



Mainstream Iranian Media Coverage of the Syrian Conflict

A Content Analysis

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About SREO

SREO is an independent, non-partisan research center based in Gaziantep, Turkey, SREO's team of researchers includes Syrians, Turks and Americans who have all spent significant time in Syria and the Middle East. Its researchers speak local languages and are dedicated to providing objective analysis of what is transpiring inside of Syria as well as in the host communities of neighboring countries. In addition, SREO provides monitoring and evaluation services along with needs assessments and feasibility studies. Together, the SREO team has over 10 years of experience working in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Turkey.

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Executive Summary

The Islamic Republic of Iran has played a decisive role in the Syrian conflict, and its steadfast support for the Syrian state has arguably enabled the regime to maintain power. Iran's strategic status as an actor in the Syrian conflict - as well as its larger geopolitical significance - necessitates a better understanding in the West of how global conflicts are addressed in the public sphere of mainstream news media.

To this end, this report presents an analysis of mainstream Iranian news media coverage of the Syrian conflict between the beginning of October 2013 through the end of March 2014. Qualitative and quantitative methods are utilized to identify patterns in themes of interest and sentiment, as well as the ways in which these sentiments are communicated. These patterns are analyzed in a framework of a careful context analysis of news media in post-Revolutionary Iran, and the political dynamics that impact - and are impacted - by the press.

Mainstream coverage of Syria is highly indicative of the constraints imposed on the press in Iran, and the examined media in many cases reflects or even promotes state policies and viewpoints. In this sample, state-associated sentiment towards various events and actors in the Syrian crisis are systematically reproduced and disseminated through linguistic and textual devices meant to influence public subjectivities. Media language projects a self-confident image of Iran as a regional figurehead of moral and political influence entitled to a role in global matters, an image which is reproduced through powerful and at times moralizing language.

With regards to its coverage of the Syrian state headed by Bashar Assad, the mainstream Iranian media likewise presents a counter-narrative to Western media coverage, emphasizing the Syrian state's legitimacy and unquestionable gains on the battlefield. Simultaneously, the press treats anti-Assad global actors with a delegitimizing discourse, conveying a sense of deep mistrust of these actors and, at times, slander. The highly subjective and even propagandic nature of media content, however, serves to undermine the legitimacy of such coverage, and thus begs the question of its reception among the reading public in Iran.

Mainstream Media Coverage of the Syrian Conflict: An Introduction

Iran has played a pivotal role in the Syrian conflict, providing extensive military, diplomatic, and financial support to the Assad regime. Syria has formed a strategically important element of Iran's Resistance Alliance since 1979, and Iranian support has been critical in sustaining the Assad Regime throughout the conflict and preserving mutual interests between the countries.¹ This support has been impactful: after three years of ongoing conflict and extensive international pressure to step down, the Assad regime has maintained its control of Damascus and other areas, and continues to be able to wage war in opposition-controlled areas.

Iran's strategic significance in the Syrian conflict and other regional issues necessitates a more comprehensive understanding of how political, cultural, and religious conflicts are interpreted and addressed in the various Iranian public spheres. Mainstream news media - as a central public sphere in the 21st century - represents an accessible and topical forum for monitoring coverage and sentiment in any nation, including Iran. In spite of this, translations of mainstream Farsi-language news media are seldom made available in the West. In this context, Syria Research and Evaluation Organization (SREO) has published translations from mainstream Iranian media outlets in an effort to enrich the global dialogue on Syria and the relevant international players impacting the outcome of the Syrian conflict.

This report presents a content analysis of mainstream Iranian news media coverage of matters pertaining to the Syrian conflict during the six-month period spanning from October 2013 to the end of March 2014. Utilizing qualitative and quantitative content analysis methods, this study examines the representation of the Syrian conflict in a body of news media consisting of over 200 news stories, op-eds, editorials, interviews, and special reports published in the online Iranian news media during this six-month period. This report will explore the sentiments and viewpoints communicated within these media by deconstructing linguistic choices, contextual clues, and thematic patterns observed. By uncovering underlying subjectivities contained within mainstream news media - and demonstrating the linguistic and textual tools with

¹ Sadjadpour, K. (2013, August 27). Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Retrieved from <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/08/27/iran-s-unwavering-support-to-assad-s-syria/gkh4>.

which these are transmitted - this study will present insight into how specific viewpoints are systematically reproduced and disseminated to participants in this vital public sphere.

