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Lenses of Iran's Role in Syria's Conflict through a Comparison between BBC and Sputnik: News Approaches from Revisionist, Multilateral, and Counter-Hegemonic Discourse

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Abstract: Syria's domestic dissent created the foundation for the country's civil conflict, where foreign actors have favored the different sides since the 2011 Arab Spring. Iran was invited to play an active role in the conflict owing to the declining fortunes of the Syrian government. Iran welcomed the opportunity and understood that it suited its foreign policy priority to endorse the counter-hegemony approach in the MENA region in addition to maintaining the country's political stability. It is essential to analyze how international media outlets covered Iran's role in Syria. This study addressed the news coverage provided by Great Britain's BBC and Russia's Sputnik—two news agencies from two distinct geopolitical sides—both of which have Persian news outlets covering Iran's role in the Syrian conflict. The foreign policy goals pursued by Iran aim at two different approaches: revisionism and multilateral partnership. Conducting a critical discourse analysis review of the news sources this study sought to demonstrate that the mass media attempt to engineer public consent in armed conflicts. According to the findings, the news agencies attempted to influence the policy preferences to adopt a peaceful architecture or try to induce a consent-driven perception in line with the foreign policy priorities set by their countries of origin.

Keywords: international news media; critical discourse analysis; Iran; Syria; civil conflict; BBC; Sputnik



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1. Introduction

As the Arab Spring evolved from social discontent, which jeopardized the stability of autocratic rulers over the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Syria started to become the setting for a highly volatile civil war between the government and the opposition groups. The resulting political instability provided an opportunity for foreign countries from the region and internationally to pursue their interests, such as the US, the EU, Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, which supported the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Iran was also involved from the onset of the conflict and then Russia was invited four years later to play an active role in helping the Syrian government retain its political stability. This opportunity was welcomed by Iran, which prepared efforts to align it in accordance with its ideational interests encompassed in its constitutional frame. In fact, Iran had every historical reason to support Syria in appreciation of Syria's support of Iran in the Iran–Iraq War (1981–1988). The two countries also share a common enthusiasm for Palestinian self-determination, for which Syria is a geographical bridge playing a supportive role. They also have a common perception regarding the head-on adversary of Israel and agree upon the counter-Western hegemonic policy known as the Axis of Resistance in the Middle East (see [Ehteshami and Hinneboush 1997](#), pp. 10–15).

The aim of this study was to evaluate Iran's role in the Syrian crisis from the perspective of two different foreign news agencies' actively circulating news in Iran's information sphere. Naturally, interpretations of Iran's role in Syria were covered differently and were portrayed by these two international news agencies from the polar opposite sides of the conflict. In fact, they pursued the foreign policy interests of their countries of origin. The

BBC and Sputnik were selected because they broadcast news in Persian. They, therefore, fall within the realm of public diplomacy media outlets for two countries with different foreign policy objectives in Syria; therefore, from this point of departure, one would expect a similar narrative from Russian media. Nevertheless, how did the UK frame it given the antagonisms with the Iranian state and contradictions with Iranian foreign and security interests and aims? This would be a good way to frame the complexities of contemporary media-based public diplomacy using these particular countries and their foreign policy priorities in Iran. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA), the main question is as follows: how did these two news organizations interpret and represent Iran's role in the Syrian crisis? Normally, this would be addressed as if they really tried to inform the world about the subject or seek to reach a peaceful resolution in the conflict in order to relieve the Syrian people of suffering. Instead, they tried to represent the news outline in accordance with their home-based foreign policy preferences. On the one hand, a news organization would be tasked to promote the interests of its origin country that covers its budget. On the other hand, it has a professional ethical duty to inform the audience and broadcast the news fairly. However, the findings indicated that the analyzed mass media organizations selected an easy strategy.

Section 2 explains what CDA is and how it helps to address the news outlets' content in an explanatory and critical manner. After Method and Approach section, in Section 4, the topic moves to address the reasons why Iran proceeded to have an active role in the Syria conflict, namely, because of ideational reasons for it in the Iranian foreign policy culture mindset since the 1979 revolution. Next is a section on the Syrian conflict situation as the background context for the main players' foreign policy preferences. The following two sections that come after give the results from the analysis and interpretation of reports from the BBC and the Sputnik news outlets.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis and International Relations: A Brief Overview

Conventional wisdom dictates that the content and tone of media are constructed in a society based on particular sets of customs and habits, where the social values and norms represent certain concepts that shape the mindsets and attitudes toward social solidarity to create the social institution as proposed by Lasswell (Simons and Manolio 2021, p. 16). In fact, media plays the role of "already occupying a certain reality" (Price 1999, p. 588), where the issue of change and confrontation with the new discourse suggests that there seems to be a real problem.

