on emphasizing negative characteristics of the latter, some comments also refer to the Self (excerpt 84):

(82) Are you sure you're not confusing Iran with Saudi Arabia? How many dictatorships have elections - where the outcome was a genuine surprise - with 72% turnout? (G17.06)

(83) Really???? Seen any women drivers in Saudi lately, thinking about experiences.... Oh yes I remember one..hw the cops in Saudi stopped in me in a park to ask me wat my relationship to the man walking with me is?? (my brother actually). (G24.07)

(84) The result of this election confirms that Iran progresses in its democratization process. It should be recalled that our Western societies like France took decades, a century, for our country to accede to democracy. As some experts (e.g. E Todd) say, Iran is 20 years ahead of the Arab Spring countries that are also engaged in the process of democratization. Let's hope that Iran and these Arab Spring countries will be quicker than France...<sup>551</sup>

[...]

This election - and its victor - shows that Iran is not the dictatorship that it is often said. **The Iranian regime is much more democratic than that of Qatar, for instance.**<sup>552</sup> (LM15.06b)

(85) Next to notable exceptions like this, we must acknowledge that the situation of women is infinitely better in Iran than in the Gulf countries. And it turns out that **whatever does not pose a problem for us with Saudi Arabia or Qatar, does so all of a sudden with Iran, which exercises much less discrimination.** Women drive, play sports (the Iranian women's futsal team is not at all ludicrous, for example, <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/04/11/235672/iran-futsal-women-championship/>).<sup>553</sup> (LM02.07)

<sup>551</sup> Le résultat de cette élection confirme que l'Iran progresse dans son processus de démocratisation. Rappelons que nos sociétés occidentales comme la France, ont mis des décennies, un siècle pour notre pays, à accéder à la démocratie. Comme disent certains spécialistes (ex E. Todd), l'Iran a 20 ans d'avance sur les pays du printemps arabe qui se sont aussi engagés dans le processus de démocratisation. Espérons que l'Iran et ces pays du printemps arabes seront plus rapide que la France...

<sup>552</sup> Cette élection - et la personne de son vainqueur - montrent que l'Iran n'est pas la dictature que l'on dit parfois. Le régime iranien est ainsi beaucoup plus démocratique que celui du Qatar, par exemple.

<sup>553</sup> Après, et à quelques exceptions notables comme celle là, il faut reconnaître que la condition des femmes est infiniment meilleure en Iran que dans les pays du golfe. Et il s'avère que ce qui ne nous pose pas de problème avec l'Arabie saoudite ou le Qatar nous en pose subitement avec l'Iran qui pratique une discrimination tellement

In a similar vein, there are repeated references in the three sites' forums to violations of human rights/humanitarian law by Israel, another rival and Western ally in the region, and its crimes against the Palestinians. Written mainly to rebut the text's topic/content or contest other posts, some posts foreground the non-democratic character of the Jewish state and challenge 'the only democracy in the Middle East' trope by depicting Israel as embodying modern colonialism through common usage of such terms as 'colonialist'/'colonizer' in British and French forums and/or regular associations with, or allusions to, South Africa and the label 'apartheid' (allowed to be) used, and quite often so, in both sites, as excerpts below and those cited earlier (section 8.3.2) show. Others aim to de-legitimize Israel alongside Iran, branding both 'pariah states', as in excerpt 88, or legitimate Iran by de-legitimizing Israel in the context of conflict between the two states and to counter the oft-invoked 'Iranian threat', as in excerpt 89, whereby the *SPON* poster contradicts the teaser, claiming: "Irans künftiger Präsident knüpft an die Tradition seines Vorgängers an. Wie vorher Mahmud Ahmadineschad hetzt er gegen Israel":

- (86) Israel is a murderous tyranny. The claim that it is a democracy echoes the propaganda of its friends in Apartheid South Africa. Israel sent lots of weapons and instruments of oppression to them. Arabs cannot vote freely in Israel and are second class citizens. Plus how is ethnically cleansing the Negev of Bedouins 'freedom'? (G02.08)
- (87) This man [Rouhani] elected, as one normally would, by his people, is considered a moderate by Western countries who pin some hope for a better future for this country's population. But for the right-wing government of Israel, which itself practices apartheid against its Palestinian neighbors, even if its regime is moderate at the moment, Iran deserves nothing but war.<sup>554</sup> (LM15.06c)
- (88) The optimistic version is that Iran makes progress towards democratization, even if it's only in small steps. [...]. And if sanctions work, there's nothing left but to apply the same treatment to Israel, the other pariah state in the region.<sup>555</sup> (LM15.06b)
- (89) Ich sehe da keine Hetze. Dass Israel Jerusalem und die Palästina räumen muss, ist rechtlich und moralisch absolut gegeben. Dass Israel das nicht tut und stattdessen immer neue Gebiete besetzt, is der eigentlich Skandal. (SPON02.08a)

Closely related to, and intersecting with, argumentations above is (2) calling out Our/Western hypocrisy and sense of superiority or condemning the demonization of Iran in the West. This entails criticizing, sometimes with irony/sarcasm, what is perceived as biased media

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moins grave. Les femmes conduisent, font du sport (l'équipe iranienne de futsal féminin est n'est pas du tout ridicule, par exemple, <http://www.presse.com/detail/2012/04/11/235672/iran-futsal-women-championship/>).

<sup>554</sup> Ce Monsieur élu normalement par son peuple, est considéré come un modéré par les pays occidentaux qui fondent quelques espoirs sur un avenir meilleur pour les populations de ce pays. Mais pour le gouvernement de droite d'Israel, qui lui, pratique l'apartheid à l'égard de ses voisins palestiniens, même si son régime est à présent modéré, l'Iran ne mérite que la guerre.

<sup>555</sup> La version optimiste, c'est que l'Iran progresse dans la voie de la démocratisation, même si ce n'est qu'à petits pas. [...]. Et si les sanctions marchent, il n'y a plus qu'appliquer le même traitement à Israel, l'autre état voyou dans la région.

depictions (namely, disproportionate targeting) of Iran and in favor of the Gulf States (all sites) or Israel (*Guardian* and *Le Monde*). Examples include the four posts below. The first three are from *Le Monde*, with one written to contest the attached text's chosen sub-head declaring that elections "in a system as tightly controlled as Iran's, often make room for surprises", and denounce media propaganda, the second posted below the op-ed appealing for an end to sanctions against Iranian people and condemns media censorship on France's Middle East policy, and the third written below a news article announcing 'cutting-edge American arsenal promised to Israel'. The fourth is written in response to *SPON*'s story on the female swimmer discussed in Chapter Seven (section 7.3.3.1.3):

- (90) Dead laughing, what does this phrase mean? There is often surprise in elections in Qatar or Saudi Arabia (oops, there isn't even any!)<sup>556</sup>  
 Anyway, **stop the propaganda for five minutes...**<sup>557</sup> (LM15.06b)
- (91) Thanks for this platform but it raises the following questions. When has there been a debate in the media to base a decision as important as implementing cruel sanctions against the Iranian people? When will there be a debate on the need for action to enforce rule of law on the Palestinian issue? Why do media refuse all debate when it comes to our Middle East policy? Media have confiscated our democracy.<sup>558</sup> (LM12.08)
- (92) Obama wants to establish peace by supplying high-tech weapons to the occupying-colonizing Israelis. Obama also wants to dissuade everyone from paying a visit to the besieged in Gaza. Obama's pro-occupation, pro-colonialist and pro-apartheid stance is flagrant, but, in its editorials, Le Monde pretends to not be aware of this and marvels at what Obama declares as standing-for-peace (a peace based on apartheid, colonization, occupation, and oppression, the whole show)<sup>559</sup> (LM23.04)
- (93) **Schön für die west- Presse aufgelegt.**  
Bei unseren "Partnern" Saudi-Arabien und Katar würde diese Frau es nicht einmal ins Schwimmbad schaffen, weil sie kein Auto fahren darf und immer demütig 2 meter hinter einem Mann gehen muss – ach, ich vergaß ja: das sind ja die "guten islamistischen Diktaturen", die seit 2 Jahren in Bahrein friedliche Demonstranten zusammenkartuschen...Und wo jede Woche je Menge Köpfe rollen... (SPON06.07, bold in original)

Referring to Iran's previous election in 2009 and unlike many comments which, as stated earlier, indicate the result's disputed/fraudulent nature or the regime's brutal crackdown,

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<sup>556</sup> Mort de rire, ca veut dire quoi cette phrase? Il y a souvent des surprises dans les élections au Qatar ou en Arabie Saudite (oups, y en a même pas !)

<sup>557</sup> Bref, stop à la propagande cinq minutes...

<sup>558</sup> Merci pour cette tribune mais ça soulève les questions suivantes. Quand y a-t-il eu un débat dans les médias pour prendre une décision aussi importante que l'application de sanctions cruelles contre le peuple iranien? Quand y aura-t-il un débat sur la nécessité d'agir pour imposer une solution de justice sur la question de Palestine? Pourquoi les médias refusent-ils tout débat dès qu'il s'agit de notre politique au Moyen-Orient? Les médias ont confisqué notre démocratie.

<sup>559</sup>Obama veut établir la paix en fournissant des armes de pointe aux occupants-colonisateurs israéliens. Obama veut aussi dissuader tout le monde d'aller rendre visite aux assiégés de Gaza. Le Parti pro-occupation, pro-colonisation et pro-apartheid d'Obama est flagrant mais, dans ses éditos, Le Monde fait semblant de ne pas s'en apercevoir et s'émerveille de ce qu'Obama déclare être-pour-la-paix (une paix fondée sur l'apartheid, la colonisation, l'occupation et l'oppression, tout un programme)

some posts in *Guardian* and *Le Monde* seek to reveal Western media bias/distortion (then or now), with the alleged endorsement of ‘regime change’ agenda by (media in) the West often implied and, on occasion, expressed:

(94)[...] The point of my comment was for Iranians to beware of the deception of the western media, remember the exaggeration of the “green” revolution? This time, maybe a “yellow” revolution in the [Mainstream Media] MSM pipeline... and no light on the abuses in Saudi Arabia, Israel, Bahrain, etc. on the no elections whatsoever in “ally” countries... so beware of the false and bias lobby influenced MSM (G13.05)

(95) **What an article, so politicized, so one-sided.**<sup>560</sup>

There were similar celebrations for the election of Ahmadinejad in 2009, in spite of what was said. But the West didn’t want to see it, full-on blinded in supporting losers’ protest.<sup>561</sup> (LM16.06)

Another repeated point of criticism in such posts, especially in *Guardian*, is to highlight the discrepancy and/or double standard in the Self/West’s Middle-East policy, echoing some opinion and commentary pieces published in the British site during this period (Chapters Six and Seven). Regularly denouncing the U.S. in addition to criticizing the selected media’s respective governments/politicians, these posts often condemn the We-group’s arms sales to authoritarian regimes or support for Israel and its violation of Palestinian rights:

(96)[...] And Yet [Prime Minister] David Cameron still thought it appropriate to take a few days off the job of running the country in order to go to Saudi Arabia in order to promote arms exports there.

**The double standards couldn’t be more blatant, and yet people are still being taken in by the propaganda that the West’s hostility towards Iran has got anything to do with human rights.** (G06.06)

(97) In a bid to sell [fighter jets] Rafale, France, in Syria just as in Libya [...], **is manipulated by absolute and misogynistic petro-monarchies: Qatar, who puts poets in jail along with Saudi Arabia’s gerontocracy that cloisters half its population and is champion of death penalty.** “Great example of words attributed to Lenin «Capitalists will sell us the rope to hang them”<sup>562</sup> (LM20.05)

(98) Ich erwäge schon lange mal nach Iran/Persien zu reisen. [...] Es ist schon eine bittere Ironie dass ausgerechnet eines der “moderneren” islamischen Länder ständig am Pranger steht, während man nach Saudi Arabien u.a. Panzer verkauft und Menschenrechte mit keinem Wort erwähnt. Die Heuchelei ist unerträglich. (SPON12.06)

(99) The US continues to arm Dictators and Apartheid in the Middle East. Lovely. (G21.04)

And (3) to foreground the wrongdoings of the West (notably U.S. and U.K.), in the past or at present, and blame its actions for current state of affairs. Similar to posts mentioned before

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<sup>560</sup> Quel article étrangement politisé, étrangement partial.

<sup>561</sup> Des fêtes semblables il y en a eu pour l’élection d’Ahmadinejad en 2009, élection sincère quoi qu’on en ait dit. Mais l’occident ne voulait pas les voir, tout aveuglé à soutenir la contestation des perdants.

<sup>562</sup> Pour tenter de vendre le Rafale, La France en Syrie comme en Libye [...], se fait manipuler par les pétromonarchies absolues et misogynes:le Qatar qui met en prison les poètes, ainsi que le gérontocratie d’Arabie Saudite, qui cloître la moitié de son peuple et qui est championne de la peine de mort „Belle illustration des paroles attribuées à Lénine «Les capitalistes iront jusqu’à nous vendre la corde pour les pendre“

(section 8.3.3) that use the topos of history to validate their counter-argument i.e. ‘Iran is not the aggressor/warmongering side’, these posts refer to pivotal historical events/issues in Iran-West relations. However, unlike previous posts that evoke history to contest the dominant discursive strategy applied in articles or forums, these comments refer to the past, notably the 1953 coup, to depict the Islamic Republic as the ‘bad’ outcome of Our/the West’s ‘bad’ actions (e.g. due to self-serving geopolitical interests and imperialist ambitions), while corroborating its regressive, radical, and/or authoritarian nature. Examples include the comment below from *Le Monde* that alludes to France’s determining role in the leading up to the revolution (Chapter Two, section 2.3), and the subsequent posts from *SPON* and *Guardian*.

- (100) Might I recall that it is **France** who allowed this «progressivist» Islamic revolution...<sup>563</sup>  
(LM02.07)
- (101) Den islamischen Staat haetten wir umgehen koennen, aber **wir der Westen** wollten 1953 halt nicht das ein demokratischer Staat seine Oelreserven fuer seinen Vorteil nutzt. Die Radikalen sind ein Ergebnis der Schahherrschaft und dem unvermoegen des Westen auch, dies haetten eine demokratischen Wandel fordern koennen - wo waren die Medien und unsere Politiker. (SPON14.08)
- (102) What a sanctimonious bunch **we** are - perhaps **the Brits** have forgotten that they with the help of the Americans organised the coup that rid Iran of its democratically elected leader Mossadegh - and so helped create the Islamic republic of Iran. How dare they be so bloody high and mighty. [...] (G24.07)
- (103) Tragic that iranian authorities are so completely terrified of women that they will not recognise a huge athletic public achievement from a determined young woman. Humiliating that it was **the US and western powers** that enabled a crazy misogynistic regime to reverse years of sophisticated civilisation in Iran - including v high levels of female education, female judges, freedom to choose their clothes, careers etc - **we share responsibility.** (G05.07)

Included is also repeated criticism of the impact of Western sanctions on Iran(ians), which is sometimes expressed via allusions to Iraq. In excerpt 104, for instance, a parallel is drawn between the suffering inflicted upon Iraqis and that on Iranians (topos of justice/humanitarian), with the *Guardian* commenter using the neologism ‘Iraqnian’ to further emphasize the similar fate of the two nations and incessant ‘US absurdities’:

- (104) An olive branch! thats delusional. Why is your finger poking in Iran’s eye? Denying the rights of the Iraqnian Peoples? Denying the victims in Iraq the Right for Justice in the Murders we have committed? The list of US absurdities GOES ON AND ON! (G04.08b)

Closely related are comments that foreground the (war) crimes committed by the West/U.S. and its democratic deficit to endorse or challenge the accompanying article or other

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<sup>563</sup> Je me permets simplement de rappeler que c’est la France qui a permis cette révolution islamique «progressiste» ...



comments' position with respect to authoritarianism/repression in Iran. Some of these posts, as evident in excerpt 108, apply rhetorical manoeuvres such as disclaimers in the form of 'apparent denial' (van Dijk, 1998, pp.39-40) to clarify one's standpoint so as not to appear as an Iranian regime sympathizer (e.g. 'I'm no fan of Iran, but...').