Methods

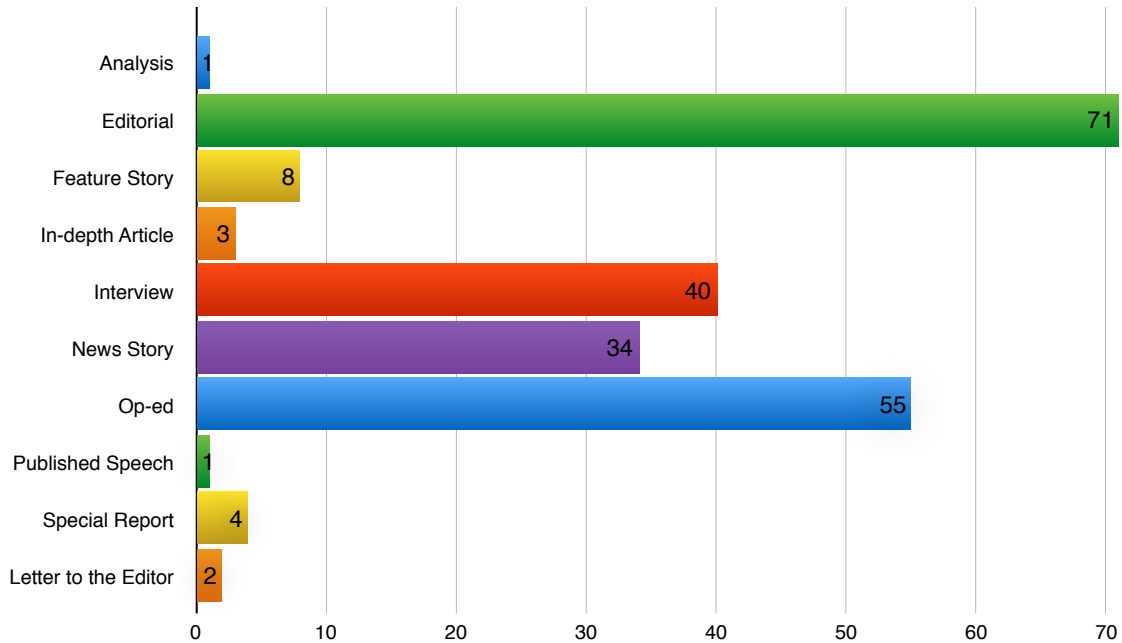
This study utilized a mixed methods approach to analysis Iranian mainstream press media, combining qualitative and quantitative methods of content analysis to create a balanced analysis of the media content. Quantitative analysis was used to identify relevant linguistic patterns that communicate theme and tone in the corpus, and these patterns were then considered carefully in-context through thorough qualitative analysis. The objective in combining these methods was to allow for a holistic analysis of the corpus that balances the limitations of using either method individually.

The sample analyzed consists of a corpus of 219 articles translated into English taken from mainstream Farsi-language Iranian news media outlets across the six-month period spanning from the beginning of October 2013 through the end of March 2014. This time period was selected due to the significant number of important developments in the Syrian conflict occurring, including the preparation for and holding of the Geneva II Peace conference, the takeover of strategic areas of northern Syria and Iraq by the insurgent group the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), and the beginning of the chemical weapons disarmament. These incidences received significant international media attention, and represent provocative issues with regards to the Iranian state viewpoint.

All articles are taken from a corpus of print media material initially selected and translated by a trained Farsi-English translator, which were made available on the SREO website² shortly after their publication in the Iranian press. Articles selected for translation spanned several categories of print journalism, including news stories, feature stories, editorials, op-eds, interviews, in-depth articles, special reports, published speeches, and letters to the editor. Figure 1 below summarizes the breakdown of each type of print media across the corpus of 219 articles.

² All translations can be accessed at <http://sreo.org/translations/>.

Figure 1: Print media article types



Sample selection methods were motivated in part by SREO's objective to fill in the gap in media monitoring of the Farsi language press in the English-speaking West, where mainstream Iranian viewpoints are not always well-represented or even made available. As such, the translator made use of both random and purposive sampling methods to select articles for translation. Each week during the six-month time period, the translator compiled a random sample of news articles by running keyword searches across more than 50 Farsi news media outlets commonly-accessed in Iran to collate all articles pertaining to the Syrian conflict. Within this random sample, the translator identified approximately ten articles per week for translation based on two pre-stipulated criteria: (1) Unavailability or under-representation of the media content in the English language western press, and (2) Content representativeness of state policies and viewpoints.

The content analyzed in this study was drawn from 40 different Farsi-language news media outlets, including online and print newspapers, magazines, and news agencies publishing online.³ All media outlets are based inside Iran, and are therefore subject to more rigorous state censorship than Farsi news outlets funded and operated from abroad. The outlets utilized comprise a range of ideological backgrounds, from those directly affiliated to the state, to outlets that espouse more moderate or even reformist views. It should be noted, however, that moderate and even reformist papers do not necessarily always contradict or

³ For a full list of news media sources from which content was drawn, see Appendix 1.

criticize state viewpoints directly, as this runs the risk of newspaper closure. Content from foreign-based Farsi news outlets and Farsi blogs and other social media platforms for political commentary and news reporting were not included in this study, as these fall outside the scope of mainstream news media.

Quantitative content analysis of the corpus was conducted via the content analysis software program WordStat to track thematic, linguistic, and tonal patterns via quantification of word frequencies and co-occurrence of keywords within the text. Thematic patterns of articles were identified through frequency data of pre-selected keywords throughout the corpus. Similarly, incidences of co-occurring keywords at the sentence level were utilized to identify underlying tone: co-occurring keywords indicative of sentiment (for example “terrorist” and “influential”) were identified in WordStat, and then cross-checked individually in-context to verify direct or indirect relationships between words. These quantitative methods were largely employed to further illustrate or bolster qualitative analysis, and conclusions drawn from quantitative data were cross-checked during qualitative analysis to ensure that these were not misleading.⁴

Limitations of this study are largely confined to potential bias in the data sample; because the sample was selected in part based on subject matter and inclusion in mainstream publications, it cannot be considered to be representative of the full range of Farsi news media. Similarly, selection of criteria based on its representation of state policy resulted in a large proportion of editorial and op-ed articles, which may be perceived as more subjective or provocative. Additionally, analyzing sentiment and tone of press media via quantitative methods of frequency and co-occurrence can lead to potentially misleading conclusions; this was circumvented via careful in-context cross-checking and matching against conclusions drawn from qualitative analysis.