Furthermore, there is a need for what Dijk referred to as "the cognitive interface of models, knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies and other social representations of the social mind, which also relate to the individual, social, micro, and macro levels of social structures" (Van Dijk 1993, p. 249). In this regard, the media would be a method of reproducing an ideology through the discourse of power and domination, especially within the various dimensions of inequality in which a sociopolitical system is faced with the challenges of legitimation as a result of a systemic inefficiency crisis or social exclusion. The hierarchy of power tries to institutionalize a cognitive program in terms of symbolic and operating models through the media. In other words, the power relations present in a given society is discursive and there is a link between the transmitted news and a moderated society (O'Halloran 2003, p. 12).

In terms of policymaking, there is also a system of ideas used by media as a platform to spread propaganda that is influenced by the Westphalian system of states that is centuries old. It has been described as the "state religion" by Chomsky and Herman in terms of two principles, the first of which is that "the holy state (nation-state) is good in its core. In other words, policymakers of the state are always assumed to have noble intentions. Logically, the second principle indicates that any violent acts committed by the holy state are always defensive in its nature, or at least that is how it is portrayed" (Chomsky and Herman 1979, p. 83).

There are three basic ideas in constructing a discourse—the habit, the cognitive interface, and the state religion—where the concept of a metaphor is set specifically in the political communications culture of a society. In fact, a metaphor is generally perceived as being the “connection between the cognitive and the cultural contexts known the greatest strength of the cognitive metaphor theory” (Koller 2005, p. 201). In this regard, a metaphor has two sides, the first of which is the strategic aspect that tries to promote a certain option in the alternatives and disregards the others, whereas the second side is the ideological aspect that entails having different ideological implications (Sowinska 2013, p. 798). In this sequence, a metaphor is a mechanism of legitimization as a symbolic assignment of specific ideological principles to participants, especially “in the moment of crisis and the construal of charismatic leadership matched against an emerging threat” (Sowinska 2013, p. 799).

The communication process in a given society acts as a tool of power to approach the (re)production of discourse in a somehow direct manner or overt support for the enactment, representation, legitimization, denial, mitigation, or concealment of the dominance of others (Van Dijk 1993, pp. 249–50). In a modern sense, the power of media involves the control of a society through a connection between action and cognition that is designated to change the minds of others in a hierarchy of power for their own interests. In other words, this hegemony of discourse has two main functions: manufacturing consent and accepting the legitimacy of hegemonic power (ibid., pp. 254–55).

Therefore, what is the significance of this discourse that has two processes? First, it reflects or represents social entities and realities. According to Foucault, it is a mirror of society. As a result, it is context-bounded (Price 1999, pp. 582–83, 588). It is just an explanatory version of discourse, and there is also a critical one that tries to create meaning, interpret, and constitute social phenomena as a practice in society. To Fairclough, critical discourse analysis “aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discourse practices, events, and texts and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. . . . My focus is political, upon the discursive events and within relations of power and domination” (Fairclough 1993, pp. 135–36).

The significance of discourse analysis, specifically in IR and foreign policy, is continuing to grow by addressing some very important points. First, foreign policy is understood as a particular representation of countries, places, and people as a national or institutional self in relation to the other; therefore, state sovereignty implies the separation between “the inside” and “the outside,” which are defined as a radical opposite of each other to justify, legitimize, and stabilize self-evidence status (Hensen 2016, pp. 96–99). It means that it contributes to the construction of realities, identities, preferences, and interests upon which the self is being constructed in relation to friends, enemies, and the magnitude of the state’s alternatives in international relations (Moshirzadeh 2015, p. 9).

Second, CDA affirms that political behavior is rooted in human nature and is driven by interests because of mankind’s inclination toward being egoistic; hence, the main issue in IR and foreign policy is who enacts foreign policy, understanding the nodal point and how the rational/irrational or the egoist/the altruist is represented (Hensen 2016, p. 99). Third, as a consequence, it is not whether political behavior is the truth or not, but it would be important to know what made the discourse a key representation of politics of post-truth or truth subversion (Adler and Drieschova 2021, p. 359). The fourth point is related to what Fairclough defined as being language use, which “is constitutive of (1) social identities (2) social relations and (3) systems of knowledge and beliefs” (Fairclough 1993, p. 134). It is through the power of language that discourse subjects, objects, actors, and identities are being constituted that say “going war against al-Qaeda or protecting the domestic automobile industry is in the American interest” (Hensen 2016, p. 99).

