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info@cejiss.org

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Research article

Remembering the Algerian War in France: The Role of Interest Groups in Framing Ontological (In)Security

Katharina Egle
Institut d'études politiques de Paris, Sciences Po, France, ORCiD: 0009-0005-6374-8387, corresponding address: katharina.egle@sciencespo.fr

Abstract

The Algerian War occupies a particularly contentious and emotionally charged place in France's national memory – serving as the source of a veritable war of memories that is regularly fought on various political and scholarly battlegrounds. Previous research has shown that the tension between republican universalism and the colonial crimes committed during imperial conquest has produced a colonial legacy that sits uncomfortably at the heart of French identity. Contributing to this scholarship, this article employs the theoretical premises of ontological security theory to examine France's incomplete reconciliation with its colonial past. By analysing how interest groups generate ontological insecurity through the contestation of the state's official narrative in their pursuit to gain official recognition and commemoration, this analysis provides a novel understanding of bottom-up memory lobbying in France. It thus examines how Harki memory entrepreneurs and associations commemorating the 1961 Paris massacre strategically frame their demands for recognition by attacking the Republic's ontological security. The study suggests that a closer analysis of bottom-up threat constructions to the state's ontological security order contributes to a more holistic understanding of the internal deliberation of the state's sense of self.

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Keywords: *Algeria, France, memory studies, memory activism, non-state actors, ontological security*

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Introduction

On 28 March 2024, the French National Assembly passed a resolution that officially recognises the massacre of Algerian protesters on 17 October 1961 in Paris. In support of the resolution, its primary signatory, Sabrina Sabahi, argued that 'this is about defining the way we look at ourselves' by commemorating those 'forgotten by the history of France' (Assemblée nationale 2024).[1] Despite marking an important step towards the recognition and inclusion of marginalised memories in France, the process of coming to terms with the past and particularly the memory of the decolonial war in Algeria continue to be polarising topics. Since the French state's official recognition of the Algerian *War* in 1999 – previously it was officially referred to as an 'operation to maintain order' – debates forming part of this 'guerre des mémoires' (Stora & Leclère: 2007) have become more salient.

The significance of the Algerian War for the broader post-colonial moment in France should be understood against the backdrop of Algeria's relevance in the broader French imperial project. As the Algerian-born French historian Benjamin Stora (2021a: 119) highlights, 'the extensive colonisation by Europeans, the discovery of oil and gas, the nuclear experiments in the Sahara Dessert, and the cruelty of a war that lasted more than seven years' between 1954 and 1962, have constituted Algerian centrality and singularity in the history of France.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Algeria's centrality to the French imperial project, its loss marked the beginning of a deliberate politics of amnesia, codified through a series of amnesty laws from 1962 onwards. Nevertheless, the limits of the state's attempt to deliberately suppress the memory of the Algerian War of decolonialisation became increasingly evident. As Jansen observes, 'since the 1990s, in countries such as France, Italy and Germany, it is possible to identify a "rediscovery" of colonial history in academic, public and sometimes even political discourse' (Jansen 2010: 266). This rediscovery was largely driven by 'memory entrepreneurs', actors committed to the public recollection of the past to create common points of reference in the present and for the future (Morin 2024; Pollak 1993). These memory entrepreneurs have thereby reinvigorated public debates about the Algerian War and obliged French political elites to confront historical wrongdoings.

The entry of previously suppressed memories into public, academic and political spaces of deliberation has fuelled a 'memory war' (Stora & Leclère 2007) over how

1 All translations from French to English were done by the author.

France ought to reckon with its history of colonisation and imperial violence – a subject that has been extensively studied.[2] Scholars have also examined how shame and the contradictions within French Republican identity, often oscillating between universalist ideals and exclusionary hermeneutics, inform the French politics of memory.

These studies resonate strongly with the now well-established literature on ontological security studies (OSS), which explores how states seek to preserve a coherent sense of self in time through the protection of the state's identity. By managing shame and guilt through hegemonic narratives and behavioural routines, states attempt to establish and maintain a sense of ontological security thereby legitimising political action and policy shifts. It is therefore striking that OSS has not yet been applied to analyse France's changing, yet incomplete process of coming to terms with its colonial past.

Moreover, although non-state actors (NSAs) are frequently acknowledged in studies on memories of the Algerian War, little attention has been paid to the specific framing strategies employed by these interest groups in their endeavour to achieve official recognition by the French government. As such, the specific ways in which NSAs exert pressure, the ways shame and guilt are mobilised as tools to advance arguments and the extent to which the recollection of the memories of the Algerian War constitutes an anxiety-inducing process for French policymakers have thus far not been systematically examined.

To fill this research gap this article employs the conceptual frameworks of OSS to examine France's incomplete reconciliation with its colonial past as well as framing theory to focus on the role of interest groups in creating ontological insecurity through the mobilisation and contestation of aspects of the hegemonic state narrative to gain official recognition and the inscription of so-called 'cloistered memories' (Eldridge 2016: 8). As such, this article explores how memory entrepreneurs and NSAs can attack the ontological security of a state through strategic framing activities in order to politicise their demands and secure official recognition.

Because of recent policy shifts towards full or partial recognition of their advocacy, two groups are of particular interest to the present inquiry and have therefore been chosen as analytical in-depth case studies to investigate interest groups' demands for recognition and commemoration in France. The first group are the *Harkis* – France's auxiliary soldiers during the Algerian War, and their descendants. The second group is composed of activists advocating for the official

2 The author most connected to the colonial history of France in Algeria, as well as its impacts on contemporary France politics, is historian Benjamin Stora. See *inter alia*, La gangrène et l'oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie, (1991); La guerre des mémoires: la France face à son passé colonial, with Leclère, T. (2007); and Doit-on s'excuser de la colonisation ? With Blanchard, P. (2025).

recognition of the Paris massacre that took place on 17 October 1961. Respectively, these memory entrepreneurs began to advocate and lobby in the 1980s for the official recognition and an apology by the French government for the suffering they experienced as a consequence of discriminatory government policy. Since then, both groups have achieved an, albeit partial, fulfilment of their demands of recognition for their suffering during the two-term presidency of Emmanuel Macron. However, whereas the *Harkis* secured an official state apology in 2021, as well as an official acknowledgment of state responsibility and reparation payments through law n°2022-229 in 2022, the associations working towards an official recognition of the Paris massacre as a state crime received only partial recognition in 2024 through resolution n°273. The former's recognition by law officially establishes state responsibility whereas the latter's recognition by resolution continues to negate a state crime.

By employing an outcome-oriented process-tracing (PT) methodology, this article utilises a qualitative approach to construct an in-depth case study analysis of the contemporary moment of recognition and commemoration of the Algerian War in France. To ensure the applicability of the findings, a diversity of primary and secondary sources have been analysed. The primary sources include *inter alia* speeches, court documents, parliamentary debates and legal documents. Data triangulation across these sources enables the cross-validation of causal inferences, thereby fulfilling the demanding methodological requirements of PT. This ensures the reliability and internal validity of the case studies at hand.

This article argues that the modification of the official narrative of the Algerian war is the consequence of pressure exerted by memory entrepreneurs who, by highlighting injustices and demanding the inclusion of their memories into the official memory, achieved a rewriting of the hegemonic account. To do so, this article begins by outlining how the omission of colonial crimes in the so-called *roman national* has been interpreted by the existing literature. The article then goes on to highlight relevant studies on narratives and narrative contestation within OSS. In the third part, this study explores how the *Harkis* and associations commemorating 17 October 1961 have, to different extents, successfully introduced subversive frames of historical events that question the hegemonic narrative, and achieved the (partial) reception of their demands of state apology and official commemoration.

This study argues that, by framing incoherences in the hegemonic state narrative through the introduction of counter-narratives, NSAs can attack the ontological security of the state. In order to (re-)establish ontological security, while also making sense of the newly introduced frames, the state is pressured to re-narrate its understanding of the state's 'self'. Thus, state representatives are expected to establish a logical autobiographic narrative that incorporates the subversive frame, because of the state's 'internal efforts to maintain their self-reflexive narratives,

their positive views of [the] self' (Subotić 2016: 614). The expected outcome is an amended narrative that compromises between previously dominant and newly incorporated frames, since uncertainty 'can only be overcome with the definition of a new frame which gives meaning to the new reality' (Voltolini 2016: 1505). Overall, this article concludes that the introduction of OSS to the study of memory politics in France allows for a more holistic understanding of the reconfigurations in the Republic's memory landscape by positing that new state-narratives respond to subversive framing strategies by memory entrepreneurs and are narratives to fulfil France's ontological security needs.

The colonial fracture in French Republican identity

The monumental work *Les Lieux de mémoire* represents a central point of departure for the investigation into France's ontological security and sense of self. Under the academic leadership of historian Pierre Nora, seven volumes on significant sites of memory were published in France between 1984 and 1992. In the final volume of the English translation, Nora stresses that the Republic as supplier of French national identity through the provision of 'history as the myth underlying the destiny of the nation' has now ceded 'her' place to society at large (Nora 1989: 633). Here he is referring to the state's authority over the '*roman national,* which explains the past for the nation-state's citizens in order to rationalize the nation's present and to look ahead to its great future' (Yanhong 2020: 151). Postmodernity has called into question the *roman national* through the introduction of memories that were previously suppressed by the historical narrative of the French nation-state (Yanhong 2020). Consequently, France's national narrative risks 'being shattered' (Yanhong 2020: 165). Overall, Nora argues that the loss of the state's monopoly over the *roman national*, which allows it to determine national history *qua* national myths, represents the root cause for the fragmentation of contemporary French society.

The ground-breaking echo of *Les Lieux* as one of the most influential works on memory in the late twentieth century stems, however, not only from the topics that were included, but also, significantly, from those that were not. The amnesiac omission of France's colonial enterprise in *Les Lieux* seems, 'from the standpoint of current academic trends . . . nothing short of fantastic' (Mann 2005: 412, see also: Jarvis 2021). This colonial lacuna has been attributed to Nora's Eurocentric, elegiac construction of the French Republic (Anderson 2009), and is clearly disclosed in the introduction of the first volume of *Les Lieux.* Here, Nora alleges that 'independence has swept into history societies newly awakened from their ethnological slumbers by colonial violation' (1989: 7), pointing to the apparent ahistoricity of France's colonies and thereby supposedly justifying their exclusion from the relevant history-memory nexus of Nora's enquiry (Achille, Forsdick & Moudileno 2020). As a consequence, Perry Anderson points out,

> the entire imperial history of the country, from the Napoleonic conquests through the plunder of Algeria under the July Monarchy, to the seizure of Indochina in the Second Empire, and the vast African booty of the Third Republic, becomes a *non-lieu* at the bar of these bland recollections. (Anderson 2009: 161)

The result of this omission is twofold. On the one hand, *Les Lieux* serves as a somewhat melancholic attempt to create a '*union sucrée*', through which 'the divisions and discords of French society would melt away in the fond rituals of post-modern remembrance' (Anderson, 2009: 162). On the other hand, it is also a comprehensive snapshot of a time when the debate about France's colonies – and the memory of the Algerian War in particular – were not established as *lieux de mémoire* but rather as *lieux supprimés* – that is, places of non-memory excluded from the state's narrative about the past. Following the wars of decolonisation, the end of the French empire and the fall of the French Fourth Republic, de Gaulle made wilful forgetting the Republic's 'primary strategy toward the Algerian War' (Derderian 2002: 29).

However, this suppression of collective commemoration of the colonial enterprise was unsuccessful in imposing a general amnesia. Individuals who were directly affected by colonial crimes maintained the 'private' memory of the war (to employ Nora's term). Since the 1990s, much has been done to remedy the determined forgetting of the colonial enterprise in France. This increasing confrontation with painful and traumatic memories of the Republic's imperial past must be understood against the backdrop of the broader international environment in which the demands for official recognition and state apologies for atrocities have been growing. To describe the post–Cold War era, various scholars have employed the term 'memory boom' (Langenbacher 2010: 13), the 'age of apology' (Barkan & Karn 2006: 8) and an era of 'international morality' (Barkan 2001) that is characterised by a large number of restitution cases, official apologies and commemorative days (Bachleitner 2021). Because of this recollection, national governments have been put under pressure to recognise their nation's past wrongdoings and to acknowledge previously suppressed and marginalised memories.

For France, this confrontation with so-called 'fragmented memories' or 'cloistered memories' of its colonial empire has been a delayed, strongly disputed and highly emotional process (Stora 1992). Since 'one of the defining features of the French state is how it defines the nation as a soul and a spiritual principle' (Mbembe 2011: 109), Bédarida argues that 'the French have a particularly strong commemorative conscience . . . because history plays a central role in the national culture and the individual identity of every citizen' (Cohen 2002: 220).