(105) "Appalling human rights record" written by the folks that created Guantanamo concentration camp and published under puppet Amnesty [International]. Clean your house its stinking up the world! (G26.07)

(106) You surely wouldn't want to tar all Iranians with the same brush, so stop constantly saying the West wants this and wants that.<sup>564</sup>  
What's the West? A single being, a single voice?<sup>565</sup>  
-Unfortunately, yes, it's Washington. We too have a democracy to restore.<sup>566</sup> (LM16.06)

(107) Over there, voting age is 16 and women had the right to vote well before France granted it to the women's party.. there you have it, a lovely camouflage for Western warmongers and Le Monde subscribers<sup>567</sup> (LM15.06b)

(108) Der Iran ist sicher kein demokratisches Musterland und den Mullahs kommt dort nach wie vor viel zu viel Macht zu, aber sieht es bei uns so viel besser aus? Sind wir in Deutschland so demokratisch? (SPON15.06a)

There are also posts in the three sites (especially *Guardian*) that routinely compare the state of democracy/human rights in Iran with that in the West (most notably U.S). This fallacy of false equivalence (Richardson, 2007, 170), known colloquially as 'comparing apples and oranges', is quite often committed in comments during this period, which coincided with the NSA spying scandal that was extensively covered by the three media, particularly the British site (Chapter Six, section 6.2.1.4), with fate of whistleblower Edward Snowden occasionally equated with that of political prisoners/dissidents inside Iran. Comments as such and posts mentioned above that draw on democracy/human rights topos to 'prove' that Iran is *not as bad as/far better than* what it is being typecast by elite and media in the West through comparisons with the West or its regional partners are sometimes dismissed and labeled by others in the forums as 'relativizing', 'trivializing', and 'whataboutery'. A closely related recurring theme in the three sites is that of questioning American democracy, with references to the role of lobbyists, especially AIPAC, in U.S. politics appearing, as already stated before, in posts in *SPON* and especially *Guardian*. Referring to AIPAC, either by name or as the 'Jewish/Israeli lobby', these posts that highlight the influential lobby and those that

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<sup>564</sup> Vous n'aimeriez surement pas mettre tous les iraniens dans le même sac, alors cessez de dire sans arrêt l'Occident veut ci et veut ça.

<sup>565</sup> c quoi l'occident? un seul être, une seule voix?

<sup>566</sup> Malheureusement oui, c'est Washington. Nous aussi avons une démocratie à retrouver.

<sup>567</sup> la bas le droit vote est à 16 ans et les femmes avaient le droit de voter bien avant que la France ne l'accorde à la fête féminine..voilà un joli camoufle pour les vatenguerres occidentaux et abonnés du Monde

mention the influence of ‘Big Money’, intend to denote, explicitly or by means of contextual inference, the forces that control over U.S. politicians/politics and, in so doing, often conjure Anti-Semitic tropes (e.g. ‘Jewish money’, ‘Jewish influence’), similar to posts cited earlier (section 8.3.2).

(109) [...] More than half of the representatives of the Senate and the House of Representatives from both the parties of this “model democracy” are now descending to Israel for the annual ritual of summer fun and frolicking - courtesy of the Israeli lobby AIPAC. And these creeps have the temerity to claim to be the leaders of a country, not to speak of a democratic country!! (G04.08b)

(110) Can we just emphasize Democrat/Republican within the American regime before we get too excited about the prospects for peace. After all he [Obama] became a candidate only because the military industrial complex/AIPAC donors vetted his candidacy - and they aren’t known for picking liberals....(G17.06)

### 8.3.5 “Ah Islam. Women exist. Get over it.”

A major predicational theme that pervades online discussions in all three sites and intertwines with above-stated themes is to use (or exploit) Iran-specific political, social, or cultural issues to vilify and disparage Islam via taking Iran/the Islamic Republic for the religion as a whole. Through prevalent religious associations mentioned before (sections 8.3.1) and by ascribing the unfavorable traits/actions attributed to Iran to Islam in general and its assumedly intrinsic characteristics i.e. being repressive (topos of democracy/human rights), sexist (topos of religion/culture), and violent (topos of danger/threat), a secular/Islamic or East/West divide is repeatedly constructed and propagated in and through these posts that outnumber comments in the three sites’ forums who dismiss these binary depictions and seek to differentiate Islamist extremism/fanaticism, as interpreted and practiced in Iran, from Islam. The most frequently used arguments in these posts are symptomatic ones “based on a relation of concomitance, association or connection” (Richardson, 2007, p.162) and fallacies of (over-)generalization and *pars pro toto* (Wodak, 2009, p.42), as illustrated in the post chosen for this section’s heading, written in reaction to *Guardian*’s story on the Iranian female swimmer (G05.07) discussed in Chapter Seven, that received 79 ‘recommends’ from fellow posters. These comments often employ the topos of (in)compatibility, a subset of topos of religion/culture, deriving from the following argumentation scheme: ‘because Their culture/religion is as it is, it is (in)compatible with Ours’. Disclaimers in the form of ‘apparent denial’, a characteristic feature in racist discourse (e.g. ‘I have nothing against x, but...’) and intended for keeping face, appear often in these posts:

(111) [...] I’m a kind, liberal-minded, free-thinking person with not a shred of racism in me, not one shred – but I feel Islam is a misogynistic, homophobic, controlling ideology. I find the traits I just mentioned abhorrent in human beings – that’s just how it makes me feel and I make no apology for that. [...] (G05.07)

In addition to regularly emphasizing difference(s) between Us/Our culture and Them/Their culture by frequently raising the ‘the essence of Islam’ and its ‘perception of women’, which Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) also identified amongst “the most significant, continuous topic categories” in Swedish social media discourses on Islam/Muslims in the course of a decade-long period, another argumentation adopted by discussants in the three news sites is to criticize current (elite, public) discourses on Islam. Similar to what was observed in the context of criticizing Israel and what Dorostkar and Preisinger (2017) noted in online discourse on migration and education in Austria, this involves displaying a sense of being pressurized into exercising self-censorship to appease religious sensitivities or (ostensibly) to circumvent moderators and avoid having their post deleted, drawing on topos of political (in)correctness. Examples include the interaction between two posters on a blogpost in *Le Monde*, with one using a disease metaphor by means of which Islam is likened to gangrene, and a comment on another article published on the French site that uses the ‘bandwagon fallacy’, through which “an arguer will claim their conclusions should be accepted because so many people agree with it” (Richardson, 2007, p.168):

(112) Religion is really such a pain<sup>568</sup>.

-Not all religions, it’s always the same that is gangrenous, and we must dare to say it.<sup>569</sup>  
(LM22.05)

(113) Despite all these idiocies, when it’s not in Iran it’s here, we can say today that everyone despises religions in general. I’m the first to denounce the toxic power of Catho[lic]s over the secular Republic. However, to declare oneself allergic to Islam (I don’t write the word not to be censured) in the land of Voltaire is considered notorious. [...] <sup>570</sup> (LM02.07)

Similarly, some posters aim to unveil and counter mainstream bias in favor of Islam and media propaganda. Examples include the two comments below from *SPON*, with the former contesting the article’s headline that declared Rouhani’s lead in the election as ‘Wahl der Hoffnung für Irans Liberale’ as well as the characterization of Rouhani in the text as a moderate, and the latter denouncing the article’s overall content and the absence of establishing a causal link between the misery endured by young Iranians – listed in the teaser as ‘schuften in Billigjobs, zahlen überhöhte Preise und müssen ihre Liebe verstecken’ – and Islam:

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<sup>568</sup> La religion c’est vraiment l’horreur.

<sup>569</sup> Pas toutes les religions, c’est bien toujours la même qui est une gangraine, et il faut oser le dire.

<sup>570</sup> Malgré toutes ces imbécilités, quand ce n’est pas en Iran c’est chez nous, on peut dire aujourd’hui que l’on déteste les religions en général. Je suis le premier à dénoncer le pouvoir néfaste des cathos sur la République laïque. Par contre, se déclarer allergique à l’Islam (je n’écris pas le mot par ne pas être censurer) au pays de Voltaire est considéré comme infamant. [...]

(114) **Liberal???**

Liberaler Kandidat ? Es ist ein ausgewählter Kandidat aus dem Islamistischen Lager. Es ist noch nicht mal jemand der säkular ist. Wenn der Spiegel diese Leute bejubelt aber nicht sagt was diese überhaupt bewirken oder ändern wollen dann kann ich das nicht nachvollziehen. Nein. Islam und gemäßigt oder gar Liberal das passt nicht und fällt unter **die Mainstream-Propaganda-Islam ist Frieden.** (SPON15.06b, bold in original)

(115) **Natürlich wieder kein Wort** im Artikel, worin genau diese Misere besteht, nämlich dem Islam. Ruhig mal etwas konkreter werden, SPON. (SPON14.08)

Furthermore, the discourse on ‘foreign Islam’ (De Cock & Du Pont, 2016) i.e. topics related to Iran and the wider ‘Muslims world’ are interdiscursively linked in some posts in *Le Monde* and *SPON* to domestic debates and issues, namely immigration/integration. In other words, the two othering forms, namely ‘international Others’ and ‘Others in a nation’, addressed by Fürsich (2010, pp.116-18) and mentioned in Chapter Three (section 3.2), coalesce and form a ‘foreign Other’. In these posts, Muslims are constructed as a homogeneous group – the negative Other – and portrayed as socio-economic, cultural and/or political problems. These comments substantiate their claims that Muslims are an economic burden or a cultural/political threat to France or Germany, drawing upon one or combining the topoi of burden, religion/culture, and danger/threat. For example, in excerpt 116, posted in response to *SPON*’s article on the Iranian female swimmer mentioned earlier, the blame for the hurdles women face in Iran is shifted from the regime onto Islam and connected with the perceived threat of Islamization of Germany – in line with the claim put forward by the populist movement Pegida<sup>571</sup>, founded in 2014. This argument is, moreover, expressed in conjunction with criticizing German media, which, as stated above, is frequently raised in online discussions on Islam:

(116) **Nicht das Regime bestimmt, sondern der Islam**

Es ist der in Deutschland gerade von den Medien hochgejubelte Islam, der diese absurden, mittelalterlichen Regelungen den Menschen aufzwingt. In den letzten Jahren wollten die Tugendamen und die Moralapostel diesen Islam sogar zu einem Teil Deutschlands machen. Wohl weil sie sich dann mit den offiziellen Titel “Tugendwächer” schmücken könnten. Das hat mit der Regierung im Iran wenig zu tun. (SPON06.07, bold in original)

8.3.5.1 “*Ancient Persia, yes, but modern Iran as presently constituted, no!*”

Closely related to posts such as the last one quoted above, several comments in all three sites blame Islam for current (social, political) problems and issues in Iran via allusions to Iran’s ancient culture/civilization and the glorification of its pre-Islamic past. This romanticizing (and exoticification) of Persian grandeur and legacy stands in stark contrast to the predominantly conflict-centered image of Iran today and its portrayal as a threat (nuclear or

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<sup>571</sup> Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes

otherwise) in online discussions, a reminder of the ‘textual, schematic attitude’ that Said (1978) proposes: “The Orient”, he maintains, “existed as a set of values attached, not to its modern realities, but to a series of valorized contacts it had had with a distant European past” (p.85). Accordingly, using the topos of Persian grandeur, a variation of topos of culture, these comments attribute positive qualities to pre-Islamic Persia or assign negative attributions to modern-day Iran, and, as such, suggest/indicate “a causal relation” (Richardson, 2007, p.164), whereby the negative traits/actions of Iran today are (in)directly ascribed to Islam. More common in *Guardian*, some of these posts also contain personal stories and refer to the writer’s acquaintances:

(117) Iran is a wonderful country with **a rich and glorious pre-Islamic culture** but indeed it now falls short of being egalitarian, as witnessed by the erosion of rights for women, persecution and imprisonment of political opponents and religious minorities (especially Christians), execution of homosexuals. The list goes on and on. I have taught many Iranians who have no wish to return to the country as it is run at present.  
**Ancient Persia, yes, but modern Iran as presently constituted, no!** (G02.08)

(118) The Egyptian, Iranian, Tunisian, Syrian etc. Muslim brothers tire us... Suffice to say that Iran can boast about having a civilization for more than 3000 years and [instead] relies on an 8<sup>th</sup> century cameleer as guidance. What a pity!<sup>572</sup> (LM02.08)

(119) **Wenn man bedenkt was für eine Hochkultur der Iran... vor dem Islam war.** Echt schade. (SPON14.08, bold in original)

It should be added that a number of comments also make reference to contemporary Iran and the Shah era. While some posts point out and criticize the repression and corruption under the Pahlavi monarchy, others are prone to painting a rosy picture of Iran before the revolution. In the first excerpt below, the *SPON* commenter brings up democracy, women’s (voting) rights, and homosexuals, which, as noted earlier, are common themes in online debates on Iran, and equally constructs a ‘good (secular) Iran of the past’/ ‘bad (Islamic) Iran of today’ binary depiction. The second excerpt is written by an Iran-born commenter who splits Iranian people along with their ‘Kultur, Erziehung und Würde’ from the Iranian government and therewith represents (positive qualities of) the culture of Iran and Islamic Republic as mutually exclusive, while using ‘die Perser’ in lieu of ‘die Iraner’ as a referential strategy that is likewise employed in Persian nationalism discourse online, with many users preferring to identify and align themselves with the ancient past rather than with present-day Iran (KhosraviNik & Zia, 2014).

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<sup>572</sup> Les frères Musulmans égyptiens, iraniens, tunisiens, syriens, etc. nous fatiguent...Dire que l’Iran peut se targuer d’avoir une civilisation depuis plus de 3000 et s’en remet à un chamelier du VIIIème siècle comme guide. Quelle tristesse !

(120) Nun ja, der Iran hatte vor 60 Jahren schon einmal demokratische Strukturen. Und er hat das Frauenwahlrecht vor etlichen anderen Staaten wie z.B. der Schweiz eingeführt. Die zu diesem Zeitpunkt übrigens Schwule noch kastriert hat.  
Bei der derzeitigen Mullah-führung erscheint das schwer glaubhaft, aber es war so.  
(SPON06.07)

(121) Leider Gottes schaffen es die westlichen Medien immer wieder dieses Land und seine jetzige Regierung so darzustellen, das es einfach schwer fällt solch einem Artikel Glauben zu schenken. Jedoch kann ich nur betonen, dass die Perser trotz der jahrzehntelangen Unterdrückung durch die islamische Regierung ihre Kultur, Erziehung und Würde nicht verloren haben. [...] (SPON12.06)

### 8.3.6 *'Iranian people ≠ Iranian regime'*

Throughout the examined corpora, Iranians are mainly assimilated by ways of collectivization (e.g. 'Iranian people'), aggregation (e.g. 'most Iranians'), or categorization (e.g. 'Iranian women', 'young Iranians'), and nominated in few posts that refer to the news subject or cite reports from human rights organizations containing victims' names. In a handful of comments, Iranians – whom the poster is acquainted with – are functionalized (e.g. 'my Iranian plumber') or identified (e.g. 'my Iranian friends', 'my Iranian wife'). Personal pronouns 'I' and 'we' are also used occasionally by Iranian commenters. Moreover, certain qualities/characteristics are repeatedly ascribed to the Iranian people in a considerable size of comments, some of which, as shown below, are consistent with the selected media's representation of Iranians discussed in the previous chapter.