Lastly, mass media is a conduit for the language of power, which means that it displaces text and context through the use of discourse manipulation. For example, here, Iran’s foreign policy is the text and Syria is the context in which it tends to examine Iran’s foreign policy; it is representing the text and context in the line of what is taken for granted or dom-

inated in the original public culture disseminated. CDA is used to criticize and deconstruct political discourse to reveal the underlying (geo)political assumptions and power relations. Based on the proposed conceptual framework, it is necessary to explore Iran's role in the Syrian crisis from the two geopolitical perspectives of news organizations, which follow radically different ideological paths and have distinct perceptions and representations of what Iran perceives and acts toward Syria's status quo.

3. Method and Approach

The study tracked the mass media content influence through the use of two major models: pluralist and elite (Robinson 2016, p. 189). The pluralist model maintains that an independent outlet is in pursuit of particular interests and motives; therefore, it might not shape the policy process but could exert an influence on it. However, in the elite model, mass media is not independent and is consequently under the control of political elites who influence the agenda and prime and frame the outlet's content (Robinson 2016, p. 199). There is a perception that the media in Western countries resonates with the first model and acts as a fourth estate in democratic systems, whereas the media in non-democratic systems fall under the influence of the political elites. Therefore, the media might be perceived as being influenced by each of the two media models regarding their coverage of aspects of the Syrian conflict, both of which are covered by the Persian language news.

The comparison of these models reveals some important points that could be interesting from a critical perspective. First, it shows that both of the analyzed news agencies could have just explained the procedural process of political issues rather than proceeding to any form of substantive criticisms. From this perspective, there is no difference between the two models mentioned above. That is why Gelpi et al. argued "the (US) public were not causality phobic but rather defeat phobic" (Robinson 2016, p. 189). Second, there is a fundamental shift from the mass outlet to the audience agency. In this regard, people can perceive their interests and preferences and can evaluate the observed values in the media content, especially with a shift into Web 2.0 applications (Moreno and Koff 2015, p. 132). Therefore, the media must go beyond the domain of mainstream news to analyze not what the media can do to people but what people can do to the media (Moreno and Koff 2015, p. 131). Moreover, by mediatizing politics, the political rulers need to find a "professionalization of political advocacy in order to gain control over the media," even asymmetrically in the digital era to determine whether the media would be influenced in a preconceived way (Felew 2017, p. 48; Okafor et al. 2015, p. 32; Schroeder 2018, p. 1; Fuchs and Trottier 2015, p. 115).

For this purpose, "Iran and Syria" were selected as the keywords searched in both international and Persian outlets of the BBC and Sputnik news websites from the beginning of the Arab Spring to the decline of the Syrian crisis in 2020 when ISIS was largely defeated in the region. It should be noted that the international and Persian outlets of the BBC news are not essentially different. However, the international outlet of Sputnik broadcasts the news in line with the international perspective of Russia's foreign policies, whereas its Persian outlet seeks to justify the common interests of Russia and Iran in Syria by addressing the voices from Iran's domestic environment.

From a methodological standpoint, this study employed a qualitative-analytical technique and content analysis method simultaneously. In other words, the paper first explains Syria's status quo and then explores the others' interests in the crisis. Their motives are also discussed. Following that, news contents are analyzed along with the designated media outlets in line with the interests of their countries of origin. Finally, they are critically analyzed for indications of the control and influence of their political ideologies and elites rather than professionally reporting the news fairly and objectively.

4. Iran's Foreign Policy toward Syria

Before addressing the context of discourse analysis, it would be valuable to add some background context by describing some of the most important items of Iran's foreign policy

guidelines to understand which ones influence the priorities and approaches regarding the Syrian conflict. In theory, the main conception of Iran's foreign policy is addressed in articles 152 to 154 of the Constitution as follows:

- Article 152: The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the notion of the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of power and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states.
- Article 153: Any form of agreement resulting in foreign control over the natural resources, economy, army, or culture of the country, as well as other aspects of national life, is forbidden.
- Article 154: The Islamic Republic of Iran has human felicity throughout human society as an ideal and considers the attainment of independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly, while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the Mustad'afun (the oppressed) against the Mustakbirun (the oppressors) in every corner of the globe ([Iran's Constitution 2021](#)).

Therefore, Iran's foreign policy is founded on four levels: preserving territorial integrity and independence; denying all colonial domination in its foreign relations; supporting Muslims throughout the world, where its priority is the Shia and then Sunnis; and lastly, there is a universal ideal to bring all around the globe into happiness via the Islamic outlet accordingly. Based upon the Constitution, some introduced it as Adib-Moghaddam due to the four principles of "radical cultural and political independence, economic autarky, diplomatic and ideological mobilization against Zionist and resistance against US influence in regional and domestic affairs" ([Adib-Moghaddam 2005](#), p. 266), or as Moshirzadeh did, "realism, Islamism, anti-Imperialism, critical dialogism and international society" ([Moshirzadeh 2015](#), p. 5). As a result, it could be summarized in three issues: revisionist, multilateral, and counter-hegemonic discourse.

