

# IMAGINING IRAN

## REPRESENTATION OF THE JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION IN DUTCH NEWSPAPERS

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## INTRODUCTION

The image of Iran in Western media<sup>1</sup> is a negative one: terrorism, dictatorship, Islamic extremism, nuclear weapons and human rights violations are considered to be newsworthy about the country. Several studies have shown that Iran related news is dominated by an American influenced discourse that is portraying Iran and the West as opposites.<sup>2</sup> That discourse is e.g. negatively affecting the relationship between Iran and the Netherlands. These countries have been trading partners since 1623. Furthermore, the Netherlands used to be one of the Islamic Republic's biggest partners in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe.<sup>3</sup> That all started changing when the Islamic Revolution (1979) broke out in Iran. The United States imposed heavy economic sanctions on the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran. During these developments, the Dutch chose the side of the Americans and decreased their contact with the Iranians. It got even harder for Iran in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the Nuclear Crisis broke out and the United States imposed even more sanctions on the Iranian economy. Between 2001 and 2012, the trade between Iran and the Netherlands was at an all-time low.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 between Iran and the P5+1<sup>4</sup> changed that situation. Iran signed the pact so that a number of the economic sanctions would be lifted. In return, the Iranian government reduced their nuclear capacity to a civil level. With the lifting of the sanctions the trading possibilities increased. Both Iranian and Dutch businesses wanted to stimulate and expand their exchange of water management and agriculture techniques.<sup>5</sup> However, before they got a chance to do so, the 'Nuclear Deal' was revoked by United States president Donald Trump on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Even though the Netherlands, like

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Western media' in this study refers to North-American, European and Australian media. In spite of its claimed openness, Western media has been demonstrated to contain biased material or coverage of certain countries or groups, usually aligning itself with staunch criticisms of those countries still independent of Western interests, and dismissing human rights abuses against nationalities by Western countries.

<sup>2</sup> Kincheloe, J. L. and Steinberg, S. R. (2004) *The miseducation of the West : how schools and the media distort our understanding of the Islamic world. Reverberations : cultural studies and education* Westport, Conn.: Praeger.;

Behnam, B. and Zenouz, R.M., (2008) A Contrastive Critical Analysis of Iranian and British Newspaper Reports on the Iran Nuclear Power Program in *Systemic Functional Linguistics in Use*, OWPLC 29, pp. 199-218, p. 199.; Beeman, W. O. (2005) *The "great Satan" vs. the "mad mullahs" : how the United States and Iran demonize each other*. Westport, Conn.: London : Praeger ; Oxford : Harcourt Education [distributor].

<sup>3</sup> Yavari, K. and Moseni, R. 2012. Trade liberalization and economic growth. *a case study of Iran*. 1 ed.: Journal of Economic Policy Reform.

<sup>4</sup> The United States, Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom and Germany.

<sup>5</sup> Chapagain, A.K., Hoekstra, A.Y. Savenije, H. H. G., (2006) Water saving through international trade of agricultural products. in *Hydrology and Earth System Sciences Discussions*, European Geosciences Union, Vol. 10 (3), pp.455-468.

i.e. the UK, Germany and France, is trying to hold the JCPOA together at the time of writing<sup>6</sup>, the historic trust between Iran and the West was broken once more and the relationship will need double the work to fix that blow.

Interestingly, however, even when the Nuclear Deal was in place, between July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018, trade numbers remained disappointing to both the Netherlands and Iran.<sup>7</sup> This can be ascribed to the hesitant attitude of the Dutch government and businesses. Neither wanted to take risks with a country they did not fully trust and a fragile JCPOA agreement. Various interviews and reports confirm that Dutch bankers, politicians and business owners expected Iran to overstep the agreements of the JCPOA and thereby endanger their investments.<sup>8</sup> Contradictory enough, it turned out to be the American president that chose to pull out of the accord. The Netherlands' attitude towards Iran in that sense is exemplary for that of many Western countries. Dutch connotations regarding Iran are mostly negative. As mentioned before, the Dutch language that is used to describe Iranians focusses on the differences between the two peoples. It deals the Dutch with 'good' characteristics, whereas it determines the Iranians with characteristics that are perceived to be 'bad'.

It seems obvious that a change in the Dutch stereotypes and negative attitude towards Iran could benefit both parties economically. Additionally, it could also strengthen the situation within the Dutch borders: the Netherlands is home to a significant amount of Iranian immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Even though their integration process has been relatively more successful than that of other groups<sup>10</sup> and despite their daily contribution to it, the Iranian minority in the Netherlands does not feel like they are accepted as a part of Dutch society.<sup>11</sup> A better mutual understanding could result in a more positive form of cultural identification. So, if the Netherlands can recognize and change its negative perspective of Iran, it could set an example for the rest of the Western world by creating a situation of mutual respect that is economically and socially beneficial for all parties.

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<sup>6</sup> NOS (2018) The Netherlands want to keep Iran deal intact. Available at: <https://nos.nl/artikel/2231086-nederland-wil-iran-deal-zoveel-mogelijk-intact-houden.html>. [Accessed 9 May. 2018].

<sup>7</sup> Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland (2017) Handels- en investeringscijfers Nederland-Iran. March, 2017. Available at <https://www.rvo.nl/sites/default/files/2017/03/Dossier%20Iran%20-%20maart%202017.pdf>. [Accessed 3 Mar. 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Beunderman, M. and L. van Nierop (2016) *It's nice to have a trade mission in Iran, but the banks are getting in the way*. In NRC Handelsblad,. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/05/11/leuke-handelsmissie-in-iran-maar-de-banken-liggen-dwars-a1493285> [Accessed Nov 11. 2017].

<sup>9</sup> Koopmans, R. (2008) 'Tradeoffs between equality and difference: Immigrant integration, multiculturalism, and the welfare state in cross-national perspective', *WZB Discussion Papers*, Vol. 4, pp. 54-61, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Ghorashi, H. (2002) *Ways to survive, battle to win: Iran women exiles in the Netherlands and the U.S.A.* New York: Nova Science Publishers, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ghorashi, *Ways to survive, battle to win*. p. 3.

### a. *Relevance*

The negative Iran-related discourse becomes especially apparent in Dutch newspapers. For instance, after Iranian diplomats convinced the International Atomic Energy Agency that Iran was complicit to the terms agreed in the Joint Compressive Plan Of Action, de Telegraaf wrote:

*'Iran, former criminal state in the 'Axis of Evil', is back as a fully-fledged member of the international community. Pariah state and potential powerhouse rehabilitated for the first time since the end of the Cold War.'*<sup>12</sup>

Being the biggest newspaper in the Netherlands with 462.000 printed copies in 2016, *de Telegraaf's* condescending tone and hostile portrayal of Iran reaches a significant part of the Dutch population. This Telegraaf quote contains a perfect example of what Adib-Moghaddam (2012) calls 'the Clash of Civilizations regime of truth'<sup>13</sup>, or 'clash regime' in short. Derived from Huntington's (2010) well known book title '*The Clash of Civilizations*'<sup>14</sup>, Adib-Moghaddam's clash regime portrays the world as a historic battleground between the Islam and the West. This thesis will establish that Dutch newspapers portray the relationship between the Netherlands and Iran in the light of an inevitable clash between the West and Islam. Part of that regime is what I call the Iran-as-Polity discourse. In line with the clash regime, Dutch newspapers portray Iran related issues as a topic on the political agenda. They see Iran as a country and a people that need to be supervised and corrected by Western countries.

For example, prior to the re-election of president Rohani on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2017, de Volkskrant wrote;

*'Elections in Iran are unfree by default. ... Women (of course) aren't eligible, but if you belong to a religious minority, you don't need to bother either. Even Sunnis are barred from applying as candidates, let alone those who criticize supreme leader ayatollah Khamenei.'*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Telegraaf (2016), Sanctions Iran can be lifted. January 17th. Original title: Sancties Iran kunnen worden opgeheven.

'Translation: Iran, nog niet zo lang geleden een schurkenstaat in de 'As van het Kwaad', is terug als volwaardig lid van de wereldgemeenschap. Voor het eerst sinds het einde van de Koude Oorlog wordt een pariastaat en potentiële grootmacht gerehabiliteerd.' Available at <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/451264/sancties-iran-kunnen-worden-opgeheven>. [Accessed 24 Jan. 2018].

<sup>13</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A., (2010) *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations: Us and Them beyond Orientalism*, London: Hurst & Company p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Huntington, S. P., et al. (2010). *The clash of civilizations: the debate*. New York, NY, Foreign Affairs.

<sup>15</sup> Safai, D. (2017). Are the elections in Iran: the population can choose between bad and worse. May 19, *de Volkskrant*.. Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/19-mei-zijn-de-verkiezingen-in-iran-de-bevolking->

The article reinforces the idea that the most important thing to know about Iran is that its government is undemocratic and that it is suppressing its people. It taps into the notion that Iran is an irrational state that needs guidance from the rational Western world.

### b. *Problem Statement*

The Iran-as-Polity discourse and the larger Clash of Civilizations regime of truth can be observed throughout Dutch newspaper articles. That is, however, not to say that covering these issues in the news is bad or that these issues hold no news value. It is merely to say that sole representation of these issues is bad. One sided representation negatively affects the image of Iran in the minds of the Dutch. That is why this thesis addresses the representation problem of Dutch news media regarding Iran. It answers the following research question: how did Dutch newspapers *de Telegraaf*, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *TROUW* portray Iran between 2013 and 2017? In answering this question, this study explains how the use of biased language prevents the Dutch news media from accurately portraying Iran. The news media are unable to see past the clash regime's 'us-versus-them' logic that dominates Iran-related news. This lack of diversity prevents editors and journalists from representing the complexity that is Iranian society. There is no one or true way of representing Iran, but by repeating one and the same version of the narrative, that becomes a reality for the Dutch. Answering the research question as stated above will widen awareness about the problems of Iranian representation in Dutch newspapers. Moreover, by stimulating awareness about representational issues, this thesis will contribute to a less Western-centred portrayal of the world.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot has been written about international relations between Iran and the West. I will limit my discussion of relevant publications to publications focusing on discourses and processes of othering, because the aim of this thesis is to assess that such discourses have changed Western perceptions of Iran. Power is unevenly distributed in the world. Baldwin (1962) asserts that a

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[kan-kiezen-tussen-slecht-en-slechter-a4495461/](#) [Accessed 23 Dec. 2017]. Original title: 19 mei zijn de verkiezingen in Iran: de bevolking kan kiezen tussen slecht en slechter. Translation text: 'Verkiezingen in Iran zijn per definitie niet vrij ... Vrouwen komen (uiteraard) niet in aanmerking, maar ook als je behoort tot een religieuze minderheid hoef je geen moeite te doen. Zelfs soennieten worden geweerd, laat staan zij die kritiek hebben op de Opperste Leider ayatollah Khamenei.'

double-standard exists no matter a person's place in society. He states that if an Irishman, a Pole or an Italian were to grab a bullhorn at a rally and scream Patrick Henry's words "Give me liberty or give me death," that person would be seen as a hero. If a black man were to scream the exact same words into the exact same bullhorn, he would be seen as an agitator, a scoundrel and probably a criminal.<sup>16</sup> One could argue that a comparable system of oppressive power is at play among states. Developed (white) western states are able to justify their nuclear programme by the logic of nuclear deterrence. Yet non-Western countries, like Iran in this case, are deemed irrational. Their 'lack of development' makes them 'untrustworthy and dangerous'. Hearing these western-centred arguments that supposedly legitimize why Iran is unfit for having access to nuclear weapons is going against the sense of pride and longing for independence that are rooted deep into the Iranian identity. According to the powerful institutions in the international system, the same logic that benefits powerful countries does not apply to countries like Iran. Western-centred discourses portray Iran as inherently different from the countries they view as 'Western' or, in other words, a part of the 'us' group. These countries act and think according to a logic that springs from their own linguistic realities and the privileges that they bring. Iran, they argue, would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons in a first strike against Israel or Saudi Arabia. Even if doing so would rationally go against Iranian interests.

It is thus interesting to ask why some discourses are chosen over others. Some discourses are more dominant than others and a disproportionate part of their power is deeply rooted in the North/West. International relations have a Western-centred character, it privileges certain perspectives and practices and the language it uses only reinforces those issues.<sup>17</sup> To understand the power that language holds, we need to understand the identities it can shape and strengthen. For example, Campbell (2008) extended the International Relations debate on identity and culture, demonstrating how perceptions of danger and difference establish national identities. With the United States as his example, he shows that foreign policy isn't just a societal expression, but considerably constitutes state identity through the interpretation of a danger posed by the 'other'.<sup>18</sup> Like Anderson and Said,<sup>19</sup> Campbell states that the affirmation of the 'other' is a significant component of the realization of the self, since identity is realized insofar as one can determine those elements which constitute the

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<sup>16</sup> Baldwin, J., (1962) *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Vintage Books, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> Nayak, M. and Selbin, E., (2010) *Decentering international relations*. London: Zed Books., p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, D., (2008) *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, B., (1991) *Imagined communities : reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, London, New York: Verso Books.  
Said, E., (1995) *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London: Penguin.



foreign. He assesses the philosophical and political implications of the establishment of U.S Foreign Policy and analyses the role of identity in the shaping of international relations. Campbell concludes that foreign policy is not just an expression of a given society, but it is tied to individual states, for it constitutes state identity through the process of ‘othering’ foreign actors.<sup>20</sup>

However, world politics doesn’t just take place behind the closed doors of government. *Writing the war on terrorism* (2005) by Richard Jackson, deconstructs the War on Terror narrative that is both used in international politics and US popular culture. Jackson examines how the rhetoric has been used to justify the global counter-terrorism offensive to the American public, as a response to the Twin Tower attacks in 2001. He discusses how language has been used to deliberately manipulate public anxiety about terrorist threats to gain support for military action, and how the abuse of Iraqi prisoners has been normalised through rhetoric and practice. Jackson explains how the War on Terror was constructed, how it was amplified by key social actors and finally how it became the dominant narrative in United States politics, as well as in public opinion. He concludes that language is never neutral. Where Campbell’s conclusion is just covering the high levels of politics and foreign policy, Jackson takes it a step further, by providing evidence that discourses actively construct societies.

International politics, like the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West (in particular the United States of America) is another example of perception manipulated by language.<sup>21</sup> Whether it manifests itself in government buildings or in people’s homes, it is important to investigate what images dominate people’s conception of Iran in the Western countries under American influence. The Netherlands is one of those countries. The main question in this research asks if the dominant discourse in the Netherlands differs from the US sponsored narrative. Or could one regard the Netherlands and its Iran-related discourse as an American proxy? A lot of research has been done on image formation of the Iranian other in the Anglo-American contexts. However, the Dutch context has not yet been thoroughly examined. Though as in Washington and London, negative narratives about Iran have dominated Dutch foreign policy and the statements that mean to legitimize it for over

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *Writing security*, p. 249.

<sup>21</sup> Ollapally, D. and Cooley, A. (1996) ‘Identity Politics and the International System’ in *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 2 (4), pp. 479-499;  
Beeman, *The Great Satan vs. the Mad Mullahs*;  
Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2008) *Iran in World Politics: The Question of the Islamic Republic*. New York, Columbia University Press.

forty years. Further elaboration on the choice for the focus on the Dutch context can be found in the Gap section of this thesis, but for now it is important to take into consideration that politics happens not just at the macro, but also at meso and micro levels.