One of the most salient themes in the three news sites' comment sections is that of separating and dissociating the Iranian people from their leaders, echoing and replicating the three media's depiction of Iran (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.3.1). Through an antithetical representation of Iran(ians) and drawing on the good/bad and victim/aggressor schema, Iranians are routinely juxtaposed and contrasted with the regime and portrayed as a homogenized group of (rational, modern, cultured) individuals fallen victim to, and far more deserving than, Islamic Republic. While Iranians are quite often depicted as victimized (and disempowered) social actors in many of these posts, similar to numerous comments mentioned earlier that highlight rights abuses, they are also assigned agency, in line with the three media's dominant narrative, by dint of their resistance to, and rejection of, the Iranian regime. Aggregation and collectivization are used as common techniques in such posts, as with attached articles, to accentuate widespread dissatisfaction of Iranian society and the massive unpopularity of Iran's political system with – if not all – a large swathe of the population (topos of appeal to majority, a sub-type of topos of number). In this vein, these comments, which often employ emotive language, tend to stress the regime's legitimacy crisis at home and, in some instances, project its imminent collapse (e.g. excerpt 122), or

place the people – the ‘real’ Iranians – in opposition to the leadership to highlight their divide and differences, legitimating the former by ascribing positive qualities and evoking admiration or compassion while de-legitimating the latter through the attribution of negative qualities and triggering apathy/threat:

- (122) The lesson from this election is that **the anti-Mullahs** were able to be counted and **they are a majority**. The end of theocracy is near.<sup>573</sup> (LM16.06)
- (123) **Die Iraner an sich sind sehr feine Menschen** und haben diese Regierung nicht verdient. (SPON12.06)
- (124) Es ist eine Tragödie antiken Ausmaßes, wie eine klerikale gewaltbereite Clique den Iran beherrscht, deren Machtapparat ein Bedrohungspotenzial etabliert hat, welches seit nunmehr annähernd 34 Jahren **die überwiegend modern eingestellte und intelligent/intellektuelle Jugend des Landes** zur Verzweiflung bringt und sie ihres Anspruches auf ein menschenwürdiges und erfülltes Leben beraubt. (SPON14.06)
- (125) To its credit the Guardian regularly reports true incidences, which should shame the Iranian authorities into change. They are not aimed at the Iranian people. **Iranians** deserve so much better than damn Ahmadinajad and the mullahs, who have turned **a sophisticated nation** into a hellhole for many. [...] (G30.04)

This strict ‘good’/‘bad’ dichotomy, which is built on, and propagates, a black-and-white view of Iran, recurs in numerous posts and, on occasion, is accompanied by drawing an analogy with other states i.e. Israel, such as the post below from *SPON* (excerpt 126), in an attempt, perhaps, to distinguish people in these countries from their hate-filled and hostile rulers – expressly stated in the case of Iran and insinuated in Israel’s – while accentuating a likeness (their peace-loving people) amid animosity between the two states, rendering, nonetheless, a reductionist depiction of these societies and wider regional politics. In some comments, the binary logic is applied to construct a ‘friend’/‘enemy’ image, as evident in a comment from *SPON* (excerpt 127) that de-legitimizes the (evil) Iranian state by indicating its threat to Israel, its role in atrocities in Syria alongside brutal repression and rights violations at home, and its support for terrorism in juxtaposition with praising the history, culture, and (great) people of Iran:

(126) **Frag das Volk**

Es ist traurig, dass die Staatsräson von Hass erfüllt ist. Das normale Volk will doch vor allem in Frieden leben, sich verwirklichen, und ein wenig persönliche Freiheit genießen können. Warum können die Glaubensführer nicht akzeptieren, dass das Volk nicht immer so will, wie sie es für richtig halten. Das gilt für Israel wie Iran gleichermaßen. Auch die Israelis wollen Frieden in der Region und eine Zukunftsgarantie für sich und ihre Kinder und Enkelkinder. Es ist unerträglich, dass die Regierenden das stets missachten und immer weiter Öl in ein Feuer schütten, das ohne ihre Dreingabe längst erloschen wäre. (SPON02.08a, bold in original)

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<sup>573</sup> L’enseignement de cette élection c’est que les anti-mollahs ont pu se compter et ils sont une majorité. La fin de la théocratie est proche.

- (127) [...] Außerdem, welchen Respekt zeigt Iran eigentlich gegenüber Israel, den Menschen in Syrien, die von iranischen Eliteeinheiten abgeschlachtet werden, den Homosexuellen, die von Baukränen baumeln, den Iranern mit anderer politischer Einstellung, die in den Kerkern verschwinden, den Terroropfer von Hamas und Hisballah, die beide von Iran mit Waffen, weitreichenden Raketen und Finanzen unterstützt werden, [...]. Soviel zum Respekt. **Respekt muss man vor der Geschichte und der Kultur Irans und dem großartigen iranischen Volk haben, das eine so menschenverachtende Regierung nicht verdient hat.** [...] (SPON06.08)

Included in this group of comments are also several posts from presumably Iranians, written in response to the overall topic of the article or other posters, with the intention of using their insider knowledge and lived experiences (topos of witness) to: dispel dominant clichés and stereotypes about Iran; foreground the glory of its ancient culture, similar to posts stated earlier (section 8.3.5.1); humanize Iranians, and, finally, differentiate between the (good) society and the (bad) leadership, constructing the latter as ‘the Other within’, in line with what KhosraviNik and Zia (2014) noted often in Persian nationalism discourse on social media:

- (128) Iranians call it [voting] "the least costly form of protest". You have to understand that **the overwhelming majority of Iraninas do not want this regime** including majority of Iranians who might classify themselves as religious. **The corruption and repression under this system of government is nothing like we have experienced in our history.** The sight of a Mullah and a Turban has now become the most hated figure ever depicted in **the Iranian psyche.** (G26.07)
- (129) [...] You must know that **80 90% of Iranians** have a democratic vision and **are against the government.** Unfortunately the government and its supreme leader control everything. Of course the new president plays an important part, but it's the supreme leader, the general assembly. etc. who accept his reforms or not. [...] <sup>574</sup> (LM16.06)
- (130) [...] Ich reise pro Jahr einmal dorthin seit meinem 2 Lebensjahr, versuchen Sie es, das Land wird sie faszinieren. Wenn etwas den Iran auszeichnet, dann ist es die knapp 8000 Jahre Kultur, Religionsfreiheit, da ein Jude neben einem Christen begraben sein kann, extreme Gastfreundlichkeit und vor allem der Wunsch nach Selbstbestimmung und Freiheit. Ich hoffe es noch erleben zu dürfen, dass **dieses Terror-Regime** fällt. (SPON12.06)

There is, in rare instances, another form of constructing an ‘Other within’ by Iranian posters in *SPON* that involves unmasking and disparaging a fellow Iranian (and active) commenter as a regime sympathizer (excerpt 131). More common in *Guardian*, some Iranian posters also denounce the British site’s typical liberal, left-wing readers for their anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism, and criticism of Western propaganda that permeate *Guardian*’s discussion forum to the point of justifying/vindicating the Iranian regime. Excerpt 132 is a case in point,

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<sup>574</sup>[...] Il faut savoir que 80 90% des Iraniens ont une vision démocrate et sont contre le gouvernement. Malheureusement le gouvernement et son guide suprême contrôle tout. Bien sûr le nouveau président joue un rôle important, mais c’est le guide suprême, l’assemblée générale, etc qui accepte ou pas ses réformes. [...]



whereby the commenter inserts several links to reports from human rights organization in order to attest the level of state repression in Iran, while distancing themselves from both ‘the brutal theocracy of the Islamic republic’ and ‘those leftist [sic]’ who side with it:

(131) **bitte von user**

Ich bitte Sie, liebe SPON-Leser, die Kommentare von User "cocuk" nicht ernst zu nehmen. Sie sind nicht repräsentativ für die Iraner. Er versucht hier lediglich das verbrecherische Regime in Teheran positiv darzustellen. Dabei werden alle wirtschaftlichen, gesellschaftlichen, politischen Mißstände so wie Menschenrechtsverletzungen die tagtäglich vorkommen ignoriert. [...] (SPON14.08, bold in original)

(132) You can't really have a debate when people are have low-information about Iran...It's not my job to educate...I am outtaaaaa here this echo chamber.

<http://www.iranrights.org/English/memorial.php>

<http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/>

<https://hra-news.org/en/>

Absolute shame on **those leftist** who support the brutal theocracy of the Islamic republic for the supposed greater good of destroying Imperialism...The end does not justify the means. In a free and democratic Iran, **we** will remember how **you** chose to side with evil...(G06.06)

In addition to othering the political establishment and distancing themselves/all Iranians from the regime or the country's negative image, a handful of comments by Iranian posters – as evident from their username – place the blame partly on the West and criticize its actions vis-à-vis ordinary people. To wit, the parallel victimization of Iranian citizens by the ruling elite and due to punitive sanctions indicated in few of the accompanying articles as well (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.3):

(133) I agree with this editorial. As much as I dislike the Mullahs, the US should engage directly with the Islamic regime and try to reach an agreement. Both war and Economic Sanctions will hurt **the people of Iran who obviously have no love for this regime.** [...] (G17.06)

(134) [...] Many countries love to create an extremist image of Iran and Iranians but one should not put the government and the people into the same basket. During these 4 years, other countries did not want to hear the voice of **the Iranians** who suffered a lot due to **their dictatorial government,** but also due to the embargoes that other countries imposed without thinking about the people. [...] <sup>575</sup> (LM16.06)

There are also comments by non-Iranians who, similar to what was discussed in prior sections, condemn the West (notably U.S.), while assigning positive traits to Iranian people, sometimes concomitant with discrediting the Islamic Republic. Examples include the two

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<sup>575</sup> [...] Beaucoup de pays aiment créer une image extrémiste sur l'Iran et les iraniens mais il ne faut pas mettre le gouvernement et les gens dans le même panier. Pendant ces 4 ans les autres pays ne voulaient pas entendre la voix des iraniens qui souffraient beaucoup à cause de leur gouvernement dictateur, mais aussi à cause des embargos que les autre pays ont fait ça sans réfléchir des gens. [...]

posts below from *Guardian* and *Le Monde*; the first, now deleted along with the account, contests rational Us/West and irrational Them/East divisions and the trope of (Orientalist) irrationality often associated with Iran by describing the country as ‘highly sophisticated and educated’, drawing on topos of witness in addition to making an analogy between Iran and Iraq prior to the 2003 invasion, and depicting (most) Iranians as rational. The second, written in agreement with another poster below a news story announcing ‘cutting-edge American arsenal promised to Israel’(LM23.04), places the ‘real’ Iranians above both regimes before and after the revolution, and worthy of a ‘real democracy’– viz. self-determination and resistance to foreign powers:

(135) Most posters here have never been to Iran. I have.

It was, and largely remains, a highly sophisticated and educated country (as was Iraq before Saddam got going with Rumsfeld's support) that outside of the main rural areas has a majority of people who are capable of debating and thinking their way to a rational position. They have done this. All it takes from the West is a little diplomacy BUT it ain't going to happen in my view. THE US military/industrial complex REQUIRES a bogeyman to keep the level of threat in the USA going. It's bing business, not rational peace-keeping, that will prevail, I suspect. (G16.06a)

(136) two thousand per cent with you, the Shah was not commendable, the current turbaned gang either, let us hope that one day real democracy is installed that frees itself from U.S. and Israel powers for the real Iranian people who will have deserved it ...[...]<sup>576</sup>

8.3.7 “[a] much freer and pluralistic society than Saudi Arabia” / “People so similar to us after all”

Similar to posts cited earlier that compare/contrast the Iranian state with Western allies in the Middle East, Iranian society is sometimes set in opposition to other Muslim-majority societies – notably regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and rarely, for instance, Indonesia, the country home to the largest Muslim population worldwide – to depict the former as more progressive, open, and developed than most people (in the West) think. These posts, as with others quoted before, often contain a criticism of Western media. Examples include the two posts below from *Guardian* and two from *Le Monde*, with one referring to an article<sup>577</sup> published in the French site during the studied period and the other contesting the attached op-ed, namely the text’s negative appraisal of Iran and Syria (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.1) by foregrounding women’s status and empowerment in both countries and questioning the author’s objectivity by asserting his affinity to Qatar:

<sup>576</sup> deux mille pour cent avec vous, le Shah n'était pas recommandable, l'actuelle clique des enturbannés non plus, il faut espérer qu'un jour s'installe une réelle démocratie qui s'affranchisse des pouvoirs US et Israël, pour le vrai peuple Iranien qui l'aura bien mérité...

<sup>577</sup> ‘Vingt-quatre heures chez les mollahs’ [Twenty-four hours amongst the Mullahs]

- (137) Whilst Iran has a poor Human Rights record but no worse than many others in that area, it has a fairly well educated Middle Class population who are Industrious and have achieved in spite of sanctions, far more in real terms than the likes of Saudi Arabia or Qatar. [...] (G26.07)
- (138) Iran is much freer and pluralistic society than Saudi Arabia, but you scarcely hear a bad word about the latter in the press. (G13.05)
- (139) Iran is an Islamic Republic, but an alternation is possible, women vote, drive, study, occupy high-ranking positions, are elected to parliament etc. Nothing to do with the stupid depiction of the latest [weekly newspaper] «Courrier International» portraying a woman in niqab [or] The newspaper of «record» after having sent a reporter to Qom to the Mullahs for 24 hours [they] should sent him 24 hours to the imams in Riyadh to the Haredi Rabbis after that to certain Evangelists, Catho[lic]s<sup>578</sup> (LM15.06a)
- (140) The Shia fundamentalism exercised in Iran or Lebanon, in Hezbollah-controlled areas, has absolutely nothing to do with the anti-feminine delirium of Sunni jihadists [that is] totally illiterate about the history of Islam [and] its theology, its various branches and its Sufi Tariqas; in Iran, female students are numerous in universities and scientific research; as for Syria of the Assad family, women enjoyed total freedom there. Mr Filiu is very close to Qatar.<sup>579</sup> (LM07.06)

As the last two passages and earlier posts show, while many comments in the three sites devote a strong attention to women's status and rights in Iran and these countries, several posts in *Le Monde* and *SPON* focus in particular on Iranian women's appearance as an indicator of their – and that of Iranian society at large – 'liberal-ness', echoing the portrayal of (young) women in some accompanying articles (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.3.1.3) and similar to what Khodadadi and O'Donnell (2017) noted in tourist-generated discourse on Iran and the signs of 'modernity' observed and reported. Besides criticizing a distorted image of Iran/Iranian women in the media, as excerpt 139 showed, these posts attempt to correct or inform other posters. Examples include excerpt 141, with the poster inserting a link to a photo of Golshifteh Farahani – Paris-based Iranian actress, banned from returning to Iran in 2012 after posing nude for *Madame Figaro* magazine – with a loose headscarf to break the prevailing cliché of fully-covered Muslim women as a monolithic group and subtype the more liberal 'Iranian women'. Other instances are second- and firsthand accounts (excerpts 142, 143) describing (young) women's modern street style and sense of fashion/clothing, whereby “‘modern’ practices and ideas are coded as pro-Western” (Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013,

<sup>578</sup> L'Iran est une République Islamique mais une alternance y est possible, les femmes votent, conduisent étudient occupent des professions pointues, so élues au parlement etc Rien à voir avec l'illustration imbéciles du dernier «Courrier International» représentant une femme eniquabée Le journal de «référence» après avoir envoyé un reporters à Qom 24H chez les Mollahs doit le missionner 24 H chez les imams de Riyad et chez les Rabbins Haredims puis chez certains Evangélistes, Cathos

<sup>579</sup> L'intégrisme chiite pratiqué en Iran out au Liban, dans les zones contrôlées par le Hizbollah, n'a strictement rien à voir avec le délire anti-féminin des jihadistes sunnites, totalement incultes sur l'histoire de l'islam de sa théologie, de ses branches variées et de ses tariqât soufies; en Iran, les étudiantes sont très nombreuses dans les universités et dans la recherche scientifique; quand à la Syrie des Asad, les femmes y jouissaient d'une totale liberté. M. Filiu est très proche du Qatar.

p.63), to accentuate the contrast between the openness of (a homogenized) Iranian society and the anti-Western/conservative order espoused and enforced by Iranian officials, on one hand, and the more traditional Muslim societies in the Middle East, on the other:

(141) Much as you are right with the criticism on the «right attires», burqa is an Afghan (or even Taliban) phenomenon. Iranian women rather look like this: <http://static.lexpress.fr/medias/1872/958544.jpg><sup>580</sup> (LM02.07)

(142) [...] Besides, one has to look at **women on the street**, even during the era of the former president, **visible hair, tight jeans, red nails, excessive makeup, public physical contact...**astounding that critics can still compare the Islamic Republic with the religious fanaticism of the Gulf monarchies...<sup>581</sup> (LM16.06)

(143) Auch ich habe schon eine Reise in den Iran gemacht. Damals war ich mit meiner Frau, eine Iranerin, noch nicht verheiratet. [...] In Teheran **liefen die Frauen mit Kopftüchern durch die Straßen, die so runtergerutscht waren, dass sie eigentlich mehr Nackentücher waren. Die Mäntel waren sehr Figurbetont und hörten schon über dem Knie auf.** Keiner störte sich daran. Das wären in Saudiarabien völlig anders. [...] (SPON12.06)

Furthermore, some comments in all three sites assign attributions to the Iranian people that are considered favorable by dint of their congruence with Us/West and can thus be concomitantly regarded implicit positive Self-presentation. These representations, as with the sampled texts (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.3.2), are “constructions of similarity” (Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013, p.63) and intend to infer a shared notion of ‘modernity’ between Them (namely Iranian people) and the presupposed liberal, secular Western Self. In other words, drawing on the topos of compatibility that insists upon familial resemblance and stands in contrast to the portrayal of the Iranian state/Islam mentioned earlier that emphasizes difference. Examples include: a post in *Guardian* that concurs with another comment and highlights the limited role of presidents in Iranian politics, who “continue to take orders from the clerics over *everything* that *actually affects* Iranians on a day to day basis” (emphases added); a post in *Le Monde* that embraces the shift in religiosity and societal secularization in Iran reported in the accompanying article, written by the French newspaper’s Iran specialist and headlined ‘Iran: a less and less religious theocracy’, another comment that cites the said article below a piece entitled ‘Iran awakens’ and published on the French site’s Iran-specific blog to stress the widening schism between the state and Iranian society; and a post in *SPON* that equates the (majority of) Iranians’ disenchantment and anti-regime sentiments with their alienation from Islam entirely:

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<sup>580</sup> Autant vous avez raison sur la critique des « bonnes tenues vestimentaires », autant la burqa est un phénomène afghan (et même Taliban). Les Iraniennes ressemblent plutôt à ça : <http://static.lexpress.fr/medias/1872/958544.jpg>

<sup>581</sup> D’ailleurs faut voir les femmes dans la rue, même durant l’ère de l’ancien président, cheveux apparents, jean moulants, rouge à ongles, maquillage à l’excès, contacts physiques publiques...étonnant que les détracteurs puissent encore comparer cette rep islamique au fanatisme religieux des monarchies du golfe...