In this regard, Iran and Syria have maintained a consistent relationship since the changing new revolutionary regime came into power in Iran, which resulted from a common existential threat perception of Israel ([Darvishi Setani and Fayazi 2016](#), p. 67). Therefore, Iran perceives an existential threat similar to what is threatening its national territory, putting at risk its strategically deepened influence that stretches through the Levant, the possibility of a collapse of Axes of the resistance led by Iran, and the changing of the regional ideological balance in favor of an opponent ([Deheshyar and Haydari 2019](#), p. 185).

This demonstrates that Syria plays a crucial position in Iran's foreign policy as a bridge of the Axes of Resistance to reach the Levant. As Iran's Supreme Leader stated, the "Syrian regime is a part of the resistance against Israel and the forefront of Iran's fighting against the US" ([Nejat 2014](#), p. 135) because "at it has a considerable population of Shia Muslim and is a neighbor to Israel, Iran is a key power to unbalance geopolitics and geostrategic equilibrium in the region" ([Ehteshami and Mohammadi 2017](#), p. 86). Indeed, for the Shia, there is no leadership alternative to Iran ([Hinnebousch 2020](#), p. 6); furthermore, Syria is a logistic hub ([Nejat 2014](#), p. 74) of resistance against Israel when it threatens Iran's regional position to substitute the passive and defense role into the active one ([Rabiee et al. 2017](#), p. 62).

By making sense of the reasons why Iran has been interested in an active role in Syria according to what is perceived as vital interests and goals of the regional situation, it explains the context by which the two components (text and context) construct when analyzing the two contested media discourses.

5. Syria's Crisis: Meddling, Mediating, and Muddling

The popular uprising began in 2011 in Dara, a city to the south of Damascus, and then spread to Damascus and Hama, where the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was bloodily suppressed in 1972. In 2012, the unrest spread to the north of Syria, Aleppo, and Adlib, where an insurgency arm broke out. In 2013, ISIS emerged in Raqqa in the northeast of Syria and spread through Iraq's border in the east of Syria, where the tempo of the insurgency was ebbing and occupied one-third of the country (see [Gharayagh-Zandi 2020](#)). The geopolitical tension was temporarily defused internationally when ISIS threatened the peace and security of the region, as well as the regional and international players, who then decided to collaboratively tackle the threat of ISIS. The entrance of Russia into the fight against ISIS in 2015 delivered a further advantage to al-Assad's government. In the north of Syria, Turkey initiated a series of military attacks on the Kurdish territory to pre-empt the Kurdish issue from entering its borders. Many attempts were also made by Israel to push back Iran and Hezbollah from Syria and its own borders. Finally, humanitarian causes were revived by the alleged chemical attacks in Ghouta, Douma, and Khan Shaykhun from 2013 to 2017, giving the conflict further international dimensions ([Saleh 2020](#), p. 556; [Sadiki 2016](#), p. 340–44).

There were numerous diplomatic attempts and mediation efforts made by the Arab League and the Geneva Sessions arranged by the Western powers and their allies. Other competing meetings were then held in the Russian city of Sochi and Astana in Kazakhstan, which were convened by Russia, Turkey, and Iran to solve the crisis. However, none of them reached a viable and sustainable solution. Therefore, solving the crisis was described as an "impossible mission" because of the huge (geo)political obstacles to a settlement ([Aggestam and Dunne 2016](#), p. 481).

The obstacles were particularly concerned with Syria's geopolitical stance and the stark contradiction between the various powers with regional ambitions that were actively involved in the conflict. From a geopolitical standpoint, Syria connects the two subsystems of the Persian Gulf and North Africa in the Levant, which maintains their ties in MENA. Strictly speaking, Iraq and Syria would set up any Arabic solidarity architecture. Iraq is located at the eastern border of the Arabian Middle East, the northern ward of which is Syria as Turkey's neighbor (see [Figure 1](#)). Its accessibility to the outside by the Mediterranean Sea without being dependent on the Strait of Suez and the Bab-al Mandeb Strait provided it with a partially autonomous position in foreign relations in comparison with other countries in the Arab League, to which Iraq is an exception.