As such, the narrative underlying French Republican identity is not only pervasive, but constitutive of France's self-identity and international legitimacy. Marcussen et

al. aptly highlight that the 'state-centred republicanism – the duty to promote revolutionary values such as brotherhood, freedom, equality and human rights, in short, "civilization" – constituted a continuous element in the discourse about political order' (Marcussen et al. 1999: 628). The construction of French identity on the basis of republican values on the one hand, and 'anti-republican' crimes committed by the Republic on the other, explain why France 'has grappled for years with the dark side of its history, including the collaborationist Vichy regime, its colonial history, and its protracted withdrawal from Indochina and Algeria' (Langenbacher 2010: 15).

As mentioned in the introduction, the Algerian War retains a particularly contentious and emotionally charged place in French public discourse as 'the multilayered and often entangled narratives reflect the fragmentation of memorial landscape along community lines' (Achille et al. 2020: 15). Underlying this 'war of memories' (Stora & Leclère 2007) is a sense of declinism that is directly opposed to the perceived former *grandeur* of the French empire and its export of hexagonal enlightenment and universalism (Mbembe 2011: 105). Central to this memory war is the 'colonial fracture' which investigates the interplay between the ideas of republicanism and the legacies of empire (Mbembe 2011). A 2006 publication by Blanchard, Bancel and Lemaire firmly captures the dispute surrounding colonial legacies in contemporary France, arguing that:

> The history of colonialism and the memories through which this history is socially constructed affect France's very identity as a nation, questioning the ways in which our national history is (re)presented, but also, in part, the myth of the supposed uniqueness of the "French genius" – an imagined composition of revolutionary values and universal duty, republican righteousness and indiscriminate tolerance of the Other, of the "civilising mission" and fear of difference. (2006: 9)

It is this tension between republican universalism and the Republic's colonial crimes that makes the process of coming to terms with France's colonial history a source of ontological insecurity. As Henry Rousso has highlighted, like the Vichy regime's crimes against humanity, the Republic's crimes during the Algerian War are 'marked by internal divisions, a tarnished image of France as guardian of human rights and represented two decisive stages in the relative decline of French power' (Rousso 2002). As such, facing its past 'demons' is a markedly anxiety-inducing process for the French Republican self-imagination and thereby a source of ontological insecurity.

Ontological security through narrative construction

Introduced to the studies of International Relations (IR) two decades ago, ontological security has gained traction in asserting that states securitise their

national identities and behavioural routines within the international system. Broadly, 'ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is' (Mitzen 2006: 344). As opposed to traditional IR security theories, ontological security understands 'security as being' rather than 'security as survival' (Steele 2005: 527). OSS thus questions mainstream understandings of 'the primacy of physical security in IR' as determining state behaviour (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi 2020: 877). By successfully proposing an alternative explanation for security-motivated behaviour of states, OSS has been increasingly employed by political scientists and IR-scholars, contributing to the considerable methodological and theoretical expansion of ontological security theory.

Within OSS, the IR-scholar Brent Steele emphasises the importance of narratives for the constitution of the self and as such for the establishment of ontological security. He argues that 'the power of memory and organizing that memory through a historical narrative . . . serve(s) to motivate nation-states to organize their Selves first and foremost, getting that Self in order to interact with the "others" of international politics' (2008: 60). Steele thus highlights the importance of self-identity, biographical continuity and state narratives *within* the state. In this understanding, the collection of information in and through the past results not only in structures of meaning but is made possible by their mnemonic narration since the narrative serves as 'a "meta code" arising between our experience of the world and our efforts to describe the experience and bestow it with meaning' (Berenskoetter 2014: 269).

The ability to narrate and justify the existence of the state by highlighting certain aspects of the national biography, by inventing traditions to create structures of meaning and by forgetting (or at least attempting to) painful and traumatising experiences, is fundamental not only for the existence of the state, but for the community it establishes. As Berenskoetter notes, the 'political potency of a national biography lies in its function to provide a community with a basic discourse, or master narrative, which guides and legitimizes courses of action and provides ontological security' (2014: 279). Overall, narratives are crucial to understanding the ontological security-seeking behaviour of nations. Because of their significance for nation building, for creating a sense of historical continuity and for operationalising historic myths to create adherence to a national consciousness, incorporating the study of narratives into OSS is key to understanding how states come into being and maintain their being-in-the-world.

For the present investigation, Steele and Berenkoetter's complementary conceptualisations of ontological security through self-reflexivity is significant in two ways. Firstly, they foreground historical continuity and narrative construction as relevant conditions for ontological security. As such, behaviour is self-monitored by the need to justify and contextualise actions, such as policy shift, within the broader self-identity construct. Secondly, they highlight the process of internal

deliberations of the national 'self' between different actors that participate in the policy-making process to determine a course of action.

As will be shown, interest groups attack these narratives and question the historic myths that create national cohesion, thereby forcing the state to respond to their demands through the establishment of a new narrative that includes their specific histories, commemorates their suffering and recognises their memories.

Recognising *Harki* suffering: Camps as *lieu de mémoire*

'As a child, I cried with [my mother] over a history I did not understand. Her tears became mine, her fears followed me in my nightmares. . . . The past took up all the space and haunted the present.' (Telali cited in Eldridge 2016: 209)

The *Harkis* case offers a telling example for the present enquiry regarding the ability of interest groups to attack the state's ontological security through strategic lobbying and framing activities to gain official recognition. Significantly, on 23 February 2022, law n°2022-229 was promulgated by President Macron, recognising the responsibility of the state for the undignified treatment and living conditions of the *Harkis* and their families that emigrated from Algeria to France after the end of the Algerian War. As will be shown, Macron's decision to formally apologise, as well as to install reparation payments was the result of successful lobbying activities by *Harki* activists.

The *Harkis* represent a community of native, mostly Muslim Algerians who were employed as auxiliaries of the French Army throughout the Algerian War. With the end of the war looming and an independent Algeria on the horizon, morale amongst *Harki* soldiers dropped as fears of reprisals from pro-independence fighters heightened considerably. Plans to prepare for the arrival in the metropole of the European settlers in Algeria and their descendants became concrete by early 1961. Importantly, the *Harkis* were classed as '*Français de souche nord-africaine*' (FSNA)[3] and differentiated from the '*Français de souche européen*'.[4] In 1962, the French army employed this differentiation to determine who would be granted French citizenship and repatriated, and who would become Algerian and have their French citizenship revoked (Morin: 2022). As Morin highlights, the *Harkis* lost French citizenship and were classified as 'undesirable' and 'incompatible' with the Republic (2002: 116)

By 1962, the year of Algerian independence, widespread violence was being carried out against the soldiers who had fought with the French. It was during this time that the term '*Harki*' became synonymous with the word 'traitor' in Algeria, and encouraged brutal reprisals, including forced labour, assault, torture and massacres. From July 1962 onwards, massacres began to unfold against the *Harkis*,

3 'French person of north African stock', referring to 'origin'.
4 'French person of European stock', referring to 'origin'.

leading to between 60,000 and 70,000 deaths, as well as to the imprisonment of over 10,000 *Harkis* (see Hautreux 2006; Morin 2022). Because of this widespread discrimination and violence, many *Harkis* and their families emigrated to France seeking refuge.

However, the *Harki* migrants from Algeria were neither expected nor welcomed by the government in Paris, which had previously implemented a strategy to encourage FSNA to stay in independent Algeria. Consequently, the Republic was unprepared for the wave of immigrants that arrived in the decade following the ceasefire. To accommodate the *Harkis* upon their arrival in France, many were lodged in precariously built housing – the '*hameaux de forestage*'[5]. There, the *Harkis* and their dependents lived in enclosed camps, isolated from the surrounding area, and lacking electricity, clean water and heating. The military personnel in charge of guarding the camps was often recruited from amongst the ranks of former colonial officers who were considered knowledgeable about 'Muslim affairs' (Morin 2022). As Eldridge highlights, 'the camps have become emblematic of the experience of *Harkis* and their families in France and have come to stand as a symbol of the wider process of marginalisation and forgetting to which the auxiliaries were subjected' (Eldridge 2016: 26).

Unsurprisingly, this isolated and totalitarian form of shelter was foundational to the *Harkis'* memory of abandonment. The living conditions within the *hameaux* quickly became the object of public contestation when, in the 1970s, protest against the dire conditions began to spread. For instance, in 1975, four *Harki* children took the director of the camp in Saint-Maurice-l'Ardois hostage, demanding the closure of the camp and the 'full integration of French Muslims into the national community' (Pierret 2007: 187). Though only one of many protests, their demands aptly illustrate the extreme living conditions which led to their protest as well as their experience of rejection by the Republic as a collective form of identification. As such, in the 1970s, *Harki* groups and activists predominantly opposed their living conditions within the camps and their restricted access to public spaces.

From the 1990s onwards, protestors additionally emphasised a commemorative dimension. Often led by second-generation *Harki* immigrants, protestors demanded official recognition for their families' suffering. As Eldridge notes, 'reappropriating the past was seen as a way . . . to obtain retrospective historical justice, by rewriting the narrative of their parents' past but also as a way of enabling them to situate more clearly their own identity in the present' (2016: 158). This narrative construction led to a universalisation of the *Harkis*' respective memories and experiences which, in reality, were extremely diverse. For instance, only about half of the *Harkis* who came to France were housed in the camps and hamlets

5 Eng.: 'forest hamlets'

either temporarily or permanently. Nonetheless, the camps became a universal symbol for all *Harkis*, since they offer a particularly effective '*lieu de mémoire* that encapsulates the notion that the *Harkis* were abandoned by the French' (Eldridge 2016: 226). This unification around emotionally evocative symbols of abandonment led to an increasing output of documentaries and novels in the 1990s which altered the public profile of the *Harkis* and their families in France.

Moreover, the protests in the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a great number of *Harki* associations, so that by the 2000s over 500 registered *Harki* groups were in existence (Eldridge 2016). Although most of them were inactive, some associations were able to develop a national profile, actively lobbying politicians, inviting members of parliament to their meetings, coordinating their protesting efforts and thus influencing the decision-making process.

The 'Association justice, information et réparation pour les Harkis' (AJIR) stands out for its particularly successful mobilisation efforts, having been involved in the arrangement of the first National Day of Homage to the *Harkis* in 2001. This is in addition to its successful lobbying efforts in contribution to the preparation of the infamous 2005 law which required educators to teach about the positive impact of the French colonial project (Eldridge 2016). The discourse promoted by the *Harki* activists is, as Eldridge highlights, 'fundamentally framed by the idea that *Harkis* have been the casualty of a catalogue of betrayal and abandonment perpetrated by others' (Eldridge 2016: 275). The increasingly high profile of national associations rallying for the cause of the *Harkis* and their descendants through media attention and direct access to policy makers, gave these activists a mediatised platform to introduce a subversive frame to the hegemonic state narrative which had largely silenced *Harki* memory.

Exemplifying the successful attack on France's ontological security is the process leading up to the recognition of the undignified treatment within the camps. As one of the largest and most important *lieu de mémoire* for the *Harki* activists, the Camp de Rivesaltes has played a fundamental role in the formalisation and validation of *Harki* memory framing. The transformation of the camp into a place of commemoration by 2015 contributed to the formalisation of *Harki* frames of victimhood and abandonment.

Significantly, the Camp de Rivesaltes is part of a broader history of negligence, transit and pain. It was first inaugurated to house unwanted foreigners and refugees who arrived in France during the Spanish Civil War. Under the Vichy regime, the camp played a 'key role in France's collaboration policy by rounding up foreign Jews and deporting them to Auschwitz' (Mémorial du camp de Rivesaltes n.d.). From 1962 until December 1964, the *Harkis* and their families were placed in Rivesaltes. After 1964, the camp was used for Guinean soldiers fighting for France as well as soldiers from North Vietnam. Until the 1990s, the camp was sporadically used by the army but largely forgotten by the wider public.

However, with the wave of *Harki* protests in the mid-90s, local civil society organisations began to erect monuments to commemorate the different groups that had transited the camp. First, in 1994, a memorial was constructed commemorating Jews that were deported from Rivesaltes to extermination camps in the east. On 2 December 1995, a second commemorative stele was placed at the site reading, 'in honour of the *Harkis* community which, loyal to the flag and the values of the Republic, honours all its soldiers who died for France during the various conflicts the Republic has known'. Slowly, the camp became an object of public commemoration and *lieu de mémoire* for memory entrepreneurs.

An important turning point presented itself in 1997 after original documents accounting for the deportation of Jewish internees at Rivesaltes were found at the local waste collection centre. Following this discovery, journalist Joël Mettay published an article about the historical documents. His commentary triggered a local scandal about the negligence of the authorities who had disposed of the papers which accounted for crimes against humanity during the Holocaust. Subsequently, a national petition was launched by two local teachers, Claude Delmas and Claude Vauchez, entitled '*Rivesaltes: mémoire ou amnésie collective*'[6] calling for an end to the 'more or less deliberate, collective forgetting' and the creation of a centre of historic research, reflection and exchanges at Rivesaltes (Pette 2023). Thus, the camp became the subject of political deliberation and, in 2000, a commission made up of several associations involved in issues of commemoration was set up. Moreover, local civil society organisations such as the association '*Trajectoire*'[7] supported the collection of eyewitness accounts and documents for exhibitions (Welter 2014). Additionally, local associations established the first international contacts and began to raise awareness of the camp at international human rights conferences (Welter 2014).