Media in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Context Analysis

Although Iran consistently receives poor ratings for its freedom of the press,⁵ the press has witnessed various fluctuations since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979, given legal changes and political developments. While there are laws in place regarding the press

⁴ A limited amount of press content from alternative Farsi media outlets was summarized and made available by the translator. Because these were only summarized or translated in part, they were not included in this study, but can be found on the SREO website.

⁵ Freedom House. (2014). {Interactive Map.} *2014 Freedom of the Press Data*. Retrieved from <http://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press?gclid=CNj6rK22ob8CFSflwgodlh0ALw#.U7FBXvmSxCO>.

and its treatment of Islam, the Constitution, and other matters, ambiguity in the wording of these laws makes it difficult for writers and editors to be certain when a line is being crossed. As Hossein Shahidi writes: "The conflict between the state and the critical press since the 1979 revolution has not centered on morality or public decency, but on different political, social, cultural and economic perspectives on Iran's past, present, and its future."⁶ For this reason, press content, government reactions to media and incidences of newspaper closures provide insight into greater political dynamics in Iran.

The initial laws established with the founding of the Islamic Republic are indicative of how the press would be treated in Iran. Although the Islamic Revolution in 1979 witnessed an expansion of news publications, the new state took quick measures to clamp down on the freedom of the press and 175 publications were closed down over the next three years.⁷ The press law introduced by the Revolutionary Council in 1979 mandated that those applying for a licence should be "in possession of political piety and moral competence."⁸

Subsequent efforts to liberalize the press have been thwarted or had mixed results. It was widely hoped that President Mohammad Khatami's time in office (1997-2005) would result in social reforms and greater liberalization, and while the number of publications rose initially during Khatami's presidency, over 100 newspapers were closed during the last five years of his presidency.⁹ Newspapers that remained open admitted to censoring themselves.¹⁰ Adam Tarock suggests that conservatives instigated this media crackdown due to reformist perceived influence of liberal press on public opinion as well as feeling "politically insecure" after recent electoral losses.¹¹ Additionally, the prime authority of the Supreme Leader in Iran makes it difficult to enact reform without their approval, and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei played a role in this crackdown.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the following president, took a distinctly stricter approach to freedom of speech and the media, and more newspaper closures took place under his rule.¹² One notable example of a newspaper closure involved the state newspaper *Iran*, which was closed when a cartoon caused unrest among Iran's Azeri community.¹³ This event demonstrates that even state newspapers are subject to closure, and that a wide

⁶ P. 753, Shahidi, H. (2008). Iranian Journalism and the Law in the Twentieth Century. *Iranian Studies*, 41(5), 739-754.

⁷ P. 746, Shahidi H..

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ P. 749, Shahidi H..

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ P. 601, Tarock, A. (2001). The muzzling of the liberal press in Iran. *Third World Quarterly*, 22(4), 585-602.

¹² P. 750, Shahidi, H..

¹³ BBC News (2006, May 23). Iranian paper banned over cartoon. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5008420.stm.

variety of incidents can precipitate paper closure, not merely criticizing the government or insulting Islam.

Current president Hassan Rouhani has not enacted significant reforms regarding media freedom, though sources have pointed to a more relaxed climate for media freedom since he took office in 2013. As one journalist explained, "Rouhani's presidency has lifted the spirits. People have regained some of their boldness and confidence but in reality, there have not been any significant changes."¹⁴ It remains to be seen whether Rouhani can enact changes and if this more liberal media climate will prevail.

While current news media in Iran is comprised of a variety of newspapers and news outlets, state media dominates the field, particularly publishers such as Kayhan and Etella't.¹⁵ Gholam Khiabany, bringing a political economy perspective to the subject of Iranian media, points out the divide between larger, state-owned companies and individual owners.¹⁶ While noting the advantages experienced by state-owned media, Khiabany argues that they too are subject to the demands of print capitalism.¹⁷ As such, media content reflects both a variety of restrictions and demands that all forms of media are subject to in Iran.

Introduction to Analysis of Syria Press Coverage

Themes of interest covered by mainstream news media in part reflect the major developments in the Syrian conflict - both inside Syria and in the international arena - that occurred during the six months which the sample spans. Figure 2 below outlines the most frequently recurring major themes of interest identified. The Syrian government - and its relationship with Iran, its legitimacy, and its policies - forms the most recurrent theme of interest. The Geneva II peace conference represents a similarly recurrent theme, appearing in over half of the content surveyed; in most cases, this media highlights Iran's prospective role in this conference alongside the concrete events being reported or discussed. The anti-Assad Opposition follows closely behind these topics; coverage of this tends to revolve around the Opposition's make-up, funding, and role in Geneva II. Similarly, the issue of terrorist groups generated ample coverage, reflecting the major gains made on the ground

¹⁴ Anonymous (2014, February 24). Press freedom in Iran improves slightly under Rouhani. *Al Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2014/02/iran-media-freedom-improves.html>.