Hence, world politics does not just take place in the public sphere. The interest in media discourses has stimulated the study of International Relations to move away from stagnant macro-political analyses focused on systemic relations between states, to find new referents and highlight new dynamics of power. The effect of media discourses on public perception and through this on policy has been established more than once.<sup>22</sup> Not only are mass media of grave importance in relation to constituting public opinion, the continuation of prejudice<sup>23</sup> and the setting of the political agenda,<sup>24</sup> they are also gravely influenced by its discourses. The same is stated by Gamson and Modigliani (1989). They argue that ‘media discourse and public opinion are treated as two parallel systems of constructing meaning’<sup>25</sup>, or in other words: reality is shaped by the media and by public opinion, both of which further construct each other. Others, like Behnam and Zenouz have argued that ‘the media has the ability to construct the way we think about a subject, whether as a benevolent or a malevolent construction’.<sup>26</sup> The establishment of the media as the primary constructing source of public opinion allows us to view the news media as a key organic information source impacting on image development in the minds of people that put themselves in relation to Iran.<sup>27</sup>

One’s consumption of media items influences one’s image formation about the foreign, is what Baloglu and McCleary (1999) found in a now well-known empirical study. They developed a model to determine which factors influence and form the image of a foreign

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<sup>22</sup> Campbell, *Writing security*, p. 198.;

Aggestam, L. (1999) Role Conceptions and the Politics of Identity in Foreign Policy. in *ARENA Working Papers*, 99 (8).;

Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, p. 30.;

Cohen, B.C. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 122-125.

Davis, D.K. and Robinson, J.P. (1989) Newsflow and Democratic Society in an Age of Electronic Media. in *Public Communication and Behavior*, pages 59-102.;

Shapiro, M.A. and Chock, T.M. (2003) Psychological Processes in Perceiving Reality. In *Media Psychology*. Vol. 5(2), pp. 163-198.

<sup>23</sup> Entman (2007) ‘Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power’ in *Journal of Communication*, Volume 57(1), pp. 163-173, p. 169.

<sup>24</sup> Kioussis, S. and McCombs, M. (2004) ‘Agenda-Setting Effects and Attitude Strength: Political Figures during the 1996 Presidential Election’ in *SAGE Journals*, Vol. 31(1), pp. 359-374, p. 361.

<sup>25</sup> Gamson, W.A. and Modigliani, A. (1989) ‘Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach,’ in *American Journal of Sociology* 95, no. 1: pp. 1-37, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Behnam and Zenouz, A Contrastive Critical Analysis of Iranian and British Newspaper Reports on the Iran Nuclear Power Program, p. 202.

<sup>27</sup> Gartner, W. C. (1994) Image Formation Process in *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 2(2-3), pp. 191-216, p. 199.

Mercille, J. (2005) Media effects on image: The Case of Tibet in *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 32(4), pp. 1039-1055, p. 1040.

country. Their results established that media discourses are one of the main vectors.<sup>28</sup> Additionally Tasci and Gartner (2007) suggest that, because of their credibility and market penetration, news media in particular can be highly influential in image formation. Particularly when they portray dramatic events, such as political upheaval, protests, terrorism, insurgency, crime and war. This literature review can thus be summed up by stating that language is power. It doesn't just constitute political decisions; it is actively present in every aspect of any given society. Furthermore, the influence of news media on the construction of 'the Iranian other' in Western public perception has been established in the Anglo-American context. However, it is yet to be studied how other countries that are considered to be 'Western' relate to these theories.

#### a. Gap

Despite useful suggestions, the Dutch news media have not been subjected to a study of constructing an 'Iranian other'. Here in the Netherlands, the role of the media has been less thoroughly investigated. Even less so in relation to the public image of Iran. According to Adoni and Mane (1984): news media play an important role in 'shaping the individual and collective consciousness by organizing and circulating the knowledge which people have of their own everyday life and of the more remote contexts of their lives.'<sup>29</sup> This thesis will show in which way this is true for the relationship between the Netherlands and Iran. Moreover, the research will focus on the discursive sphere in which the Dutch attitudes towards Iran become apparent.

As stated in the introduction, Iran and the Netherlands could both benefit from a more positive Dutch outlook towards Iran. Socially and economically, the countries could gain new insights from each other. Socially, treating Iranians like people, instead of 'others' will make the white people in the Netherlands see that their prided 'tolerance' towards 'others' within Dutch society is based on a system of oppression and racism that privileges white people. Instead, they could try and move from tolerance towards acceptance, thereby creating equal opportunities for everyone in society.

Economically, the Dutch could use their privileged position in the world to assist the Iranians in setting up new technical systems of agriculture and water management and help

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<sup>28</sup> Baloglu, S. & McCleary, K.W. (1999) A Model of Destination Image Formation. In *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 868-897, p. 880.

<sup>29</sup> Adoni, H. and Mane, S. (1984) Media and the Social Construction of reality: Toward an Integration of Theory and Research. In *Communication Research*, Vol. 11(3), pp. 323- 340. p. 325.

them to handle extreme weather. Furthermore, the power dynamic that is present in the relationship between Iran and the Netherlands is unequally benefitting the Dutch. For Iranian citizens, getting a visa for a country like the Netherlands is a difficult, costly and sometimes even impossible undertaking. The rate of Iranian Rial to Euro's is extremely expensive<sup>30</sup> and the Dutch visa regulations regarding Iran are very strict. So not only does Iran's bad reputation in the Netherlands prevent i.e. increasing Dutch (eco)tourism to Iran, trade interactions and the freedom of Iranians, it also estranges the Dutch from the significant Iranian minority in that actively contributes to their society. The lacking knowledge about Dutch narratives that underlie the discursive domain in which the relations between the Iranians and the Dutch manifest themselves needs to be tackled. Being aware of these primary Dutch narratives can offer insights in the complex relation between the two countries, because it sheds a new light on the identities and interests of its journalistic machine.

## OBJECTIVE

After asserting the media's responsibility in the construction of damaging and distorting narratives about Iran, it is clear that a study of Dutch newspapers is necessary. First of all, to clearly identify the discourses involved. Second, because examining relevant media items will help to explain the discourses and, third, because it will contribute to counter the narratives they reinforce. This research does not mean to establish that the news coverage about i.e. terrorism and human right violations in Iran is wrong in itself. These topics definitely deserve attention. However, the way they are used to empower the dominant regime of truth is harmful to the Iranian people. They help create an enemy for Western countries to rally against in a classical us vs. them discourse. They barely give notion of the broader context of events and don't take the actions of i.e. Western governments into account: Trump pulling the US from the Nuclear Deal and reinstalling sanctions receives considerably less negative attention than the rumours of Iran violating the agreed enrichment limits. Furthermore, the involvement of the United States, Israeli and Saudi Arabian governments in conflicts in the Middle East or West Asian region is rarely mentioned, whereas the Iranian government is condemned for every action that is related to these conflicts. These double standards are portrayed as objective and actively influence journalism, public opinion and policies. Dutch

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<sup>30</sup> Bloomberg (2018) From September 2017 to April 2018, IRR to EUR exchange rates have more than doubled. Available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-08/iranian-rial-hits-record-low-dealers-stop-trading-dollar-euro> [Accessed on 5 May. 2018].

awareness about these representation issues. The Dutch participate in a dominant discourse that is harming the interests of Iranians and this thesis aims to raise awareness about these issues. To achieve its objective of identifying, explaining and countering the dominant discourse, this research will follow the research question and sub questions as stated in the next paragraph.

## RESEARCH QUESTION AND SUB QUESTIONS

To achieve its objective, the main question of this research asks; how did the Dutch newspapers (*de Telegraaf*, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *TROUW*) report about the Joint Compressive Plan of Action between 2013 and 2017? To find an answer to the research question, it is necessary to divide the study into multiple sub-questions. The goal is to get a representation of all the Dutch newspaper's image of Iran in said period. This will be expanded upon in the methodology section of this thesis. For now, it is sufficient to distinguish that this study will discuss newspapers that adhere to three different perceptions across the political spectrum.

First, the Nuclear Deal-related narrative of the most left-winged newspaper, *TROUW*, will be examined. Answering the first sub-question 'how did *TROUW* portray the Nuclear Deal between 2013 and 2017?' will show how *TROUW* portrayed Iran and its relationship to the Netherlands in that period. Second, this research will do the same for the right-winged newspaper *de Telegraaf*, by answering the question how it portrayed the JCPOA between 2013 and 2017. Finally, the same question will be answered for the moderate newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*. Together, the answers to these question will provide an insight into the discourses that dominate Dutch Iran-related news. Furthermore, the conclusion can help to better understand and strengthen the relationship between the Netherlands and Iran, and the West and Iran in general.

## RESEARCH OUTLINE

This research will thus be structured as follows: this thesis will first establish what it considers to be the Clash of Civilizations regime of truth as the wide framework for this thesis. In the first chapter, it will describe the most important aspects of the Iran-as-Polity and Iran-as-Society discourses and the images they portray. The chapter will continue to examine the

JCPOA-related content from right-wing newspapers to see how it relates to the Iran-as-Polity and/or Iran-as-Society discourses. Titled ‘a right-winged view of the nuclear deal’ the first chapter thus goes into *De Telegraaf*’s conservative perception of the JCPOA. Furthermore, the second chapter, ‘a moderate perspective of the nuclear deal’, deals with the discourse that dominates the articles in relatively moderate newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*. Then, the third chapter of this thesis, titled ‘left-winged coverage of the JCPOA’<sup>31</sup> will discuss the relevant narratives in progressive newspaper *TROUW*. Ultimately, this thesis will discuss which discourse dominates Dutch newspapers and how the news media have trapped the less hostile discourse in a paradox. The conclusion sets forth how this all relates back to the clash regime and what this means for the relationship between the Netherlands and Iran and, in a bigger picture, the relationship between the West and the Islam.

## THEORY

As stated before, the broad theoretical framework for this research is the Clash of Civilisations regime of truth. Studying the power of language matters, because it executes power over the reality in which we live. According to Foucault (1989) discourses are dictated by a larger regime of truth.<sup>32</sup> This study draws attention to the clash of civilizations regime, hereafter referred to as the ‘clash regime’. It holds that individuals and societies define themselves and others in terms of ‘us-versus-them’ logic, rather than within a situation that is neutral. As a result, the logic of interaction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is based on inventions, rather than ‘our’ and ‘their’ ‘actual’ qualities. An expert on the topic is Arshin Adib-Moghaddam. In 2012 he described the clash regime as a vast system: He stated that ‘its excluding logic is imprinted again and again into society and that its structural tenets have not emerged recently.’<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, in 2010 Adib-Moghaddam explained that the clash of civilizations regime, as it appears to us in this age, focusses on the dichotomy between ‘the Islam’ and ‘the West’. It is a surface effect of all that has been invented about ‘us’ and ‘them’ in all the books, ideologies, histories and statements that have contemplated about the inevitability of inter-group conflicts.<sup>34</sup>

Samuel Huntington’s now well-known article in *Foreign Policy* (1993) and

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<sup>31</sup> The chapter titles are only drafts at this point

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, M. (1998) *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*. London: Penguin, p. 22.

<sup>33</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A. (2012) The Theory and Praxis of Iranian-American Relations, in *International Studies Journal*, Vol. 9(1), pp. 35-69, p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations*, p. 7.

subsequent book *A Clash of Civilizations* (1996) perfectly captures the tone of this discursive field. It is no wonder that Adib-Moghaddam named the regime of truth after Huntington's book title. Huntington imagines the post-Cold war world as a place where religious and cultural identities inherently are the biggest source of conflict. According to this deterministic theory, the most conflicts will arise between Muslims and non-Muslims. Huntington normalizes his claim about igniting conflicts between the Islam and the West by attempting to secure a historic base for the collision of the two civilizations. He states that the conflict that persists in 21<sup>st</sup> century dates back to the first invasion of the Islam in Europe in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, its eventual conquest during the Spanish Reconquista, the Ottoman attacks on the Balkans, also counting Hungary and Austria, and the colonial and post-colonial distribution of Muslim majority countries by Europeans. Overall, he generalizes peoples and defines them as opposites. Furthermore, 20<sup>th</sup> century examples of what he terms 'Islamic Resurgence' include the first Gulf War and the Iranian Revolution. Factors that add to the conflict are the characteristics that Christianity and the Islam share: both are missionary religions, both are universal religions: they leave no room for others. And both religions are teleological, meaning they vision of history is linear and focused on a Final Judgement. With his analysis, Huntington attempts to convince his audience that the conflict is based in undeniable reality and that history points out that there is no way around the clash between Islam and the West.<sup>35</sup>

Huntington's works have spread wide and influenced many liberal foreign policy decisions, like the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States. To combat the scientific legitimization of the clash concept, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam revisits the theoretical grounds that support Huntington's theory. In *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations* Adib-Moghaddam presents an inquiry into the ways these sort of revivals of the clash idea became possible in our age; within what material and ideational constellations it has been produced; on the basis of which ideas it could appear, travel, metamorphose and objectify itself. The Clash of Civilizations idea appears to us today in the form of i.e. news articles. To create more awareness about its workings and effects, the Clash of Civilizations idea needs to be seen in relation to this grander and historically reinvented clash regime. Adib-Moghaddam departs from stating that the clash regime is a cultural artefact because of its claims of historical depth and normative importance.

Adib-Moghaddam shows the clash regime's success in transforming myths into pseudo realities. The disciples of the clash regime continuously attempt to prove that the

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<sup>35</sup> Huntington, *The clash of civilizations*.

supposed conflict between the 'Islam' and the 'West' has always existed, that it is inevitable, natural and that there is no way around it. Adib-Moghaddam states that the normalisation of the conflict that sustains the clash regime in our age uses three main binaries. The first is the barbarian versus civilised binary. It is a dichotomy that has been extracted from the interaction between Greeks and Persians in antiquity. In this perception, the Persians serve the role of a barbarian people with an inherit bloodlust in battle, they were believed to have childlike and/or 'exotic' features and to be merciless slave drivers.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the Greeks were perceived to be the realization of reason and logic, social maturity and grace. The second binary is Islam versus Christianity. It was stressed during consecutive periods of imperial rivalry between Muslim and Christian rulers especially during the medieval period, convincing people in the West of the legitimate and noble cause of the Christians, all the while portraying the Muslims as a homogenous, angry and threatening people. Subsequently, the 'Middle Ages' are perceived to be a time of scientific stagnancy and war against the Muslims, instead of a period of flourishing trade and Islamic scientific significance. The third binary is the West versus Islam. It emerged more forcefully in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup> This last bias is currently ever gaining strength in a century which beginning was marked by the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the following War on Terror policy initiated by the United States. It stresses the civilized, advanced and democratic/peaceful character of the West, versus the dangerous, illogical and immature character of Muslims. The West versus Islam binary can be recognized in an array of media today.

To explain the clash regime, Adib-Moghaddam engages with male thinkers from the east/orient as well as the west/occident, such as Žižek, Weber, Ibn Sina, Marx, Marcuse, Khayyam, Hegel, Foucault, Farabi, Derrida and Adorno. Interestingly, Adib-Moghaddam investigates the influence of Islamic and Western representations of the other and refuses to treat the entities that are historically seen as 'others' as separate. He deconstructs the Clash of Civilisations discourse step by step and offers an alternative to the doctrine that Huntington's infamous book title encapsulates, thereby contributing to Edward Said's legacy of radical critique of all essentialist constructions of otherness. Finally, he concludes that the regime of truth that historically underlies the clash idea refers to the mechanism of techniques strategies,

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<sup>36</sup> A characteristic example of this is the 2006 Hollywood movie *300*. It was directed by Zack Snyder and stereotypically tells the story of King Leonidas of Sparta and a force of 300 men who fight the Persian king Xerxes and his forces at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.

<sup>37</sup> Adib-Moghaddam. *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations*, p. 20.



policies, ideas and disciplinary intentions that compel 'us' into believing in some seemingly inevitable clash with 'them'. It is this 'clash regime' that suggests a 'clash of civilizations' with the aim to persuade 'us' about the importance of a permanent war against the 'other'.

Thus, the truth constellation, a system of control, constituted by many discourses, permeated by entrenched ideologies and many disciplines including some of those that are being enforced at this very moment, all of which ensure a permanent reactivation of the clash regime and its 'us vs. them' mentality. Not only could one consider the omnipresence of the clash regime as an indication of the disempowerment of the University and critical discourse in general, but also as a product of today's global media culture that has catapulted figures like Bin Laden and Trump into international fame. To end the legitimization of this permanent war, it is vital to investigate how the clash regime has been perpetuated and to disprove its violent logic. More up close investigations are needed of the linguistic dimension in which complex systems like 'Islam' and 'Christianity' are constituted and the central institutions and norms in which the divisive narratives are formed. In fact, the complete cultural-political apparatus could use more critical analysis by scholars of various disciplines.