Importantly, the link established between the Jews' internment during the Vichy Regime and the *Harki* community's transit through the camps following the end of the Algerian War lent considerable weight to the *Harkis'* memory framing of mistreatment and abandonment. As Rausch shows, in a repeated blending of past and present, the Rivesaltes Camp and the forest hamlets are labelled concentration camps in an attempt to prove France's complicity in the persecution of the *Harkis* (Rausch 2023: 223). This assessment is supported by Eldridge, who has shown that the language employed by *Harki* activists was 'rooted in the concepts of persecution and genocide' and thereby 'strongly reminiscent of that which accompanied the reawakening of Jewish memory in the 1970s' (Eldridge 2016: 276). The creation of a place of commemoration at Rivesaltes would serve to formalise this link, placing the *Harki* victims of France's abandonment next to the Jewish victims of France's collaboration in the Holocaust.

6 Eng.: 'Rivesaltes: memory or collective amnesia?'
7 Eng.: 'Trajectory'

In 2015, the memorial was opened after nearly 17 years of political campaigning and lobbying efforts by local NSAs and national interest groups including AJIR and the '*Comité National de liaison des Harkis*' (CNLH). Notably, throughout this long period of campaigning and with the opening of the memorial in 2015, the official narrative that had previously ignored the abandonment of the *Harkis* and later rejected the state's responsibility in this abandonment was fundamentally altered. As Berenskoetter argues, if 'governments sustain their legitimacy in part by providing and representing an authentic national biography for their society, then challenging their rule requires the formulation and dissemination of an alternative narrative that resonates with a large section of that society' (2014: 280). Through the establishment of a link between the Jewish and *Harki* internees at Rivesaltes, the framing of the *Harki* community as abandoned and the transformation of the camp into a *lieu de mémoire,* French state officials were compelled to re-narrate the official historical accounts and recognise the *Harkis*.

Thus, to reestablish ontological security, the new narrative is framed as a return to Republican values. As exemplified by the press kit released prior to the opening, the Rivesaltes memorial is presented as highlighting the 'Republican values of humanism' aiming 'to raise public awareness of the dangers that weakened democratic values in the past and which have, and continue today to jeopardize the freedom of men and women everywhere' (Mémorial du camp de Rivesaltes 2015). During the opening ceremony, then Prime Minister Manuel Valls evoked the values of the Republic, arguing that they can be found in remembering and creating places of memory: 'Hope often died at Rivesaltes, in the eyes of these children, these men and women, marooned, humiliated and oppressed. But today hope must live again, for this is the soul of eternal France: hope and exigency' (Valls 2015). By discursively establishing a break between the history at Rivesaltes and the contemporary Republic, Valls situated the painful memories of France's history within a broader narrative of hope, inclusion and universalism. According to Valls, the exclusion of minorities at Rivesaltes denies the humanism for which France symbolically stands. The commemoration of this marginalisation, however, reestablishes the Republican values. The lesson that should be drawn from this memory lies in 'giving a chance to those who come to live in France, embrace its values and aspire to become French, [while] refraining from casting that suspicious, inquisitive gaze on them - the gaze of yesterday' (Valls 2015). Overall, the transformation of the camp from *lieu oublié*[8] to *lieu de mémoire* should be attributed to the activism of local associations and their work against (deliberate) forgetting. The politicisation of the project, the support of local state and NSAs as well as the framing of abandonment successfully led to the completion of what is today one of the largest places of commemoration for the *Harki* community.

8 Eng.: 'Forgotten place'

Moreover, with the 2017 election of French President Emmanuel Macron, the *Harkis'* central demands relating to an official apology and reparation payments gained new impetus. In 2020, Macron commissioned historian Benjamin Stora to write a report to address the question of the commemoration of the Algerian War in France and to propose recommendations to reconcile the diverse memories. When the report was published in 2021, *Harki* associations were dissatisfied with the result, highlighting that their demands had been excluded from the final document. On 10 January that year, in an open letter spearheaded by the association AJIR and signed by the presidents of numerous *Harki* associations, the representatives requested to meet with the president to discuss reparation payments for the living conditions in the camps as well as the promulgation of a law officially apologising for their abandonment (AJIR Pour les *Harkis* 2021a).

In their letter, the *Harki* associations address Macron directly, expressing the hope that as 'President of the Republic, for the honour of France and of all those who died for her, you will pass this long-awaited law during your term in office' (AJIR Pour les *Harkis* 2021a). In response to this letter, the president received four representatives of the associations on 10 May 2021 at the Elysée to discuss a law recognising the responsibility of the state for their abandonment and allocating reparation payments (AJIR Pour les *Harkis* 2021b). Having promised during the meeting to provide an official response to the request for legislation, Macron invited 120 *Harkis* and their relatives to the Elysée Palace on 20 September 2021. During this reception, Macron officially recognised the abandonment of the *Harkis* and apologised, stating 'this is not a meeting with the *Harkis*, it's a meeting with the truth, with France, with a part of us' (Macron 2021). As Valls had done at Rivesaltes, so too did Macron present France's past actions not only as an affront to the *Harkis*, but against Republican values in general: 'France abandoned and turned its back on [the *Harkis*]. Faced with those who had loyally served it, our country was faithful neither to its history nor to its values' (Macron 2021). Macron presents the recognition of *Harki* suffering as a reestablishment of Republican values and coherence. Inscribing France's past crimes against the *Harkis* into the official memory thus becomes a Republican act *sui generis.*

Overall, the activism and framing activities of the *Harkis* led to their official recognition as victims of the French state. The activism of second-generation *Harkis* from the 1990s onwards helped raise the public profile of the *Harkis.* Here, the establishment of the camps as a collective *lieu de mémoire* gave a tangible image to the collective struggle of all *Harkis* and provided a physical link for the discursively established parallels between the suffering of the Jews under Vichy and the *Harki* abandonment by the Fifth Republic. The creation of a place of commemoration at Rivesaltes was, as has been shown, the result of an alliance between local activists and national associations who relentlessly lobbied for the construction of the Rivesaltes memorial. The continuous engagement by the national *Harki*

associations, most importantly AJIR, led to further official measures that would ultimately cumulate in the official apology, as well as reparation payments in 2022.

To conclude, by effectively attacking the French state for abandoning them, stressing the '*sang versé pour la République*'[9], the *Harkis* were able to draw out and politicise inconsistencies in the hegemonic narrative of their reception in France following the Algerian War. By questioning the hegemonic narrative and thereby attacking the ontological security of the Republic, the *Harkis* achieved official commemoration, received a state-apology and financial compensation, and were able to inscribe their memory of abandonment into the state narrative.

The recognition of the 17 October 1961 Paris massacre

'On the riverbank I see the welcoming-committee that wants to turn this bridge into our coffin. The [opposing] flanks stare at each other, [and] a deathly silence settles between the two shores of the Seine. Then, a voice shouts: "Down with the curfew!" and the bullets start to rain' (Médine 2006).

Seventeen October 1961 has become emblematic of the wider violence that reigned over the Algerian community living in France during the Algerian War. As one of the bloodiest state repressions of a street protest in modern history (House & MacMaster 2006), the Paris massacre was the result of excessive violence by police forces against peaceful protestors. The precise number of deaths remains subject to controversial debate amongst historians and commentators. Some analysts have put the number at more than 200 killed and thousands injured (Einaudi 1991), whereas others have concluded that between 20 and 30 Algerians died as a consequence of police violence (Brunet 1999). Whether one follows the minimalist approach of Brunet or the maximalist number of Einaudi, 17 October 1961 cannot be taken out of the context of the broader terror and police violence that dictated the lives of Algerian migrant communities in France. As House and MacMaster highlight, the psychological and physical violence to which the Algerian workers were routinely subjected, 'became endemic within the police force and . . . show that the events of 17 October 1961 were not an anomaly but a manifestation of a deeply entrenched culture of aggressive racism' (House & MacMaster 2006: 80). Within this system of random stop-and-search operations in Paris, Algerians were regularly subjected to racial profiling, abuse, physical assault, humiliation, arrest and torture.

By 1961, with the end of the Algerian War looming, Maurice Papon, the prefect of the Parisian police at the time and who would later become a symbol of excessive police violence and state terror, intensified the systemic brutality. As a consequence of attacks by the pro-independentist Front Liberation Nationale (FLN), 'the Prefect of Police unleashed a wave of remorseless terror against the Algerian

9 Eng.: 'Blood spilled for the Republic'

immigrants' (House & MacMaster 2004: 95). Within this framework of excessive state violence, a discriminatory curfew was imposed that exclusively targeted Algerian residents of Paris. The intensification of police violence, the imposition of a discriminatory curfew and a rising number of bodies of North-African origin found in the Seine and different canals in Paris and the Île-de-France region created fertile ground for a series of FLN-organised demonstrations.

As such, in response to the October curfew, the FLN organised a protest in Paris on the eve of 17 October. At least 30,000 men, women and children moved peacefully through the large Parisian boulevards to reach the public centres of the capital. Following commands to hold their ground and not give way to the protestors, the Republican Security Corps and gendarmerie fired live ammunition into the crowds and beat the protestors with batons, iron bars and wooden sticks. The beatings were aimed at the heads and stomachs of protestors, as subsequent hospital records show. House and MacMaster write that the onslaught of police officers against protestors was so 'savage . . . that thirty of the fifty clubs (*bidules*) issued by the police district commander Mézière were broken' (House & MacMaster 2006: 118). Moreover, at different bridges in Paris, protestors were beaten to unconsciousness and thrown over the railings to drown in the Seine. Many dead would be found in the following days, downstream from these bridges. Other corpses were collected and removed by the police. Most of the eyewitness accounts that remain from these so-called *ratonnades* stem 'from the fact that at least one Algerian had survived a murderous attack, often against the odds and through an ability, although wounded, to reach the banks of the Seine' (House & MacMaster 2006: 136). However, many others who were killed remain unknown, which is why the number of deaths at the hands of the police remains an estimate.

Media reports and official accounts on the following day disguised the extent of the violence. The prefect explained that the exchange of gunfire was the consequence of FLN men shooting bullets at police officers, who returned fire in self-defence. Moreover, according to these reports, only three protestors had died while 13 police officers had been injured (Einaudi 1999). This official narrative would remain in place until the late 1990s.

As will be shown, the emergence of a counter-narrative in the 1990s, which employs a 'truth-and-justice' frame to highlight the state's official policy of falsification, attacked the official narrative and by extension the state's ontological security, forcing policy makers to respond and re-narrate the events. As House and MacMaster highlight 'the 1990s saw an important change to include the formulation of specific demands to government and attempts at wider awareness raising' (House & MacMaster 2006: 296). The push for commemoration in the 1990s was decidedly driven by newly formed associations, historians and academics, who questioned the official accounts of the massacre and elaborated counter-narratives that illustrated the extreme violence with which the police had

treated protestors. This new counter-narrative challenged the official narrative, which continued to maintain that only three protestors had died during the protests as a consequence of FLN-incited violence. Importantly, the three decades of suppression of the memory of the Paris massacre through a falsified official report makes the introduction of a counter-narrative that highlights the 'lies' (Le Cour Grandmaison 2017) of the state particularly threatening for France's ontological security. As such, coordinated pressure by different associations, the publicity through increased media attention, as well as the construction of a 'truth-and-justice' frame by memory activists created a threat to France's ontological security, compelling officials to react and establishing a new narrative of the events.

Central to this new impetus in the 1990s was the creation of the association *Au Nom de la mémoire* (ANM) by journalist Samia Messaoudi, film director Mehdi Lallaoui and historian Benjamin Stora. ANM published the book, *Le 17 Octobre, l'oubli revisité* as well as the film *Le Silence du fleuve*, organised conferences and protests to open the sealed archives as well as annual marches to commemorate the Paris massacre. Concurrently with these public campaigns, the historian Jean-Luc Einaudi published a comprehensive study of 17 October 1961, entitled *La bataille de Paris,* based on the archives of the FLN – he was not granted access to the French national archives – and on eye-witness accounts and interviews. His study provided the 'single most single most ground-breaking and influential investigation of the events' and offered, along with the increased activism by civil-society actors, 'another source of counter-knowledge with which to challenge the official French' narrative (House & MacMaster 2006: 7, 295).

The immediate reverberations of the publication in the media, as well as the united call for the commemorations planned on 17 October 1991 by a number of civil society associations and political parties, led to the gathering of over 2,500 people. The 30th anniversary of the massacre thus witnessed the assembly of a significant number of historians, state- and NSAs to commemorate the Algerian victims of 17 October 1961. ANM, moreover, organised the placement of a stele by the Pont de Bezons to remember the Algerians that had been thrown into the Seine. The stele was subsequently removed by the local authorities, 'indicating the sustained opposition by the French state to recognise its crime' (Einaudi 2001: 14). Nonetheless, the increased visibility of the Paris massacre and, importantly, the publication of Einaudi's *La Bataille de Paris* led to a large outpouring of articles and reports throughout October 1991. These articles almost unanimously proclaimed that the massacre had cost over 200 Algerian protesters their lives – a number that remains staunchly contested. As such, the activism of different associations as well as historians created the impetus for an increasing number of publications, documentaries, exhibitions, songs and articles about the Paris massacre.