Syria's proximity to Lebanon and Palestine, which are known as the core states of the Middle East, has prolonged the conflict for more than seven decades. It has stretched to the annexation of the Golan Heights, which were occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, which impacted the problems in Lebanon and Palestine. Moreover, Iran has been stretched across to the Levant and Israel's borders, known as the bridge to the Axis of Resistance. As a result, Syria has been maintaining a crucial geopolitical stance, both regionally and internationally. Having a resistance relationship with Syria is a cause of concern for the surrounding region because it is a country with a Sunni majority (74%) and has a strategic relationship with Iran, where it also possesses a Shiite minority (see [Pierret 2016](#)).

Within the context of the Shiite crescent, Syria links Lebanon up to Iraq and Iran. If the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are undertaken, the main energy resource of the Middle East will then be located in a Shiite-inhabited region. Controlling the Shiite region would mean a potential risk for the Sunni countries, for the Shiites would be at a power advantage. The main reason why Syria tries to make the most of its geopolitically privileged position is to cooperate freely with a wide variety of different players to compensate for the shortage of its natural resources in comparison to other regional countries, such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, as long as the Shiite minority is in power alongside Baathist nationalism, it maintains a political balance and creates harmony for Christians and the Druze in Syria,

but also autonomous ambitions have ensued between the Alevites to boost confidence in relation to the Sunnis majority by holding power since 1946. In fact, Syria inherits a peculiar relationship between domestic power inequality and geopolitical privilege.



Figure 1. Map of Syria and its Neighbghrs. Source: https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/syria_pol_2007.jpg (accessed on 4 April 2022).

Syria suffers social fragmentation from the Kurdish/ Arabic, Shiite/Sunnis, and religious/secular gaps (Sorenson 2016, p. 294). They are all perceived as originating from the colonial administrations that fabricated contexts to operationalize the sectarian conflicts that emerge across the region. Not only is it present in the domestic environment, but it has also left impacts on other places where there are the same sects in Syria as there are in Lebanon.

Any attempts to escape from the traps alongside the geopolitical determination and the colonial fabrication should not be ignored for two major reasons. First, manipulating the current situation without having a practical solution to what was historically constructed might exacerbate all that of these past and present grievances with something without a solution, but launched 15 coups between 1949 and 1970 when there were wars with Israel three times (Brooks 1998, p. 13). Therefore, it is necessary to find a lasting solution. Second, the crisis in Syria is prolonged because there has been no satisfactory solution for any of the partners due to geopolitical, political, and social contradictions explained below.

At the periphery, the Justice and Development (the AK) Party in Turkey intended to take power with the same religious sect as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood for two reasons.

By expanding the sect across the region, it started to gain control over the Kurdish territory in the north of Syria from the inside, something that has secured the future for the AK party in Turkey and other new places in advance (Monshipouri 2019, pp. 8–9; MacQueen 2018, p. 347). The main issue is that the religious identification came in stark contrast with the Kurdish priority as an ethnic group and failed to arouse the interest of Saudi Arabia as a hostile religious group. Known as another neighbor, Iraq intended to preserve the Shiite position in Syria because of its Shiite majority and prevent the re-joining of the Sunni population in the west to the eastern side of Syria, which was once occupied by ISIS. It also has a common interest with Turkey to take over control of Kurdish separatism in the region. For Saudi Arabia and Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood gaining power would mean more dominance of the Shiites than what is currently the case. Israel is striving to oust Iran's Axis of Resistance from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. There has been a complicated situation since a democratically elected government coming into power would pursue the Golan Heights as a very important geostrategic point that has been under their control since 1967. In the meantime, any situations that fall out of control would lead to the collapse of the existing state and result in the emergence of terrorist groups, something that is not in favor of Israel's national interest (see Haji-Yousefi 2021).

Known as being an international player, Russia is now becoming directly involved in the crisis for two geopolitical purposes: the first of which is to fight the terrorist groups in Syria to counter their further proliferation to Russia, while the second purpose is to maintain its naval base deployed in Tartus on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea since the Cold War. The EU and the US intend to cause a regime change to swap al-Assad's rule with a "democratic" government to find a peaceful settlement in Lebanon and Palestine without delivering power to the terrorist groups. This solution does not seem to be promising in terms of increasing human or state security.

Consequently, the attempts to meddle with the incumbent government have not achieved any promising result, and all diplomatic mediations to offer a satisfactory solution to a political settlement have proved useless. Moreover, any muddling efforts over the crisis would cause an angry outcry from the terrorist groups. Finally, what can logically be expected from the media news reporting in such complex situations, such as the issues in this conflict? It is necessary to employ CDA to evaluate the research questions by analyzing the two media outlets in question.