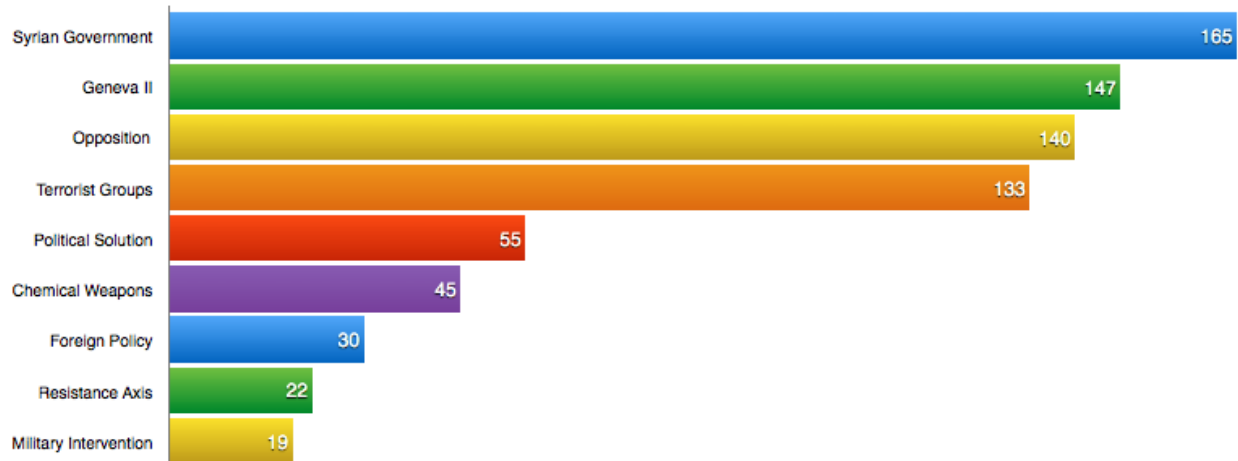
¹⁵ P. 491 Khiabany, G. (2007). Iranian Media: The Paradox of Modernity. *Social Semiotics*, 17(4), 479-501.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ P. 500, Khiabany, G..

by Islamist groups such as ISIS and the Jabhat Al Nusra. The issue of Syria's chemical weapons - including the disarmament of Syria's weapons arsenal in the wake of the Ghouta chemical attacks - formed another prominent theme of interest.

Figure 2: Recurrent themes of interest in mainstream press



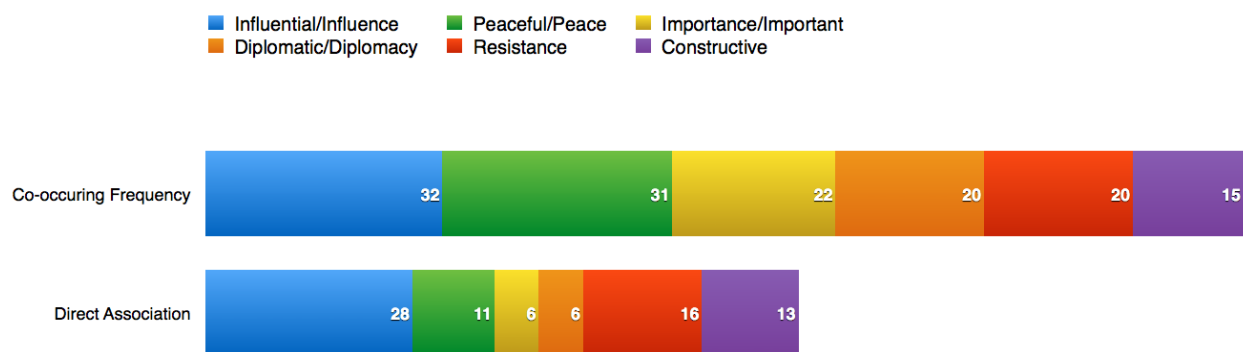
Content analysis of the language within these themes of interest reveals striking patterns in how the mainstream press media in Iran portrays major actors and events related to the Syrian conflict, which can be observed across three major categories. Media language disseminates a self-confident image of Iran as a regional figurehead of moral and political influence entitled to a role in regional and global matters, an image which is reproduced through powerful and at times moralizing language. With regards to its coverage of the Syrian state headed by Assad, mainstream media likewise presents a counter-narrative to Western media coverage, emphasizing the Syrian state's legitimacy and unquestionable gains on the battlefield. Simultaneously, the press treats anti-Assad global actors with a delegitimizing discourse, conveying a sense of deep mistrust and even slander.

Portrayal of Iran: Power and Glory

Three significant patterns in the manner that Iran is portrayed in the mainstream news media emerge: Iran is concurrently or alternately projected as a powerful figure of unquestionable diplomatic and political influence, a level-headed advocate for peace, and/or a figure of steadfast resistance to any parties seen as countering its agenda. Through such portrayals, the mainstream press of Iran disseminates an image of power, legitimacy and self-confidence to its audience, whether addressing the Syria crisis or other subjects.

These three patterns of self-projection become evident through frequencies of descriptive keywords co-occurring with “Iran” at the sentence level. The most common illustrative adjectives and nouns concurrently used in sentences with “Iran” were identified through the WordStat software and then crosschecked at the textual level to verify how directly they were used in reference to “Iran.” Figure 2 below illustrates the frequency of the most common illustrative adjectives used in the context of “Iran”: “co-occurring frequency” indicates that the word/s appear together in the same sentence, while “direct association” indicates that the word is used to directly describe “Iran.” In both cases, the concomitance of these illustrative or provocative descriptive words communicates an association between their meaning and the image of Iran to the reader.