This research only focuses on a small aspect of the larger discursive field: the clash regime enveloping the attitude of the Netherlands towards Iran. What Dutch journalists, tourists, bankers and political elites are reacting to is not the immediate reality of the Iranian government or the Iranian people, but representations of their reality which are filtered through thick layers of normative and institutional structures. Moreover, what has shaped the Dutch interaction with Iran most are invented myths about the country, its government and its people. Until these myths are completely dispelled, politically and intellectually, the Dutch public image about Iran will be distorted. However, the discursive field is perpetrated with memories of violence and populated by powerful social agents who are negatively biased towards the Iranians.

The Netherlands inhabit the discursive field that is occupied and determined mostly by the United States and in a slightly less but still significant manner by Iran. This uneven playing field is influenced by the western centred tendencies of international relations, i.e. the US simply has a significant advantage in both hard and soft global power. The interesting thing about Dutch representations of Iran is the matter in which 'we' are influenced by the 'us' versus 'them' distinction that originated between the United States and Iran. Focussing on the linguistic sphere in which relations between Iran and the Netherlands, and in particular the Dutch aspect of that matter take place will show the American favoured bias in Dutch news, the realisation of the dominant regime of truth and its consequences in Dutch society.

Of course, as e.g. Foucault has established; discourse narrates history; it is a fundamental building block. Always also political (and thus violent) in our efforts to invent cultural realities. If Foucault is right when he said ‘power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere’<sup>38</sup>, then that means the texts that are written down at news agencies and published in national news media are interconnected with the clash regime. The articles selected both produce and are produced by the constructed reality that dictates their discursive sphere. Moreover: the work of journalists and editors is influenced by their culture, history, ideology, etc.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, ‘facts’ are shaped by human activity and ‘the perceived fact is codetermined by human ideas and concepts, even before its conscious theoretical elaboration by the knowing individual.’<sup>39</sup> The authors are suggesting there is a link between discourse and the construction of cultural realities, of which world politics in general and foreign policies in particular are a part. Along those lines of reasoning, it becomes apparent that it is impossible to imagine contemporary politics, proto-fascist, right-wing discourse and the international media without taking into account the idea of a ‘clash of civilizations’. One of the narratives that is indicative of the signs and symbols that populate the discursive field is the Iran-as-Polity discourse, because it so clearly sets the Kingdom of the Netherlands - and Western relations in general - apart from the Islamic Republic of Iran.

This research will contribute to the de-legitimation of the clash regime in general, and the deconstruction of the Iran-as-Polity discourse in Dutch news media in particular. To understand and battle with this overwhelmingly powerful and structural power, we need to find and dismantle the discourses and narratives in which the clash idea has located itself. To attempt this idealistic goal, the next chapters will subsequently discuss the relation between the clash idea and this Iran-as-Polity discourse in Dutch news media and the less mainstream, but nonetheless significant Iran-as-Society discourse that is enforced by some of the very same news media. The power of words lies not only in their ability to ignite war, but also in their capacity to call for mutual understanding.

## METHODOLOGY

### *What – data selection*

This research approaches the topic from a social constructionist perspective, since societal and

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, p. 93.

<sup>39</sup> Adorno, T. W. and Horkheimer, M. (1997). *Dialectic of enlightenment*, pp. 200-201.

media discourses are the major determinants. The approach was driven by the gathered data, which makes it inductive in nature. Newspaper searches generated the 100 texts on the topic of the Joint Compressive Plan of Action that were analysed in this research.

The period 2013-2017 was chosen due to its significance in Iran's (inter)national political history. The year 2013 marked the end of president Ahmadinejad's days in office and with him the low point of West-Iran relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Compared to Ahmadinejad's presidency, it was easy for the Western media to portray newly elected president Rohani as a moderate politician, especially because he announced a resumption of the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. This announcement precluded the fertile period of negotiations that resulted in the Joint Compressive Plan Of Action. Preceding the recent development of the US pulling out of the Nuclear Deal, Trump officially declared for the first time that he would not certify the JCPOA agreement in October 2017. Even though, according to the latest reports of the IAEA, Iran is upholding its international commitments. Trump's declaration in October was immediately followed by a joint statement from the United Kingdom, Germany and France stating their continued support for the JCPOA. Moreover, the publication dates of the selected articles largely range from two years prior to two years after the agreeing of the Nuclear Deal in the summer of 2015. They report on hope for success as well as difficulties in the relations.

The element of investigation existed of the analysis of articles from a number of leading Dutch broadsheets. The scope and time limit forced a choice between the vast array of existing media upon this research. The choice fell upon newspapers for a number of reasons. First of all, an extensive amount of written items per day. Newspaper articles thus supplied the largest source of items to use for this research. The second argument ties in with that consideration: neither moving image nor audio items could be searched as easily for the specific words or sentences that this research was built around. So they are the largest, most easily searchable source. Third, Dutch newspapers both publish their written articles online and offline, ensuring an average of 34% of the population to read a newspaper for 15 minutes every day.<sup>40</sup>

A further selection between the broadsheets themselves was made, based on their political ideology and their number of readers in the years 2013-2017. Ultimately, four newspapers were chosen that represent right-winged, liberal/moderate, progressive/moderate and left-winged ideologies. In 2016, the largest newspapers for each part of the spectrum were

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<sup>40</sup> Sonchik, N. and Haan, J. de (2015). Media: een tijdsbeeld. *Dagelijkse tijd gespendeerd aan media en communicatie. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*. p. 53.

as follows: The first, *Telegraaf*, was the leading newspaper in the Netherlands with 382.000 printed copies in 2016.<sup>41</sup> Marketed as a ‘family newspaper’, it focusses on entertainment, as well as domestic-, international- and sport news. Founded as an ideologically ‘neutral’ newspaper during the ‘Verzuiling’<sup>42</sup>, over time it transformed into the right-winged, commercial tabloid that it is today.<sup>43</sup> That makes the articles in *Telegraaf* a sublime representation of the most right and conservative on the ideological spectrum. The second selected newspaper is *NRC Handelsblad*, 136.000 printed copies.<sup>44</sup> It was founded as a neutral/liberal publication. Today, it still markets itself as a liberal-orientated newspaper that targets the intellectual elite. Besides domestic and foreign news, the tabloid focusses mainly on economics, literature, art and opinionated articles. Because of the diversity of its articles, this research has categorized *NRC Handelsblad* as a moderate newspaper with a slightly right-winged preference. Furthermore, *de Volkskrant*, 218.000 printed copies<sup>45</sup>, was founded with a Roman-Catholic base, but moved its focus to a more progressive public with a theoretical education in the 1960’s. Their main focus, outside of domestic and foreign news, lays on science, culture, lifestyle and opinionated articles. This broadsheet will represent the moderate outlook, with a slight left-winged presence. The fourth and last selected newspaper is *TROUW*, 85.000 printed copies.<sup>46</sup> It has orthodox-protestant roots, but changed its image to a progressive one. Domestic-, and foreign news articles are varied with articles on philosophy, religion and news-backgrounds. In this study, the relevant articles in *TROUW* will represent the progressive perspective, with a left-winged preference.

From these four newspapers, a selection of relevant news items was made. The selection was based on the method of discourse analysis. *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant* and *TROUW* were subjected to searches for news items that contained the search criteria ‘Iran’, ‘Nuclear Deal’ and/or ‘Joint Compressive Plan of Action’.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, for this study I only selected items that were published between May 2013 and October 2017. To narrow the search, only the 20 to 30 ‘most relevant’ items according to the concerning publisher were used in the analysis. The choice for 20 to 30 items was based on the available amount of texts per title, due to time limitations and the restraint of paywalls that ‘protect’

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<sup>41</sup> Bakker, P. (2017). *Nationaal Onderzoek: Multimedia oplage 2016*. Amsterdam, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Commonly translated as ‘pillarification’.

<sup>43</sup> Blom, J.C.H. and Talsma, J. (2000). *De verzuiling voorbij: godsdienst, stand en natie in de lange negentiende eeuw*, Amsterdam. p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> Bakker, *Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Or JCPOA.

many articles that were published in the chosen period. The choice between ‘most relevant’ and ‘most read’ was based on the fact that the discourse that is produced by news media is central to this research. Thus it was relevant to know which publicized items each of the four newspapers in question deemed most important in relation to the search criteria. The final breakdown per news medium was as shown in figure 1.

Number of ‘relevant’ articles per newspaper: Year of publication	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
<i>Telegraaf</i> 30	2	3	10	3	12
<i>NRC Handelsblad</i> 20	0	0	4	10	6
<i>de Volkskrant</i> 20	5	2	8	4	1
<i>TROUW</i> 30	12	8	7	2	1

Fig. 1: Number of analysed articles <sup>48</sup>

#### *How – Data Analyses*

Discourses determine the flow of knowledge through time. The words, phrases, sentences and even the attached images in the selected newspaper items are the necessary elements for the producers, the journalists, to communicate their message to their recipients. To better understand the messages in the texts, the selection of items of each newspapers was subjected to a discourse analysis.

This study’s analysis of the collected data is based on Michel Foucault’s writing on discourse, primarily as developed in his book *Archaeology of Knowledge*.<sup>49</sup> By using the discourse analysis method, two separate discourses related to Iran were identified. The first is the dominant Iran-as-Polity. This is a discourse that solely portrays Iran-related issues as matters on the (inter)national agenda and supports the idea of an eminent clash between the West and Islam. On the other hand, another discourse was identified. This narrative focuses on similarities and equality between the Dutch and the Iranian societies. This discourse will be referred to as the Iran-as-Society from here on out.

The kind of analysis that is used in this research is legitimized by professor Strydom (2000). His argumentation on the ‘discursive field’ should be understood ‘in the sense of the structured context of the constructive activities of collective actors who produce and

<sup>48</sup> A majority of the articles on Iran produced by my search originated from the political and international sections of the selected newspapers.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *the Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 88.

reproduce reality'.<sup>50</sup> Foucault defines discursive formations as 'systems of dispersion'.<sup>51</sup> 'Dispersion', because they are located in many different places. 'Systems', because they are not just spaces of creativity but places where particular constructions of reality are repeatedly articulated. Since the research deals with numerous texts from different newspapers and is searching for the regularly recurring elements across the range of texts, such an approach proved particularly productive.

Any discourse analysis mobilising the concepts and insights developed by Foucault will rest on a number of basic principles. First of all, a discourse is reproduced by repetitive articulation of statements across a range of sources. Second, statements are uttered from institutional or other 'surfaces of emergence' which largely determine the reach, texture and credibility of those statements. Third, while statements may have identifiable authors, such as journalists, and the identity of these authors may be important from other points of view, like opinionated articles, from a Foucauldian perspective discourses are anonymous. This holds that the existence of the statements, and the surfaces and corresponding subject positions from which they emerge are more important than the individual who utters them. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that discourses do not in any sense describe, but, as required by a social constructionist ontology, produce their object.<sup>52</sup> Where Foucauldian discourse analysis differs most strikingly from other forms of textual analysis is in its refusal to indulge in textual interpretation. As Foucault puts it in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: What are described as 'systems of formation' do not constitute the terminal stage of discourse, if by that term one means the texts as they appear, with their vocabulary, syntax, logical structure, or rhetorical organization.<sup>53</sup>

Since the chosen approach is Foucauldian in inspiration, this research is not a search for the 'truth', but an attempt to identify what Foucault himself calls 'regimes of truth': Each society can have different regimes of truth. 'Its 'general politics' of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.'<sup>54</sup> In other words, the concern is not to establish whether any of the discourses of Iran is in any sense 'truer' than any other, or indeed 'true' in any other sense: the aim is to identify the 'regime of truth' at play, and what version

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<sup>50</sup> Strydom, B.P. (2000). *Discourse and knowledge: the making of Enlightenment sociology*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, p. 82.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.41.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, M. (2009). *Security, territory, population : lectures at the Collège de France : 1977-78*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan., p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 84.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon, C. (1980). 'Afterword', in *M. Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Brighton: Harvester, 229-259, p. 231.

of Iran it portrays as a reality to the people in the Netherlands.

This thesis was not originally conceived, nor carried out within a specifically Orientalist outset. Nonetheless, the data gathered clearly supports Edward Said's central argument in *Orientalism* (1981) that the West produces the East according to its own (i.e. the West's) requirements, and that a certain understanding of Iran has become 'an orthodoxy of (western) society. It enters the cultural canon, and this makes the task of changing it very difficult indeed'<sup>55</sup>. In *Orientalism*, Said acknowledges the influence of Foucault in his opening pages and uses the term 'Orientalism' to refer to what he sees as 'a constellation of institutionalised discourses underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East.'<sup>56</sup> Said argues that the institutionalisation of romanticised images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture was mainly an implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions: in his own words, 'Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness.'<sup>57</sup>

After carefully reading the selected newspaper articles, the insights of Foucault, Strydom and Said were translated into the discourse analysis by selecting key words in the relevant newspaper items. These key words are:

*Islam, threat, repression, Human Rights, sanctions, violations, nuclear weapons, tension, terror, concern, trust, agreement, uranium, war and warning.*<sup>58</sup>

These are words that were used disproportionately in relation to the JCPOA and Iran. Yet, these words have no inherent connection to Iran as a country, Iranians as a people or the JCPOA. Persistent triangular linkage between these keywords, the JCPOA and Iran influences the audience's perception of the subject. When, for example, the audience repetitively sees the words Iran and/or JCPOA in relation to these key words, it is not surprising that the audience starts connecting those factors and even begins to see them as inseparable. This thesis shows that these words were disproportionately placed in the same articles and sentences.

Additionally, they were not used to describe Westerners, but solely aimed at portraying the behaviour of Iranian actors in the JCPOA affairs. Furthermore, this thesis will demonstrate

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<sup>55</sup> Said, E. (1997). *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Random House, p. 157.

<sup>56</sup> Said, E. (1981). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London: Penguin, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 204.

<sup>58</sup> These terms are translated from the original Dutch keywords that were entered into the search engines: *Islam, dreiging, onderdrukking, mensenrechten, sancties, overtrading(en), nucleaire wapens, spanning, terror, zorgen/bezorgdheid, vertrouwen, overeenkomst, uranium, oorlog en waarschuwing*.

that the relationship between these keywords mean that a biased discourse exists in Dutch newspapers that negatively affects Iran. The key words fit into the narrative that is put forward by the clash regime. That means the representation of Iran in the context of the Nuclear Deal is biased. The goal is to decrease misinformed actions on the international stage. To establish that, it is necessary to investigate the misconceptions that underlie current behaviours. This data analysis is doing exactly that for the conduct of Dutch actors in relation to the Joint Compressive Plan of Action.



## CHAPTER 1: A RIGHT-WINGED VIEW OF THE JCPOA

Before starting the analysis of the different newspaper articles, it is important to further explain the two discourses that these news items (re)produce. The first is the Iran-as-Polity discourse. This discourse portrays Iran as a religious, cultural and military threat to the West. It focuses on the differences between Iran and the Netherlands and, in a broader context, the difference between ‘the Islam’ and ‘the West’ in general.<sup>59</sup> The discourse is ultimately derived from the American political field – American and European political actors are frequently mentioned by name – and mediated by the Dutch political field as a result of its alliance with the US and the EU on this issue. I refer to this discourse as the Iran-as-Polity discourse, because it portrays Iran solely as an item on the political agenda, needing intervention and management from the West. This thesis distinguishes five aspects of the Iran-as-Polity discourse: Iran in need, Iran as a nuclear threat, Iran as hostile, Iran as dangerous, Iran as an Islamic other, Iran as a supporter of terrorism.