Moreover, undoubtedly ending the collective amnesia of 17 October were two trials involving both Papon and Einaudi. In the first of these trials Papon was ac-

cused of crimes against humanity committed as head of the police in Bordeaux during Vichy in the 1940s. In this position, he collaborated in the deportation of the Jewish population from the Gironde region until 1944. The 1997 Bordeaux trial against Maurice Papon created a link between his involvement in the Holocaust and his crimes committed as Parisian prefect in 1961. Although the attention was primarily on the deportation and extermination of French Jews under the Vichy regime, a link was established between his oversight of crimes during the Holocaust and the Paris massacre during the Algerian War. The question of historical continuity was aptly summarised by historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet in an article for *Le Monde* in 2001 where he asked if we should not 'remember that the man who put the Jews into the trains to Auschwitz, was the same man of the 17 October 1961 massacre? Can we judge one side of Papon, but forget about the other?' (2001).

In the highly mediatised trial of Papon in 1997, Einaudi was invited by Gerard Boulanger, the leading lawyer who had filed the charges against Papon, to testify about Papon's actions as prefect of the Parisian police during the Algerian War (Einaudi 2001). However, because the amnesty laws passed after 1962 prohibited the judicial persecution of the prefect's actions during the Algerian War, Einaudi's testimony remained a symbolic act linking the genocide of the Jewish population with the massacre of the Algerian protestors. Boulanger explained, 'the sons and daughters of the Jewish victims gave the floor to the Arab sons and daughters of the 1961 *ratonnades*' (Boulanger, cited in Riceputi 2015: 87), establishing a symbolic alliance between the victims of Papon's persecution and, importantly, creating an untenable link between the Fifth Republic and the Vichy Regime. This emotionally evocative framing of historical continuity between World War II and the Algerian War enabled the memory of 1961 to emerge into the public eye, questioning the previously hegemonic narrative about the Paris massacre and forcing a re-narration of the events.

The controversy around the term 'massacre' which Einaudi employed to characterise the 1961 police violence in his book and again during the 1997 trial against Papon, led to a second lawsuit. This time, Papon demanded compensation from Einaudi for defamation. This latter trial, which commenced in 1999, enabled Einaudi's public defence of his characterisation and put the 17 October 1961 centre court. For the first time, victims of the violence stepped forward to speak publicly about the abuse they had experienced and witnessed during the 1961 protest. Einaudi's own investigation, as well as the witnesses that testified, led the judges to concede that a 'massacre' had indeed happened and Papon lost the trial against the historian. As House and MacMaster highlight, 'this was probably the most significant victory for campaigners in the long history of the struggles for recognition that wide-scale killings had taken place during the 17–20 October period' (House & MacMaster 2006: 314).

As a consequence of the pressure imposed by civil society and the media, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin eased access to the archives – a demand long made by associations and activists concerned with the exposure of the events of October and November 1961. Significantly, these preliminary and cautious steps to recognise the demands of the associations and historians were mainly taken up by the French socialists who formed part of the government during the cohabitation period between 1997 and 2002. By 2000, Jospin acknowledged 'the tragic events of 17 October 1961 which caused the deaths of dozens of Algerians' (Einaudi 2001: 67). Though still avoiding the term 'massacre' and refraining from recognising the state's responsibility for the events, his declaration nonetheless marked an important step towards official confrontations with the memory of 17 October 1961 and an official deviation from the previous narrative. As such 'the debates of the late 1990s had rendered inoperable the official French policy of silence in place since 1961 and made the 17 October repression a central event in debates on the war, nearly forty years after it took place' (House & MacMaster 2006: 314). The framing of the memory the 17 October 1961, as a 'massacre' and the establishment of historical continuity between the crimes of the Vichy regime and the events of the Algerian War led to the development of a successful counter-narrative that reintroduced the memory of 1961 into the collective memory. Through the work of activists, civil society organisations and historians, the prior narrative promulgated by Papon and state officials was sufficiently questioned through the imposition of a 'truth-and-justice' frame, paving the way towards state acknowledgment by 2000. However, although recognising the 'tragedy', the new official narrative introduced a 'bad apple'-frame which deflected blame away from the state to the person of Papon (the 'bad apple').

Since 1991, The levels of politicisation and solidarity that were achieved with the 30th anniversary of the massacre have not been reproduced. Nevertheless, because the narrative continued to avoid the term 'massacre' and maintain the 'bad apple'-frame, activists and associations have continued to advocate for an official recognition, however splintered. As such, specific partisan activism on the left achieved the successful official recognition of the Paris massacre in 2024. Following intense negotiations and using the 'niche parlementaire' – one day every month during which the agenda setting is reserved for opposition parties – the MP of Nanterre Sabrina Sabahi was able to successfully spearhead the 2024 resolution which officially recognises the violence on 17 October 1961 as a 'massacre'. Nonetheless, the wording of the final text was extensively restricted by members of Macron's Renaissance (Allombert 2024). While the term 'massacre' was successfully inscribed into the resolution, the 'bad apple'-frame remained in place deflecting responsibility on 'the authority of Police Prefect Maurice Papon on 17 October 1961' (Assemblée nationale 2024). Overall, although the recollection of 17 October 1961 and official recognition as 'massacre' has been a success,

the fact that this resolution continues to reject state responsibility is considered by Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison to be 'an Élysian tale, insofar as Macron holds Maurice Papon exclusively responsible' (Le Cour Grandmaison 2024). As such, the tale of the 'bad apple' continues to be in place, protecting the state from assuming responsibility for the massacre committed in the heart of Paris.

In conclusion, the recovery of the memory of 17 October 1961 in the 1990s after three decades of official silencing, and indeed disinformation, should be understood as the result of concerted memory activism by anti-racist organisations who sought official recognition and commemoration of the Paris massacre. The trials of 1997 and 1999 exposed the memory of the massacre to the general French public. The link drawn between World War II and the Algerian War, as well as the establishment of a 'truth-and-justice' frame constructed 'a social reality by culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections amongst them to promote' the interpretation of 17 October 1961 as a massacre (Entman 2007: 164). This framing forced state officials to reinterpret the official account of the events and concede that a suppression had occurred. The events of the 1990s and the new narrative established by 2000 are examples of how civil society actors and memory activists were able to sufficiently politicise the memory of 17 October 1961, creating uncertainty to which the state had to respond. The new narrative that sought to reinstate a sense of ontological security, redirected blame away from the state and on the Prefect Papon. The 2024 recognition of the Paris 'massacre' can best be explained by the continued partisan activism on the left and the work of memory activists who refused to accept the official description of 17 October as a bloody 'repression' rather than a 'massacre'. The incompleteness of the recognition that redirects the blame to the former prefect is the result of a 'bad apple'-frame that deflects blame and shame by refusing to acknowledge the government's responsibility in the massacre.

Conclusion

In the 63 years since the end of the Algerian War, its memory has undergone profound changes and reconfigurations. Although officially silenced and suppressed by the state over three decades, different narrative frames about painful, traumatic and formative episodes of the Algerian War continued to circulate as cloistered memories within the communities directly affected. Predominantly promoted by the children of these communities, their experiences became the object of wider consideration through protests, books, films, songs, exhibitions, judicial proceedings and annual commemorative practices from the 1980s onwards. In their demands for recognition, interest groups framed 'current social and political debates in ways that raise uncomfortable questions for a nation which has always promoted itself as a harbinger of progress and a bastion of equality' (Eldridge 2016: 4). Successful framing strategies have called into question the Republic's

self-image, thereby forcing the government to respond to the demands of memory entrepreneurs and associations.

Using the cases of the *Harkis* as well as of different memory activists and associations commemorating the Paris massacre, this article has shown that NSAs can attack the ontological security of the state through strategic framing activities. In doing so, this article contributes to a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of the securitisation of state identity and the autobiographical narrative in France. The case studies presented in this study provide evidence of how interest groups can highlight inconsistencies and injustices in the state's official narrative of the Algerian War. The politicisation of their demands and their attack on the state's ontological security forced state officials to confront and amend the previously hegemonic narrative in order to include the new frames. Methodologically, this study has provided a detailed analysis of framing strategies employed by interest groups and their impact on France's narrative of the self. Through its in-depth focus on NSAs, this article illustrates how framing strategies can successfully be employed to effectuate bottom-up policy shifts and the alteration of the hegemonic narrative. Overall, rather than understanding policy shifts in France's recognition of colonial crimes as an elite-driven process, this paper has demonstrated how the sustained mobilisation and contestation by NSAs reshape the boundaries of the thinkable, sayable and demandable in national discourses on colonial crimes.

Finally, this article's inexhaustive case-study approach invites further research on the role of memory entrepreneurs in the shifting commemoration configurations in the memory politics of former colonial powers regarding racist and colonial crimes.

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Katharina Egle is a doctoral student at the Center for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po. Her research explores the role of interest groups in shaping France and Germany's politics of memory through the lens of ontological (in)security. She holds an MPhil from the University of Cambridge, where her dissertation on France's commemoration of the Algerian War received the Joffé Award and the LSE Algerian Studies Dissertation Prize. Before her doctoral studies, she gained research and professional experience at the European Council on Foreign Relations, King's College London, the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).

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Research article

From Soft Power to Sharp Power: Weaponising Western Academic Knowledge in Russian Political Discourse

Otar Pareishvili
Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, corresponding address: otar.pareishvili@stud.uni-corvinus.hu

Abstract

This paper examines how Russia appropriates Western academic knowledge as a tool of influence in its communication with Western audiences. It pursues three main objectives. First, it argues that the concept of soft power has been widely misunderstood due to its intangible, non-kinetic nature, often being mischaracterized as disinformation and manipulative practices associated with Russian influence. Second, the paper offers a refined interpretation of sharp power. While sharp power has typically been examined in political, institutional, normative, or economic contexts, this study calls for an ideational—or even ideological—approach. Third, it argues that Russia exploits the intellectual strengths of Western democratic societies, namely the knowledge field. In order to explain the last point, this study offers a discourse analysis of Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov, Russian intellectuals who frequently present themselves as independent commentators, alongside Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister. The aim is to demonstrate, both the similarities in their discursive strategies, and how they directly draw on concepts originating in the Western academic tradition. These concepts and theories, particularly those rooted in international relations and political science, are selectively appropriated, re-signified, and mobilized to 'speak the language' of Western audiences, with the intention of legitimizing Russia's foreign policy positions.

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Keywords: *sharp power, soft power, Russia, disinformation, manipulation, IR theories, realism, neorealism, information warfare*

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, as the democratic world, led by the United States, celebrated the triumph of liberal democracy over the authoritarian rule of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, Western academia began to praise and universalise the liberal norms championed by the victors of the Cold War. In the 1990s, Francis Fukuyama famously framed liberal democracy as the pinnacle of governance, while a decade later Joseph Nye introduced the concept of *soft power* to highlight the universal appeal of Western liberal norms, which he argued contributed to US supremacy. Nye sought to demonstrate that American dominance on the international stage was not solely attributable to military strength but also to the values and principles upheld by US society and government.

Over time, the concept of soft power came to be understood as a *non-coercive*, and most importantly, a *non-kinetic* form of influence distinct from military or economic force, and largely reliant on *intangible* means of persuasion. This interpretation aligns with Gallarotti who, building on conventional International Relations (IR) scholarship, contrasts Nye's understanding of power with that of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, who associate power primarily with military capabilities (Gallarotti 2011: 26).

In 2017, Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy challenged the prevailing theoretical understanding of soft power, arguing that this conceptual limitation contributed to practical difficulties in countering authoritarian regimes, particularly Russia and China. They introduced the term *sharp power* to describe the methods of influence employed by authoritarian states, defining it as a strategy that seeks to 'pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in targeted countries' (Walker & Ludwig 2017). Their central argument is that Russia exploits the very strengths of Western democratic societies – such as openness, civil liberties and individual freedoms – by weaponizing them against these very societies.

Following the logic of Walker and Ludwig, this article argues that as the Kremlin employs sharp power tactics – characterised primarily by manipulative methods – the Russian political leadership draws upon theories of international relations and debates rooted in Western academic traditions to justify the war in Ukraine. In other words, Russia exploits Western scholarly knowledge to manipulate and shape perceptions both domestically and internationally.

This paper has several aims. First, it argues that the notion of soft power is often misunderstood, which allows Russia and other authoritarian or dictatorial regimes to gain access to Western societies while simultaneously isolating themselves from external influence. Second, it introduces the concept of sharp power and contends that, in addition to commonly associated practices such as spreading disinformation, manipulating public opinion and censoring dissent, sharp power can be understood as the exploitation of features typically regarded as strengths of Western democratic systems. Finally, to illustrate this argument, the paper analyses the dominant discourse within the Russian political sphere, demonstrating how specific ideas originating in Western academic scholarship – particularly in the fields of international relations and political science – are appropriated, weaponised and projected onto the international stage.