- (144) Indeed. Back in the real world, nothing that matters to most Iranians will change (eg, youth getting very tired of gender segregation or having parties broken up for the “sin” of dancing or having to disguise ‘illegal’ satellite dishes that receive ‘unauthorised’ channels like its still 700AD - or even what pets to keep) [...] (G16.06a)
- (145) This article shows a great deal of optimism. I hope that the Iranian people, a civilized and bright people, can find a political regime worthy of its qualities.<sup>582</sup> (LM11.06a)
- (146) Rouhani’s victory restores hope to Iranians, they need it a lot. [...] But, as Christophe Ayad puts it in Le Monde’s article today, Iranians are sick of religion, mosques are empty. The rejection of the clerics is real, and won’t be returning anytime soon. Once the effervescence of this small victory subsides, what’ll happen? We sign up again for 4 years of denied human rights?  
Must we await the death of Khamenei for the regime to collapse?<sup>583</sup> (LM16.06)
- (147) [...] Sehr viele (die meisten?) Iraner sind gegen das Regime, sie wollen individuellen Wohlstand und individuelle Freiheit und keinen islamischen Tugendterror. Und im Verborgenen schaffen sie es auch, zumindest einigen unislamischen Genüssen nachzugehen [...]. (SPON12.06)

Allusions to, and the glorification of, Iran’s pre-Islamic past, in line with the posts quoted before, also reappear in several comments from *Guardian* and *SPON*:

- (148) [...] Iran’s transition to a more secular form of government is inevitable. People no longer share the revolutionary fervour for an Islamic government and many long for a more all-inclusive philosophy that colours their lives – perhaps one of the reasons Iranians look longingly at their exotic history and the Zoroastrian experience. [...] (G13.05)
- (149) When my daughter went to Iran recently, she encountered a country full of Persians, who still resented the Muslim takeover.  
When I asked my Iranian plumber about this he said they were all waiting patiently for a peaceful change to come.  
Lets hope this is the start of it. (G23.06)
- (150) **Das großartige iranische Volk mit seiner Jahrtausende alten Zivilisation und Geschichte**, das zu Recht stolz sein kann auf seine Zivilisationsleistungen, hat diesen verblendeten und inhumanen Religionsterror nicht verdient. (SPON15.06a)

There are, less frequently, also cases of overt positive Self-presentation in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, with favorable qualities (e.g. modern, secular, tolerant) ascribed explicitly to Us/the West which, sometimes, are concurrently assigned to Iranians, serving as positive presentation of Them/Iranian people by virtue of their resemblance to Us, resonating with the notion that, if not “most citizens of major Western nations”, as van Ginneken (1998, p.62, emphasis added) maintains, but some “are deeply convinced that their society not only

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<sup>582</sup> Cet article fait preuve d'un grand optimisme. Je souhaite que le peuple iranien, peuple civilisé et brillant puisse retrouver un régime politique digne de ses qualités.

<sup>583</sup> Cette victoire de Rohani redonne de l'espoir aux Iraniens, ils en ont bien besoin. [...] Mais comme le dit bien Christophe Ayad dans l'article du Monde aujourd'hui, les Iraniens sont dégoûté de la religion, les mosquées sont vides. Le rejet des religieux est réel, et ne reviendra pas de si tôt. Une fois l'effervescence de cette petite victoire retombée, que va t'il se passer? On rempile pour 4 ans de droits de l'homme bafoués? Faudra t'il attendre le décès de Khamenei pour que le régime s'effondre?

represents the very apex of civilisation, but is also willing to do all it can to help others reach this stage as soon as possible” (quoted in Richardson, 2004, p.95). This Eurocentric argumentation is employed to justify and depict Our actions against Iran, for instance, in the nuclear context, as essential for the sake of Their people (topos of ‘pro bono eorum’<sup>584</sup>), as in excerpt 151; draw a comparison with Our allies and deem Iran a more suitable (namely, similar) ‘partner for peace’ (excerpt 152); or foreground Our positive traits (Our freedom, Our quality of life), citing Iranian acquaintances (topos of witness), and discredit what is perceived as ‘primitive’ anti-imperialist/anti-American sentiments endorsed by some posters (excerpt 153):

(151) [...] Iran must be weakened so that the theocracy can be overthrown from within and young Iranians can **join the modern world with its secular values.** (G07.05)

(152) Like it or not, Iranian society is **much more tolerant and closer to ours** than that of Saudi Arabia. The West prefers to be close to the Sunnis and fight the Shiites. Of course, the Sunnis are greater in number, but it seems to me that if we accept Iran to be independent (that is to say, it isn’t afraid of being invaded for one reason or another), the latter **could secularize soon enough and become our partner for peace.**<sup>585</sup> (LM11.06a)

(153) I’d like to know what my Iranian friends (around 30 years old), who live and study in Southeast Asia, think of this election. **People so similar to us after all.** When I asked them how their life in their country was, they simply responded with a smile that being caught while drinking alcohol costs them 40 lashes. And they toasted with me to the freedom and the quality of life that they had outside Iran. it’s just a short anecdote addressed to all the «right-minded» who are clueless about this country and imagine that the level of freedom and repression is actually same as in France, or in the West and we shouldn’t «judge». All this under the pretext of primitive American/Western anti-imperialism. [...] <sup>586</sup> (LM16.06)

### 8.3.8 “...außerordentlich freundlich, kultiviert und gastfreundlich”

As evident in some of the posts quoted above, there is a markedly favorable evaluation of the Iranian people in the discussion forums, with certain qualities recurrently ascribed to Iranians by discussants. Excerpts 154-58 are representative of such positive posts, especially in *Guardian* and *SPON*. Whether constituting a primary or secondary discourse topic, these attributions often serve to depict the Iranian people as the antithesis of the Iranian state. In

<sup>584</sup> ‘to the advantage of them’ (in this case, Iranian people), a subset of topos of advantage (Wodak, 2001b, p.74)

<sup>585</sup> Qu’on le veuille ou non, la société iranienne est bien plus tolérante et proche de la notre que celle d’Arabie Saudite. L’Occident préfère être proche des Sunnites et combattre les chiites. Certes les sunnites sont plus nombreux, mais il me semble que si nous acceptions que l’Iran soit indépendante (c’est à dire qu’elle ne craigne pas de se faire envahir pour une raison ou une autre), cette dernière pourrait se séculariser assez vite et devenir un partenaire pour la paix.

<sup>586</sup> J’aimerais savoir ce que mes amis iraniens (environ 30 ans) qui vivent et étudient en Asie du sud est, pensent de cette élection. Des gens tellement proches de nous finalement. Quand je leur demandais comment était la vie dans leur pays, ils me répondaient simplement en souriant qu’être pris en train de boire de l’alcool leur valait 40 coups de fouet. Et ils trinquaient avec moi à la liberté et à la qualité de vie qu’ils avaient en dehors d’Iran. C’est juste une petite anecdote adressée à tous les «bien pensants» qui ne connaissent rien à rien sur ce pays et qui s’imaginent que le degré de liberté et de répression est finalement le même qu’en France, ou en Occident, et qu’on a pas à «juger». Tout ça sous prétexte d’anti impérialisme américain/occidental primaire. [...]

other words, these traits, some of which are also mentioned or emphasized in attached articles, tend to accentuate characteristics that are counter to (dominant perceptions about) Iran as state actor. For instance, ‘Iranian hospitality’ that is highlighted in several *Guardian* and *SPON* comments, the latter which are written in response to the accompanying travel story, stands in contrast to the hostility and belligerence commonly associated with Iran/the Islamic Republic, similar to what Khodadadi and O’Donnell (2017) noted in tourist-generated discourse on Iran in the U.K. The same can be argued with regard to comments accentuating the ‘friendliness’ of Iranians in the British and German forums or other attributions in all three sites, including a ‘cultured’/‘educated’/‘sophisticated’ nation (as opposed to the backward, barbaric regime) and ‘reasonable’/‘rational’/‘polite’ people (unlike the fanatical, irrational, confrontational regime):

- (154) Iran: from accounts of people I know who have traveled there: **THE friendliest place on earth.** (G16.06b)
- (155) [...] I have known quite a few Iranians during my years in academia. They were always **very nice intelligent hard working folk.** [...] (G16.06b)
- (156) [...] Something has to give. If Iran could join the international community, it will be a great gain for both the world economy and the Iranian people.
- (157) The **culture, the education of the young, the entrepreneurial spirit that is one of the hallmarks of the “Persian” people,** it is truly a shame that the situation is what it is now. [...] (G13.05)
- (158) Auch ich habe den Iran bei einer dreiwöchigen Reise von Turkmenistan durch den westlichen Iran und dann in die Türkei neuerdings als **außerordentlich freundlich, kultiviert und gastfreundlich** erlebt. [...] (SPON12.06)

Besides these oft-cited qualities, a handful of comments in *SPON* point out pro-American sentiment amongst Iranians which, same as the characteristics stated above, is strongly opposed to the Iranian regime’s anti-Americanism, the lasting impact of the hostage crisis and the enduring image a Death-to-America-chanting nation:

- (159) [...] Es dürfte, außer Israel, keine andere Bevölkerung im Nahen Osten geben, die **so USA affin ist** wie die Iraner. Die Exiliraner sind außerdem eine sehr gut integrierte Gruppe in den USA mit reichhaltigen familirären Kontakten in den Iran. Medienberichte offenbaren auch, das die “tollen Proteste” gegen die USA organisiert sind und keine Massenbewegungen sind. [...] (SPON13.07)
- (160) Iran wird nicht ewig von Leuten regiert werden, denen die eigenen Taschen und die eigene Ideologie wichtiger ist als die berechtigten Sehnsüchte und Hoffnung des iranischen Volkes. Es gibt zum Beispiel wohl kein Land auf diesem Globus, wo die “USA feindliche Haltung der “Regierung”” und ihrer Handlanger in einem so großen Gegensatz zu der “USA-Begeisterung” großer Teile der iranischen Bevölkerung steht. (SPON03.08)

In the entire material examined, there were three negative posts, in *SPON*, regarding Iranian people, which, in line with the German site's comments on Islam/Muslims stated earlier (section 8.3.5), overlap in one way or another with representations of 'outsiders', typical of (anti-)immigration discourse in mainstream media (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2010b) or online public discourse (e.g. Dorostkar & Preisinger, 2017; Paprota, 2017) and can be construed as overt forms of populism/xenophobia. The first, written below Elham Asghari's story, stresses the female swimmer's responsibility to solve *her* problem in *her* own country – "Stay in your homeland" that could be viewed as a variation of the "Go back to where you came from" epithet – and, moreover, employs topos of burden to represent the Iranian woman as the archetypal opportunistic foreigner predisposed to seeking attention, manipulating the public, and abusing the welfare system. Hinting at the guest writer, an Iran-born dissident journalist living in Germany, the second post likewise uses topos of responsibility to accentuate the duty of 'Persians' to remain in their country and bring about change from within Iran:

(161) Sie ist in diesem Land geboren, und lebt auch dort, wenn ihr das dortige Regime nicht passt soll sie das selber mit ihrem Land klaeren. Was sie will ist klar und faengt mit Faselbuch an, alle aufhetzen, und dann selber nach Deutschland Uebersiedeln. Sie hat sicherlich mitbekommen, in Deutschland liegen ihr alle zu fuessen, bekommt auf Staatskosten alles umsonst, und kann uns alle Vollquasseln. (SPON06.07)

(162) **Die Perser sollen mal schön bleiben wo sie sind...**  
wer sein Land liebt, verändert es selbst, und haut nicht ab um dann aus der Ferne rumzuzicken wie z.B. die kubanischen exilanten... (SPON14.08, bold in original)

The third comment, posted in response to 'Iranian hospitality' foregrounded in the attached travel article and also pointed out by many in the forum, stresses the *spatial* geographic division between Us and a distant Them ('dort', 'die Länder dort' versus 'hier bei uns in Deutschland') in addition to establishing a cultural one, simultaneously constructing a foreign and domestic Other. Adopting a Third World narrative and by ascribing the culture of hospitality in Iran to simple/small-town mindset that is characteristic of provincial societies, the former portrays Iran as an underdeveloped nation lacking Our presupposed urban sophistication, whereas the latter emphasizes the Otherness of some (Muslims) living in Germany and, moreover, discursively excludes these (bad) 'foreigners' – which, in this context, carries a negative connotation – from mainstream society and using the topos of religious incompatibility (Their Islamism/extremism). In line with other posts cited earlier, this comment also contains criticism of German politicians and media:

(163) **Hmm**  
Ja Ja mag ja sein das es schön dort ist. Und es mag sein das man ehr Im Iran auf einen Kaffe eigeladen wird als hier bei uns in Deutschland. Aber Ich wohne auch in Hamburg und nicht auf den Land!! Ich bin echt sehr tolerant aber irgendwelche Leute in meine Wohnung einzuladen..Nein Danke. Mit einem Haus auf dem Land kein Problem aber da kommt ja auch



nur einer vorbei im Monat;) Dies sollte man immer vergleichen! Und das die Länder dort schön sind wusste ich schon lange, lasse mich ja nicht von unseren manipulativen Medien einreden das wir dort wirklich Krieg führen sollten. Nein, danke Merkel! Nur weil einige Ausländer bei uns Leben die sich benehmen wie Idioten und ihren Koran aggressive ausleben, so kann man sagen das diese Menschen in ihren Heimatländern, auch nicht Willkommen wären/sind wegen ihrer Radikalität!! (SPON12.06, bold in original)

Finally, there is a tendency in few *Le Monde* and *SPON* posts to genericize/homogenize Middle Easterners and mislabel Iran as an(other) Arab nation, when criticizing Israel, by mixing up Iranian and Arab peoples i.e. considering Iran an ‘Arab country’, for instance, in excerpt 164 in which this identification is denoted by inference via the countries listed, or referring explicitly to Iran as belonging to the ‘Arab world’ and Iranians as the ‘Arab population’ (excerpt 165). This erroneous conflation is occasionally corrected by others, such as excerpt 166, wherein the poster equates Iranians and Persians – although ‘Iranian’ has come to denote a nationality and ‘Persian’, an ethnicity – and draws a distinction between the two and Arabs, while disregarding Iran’s non-Persian ethnic groups, including its Arab community (e.g. Ahwazi Arabs).