The second discourse is the Iran-as-Society discourse, which focusses on the similarities between the Dutch and the Iranians as people and the two countries as societies. A message of connection and cooperation between Iran and the West underlies these articles. The related newspaper items are written by journalists who have extensive experience and knowledge about Iran, its history, culture and geopolitical motives. In other words, the humanity and agency of Iranian has a central place in the Iran-as-Society discourse.

### IRAN IN NEED

So what story does the right-winged newspaper *Telegraaf* tell its audience about Iran? The newspaper’s relevant articles from the 2013-2017 period paint a picture of Iran as a threatening state in the already chaotic Middle East region. First of all, *Telegraaf* repeatedly reports about foreign leaders and diplomats talking about Iran, without the presence of Iranian representatives. For instance, in one item they write about a phone call between Putin and Obama concerning the JCPOA that was agreed upon the day before:

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<sup>59</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A., (2010). *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations: Us and Them beyond Orientalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 18.

‘Both leaders agree that the agreement is in the interests of the international community. The deal must ensure that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons and that tensions in the Middle East decline.’<sup>60</sup>

This article presents a significant relation between the key words *nuclear weapons*, *tensions* and *nuclear deal*. Moreover, it portrays the views of the US and Russian leaders as unquestionably true. Another *Telegraaf* items report Obama’s reaction to the agreement.<sup>61</sup> The Iranian reaction is almost completely left out of the picture. The only Iranian focused item states that ‘...supreme leader ayatollah Khamenei is thankful to the negotiators that reached an accord about Irans nuclear ambitions.’<sup>62</sup> By using words like ‘thankful’ and again suggesting the military purpose of the nuclear program, instead of mentioning the sanction lift, *Telegraaf* portrays the JCPOA as a sole victory for the P5+1, instead of mutual agreement that profits both parties.

By focussing on the conversation of powerful nations about marginalized nations, *Telegraaf* reinforces the idea that Iran is a state that is in need of management and intervention of other (more civilized) countries. This narrative confirms the image of powerful nations congratulating each other with their victories and neglects to mention the Russian and US responsibilities for the ‘tensions in the middle east’. Instead of focussing on the newly established agreement between ‘the West’ and Iran, *Telegraaf* chooses to put the focus on the relation between Russia and the US. Furthermore, these items go against the Iranian sense of pride and their longing for independence, because it discredits the Iranian effort and conversations about the Joint Compressive Plan of Action.

## IRAN AS A NUCLEAR THREAT

*Telegraaf*’s journalists agree that one of the topics Iran needs management on, is nuclear research. The articles portray it as an unavoidable and dangerous truth that Iran will get a

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<sup>60</sup> *Telegraaf* (2015) Putin talks to Obama about Nuclear Deal. 16 July 2015. Original title: Poetin spreekt met Obama over Atoomakkoord. Original text: ‘Beide leiders zijn het erover eens dat het akkoord in het belang is van de internationale gemeenschap. De deal moet ervoor zorgen dat Iran geen atoomwapens ontwikkelt en dat spanningen in het Midden-Oosten afnemen.’ Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/786944/poetin-spreekt-met-obama-over-atoomakkoord> [Accessed 4 July 2018].

<sup>61</sup> *Telegraaf* (2015), Obama: deal Iran kans op safer world. July 15. Original title: Obama: deal Iran kans op veiliger wereld. Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/786960/obama-deal-iran-kans-op-veiliger-wereld> [Accessed on 3 July 2018].

<sup>62</sup> *Telegraaf* (2015), Ayatollah dankfuol after nuclear deal Iran, July 14. Original title: ayatollah dankbaar na nucleaire deal Iran. Original text: ‘De geestelijk leider van Iran, de ayatollah Ali Khamenei, heeft dinsdag de onderhandelaars bedankt die een akkoord hebben bereikt over Irans nucleaire ambities.’ Available at <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/787276/ayatollah-dankbaar-na-nucleaire-deal-iran> [Accessed on 3 July 2018].

nuclear weapon if the international community doesn't intervene. A majority of the JCPOA related news items directly link Iran's nuclear program to the suggestion of a nuclear weapon:

'Iran has installed hundreds of new nuclear centrifuges at the Natanz nuclear complex. Uranium can be enriched with the centrifuges. The international community, the United States and Israel first, are worried about Iran's nuclear program. They fear that the country is working on a nuclear weapon. Iran has taken steps in the construction of a research reactor. According to experts, Iran can also use this for the production of material for a nuclear bomb.'<sup>63</sup>

By persistant relating key words *uranium*, *nuclear*, and *weapon*, the article suggests a reality in which an Iranian nuclear weapon will soon exist, or already does exist. *Telegraaf* refrains from questioning US and Israeli interests in discrediting the Iranian intentions. This is not an isolated factor in the newspaper's reports about the JCPOA. *Telegraaf* is actively linking every single one of Iran's nuclear activities to nuclear weaponry, whereas Iran's pursuit of nuclear energy is barely mentioned at all. On a more general note, these articles reinforce a divide between a peace bringing west (us) and a despotic Iran (them) that is seeking to destabilize the Middle East and the world through expansion of its nuclear capacity.

This sceptical outlook towards Iranian intentions is ever present in *Telegraaf*'s relevant news articles. On the day of the Joint Compressive Plan of Action agreement, *Telegraaf* published a news item that expressed the doubts of the Republicans and the Israeli government, stating that 'a nuclear arms race could be at hand.'<sup>64</sup> A couple of months later, when Obama got the green light from the Senate, *Telegraaf* wrote:

'The American Republicans have failed to block the controversial nuclear agreement with Iran ... The Republicans are against the agreement because they do not trust Tehran. They fear that Iran will share its nuclear knowledge with terrorists.'<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Telegraaf (2013) Iran installs hundreds nuclear centrifuges, 22 May. Original title: Iran installeert honderden kerncentrifuges. Original tekst: 'Iran heeft honderden nieuwe kerncentrifuges geïnstalleerd in het nucleaire complex Natanz. Met de centrifuges kan uranium worden verrijkt. De internationale gemeenschap, de Verenigde Staten en Israël voorop, maken zich zorgen over het nucleaire programma van Iran. Ze vrezen dat het land werkt aan een kernwapen. ...Iran heeft stappen gemaakt in de bouw van een onderzoeksreactor. Die kan Iran volgens experts ook gebruiken voor de productie van materiaal voor een kernbom.' Available at <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1106278/iran-installeert-honderden-kerncentrifuges> [Accessed on 5 July 2018].

<sup>64</sup> Ralph Dekkers (2015), Republicans fear nuclear arms race after deal. July 14, *Telegraaf*. Original title: Republikeinen vrezen kernwapenwedloop na deal. Available at <https://www.telegraaf.nl/video/787367/republikeinen-vrezen-kernwapenwedloop-na-deal> [Accessed 4 July 2018].

<sup>65</sup> Telegraaf (2015) *Nuclear Deal VS Iran can continue*, September 10. Original title: Atoomdeal VS Iran kan doorgaan. Original text: 'Het is de Amerikaanse Republikeinen niet gelukt het omstreden atoomakkoord met Iran te blokkeren ... De Republikeinen zijn tegen het akkoord omdat ze Teheran niet vertrouwen. Ze vrezen dat Iran

This item connects the *nuclear agreement* with a lack of *trust* and a risk of *terrorism*. The news value of these items is based on statements of unnamed Israeli and Republican politicians. In the discourse that becomes apparent from the selected articles, Iranian diplomats are seen as to hold the nuclear goal the highest, even though the country and its international position would suffer from the continued pursuing of a bomb. Distrust surrounds Telegraaf's reports about the nuclear deal, because they never fail to suggest the world should keep an eye on Iran, as they could secretly be enriching uranium or building another nuclear site.<sup>66</sup>

### IRAN AS A TERRORIST NATION

Even more important than the nuclear threat, is the image that Telegraaf creates of Iran as a terrorist nation. Their news items repeatedly report on the financial and military bonds between what they call 'terrorist organisations' and the Iranian government. In particular the Revolutionary Guard:

'The Revolutionary Guard was established shortly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and consists of three parts: the army itself, the special forces of the Al-Quds brigade operating abroad, and the Basij militia that can mobilize hundreds of thousands of reservists to precipitate domestic protests... Former CIA director James Woolsey calls the Guard "the most dangerous terrorist organization in the world ... It is the only terrorist organization in the world with an army, navy and special forces"<sup>67</sup>

By generalizing the intentions of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as the intentions of Iran as a whole, without ever offering an alternative picture, the image of the *Islamic Iran* as a supporter of *terrorism* is strengthened. Telegraaf also chooses never to inform its readers about the larger context. It's important to note that Iran supports Shia militias and militant groups as well as some allied Sunni militant groups that engage in insurgencies or terrorist acts, including the Iraqi Shia in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular

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zijn nucleaire kennis zal delen met terroristen. Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/506233/atoomdeal-vs-iran-kan-doorgaan> [Accessed at 5 July 2018].

<sup>66</sup> Telegraaf (2014) Iran destroys enriched uranium, 14 July. Original title: Iran vernietigt verrijkt uranium. Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/936951/iran-vernietigt-verrijkt-uranium> [Accessed on 5 July 2018].

<sup>67</sup> Ralph Dekkers (2017), Terrorist Organisation with its own Army. October 10, *Telegraaf*. Original title: Terreurorganisatie met eigen leger. Available at <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/749112/terreurorganisatie-met-eigen-leger>. [Accessed 1 July 2018].

Translation: De Revolutionaire Garde werd opgericht kort na de Islamitische Revolutie van 1979 en bestaat uit drie onderdelen: het leger zelf, de special forces van de Al-Quds brigade die in het buitenland opereren, en de Basij-militie die honderdduizenden reservisten kan optrommelen om met name binnenlandse protesten neer te slaan. Voormalig CIA directeur James Woolsey noemt de Garde "de gevaarlijkste terreurorganisatie ter wereld. Het is de enige terreurorganisatie in de wereld met een leger, marine en special forces."

Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and, to a lesser extent, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen, among others.<sup>68</sup> The news articles that mention the country's support for terrorism seldom mention the difference between the organisations that are associated with terrorism (for instance based on Shia or Sunni Islam). Moreover, Telegraaf fails to properly inform its audience about the fact that the JCPOA held no clear restrictions about the support for militia's and/or militant groups and even frames these activities as contradicting the Nuclear Deal.

The lack of context and the press' continuous association of Iran with any kind of Islamic terrorism reinforces another damaging stereotype that has dominated the media for years; the inherent connection between Islam and terrorism. Whether it is laid out expressly or implicitly, the connection between the two is made in every one of the relevant items, meaning the diverse nature of Islam is reduced to a newspaper headline and its relation to terrorism has been normalized.

## IRAN AS HOSTILE

Portraying Iran as a terrorist nation goes hand in hand with the third aspect of the Iran-as-Polity discourse: the notion that the Iranian government is a hostile one. The idea of Iran as the antagonist is repeatedly suggested in *Telegraaf's* narrative:

'When asked what the three biggest threats to the United States are, General Jim 'Mad Dog' Mattis invariably answered in recent years: "Iran, Iran and Iran."<sup>69</sup>

And:

'The United States mark Iran as a "state sponsor of terrorism". According to the US, Tehran's support for the civil war of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the Houthi rebels in the civil war of Yemen and the militias of Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon encouraged the destabilization of the Middle East.'<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> [State Sponsors of Terrorism - Overview](https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm) - United States Department of State - Official Website <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm>

<sup>69</sup> Ralph Dekkers (2017), Iran tests ballistic missiles and president Trump, February 2, in *Telegraaf*. Original title: Iran test ballistische raket en president Trump. Original text: Op de vraag wat de drie grootste bedreigingen voor de Verenigde Staten zijn, antwoordde generaal Jim 'Mad Dog' Mattis de afgelopen jaren steevast: „Iran, Iran en Iran.” Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/52573/iran-test-ballistische-raket-en-president-trump> [Accessed 6 July 2018].

<sup>70</sup> Telegraaf (2017) *Trump: Iran must stop support terrorists*, 22 May. Original title: Trump: Iran moet steun terroristen stoppen. Original text: De Verenigde Staten merken Iran aan als „staatsponsor van terrorisme”. Volgens de VS heeft Teherans steun aan de burgeroorlog van de Syrische president Bashar al-Assad, de Houthi-

Articles like these portray Iran's actions as inherently aggressive. Connecting the notions of *Iran, threat, terrorism* and *war* without further contextualization conveys the message that the international community should be wary of Iran's intentions, because the Iranian government wants to expand its influence at any costs. 'The destabilization of the Middle East' is a recurring factor in that narrative. In an article titled *Iran: the Big Destabilizer*, *Telegraaf* writes:

'The tentacles of Teheran extend to the Middle East. From Lebanon to Afghanistan the Ayatollahs expand their influence considerably. In the short term they even want to send warships to the Syrian Latakia, less than 200 kilometers away from EU member Cyprus.'<sup>71</sup>

*Telegraaf* uses language like 'tentacles' and 'warships' to instil fear into its audience. By mentioning 'less than 200 kilometers away from EU member Cyprus', *Telegraaf* places those threats right into the imagined backyard of its readers. The article hammers on Iran's hostile intentions and warns its audience for the expansion of Iranian influence in the Middle East:

'...the regime in Tehran is the world's largest terrorist sponsor, destabilizing the entire Middle East. A confrontation is at hand.'<sup>72</sup>

Ultimately, the article paints a picture of a confrontation between Iran (and its sphere of influence) and the West. It portrays a picture of the consequences Iran's hostility could have for the 'peaceful' Western way of living.

The military tests that the Iranian government keeps enacting is only strengthening that fear. After the launch of a medium-range rocket, *Telegraaf* wrote: 'Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that the development of missiles is essential for the Islamic Republic to defend itself against its enemies.'<sup>73</sup> In 2016 and 2017, *Telegraaf* repeatedly suggested that those military actions are to be considered the reasons Trump re-evaluated the

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rebellen in de burgeroorlog van Jemen en aan de milities van de sjiiitische Hezbollah in Libanon de destabilisering van het Midden-Oosten in de hand gewerkt. Available at:

<https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/177339/trump-iran-moet-steun-terroristen-stoppen>, [Accessed on 5 July 2018].

<sup>71</sup> Ralph Dekkers (2017), Iran: the Big Destabilizer, in *Telegraaf*, April 22. Original title: Iran: de Grote Destabilizator. Original text: 'De tentakels van Teheran reiken tot steeds verder in het Midden-Oosten. Van Libanon tot Afghanistan breiden de ayatollahs hun invloed flink uit. Op korte termijn willen zij zelfs oorlogsschepen sturen naar het Syrische Latakia, op nog geen 200 kilometer afstand van EU-lid Cyprus' Available on: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/135106/iran-de-grote-destabilisator> [Accessed on 5 July 2018].

<sup>72</sup>Ralph Dekkers (2017), Iran: the Big Destabilizer, in *Telegraaf*, April 22. Original title: Iran: de grote destabilizator. Original text: 'het regime in Teheran is 's werelds grootste terreursponsor die het hele Midden-Oosten destabiliseert. Een confrontatie loert.' Available on: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/135106/iran-de-grote-destabilisator> [Accessed on 5 July 2018].

<sup>73</sup> Telegraaf (2016) *Iran tests medium-range rocket*, May 9. Original title: Iran test middellangeafstandsraкет. Original text: 'Opperste leider ayatollah Ali Khamenei zei in maart dat de ontwikkeling van raketten essentieel is voor de Islamitische Republiek om zich tegen haar vijanden te kunnen verdedigen.' Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/414061/iran-test-middellangeafstandsraкет> [Accessed on 6 July 2018].

JCPOA, because ‘Iran uses the released money for missile testing and for an aggressive policy in the Middle East.’<sup>74</sup> These articles are all accompanied by archived pictures of ominous missile launches or other military activities.

*Telegraaf*, portrays these actions as deeds of irrational aggression that is especially volatile against western countries. Furthermore, some articles quote American Republicans, Israelis, Saudis and/or organisations that are hostile towards the Iranian government as a source, without complementing those statements with a geo-political context.