The paper is structured as follows: after the introductory chapter, it continues with an outline of the main methodological considerations, followed by a brief conceptual discussion on the terms of *soft power* and *sharp power*. After the conceptual debate, the paper proceeds with a discourse analysis of public speeches, comments and written communications by President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as well as by Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov – two influential figures in Russian intellectual circles who are often portrayed as independent voices, but are, in fact, closely associated with the Kremlin. Due to space constraints, the paper highlights how selected ideas from Western academic thought are referenced or appropriated in the analysed speeches, without providing comprehensive definitions or full contextualisation of each academic concept.

Methodology

As this study examines how the Russian political elite uses Western academic knowledge to engage Western audiences – at the governmental, academic and societal levels – it adopts discourse analysis to detect, trace and analyse how Western theories are appropriated to shape perceptions of the West. The paper follows the discourse-analytical approaches of Jennifer Milliken and David Campbell, grounded in the view that language is not merely reflective but constitutive of threats, identities, legitimacy and policies. In brief, Milliken addresses how to analyse discourse, while Campbell explains why it should be analysed.

David Campbell argues that the concept of security does not simply respond to pre-existing threats (Campbell 1998). Articulated through language, security is a discursive construction that generates the very threats it claims to address. Foreign policy, therefore, is not merely reactive but shaped by ongoing discursive practices centred on the invocation of threat. This is especially relevant for Russia, which often depicts itself as a victim of Western expansionism, invoking narratives of existential danger, neocolonialism and threats to the statehood of peaceful Orthodox Christian communities in Russia and Ukraine.

For Campbell, discourse not only articulates threats that shape foreign policy, but also constructs national identity. He contends that identities are largely formed through antagonism – by drawing boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. What is particularly relevant to this study is the idea that identities are fluid and can be reshaped through discourse. This is significant, as the Russian political elite frequently navigates across various ideological paradigms, often shifting the perception of the Russian state or people, and adopting ideas that are convenient at a given moment.

Milliken (1999) who – similarly to Campbell – draws on philosophical perspectives from Jacques Derrida and Ferdinand de Saussure, outlines three key premises for discourse analysis:

1. Discourses as systems of signification: Discourses are structured systems of meaning-making that work to normalise and legitimise specific ways of speaking or thinking by reproducing them over time. Here, Milliken draws on a social constructivist notion that meaning is not inherent in the material world but is constructed through linguistic and symbolic representation.
2. Discourse productivity: This refers to the productive power of discourse – its ability to shape what can be thought, said or known. In this process, some ideas are legitimised while others are marginalised or excluded. Discourses thus create boundaries of acceptable knowledge, empowering some actors or perspectives while disqualifying others.
3. The play of practice: This concerns how discourses move beyond abstract ideas and begin to inform policy, identity and practice. Through repeated use and institutionalisation, discourses can become hegemonic, shaping what is considered common sense or politically legitimate.

For Milliken, discourse analysis is not simply a method for interpreting language; it is a way of understanding how ideas, theories and knowledge shape political realities. Discourses do not merely reflect the world – they actively constitute it. In this view, tracing how the Russian elite appropriates Western academic knowledge is not just a matter of translation or adaptation, but a process of re-signification and strategic use of theory for political ends.

Drawing on the main arguments and principles proposed by Milliken and Campbell, this paper analyses the discourse of the contemporary Russian political elite, which heavily relies on Western academic knowledge, especially on authors such as Mearsheimer, Chomsky, Said, Harvey, etc. In terms of material, the study draws extensively on notable and relevant speeches not only by Putin and Lavrov – who directly represent the Russian state – but also by modern Russian intellectuals such as Pozner and Lukyanov, who hold the status of independent commentators. These figures either engage directly with Western, primarily English-speaking audiences, or are frequently cited in international discourse.

This study covers the period from 2017 onward, encompassing the war in Ukraine. This time frame follows the consolidation of Russia's post-Crimea for-

eign policy discourse and coincides with the expanded role of the digital sphere in information warfare, particularly after the 2016 US presidential election. During this period, Russian officials and intellectuals increasingly engaged Western academic concepts and critical frameworks as tools of international persuasion. The analysis draws on a purposive selection of speeches, interviews, public lectures and media appearances that explicitly address Western audiences or circulate widely in international media and expert communities.

Methodologically, rather than adopting a positivist approach or formal coding procedures, this study employs an interpretive and theory-driven discourse analysis. Following Milliken and Campbell, the analysis relies on close reading and contextual interpretation to trace how Western academic ideas are appropriated, re-signified and strategically mobilised within Russian political discourse. Particular attention is paid to patterns of argumentation, moral equivalence, analogies and appeals to authoritative Western thinkers. This approach allows the study to capture how similar discursive logics circulate across official state discourse and quasi-independent commentary, while sustaining the appearance of pluralism and intellectual openness.

Theoretical misconception: What is soft power?

Walker and Ludwig argue that a theoretical misconception about *soft power* has led to direct threats faced by democracies. This misconception can be explained through two key arguments. The first, though only *implicitly* addressed by Walker and Ludwig, is that the *intangible nature of soft power* has created significant confusion, leading to the assumption that anything falling outside conventional warfare or hard power must necessarily be categorised as soft power. The second argument, *explicitly* outlined by Walker and Ludwig, suggests that the openness of democratic societies, closely linked to Western soft power, became so highly valued that policymakers and intellectuals grew hesitant to reassess authoritarian influence. They feared that imposing restrictions on this influence might compromise democratic integrity.

As the aim of this paper is not to challenge the core assumptions of soft power or to extend the concept with additional theoretical insights, but rather to illustrate how Joseph Nye's formulation transformed the understanding of non-kinetic and intangible forms of influence, the analysis focuses exclusively on his most influential work, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Despite the extensive discussion and application of soft power by scholars, policymakers, journalists and commentators alike, this book remains the most cited and influential contribution to the conceptualisation of soft power.

Nye developed this notion with two primary objectives: *to offer an alternative understanding of power and to highlight the appeal of liberal democratic norms.* Let us briefly examine both. First, he sought to offer an alternative perspective on

power in international relations. During the Cold War, realist scholars dominated IR theory, emphasising military force and economic strength as the most significant factors in global politics, often ranking them above diplomatic efforts. Nye, writing just over a decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union – a period still largely shaped by conventional, rationalist IR approaches – challenged this view by proposing a broader conceptualisation of power. He argued that hard power was not the only influential force in international relations (Nye 2004). Instead, he suggested that beyond military might and coercion, states and leaders could exert influence through attraction and persuasion.

By incorporating the human dimension – both at societal and individual levels – that was largely overlooked by realist scholars, and by emphasising the role of norms and culture, Nye positioned himself as an intellectual counterpoint to the realist worldview. His intention was not to reject realism outright but rather to expand its scope. Coercive methods, he suggested, frequently generated resistance and resentment, leading to unintended counterproductive outcomes. By contrast, promoting one's own norms and values could shape those of others, fostering influence without direct coercion.

Nye defined soft power as the ability to shape others' preferences through attraction and persuasion (Nye 2004). The emphasis on *ability* is particularly important, as soft power is often misinterpreted as a term synonymous with influence operations. In reality, Nye conceived of soft power as an inherent characteristic of a state – its cultural appeal, political values and foreign policy – that generates attraction. While political and cultural factors can shape a country's soft power, Nye argued that governments have limited direct control over it. Rather than being an instrument wielded by the state, soft power exists as an overarching capacity to influence others through non-coercive means.

This very association of soft power with non-military and, by extension, non-kinetic or non-tangible forms of influence led to a widespread misinterpretation: Any form of influence that did not involve military force or economic coercion was mistakenly classified as soft power. As a result, ideational influence – particularly methods such as disinformation – was erroneously considered a part of soft power. Walker and Ludwig specifically challenged this misconception, arguing that practices such as information censorship, restrictions on free speech, misinformation or disinformation campaigns should no longer be categorised under soft power.

When revisiting contemporary IR literature on either soft or sharp power, most authors tend to adopt Nye's conception, associating soft power primarily with non-kinetic influence. While there is nothing inherently problematic about understanding soft power as ideational or knowledge-based, it becomes evident that its intangible nature often leads to confusion. This confusion, in turn, results in the mistaken tendency to group together fundamentally different practices – such as cultural appeal and disinformation or censorship – under the same

conceptual umbrella. For example, an academic study titled *Soft Power of TikTok: The Social Network That Conquered the World* argues that the social media platform TikTok constitutes a tool of Chinese soft power because it removes content critical of either the Kremlin or the Chinese Communist Party (Podosokorsky 2022). While such a practice is indeed concerning, it exemplifies precisely what Walker and Ludwig warned against: Censorship, the restriction of information, content removal, should not be mistaken for manifestations of soft power, but rather of sharp power.

The second factor contributing to misconceptions about soft power stems from its association with democratic policies, a link closely tied to the empiricist nature of Nye's thesis. Many positivist scholars in international relations at the time – whether realists or liberals, such as Mearsheimer, Walt, Layne, Posen, Moravcsik, Keohane, Ikenberry and Fukuyama – grounded their arguments in empirical observations of US foreign policy. Fukuyama, for example, developed his thesis on the triumph of liberal democracy before the Soviet Union's collapse, but this event was later seen as empirical proof of his argument. Similarly, following the positivist tradition, Nye introduced soft power to highlight what he saw as the success of American socio-political norms at home and abroad. In *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, he challenged claims of US decline, arguing that its dominance rested not only on military and economic strength – what he termed hard power – but also on its ability to attract and persuade (Nye 1990: 260). Over a decade later, he expanded this into a more developed theoretical framework, formalising soft power as a key dimension of international relations.

Nye (2004: 10–14) identified three primary sources of American soft power. First, its culture, including classical literature, popular culture such as film and music, and the broader academic and knowledge sectors. Second, its political values, which fostered an economically attractive environment, upheld democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights and civil liberties, projecting the United States as an ideal liberal-democratic model. Third, its foreign policy, which, when aligned with legitimacy, moral responsibility and international norms, enhanced its global image. Combined with military and economic strength, these elements made the US arguably the most influential state in modern history. Nye argued that the post–Cold War goal of spreading democracy could be achieved more effectively through soft power, since coercion and military interventions often bred resentment. While governments can implement policies to strengthen democratic institutions and economic growth, Nye stressed that soft power is largely generated by civil society and develops gradually. It is not a short-term policy tool, but a long-term process shaped by societal norms, cultural appeal and consistent values.

For Nye, soft power is associated with notions such as appeal, attraction, culture, democracy, the rule of law, various liberties, shared values of justice, civil society and education. However, he argues that a country's soft power can be

significantly undermined by its government for several reasons. First, if a government pursues a foreign policy devoid of moral commitments, it can severely damage the country's reputation on the international stage. More importantly, given Nye's strong emphasis on democratic norms, he asserts that if a government fails to uphold or protect civil and individual liberties domestically, its soft power – rooted in these very norms – diminishes.

In response to Walker and Ludwig's concerns about democratic governments' reluctance to counter Chinese and Russian influence, Nye warned that combating authoritarian sharp power could unintentionally weaken the soft power of democracies. He cautioned that 'openness remains the best defense: faced with this challenge, the press, academics, civic organizations, government, and the private sector should focus on exposing information warfare techniques, inoculating the public by exposure' (Nye 2018). In other words, measures against authoritarian influence risk eroding media and academic freedoms – key achievements of democratic societies. This mirrors Walker and Ludwig's central point: They argued that the openness Nye championed was precisely what regimes like Russia and China were exploiting.

Building on the approaches of Fukuyama and Nye, and drawing from Cold War experiences, Western democracies assumed that the same strategies that successfully projected their norms onto the closed societies of the Soviet Union – through outlets such as Radio Liberty, Voice of America and Western rock music – could be replicated. By opening themselves to engagement with the successors of communist regimes and other authoritarian systems, they anticipated once again disseminating their universally appealing norms (Walker et al. 2020).

Contrary to Western expectations, authoritarian regimes used censorship, restrictions on free speech, internet controls and curtailed media freedoms to monopolise their domestic information space, making it difficult for Western media and other actors to reach these societies. At the same time, these regimes saw the West's openness and liberal norms as vulnerabilities to exploit. Scholars have described this dynamic – characterised by extreme information closure on one side and strategic exploitation of openness on the other – as *glaring asymmetry* (Walker & Ludwig 2017).

To sum up, the above logic suggests two main reasons why the West misunderstood soft power, causing practical complications. First, due to the intangible nature of soft power, as described by Nye, it was seen as an alternative to hard power, which involves tangible, measurable assets. This caused confusion, leading to the assumption that anything outside military and economic means was soft power. Consequently, two opposing approaches – democratic soft power and authoritarian sharp power – were wrongly equated. That is, promoting democratic norms, cultural values and institutional strengths was conflated with disinformation, censorship, manipulation and Soviet-style influence. Second, this

confusion was worsened by the West's fear that weakening aspects of its own soft power – like media freedom, academic freedom and civil liberties – could harm it. These were increasingly exploited by authoritarian regimes. The West feared that responding to Russia's intangible influence with Russian-style restrictions would cost it moral superiority.