(164) After the destruction of Iraq, by the Americans, let us destroy Syria, then Iran, then all the Arab countries who do not wish to recognize the legitimacy of Israeli colonial expansion. Let us continue this mad policy, we are democracies, so we are right.<sup>587</sup> (LM09.05)

(165) **war ja zu erwarten...**

...da hatte man nun gehofft, dass endlich mal kein Holzkopf dort an der Macht ist und noch vor seiner Verteidigung hetzt er nun gegen Israel. [...] Nicht, dass ich dir israelische Politik und Regierung gut finde. die dortigen ultraorthodoxen sind meistens genauso schlimm, wie die radikalen Islamisten (wenn sie auch keine Anschläge verüben). Aber der arabischen Welt muss einfach klar gemacht werden, dass der Westen nur liberal eingestellte Regierungen toleriert und unterstützt. [...] (SPON02.08a, bold in original).

(166) Wie wäre es mal, wenn Israel den Besitz seiner Atombombe endlich mal offiziell zu gäbe und Anbieten würde, wenn der Iran auf Atomwaffen verzichtet, im Gegenzug auch seine Atombomben zu zerlegen. Man kann der Arabischen Bevölkerung doch nicht ernsthaft verständlich machen, dass sie keine Atombombe haben dürfen, aber Israel nicht mal zugeben muss das es tatsächlich welche besitzt.  
-Das hier immer Leute ohne Basic-Kenntnisse mitdiskutieren. **Iraner = Perser = keine Araber!** (SPON03.05, bold in original)

It is worth noting that while the term ‘Persian(s)’ is used interchangeably for ‘Iranian(s)’ in several *Guardian* and more so *SPON* posts, naming modern-day Iran by the historical name ‘Persia’, an anachronism, appears in a handful of comments only in the German site.

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<sup>587</sup> Après la destruction de l’Irak, par les américains, détruisons la Syrie, puis l’Iran puis tous les pays arabes qui ne veulent pas reconnaître le bien-fondé de l’expansion coloniale israélienne. Continuons cette politique folle, nous sommes des démocraties, donc nous avons raison.

## 8.4 Discussion

This chapter addressed the third research question, namely how Iran is represented in the three news sites' comment sections by examining Self- and Other constructions in these online spaces. The 'polyphonic (or indeed cacophonous) character' (Paprotta, 2017, p.201) of forums allow for co-existence of multiple and conflicting Self/Other presentations. Self-identification can range from the poster as an (anonymous) individual to a constructed ingroup comprising the respective media's readers, fellow citizens, a Western/non-Western We-group, and/or co-members of international community. In some posts, Iran is referenced as the Self, with the poster expressly identifying themselves as Iranian (or use a hyphenated form i.e. 'Ich als Deutsch-Perser') or it can be presumed and inferred from their username or the content of their post. While these groups establish and depict varied entities as Other(s), there are instances where an 'Other within' is discursively constructed and de-legitimated via referential 'name-calling' (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017, p.3623). This includes, in the former's case, othering other posters in the forum i.e. using the derogatory term 'Guardianista' to brand the British site's typical left-liberal readers, and dissociating oneself – or all Iranians – from the Islamic Republic (all sites) in the latter's case, similar to that observed by KhosraviNik and Zia (2014), or some opposition groups in exile (*Guardian*), and 'outing' fellow Iranian posters as a regime sympathizer/apologist (*SPON*). Identity and group membership formations in these online platforms, which (are expected to) bring together a heterogeneous group of people, especially on English-speaking *Guardian* with its wide global reach (Chapter Five, section 5.3.3.1), and the level and dynamics of Self- and Other-presentations are thus contingent upon primary and the emerging secondary discourse topics and developments unfolding in comment sections.

As stated at the outset (Chapter One, section 1.2.1), this study was particularly interested in investigating the degree to which the opinions (allowed to be) expressed within these media-enabled spaces correspond to, or diverge from, mainstream discourses on Iran(ians) and Iran-specific issues. Building on and contributing to contradictory findings in the literature on the content of online comments outlined in Chapter Four (section 4.3.2.3.2), the results from this study paint a rather mixed picture of online debates in Iran's case: Certain themes such as the state/society dichotomy confirm previous work that noted a limited level of new topics/issues raised by posters (e.g. Milioni et al., 2012) or mainstream media frames dominating online discussions (e.g. de La Poype & Sood, 2012). With the exception of several posts whose negative representation of Iranians is interwoven with (non-)institutional discourses on Islam/Muslims (Richardson, 2004; Shooman, 2014; Terman, 2017; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016) or few by Iranian commenters that construct an Us-versus-Them/West

divide (*Guardian*, *SPON*), Iranians are aligned with the Western Self to “familiariz[e] the unfamiliar” (Huiberts & Joye, 2017, p.344) or contrasted with (the prevailing image of) a mutual Other. However, this study also observed that users in all three sites tend to bring additional information as well as a broader perspective to certain topics, consistent with some studies (e.g. McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012), that involve addressing issues extending those covered in the articles, challenging journalistic views, and providing a more complex representation. This was, for instance, apparent in the tangible ‘discordance’ in all three sites between elite and public perceptions (Henrich & Holmes, 2011, p.2) of (Iran’s role in) Syria; placing (conflict with) Iran today in historical context, referring to the U.S./British involvement in the 1953 coup – also in the German forum, as opposed to *SPON*’s coverage that was limited to current affairs, excluding one story<sup>588</sup> throughout this period that briefly mentioned Iran before 1979 – and decisive events in the respective countries’ bilateral relations with Iran i.e. France’s role in the Iranian Revolution (*Le Monde*) or the Shah’s Berlin visit (*SPON*); and tackling Iran-specific issues in a way that serve mutually contradictory purposes. For example, the state of democracy and human rights in Iran, a salient theme in the three media’s overall reporting (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2) and sampled texts (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.3) is invoked – and appropriated – in recurring posts that quite often rely upon a single or mixture of ‘modes of persuasion’ (Richardson, 2007, p.159) and related fallacies, either as an othering and de-legitimizing strategy deployed in accord with Ideological Square, namely positive Self- and more so negative Other-presentations to vilify Iran and depict it as a brutal and despotic state, an unstable and dangerous place, and an abnormal and unreliable entity on international scene, or, conversely, as a counter-discursive strategy adopted to contest the Ideological Square by accentuating Their good and more so Our/the West’s bad properties. Common criticism of the West, mirroring few *Le Monde* and more so *Guardian* texts, involves emphasizing democratic deficit/rights abuse by the West – presented as the Self or Other – and its allies, to wit, the Gulf states and Israel, even though the former is rarely listed alongside Iran – unlike, for example, China and Russia – in the three media when naming illiberal regimes (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.3) and compared with Iran in one article through indirect speech (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.3), and the latter is omitted in Iran coverage. Similarly, while the Iran (nuclear) Threat is reinforced and perpetuated in all forums in line with what is implicitly/explicitly stated in most attached texts, with exceptions in *Guardian* (Chapter Seven), often drawing, in addition, on recurring Iran-related topics/issues detected in the three media’s reporting (Chapter Six) albeit expressed in a more overt, impassioned, and conflict-ridden language, numerous posts refer

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<sup>588</sup> ‘USA gegen Iran in Den Haag: Das Milliarden-Dollar-Tribunal’

repeatedly to Western hypocrisy (*Guardian* and *SPON*), Israel's nuclear taboo (all sites), and Iran's right under NPT and to self-defense against hostility (all sites) – from the West (notably U.S.) and Israel. Hence, similar to democracy/rights, conflict with Iran (nuclear or otherwise) is used – or instrumentalized – to condemn the West and expose its double standards. Be it in the form of blanket statement or elucidation and sometimes backed by intertextual content such as links to NGOs and think tanks, quotations from politicians and especially other media texts, rendering public discourse “a major reference point” (Paprotta, 2017, p.203) or personal account in some cases, online discussants bring a range of views to the topic/issue reported or conjured up by others in the forums, leading to a gap between institutional discourse and public opinion on tensions with Iran in all three sites.

As observed by others (Friemel & Dötsch, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017), the above-stated gap encompasses input from those whose (populistic) voices are not represented in left-leaning sites. This was noticed in the present study particularly with regard to Islam that constituted a primary discourse topic (in)directly related to the article or routinely brought up in comment sections. Whether expressed in a subtle manner, using humor, irony, and sarcasm, or, as noticed elsewhere (e.g. Shooman, 2014; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016), conveyed through aggressive language and derogatory terms, many posts glorify Iran's (ancient, modern) pre-Islamic past or portray Iran-related issues as being symptomatic of the fundamental problems associated with Islam – the (hostile, illiberal) Other. This outgroup construction is also linked on occasion to domestic issues in French and German forums, namely debates on Muslim integration, or lack thereof, and positioning Our secular values against Their uncivilized culture. The anti-Islam/Islamophobic rhetoric reiterated in all three forums is a clear example of what Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) saw in their research: “Comment sections, as communicative spaces, seem to be predestined to host a specific type of counterpublic sphere: those that propagate ideas that are systematically excluded from the mainstream mass media but, at the same time, remain within the realm of what is considered legal and broadly ‘sayable’ within a given sociopolitical context” (p.485). This is also evident in terms of (criticizing) Israel, another recurring topic in threads, as stated above. Whether in relation to the Palestinians or in the context of dispute with Iran, be it covert or blatant, anti-Semitic clichés and prejudices manifest themselves in forums which, as with Islam, are aimed at contesting what is perceived as (elite, public) silence – out of fear or bias – or justified in the name of free speech while exhibiting ostensible self-censorship and anticipating backlash. Moreover, notwithstanding the repetition of Israel's crimes against Palestinians in all sites' comment sections, references to Israeli ‘colonization’ or ‘apartheid’ appear only in British and French corpora, and quite often so, with Israel's right to exist

questioned on several occasions in *Guardian*. This can partly be explained in terms of moderation policies and what constitutes anti-Semitism for each outlet and where the line between criticism of Israel and Anti-Semitism is drawn, and/or due to individual choices (e.g. anti-Zionism of the Left or national sensitivities).

The last point relates to multiple readings and variations in interpretation: As mentioned in the beginning (Chapter One, section 1.2.1), readers, as active users, undergo what Hall (1980) explicates as encoding and decoding processes shaped by myriad factors, inter alia, individual stances/worldviews that result in endorsing or rejecting a given text or the creation of new meanings. A comparison between the researcher's analysis of selected articles (Chapter Seven) and accompanying comment sections shows, for instance, that while readers in all sites align themselves with the 'framework of interpretation' prevailing the three media's representation of Iran as a state actor and also reflect the regime/people binary, differences exist in reading and interpreting the same texts. This was, for instance, apparent in *Guardian* posts amid the ubiquitous criticism of the West and anti-Establishment sentiments in the British site's left-liberal context. While most interlocutors react to the overall topic of the article, dismissing the text instantly in some cases, some are more attentive to the content and details/features therein. Examples include the two posts below from *Guardian*. The former contests what the commenter views as selective information inserted in the article with the intention to influence/manipulate public, using the military metaphor 'psychological operations' (PSYOP) to criticize the text's inclusion of U.S. suspicions about Iran's nuclear ambitions, contrary to what was stated in Chapter Seven (section 7.3.2.2.1) as a characteristic feature of *Guardian* reporting, unlike *Le Monde* and *SPON*, to incorporate the stances of both sides of the conflict – including that of the Other. The latter is one of many posts in the British forum condemning what is perceived as arrogance/condescension of the West towards the Third World, construed in the previous chapter as the British site's attempt to place responsibility – besides Iran – onto the Western We-group to solve the stalemate (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2.2.6), with the commenter referring to a passage from the *Observer* editorial that distances the Self – readers of the paper, citizens of the 'free world' – from the Bush/Blair alliance and their dichotomous worldview, stressing: "What we now need is a more nuanced, sophisticated and informed engagement if we want to help the new Iranian president help himself and his people":

(167) I EMPHATICALLY object to the psyops of this article.

It says:

"The US has long believed that Iran has been working to develop nuclear weapons. Iran insists its program is for peaceful energy and research purposes only."

**This is an absolute lie and a total fabrication.**

Our intelligence assessment, the consensus of ALL intelligence agencies asserts that Iran

gave up this program in 2003 after the Iraqi invasion.

Why insert **this lie** into the article? (G04.08b)

(168) What a crock of **patronising condescending** smug drivel

What makes you believe the Iranians want to engage with the duplicitous war mongering conniving west so he can 'help himself'

Never heard such **utter pretentious bourgeois middle class effluent** in my life (G23.06)

## 9. Chapter Nine: Concluding Remarks

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”<sup>589</sup>  
Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup>-century Sufi mystic and poet*

This research project started with a key concern: to examine how Iran was represented – and othered – in some of Europe’s leading media during a period marked by tension both at home and abroad. Adopting CDA as its overall approach (theory and method), this thesis, moreover, sought to contribute to an emerging body of CDA-oriented scholarly work on bottom-up mediated public spaces online by juxtaposing Iran’s coverage in mainstream news sites with its representation(s) in comment sections. Through incorporating audience reception/interpretation, this study sought to fill a void with regard to scant reception studies within an otherwise rich field of empirical work on Western media’s portrayal of Islam/Muslims. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight thoroughly presented the key findings of this study in response to the three research questions raised in Chapter Five (section 5.2): (1) What were the salient topics and recurring themes in the selected media’s Iran coverage in 2013? (2) How was the Other/Iran constructed in mainstream media discourse? (3) How was Iran discursively constructed in non-institutional online discourse? Rather than reiterating these findings that were extensively discussed in previous chapters, this final chapter provides a synthesis of the results while pointing out blind spots in the selected media’s Iran coverage in 2013. This is followed by the present study’s implications for theory and journalistic practice, its limitations, and suggestions for future research.

### 9.1 The Iran Story: spotlights and blind spots

Mainstream media’s “interest in selling foreign news can reinforce sensationalist tendencies, which, in the field of international news usually take the form of extensive coverage of crises, conflicts and wars” (Hafez, 2000a, p.33). Besides the salience of the Syrian crisis – and Iran’s involvement – in summer of 2013 in the three selected media’s reporting, Iran’s “hypervisibility” (Biswas, 2018, p.342) due to its disputed nuclear program, and the importance of the 2013 presidential election in Iran with respect to its internal and external implications, what seems to render Iran-related stories and events newsworthy appears to be a mix of: reinforcing well-established discourses and confirming existing beliefs in accord

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<sup>589</sup> This is the well-known translation and interpretation by American poet Coleman Barks who popularized Rumi’s works in the West. A more accurate translation would be: “Beyond blasphemy and Islam there is a desert plain, in that in-between space our passion shall reign”.

with an *expected* image of Iran(ians); occasional counter-discourses that contest mainstream views of Iran and/or Western-led global order; and a range of conventional news factors (e.g. conflict/violence, negativity, timeliness). In this respect, Fowler (1991) argues that ‘meaningfulness’, as proposed by Galtung and Ruge (1965), “with its subsections ‘cultural proximity’ and ‘relevance’, is founded on an ideology of ethnocentrism, or [...] more inclusively, homocentrism: a preoccupation with countries, societies and individuals perceived to be *like oneself*; with boundaries; with defining ‘groups’ felt to be *unlike oneself, alien, threatening*” (p.16, emphases added). In this vein, “the culturally remote country may be brought in [to news discourse, added] via a pattern of conflict with one’s own group” (Galtung & Ruge, 1965, p.67). Besides numerous stories published in all three outlets that accentuate the differences – or confrontation – between (a distant) Iran and the Self, some items tend to bring forth certain similarities – or compatibility – between the readers’ anticipated worldview and that of ordinary Iranians i.e. lifestyle, shared antipathy towards the (Islamic) regime/Ahmadinejad, and/or a mutual hope for better relations with the West. In this vein, the most decisive factors based on which news “is selected and constructed” (O’Neill & Harcup, 2020, p.226) about Iran in both areas of foreign and domestic affairs entail a preconceived contrast between Iranian (political, religious, cultural) idiosyncrasies and a Western We-group, an affinity between Us and (some of) Them, and ongoing conflict(s) *with* – and perceived threat to – elite nations and their partners as well *within* the country amongst political factions and between the public and officialdom. Notwithstanding the tendency – and willingness – to bring diversity to Iran’s coverage regarding breadth and scope of topics and a plurality of voices/perspectives that is more apparent in the online versions of the British and French legacy outlets, through items produced by their parent medium and made-for-web content (*Guardian*, *Le Monde*) as well as digital editions and UGC (*Guardian*), compared to their (then) web-only German counterpart, blind spots are noticeable in the three news sites’ reporting on Iran:

First, excluding some analyses, op-eds/commentaries (*Guardian*, *Le Monde*) and editorials (*Guardian*) that incorporate relevant additional/background information and a more balanced understanding of Iran today, the Iran-West conflict is, by and large, interpreted and covered – deriving from enduring perceptions and underlying sentiments about Iran and a lasting image of the Islamic Republic – as a Western (or ‘global’) effort to thwart the hidden nuclear quest of a recalcitrant and adversarial Other, in defiance of the (civilized, rational) Self, and its dangerous bid for regional hegemony. As such, Iran’s tensions with the West, be it the nuclear or Syrian crisis, are, with exceptions in *Le Monde* and especially *Guardian*, not amply contextualized within the broader socio-political and historical developments in Iran



and their relations to the West, viz, the three media's respective countries (Chapter Two), the rivalries, strategic interests, and geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East or the broader global context, power relations, and "keeping in place a global nuclear order in which the normative West remains dominant" (Biswas, 2018, p.343).