6. Iran's Role in Syria from the Perspective of Great Britain's BBC News

Great Britain's foreign policy on what is known as the Arab Spring can be described as "liberal conservatism" at its best. At first, Britain was not involved due to the justification that it was a peaceful protest. Therefore, Britain believed that intervening would provoke al-Assad's security apparatus to seek to restore power and order. Therefore, to respond, Britain's foreign policy needed to evaluate the rigidity of the conflict; the BBC claimed that Prime Minister Cameron "carefully assessed the rapidly shifting political and military picture before making any decisions" (Ralph et al. 2017, p. 5). The BBC also stated that Britain needed to be cautious when approaching Syria's crisis due to the ideas of the Labor Leader Jeremy Corbyn, who was renowned for his antiwar rhetoric background (Ralph et al. 2017, p. 5).

Once the protest turned violent, the British government stated that "Syria is not Libya." Therefore, military intervention would be imprudent. Having this discursive strategy, the British government tried to legitimize its inability to keep up with the situation in accordance with its liberal approach (Ralph et al. 2017, p. 6). More importantly, the British Defense Industry took its chance by selling arms to forces in the region, especially to the authoritarian regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, which used them against the Yemeni troops and people. Interestingly, "it provided around 30,000 jobs within the country and boosted the country's economy annually by around UK£35 billion." (Scott 2016, p. 350). By using what was earned from selling arms, partial financial aid was allocated to the fight against the humanitarian crisis in the region. This led to a contradiction; however, the

British government did not think so and stated that “there is no contradiction in supplying weapons as it supports the legitimate government, and, by providing the humanitarian aid, the government makes sure that civilians are not harmed.” (Sabbagh and McKornan 2019, p. 92). Regarding all issues and the alleged chemical attacks that occurred in Douma, Ghouta, and Khan Sheykhun from 2013 to 2017, the BBC reported the news in line with the British foreign policy and quoted the White Helmets, which was accused of spreading misinformation about the Syrian and Russian governments and used the term “suspected” to accuse the other side of the conflict (Sabbagh and McKornan 2019, pp. 10–11).

Similarly, the BBC tried to make three particular metaphors regarding Iran’s role in the Syrian crisis in line with the UK’s foreign policy. First, at the beginning of crisis, it tried to show that Iran was allegedly concerned with the arrival of the US forces in Syria, criticizing the killings: “Ahmadinejad said Iran would encourage all sides to reach an understanding and warned the US not to enter Syria.” (Syria Crisis 2011). In other news, analyses provided by James Reynolds stated that Iran advised Syria and provided riot gear and surveillance equipment for the Syrian security forces against the demonstrators. It also added that “the US government said that Mr. Radan [a top officer in Iran’s police forces] had travelled to Damascus in April 2011, when he met with the Syrian security service and provided expertise to assist the Syrian government’s crackdown on the Syrian people.” (Reynold 2012). It also referred to the report of 6 February 2012 published by Israel’s Haaretz newspaper saying that “General Suleimani [the then Commander of Quds Forces related to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRG), who was assassinated in an attack administered by the US in Iraq in 2020] had gone to Syria and taken up a position in what the newspaper described as a ‘war room’ which managed the Syrian army’s maneuvers against opposition forces.” (Reynold 2012). In this regard, it tried to show that Iran not only had no neutral positions in the Syrian crisis but supported the Syrian security forces against the anti-government protesters.

The BBC also tried to show that Iran sent ground forces that fought alongside the Syrian troops (Ghattas 2013), spent billions of dollars, provided military advice, subsidized weapons (Syria Crisis 2015), and supplied lines of credit and oil to the Syrian government. During the terrorist chemical attack that occurred in Eastern Ghouta in 2013, the BBC not only tried to accuse Iran and Russia of permitting what happened but also criticized both countries for not facilitating access by humanitarian agencies to Eastern Ghouta. In fact, the BBC reported that “The area had been designed as a ‘de-escalation zone’ by Russia and Iran, the Syrian government’s main allies” (Syria War 2017a) and “The UN’s humanitarian coordinator for Syria rebuked Russia and Iran for not doing anything to provide aid agencies with access to the Eastern Ghouta.” (Syria War 2017b). It can be deduced that both countries did not want the UN agencies to find any evidence or proof of the involvement of the Syrian government. The BBC reached the conclusion that the Syrian government acted against its people before the authorized agencies released the news on what had actually happened.