When the soft becomes sharp: Reconceptualising Russian manipulative methods of influence

Due to this very misconception, in 2017 Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig of the National Endowment for Democracy published an article in *Foreign Affairs* introducing the concept of *sharp power*. Their primary intention was to illustrate the inadequacy of the well-established concept of *soft power* in capturing certain forms of non-kinetic influence. However, amid the renewed momentum of Russian and Chinese efforts to influence democratic societies, as well as the intensification of information warfare, the newly coined concept of sharp power proved to be exceptionally timely. As a result, it quickly became a widely adopted buzzword, embraced by scholars and practitioners who were puzzled by the absence of a conceptual counterpart to soft power capable of describing the malign nature of authoritarian influence.

Consequently, the notion of sharp power – which remains a neologism rather than a full-fledged theory – has increasingly been used as an analytical tool despite the absence of sustained theoretical scrutiny. This theoretical deficiency appears to have accompanied the concept since its introduction. For instance, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak experts examining Russian disinformation campaigns and producing valuable empirical research rely almost exclusively on Walker and Ludwig for their brief theoretical frameworks (Political Capital 2022). A similar pattern can be observed in the work of scholars from Masaryk University in Brno, who analyse Russian strategic influence in Central Europe (Kleiner et al. 2023). Glazunova et al. (2023) link Russian sharp power to RT (formerly *Russia Today*) and its attempts to manipulate Western societies, while leaving the conceptual debate largely unaddressed. Fitzgerald (2024), following the logic of Walker and Ludwig, interprets sharp power as a consequence of failed soft power. Marin (2024) associates sharp power with Soviet-style psychological operations yet likewise refrains from challenging or extending the original conceptual framework proposed by Walker and Ludwig.

Most authors conceptualise sharp power through the political dichotomy of democracy versus authoritarianism, which subsequently gives rise to institutional and normative arguments. This approach is conveniently summarised in Richter's (2022) work. His normative argument suggests that freedom of speech, media freedom, and other individual and civic liberties constrain democratic governments from adopting sharp power tactics. In parallel, the institutional argument

emphasises that democratic structures – such as checks and balances, media plurality and transparency – limit the further development of sharp power. Conversely, the absence of these institutional and normative features renders authoritarian systems more prone to the deployment of sharp power methods. While analysing sharp power through this political, institutional and normative lens is analytically sound, the broader sharp power literature largely neglects the ideational and ideological dimensions through which Western ideas themselves may be mobilised against Western political orders.

Taken together, these and many other studies indicate that the original contributions of Walker and Ludwig remain the most influential, most cited and most authoritative references in discussions of sharp power. Although much of the existing scholarship offers highly valuable empirical insights, the theoretical and conceptual debate surrounding sharp power remains relatively underdeveloped. This is not to suggest any deficiency in the original formulation advanced by Walker and Ludwig – quite the contrary – but rather to highlight that the absence of sustained conceptual engagement may ultimately undermine the analytical and theoretical rigor of sharp power scholarship.

The original piece of Walker and Ludwig published in *Foreign Affairs* that the soft power framework is significantly flawed. The authors claim democratic systems, at both governmental and academic levels, have become complacent by wrongly labelling authoritarian influence methods as soft power (Walker & Ludwig 2017). They warn that as long as Western academia embraces this framework, scholars and policymakers will fail to identify manipulative tactics used by Russia and China. These strategies focus less on 'winning hearts and minds' and more on manipulating public opinion via disinformation – methods that contradict the attraction and persuasion principles of soft power.

In their much lengthier report, Walker and Ludwig suggest that the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China were no longer capable of telling persuasive national stories to the international community that would enhance their global image (Walker & Ludwig 2017). Due to entrenched kleptocracy, systemic corruption, suppression of various freedoms, deteriorating human rights records and other shortcomings, Russia and China were no longer able to 'win hearts and minds', to borrow Nye's expression.

Walker and Ludwig argued that *sharp power* represented a form of exported authoritarianism: Just as Russia and China monopolised power domestically – especially in the field of information – they pursued the same objectives internationally. These regimes employed tactics such as censoring information, restricting freedom of speech, undermining the integrity of academic freedom in democratic societies, spreading disinformation and manipulating public opinion. Such efforts, the authors contend, pose a significant threat to younger democracies with relatively weaker democratic institutions, especially in the age of the internet and social media.

Walker argues that even mature democracies with strong institutions face threats from authoritarian sharp power. He identifies three main channels for sharp power in democratic systems: culture, academia and publishing (Walker 2018). The threat to academic integrity – especially through restrictions on academic freedom – is a major concern. Walker notes several cases of Russian and Chinese interference in American and British university libraries, where many articles critical of those governments were reportedly removed. Rachel Peterson provides a detailed investigation, done with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Canadian Association of University Professors (CAUP), into how Confucius Institutes and their parent organisation, Hanban, censored topics on American campuses. This included restricting discussions, removing content sensitive to the Chinese Communist Party, exploiting scholars' financial dependence and intimidating Chinese academics (Peterson 2017).

Between 2018 and 2021, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Forum for Democratic Studies published a series of reports analysing Russian and Chinese sharp power. These reports provided valuable empirical insights but often overlooked ideological or ideational dimensions. For example, Hoffman (2021) and Wright (2020) focus on how China uses technology and AI for surveillance, posing threats to civil liberties. Cole (2018), however, shifts the emphasis toward ideological goals, arguing that authoritarian sharp power seeks to erode faith in democratic principles. Cook (2021) similarly highlights disinformation campaigns targeting democracies. Other studies examine influence through funding and institutional control. Stefanov & Vladimirov (2020) reveal Latin American media's financial dependence on Russia and China, while Tiffert (2020) analyses CCP efforts to shape Western academic agendas. Rolland (2020) notes authoritarian think tanks designed to mimic democratic institutions, and Lucas (2020) underscores how free speech vulnerabilities are exploited by authoritarian regimes for disinformation. Richter (2022) summarises that while soft power enhances a country's image, sharp power aims to discredit democratic institutions, targeting media, academia and public trust. Walker & Ludwig (2021) concur, emphasising that sharp power extends beyond censorship to the manipulation of narratives across civil society.

A reverse operationalisation of multiple investigative works on Russian sharp power, specifically focusing on its ideational (non-institutional) dimensions, reveals the following recurring themes and indicators that illustrate the Kremlin's intentions, methods and narratives: the strategic dissemination of information to intensify ideological conflicts; efforts to divide targeted societies; attempts to discredit democratic principles and sow distrust in the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governments; and fostering scepticism toward mainstream media. Additionally, Russian sharp power supports left-wing, right-wing and anti-establishment movements that seek to undermine social and political cohesion in Western societies.

Among its many forms, sharp power tactics typically aim to depict Western governments as equally flawed, morally corrupt, or degenerate, thereby eroding their credibility. For example, two months after the war began, Lavrov suggested that those who 'lose sleep' over the conflict in Ukraine should imagine Ukraine as Palestine and Russia as the United States (Dutton 2022), clearly implying a parallel between American and Russian policies. This and similar statements exemplify the Russian political elite's use of a mirroring technique – framing their actions through analogies familiar to Western audiences – in an effort to engage with ideological frameworks deeply embedded in the consciousness of Western intellectuals and broader audiences.

Drawing extensively on the sharp power literature – as it is not always explicitly communicated but rather implicitly referenced (see the above-mentioned glaring asymmetry) – this paper argues that sharp power, among its various interpretations, can be understood as Russia's attempt to exploit the very strengths of democratic societies. While this has been discussed at the institutional and normative levels by numerous sharp power scholars (e.g. taking advantage of media plurality, freedom of speech, public debate, societal scepticism toward the establishment, etc.), this paper suggests that the same tactic is evident at the ideational or ideological level. Specifically*, Russia seeks to capitalise on the strengths of Western academia by appropriating knowledge produced within academic scholarship and weaponising ideas, theories and intellectual debates for use against Western audiences.*

Ignoring this ideological appropriation – especially considering how flexibly and effectively the Kremlin navigates and deploys ideologies – represents a significant oversight. The following chapters seek to address this gap by focusing specifically on the discourse propagated by key figures within the Russian leadership.

Weaponising the knowledge field

While much has been said about Vladimir Putin's speeches prior to the Ukrainian invasion – particularly his infamous essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' – very few, if any, have discussed Russia's attempts to hijack Western academic discourse to manipulate not only public opinion in Western societies but also the perspectives of world leaders and influential opinion-makers. Recent tendencies within the Trump administration to adopt a more conservative, isolationist approach characteristic of the realist worldview when discussing the war in Ukraine – often leading to outcomes favourable to the Russian perspective – have become increasingly evident. Whether it is President Trump himself, Secretary of State Rubio, public figures such as Elon Musk, or popular podcasters who have no formal background in political science or international relations, but who wield a significant influence over public opinion both in the US and globally have been adopting the logic of the realist school of international relations (both classical and neorealist traditions). This logic, which has long been dominant in Russian

propaganda before and after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, demonstrates how effective and far-reaching Russian sharp power efforts have been.

Although this paper does not offer a full critical analysis of the theories appropriated by the Russian political elite, it is important to address the nature of the realist perspective – the most frequently detected element in Russian propaganda. Scholars such as Richard Ashley (1984), Robert Cox (1981), Alexander Wendt, Robert Campbell (1998) and others from social constructivist and critical traditions have all underscored a major weakness of the realist tradition: its tendency to oversimplify reality and ignore other aspects of international politics, including historical, cultural, normative and even psychological dimensions. This point is crucial as realism's commonsensical and intuitive appeal has led to its widespread acceptance by mass audiences, ultimately making it one of the most frequently employed instruments of Russian proponents.

The incorporation of the realist agenda not only in Russian but also in the global discourse and wider attempts to normalise the discussion of the Russo-Ukrainian War within the paradigm of the realist tradition is becoming increasingly evident. For example, recently, Al Arabiya's *Counterpoint* programme hosted John Mearsheimer – one of the founding figures of the neo-realist tradition – and Sergey Karaganov, the Kremlin's advisor on foreign affairs (Al Arabiya 2025). To witness a discussion titled 'Ukraine Will Be Eliminated', featuring one of the most prominent names in contemporary Western academia and Putin's close ally, both largely agreeing on most aspects, is, if not alarming, then certainly deserving of attention.

For Putin and the Russian leadership, ideas and knowledge serve as tools to justify their intentions and geopolitical goals. This instrumental use of ideology is clear in the ideological ambivalence of Russian-backed political actors in Europe. Although Russia is often seen as aligned mainly with right-wing populists, reports show it supports both left-wing and right-wing politicians, as well as various anti-establishment groups, aiming to undermine targeted governments (Richter 2022). Right-wing parties usually claim the war in Ukraine stems from NATO expansion, while left-wing parties – known for anti-American views – blame the West for neocolonialism (Zavershinskaia 2024). For example, in Italy, the right-wing Lega opposes arms deliveries to Ukraine, while the left-wing Five Star Movement (M5S) accuses the US of instigating global wars. In Germany, similar views come from the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and the left-wing Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) (Pfeifer 2024).

As veteran Kremlinologist Lilia Shevtsova puts it, 'for the Kremlin, ideas are instrumental. If an action is deemed necessary, ideas will be found to justify it' (Shevtsova 2015: 25). Indeed, Vladimir Putin has long shown interest in various non-conventional ideas. For instance, he has endorsed the concept of the *Golden Billion* – a conspiracy theory originated in 1970s Russia with Anatoly Tsikunov and

later popularised by nationalist thinker and writer Sergey Kara-Murza (Maynes 2022). The theory claims that a global ruling class of one billion people exploits both human and natural resources to the detriment of the rest of the world's population. Echoing this idea, during his first year in office, Putin referenced the *Golden Billion* at the Asia-Pacific Economic Summit while addressing global inequalities: 'As we know, in terms of development, the world is divided into the North and South, into the so-called *golden billion* and the rest of humanity' (Putin 2000). The concept is also embraced by Nikolai Patrushev, who argues that behind the rhetoric of liberal democracy and human rights, the West is actually advancing a *Golden Billion* agenda (Ivanov 2022).

The case of Vladimir Pozner

Russian sharp power is seen in its efforts to frame reality using language that resonates with Western audiences. Communicating in terms familiar to Western logic is more effective than promoting a distinct Russian geopolitical view. A striking example of this appropriation of Western academic thought since Crimea's annexation is found in Vladimir Pozner's speeches. Though Pozner's background isn't suited for linguistic analysis, his significance lies in his reach among Western intellectuals, academics and the public, and as one of the few Russians allowed to openly criticise the government.