Second, despite an effort, which is more discernible in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*, to report about ordinary Iranians (at home or abroad), everyday life in Iran, and the country's socio-cultural aspects i.e. changes and intergenerational differences in consumer culture (e.g. popular music, veganism), wedding customs/traditions, and religious beliefs/practices (e.g. fasting during Ramadan, pilgrimage), the majority of stories about Iran's complex and rapidly changing society during the studied period were confined to reiterating and accentuating popular (economic, social, political) grievances, a secular shift, and its (youth's) openness to Western/American lifestyle and ideas, bearing resemblance to a pre-determined and oversimplified template of what Iran 'behind the veil' is (not) expected to be. The (over)emphasis placed in all three media, with exceptions in British and French sites, upon a State-versus-Society divide (political or otherwise), seeks, above all, to differentiate Iranian people from their rulers and to humanize a population amid their country's overwhelmingly negative image in the West, therewith feeding into the dichotomous 'good people/'evil state' discourse dominating Iran's representation(s) in the three sites' comment threads (Chapter Eight, section 8.3.6) that neglects Iranian society's complexities and contradictions: depicting (young) Iranian people's lifestyle/consumption choices as political acts and 'anti-regime' behavior or as token of 'openness' and 'modernity' – *embracing Our (Western) way of living* – misses the "diversity and hierarchies along gender, ethnic and socioeconomic lines" (Olszewska, 2013, p.844). Based on her ethnographic research, Olszewska (2013, p.856) cogently argues that "people's subjectivities in the contemporary Islamic Republic of Iran can be shaped by both the opportunities and the instances of coercion that arise not only from top-down state initiatives but also from broader social factors", namely class, status, and (aspiration for) social mobility; the level of tolerance and the oft-cited trait of 'Iranian hospitality' in user posts have, for instance, been less than gracious to the Afghans residing in Iran, who routinely face (systematic, community) racism. The situation of Bahá'ís, an issue raised on occasion in *Guardian* texts (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.3) and brought up repeatedly in British and German comment threads (Chapter Eight, section 8.3.3) is another example. Besides systematic discrimination and state-led persecution affecting different spheres of their lives, members of the Bahá'í community also, on occasion, face ridicule and animosity in daily life due to prejudices ingrained deeply in Iranian society over the past century. The social media campaign 'Iran Without Hate' was launched in summer of 2021 precisely to

address discrimination against the Bahá'ís by *both* the Iranian state and ordinary citizens; bifurcating Iran into a nation of freedom-loving, democracy-seeking people against an undeserving fanatic regime fails to account for Iranian nationalism containing elements of pride and prestige, self-interest, independence and resistance to (real or imagined) foreign intervention (Chapter Two, section 2.2), some of which were also expressed in several posts (Chapter Eight, section 8.3.2) that can unite large swathes of population, irrespective of their sympathy or antipathy to Iranian theocracy. How, for instance, can one explain the flocking of Iranians to the funeral of top military commander Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated by the U.S. in January 2020, and that of opposition figure and acclaimed classical music composer Mohammad-Reza Shajarian several months later through a reductionist State-versus-People Manichean lens?

Similarly, articles, blogposts, and features on Iranian women as news subjects – be it related to politics, society, culture, or sports – that were relatively higher in number in *Guardian* mostly revolved around central issues pertaining to oppression, women's rights and gender (in)equality in Iran (all three media) or dissident voices abroad i.e. pieces about well-known human rights activists (*Le Monde*) and interviews with (young, middle-class, secular) authors, film-makers, or journalists in exile (*Guardian*, *SPON*). Exceptions included limited items in *Guardian* (traditional recipes by an Iran-born chef, reviews of a debut film by a U.K.-based female director on asylum experience and the brutalities faced both in Iran and Britain) and *Le Monde* (photographic series by an Iran-based artist, a profile feature story on a Paris-based Iranian psychoanalyst). The general lack of diversity in stories and voices of Muslim women – including Iranian women – in the West and a stronger focus on the narrative of suffering in Islamic states were, in fact, pointed out in two pieces published in *Guardian*'s 'The women's blog'. While these stories perpetuate the stereotype of oppressed Muslim women that strikes a chord with their intended readers' perceptions of women's status in Islam/Islamic societies, as clearly evident in many comments (Chapter Eight), their newsworthiness cannot be only ascribed to Western media's extensive coverage of Muslim women's rights/equality, as studies have shown (e.g. Richardson, 2004; Terman, 2017). It is not just their shared experience as victims of state repression that constitutes a thread uniting these women, but their (re)action and/or stance against the Islamic Republic, on one hand, and their profiles as symbolizing a more 'progressive Iran', on the other. It is these modern/liberal individuals – and advocates – who resonate and have more in common with imagined readers, as opposed to the enduring cliché-ridden image of anonymous women clad in black chador that are quoted/mentioned in some texts or pictured as a group in the accompanying photograph (see also Khan, 2013; McAuliffe, 2007; Roushanzamir, 2004),

who are made visible, individualized, and granted voice and agency. Existing state-enforced restrictions on dress code (challenged mostly in urban areas/cosmopolitan cities), quotidian life, and public conduct as well as the broad range of discriminatory policies and obstacles that Iranian women are subjected to can (and should) not be overlooked. But neither should the complexity and multidimensional aspects of their lives, similar to those of their European counterparts, be disregarded in media portrayals in favor of a fixation on their oppression or (heroic) resistance/defiance. This Eurocentric view and the reductive representation that it espouses, by Iran-born and non-Iranian journalists alike, in an attempt to dismantle clichés about Iranian women and ‘prove’ that *They are more similar to Us (in the West) than one might imagine*, while constructing and reinforcing new ones, fails to: account for the plurality of personal views/life experiences and the intersection of determining factors (e.g. education, ethnicity/religion, socio-economic status, occupation); look beyond simplistic secular/religious and modern/traditional dichotomies; and consider Iranian women’s socio-political activism beyond “a single fault line of struggle in society” (Olszewska, 2013, p.844). Iran’s #MeToo movement in summer of 2020 is a telling example, with women from different walks of life not speaking out against the Islamic regime per se, but the patriarchal norms and misogynistic culture at their workplace and rooted deeply within the society they live in. What added an element of complexity to the dominant narrative – the plight of Iranian women under theocratic rule – was, besides the fact that women (and some men) broke their silence on sexual abuse, a taboo topic in Iranian culture and a sensitive subject even in one’s own family and social circle, that Iranian authorities acknowledged these voices who accused, amongst others, clerics and celebrated artists/intellectuals, and the police encouraged victims to come forward while guaranteeing their anonymity in addition to assuring that they will not be arrested for alcohol consumption and having had extramarital sex, both which are officially illegal in the Islamic Republic. Most recently, Iran’s women-led protests that began in September 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman, by the so-called morality police, and continues today, transcend gender, ethnic/religious, social and sectarian divides. Dubbed by some Western outlets as ‘anti-Hijab protests’ and reported as a general rage against Islam, which serves to perpetuate Islam/West binarism and reinforce a reductive depiction of Iranian women’s struggle against intersecting forms of oppression, the current uprising, unprecedented since 1979, unites men and women across the country, headscarf-burning Generation Z (known as Gen Z) and chador-wearing conservative women of the mostly-Sunni city of Zahedan alike, under the slogan ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ – a slogan that has witnessed global resonance.

Third, excluding limited stories and passing remarks about ethnic/religious minorities, who, with exceptions (e.g. one *Guardian* travel story on the Zoroastrian-descendant Parsis in India) are mostly mentioned in the context of state-sponsored discrimination and persecution in the three sites, Iran, by and large, is portrayed as a homogenous and monolithic society, despite its diverse multicultural and multiethnic mosaic. Iran's Jewish minority is a case in point. Home to the largest community (outside of Israel) in the Middle East, Iran is also a country where its leaders use the epithet 'Little Satan' for Israel – with U.S. being the 'Great Satan' – and chanting anti-Israel slogans or flag burning at rallies are commonplace. In view of the Islamic Republic's regional policy since its inception as self-proclaimed champion of the Palestinian cause, the controversial and highly-publicized anti-Semitic/anti-Israel remarks by some Iranian officials – the most indelible being Ahmadinejad – and compared with the salience attached by the media to political tensions between Iran and Israel in the nuclear and other contexts, as also shown in this study, Iran's Jewish community is seldom featured in the news (Chapter Six, section 6.2.2.3). In addition to showing the diversity of Iranian society, the coexistence of various ethnic/religious groups, and the complexity of Iranian realities that might seem contradictory to outsiders, including the decision of a community to stay in a country it has considered home for more than 3000 years – as Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari (2011, pp.218-20) reminds us – that, at the same time, is a perennial foe of Israel since 1979, the necessity and benefits of reporting such stories are twofold: (1) untangling popular misconceptions about an inherent Iranian hostility towards Jews and the idea that anti-Semitism is deeply-entrenched in Iran's Muslim-majority society, a recurring theme in *Guardian* and *SPON* comments (Chapter Eight, section 8.3.3), against the backdrop of the Iran-Israel conflict, official discourses in both countries, and the prevailing image induced and propagated by political elite and media in the West; (2) challenging prejudices and stereotypes fostered and perpetuated by the media's attention (and bias) towards reporting conflict-laden political issues – excluding one front-page article in *Le Monde* on a civilian initiative in Israel to bridge the divide with ordinary Iranians – rather than focusing on (cultural, historical, societal) commonalities, which develop a barrier that further impedes intercultural/international dialogue. Such stories could also bring much-needed nuance in the current climate and amidst media/political immigration debates in Europe on 'new'/'imported' Anti-Semitism, especially since 2015 with the Charlie Hebdo attack in France and the so-called refugee crisis in Germany. While acknowledging the prevalence of these sentiments among some groups/individuals from the 'Arab/Muslim world', the essentialist and pervasive discursive construction of a Muslims-versus-Jews binary opposition is not only an overly simplistic and ahistorical representation but can also have

grave repercussions at international and societal levels. These include incurring enmity towards other nations in addition to exacerbating social tensions and fueling resentment instead of promoting tolerance and mutual understanding amongst, on one hand, various minorities within a multicultural society, and between these groups and the wider population, on the other. These stories, moreover, ought to contribute by bringing complexity to dominant narratives and (mis)perceptions about societies like Iran in the West and not construct further dichotomies by resorting to arguments based on a false dilemma fallacy; in other words, the point should not be to negate one truth, or ‘a single story’ as Adichie (2009) calls and was cited in the beginning of this thesis, at the expense of others, but to accommodate different – even seemingly contrasting – ones. Questioning the premise of a report in 2018 by (American TV program) PBS NewsHour which stated that the Trump administration and Israel “often depict the Iranian government as composed of anti-Semitic radical Islamists bent on destroying Israel. *But* within Iran, many of the estimated 15,000 Jews say they’re safe and happy living in the Islamic Republic” (Sayah, 2018, emphasis added), Larry Cohler-Esses, the first journalist from a Jewish and pro-Israel publication (the Forward) to be granted reporting visa since 1979 by Iranian authorities, who himself wrote in 2015 about “the surprisingly favorable account of the circumstances under which Iran’s Jews lived”, argued: “Why the but? Both things are true” (Cohler-Esses, 2018).

## **9.2 Implications for journalistic practice**

Based on above-stated observations, this study proposes two main suggestions in covering Iran: *diversification of topics* and *complexification of narratives*. This would involve more diversity in the scope of topics reported about Iran as well as more depth in coverage. Given the politics-centered and conflict-oriented coverage of Iran and considering the prevalent stereotypes about Islam/Muslims expressed in comment sections, (Iranian) journalists could report more about Iranian history and culture (e.g. Persian poetry), its cultural landscape – as the tenth country with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites – and architecture. Regarding Iranian society, in addition to societal dynamics such as those stated above, journalists could focus on the various aspects of everyday life in Iran i.e. customs and traditions, (religious, non-religious) rituals and ceremonies as well science and technology, the latter which, similar to other contexts (e.g. Hafez, 2002; Richter & Gebauer, 2010), receive negligible to no attention in foreign news coverage. Stories on Iranian women could, for instance, incorporate: reporting positive stories about Iranian women’s achievements in the arts – besides migrant narratives in artistic works i.e. novels, films, and plays – or the startup scene and other business sectors; covering the challenges of gender roles/stereotyping in families,

equal pay, work-life-balance, and glass ceiling effect; reporting issues as varied as “marriage, abortion, infidelity and lesbianism”, mentioned in passing in one *Guardian* feature story; giving space and voice *also* to those who willingly wear the veil and practice their faith; and acknowledging the unintended consequences of gender politics in post-revolutionary Iran, namely the substantial rise in women’s literacy rate and their participation in higher education and public life, the mere recognition of which carries the risk for journalists of being branded regime apologists (Olszewaka, 2013; Wiedemann, 2018).

Finally, during the studied period, articles about (or referring to) Iran that were published in the three media’s finance and business sections were, in one way or another, related to sanctions i.e. their effect on French and German companies (*Le Monde*, *SPON*), their breach by European individuals/entities and exposure to fines (all sites), and Iran’s illegal transactions (*Guardian*), with Iranian economy mostly mentioned as a secondary topic in other contexts such as the nuclear conflict, Iran’s political system and corruption, the impact of sanctions on society and people’s grievances. As such, ‘economy’ did not constitute a topic/subject area of itself in the thematic analysis part (Chapter Six). Beyond reporting about the crushing impact of sanctions, a country on the verge of collapse, and state corruption/mismanagement, journalists could also report and inform readers about Iran’s economic sectors (oil and natural gas, agriculture, manufacturing) and development.