## IRAN AS DANGEROUS

Telegraaf only considers Iran newsworthy when it concerns war, terrorism, nuclear activities, violation of human rights and other negative stereotypes that surround the country. Time and time again, the focus lays on the danger that the Iranian government poses to its own people: the country is portrayed as an inherently hazardous place. Cases of Iranian minorities that are in some way oppressed by their government are repeatedly cited. Whether it is for their religion, ethnicity, gender, political standpoints or other matters, the fact that the government and its institutions are consistently oppressing them, persecuting them and violating their basic human rights is used to strengthen the general understanding that Iran is dangerous.

‘The Iranian human rights activist and writer Golrokh Iraee was arrested again this Sunday. That is what Amnesty International states on Wednesday.’<sup>75</sup>

This article lays the focus on the fact that the Iranian government arrested Iraee and her husband for their partition in the struggle for *human rights* in Iran. The way it is portrayed doesn’t inform the audience about either one of the activists and their work. I.e., the image that accompanies the article doesn’t show Iraee or her husband, but it shows an anonymous woman in a black chador, who’s face is covered by the Iranian flag. Moreover, this article solely strengthens the idea that Iran is a dangerous country that needs to be checked by Amnesty International, an organization that makes sure that the Western ideals are monitored

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<sup>74</sup> Ralph Dekkers (2017), Nuclear Iradeal can take Peace in its Fall, October 14 in *Telegraaf*, Original title: Nucleaire Iradeal kan Vrede in Val meenemen. Original tekst: ‘Iran gebruikt het vrijgekomen geld voor testen van raketten en voor een agressieve politiek in het Midden-Oosten.’ Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/770351/nucleaire-iradeal-kan-vrede-in-val-meenemen> [Accessed at 6 July 2018].

<sup>75</sup> Telegraaf (2017) Iranian writer Iraee arrested again, January 25, original title: Iraanse schrijfster weer opgepakt. Original text: De Iraanse mensenrechtenactiviste en schrijfster Golrokh Iraee is zondag opnieuw gearresteerd. Dat laat Amnesty International woensdag weten. Available on: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1310322/iraanse-schrijfster-irae-weer-opgepakt> [Accessed 8 July 2018].

worldwide. In *Telegraaf*'s narrative, a government that imprisons its own citizens if they speak out against its policies surely fits that description. Further investigation into the case or letting relatives speak out is deemed unnecessary. *Telegraaf* thereby places Iran in stark contrast with the Netherlands and 'the West' in general, which is deemed a safe place for all its inhabitants since it's where all are granted basic human rights.

## IRAN AS AN ISLAMIC OTHER

The last aspect of the Iran-as-Polity discourse highlights the differences between 'Iranian' and 'Western' cultures further, by obsessing over the Islamic nature of Iran's policies and specifically Islamic punishment. The Islamic theocratic government structure is often cited in relation to Iran's violations of human rights in events like the stoning of women in case of adultery and the capital punishment for gay people. A common seen trope that intends to prove the oppressive nature of Islam takes form in pictures of Muslim women wearing all black hijab or chador.<sup>76</sup> Ideally, these anonymous women walk in front of anti-America murals, like the walls of the former Embassy of the United States in Tehran, or are put in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran in another way. These stereotypes and tropes reduce Iranians to their Islamic religion, often without even making a distinction between Shia or Sunni. Furthermore, it neglects the various other religions in Iran, like the Zoroastrians and Christians. By portraying Iranians as a homogeneous Islamic crowd, these kinds of articles tie in with orientalist notions of Iran as barbaric, brutal and uncivilized. It also reinforces the dichotomy based on religious identities. Such articles are rarely able to resist the dominant representations of Muslim men as violent and dangerous (often pictured as yelling and/or wearing religious attire)<sup>77</sup> and Muslim women as victims of oppression (pictured in black chador)<sup>78</sup>. The dominant images of both Muslim men and women served the same purpose: They established the need to intervene to rescue the women and control the men.

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<sup>76</sup> Smeeta Mishra (2012), "Saving" Muslim Women and Fighting Muslim Men: Analysis of Representations, 24 November, in *The New York Times*.  
Global Media Journal, 2007.

<sup>77</sup> As can be seen here:

Telegraaf (2016). Terrorism gets priority. Original title: Terreur krijgt voorrang. Available at: <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/1494972/terreur-krijgt-voorrang> [Accessed on 8 July 2018].

<sup>78</sup> As can be seen here:

Telegraaf (2017). Iranian writer Iraee arrested again.; and  
Ralph Dekkers (2017). Terrorist Organisation with its own Army.



Thus, the right-winged newspaper *Telegraaf* presents Iran as a country that is inherently different from the Netherlands and the West. And not in a positive way. A negative connection between the key words was present in a significant amount of the analysed articles. The Iran-as-Polity discourse is clearly represented in the selected articles. Sometimes it isolated different notions, whereas other times it ticked all the boxes: Iran in need of management from the West, as a nuclear threat, as a terrorist threat, as hostile, as dangerous and as an Islamic other.

It is especially interesting to analyse *Telegraaf*'s perception of Iran as a nuclear threat throughout the time period of 2013-2017. Between 2013 and 2015, when Rohani and Obama were steering Iran towards the JCPOA, *Telegraaf* published less articles that tried to convince their audience from the nuclear threat Iran posed to the Western world. After the AEIA confirmed Iran's cooperation, however, *Telegraaf* substituted the nuclear threat notion for the notion of Iran as a terrorist threat. Moreover, after Trump was elected president and fired up the questioning of Iranian nuclear and terrorist intentions again (2016-2017), so did *Telegraaf*'s articles. These parallels to the socio-political context and the US leaders in particular only confirm that there is a bigger web of power at play. The construction of the 'us-versus-them' dichotomy between Iran and the West becomes apparent from *Telegraaf*'s articles. In none of the selected *Telegraaf* articles any trace of the Iran-as-Society discourse could be found, meaning that the newspaper did not construct any arguments about Iran that portray the country as having similarities to the Netherlands. So far, it can be stated that the right-winged newspaper upholds the anti-Iran discourses of the Clash of Civilizations regime.

## CHAPTER 2: A MODERATE PERSPECTIVE OF THE NUCLEAR DEAL

The analysed material from right-winged *Telegraaf* proved to confirm the ‘generally accepted knowledge’ that Iran is inherently different from the Netherlands. The Iran-as-Polity discourse was strongly represented, whereas the Iran-as-Society discourse was not represented at all. This next chapter shows how both discourses in relation to the JCPOA are adhered to by moderate newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*.

### IRAN IN NEED

When reading the selected news articles from these moderate newspapers, the first thing that stands out is the way both newspapers describe the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The agreement is popularly dubbed the ‘*Nuclear Deal*’ or ‘*Atomic Deal*’. That name suggests that the focus of the agreement was Iran’s nuclear program. That same narrative is present when the accord is summarized. A significant number of the articles describe the JCPOA as a deal that ensures that Iran decreases its nuclear capacity and puts it under the control of the Atomic Energy Inspection Agency, (that is portrayed as representing the international community). In ‘return’ for that, *Volkskrant* and *NRC* state (if they do so at all) that the P5+1 agreed to lift ‘a number’ or ‘most’ of the sanctions that the US, Europe and the United Nations installed on the Iranian economy. Moreover, by associating *Iran* and the *JCPOA* with the idea of preventing an Iranian *nuclear weapon*, the moderate newspapers depict the JCPOA as a Western effort. For example:

‘After long negotiations, the world powers and Iran agreed last year that Tehran would phase out its nuclear program in exchange for withdrawing the sanctions. The US and other world powers achieved that Iran would not become a nuclear power.’<sup>79</sup>

The Western centred nature of this discourse becomes apparent when matters are viewed from an Iranian perspective. The economic sanctions that *Volkskrant* and *NRC* portray as a mere enticement, where the whole focus of the negotiations for the Iranian diplomats. Furthermore, describing the 2015 agreement as a ‘deal’ that the P5+1 ‘got Iran to sign’

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<sup>79</sup> Volkskrant (2016) ‘Iran removes core from nuclear reactor Arak’, January 15, Original title: ‘Iran verwijdert kern uit atoomreactor bij Arak.’ Original text: ‘Na lange onderhandelingen kwamen de wereldmachten en Iran vorig jaar overeen dat Teheran zijn atoomprogramma zou afbouwen in ruil voor het intrekken van de sancties. De VS en andere wereldmachten bereiken zo dat Iran geen atoommacht wordt.’ Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/iran-verwijdert-kern-uit-atoomreactor-bij-arak~b5ba5a46/> [Accessed on 12 May 2018].

actively discredits the efforts and contribution of Iranian actors to the final achievement. It confirms the widespread Western idea of the P5+1 as powerful nations that get what they want, whereas Iranians are deprived of their agency and the successes that they achieved in the negotiations. Moreover, the language that this narrative uses is not a language of cooperation and peace between two equal parties, but a Western-centred language of conflict and winners-versus-loser. The narrative of us-versus-them can thus be recognized in the narrative of the moderate newspapers.

The focus on conflict and the ‘need’ for the West to intervene in Iranian affairs is exemplified by the constant Westernization of all truce related diplomacy. In other words: the Dutch news media often portray negotiations of peace and reconciliation as solely Western efforts. The involved politicians from Europe and/or the US are named and quoted, whereas the Iranian actors and their part of the effort are left out of the story. Even if the diplomacy was first initiated by an Iranian politician. An example of portraying diplomacy as western centred is the following item: ‘UK to tighten relation with Iran’.<sup>80</sup> The title indicates that the Brits will improve relations with Iran. In this news article, the journalist quotes British minister of Foreign Affairs William Hague on the fact that the Brits mean to mend diplomatic ties and eventually reopen the embassies that have been closed since 2011. The engagements will be engineered under the condition that Iran makes concessions regarding its nuclear programme.<sup>81</sup>

Solely ascribing peace efforts to Western countries reinforces the notion of Iran as a helpless country that needs guidance from a peaceful West. Moreover, it leaves the involved Iranian representatives without recognition and even without a voice, while it strengthens the position of the people in power and the status quo of collision.

## IRAN AS A NUCLEAR THREAT

The moderate newspapers ply a conflict-focused explanation of JCPOA-related issues. That sentiment is represented in the selected articles as a concern for a situation in which Iran might develop a *nuclear weapon*.

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<sup>80</sup> de Volkskrant (2013), ‘UK to tighten relations with Iran’, October 8. Original title: Britten gaan banden aanhalen met Iran. Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/britten-gaan-banden-aanhalen-met-iran~bddea888/> [Accessed 2 May 2018].

<sup>81</sup> de Volkskrant (2013), ‘UK to tighten relations with Iran’.

‘The completed nuclear agreement with Iran is a victory for diplomacy and proof that international sanctions work. Iran dismantled over 12,000 ultracentrifuges for uranium enrichment. It has filled up the core of its heavy water reactor with concrete. And it transferred more than eight tons of enriched uranium, almost the entire stock, to Russia. ...However, not all routes to a nuclear weapon are closed - Iran could still buy one elsewhere in the world - but the most important one is.’<sup>82</sup>

Not only does this article portray the JCPOA agreement as a Western effort, it also depicts the accord as a victory for the P5+1 over Iran and praises the use of economic sanctions to damage the Iranian economy. More importantly, it skips the civil possibility of Iran’s nuclear programme and immediately portrays it as hostile and threatening to the West. In addition, even though the West ‘got’ Iran to decrease its nuclear capacity, the country should still be viewed with distrust according to this text. A deeper laying fear that Iran will ‘inevitably’ develop a nuclear weapon if the West doesn’t ‘intervene’ clearly becomes apparent in this article. Another example states that Iran would have definitely let the situation ‘escalate’ without the JCPOA:

‘The danger of a nuclear-armed Iran would immediately have increased sharply. The Iranian government would have expanded its nuclear program and took steps towards the atomic threshold. Pro-war figures in Tehran would have strengthened their position, with a corresponding response from the countries that fear Iran the most: escalation and chaos everywhere.’<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, editorial suggestions and choice of headlines play into this notion. For example, the title of a *Volkskrant* article; ‘Iran buys parts for heavy water reactor’<sup>84</sup>, implies that it is a fact that Iran is buying parts for its heavy water reactor, rather than an accusation by an

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<sup>82</sup> NRC Handelsblad (2016) ‘Nuclear accord Iran unique chance for better relations’, January 16, Original title: ‘Nucleair akkoord Iran unieke kans op betere betrekkingen’. Original text: ‘Het voltooide nucleaire akkoord met Iran is een overwinning voor de diplomatie en het bewijs dat internationale sancties werken. Iran heeft ruim 12.000 ultracentrifuges voor uraniumverrijking ontmanteld. Het heeft de kern van zijn zwaarwaterreactor volgestort met beton. En het heeft meer dan acht ton verrijkt uranium, vrijwel de gehele voorraad, overgedragen aan Rusland. Niet alle routes naar een kernwapen zijn daarmee afgesloten – Iran zou er bijvoorbeeld elders in de wereld een kunnen kopen – maar wel de belangrijkste.’ Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/01/18/nucleair-akkoord-iran-unieke-kans-op-betere-betre-1581114-a260863> [Accessed 12 February 2018].

<sup>83</sup> Rob Vreeken (2015) ‘What does the Nuclear Accord mean for our safety?’ In de *Volkskrant*, July 15, original title: ‘Wat betekent nucleair akkoord voor onze veiligheid?’ Original text: ‘Het gevaar van een nucleair bewapend Iran zou ogenblikkelijk fors zijn toegenomen. De Iraanse regering zou haar nucleaire programma hebben uitgebreid en stappen hebben gezet in de richting van de atoombrem. Oorlogszuchtige figuren in Teheran zouden hun positie hebben versterkt, met een navenante reactie van de landen die het meest van Iran te vrezen hebben. Escalatie alom.’ Available on: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/wat-betekent-nucleair-akkoord-voor-onze-veiligheid--b45e89dc/> [Accessed 20 July 2018].

<sup>84</sup> de *Volkskrant* (2014), ‘Iran buys parts for heavy water reactor’, December 10. Original title: ‘Iran koopt onderdelen voor zwaarwaterreactor’, Original tekst: Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/-iran-koopt-onderdelen-voor-zwaarwaterreactor-a3808029/> [Accessed 3 December 2017].

anonymous state actor. Journalists legitimate their right to present individual statements as suggestive headlines by placing the title between quotation marks, indicating that the statement is not their own. This tactic may work to attract more readers and internet ‘clicks’, but it also adds to the negative reputation of Iran. Withal, *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* portray Iran as an threatening ‘other’ that is looking for the possibility to destabilize the world as we know it.

## IRAN AS A TERRORIST NATION

The notion of Iran as threatening the world order can also be recognized in articles on Iran’s support for militant groups and organizations. Iran’s role in terrorist activities around the world is generalized, whereas the role of the US and Europe isn’t mentioned. Furthermore, Saudi-Arabia’s part in the 9/11 attacks and their financial support of schools and mosques that help to radicalize religious people in the Netherlands isn’t nearly mentioned as much or at all.<sup>85</sup> Despite those red flags, the government of Saudi-Arabia is mostly depicted as an ally of the West in terrorism related issues:

‘Islamic countries want to combat terrorism together. 34 countries form a coalition led by Saudi Arabia. Countries that are part of the coalition include Pakistan, Turkey, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. African people include Chad, Mali, Somalia and Nigeria. Iran does not become a member of the alliance.’<sup>86</sup>

Iran’s Shia expressions are deemed imprescriptible and historically anchored when it comes to Iran’s regional ambitions, yet neither *VK* or *NRC* make that distinction between Shia and Sunni militant groups when it comes to accusing Iran of supporting them. That generalization results in a portrayal of Iran as ‘a state sponsor of terrorism’ and as holding a bigger part in the support of terrorism than it actually does. Again, that is not to say the Iranian government doesn’t support militant groups. It is meant to question the way in which *VK* and *NRC* portray

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<sup>85</sup> Carolien Roelants (2017) ‘Question: why is Iran such a deadly threat?’ In *NRC Handelsblad*, April 24, original title: ‘Vraagje: waarom is Iran toch zo’n dodelijk gevaar?’ Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/04/24/vraagje-waarom-is-iran-toch-zon-dodelijk-gevaar-8350664-a1555718> [Accessed on 20 July 2018].