Russian political culture has a long tradition of *systemic opposition*, where a political entity formally opposes the ruling power but aligns with the state in practice – creating an illusion of democracy, competition and debate. Harley Blazer (2003) calls this *managed pluralism*, a practice originating in Soviet Russia and perfected during the Yeltsin era. Managed pluralism extends beyond politics into public life, allowing actors to engage socially and economically within Kremlin-controlled limits. Genuine opposition figures like Boris Nemtsov and Alexei Navalny were targeted or killed for opposing the government, while formal opposition consists of actors who fade away or align their rhetoric with the regime. Examples include Sergei Mironov and Ksenia Sobchak, presidential candidates who later supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine and other government policies (Roth 2024). Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov, who also ran against Putin in 2012, left politics soon after to focus on business.

Pozner can certainly be seen as a part of Russia's managed pluralism. While he is a vocal critic of the state nomenklatura and the country's systemic corruption, he consistently refrains from criticising the Russian government's foreign policy – particularly when addressing non-Russian audiences. A trilingual Russian intellectual holding Russian, American and French citizenship, Pozner could be described as one of the first direct Soviet influencers targeting Western – especially English-speaking – societies. During the Cold War, alongside various positions within Soviet foreign propaganda institutions, Pozner hosted the *Voice of Mos-*

cow, a state-controlled TV and radio network. He frequently appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* in the 1980s, where he openly criticised both the Soviet and American governments (Yale University 2018b). These appearances, combined with his fluency in English, earned him the reputation of being the 'English voice of the Soviet Union'.

Pozner's positioning within Russia's tightly controlled media landscape became particularly evident during a televised exchange with the late Alexei Navalny. When asked why he had never invited Navalny onto his show, Pozner admitted, 'Of course, I would invite you [Navalny] on my show . . . There are a number of other people I would invite. But I can't. I say that completely openly' (Moller-Nielsen 2024). Responding to Navalny's claim that this amounted to state censorship, Pozner argued that, since he had never seen a physical list of banned guests, it could not be called censorship – an example of what in Russian is often referred to as *zheleznaia logika* (iron logic).

While being openly critical of government efforts to control the media, Pozner simultaneously promoted ideas that have since become integral to Russian state propaganda. He was one of the first – if not the first – figures outside the Kremlin to advance the argument that Russia's aggressive foreign policy in its near abroad was a response to NATO's eastward expansion. His 2018 public lecture at Yale University serves as a vivid example of Russian sharp power: a Russian journalist addressing a Western – specifically American – audience, while incorporating familiar ideas, values and even names to subtly manipulate opinion and distort reality through strategic use of language.

In the lecture, which has garnered nearly 10 million views on YouTube, Pozner presents Russia as a reactionary power – one compelled by external forces to behave in a certain way. Even the title, 'How the US Created Vladimir Putin', frames the West as the primary agent responsible for Russia's actions. Several aspects of Pozner's speech are noteworthy. First, he opens by identifying himself as an impartial observer who is 'not representing anybody or anything' (Yale University 2018a). This is a clear rhetorical strategy aimed at establishing credibility by presenting himself as an independent commentator – despite the fact that he hosts one of the most popular political talk shows on Russia's most influential state-controlled television channel.

The central point of Pozner's speech is the classical security dilemma, a key concept in realist international relations. He presents NATO enlargement as a threat to Russia's security. Ignoring that many NATO aspirants have faced Russian aggression and overlooking NATO's defensive nature aligns with Campbell's and Milliken's view that threats are constructed through discourse, not always based on real dangers. Pozner seeks to legitimise NATO expansion as an American concern, citing George Kennan, who in 1998 called it 'the beginning of a new Cold War'.

Pozner portrays the United States not only as an untrustworthy partner in the post–Cold War era, but as an audacious actor that dismissed the pride of the Russian people, thereby exacerbating national wide grievances. This narrative aligns with Campbell's paradigm, which suggests that national identities are often constructed through antagonism – by establishing a binary of 'us versus them'. Russia is depicted as a historically misunderstood and humiliated actor, eager for partnership but consistently ignored by the West. Pozner's victimisation narrative is evident in his claim that between 1985 (the Gorbachev era) and 2007 (the Putin era), Russia allegedly did nothing – domestically or internationally – that could have disappointed the United States. He further describes Putin as a pro-Western politician who offered assistance to the US on several occasions, only to be unjustly dismissed, while NATO expanded to include former Warsaw Pact countries.

To fully understand Pozner's rhetorical strategy, it is crucial to examine not only what is said, but also what is deliberately omitted. He entirely ignores Russia's involvement in suppressing peaceful protesters in Kazakhstan, Georgia, Lithuania, Latvia and Azerbaijan; its participation in proxy wars and civil wars in former Soviet republics; its military support for secessionist movements in Moldova, Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh; the two brutal Chechen wars; systemic human rights abuses based on ethnic and religious identity; the assassination of journalists; and numerous other actions that have contributed to Russia's undemocratic image. Pozner's decision to exclude these events exemplifies a classic propaganda technique. As Lendvai (2024) argues, propaganda involves the dissemination of selective information – presenting only favourable elements while concealing those that may undermine the argument – in order to shape public perception.

In the 2010s, Pozner described Russia as a reactionary power compelled by the West to act in certain ways. However, prior to the 2022 invasion, he explicitly accused the West of provoking Russia to invade Ukraine. In a February 2022 interview, Pozner suggested:

> Russia attacking Ukraine is something that the West is interested in and that Russia doesn't want because Russia can win nothing by invading Ukraine . . . It would be total destruction of any kind of respect for Russia. There's nothing to win and a lot to lose. And there are people who say that's exactly what the West wants (Kelly 2022).

Another important theme in Pozner's rhetorical arsenal, which he has employed for years, is the Cuban Missile Crisis (CMC) of 1962. This event is widely regarded as one of the most discussed and illustrative case studies within the realist tradition of international relations, alongside Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, the Cold War-era technological rivalry and arms race, the Persian Gulf War and others. Pozner, however, invokes this case with a specific objective: to equate Russia and

the United States as great powers that occasionally resort to unethical means for the sake of survival. In his February 2022 pre-war interview, Pozner stated:

> This is not about the Russia and Ukraine border . . . should Ukraine become a member of NATO, that would present an existential threat to Russia. It's very much like 1962 and the issue of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil, which they had the right to do. They had agreed, the two independent countries. And the United States – quite correctly, in my opinion – saw this as an existential threat and said, we will not allow it. And if we have to sink your ships and bomb Cuba, we will do it. And whether that leads to World War III or not doesn't really matter (Kelly 2022).

This framing is a clear embodiment of sharp power for several reasons. First, as described by many scholars of sharp power, a core objective of Russian misinformation (as distinct from disinformation) is to draw moral equivalence between Russia and the United States. Pozner attempts to persuade viewers that Russia is not fundamentally different from the US, and that great powers operating on a 'realist chessboard' pursue similar – if not identical – interests, primarily survival, and will use whatever means are necessary, regardless of their ethical implications. Moreover, not only does he once again depict Russia as a reactionary power, but by praising the US response during the Cuban crisis, Pozner once again assumes the role of an objective observer – someone who can adequately assess the actions of a Russian antagonist and recognise America's right to defend itself. By doing so, he implicitly invites Western audiences to extend the same legitimacy to Russia's actions.

While Pozner clearly adopts ideas rooted in the realist tradition – most notably those recently popularised by John Mearsheimer – he simultaneously criticises American hegemony by highlighting the inconsistency between US foreign policy behaviour and the liberal norms it professes to uphold. This type of critique is not exclusive to realist scholars like Mearsheimer (see *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*) but is also prevalent among postcolonial and critical scholars such as Edward Said, Noam Chomsky, David Harvey and others.

Here, we can detect a similarity between Pozner's tactic and the above-mentioned reports suggesting that Russia exploits both left and right-leaning political parties in Europe. While the realist tradition is typically associated with a somewhat conservative worldview, Pozner's depiction of US-Ukraine relations – which removes agency from Ukraine – clearly resonates with Noam Chomsky's interpretation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Chomsky, whose views are rooted in radical critical theory, Marxist-influenced socialism and a longstanding critique of Western imperialism and capitalism, offers a perspective that, while distinct from Mearsheimer's, converges with it in key ways that lend support to

the Russian narrative. For example, like Mearsheimer, he frequently references the alleged promise made by James Baker and President George H. W. Bush to the Soviet Union not to expand NATO eastward (Chomsky 2022) a narrative widely appropriated by Pozner and other Russian intellectuals.

What further aligns Chomsky's ontology with Mearsheimer's is his portrayal of Ukraine not as an independent actor defending itself from aggression, but as an American puppet-state seeking to weaken Russia. Chomsky's position is not surprising given his long-standing and harsh criticism of the United States. He has even suggested that 'Russia is fighting more humanely in Ukraine than the US did in Iraq' (Vock 2023), citing the fact that Russia has not turned Kyiv into an unliveable city, as the US did to Baghdad – though, in his view, it easily could have. In response to his statements, Ukrainian academics published an open letter to Chomsky, correcting his claims about Ukrainian agency, the sovereignty of the Ukrainian state, the verbal promise by Baker concerning NATO enlargement and his apparent whitewashing of Putin's intentions and views on Ukraine (Kukharskyy et al. 2022).

To summarise the Pozner case: He is portrayed as an independent, impartial journalist – even one willing to criticise the Kremlin. He was among the first, if not the first, prominent Russian intellectuals to successfully communicate and disseminate the Russian narrative to Western audiences using their own discursive frameworks – not only linguistically, but ideologically. What is most important for this analysis is that Pozner clearly adopts ideas originating within the Western academic tradition – both from conservative and progressive perspectives – and projects these very ideas back onto Western societies, implicitly inviting them to tolerate Russia's aggressive actions toward Ukraine. He does not simply justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy; through discursive representation, he renders Russia's actions thinkable – and thus, in Campbell's terms, 'doable'.

Lukyanov's case

Alongside Pozner, another relatively influential figure not directly associated with the Russian state nomenklatura, but falling into the category of what Blazer describes as 'managed pluralism', is Fyodor Lukyanov. He is the editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs* – a Russian journal modelled on *Foreign Affairs* – as well as the research director of the Valdai International Discussion Club, a think tank that frequently hosts President Putin. Lukyanov is also a regular guest at the Munich Security Conference, among other international forums. He is known for fluently deploying international relations (IR) theory, aligning himself primarily with the realist tradition, and often criticising the West while warning it of its own strategic missteps.

Lukyanov was one of the first prominent commentators to not only deny agency to the Ukrainian people, but to claim that there was, in fact, no such entity

as a unified Ukrainian nation. In 2014, just days before Russia annexed Crimea, *The New York Times* published an article by Lukyanov in which he asserted:

> The truth is that the Ukrainian nation, accidentally composed of different parts with very different backgrounds, does not exist as an entity . . . Ukraine would need another couple of decades to emerge as a consolidated nation, able to formulate a national interest. Until then, the country should be left alone to peacefully develop its identity without forcing Kiev to decide its future orientation (Lukyanov 2014).

This episode is significant because, through *The New York Times*, Lukyanov presents the perspective of an intellectual who is not officially affiliated with the state apparatus yet speaks directly to the English-speaking – and thus international – audience. His attempt to deny the existence of a Ukrainian national identity – one of the central justifications later invoked for the invasion – and to advance this claim to American and European audiences under the guise of an independent researcher, serves as a clear example of Russian sharp power in action.

If today's Russian political discourse tends to frame Ukraine as divided between two great powers – Russia and the United States – then back in 2014, Lukyanov ascribed a similar role to the European Union: 'This country [Ukraine] is spoiled by self-perception as an enormously attractive trophy in a geopolitical battle between big powers—Russia and the E.U.—while those powers continue this fight out of inertia' (Lukyanov 2014). Here, Lukyanov offers a realist interpretation of what was then referred to as the 'Ukrainian crisis', portraying it as little more than a continuation of the Cold War–era rivalry between the EU and Russia.

Fast forward to 2025, Lukyanov claims that Russia's primary concern regarding Ukraine is not territorial acquisition, but security. When discussing the potential de facto recognition of the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories by the United States, Lukyanov emphasised that the war was never about territorial expansion, but rather about the demilitarisation of Ukraine and its neutrality, which he argues are essential to ensuring Russia's security (Lukyanov 2025a). While this implicitly draws on a realist perspective, Lukyanov explicitly references Stephen Walt, one of the leading neorealist theorists. He asserts that 'Russia's military operation . . . was not merely about Ukraine. It was about Moscow's broader struggle against the entire so-called Western bloc' (Lukyanov 2025b).

In an interview with the Swiss magazine *Die Weltwoche*, Lukyanov described the war with Ukraine as a necessary step, arguing that Russia had no other choice but to defend itself (Weltwoche 2025). Similar to Pozner, he portrays Russia as a reactionary power compelled to act in response to Western provocations, while also criticising Moscow for its failure to diplomatically resolve the post–Cold War tensions. In doing so, Lukyanov positions himself as an ostensibly objective

observer – critical of Russia, when necessary, yet ultimately sympathetic to its strategic rationale. Echoing Chomsky, he draws a parallel with the US war in Iraq, using it to underscore the precision of Russian missile strikes and to emphasise Russia's restraint in avoiding civilian casualties in Ukraine.