### **9.3 Theoretical implications**

Similar to other CDA-oriented projects, this study adopted the concept of Ideological Square (Chapter Three, section 3.3.3.1) to examine the mechanisms of in- and outgroup construction, which was operationalized using the analytical categories proposed by DHA (Chapter Five, section 5.1), in media texts and their attached comments. Salient topics/issues and recurring themes detected in the three media’s reporting of (conflicts with) Iran (Chapter Six) alongside the macro-strategies of positive Self- and, as noted elsewhere (e.g. KhosraviNik, 2015; Koller, 2009), especially negative Other-presentations, with Our legitimation primarily predicated on, and substantiated by, Their de-legitimation (Chapter Seven), are consistent with the Ideological Square. However, variances exist amongst news outlets and between topics. While Self-legitimation in *SPON*’s Iran coverage is deemed superfluous or taken as given and heavily reliant upon de-legitimizing the Other/Iran in the nuclear dispute or other contexts, instances of positive Self-presentation and legitimation are apparent in the British and French media’s reporting, whereby Our course of action in reaction to the (presupposed) Iran Threat, be it nuclear (both sites) or regional i.e. its role in the Syrian war (mainly *Le Monde*), are justified and therewith portrayed as sensible, vital or unavoidable. In addition to

the topic at hand, other factors such as the selected media's political leaning, the genre of the material investigated, and the ideological bias of the individual staff or (guest) writers further complexify or even contest the general rules of *positive* Self- and *negative* Other-presentations. This was apparent, for instance, in occasional counter-discursive strategies deployed in some *Guardian* blogposts, op-eds and columns, including those authored by well-known critics of the U.S./West, that challenge dominant and persistent themes in mainstream Western discourses on Iran (Chapter Two, section 2.6) by foregrounding and accentuating Our negative properties and wrongdoings in the past or at present and/or emphasizing Iran's legitimate rights and actions. The othering process, moreover, does not necessarily entail assigning negative qualities/actions to (all of) Them or simultaneously constructing in- and outgroups in a linear way and in polarizing/oppositional terms. In fact, as the three media's depiction of regular Iranians show (Chapter Seven, section 7.4), it could, in some cases, involve the discursive construction of similarity/sameness, rather than difference, premised upon ascribing certain positive traits/characteristics – which They have in common with Us – that turns (some of) Them into Our 'friends' (or 'friendly strangers') as opposed to Our 'foes'.

Although a useful tool, the concept of Ideological Square, as Carvalho (2008, p.163) points out, can overlook "the time plane in discourse analysis of journalistic texts", namely representational continuities and discursive shifts over time, as also noted during the period chosen for this study – before and after Rouhani's election – with Iran's depiction shifting from an *irrational* to a (more) rational Other. In- and outgroup constructions are not static and subject to (re)negotiation that is contingent upon time and context of coverage. The material analyzed in this research revealed, for instance, that the U.S., personified by Barack Obama, is predominantly considered part of 'Us' whereas the Republican-run Congress and the Bush administration (especially in *Guardian*) are positioned as the 'Other within'. It can only be surmised that the three media's reporting of U.S. politics during the Trump administration would be markedly different to that of the Obamas, or 'Familie Cool', as *SPON* labelled in summer of 2013. Likewise, the Islamic Republic's stance and its coverage in the coming years can well be expected to differ from that during Hassan Rouhani's two terms in office – with a controversial, ultraconservative president-elect under U.S. sanctions for grave human rights abuses.

As for non-institutional discourse online, this research builds on and contributes to extant literature regarding the volume and content of reader comments in mainstream news sites (outlined in Chapter Four) in two respects: First, the findings show that notwithstanding a strong correlation between the three media's thematic coverage and their readers' thematic

preferences, both which appear to be influenced by a mixture of traditional news values and Iran-specific themes, a gap exists between the latter's interest in political topics and the attention paid by the former to non-public-affairs and human-interest stories, noticed in some studies as well (see Chapter Seven, section 7.1). The results, moreover, indicate a notable gap concerning stories on Iranian culture/society, with the numerically higher items published, particularly in *Guardian*, about Iranian cuisine, modern/contemporary art and culture yielding far less posts compared to articles covering quotidian life with an angle built around (societal, religious, political) tensions between the Iranian state and the society. As for online forums' immediate and wider contexts, while all or the majority of stories about Iran were comment-enabled in *Le Monde* (for paying subscribers) and *SPON*, respectively, over 40% of those in *Guardian* – in international and domestic categories – were not open to comment, thereby suggesting the British site's tough 'spacekeeping' (Almgren & Olsson, 2015) restrictions. Other media- and national-specific factors that seem to impact (the amount of) commenting include: the placement of the article on the site and its author's name/repute (*Guardian*), the text's topic and genre (all three sites), and subscription as prerequisite for reading paywalled content or posting comments (*Le Monde*).

Second, the emphasis placed on partial interpretation by any researcher conducting qualitative work, a point of criticism made regarding CDS in particular (Chapter Three, section 3.3.5) and acknowledged in the methodology section of this study (Chapter Five, section 5.4) as well, runs the risk of neglecting multifarious readings by the audiences of a given text, published by a specific outlet and situated in a specific social/cultural/political context, that are influenced by myriad internal and external factors. The sequential in-depth analyses in this research, comprising a thorough examination of sampled articles that were representative of the three media's Iran coverage at the time in juxtaposition with their attached comments, allowed for multiple – and conflicting – interpretations and indicated both an alignment between the researcher's own 'decoding' (Hall, 1980) of 'institutional messages' (Molek-Kozakowska & Chovanec, 2017, p.5), that is, my analysis of dominant representations of Iran and that of 'vox populi' (p.5) as well as variations in interpretations not only between the two but also amongst posters across the three sites, below diverse articles in each site, or within a single forum. To name a few examples: the former entails reproducing and reinforcing the 'framework of interpretation' promulgated, to varying degrees, by the three news sites in their coverage of Iran, as a state actor (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.2), with Otherness constructed in a much more overt and coarse or aggressive manner in forums, bearing resemblance to online (anti-)Islam/Muslim discourse, as prior research has shown (e.g. Shooman, 2014; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016), compared to the



subtlety, latency, and implications in the articles – depending on topic, genre and outlet – due to anonymity and online spaces’ disinhibition effect (Chapter Four, section 4.3.2.3); and replicating the dominating ‘good’/‘bad’ narrative and binary view of the Iranian people/leadership that all three media predispose their readers to (Chapter Seven, section 7.3.3). The latter involves attending to presuppositions in media texts, with some also called out and reflected on in several posts but mostly assumed as commonsensical and left unchallenged throughout the corpora (e.g. *who* constitutes ‘international community’), while others remain unnoticed and thus unquestioned (e.g. *what* signifies ‘modernity’ in the Iranian context from a Western point of view); and conflicting positions adopted by commenters with respect to the text at hand, be it the subject/content or the overall topic, especially the issue highlighted in the beginning of the article (Chapter Eight, section 8.2), in keeping with their personal stance, leading to selective reading and meaning-making that fit their worldview. This was, for instance, evident in recurrent posts from all three sites concerning Syria that, during this period – which pre-dates the so-called refugee crisis in Europe and rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) – and counter to the Ideological Square, foregrounded Their/Iran’s positive actions i.e. backing a legitimate government and combatting terrorism/extremism (Chapter Eight, section 8.3.2). Differences in reading, evaluating, and interpreting media texts were also apparent in posts by Iranian interlocutors through Self- and Other-identifications, with the Self presented intersubjectively by constructing the Other i.e. the West, the Iranian regime, or some Iranians (Chapter Eight, sections 8.3.2, 8.3.6). Hence, while numerous posts subscribe to unequivocal positive Self- and/or negative Other-presentations, countless others (with differing stances and motives) do not adhere to “this ideological double strategy”, whereby, as Richardson (2004, p.102) proposes in the context of news discourse, *who* is positioned as Us and Them can simply be recognized by “identifying whose opinions and social activities are represented positively and whose receive criticism”.

#### **9.4 Contributions to research, limitations, and avenues for further work**

Given the lack of systematic analysis and non-anecdotal studies on Iranian society’s portrayal in Western (especially European) media – excluding few on women and/or the youth – and the much stronger attention devoted in comparison by scholars to examining the coverage of public affairs-related topics and issues, namely the nuclear conflict, Iranian politics or internal turmoil (Chapter Three, section 3.4; Chapter Five, section 5.2), this thesis sought to fill a void in post-9/11 literature and paint a broader picture of Iran’s representation in some of Europe’s leading news sites. As such, it aimed to provide more insight into Iran’s

depiction not just as a political entity but as a country with different aspects and realities. Furthermore, although the choice of the period under scrutiny that comprised the months before and after Iran's election was deliberate, since it included non-eventful weeks as well as an 'important discursive event' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016, p.38) which drew additional coverage, presented the three media with an occasion to report about locals/daily life, and could be examined from a comparative perspective across the sampled sites, it may have exerted undue influence on topic intensity, width, and scope during this time. Placed against the backdrop of high-level tensions both at home and abroad, the studied period, moreover, pre-dates major events, inter alia: the interim nuclear agreement in November 2013, the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ('Iran Nuclear Deal') during the Obama administration in 2015 that ended more than a decade of deadlock; the lifting of sanctions and Iran's subsequent economic growth and booming tourism; the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the deal under the Trump administration in 2018 and the reinstatement of sanctions; eruption of protests in 2019 – Iran's most serious unrest since 2009 – and the brutal crackdown that followed; U.S. assassination of Qasem Soleimani in Iraq in 2020 that brought the escalation in Iran-U.S. conflict to the precipice of an open war; elections of new presidents in both U.S. and Iran – a Democrat in the former, an ill-reputed hardliner in the latter – amid renewed international tensions over the Iranian nuclear program with Iran continuing to be "widely criticized" and unfavorably viewed in most of Europe (PRC, 2020); and ongoing protests – Iran's most serious since 1979. A longitudinal study that encompasses major events related to Iran and periods during which the country is not in the international news cycle would offer a more nuanced picture of what is (not) reported about Iran(ians) in European media as well as discursive trends in Iran's representation(s) and othering over time. This comprehensive and mixed-methods approach can be guided by prior studies (e.g. Hafez, 2002; Richter & Gebauer, 2010) while shifting the focus on Iran's portrayal in traditional media to the under-explored online news sites, given the richness of the material in the digital landscape that includes print and web-only content i.e. blogs (*Guardian*, *Le Monde*), as shown in this study, and audiovisual storytelling, including soft news videos on Iran-based fashion designers (*Guardian*), Eyewitness images (*Guardian*) and photo galleries of everyday life in Tehran (*Le Monde*, *SPON*) which, as stated in Chapter Five (section 5.4), were sidestepped in this thesis. It is hoped that the present study's first endeavor and modest contribution to a holistic understanding of how Iran's country image is constructed and shaped through the media paves the way for future research that is not limited to examining Western media reporting of (stereo)typical Iran-specific topics and contentious issues

dictated by international and internal tensions but also delves into how Iran is covered and perceived across a wider range of (economic, cultural, social etc.) stories.

The thematic analysis part of this research, which preceded in-depth analysis and involved a close reading of stories about Iran and parallel side-note items, not only allowed for a quantitative overview of subject areas in the three media's Iran coverage as well as the importance placed on certain topics/issues and recurring themes therein, but also helped unmask both infrequent patterns (e.g. counter-discourses) and striking ones, namely the contexts where Iran was cited the most – all which would have otherwise been overlooked. It was noted, as stated in Chapter Six, that Iran was often named, singled out or lumped with others, to exemplify global hotspots/vexing problems and illiberal regimes, a trend observed in other cases as well (Kim, 2014; Richter & Gebauer, 2010). In these crisis- and conflict-laden contexts, Iran was routinely associated with certain states, namely Syria and North Korea, on one hand, and China and Russia, on the other. Frequent collocation and outgroup construction of these actors – which occasionally included Cuba, Venezuela, and Libya in connection with rights abuses or authoritarian rule, but seldom Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies – in mainstream European media, which divides the world into U.S. allies and adversaries/rivals that echoes and propagates Washington's foreign policy discourses, deserve further scrutiny. Future work could systematically examine these repeated patterns across a larger data set by adopting a corpus-based or corpus-driven CDA approach (e.g. Baker et al., 2008; Baker & McEnery, 2013b; Kim, 2014; Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016). This data set, moreover, should not be limited to political reporting, since these actors are also grouped together, albeit less frequently, based on their presumed shared status as rogue nations – implicitly assumed and rarely labelled as such – or non-U.S. allies on the international scene in non-political (but mostly negative) contexts, as the material in this study showed.

This study faced a number of challenges and inevitable limitations pertaining to its research method and design. Due to the laborious and time-consuming task at hand in CDA-oriented projects, practitioners of this approach traditionally opt for a manual, small-scale qualitative analysis, which raises questions regarding data selection and the results' generalizability, as discussed in Chapter Three (section 3.3.5). Since most research projects do not make their data sampling process transparent despite the repeated call that, as CDA scholars, “we must also begin explicating our coding methods – not just by referencing Fairclough, Wodak, or van Dijk, but by outlining the specific procedures we use to identify ideological themes in content” (Reynolds, 2019, p.57), this study sought to conduct the processes of data collection, selection, and analysis in a systematic manner and explicitly

explain the sampling criteria to build the corpus for in-depth analysis (Chapter Five, 5.3.3, Chapter Seven, section 7.1). While adhering to certain parameters (e.g. Iran stories, number of posts) helped circumvent the risk of ‘cherry-picking’ and potential bias in CDS, it faced unforeseen complications imposed by the examined news outlets and the material gathered that limited the possibility to select items that were representative of the news sites’ reporting on certain topics over this period. In other words, besides the general risk of overlooking discursive patterns in and across media texts due to the small data set in qualitative CDS, there were additional restrictions with regard to the British and French texts. Despite *Guardian*’s extensive reporting and side-notes published on Syria during this time that often cited Iran in relation to its (in)direct involvement in ongoing atrocities, its role in exacerbating the Shia-Sunni schism and tension with Israel, the growing danger of its regional sway and London’s push (alongside Paris) to arm the Syrian rebels, only five articles were directly related to Iran, with just two open to comments. Although the entry-level thematic analysis allowed for detecting dominant issues/themes and infrequent alternative discourses conveyed in side-note news reports, analysis/commentary, and opinion pieces, these items, their adopted discursive strategies and occasional sensational tendencies (e.g. “Iranian and Hezbollah fighters came into our neighbourhood with their swords drawn. The women they found, they raped. They burned our homes”, she adds, too exhausted by grief to stop crying’) were not included for detailed analysis (Chapter Seven). Similarly, stories on Iranian society, daily life, and diasporic community in *Le Monde* attracted negligible to no comments (Chapter Seven, section 7.1). As a result, the majority of comments on articles that were selected for in-depth analysis were disproportionately posted on the French site’s Iran-related or other blogs.

As discussed in Chapter Five, analyzing media content involves attending beyond language and textual level to the conditions of news production and consumption (section 5.1), which, despite the great importance attached to these processes in CDA approach, have not received ample scholarly attention (section 5.1.2). Since it has been argued that “few authors are entirely able to come to grips with the multiple and varied stages of media production and reception that underpin those texts” (Milani & Johnson, 2010, p.11), this thesis sought to fill this void not only in CDS but also, as stated in the beginning (Chapter One, section 1.2.1), concerning the scant reception studies within an otherwise rich field of empirical work on Western media’s reporting of Islam/Muslims that render it “difficult to measure the impact of media content” (Poole, 2020, p.480) by incorporating an analysis of reader decoding/interpretation processes. This thesis, however, did not delve into the multifaceted economic and institutional factors, editorial policies, and journalistic norms and

practices that precondition media content, beyond drawing upon the theoretical and empirical body of work (detailed in Chapters Three and Four) on some of the key factors that shape and influence foreign news reporting in the digital era. This decision, using the words of Garrett and Bell (1998, p.19), was “not so much theoretical as practical and interactional”, since “[a]ccess to and acceptance by media organizations and personnel is the central problem”, in news production research (p.19). After the data collection phase, I contacted some of the three media’s journalists who regularly wrote about Iran during the sampled timeframe, and apart from one from *Spiegel Online* who replied that they had no time (while questioning this study’s choice to examine user comments), others did not respond. Due to time constraints, I did not approach anyone any further and, instead, relied on anecdotal evidence – in absence of empirical production research on Iran – and conjecture for interpreting and explicating the results. Incorporating production research in a CDA-adopted study of Iran in the future could, besides filling a literature gap, offer valuable insight into the challenges associated with covering closed societies (Chapter Three, section 3.1.1.5) and their potential impact on news output. For instance, how do state control and existing obstacles affect Iran’s thematic coverage – amid the difficulties of accessing the country, restrictions on freedom of movement and independent reporting on the ground – as well as the selection and treatment of stories by some (Iran-born) journalists in *Le Monde* who (are allowed to) report regularly from Tehran? In addition to these conditions that are specific to reported-on places like Iran, future production research could also provide a more tangible understanding of the complex interplay between domestic views in the reporting country and international conflict coverage. Iran stories in then-*Spiegel Online*, are told from a single angle that is consistent with elite U.S./Israeli narratives concerning the Iranian (nuclear, regional) Threat and in a marked absence of analytical depth and diverging viewpoints offered in both *Guardian* and *Le Monde* or alternative/oppositional perspectives occasionally offered in *Guardian* that counter mainstream representations of Iran and Israel. Future research could elaborate further on how historical/socio-political factors and sensitivities influence German media’s coverage of Iran’s domestic and foreign policies, given Germany’s history and special relations with that country. In other words: Are there red lines (if so, where are they drawn) in German media’s representation of Iran not as a threatening Other but as a rational state actor with legitimate geopolitical interests and security concerns?