<sup>86</sup> Joram Bolle (2015), ‘International Islamic alliance against terrorism’, in *NRC Handelsblad*, December 15, Original title: ‘Internationale islamitische alliantie tegen terrorisme’, Original text: ‘Islamitische landen willen gezamenlijk terrorisme tegengaan. 34 landen vormen een coalitie onder leiding van Saoedi-Arabië. Landen die deel uitmaken van de coalitie zijn onder andere Pakistan, Turkije, Egypte, Libië en Jemen. Uit Afrika nemen onder meer Tsjaad, Mali, Somalië en Nigeria deel. Iran wordt geen lid van de alliantie.’ Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/12/15/internationale-islamitische-alliantie-tegen-terrorisme-a1410803> [Accessed on 19 July 2018].

the Iranian responsibility for terrorist activity around the world, whereas they seem to ignore or even excuse the role of others in that matter.

## IRAN AS HOSTILE

According to the selected articles, the biggest threat to the JCPOA was the Iranian government. The representatives of the Islamic Republic are depicted as longing for more influence in the Middle East region.

‘...prevent the tensions from increasing because the ayatollahs use the political and financial profits [of the JCPOA] to pursue their regional ambitions with doubled diligence.’<sup>87</sup>

The link between *the JCPOA* and regional *tension* suggests that such an extension of Iranian power should be prevented at all cost. The destabilizing Iranian efforts will only cause more harm. At the same time, the articles describe chaos in the Middle East to be inevitable. That claim is supported by the image of an historic conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. For example, *de Volkskrant* wrote:

‘The religious battle between Sunnis and Shiites is as old as Islam itself’

After a summary of historic events, they conclude:

‘Since then, the Islamic world has been divided into the followers of Ali and his family, and Sunnis who consider the claims of Shiites to be absurd.’<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, on the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca that is a duty for all Muslims, *NRC Handelsblad* wrote:

‘Relations between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia have been particularly tense for years. After a previous massacre in 1987, Iran boycotted the Hajj for three years.’<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Brill (2015), ‘Watch out for Iran’s regional ambitions’, July 24, in *de Volkskrant*. Original title: Pas op voor Iraanse regionale ambities. Original text: ‘...voorkomen dat de spanningen alleen maar toenemen doordat de ayatollahs de politieke en financiële winst aangrijpen om hun regionale ambities met verdubbelde ijver na te streven.’ Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/pas-op-voor-iraanse-regionale-ambities~b08472f3/> [Accessed on 11 May 2018].

<sup>88</sup> Henk Müller and Rob Vreeken (2016), Iranian reaction suits Saoudi interests, in *de Volkskrant*, January 5, original title: Iraanse reactie komt Saoudi-Arabië goed uit. Original text: ‘De religieuze strijd tussen soennieten en sjiieten is zo oud als de islam zelf... De islamitische wereld is sindsdien verdeeld in de volgers van Ali en zijn familie, en soennieten die de claims van sjiieten als onzinnig beschouwen.’ Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/iraanse-reactie-komt-saoudi-arabie-goed-uit~b6f6b60f/> [Accessed on 11 May 2018].

<sup>89</sup> NRC Handelsblad (2016), ‘Iranians avoid pilgrimage’, May 30, Original title: Iraniers mijden pelgrimstocht. Original text: De betrekkingen tussen het shi’itische Iran en het sunnitische Saoedi-Arabië zijn al jaren bijzonder gespannen. Na een eerder bloedbad in 1987 boycotte Iran drie jaar lang de hadj.

This is all meant to legitimize the claim that Iran is on a collision course with the ‘free’ West and its allies: Israël and the Sunni countries in the Middle East region. Furthermore, a notable number of the selected articles reports on Iranian military activity. Especially news articles about missile tests <sup>90</sup>, accompanied by images that show the launches or explosions are common. Iran is portrayed as a hostile and threatening force that holds animosity against the West and its allies in West-Asia. Thus, these articles legitimate the perception that Iran should be treated as a hostile force.

## IRAN AS DANGEROUS

Iran isn’t just portrayed as a threat to the outside world, it is also depicted as an inherently dangerous place for its own people. Both *VK* and *NRC* repeatedly depict the government of the Islamic Republic Iran as unsafe for citizens that do not closely follow its restrictive laws. The selected articles refer to its government as ‘dictatorial’ and constantly in violation of human rights. The illegitimate suppression of women, minorities and ‘traitors’ gets a lot of attention. For example, the article ‘Iranian nuclear specialist hanged’ reports:

‘Amiri, along with about twenty others, would have been hanged in Iran earlier this week because of terrorism. These executions led to protest by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. In a statement he spoke of "vague indictments", "disdain of the right to a fair trial" and thus of "serious injustice". According to Zeid, probably all convicts belonged to a minority group: Kurdish Sunnis. Human rights organizations have great criticism of Iran because of his executions. It is one of the countries where the death penalty is most often carried out. According to Amnesty International, 977 people were sentenced to death in 2015.’<sup>91</sup>

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Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/05/30/hadj-naar-mekka-iraniers-mijden-pelgrimstocht-1624777-a210490> [Accessed on 10 July 2018].

<sup>90</sup> Belia Heilbron (2017), ‘Iran to expand missileprogram’, *NRC Handelsblad*, September 22. Original title: ‘Iran gaat raketprogramma uitbreiden’ Available on: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/09/22/iran-gaat-raketprogramma-uitbreiden-a1574449> [Accessed 12 July 2018].

<sup>91</sup> Menno Sedee (2016), ‘Iranian nuclear specialist hanged’, August 7, original title: ‘Iraanse atoomspecialist opgehangen’, Original text: ‘Amiri zou samen met zo’n twintig anderen zijn opgehangen in Iran eerder deze week wegens terrorisme. Deze executies leidden tot protest bij de Hoge Commissaris van de Mensenrechten van de Verenigde Naties Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein. Hij sprak in een verklaring van “vage aanklachten”, “minachting van het recht op een eerlijk proces” en dus van “zwaar onrecht”. Volgens Zeid behoorden waarschijnlijk alle veroordeelden tot een minderheidsgroepering: Koerdische sunnieten. Mensenrechtenorganisaties hebben grote kritiek op Iran wegens zijn executies. Het is een van de landen waar het vaakst de doodstraf wordt uitgevoerd. Volgens Amnesty International werden 977 mensen ter dood veroordeeld in 2015.’ Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/08/07/iraanse-atoomspecialist-opgehangen-a1515093> [Accessed on 20 July 2018].

Another example of depicting the inhumane and chaotic circumstances in Iran:

‘Most of the executed in Iran receive the death penalty for drug possession or drug trafficking. Iran uses the death penalty to deter drug crime, but that approach fails, Amnesty said last year. Even Iranian researchers say that the death penalty does not have the intended effect. There would be no reduction in drug trafficking. Iran is also one of the world's last countries where juvenile delinquents are put to death. In 2015, the country executed at least four people who were younger than 18 years old.’<sup>92</sup>

These quoted articles illustrate how the image of Iran as a dangerous country is confirmed time and time again. This disproportionate depiction of state violence ‘proves’ that Iran is a place of chaos and brutality that continues to exercise horrific punishments, even despite the evidence that the situation is deteriorating for both civilians and politicians. It also seems to suggest that Iran solely has itself to blame for its problems and that everything would be solved if they would just accept the Western human rights laws. That oversimplification leads to a distorted image of Iran as a country and as a member of the international community.

## IRAN AS AN ISLAMIC OTHER

That image is even further distorted by the active portrayal of religious and cultural differences between Iran and the West. Iran’s theocratic government, the Islamic revolution and especially the influence of the ayatollahs in daily life are highlighted in *VK* and *NRC*:

‘If it is up to the clergy, women continue to cover themselves in black from head to toe and the media remain fully censored. Dance and music are out of the question, let alone cafes, where alcohol is served. Cinemas are also under the supervision of the government.’<sup>93</sup>

More importantly, the heavy punishments that were described in the last section are also ascribed to the Islamic nature of Iranian policies. Relating stonings, death penalties and

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<sup>92</sup> Bas Tooms (2016) ‘Kurds in Iran executed for terrorism’, in *NRC Handelsblad*, August 4, Original title: ‘Koerden in Iran geëxecuteerd vanwege terrorisme’ Original text: De meeste geëxecuteerden in Iran krijgen de doodstraf wegens drugsbezit of handel in drugs. Iran gebruikt de doodstraf ter afschrikking van drugscriminaliteit, maar die aanpak faalt, stelde Amnesty vorig jaar. Zelfs Iraanse onderzoekers zeggen dat de doodstraf niet het beoogde effect heeft. Er zou geen vermindering in drugshandel zijn. Iran is ook één van ‘s werelds laatste landen waar jeugdige delinquenten ter dood worden gebracht. Het land executeerde in 2015 ten minste vier mensen die jonger dan 18 jaar waren. Available on: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/08/04/koerden-in-iran-geexecuteerd-vanwege-terrorisme-a1514671> [Accessed 21 July 2018].

<sup>93</sup> Floris van Straaten (2017), ‘In Tehran, young people long for freedom’, in *NRC Handelsblad*, May 29. Original title: ‘In Teheran snakken jongeren naar vrijheid.’ Original text: ‘Als het aan de geestelijken ligt, blijven vrouwen zich van top tot teen in het zwart hullen, blijven de media volledig gecensureerd. Dans en muziek zijn uit den boze, laat staan cafés, waar alcohol wordt geschonken. Ook bioscopen staan onder toezicht van de overheid.’ Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/05/29/in-teheran-snakken-de-jongeren-naar-vrijheid-10593677-a1560823> [Accessed 18 July 2018].



oppression to Islam, results in a one sided and stereotypical perception of the religion. It confirms the narrative that Muslims are dangerous ‘others’ that are separated from ‘us’ because of their religious and cultural background. Moreover, linking *Islam* to the violation of *human rights* puts Westerners in the position of ‘good guys’ and Iranians, or Muslims in general, in the position of ‘bad guys’.

## IRAN-AS-SOCIETY

The Iran-as-Polity discourse does not determine the only perception on the matter, however. In addition to the dominant Iran-as-Polity discourse that I discussed above, another narrative became apparent in the margins of the otherwise mainly divisive articles. It does not connect the mentioned keywords to each other, but offers a more moderate, more nuanced and positive perspectives of Iran and the JCPOA. This narrative is displayed in both *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*. This representation of this Iran-as-Society discourse can be recognized in some of the selected articles and holds an interesting relationship with the more dominant Iran-as-Polity discourse.

Focussed on reconciliation and pacification, it actively tries to undermine the dominant narrative by offering context and multiple perspectives on Iran’s nuclear issues. Take this article, for instance: ‘Iran wants to restore relations with the Netherlands’. It’s an article the economic relations between Iran and the Netherlands. In contrast to most articles, it focusses on the initiative of Iranian Foreign Affairs minister Mohammed Zarif in repairing the connection that was damaged by economic sanctions:

‘“We have to leave the past behind and restore the good relationship with the Netherlands.” Zarif mentioned the oil and gas industry, the water sector and agriculture as examples where he sees perspective for Dutch businesses. The Netherlands and Iran have maintained diplomatic relations for over 390 years.’<sup>94</sup>

The article shows Zarif’s agency and strategic intelligence. It also portrays an image of reconciliation after a relatively short period of conflict, between two parties that have been partners for almost four centuries. ‘Teaming up’ Iran and the Netherlands like that goes into

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<sup>94</sup> Volkskrant (2015) ‘Iran wants to restore relationship with Netherlands’, September 20, original title: ‘Iran wil banden met Nederland flink aanhalen’, original text: ‘We moeten het verleden achter ons laten en de goede relatie met Nederland herstellen.’ Zarif noemde de olie- en gasindustrie, de watersector en de landbouw als voorbeelden waar hij perspectief ziet voor het Nederlandse bedrijfsleven. Nederland en Iran onderhouden al meer dan 390 jaar diplomatieke relaties.’ Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/iran-wil-banden-met-nederland-flink-aanhalen~b5db8ae1/> [21 July 2018].

divisive ‘truths’ about Iran that the dominant narrative is portraying.

Another example of anti-conflict focussed news articles is titled ‘hijab may loosen slightly in Iran’. It reports on the social responsibilities that Iranians are taking in the cities:

‘The struggle for the public space that urban Iranians with more modern norms and values hold against the mandatory rules of the state is visible everywhere. It is not a protest or political statement, but a simple expression of renewed self-confidence. This ‘lifestyle movement’, as the Iranians call it, can be witnessed throughout the capital.’<sup>95</sup>

The movement stimulates Iranians to make change along the margins of politics, where the state cannot accuse them of initiating reform. Another article calls for the responsibility of the UN, the P5+1 and other Western countries to take their responsibility in helping to strengthen human rights in Iran. Written by a Dutch-Iranian women’s rights activist, the text goes into the responsibility of both sides to make Iran a safer country.<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore, some news articles from 2015 explain the JCPOA agreement and related developments from an Iranian perspective, before contextualizing it with a Western point of view.<sup>97</sup> The language that suggests a collision course between the West and Iran is dialled down or even completely absent from these articles. Instead, the counter-discourse of Iran-as-Society concentrates on the modernity of certain aspects of the country, as well as the kindness and humanity of its people. Its foremost elements are similarities between Iran and the Netherlands, Iranian daily life and the interests that are intertwined with issues in Iran related politics. It actively tries to bridge the gap of estrangement between the two and educate the audience in the Netherlands about the Iranian reality (in the post-modern sense of the word).

However, even though *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* encourage critical thinking in their readers by supporting the Iran-as-Society discourse, their overall position in the matter shows how strong the representation of the clash regime is in the press. The articles that fit the Iran-as-Society narrative are a small minority amongst the total amount of selected news articles. Furthermore, the articles that inform the Dutch audience about the Iranian

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<sup>95</sup> Thomas Erdbrink (2015). ‘Hijab may loosen slightly in Iran’. *de Volkskrant*. Original title: Hoofddoek mag ietsje losser in Iran. [online] Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/hoofddoek-mag-iets-losser-in-iran~b1807a22/> [29 May 2018].

<sup>96</sup> Darya Safai (2015) ‘Iran is calling, but don’t forget about human rights there’ in *NRC Handelsblad*, July 29, original title: ‘Iran lonkt, maar vergeet de mensenrechten daar niet’ Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2015/07/29/iran-lonkt-maar-vergeet-de-mensenrechten-daar-nie-1519470-a330022> [Accessed 23 July 2018].

<sup>97</sup> *De Volkskrant* (2015), ‘IAEA: Iran was working on a bomb until 2003’, December 2, original title: Atoomagentschap AIEA: Iran werkte tot 2003 aan bom. Available at: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/atoomagentschap-iaea-iran-werkte-tot-2003-aan-bom~b77f2d16/> [22 July 2018].

lifestyle and society disclaim that they offer a view that differs from Iran's image as portrayed in mainstream media. But what does that mean? Do they refer to other news outlets, like competing broadsheets? Are the statements meant to suggest that the particular newspaper is more objective than its competitors, because it shows more sides of a story? And how does that relate to the fact that both *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* benefit the dominant Iran-as-Polity discourse in an uneven manner? Does that mean the Iran-as-Society discourse cannot exist without the Iran-as-Polity discourse? The results seem to point out that one discourse dominates the other to the point of irrelevance. That means the Iran-as-Polity discourse fits Strydom's definition of a hegemonic discourse, discussed in *Discourse and knowledge: the making of Enlightenment sociology*: 'a hegemonic discourse ... which overwhelms or suppresses' competing discourses on the same topic.'<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, Foucault himself describes these competing discourses as being thereby 'disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity'<sup>99</sup>.