The BBC also looked at Iran’s role in Syria as a violent situation that escalated when various militia, including Afghani groups, were sent there by Iran. According to the BBC Persian report (Sahraei 2016), Iran had influenced the decision of Lebanon’s Hezbollah movement to send fighters to Syria to assist pro-al-Assad forces, which would ignite the fuel of sectarian conflicts between the Shiites and the Sunnis: “Will it [the Hezbollah Movement] find itself in a confessional civil war with the Sunnis in Lebanon, especially if Syria breaks apart and the region is plunged into a process of sectarian balkanization?” (Muir 2013). Iran also tried to provoke Israel to become directly involved in the crisis (Syria Civil War 2018) in an effort to turn the civil war into a regional conflict. Iran was also assigned no positive roles in the mediated political settlement by insisting that President Bashar would be a part of the solution but not the problem. The BBC reported that “While stressing that it is not seeking to keep Mr. Assad in power forever, Iran meanwhile believes he needs to continue as president to fight the Jihadist IS and maintain the national unity.” (Naji 2015). As a result,

this is why the Genova group had withdrawn its invitation from Iran to participate ([Syrian Conflict 2015](#)).

All of these three metaphors showed that the information that the BBC tried to disseminate as news had two functions. From a political standpoint, the BBC sought to demonize the Syrian government because it was judged as not properly reacting to the popular protests and also carried out an alleged chemical attack against its own people, although without having sufficient proof. From a geostrategic stance, it strived to accuse Iran and Russia of supporting al-Assad's regimes, despite all of his atrocities, such as the chemical attacks. Therefore, the BBC operated in line with Britain's foreign policy in a perfectly aligned way without inquiring about what was to happen if the existing government collapsed in Syria and what would ensue for the civilians and the future of national unity. It also provided a chance for the various terrorist groups that were operational in the MENA to gain more power. Accordingly, it went further by addressing Tony Blair's criticism of Iran's foreign policy when he stated that "regime change in Tehran would immediately make me significantly more optimistic about the whole of the region" ([Tony Blair Criticizes Iran and Syria Regimes 2011](#)). Therefore, the BBC news could be understood by using the CDA and quoting different authors, such as [Van Dijk \(1993\)](#) and [Fairclough \(1993\)](#), as providing essential informational support for the façade of legitimacy for the Western geopolitical policy of regime change in Syria by creating an unbalanced informational interpretation of the elements in ethical and judicial dimensions of the conflict to subjectively affect the audiences' cognitive evaluations and conclusions.

7. Iran's Role in Syria from the Perspective of Russia's Sputnik News

A collective paper was published on Russia's foreign policy in 2019 entitled *The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Strategy or Opportunism?* ([Talbot and Lovotti 2019](#)). The paper tried to provide a satisfactory answer to the stated question. Strategically, it tried to follow a "post-Soviet" strategy by focusing on the near abroad and "the Westphalian approach" or the non-violability of the state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs ([Simons 2021](#), p. 96). It also stated that Russia's foreign policy was to follow three main functions: "(1) helping secure Russian interests at the domestic, regional, and international levels; (2) serving as a balancing mechanism against the US and its allies perceived as moving toward a post-Westphalian model of sovereignty; (3) acting as a maker of the "non-Western" power in the emerging multipolar global order" (Deyermond 2016, quoted from [Simons 2021](#), p. 96).

It also provided a window of opportunities for Russia's foreign policy to act as a key player internationally in the hope of rapprochement with the West as the annexation of Crimea to Russia unraveled. Other actions included describing the MENA situation as the spoiled aftermath of the Arab Uprising since 2011. By adopting a US hodge-podge foreign policy in the region, it also tried to balance with all states interested in Syria as a "power broker" ([Simons 2021](#), p. 97) by selling arms to the authoritarian regimes in the region, stabilizing Syria's situation to preserve its naval facilities in Tartus, and preventing the emergence and spread of the terrorist groups over the near abroad. Finally, Russia tried to play a positive role in the international system through different actions, such as what it did in eliminating the chemical weapons in Syria and thereby preventing possible mass destruction in the region, which the US tried to provoke.

Russia's Sputnik tried to relay Iran's role in Syria in line with Russia's foreign policy using three metaphors. First, it published the news of Iran and Israel officially and unofficially in relation to their concerns with Syria with no comments in favor of Russia's power broker role (see [Baev 2015](#)).

Second, Russia used the Noje Airbase located in Hamendan (Iran) in order to perform air operations against terrorist groups in Syria since the airbase offers geographical advantages. This move caused great concerns because establishing any foreign military bases in Iran "even for peaceful purposes" is forbidden in accordance with Article 146 of Iran's Constitution. Sputnik created a series of interviews with the Russian Ambassador

in Tehran and some Iranian experts and officials who agreed to justify it in order to reach a temporary solution to the Syrian crisis ([Al-Shallan 2016a](#)). Based on the two countries' agreement, this was proof of Iran's military diplomacy ensuring that facilities for the deployment of international operations, in addition to the great sensibilities coming back to the Cold War atmosphere, did not become a matter and cause for concern ([Al-Shallan 2016a, 2016b](#); [Interview with Levan Dzhagaryan, Russia Ambassador in Iran 2021](#); [Abshenas 2016](#); [Mehrabi 2016](#); [Brojerdi 2016](#)).