Figure 2: Co-occurring words with “Iran”: sentence level



The language used to describe Iran - whether the nation itself, its policies, actions, or government - often conveys a sense of power by emphasizing Iran’s centrality and influence both as an actor in the Syrian conflict and as a regional figurehead. In reference to its status on the regional and global stage, the concepts of “importance” and “influence” recur in mainstream media language: *“Iran has proved to be the most influential regional country in different regional developments,”* proclaims a December op-ed printed in Arman Daily, justifying Iran’s entitlement to participate in Geneva II. At times the description of Iran’s regional role verges on infallibility: *“Iran has always been the most influential country in the Middle East since the beginning, as regional rivals and analysts admit,”* asserts an interviewee in a December printed interview in Arman Daily.

In coverage of Syria, this regional influence translates into highlighting Iran’s role as a level-headed diplomatic actor and advocate for peace, an image articulated through language implying constructiveness, sense, and even benevolence. *“Settlement of the Syrian crisis*

needs Iran's constructive role," states an op-ed from December, a commonly-repeated assertion in mainstream press during the preparations for the Geneva II conference. Iran's association with "peace" in the news media is also notable: *"Iran has been stressing a peaceful settlement of the Syrian conflict since the beginning,"* asserts a January article from Javan Daily. *"The judicious policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in fact, ensures peace and security in the region"* is stated in a December interview with Syria's ambassador to Iran, published in Bultan News. In some contexts, these positive characteristics and actions of Iran are couched within statements implying the opposite characteristics of other actors: *"The foreign movements on the Syrian crisis are divided into two different groups: peace-seekers, including Iran and Russia, and warmongers, including the West, Turkey, Zionists and some regressive Arab countries,"* claims an October news story appearing in Siasat E Rooz in an example demonstrating how mainstream press asserts Iran's positive characteristics by contextualizing its qualities with nations and other entities that do not align with the Iranian state's agenda.

A third less recurrent but nonetheless prominent pattern in the portrayal of Iran is that of a figure of resistance to any entity or concept deemed as counter to the Islamic Republic's interests. In mainstream news media, the resistance is institutionalized in the form of "Resistance," which can be broadly defined as both an ideology and a systematic set of efforts that further the Islamic Republic's agenda and counter any entity or action seen as diverging from these. This institutionalized resistance is carried out via terms such as the "Resistance Axis" and the "Resistance Front," or the alliance between the Islamic Republic, Hezbollah, the Assad government, and Hamas. News media examined in this sample propagates this idea of "Resistance" using a language that verges on nationalist discourse, emphasizing the strength and legitimacy of Iran's agency in this process.

"The Resistance Axis has a specific definition in the Middle East and the position of Iran within this Axis is completely obvious," states a Khorasan article from December describing Iran at the center of an influential and morally upstanding movement. The idea of Resistance is used to further the self-projection of the Islamic Republic as a powerful actor backed by a moral weight and mission. A January editorial from Kayhan Daily which reports a supposed victory for the Syrian army asserts that *"This defeat may be a start to acceptance of a fact in the Middle East: the Resistance Axis, after the 33-day, 22-day, and 8-day wars and the Syrian conflict, has proved to be undefeatable even in direct confrontations."* This "Resistance" discourse asserts the image of Iran as a global moralizing authority, and the lone alternative to Western imperialism.

Given the environment of limited press freedom in Iran in which media is often controlled by, imposed upon, or complicit with the state, this self-projection of state power, rationality, and morality - and at times infallibility - is not surprising. However in the context of Syria coverage in the mainstream media sample, the at times exaggerative language undermines this carefully constructed image of power by distorting to unreal proportions.

The Syrian state: a Counter Narrative of Military Might and Legitimacy

The sample survey of news media has overwhelmingly portrayed Syria and the Assad regime favorably by creating a narrative of victory surrounding the Syrian conflict, as well as highlighting the legitimacy of the Assad regime and its role as a partner in the "Resistance." This framing provides a narrative in which any other outcome but Assad's victory against the rebels is unthinkable, while grounding Assad's legitimacy in the close relationship between Syria and Iran.

This narrative of victory is reliant on portraying the strength of the Syrian Army as well as the successes of the army in defeating the opposition. This strength is alluded to in many articles that mention the Syrian army. As one November news story from Fars News Agency says, *"the power of the Syrian government stems from the power of its army."* Another October article published in Ahlulbayt quotes the Iranian ambassador to Syria as saying, *"the Syrian nation has an increasingly strong will to confront the US and Zionists' conspiracy in the region...the government, army, and nation of Syria are united and have proved their steadfastness so far."* These statements demonstrate a tendency in the press to conflate the army, the government, and the people, thereby assigning unity to the war-torn country. Additionally, mentions of Syrian Army "victories" in the Iranian press are frequent, although the specifics regarding these victories are notably absent. Describing the Syrian Army as victorious serves to further the image of strength of the army, and shows Iran as backing the winner of this conflict.

While portrayals of the strength of the army and national unity are utilized to endow the Syrian government with legitimacy, actual references to the character of Bashar al Assad are few yet positive. According to an October interview with General Brigadier Safavi in Fars News Agency, *"Bashar Al Assad is a young man graduated from a British institution. However, thanks to his admirable wisdom and bravery and the altruistic resistance of the Syrian Army in the 30-month war and people's support of Bashar Assad, he has been able to win the war so*

far." This description portrays Assad in a very innocent manner, highlighting his youth and Western education. Although this description runs counter to current depictions of the Syrian president in Western media, the paucity of in-depth descriptions of Assad in Iranian media suggest that he is not necessarily considered a sympathetic figure; indeed, the media relies more on negative portrayals of the Syrian Opposition than favorable portrayals of Assad.