So, the two discourses are unequally represented in the two moderate Dutch newspapers. The Iran-as-Society discourse needs the dominant narrative to contrast itself against. On the other hand, the dominant Iran-as-Policy discourse is strengthened by the Iran-as-Society discourse, because it gathers more credibility for the newspapers that are portraying the dominant discourse. The last chapter showed that right-winged *Telegraaf* doesn't represent the deviant discourse at all. In the next chapter, this study will set out if the left-winged newspaper *TROUW* maintains equal (re)production of the different discourses regarding the JCPOA.

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<sup>98</sup> P. Strydom, 2000. *Discourse and knowledge: the making of Enlightenment sociology*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, p. 51.

<sup>99</sup> M. Foucault, 1972, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, p. 82.

## CHAPTER 3: LEFT-WINGED NEWS COVERAGE OF THE JCPOA

*TROUW* is a progressive, left-winged newspaper. This chapter will set out its portrayal of the JCPOA. The newspaper presents its readers with both the Iran-as-Polity and the Iran-as-Society discourse and uses the least Western-centred language. First, this chapter will set out *TROUW*'s reproduction of the Iran-as-Polity discourse. Then, it will explain *TROUW*'s empowerment of the Iran-as-Society discourse. And ultimately, this chapter will discuss how the two opposing discourses can exist in the same newspaper and why that indicates that a paradox is at play.

### IRAN IN NEED

Similar to the selected articles from *Telegraaf*, *TROUW* tends to leave Iranian actors out of the conversation about the JCPOA. The title 'Kerry updates Gulf states about Iran agreement'<sup>100</sup> suggests that Kerry (US) holds the initiative and does the talking. According to this article, he travels to Qatar to discuss the Iran deal with the Gulf states. This is a paternalistic outlook in itself, because the US is the actor and the Gulf states are portrayed as passive receivers of information. Furthermore, Iran does not get its own voice, but is being discussed by the US and its allies in the Middle East. This lack of involvement and acknowledged agency damages the Iranian prestige.

This notion legitimizes that Iran is in need of Western intervention to guide it towards a peaceful future. Analyses of the selected news items shows that *TROUW* describes Iran's nuclear program with less violent language than the right-winged and moderate newspapers. The left-winged broadsheet has more attention for both sides and seems to dial down the conflict ridden tone. However, *TROUW* still paints the JCPOA picture from a Western point of view:

'With an agreement, the West wants to prevent Iran from building an atomic bomb. In exchange, the current sanctions against Iran could be relaxed. In the framework of the provisional agreement, Iran suspended the enrichment of uranium, the most controversial part of its nuclear program.'<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> TROUW (2015). 'Kerry updates Gulf states about Iran agreement', August 4, original title: Kerry praat golfstaten bij over Iran akkoord'. Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/kerry-praat-golfstaten-bij-over-iran-akkoord-acd39d62/> [Accessed 23 July 2018].

<sup>101</sup> TROUW (2014), 'Iran destroyed controversial enriched uranium', July 20, original title: 'Iran heeft omstreden voorraad verrijkt uranium vernietigd', Original tekst: 'Met een akkoord wil het Westen voorkomen dat Iran een atoombom kan bouwen. In ruil zouden de huidige sancties tegen Iran kunnen worden versoepeld. In het kader van het voorlopige akkoord schortte Iran de verrijking van uranium, het meest omstreden deel van zijn

The tone of ‘preventing’ against ‘relaxing’ are not equal actions in this regard. And, again, key words *Iran*, *nuclear weapon* and *uranium* are portrayed to be interconnected.

Furthermore, this article portrays the West as a dominant, winning power that is giving Iran the necessary medium of exchange. The item goes into detail about the possibilities and risks of uranium, but doesn’t inform the reader about the consequences of the sanctions.

Publications like these confirm the idea that the West made the world a safer place by making Iran destroy their storage of enriched uranium. At the same time, they withhold information about the problems and despair that the sanctions caused in Iran, or state that the country did that to itself. By reinforcing the idea of Iran in need of interference and the West as qualified intervention agent, this notion ties in with the conflict focusses language of the clash regime.

### IRAN AS A NUCLEAR THREAT

The notion of Iran as a nuclear threat is also less present in *TROUW* than it is in the other studied broadsheets. The progressive newspaper offers a more balanced and less Western centred outlook on JCPOA related matters. Still, the choice of language leans towards words and formulations that benefit the Western agenda. Even though it is less outspoken, a paternalistic outlook can be detected between the lines. For instance in this article, titled ‘Atomic watchdog pleased with Iran’:

‘The Iranian cooperation is good news for the great powers that are trying to reach long-term agreements about Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Western countries suspected Iran of working towards a nuclear weapon for a long time ... ’<sup>102</sup>

The formulation that the AIEA is ‘pleased’ with Iran has a denigrating tone. The word pleasing hold an uneven power dynamic, with one party acting in agreeable order to satisfy another. It suggests that Iran should gratify the institutions and countries that are responsible for the sanctions. Furthermore: ‘cooperation’ suggests the plan was initiated by the ‘great powers’ and Iran is simply doing what they say. This leaves the Iranian representatives that worked on the agreement without recognition. Most importantly, the last sentence make it clear to the reader that Western countries ‘knew’ that Iran’s nuclear reserves did not just have

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nucleaire programma, al op.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/-iran-heeft-omstreden-voorraad-verrijkt-uranium-vernietigd-~ae3667ee/> [Accessed on 25 July 2018].

<sup>102</sup> TROUW (2014). ‘Atomic watchdog pleased with Iran’ May 24, original title: ‘Atoomwaakhond tevreden over Iran’, original text: ‘De Iraanse medewerking is goed nieuws voor de grote mogendheden die proberen te komen tot afspraken voor de lange termijn over de nucleaire ambities van Iran. Westerse landen verdenken Iran er al heel lang van op een kernwapen uit te zijn...’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/atoomwaakhond-tevreden-over-iran~a3f30f01/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

a civil purpose, but were meant for a nuclear bomb. In other words, the key words *Iran*, the *JCPOA* and *nuclear weapons* are once again portrayed to be interconnected.

Moreover, *TROUW*'s suggestive, and highly sensationalistic titles, like 'Iran to enrich more uranium in Nantez'<sup>103</sup> and 'IAEA: New step Iran in enrichment uranium'<sup>104</sup> only play into the fuse of uranium enrichment and nuclear weapons in the mind of the reader.

Generalizing those associations and concealing the many difficult steps that lay between those two situations strengthens fear of Iran's nuclear program. It amplifies the division between a peace loving West and a despotic Iran that is acting in defiance of the civilized world.

## IRAN AS HOSTILE

The selected articles display the notion that Iran shows hostile behaviour to other countries and nationals. Victims of this hostility are primarily Western people and their interests.

'The involvement of Iran in the fight against terrorist movement Islamic State in Iraq complicates the American fight against terror and destabilizes Iraq. The Iranian general Qassem Soleimani advises the Shiite militias fighting with the Iraqi army in the battle for IS-stronghold Tikrit. According to CIA boss Brennan, Soleimani is "very aggressive and active" in that role and Iran should not be seen as an ally.'<sup>105</sup>

This quote signifies that Iranian aggression hinders the US in their 'fight against terrorism' and that the country shouldn't be considered to be on the same side. Other article suggest that Iran is searching ways to expand its military strengths and interests along the margins of the JCPOA. That activity is regarded as threatening, because it endangers other Western efforts in the Middle East and could eventually lead to military capacity that forms a direct threat to Europe:

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<sup>103</sup> TROUW (2013). 'Iran to enrich more uranium in Nantez', Februari 1, original tile: 'Iran gaat meer uranium verrijken in Nantez', Available at: (<https://www.trouw.nl/home/iran-gaat-meer-uranium-verrijken-in-natanz~aa042ecf/>) [Accessed 25 July 2018].

<sup>104</sup> TROUW (2013). 'IAEA: New step Iran in enrichment uranium' February 22, original title: 'IAEA: nieuwe stap Iran in verrijking uranium' Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/iaea-nieuwe-stap-iran-in-verrijking-uranium~a1595ecd/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

<sup>105</sup> TROUW (2015). 'CIA boss: Iran disrupts Iraq', March 23, original title: 'CIA-baas: Iran ontwricht Irak', original text: 'De betrokkenheid van Iran bij de strijd tegen terreurbeweging Islamitische Staat in Irak compliceert de Amerikaanse strijd tegen terreur en destabiliseert Irak. De Iraanse generaal Qassem Soleimani adviseert de sjiitische milities die met het Iraakse leger meevechten in de strijd om IS-bolwerk Tikrit. Volgens CIA-baas Brennan is Soleimani 'zeer agressief en actief' in die rol en moet Iran niet 'als bondgenoot' worden gezien.' Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/cia-baas-iran-ontwricht-irak~ae85af4e/> [Accessed 23 July 2018].

‘Iran has warned Europe that the range of long-range missiles can be increased. If Europe threatens Tehran, Iran will ensure that the missiles go beyond the current maximum of two thousand kilometres...’<sup>106</sup>

Key words here are Iran and threat. The language and ambitions that are assigned to Iran are aggressive and seemingly confirm the idea that Iran has malicious intentions. It enforces the theme of Iran as an antagonist that needs to be kept in check, or even defeated by the protagonist West.

## IRAN AS A TERRORIST NATION

Only one of the selected *TROUW* articles lays a direct link between Iran and terrorism. The item reports on Iranian reaction on Canadian accusations:

‘According to the Canadian police, the suspects had support from the al-Qaeda terrorist movement in Iran.’<sup>107</sup>

The Canadian allegations were apparently made without evidence. More importantly, the article disregards the differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims and suggest that Shia Islamic Iran supported Sunni Islamic Al-Qaida’s paramilitary groups. The article accuses Iran of supporting terrorism regionally and internationally and raises the issue of ‘Islam’. It’s only one article that portrays this image, but there are no items that actively make a distinction between the Islam and terrorism. That is problematic, because it stimulates generalizations about Muslims.

## IRAN AS DANGEROUS

As well as *Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*, another common denominator in the selected articles, is that Iran and the Middle East region as a whole are portrayed as dangerous territory:

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<sup>106</sup> TROUW (2017) ‘Iran: missiles can reach further if Europe threatens us’, October 26, original title: ‘Iran: Raketten kunnen verder reiken als Europa ons bedreigt’, original text: ‘Iran heeft Europa gewaarschuwd dat het bereik van de langeafstandsraketten kan worden opgeschroefd. Als Europa Teheran bedreigt, zal Iran zorgen dat de raketten verder komen dan het huidige maximum van tweeduizend kilometer...’, Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/iran-raketten-kunnen-verder-reiken-als-europa-ons-bedreigt~a5f9b5a2/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

<sup>107</sup> TROUW (2013), ‘Iran denies involvement conspiracy against Canadian train’, January 23, original title: ‘Iran ontkent betrokkenheid complot tegen Canadese trein’, Original text: ‘Volgens de Canadese politie hadden de verdachten steun van de terreurbeweging al-Qaeda in Iran.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/iran-ontkent-betrokkenheid-complot-tegen-canadese-trein~a2901097/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

“The Middle East experienced a new landslide yesterday. This time it’s not caused by war, or jihadist attacks, but the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program.”<sup>108</sup>

This article displays a stereotypical portrayal of Iran and the Middle East region by suggesting that the only important events that occur there are wars and terrorist attacks. Furthermore, *TROUW* repeatedly cites cases of Iranian minorities that are in some way oppressed by their government. Whether it is for their religion, ethnicity, gender, political standpoints or other matters, the fact that the government and its institutions are consistently oppressing them, persecuting them and violating their basic human rights<sup>109</sup> is clearly reported in the news items:

‘A British-Iranian woman who tried to attend a men's volleyball match in Iran has been sentenced to a one year prison sentence.’<sup>110</sup>

And:

‘Five men were hanged Wednesday in Kerman prison after the Supreme Court had confirmed their sentence. The trafficking of more than five kilograms of drugs can be sanctioned in Iran with the death penalty.’<sup>111</sup>

*TROUW* repeats the message that Iran is not a safe country. It does so by solely focussing on severe punishments that are considered outrageous in the West. I.e. executing drug dealers and incarcerating a woman that tried to attend a sport event. It repeats and confirms the message that Iran’s legal procedures are serving the interests of the conservative establishment. The Iranian government profanes its people by systematically violating human

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<sup>108</sup> Ghassan Dahhan (2015), ‘Nuclear Deal could make Iran into a superpower’ in *TROUW*, July 14, original title: ‘Atoomdeal kan Iran tot grootmacht maken’, original text: ‘Het Midden-Oosten maakte gisteren een nieuwe aardverschuiving mee. Geen oorlog, of jihadistische aanslag is deze keer de oorzaak, maar het internationale akkoord over Irans nucleaire programma.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/atoomdeal-kan-iran-tot-grootmacht-maken~aeabbace/> [Accessed 23 July 2018].

<sup>109</sup> *TROUW* (2015), ‘UN concerned about Human Rights Iran’, March 17, original title: zorgen bij VN om mensenrechten Iran’, Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/zorgen-bij-vn-om-mensenrechten-iran~abe27784/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

<sup>110</sup> *TROUW* (2014), ‘British-Iranian women sentenced to one year in Iranian prison’, November 3, original title: ‘Brits-Iraanse vrouw krijgt jaar cel in Iran’, original text: Een Brits-Iraanse vrouw die probeerde een wedstrijd mannenvolleybal bij te wonen is in Iran veroordeeld tot een jaar celstraf., Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/brits-iraanse-vrouw-krijgt-jaar-cel-in-iran~a51ba196/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

<sup>111</sup> *TROUW* (2013), ‘Five drugdealers hanged in Iran’, February 2, original title: ‘Vijf drugdealers opgehangen in Iran’, Original text: ‘vijf mannen werden woensdag opgehangen in de gevangenis van Kerman, nadat het hooggerechtshof hun straf had bevestigd. Het verhandelen van meer dan vijf kilogram drugs kan in Iran gesanctioneerd worden met de doodstraf.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/vijf-drugdealers-opgehangen-in-iran~abd9d5f3/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].



rights. Thereby, it draws up a divide between a safe and free West, and a dangerous and oppressed Iran.

## IRAN AS AN ISLAMIC OTHER

The last recurring theme is 'Islam'. *TROUW* portrays the Iranian identity as automatically being an Islamic identity. Furthermore, it stresses the 'otherness' between Islamic and Western cultures:

'Out of respect for the Iranian culture and the faith of the Iranian President Hassan Rohani, Rome has covered several naked statues in the Capitoline Museums... Additionally, in view of his Islamic faith, dinner was served without wine.'<sup>112</sup>

Even though this quote holds no direct judgement, it does stress the difference between cultures. On the one hand, it shows the West, represented by classic works of art and customs that date back to the beginning of our society. On the other hand, it shows Iran, with its Islamic government that enforces strict, restrictive policies. That sentiment can also be recognized in articles about Islamic law as installed by the Ayatollahs, like the ones discussed in the 'Iran as dangerous' section. A common denominator in those articles is the marginalized position of the victims. For example, the British-Iranian woman was sentenced to prison, because

'...in Iran, it is forbidden for women to watch sports competitions with men's teams.'<sup>113</sup>

Another article stresses the severe punishments for violating sharia law:

'A court in the Iranian city of Rasht has sentenced four Christians to eighty whip lashes for consuming sacrament wine. Drinking wine is forbidden in Islam. The four belong to the illegal Protestant religious communities and are probably converts. According to the Sharia, the death penalty applies to apostasy from Islam.'<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> TROUW (2016), 'Rome covers statues for Iranian visitors', January 2016, original title: 'Rome bedekt beelden bij Iraans bezoek', original text: 'Uit respect voor de Iraanse cultuur en het geloof van de Iraanse president Hassan Rohani, heeft Rome verscheidene naakte beelden bedekt in de Capitolijsne Musea... Met het oog op zijn islamitisch geloof werd bij het avondeten ook geen wijn geschonken.' Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/rome-bedekt-beelden-bij-iraans-bezoek~aeb79419/>

<sup>113</sup> TROUW (2014), 'Brits-Iraanse vrouw krijgt jaar cel in Iran' November 3, original title: 'British-Iranian women sentenced to one year in prison', original text: 'In Iran is het voor vrouwen verboden om sportwedstrijden met mannenteams te bekijken.', Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/brits-iraanse-vrouw-krijgt-jaar-cel-in-iran~a51ba196/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

<sup>114</sup> TROUW (2013), 'Iranian court sentences christians for sacrament wine', October 28, original title: 'Iraanse rechtbank veroordeelt christenen om avondmaalswijn' original text: 'Een rechtbank in de Iraanse stad Rasht heeft vier christenen veroordeeld tot tachtig zweepslagen wegens het nuttigen van avondmaalswijn. Wijn

Furthermore, the compulsory hijab is a theme that is often used to portray the trope of oppressed Muslim women:

‘...grandayatollah Ali Khamenei calls Iran the heart of the Muslim world, a model country. That’s why women who show their true face are considered a threat.’<sup>115</sup>

These articles stress an absurdity in Iranian culture, caused by their Islamic administration. This narrative supports the idea that ‘We’ the West are normal, democratic and rational, because we separated state and religion. Outside of that, Iran exists in a delirious, theocratic society that it created along the lines of its oppressive religious values. These two cultures are depicted as irreconcilable.