Furthermore, Suleimani's assassination in 2020 was the main motivation for Iran's regional strategy in Syria and the region to be disseminated in the news by Sputnik in order to avoid probable entrapment in a conflictual manner with the US. Suleimani, who was the Quds Commander of the IRG, was actually in Russia's military ground partnership in the Syrian crisis and instrumental in defeating ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, Sputnik needed to present the situation with surprise as the invaluable news came out and could be crucial for the region's security arrangement in the foreseeable future ([Israeli Commanders Talked about Ghasem Suleimani 2019](#); [Iran Calls Suleimani's Killings 'State Terrorism' Repeats Call for Justice for Slain Commander 2020](#)).

In this instance, Sputnik favored Russia's foreign policy of regime stability in Syria, which was connected to Iran's foreign policy priority, where Syria represented a long-term ally of Iran in a largely anti-Iranian region. Therefore, CDA revealed that (unlike the BBC) Sputnik's narrative described Iran's role as positive in the region within the frame of an emerging non-Western multipolar order that challenged the US-led order. Regarding both BBC's and Sputnik's reports on Iran's role in the Syrian conflict, the findings were consistent with the thesis conducted by [Bernays \(1947\)](#), who introduced the idea of news as a mechanism for engineering public consent.

8. Conclusions

This study aimed to demonstrate how the two important news networks from opposing sides of the Syrian conflict portrayed Iran's role in the crisis. Critical discourse analysis was employed to determine how the media outlets would work in the production of news content in accordance with their habits and editorial lines, which was specific for each of them and in line with the preferences of the government in their country of origin.

From a critical standpoint, this paper explained that the metaphors employed by the media on Iran's role in Syria were created with the intention of engineering some important conclusions among the audience. First, the media in question tried to operate perfectly in line with the foreign policy preferences of its country of origin rather than trying to resolve or make sense of the crisis by acting as a bridge to peace and relieving the people suffering in the terrible situations.

Second, there were no overt and open attempts to assess the foreign policies of their countries of origin in Syria. These policies determined under what circumstances the liberal countries should decide to conduct a military humanitarian intervention in Syria, why Syria's crisis was different from Libya's one, why military humanitarian intervention in Syria had been as imprudent as that of Libya in accordance with the responsibility to protect (R2P) mission, why the Western countries strived to pursue humanitarian aid leading to the regime change in Libya, and why they also tried to change the regime in Syria without considering the consequences and aftermath in Libya ([Simons 2018](#), chp. 9).

Other policies determined why Russia was not involved in the crisis on the ground and why it played with all groups interested in the crisis in order to maintain the role of a power broker rather than trying to solve the problem and drawing a distinction between the terrorist groups with protesters, who intended to demonstrate in a peaceful rally. Another important area indicated that the Russian policy for the future of Syria when the crisis subsided was to offer a satisfactory solution to what were the root causes of the crisis. None of the players that meddled in the crisis conducted a prior comprehensive assessment prior as to the possible impact of their policies.

Moreover, they tried to utilize the news related to Iran's foreign policy in Syria via the news outlets of those countries on the opposite side of Iran in Syria. There were no reports as to why Iran was involved in the Syrian crisis, what Iran's solution was for the crisis, how it tried to promote multilateral treaties, and how the counter-hegemonic policy used by Iran influenced its thinking and actions. The main issue in Iran's foreign policy on the Syrian crisis was that any efforts to collapse the state in the MENA region would escalate the crisis, spread it into other places, and create an environment that facilitates terrorist groups' ability to emerge according to the evidence from past events. These issues were not included in the analysis.

Taking a glance at what occurred in the MENA region from the outbreak of the Arab Spring, one can understand that there was no hope for a sense of the early optimism perceived by people and their ability to shape democratic processes and to win their self-determination. The efforts of all sides muddled into the crisis, leading the situation toward a catastrophe and disappointment caused by Arab Winters in the region, especially with regard to what happened recently in Afghanistan after twenty years of being occupied by the foreign countries claiming to fight the Taliban and Islamic extremism, which were accused of conducting the 9/11 terrorist attack. In fact, the Western countries and media left people ignorant or misinformed about the events and processes that were unfolding. Therefore, a future question is as follows: what prophecy will the media hold for a similar scenario in the future?

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