The Assad government is further legitimized through its membership in the Resistance Front,¹⁸ referring to the alliance between Iran, Syria, Palestine and Hezbollah. Additionally, close ties between Syria and Iran are emphasized in the Iranian media, thereby naturalizing Iran's support for Assad. Media sources referring to the Resistance Front stress Syria's role in resisting the United States and Israel, thereby highlighting Syria's importance as an anti-imperial ally. As a January article from Resalat Daily says, *"Bashar Assad's resistance against Israel and the US has raised public support for the Resistance Front."* Another article from Fars News Agency describes Syria as the *"bridge that connects Iran to Lebanon's Hezbollah and is on the Resistance Axis against the Zionist Regime."* These quotations point to the geographic as well as political interests of Iran's relationship with the Assad government.

Along with rhetoric highlighting Syria's role in the Resistance Front, the relationship between Iran and Syria is portrayed as exclusive and close. Iranian cultural attache Hesamoddin Ashena is quoted in IRNA as saying, *"The two brother countries, Iran and Syria, in addition to shared religious and cultural backgrounds, have deep roots in history, culture, and human civilization...We do not forget what Syria did for us during the Imposed War of Iraq against Iran. Thus, the Iranian nation sees itself beside the Syrian nation in time of hardship today."* Given the linguistic and religious differences between Syria and Iran, this quote exaggerates cultural relations between the two to emphasize closeness. Additionally, referencing the Iran-Iraq War to evoke Syria's past support is a very emotionally charged reference, given the suffering experienced in Iran throughout this period. Another official comments in a November IRNA news story *"we never forget Syria's help to Iran during Saddam's eight-year military invasion of Iran, and we want to help Syria to come through this crisis with minimum damage."* Comparing the Syrian conflict to the Iran-Iraq War, which Iranians have generally perceived as an imperial invasion that the international community allowed to happen, emphasizes the justness of Assad's cause and underscores Syria's dire need for help from Iran.

¹⁸ Also referred to as Resistance Axis or Alliance.

Portrayals of the Syrian government are steeped in words referring to strength and victory, and demonstrate Syria's key role as a member of the Resistance Front. Through providing such depictions, state media reflect the Iranian government's interest in supporting Assad and his tenure in power. While they are certainly not the only viewpoints circulating in Iran regarding Bashar al Assad and the Syrian conflict, state media provide insights into the rationale behind Iran's support for Syria as well as an informative counter-narrative to Western portrayals of the conflict.

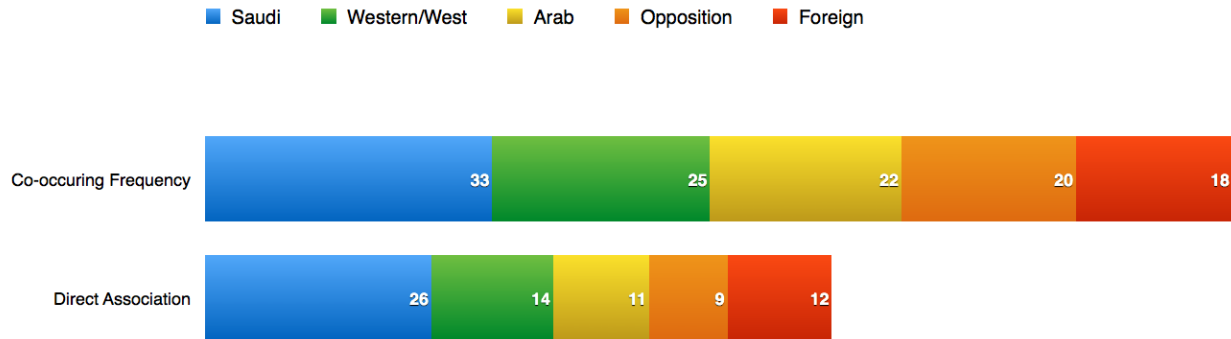
Portrayals of Global Actors: Criticism and Conspiracy Theories

In mainstream press coverage of the Syrian conflict, an inherently subjective language is applied to anti-Assad actors - whether nations, international bodies, or factions in the conflict - characterized by labeling, accusations, and generalization. Within this context, a kind of conspiracy theory discourse is often embedded within press portrayal of other actors in the Syrian conflict, a discourse which undermines the legitimacy of these through the use of inflammatory language and negative word associations. This type of discourse can be observed in coverage of the Assad Opposition, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, Western nations, and Israel - or as it is called, the "Zionist movement" or "Zionist regime"; indeed, these actors are often addressed in the same context using similar language, which creates the impression that they share the same unsavory intentions and characteristics.

This discourse in part revolves around the application of the word "terrorist" or similar words such as "takfiri" and "salafist"¹⁹ which associate illegitimacy and alarmism in association with the Assad Opposition, and the nations and factions funding or associated with this Opposition. Common co-occurring words with "terrorist/s" at the sentence level are outlined in Figure 4.

¹⁹ Takfiri" and "Salafist" refer to extremist Sunni Islamist ideologies advocating strict interpretation of Islam and - in some cases - apostasy of non-Muslims or non-Sunnis.