Moreover, the Iran-as-Polity narrative confirms the idea of a Clash of Civilizations: Islam and the West are bound to combat each other in inevitable and never ending conflict. This recurring theme accuses all Muslims of complicity in the formation of terror. What isn’t mentioned, however, is that most victims of the so called Islamic terrorism worldwide are Muslim. So not only does the dominant discourse warn the West for Iranians, it warns for the Islamic culture as a whole.

## IRAN-AS-SOCIETY

*TROUW* counters the violent logic of the dominant Iran-as-Polity discourse with articles that endorse a focus on the Iranian humanity. This Iran-as-Society discourse portrays the JCPOA as a cooperation between two equal parties. It does not portray the key words as inherently connected, but combats the stereotypical portrayal of Iran. The main theme of this narrative is reconciliation between Iran and the West. Among the selected *TROUW* articles are some good examples of this approach. There are reports on Iran’s atomic research program that solely focus on its civil purposes. For example, the ‘Russia Iran discuss second power plant’ article

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drinken is in de islam verboden. De vier behoren tot de illegale protestantse geloofsgemeenschappen en zijn waarschijnlijk bekeerlingen. Volgens de sharia staat er op afvalligheid van de islam de doodstraf’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/iraanse-rechtbank-veroordeelt-christenen-om-avondmaalswijn~a9812b8b/> [Accessed on 26 July 2018].

<sup>115</sup> *TROUW* (2014), ‘Iranian women take selfies without headscarves’ May 13, Original title: ‘Iraanse vrouwen maken selfies zonder hoofddoek’, original text: ‘...grootayatollah Ali Khamenei noemt Iran het hart van de moslimwereld, een voorbeeldland. Daarom worden vrouwen die hun ware gezicht laten zien beschouwd als bedreiging.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/iraanse-vrouwen-maken-selfies-zonder-hoofddoek~a51f3a88/> [Accessed 25 July 2018].

makes no mention of keywords like ‘nuclear’, ‘military’, ‘weapon’ or ‘bomb’.<sup>116</sup> It reports that the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Ali Akbar Salehi, and his Russian counterpart talked about the construction of a new power plant.

Furthermore, the left-winged broadsheet published a number of news items in a section of the newspaper called ‘Life in Iran’ that go into further detail about Iranian society. Written by Carolien Omid-Damen, the articles inform the reader about Iranian lifestyles, public debate and Iranian opinions about local, national and international politics. In a report on the sanction’s humanitarian consequences she writes:

‘Although the United Nations committed to the Millennium Goals to provide continuous access to cheap essential medicines for 2015 in developing countries, we see that sanctions have made importing medicines into Iran almost impossible.’<sup>117</sup>

This account of events shows that the sanctions affect the common Iranian people the as well as or even more so than the targeted people in power. Moreover, it shines a light on the hypocrisy of Western policies. In another article, she describes an Iranian view on their negative reputation abroad:

‘Many Iranians cherish the hope that with the lifting of the sanctions, Iran’s ‘pariah state’ stigma will disappear. Not just on a political level but on a human level as well. Especially the elderly are burdened by Iran’s bad image. They remember the time when many foreign companies were active in Iran and the world considered Iranians to be refined, cosmopolitan people. After the revolution of 1979, however, public opinion about Iran and the Iranians changed completely.’<sup>118</sup>

By showing the effects of stereotypes, Omid-Damen puts the Iran-as-Polity discourse in perspective.

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<sup>116</sup> TROUW (2013), ‘Russia Iran discuss second power plant’, August 12, original title: Overleg Rusland Iran over tweede centrale, Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/overleg-rusland-iran-over-tweede-centrale~a53e6a51/> [Accessed 23 July 2018].

<sup>117</sup> Carolien Omid-Damen (2014), ‘Prominent Iranians: give our country medicines’, January 14, original title: ‘Prominente Iraniërs: geef ons land medicijnen’, original text: ‘Hoewel de Verenigde Naties zichzelf in de millennium-doelstellingen hebben verplicht om voor 2015 mensen in ontwikkelingslanden continu toegang te verschaffen tot goedkope essentiële medicijnen, zien we dat sancties de import van geneesmiddelen in Iran zeer moeilijk tot onmogelijk hebben gemaakt.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/prominente-iraniers-geef-ons-land-medicijnen~a8651f96/> [26 July 2018].

<sup>118</sup> Carolien Omid-Damen (2016), ‘Waking up in a country without sanctions’ January 18, original title: ‘wakker worden in een land zonder sancties’, original text: ‘Daarnaast koesteren veel Iraniërs de hoop dat met de opheffing van de sancties het stigma van Iran als paria-staat verdwijnt. Niet alleen op politiek maar ook op menselijk niveau. Vooral ouderen gaan gebukt onder Irans slechte imago. Zij herinneren zich nog de tijd waarin er veel buitenlandse bedrijven in Iran actief waren en Iraniërs in de wereld als verfijnde, kosmopolitische mensen werden beschouwd. Na de revolutie van 1979 veranderde de publieke opinie over Iran en de Iraniërs echter totaal.’ Available at: <https://www.trouw.nl/home/wakker-worden-in-land-zonder-sancties~ab1e6599/> [Accessed 26 July 2018].

Analysis of the sources found that *TROUW*, the most progressive, left-winged newspaper of the selected sources, portrays the JCPOA in the least Western-centred way. The selected articles light related issues from both the Western as the Iranian side. The number of articles from *TROUW* that reproduce the Iran-as-Society discourse is relatively high: 12 out of 30. Thence, *TROUW*'s portrayal of the Joint Compressive Plan of Action actively challenges the dominant narrative. It contextualizes and questions information that the Iran-as-Polity discourse portrays as 'truths' and thereby stimulates readers critical ability to form their own opinion about the events.

However, even in this broadsheet the Iran-as-Polity discourse remains dominant. A significant amount of the selected news items from *TROUW* still showcase structural confirmation of the violent 'us-versus-them' logic. Moreover, the critical items state that they provide information that isn't presented in 'the media' and/or 'the press'. Some of these articles even warn their readers that they shouldn't take the image that is portrayed in the news for an objective reality. This is where *TROUW* contradicts itself. The newspaper uses the Iran-as-Society discourse to warn people about one-sided information. At the same time, those statements indicate that *TROUW* is a trustworthy and unbiased newspaper that shows the whole story, because the publication of both narratives shows that there is room for discussion among the editors. That way, *TROUW* uses the dissident discourse for its own benefit. And the paradox goes even further. The progressive broadsheets produces and reinforces the dominant Iran-as-Polity. So on the one hand *TROUW* uses the Iran-as-Society discourse for its own gain. On the other hand, they publish a disproportionate amount of articles that contain the discourse they warn their readers to stay critical about. That way, the editors of *TROUW* nullify the power of the Iran-as-Society discourse.

## DISCUSSION

Discourse analysis demonstrates that *Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant* and *TROUW* predominantly circulate a negative discourse regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The main themes of this Iran-as-Polity discourse are intervention, nuclear issues, hostility, danger, Islamic identity and terrorism. The divisive message conveyed by the press stresses Iran's otherness and fails to represent Iran as a more balanced and complex country. Furthermore, these Dutch newspapers reproduce the clash regime, that is in part a US agenda. Additionally, with their insufficient critical attitude towards the Iran-as-Polity discourse, the news articles endorse the Netherlands' government's current diplomatic position that is aligned with the interests of the P5+1.

Even though the power of the dominant Iran-as-Polity discourse should not be overlooked, the same newspapers also print items that project the 2015 agreement in a less one-sided and more positive manner. These articles generate an alternate discourse; Iran-as-Society. Its foremost elements are similarities between Iran and the Netherlands, Iranian daily life and the interests that are intertwined with issues in Iran related politics. It actively tries to bridge the gap of estrangement between the two peoples and educate the audience in the Netherlands about the Iranian reality (in the post-modern sense of the word). The analysed texts show Iranian agency, independence and strength as well as their troubles. They trace responsibility for Iranian problems back to both Iranians themselves as well as Western actors that push their own agenda. The articles that confirm the Iran-as-Society discourse actively engage with the Iran-as-Polity discourse and make significant efforts to disprove the 'us-versus-them' logic that it employs. In other words: these journalists actively counter the clash regime. They offer an alternative for the violent language that persuades legitimization of a permanent war against 'the other'; they offer a nuanced account of multiple constructed realities.

However, even though moderate and progressive newspapers *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *TROUW* encourage critical thinking in their readers by supporting the Iran-as-Society discourse, their overall position in the matter indicates how strong the representation of the clash regime is in the press. This is where a paradox comes to light. The ambiguity holds that the press enforces two narratives to keep up the appearance of neutrality, but all four of the newspapers display a significant preference, and systematically support the dominant narrative. I.e. the paradox illustrates that the Iran-as-Polity is a 'hegemonic

discourse ... which overwhelms or suppresses' competing discourses on the same topic<sup>119</sup>, these being thereby 'disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity'<sup>120</sup>. It appears that, despite its efforts, the Dutch newspapers aren't critical enough of its own content. The mainstream discourse supports the government's endorsement of US led diplomacy towards Iran. That means that the clash regime is alive and well in Dutch society.

The dissident articles in *NRC Handelsblad* are described as 'separating facts from fiction'. This might imply that the newspaper considers it difficult for their readers to determine objectivity. As if, and this might be a leap, they encourage their audience to stay critical. Study of the selected articles has shown that Dutch broadsheets enforce the clash regime by over-representing the Iran-as-Polity discourse in news articles. At the same time, they publish columns that represent the Iran-as-Society discourse. Not only do these columns actively challenge the dominant narrative, they also warn readers not to consider the image that is portrayed in the news a sole reality. Furthermore, what does it say that all four newspapers have special attention for Iran, but not for countries like Belgium, France or Great Britain? Does that not confirm the 'special' status of Iran in the Dutch perception? By putting so much effort in trying to dismantle Iran's 'otherness', doesn't that paradoxically raise Iran to a whole new level of alien? In other words, the Iran-as-Society discourse is only of interest to newspapers because of a stricter Iran-as-Policy discourse. Thus, the paradox is that both are subordinated to the logic of the clash regime.

So what incites this paradox? These items are at least to some degree published to stimulate their readers to stay on their toes. At the same time they present their own newspaper as a helping hand in that matter, because their representation of multiple discourses makes them unbiased and thus trustworthy. The publication of multiple discourses also shows that there is at least room for discussion among the editors of the publishing news organizations. The broadsheets produce and reinforce the dominant discourse they warn their readers to stay critical about. Yet, a clear hierarchy remains that benefits the dominant discourse and thus the clash regime. The articles that reinforce the Iran-as-Polity discourse are classified as 'news' and 'factual'. They can be found on the first few pages of the newspapers. In contrast; the articles that represent the Iran-as-Society discourse are characterized as opinions or entertainment and can generally be found in the back of the newspaper. These

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<sup>119</sup> P. Strydom, 2000. *Discourse and knowledge: the making of Enlightenment sociology*. Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, p. 51.

<sup>120</sup> M. Foucault, 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge, p. 82.

findings confirm that the Dutch press cannot be viewed without considering the violent logic of Adib-Moghaddam's clash regime. Furthermore, the 'us-versus-them' argumentation is intertwined with the Netherlands' relation to the Joint Compressive Plan Of Action and thereby with the Iranian government.

## CONCLUSION

The clash regime is the system of techniques, policies, ideas, strategies and disciplines that force ‘us: the West’ into believing in a seemingly inevitable clash with ‘them: the Islam’. The four leading ‘quality newspapers’ in the Netherlands employ editorial policies and writing styles that are part of the cultural apparatus sustaining the clash regime in our age. The news reports from *Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant* and *TROUW* on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action suggest an artificial divide and fit into a bigger structure of dissociation between the West and Islam. This journalistic discrimination stimulates the idea of Muslims as a danger to Western societies. Without consistent interference and resistance of the media, counter-dominant narratives, such as the significant Iran-as-Society discourse, could be subordinated to the resurgence of right-wing realities. The many articles that portray Iran as a threat to the Western way of life, are part of a larger cultural apparatus that is negatively biased towards Islam and everything it is supposed to stand for.

As Adib-Moghaddam puts it himself: ‘It is a necessity to stay sceptical of accounts attempting to capture such complex transcendental and ideational systems we have conveniently called ‘Islam(ism)’ and ‘the West’.’<sup>121</sup> The effort to restrict their plurality to a set of singular formulas and a unified essence is inherently affected by human inventions and thus subjected to processes of social engineering. Of course, this research only studied four newspapers in the Netherlands, leaving out other news sources inside and outside of the country. Moreover, a lot more studies are needed to pinpoint the exact relation between dominant and alternative discourses in the media. That said, the results of this thesis give an indication of the ferocity and level of penetration of the clash regime in Dutch society. It is and will be continuously reproduced, objectified in formal and informal institutions, internalised by society and introjected into our consciousness.

At the time of writing, people are taking to the streets in various Iranian cities. They are angry about Rohani’s false promises of a better economy after the JCPOA and his claim to battle corruption. It’s particularly the poor people, who have been heavily affected by, among other things, the economic sanctions and their consequences. The Dutch news articles reporting on the protests focus on Iranians who fight their oppressing, Islamic government, for example by showing pictures of women taking off their hijabs. Yet, the ‘expert’ Iranian comments and opinions that are published are solely men’s. On another note: *NRC*

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<sup>121</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, A., 2010. *A Metahistory of the Clash of Civilizations: Us and Them beyond Orientalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 266.



*Handelsblad* recently published a news item that reported on Khomeini's statement about the protest<sup>122</sup>, apparently oblivious to the fact that Khomeini died in 1989 and was succeeded by Khamenei. *NRC* has since adapted the name of the supreme leader in the article, but it indicates a lack of genuine understanding and interest for Iran.

As these most recent examples show, the clash regime continues to be reproduced by newspapers. And it will stay that way if universalists' superficial and naïve vows about inclusivity aren't stripped to their exclusionary core. The value of the Iran-as-Society discourse is essential to resist the power of the clash regime that pits 'us' against 'them', but only if it becomes an independent discourse. However marginal, every person it reaches is a positive step towards reaching a more inclusive and equal division of power in the world.

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<sup>122</sup> Huib de Zeeuw (2018), Nine dead at fifth day of protest in Iran, January 2 in *NRC Handelsblad*, original title: 'Negen doden tijdens vijfde protestdag in Iran' Available at: <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2018/01/02/9-doden-tijdens-vijfde-protestdag-in-iran-a1586774> [25 July 2018].

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