The last point stated above is closely related to a final possible area for further research. As mentioned at the outset and shown in the literature review detailed in Chapter Three (section 3.4), the empirical studies hitherto conducted on Iran’s depiction in Western media have, with exceptions, mostly focused on U.S./U.K. media – as single- or cross-country

analyses – due partly to practical reasons such as language skills and political considerations, namely the long history of mistrust and the conflictual nature of these countries’ bilateral relations with Iran. This thesis aimed to fill the extant gap in comparative empirical studies by shedding light on cross-national differences/similarities in Europe in terms of Iran’s coverage. However, due to time and space constraints, one news outlet per country was selected with a deliberate choice of their political/ideological leaning and progressive tendency. Given that “an excessive focus on differences between countries may lead to an understatement of domestic heterogeneity” which “may come at the risk of ignoring variance within societies” (Hanitzsch, 2020, p.516), future research could extend this sample by including different news media in each country to avoid sweeping generalizations and allow for a more balanced picture of these countries’ national mediascape and potential inter-media variances in their reporting of Iran. This could, for instance, further elucidate the extent to which the lack of diversity and plurality – in terms of topic, voices, and news angle – in former *Spiegel Online*’s Iran coverage is linked to outlet-specific traits pertaining to the German news site’s limited resources as a web-only compared with the digital editions of the two British and French legacy media, the training/experience of its journalists, its editorial line, and the wider (social, cultural, political) factors at the national level. It might be interesting, for example, to consider the Munich-based quality and left-leaning newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and Berlin’s Green-left-leaning *die tageszeitung*.

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## **Appendix Three – Zusammenfassung der Forschungsergebnisse/ Summary of the results**

### **Zusammenfassung der Forschungsergebnisse**

Diese Studie untersucht die Repräsentation des Iran auf den etablierten europäischen Nachrichten Seiten. Ziel der Studie ist (war) es, Aufschluss zu ergeben inwiefern Iran aus Mediengenerierten Texten und Leser Kommentaren konstruiert ist („below the line“). Untersucht wird die Berichterstattung über Iran unter anderem in Guardian, Le Monde, und dem ehemaligen SPON, in einem Zeitraum von vier Monaten, jeweils zwei Monate vor der Präsidentschaftswahl in 2013 und zwei Monate danach, im direkten Bezug auf die Hintergründe der Spannung im In- und Ausland. Das allgemeine Vorgehen (Theorie und Methode) in der Studie ist die Kritische Diskursanalyse, welche auf dem Konzept des Ideologischen Quadrats beruht. Die Studie wird von drei zu untersuchenden Fragen geleitet: (1) Was sind die auffallenden Themen und wiederkehrenden Motive in den Ausgewählten Berichterstattungen über Iran? (2) Wie ist der andere Iran in den zentralen Medien Diskursen dargestellt? (3) Wie ist der andere Iran in halböffentlichen Diskursen dargestellt? Um diese Fragen beantworten zu können wurde ein zwei-Stufen Verfahren entwickelt, welches die Einstiegs-Level-Thematik umfasst. Insgesamt 1092 Artikel für die erste Frage, und die weitere Tiefenanalyse von insgesamt 58 Artikeln, sowohl deren zugefügte Kommentare, wurden nach den Strategien die in dem („discourse-historical model“) (referentiell, „predicational“, argumentativ) vorgestellten Modell verwendet, um die Fragen zwei und drei beantworten zu können.

In Bezug auf die erste Forschungsfrage lieferten die empirischen Ergebnisse einen neuen und ganzheitlichen Einblick in die Berichterstattung westlicher Medien über den Iran, die bisher meist im Kontext (stereo-)typischer iranspezifischer Themen und Streitfragen untersucht wurde. Die Ergebnisse zeigen eine überwiegend politikzentrierte Berichterstattung über den Iran in allen drei Medien, die sich an einer Mischung aus konventionellen Nachrichtenfaktoren/-werten (z. B. Konflikt, Aktualität) und wiederkehrenden iranbezogenen Themen orientiert, die internationale und innenpolitische Krisen/Probleme wie Konflikte/Krieg und (religiöse) Gewalt, innenpolitische Reibungen, eine Kluft zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft, Menschenrechte und Katastrophen/Tragödien umfassen. Während sich die SPON-Berichterstattung stark auf aktuelle Ereignisse und offizielle westliche/israelische Narrativen stützt, bieten Guardian und Le Monde ausführliche Beiträge und ein breiteres Spektrum an Einblicken in den Iran. Außerdem stellt der Guardian gelegentlich den Mainstream-Diskurs über den Iran in Frage und/oder kritisiert die westliche Scheinheiligkeit gegenüber dem Iran in der Vergangenheit oder Gegenwart. Die Ergebnisse zeigen zudem eine Vielfalt an Themenbereichen (z. B. Kunst, Kultur, Gesellschaft) auf, die in den iranspezifischen Blogs von Guardian und Le Monde oder in anderen Bereichen ihrer Website veröffentlicht werden. Trotz dieser quantitativ beobachteten Vielfalt wird bei näherer Betrachtung deutlich, dass Berichte über die iranische Gesellschaft im Großen und Ganzen einen (kulturellen, sozialen, religiösen) Konflikt zwischen einfachen Iranern und der Beamtenschaft beinhalten.

Was die zweite Frage betrifft, so zeigt die gründliche Analyse der Artikel auf den drei Nachrichtenseiten, dass die drei Medien neutrale und bewertende Nominierungs-/Referenzierungsstrategien anwenden, um das Selbst und den Anderen zu konstruieren. Der Begriff "der Westen" ist in den Texten aller drei Medien allgegenwärtig und bezeichnet eine mächtige Innengruppe, während "die internationale Gemeinschaft" in den Artikeln von Le Monde und Spiegel Online hauptsächlich dazu verwendet wird, das Selbst zu legitimieren und uns (und unsere Verbündeten) als einheitliche, globale Gruppe darzustellen, während

gleichzeitig der Andere delegitimiert und der Iran als Außenseiter dargestellt wird. In Bezug auf den Iran wurden ebenfalls neutrale und wertende Entscheidungen festgestellt: Auf den Iran als staatlichen Akteur wurde sowohl in neutralen als auch in wertgeladenen Begriffen Bezug genommen, wobei letztere geladene Eigenschaften und Zuschreibungen enthielten, die einen negativen (autokratischen) Anderen nicht nur in Kontrast zum (liberalen, säkularen) Selbst setzten, sondern oft auch als eine von gewöhnlichen Iranern verschiedene Entität; Iran als Rouhani die Rückkehr der Rationalität in den Iran verkörperte; und Iran als das Volk versuchte, sich mit den regulären Iranern vertraut zu machen - und sie zu vermenschlichen - im Gegensatz zu den Behörden, die als eine kollektivierte Außengruppe dargestellt wurden. Was die Prädikations- und Argumentationsstrategien betrifft, so gab es zwar Fälle, in denen die positiven Eigenschaften/Handlungen des Selbst in den Vordergrund gestellt wurden, aber die Selbstlegitimation der drei Medien in ihrer Berichterstattung über den Iran (Konflikte mit dem Iran) beruhte hauptsächlich auf der Hervorhebung der negativen Eigenschaften/Handlungen des Iran und der Entlegitimierung des Anderen durch die Betonung seiner zerstörerischen Präsenz in Syrien (Unterstützung eines brutalen Regimes, religiöser Extremismus/Terrorismus, Bedrohung Israels), ihre nukleare Bedrohung (nicht-friedliche Absichten, Bedrohung Israels und der regionalen Stabilität), ihre Bedrohung der Demokratie/Menschenrechte, usw. Diese zwiespältige Darstellung wurde in mehreren Kommentaren und Kolumnen des Guardian widerlegt. Was die einfachen Menschen betrifft, so wird in den drei Medien, abgesehen davon, dass sie manchmal auf eigenwillige Merkmale der iranischen Kultur hinweisen (Le Monde) oder eine Vielzahl lokaler Stimmen einbeziehen (Guardian, Le Monde), der Diskurs über die iranische Gesellschaft stark auf die Konstruktion von Affinität und Ähnlichkeit ausgerichtet ("Sie sind gut, weil sie wie wir sind") oder versucht, Mitgefühl zu wecken.

Zur dritten Frage: Eine detaillierte Analyse von 4.731 Kommentaren, die als Reaktion auf die ausgewählten Medientexte gepostet wurden, zeigt die vielfältigen Selbst- und Fremdkonstruktionen, die in Online-Foren entstehen; die Selbstidentifikation kann vom einzelnen Poster als anonyme Person bis hin zu einem konstruierten Wir reichen, das unter anderem den typischen Leser des jeweiligen Mediums, Mitbürger, eine westliche Wir-Gruppe und/oder Mitglieder der "internationalen Gemeinschaft" umfasst. In einigen Beiträgen wird auch auf den Iran als das Selbst verwiesen, wobei sich der Kommentator ausdrücklich als Iraner zu erkennen gibt oder dies aus dem gewählten Benutzernamen und/oder dem Inhalt seines Beitrags hervorgeht. Als solche produzieren diese Gruppen verschiedene Entitäten als den/die Anderen, einschließlich Fällen, in denen ein "Anderer im Inneren" diskursiv konstruiert wird. Die Analyse zeigt außerdem, dass das Ausmaß und die Dynamik positiver Selbst- und negativer Fremddarstellungen, d. h. welche positiven oder negativen Aspekte über den Iran hervorgehoben/unterstrichen werden, vom Thema/Inhalt des Medientextes, den von den Kommentatoren aufgeworfenen Fragen oder den in den Threads auftauchenden Entwicklungen abhängt. Darüber hinaus widersprechen die Kommentatoren auf allen drei Websites zwar häufig den westlichen "Mainstream"-Ansichten über den Iran und/oder kritisieren die Medien, aber die häufigsten iranbezogenen Themen, die in den Online-Foren der drei Websites angesprochen und diskutiert werden, entsprechen in hohem Maße den vorherrschenden und wiederkehrenden Themen in der Iran-Berichterstattung der drei Medien.

Die empirischen Ergebnisse dieser Untersuchung tragen sowohl zur wissenschaftlichen Arbeit über Online-Kommentare bei, einem noch vergleichsweise wenig erforschten Bereich der kritischen Diskursforschung, als auch zu den spärlichen Publikums- und Rezeptionsstudien über die Darstellung des Islam/Iran in den westlichen Medien.

## Summary of the results

This study investigates representations of Iran in mainstream European news sites. It aims to shed light on how Iran is discursively constructed in both media-generated texts and reader comments ('below the line'). It examines Iran's coverage in *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and (former) *Spiegel Online* over a four-month period spanning two months before and after Iran's presidential election in 2013 and against the backdrop of high tensions at home and abroad. The overall approach (theory and method) adopted in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis, which operates the concept of Ideological Square, and is guided by three research questions: (1) What are the salient topics and recurring themes in the selected media's Iran coverage? (2) How is the Other/Iran constructed in mainstream media discourses? (3) How is the Other/Iran constructed in semi-public discourses? To address these questions, a two-level procedure was employed encompassing an entry-level thematic analysis of 1092 articles to answer the first question and a subsequent in-depth analysis of 58 articles and their attached comments, using the analytical tools proposed by the discourse-historical model (referential, predicational, argumentation strategies) to address questions two and three.

Regarding the first question, the empirical results provided a first-time and holistic insight into Western media's Iran coverage, which hitherto has mostly been examined in the context of (stereo)typical Iran-specific topics and contentious issues. The results show a predominantly politics-centered reporting on Iran in all three media that adheres to, and is dominated by, a mix of conventional news factors/values (e.g. conflict, timeliness, negativity) and recurring Iran-related themes involving international and domestic crises/issues such as conflicts/war and (religious) violence, internal political friction, a state-society divide, human rights, and disaster/tragedy. While *Spiegel Online*'s reporting relies heavily on current events and official Western/Israeli narratives, *Guardian* and *Le Monde* offer more in-depth pieces and a wider range of views on Iran. Furthermore, *Guardian* occasionally challenges mainstream discourses on Iran or criticizes Western hypocrisy towards Iran in the past or at present. The results also show diversity in subject areas (e.g. art, culture, society) published in *Guardian* and *Le Monde*'s Iran blog or other sections of their website. Despite this observed diversity in quantitative terms, it becomes clear upon closer inspection that stories on Iranian society, by and large, contain an angle involving (cultural, social, religious) conflict between ordinary Iranians and the officialdom.

As for the second question, in-depth analysis of articles sampled from the three news sites shows that the three media adopt neutral and evaluative nomination/referential strategies to construct the Self and Other. The term 'the West' is pervasive in the texts from all three media and denotes a powerful ingroup, whereas 'the international community' is mostly used in articles from *Le Monde* and *Spiegel Online* to legitimate the Self and depict Us (and our allies) as a unified, global group while, at the same time, de-legitimizing the Other and depicting Iran as an outcast. With regard to Iran, neutral and evaluative choices were likewise detected: Iran as state actor was referred to both in neutral and value-laden terms, the latter which contained loaded traits and attributions that placed a negative (autocratic) Other not only in contrast to the (liberal, secular) Self, but also often as an entity that is distinct from ordinary Iranians; Iran as Rouhani personified the return of rationality to Iran; and Iran as people sought to familiarize – and humanize – or regular Iranians contrary to the authorities who were presented as a collectivized outgroup. As for predicational and argumentation strategies, although there were instances whereby the Self's positive properties/actions were foregrounded, the three media's Self-legitimation in their coverage of (conflicts with) Iran predicated mostly on accentuating the negative properties/actions of Iran and de-legitimizing the Other by stressing Their destructive presence in Syria (backing a brutal regime, religious extremism/terrorism, threat to Israel), Their nuclear threat (non-peaceful intentions, threat to Israel and regional stability), Their threat to democracy/human rights, etc. This dichotomous portrayal was countered in several *Guardian* op-eds and columns. As for ordinary people,

apart from sometimes pointing out idiosyncratic traits of the Iranian culture (*Le Monde*) or incorporating a variety of local voices (*Guardian, Le Monde*), the three media's discourse on Iranian society is strongly predicated on constructing affinity and similarity ('They are good because They are like Us'), or seeks to evoke compassion.

Addressing the third question, a detailed analysis of 4,731 comments posted in response to the sampled media texts reveals the multifarious Self and Other constructions emerging in online forums; Self-identification can range from the individual poster as an anonymous person to a constructed Us that includes, among others, the respective media's typical reader, fellow citizens, a Western We-group, and/or co-members of 'the international community'. In some posts, Iran is also referenced as the Self, with the commenter expressly identifying themselves as an Iranian or this can be inferred from their chosen username and/or apparent from the content of their post. As such, these groups produce various entities as the Other(s), including instances whereby an 'Other within' is discursively constructed. The analysis, moreover, shows that the level and dynamics of positive Self- and negative Other-presentations i.e. what positive or negative aspects about Iran are emphasized/backgrounded, are contingent upon the topic/content of the media text, the issues raised by commenters or those emerging in the threads depending on developments unfolding in the comment threads. In addition, while commenters in all three sites often contest 'mainstream' Western views on Iran and/or criticize the media, the most prevalent Iran-related topics raised and discussed in the three sites' online forums correspond strongly to dominant topics and recurring themes in the three media's Iran coverage.

The empirical results deriving from this research contribute both to scholarly work on online comments, a still comparatively less explored domain in Critical Discourse Studies, as well as to scant audience and reception studies on the Western media portrayal of Islam/Iran.

## **Appendix Four - Author Resume**

For reasons of data protection, the curriculum vitae is not published in the electronic version.