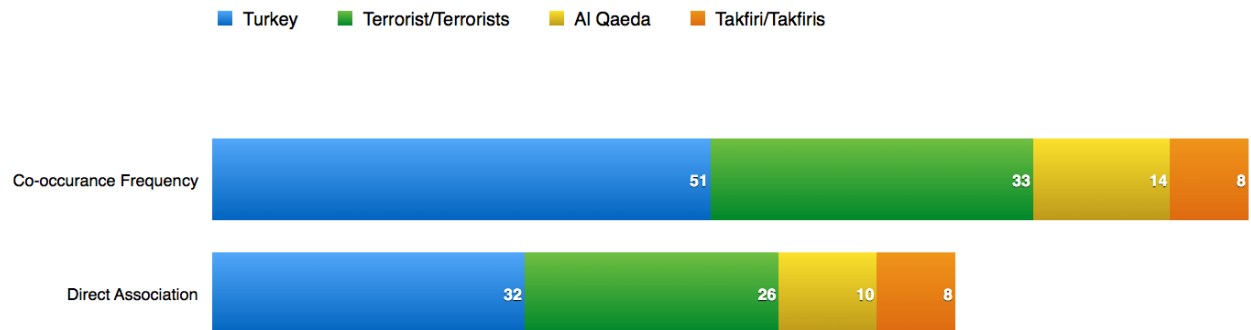
Figure 4: Co-occurring words with “terrorist/s”: sentence level



The co-occurrence of “Opposition” (referring specifically to the Assad opposition in this analysis) with “terrorist” is indicative of a trend in the media sample to generalize the entire anti-Assad opposition as dangerous terrorists. Such criticisms can be markedly unsubtle: *“the Syrian conflict, though still ongoing, is not expected to be won even by the most optimistic of the opposition supporters - better to call them ‘terrorists,’”* claims a January article published in Kayhan Daily. The implication that the “terrorists” that make up the Opposition are “foreign,” or supported by “foreigners” i.e. non-Syrian further undermines their validity, and conveys a message that this Opposition is untrustworthy. *“The Syrian Opposition coalition is made up of militia and terrorist groups in Syria and foreign-based political factions,”* explains a January editorial from Jamejam Daily. A similar sentiment is conveyed in a January article from Kayhan Daily which asserts that *“...the armed Syrian opposition to Bashar Assad is made up of ...non-Syrian terrorist militias.”* Implications that the Opposition is foreign serves to further undermine its legitimacy, associating them with imperialism and outside interests.

While mainstream Farsi media communicates a distrust of multiple anti-Assad actors, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are frequently conflated foreign actors in the media, being mentioned together 35 times throughout the sample; indeed, these three are often grouped together in a triad of complicity. Of these three nations, Saudi Arabia is the most criticized, and the word “Saudi” is often situated with alarmist and negative descriptive words, including “terrorist/s” and “Al Qaeda.” Figure 5 below illustrates the prevalence of contextual associations of “Saudi” with such words denoting Sunni extremism. Contextualizing “terrorists” with these nations conveys an evident anxiety and alarmism to the reader regarding the nation’s trustworthiness.

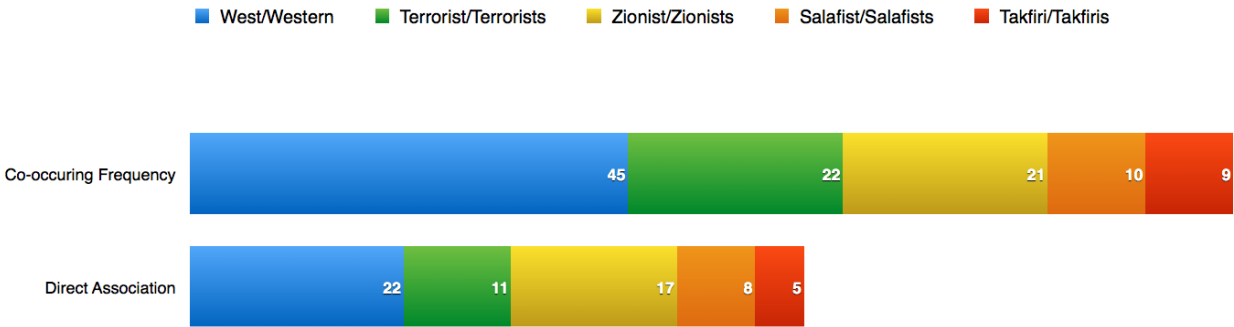
Figure 5: Co-occurring words with “Saudi”: sentence level



In keeping with this sense of anxiety, all of the above actors are often portrayed within a model of conspiracy theory discourse which projects an image of foreign entities conspiring against the legitimacy of the Syrian state, and by extension, the Iranian state. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are typecast as direct agents of violence and discord, at times individually, and other times in collusion with a variety of other offenders. A common claim is a supposed alliance between Western, Arab, and Zionist actors, as seen in a February interview: *“A coalition of western countries, regressive Arab countries, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey and the Zionist regime put the destruction of Syria on their agenda by employing terrorist groups, particularly Al Qaeda.”* This statement, which situates nations holding different and even conflicting ideologies and agendas into a model of dangerous conspiracy speaks to the extent to which mainstream press seeks to create an impression of gravity or threat.

This discourse of conspiracy is taken so far in one instance, that the actual basis of the conflict is called into question: *“everybody knows that the Syrian crisis is a common plan devised by the triangle of the West, reactionary Arab countries and the Zionist regime.”* This incendiary statement also demonstrates how prejudices can be generated and reinforced through media language by contextualizing non-associated factions with vague accusations (and derogatory labels). This can be observed in the co-occurrence with the word “Arab,” which is attached to highly subjective and negative descriptive words.

Figure 6: Co-occurring words with “Arab”: sentence level



The image of anti-Assad actors in the Iranian press is mediated through subjective and often inflammatory language and associations, which disseminates a message of illegitimacy, non-trustworthiness, and even danger to readers. Such portrayals of entities that run counter to the Iranian state’s viewpoints speak to the extent to which mainstream media attempts to reproduce state-generated sentiments among the public.

Conclusion

Through deconstructing coverage of the Syrian conflict in Iranian mainstream press media, it becomes clear that this media forms a public sphere where specific sentiments and subjective viewpoints - whether on Syria or other events - are reproduced and transmitted to the readership. These sentiments often reflect policy and views articulated by the state of the Islamic Republic, which speaks to the highly constrained media environment in Iran.

This study has shown that the sentiments appearing in mainstream press coverage on Syria are mediated through highly illustrative - and at times inflammatory - language and suggestive contextualization which serves to bolster the image of Iran and the Syrian state while simultaneously undermining that of entities running counter to the Iranian state agenda. Additionally, positive portrayals of Syria and accounts of a close relationship between Iran and Syria serve to justify Iran's economic and political support to the Syrian regime.

However, the highly subjective and even propagandic nature of media content serves to undermine the legitimacy of this Syria coverage. Indeed, when situated within the framework of widespread censorship of which the reading public may be aware, it can be assumed that these sentiments may not be fully digested by the public. Indeed, poll results from late 2013 suggest that Iranians' support for the Syrian government has decreased,²⁰ indicating that news media have not entirely managed to sway public opinion. This trend of decreasing support for Iran's relationship with Syria raises questions about the sustainability of this relationship and how its benefits are sold to the public. Despite the fact that alternate viewpoints exist regarding Syria and Iran's support for Syria, they are not expressed in the mainstream Iranian press in any significant way. However, as Iran potentially moves towards a more permissive media climate in the future, continued monitoring of Syria press coverage will reveal how the observed patterns in sentiment and tone change over time.

²⁰ Loschy, J. (2013, November 15). Iranians' support for Syria softens. *Gallup World*. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/165878/iranians-support-syria-softens.aspx>.

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Appendix 1: News Media Outlets Utilized in this Study²¹

Media Outlet Name	Background	Number of Articles in Sample
Afarinesh Daily	Moderately conservative newspaper	4
Afkar	News website with religious leanings	1
Ahlul Bayt News Agency	Shia-oriented news agency	4
Alalam News Network	News channel and website owned by the state-owned Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)	3
Alef News	Conservative news website	2
Arman Today	Reformist newspaper	5
Aseman Weekly	Weekly magazine with reformist leanings	1
Asef News	News website	1
Asr Iran	Independent, pro-reform news site	1
Basij Press	Conservative news website affiliated with the ultra-conservative Basij movement, affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards	1
Bultan News	Conservative news website	2
Ebtekar Daily	Reformist newspaper that was banned in April 2014	6
Ettelaat Daily	Iran's oldest newspaper, considered to be politically moderate	8
Fararu	Conservative news website	1
Fars News Agency	State-affiliated news agency with conservative bent	24
Ghanoon Daily	Moderately conservative newspaper	2
Hamshahri Daily	Daily newspaper affiliated with the Tehran Municipality, with moderately conservative leanings	4
Hemayat Daily		12
Iran Diplomacy	Moderate reformist news website owned by a former foreign minister	4
Iran News	State-affiliated daily newspaper	4

²¹ The following sources were used to categorize media outlets: BBC News (2006, December 13). The press in Iran. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5334828.stm. Mahtafar, T., Khiabani, M., & Niknejad, G. (2009, December 10). Iran Media Guide. PBS. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2009/12/media-guide.html>. SREO's Persian translator was also consulted regarding the political orientation of news outlets.

IRNA (Islamic Republic News Agency)	Official state news agency of Iran, funded by government	9
ISNA (Iranian Students News Agency)	Moderate news website founded and staffed by volunteer student journalists	7
Jamejam	Conservative newspaper published by the IRIB	7
Javan Daily	Conservative daily affiliated with Iranian Revolutionary Guard	3
Jomhuri Islami	Official newspaper of the Islamic Republic Party	5
Kayhan Daily	Highly conservative daily newspaper	9
Khabar Online	Conservative news website	5
Khorasan Daily	Conservative daily newspaper	9
Mardomsalari Daily	Reformist newspaper	1
Mashregh News	Conservative news website affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard	4
Mehr News Agency	Highly conservative news agency owned by the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization	10
Quds Daily	Conservative daily newspaper	5
Resalat Daily	Conservative daily newspaper with religious leanings	6
Shargh Daily	Most popular reformist newspaper in Iran	8
Siasat e Rooz	Hardliner daily newspaper affiliated with Iranian Revolutionary Guard	7
Sobhe Sadegh Magazine	Conservative weekly magazine of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard	1
Tabnak	Conservative news website	3
Tasnim News Agency	State-affiliated news agency espousing pro-government views	12
Tehran Emrooz Daily	Conservative daily newspaper	12
Vatan e Emrooz	Conservative newspaper supportive of state policies	1
Young Journalists Club	News website affiliated with state-owned IRIB	5