Lavrov's case

While Pozner and Lukyanov represent Russia's perspective without formal state ties, similar narratives are prominent in Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's official discourse. Like them, Lavrov often invokes NATO expansion, a persistent theme in his rhetoric. He began using this narrative consistently after the 2014 Euromaidan events and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Since then, deterring NATO enlargement has become a central, if not primary, pillar of Russia's foreign policy rhetoric.

From this period onward, Lavrov's interviews and speeches – delivered at international conferences, forums and the United Nations – demonstrate that he has consistently maintained a position similar to that of Pozner and Lukyanov, often employing analogous rhetorical strategies, particularly the technique of equating Russia with the United States. For instance, in May 2022, several months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Lavrov addressed English-speaking audiences in English and made a controversial comparison that ultimately compelled Vladimir Putin to issue an apology to then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Lavrov stated: 'if you "cannot sleep" because of the Russian conflict, there are some *advices* [sic] to calm you down. First, imagine this is happening in Africa. Imagine this is happening in the Middle East. Imagine Ukraine is Palestine, imagine Russia is the United States' (Dutton 2022).

This commentary contains several allusions likely intended to evoke specific emotional responses from the audience. First, by referencing Africa and the Middle East, Lavrov implicitly critiques the West's historical indifference toward its former colonies – a recurring theme in postcolonial studies and left-leaning scholarship. He suggests that if Western societies can remain untroubled by conflicts in those regions, they might adopt a similar indifference toward Ukraine. This framing seeks to expose what Lavrov portrays as the West's selective moral engagement with global crises. Second, by drawing a parallel between Russia and the United States, Lavrov invokes a central tenet of realist international relations theory: that great powers behave similarly, regardless of their ideological orientation, political system or the era in which they operate.

Lavrov conveniently draws not only on academic knowledge but also on conspiracy theories. For example, when criticising the United States and the unipolar model of world order, he explicitly referenced the previously mentioned *golden billion* conspiracy theory and accused Europe and America of exploiting the resources of Asia, Africa and Latin America (United Nations 2022). The overall tone of Lavrov's 2022 speech can be described as an incrimination of the West.

He accused Western powers not only of attempting to defeat Russia militarily but also of seeking to fracture Russian statehood – an ambition he described as an unprecedented level of Russophobia. While this speech targeted the West, a year earlier he had referred to Russophobia in Ukraine and the Baltic states (MFA of the Russian Federation 2021). Russophobia is a recurring theme not only in Lavrov's rhetoric but in Russian political discourse more broadly. It draws on liberal norms such as tolerance, inclusiveness and victimhood – key elements of the increasingly mainstream discourse of identity politics that is familiar to democratic societies.

Secondly, he accused the West of disrespecting and undermining Ukraine's sovereignty: 'let other members of the international community decide for themselves what their positions would be – on the side of one, on the side of the other, or neutral – that's what happens in democracy' (United Nations 2022). Westphalian sovereignty – non-interference, legal equality and self-determination – is deeply important to Western governments and societies. However, Lavrov and the Russian elite's use of sovereignty predates the Ukraine war by nearly a decade. The concept of sovereign democracy, introduced by Vladislav Surkov in the mid-2000s, is often described as Kremlin ideology, conveying that Russia is a democracy and that no external actor can question its political model (Shekhovtsov 2019). Thus, Lavrov frames Ukraine's sovereignty as a Western interference accusation, alleging attempts to stage colour revolutions or meddle in Ukraine's affairs.

The third line of Lavrov's accusations referred to the Western powers' disregard for Russia's security concerns, particularly regarding NATO expansion. Similar to Pozner and Lukyanov, Lavrov portrayed Russia as a reactionary power that had no choice but to defend itself – and the Russian populations in Donetsk and Luhansk – against threats allegedly created by NATO (United Nations 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has offered, on the one hand, a conceptual debate and, on the other, an analysis of Russian political discourse as empirical data to complement the theoretical discussion. The conceptual section makes three key arguments.

First, the concept of soft power has often been misunderstood due to its intangible, non-kinetic nature. Anything that did not fall under military or economic tools was frequently labelled as soft power, without sufficient scrutiny.

Second, Western – primarily American – scholars and policymakers tended to believe that methods of influence categorised as soft power should remain unchecked. Their rationale was that regulating such influence could undermine the core values of liberal democratic systems, such as individual and public liberties, openness, media plurality and freedom of speech. In other words, challenging Russia's supposed soft power risked backfiring by undermining Western soft power itself.

Third – and arguably most importantly – this paper offers a refined interpretation of sharp power. While sharp power has typically been discussed in political, institutional or economic contexts, this paper calls for an ideational or even ideological inquiry. Building on Walker and Ludwig's initial understanding that sharp power exploits the openness and freedoms of democratic systems, this study argues that Russia also exploits what can be considered the intellectual strengths of these societies – namely, the knowledge field.

The theoretical argument is extended through a discourse analysis aimed at identifying and interpreting how, and to what end, Russia appropriates Western academic knowledge. The analysis of Russian political discourse reveals several key patterns. First, Russia heavily relies on the knowledge domain – drawing from both academic scholarship and conspiracy theories. In both cases, the goal is either to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy or to discredit and morally challenge the West.

Importantly, Russia mimics the norms of democratic societies by promoting commentators who are not officially affiliated with the state. This creates the illusion of independent and open debate, intended to persuade Western audiences that these perspectives come from independent observers, not from the government. The cases of Vladimir Pozner and Fyodor Lukyanov illustrate how such figures, who are both scientifically literate and highly effective communicators, use Western academic knowledge to influence opinion abroad.

Both Pozner and Lukyanov heavily project a neorealist worldview in which all states behave similarly, and Russia is portrayed as a reactive power forced to act due to Western provocations – particularly NATO expansion. This incorporation of neorealist ideas serves another purpose: It presents Russia, the United States and its allies as morally equivalent actors in international relations – self-interested, amoral and unbound by ethical constraints. These narratives are echoed by Russia's top leadership, particularly Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov.

In addition to neorealist themes, the Russian discourse includes ideas more typically associated with leftist Western critiques. These include references to American colonialism, the legacy of Western imperialism, and critiques of modern foreign policy as neo-colonialism. Russian rhetoric often echoes or directly cites left-leaning Western thinkers such as Chomsky, Said or Harvey, as well as public debates around identity politics. Concepts such as 'Russophobia', Western indifference to non-Western regions and even the extreme 'Golden Billion' conspiracy theory are used to build this narrative.

These and other examples demonstrate that beyond targeting the institutional and normative foundations of Western societies, Russia strategically exploits Western academic knowledge. By 'speaking the language' of Western audiences – through ideas, theories and intellectual frameworks – Russia aims to extend its influence, gain moral or political advantage, and discredit democratic systems and institutions.

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Otar Pareishvili is a PhD candidate in International Relations. His research focuses on Russian foreign policy, particularly the use of discourse, religion, socio-cultural, and other ideational and non-kinetic factors, as well as concepts such as soft power and sharp power.

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Research article

Understanding Terrorism: A New Perspective through Group Cohesion

Tharindu Yashintha Herath Karunasena

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan, ORCiD: 0009-0002-8427-0456, corresponding address: karunasenatharindu@gmail.com

Abstract

Terrorism is a paradoxical phenomenon: Despite its status as a critical global security threat, its strategic effectiveness often proves counterproductive, failing to achieve its core agendas. Therefore, why does terrorism persist as a global threat despite its frequent failure to achieve political or ideological goals? This article argues that the answer lies not in simple political or strategic models, but in the complex, reciprocal relationship between individual psychology and organisational factors. This article introduces a new theoretical framework, the Group Cohesion Model, to analyse this dynamic. This multi-dimensional framework is applied to three of the most dangerous and violent extremist Islamic terror organisations – ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab – using media interviews and testimony reports from current and former members. A comparative analysis between these organisations reveals that the choice to use terrorism is not just a strategic or rational decision. Instead, the model shows it is a complex process of interplay between individual drivers and organisational elements that transform terrorism into a seemingly legitimate action. By presenting these nuanced insights, this new framework sheds light on why these organisations persist and offers ways to develop more effective, multi-dimensional counterterrorism policies.

Keywords: *terrorism, group cohesion, extremist organisations, radicalisation*

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Introduction

Terrorism represents a complex political anomaly – while terrorist groups employ seemingly strategic violence to achieve political or ideological goals, the resulting backlash often proves to be counterproductive. Nevertheless, it remains a formidable threat to global security. Despite its violent nature, before the Al-Qaeda attacks in New York on 11 September 2001, this rather concerning global issue proliferated effectively while remaining largely unnoticed. It can be argued that the fanatical and irrational connotations surrounding terrorism have pushed it into a space of negligence, allowing it to incubate and flourish (Stampnitzky 2013: 50). Even in the face of atrocities such as 9/11, terrorism is criticised for its ineffectiveness in achieving any notable political concessions. In fact, despite the scale of violence and destruction, a substantial portion of the literature argues that terrorism has consistently failed to secure its desired political or ideological concessions (Abrahms 2006; Neumann & Smith 2007; Schelling 1991). This persistent ineffectiveness, however, underlines a fundamental puzzle that remains to be fully addressed – to understand the underlying drivers that compel groups to engage in acts of terrorism.

Political science scholarship has extensively explored the causes of terrorism. Martha Crenshaw (1981), for instance, contributed valuable insights into the motivations behind such acts. However, a key gap remains: Despite prevailing assumptions that terrorism is an ineffective tactic, we lack a comprehensive understanding of why it is chosen as a seemingly desirable strategy for achieving political, ideological and religious goals. Moreover, much of the literature examines individual motivations and organisational dynamics separately, overlooking the reciprocal relationship between those elements. While this approach allows for an in-depth analysis of individuality, motivations and organisational structures, it fails to capture the intricate interplay between these factors. This isolated approach ultimately limits the understanding of complex dynamics that underlie the existence of terrorism.

Moving beyond this political lens, incorporating psychological elements into the analysis of terrorism offers valuable insights. This approach allows us to further unpack this phenomenon through two key, yet not fully synthesised, questions: What factors make terrorism seem legitimate or desirable for certain groups, and what brings these groups of individuals together? In light of these inquiries, this paper aims to propose a new perspective on terrorist behaviour and organisational structure by addressing 'What drives radical Islamist groups such as Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and ISIS, embedded in a specific interpretation of Islamic teachings, to choose terrorism over alternative courses of action?' The

theoretical and practical significance of this research is twofold: first, it develops a multilevel framework that integrates individual and organisational factors; second, it demonstrates how this framework can enhance both theoretical understanding and policy response to terrorism.

Creating a psychological explanation of terrorism is a politically and intellectually challenging task. Despite the divergence between psychology and political science, behavioural theories still offer valuable insights for researchers seeking to understand the core motives behind why terrorism is chosen over other avenues of action. Within this scope, group cohesion, rooted in the foundational work of Kurt Lewin's (1947) field theory, is an outstanding aspect in the realm of social psychology. Grounded in this group cohesion model, this paper hypothesises that terrorist organisations choose terrorism due to the reciprocal interplay between individual factors such as trauma, humiliation and deprivation, and group factors such as collective identity and decisions. These interactions form the foundation for terrorist organisations to legitimise and amplify their actions.

The remaining sections of this paper establish this argument in the following order: first, a careful overview of existing literature on the use of terrorism will provide a foundational understanding of the conventional view on terrorism; second, a multi-dimensional model is created through the application of group cohesion principles; third, a detailed analysis of group cohesion dynamics within three terrorist organisations: ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab is presented. Finally, the paper offers a discussion of its findings, and the study will conclude with policy implications on both the national and global levels to prevent the future proliferation of terrorism.

Literature review

The rapid expansion of terrorism, as well as its internationalisation, has transformed a simple concept of terror into a complex phenomenon, extending far beyond traditional political and territorial goals. Given this accelerated growth, it has paved the way for political scientists to assess this issue through a rational lens, also conventionally known as the strategic model. The strategic model suggests that terrorism is conducted or chosen to achieve specific sets of goals that these groups are unable to achieve through normal political means. These goals can vary from forcing political changes to occupying territories (Hoffman 2006; Kalyvas 2004; Merari 1993; Pape 2005). Theories derived from the strategic model assume that terrorism is a choice that is made under rational thinking. Hausken's (2018) analysis of terrorist attacks emphasises the notion that the instrumental rationality of these terrorist organisations frames their motivation to use terrorism as a credible method given their strategic objectives. This presumption of rationality proposes that these organisations operate similarly to state actors, in which they organise terror based on rational calculation of cost and benefit (Fortna 2015; Thomas 2014).

On the most fundamental level, this rational choice to engage in terrorism suggests that groups should make an *ex-ante* calculation of the cost involved in using terrorism and consciously decide that the benefit outweighs the proposed cost. Yet the empirical evidence on terrorism shows that in most cases, these groups do not engage in these careful calculations (Abrahms 2006). This contrast between the theoretical implications and the reality of the outcomes hints that the choice to engage in terrorism goes beyond simple material or political strategic gains.

Hence, scholars such as Boyle (2023) attempted to address this critical gap by expanding the strategic model by fusing Arnold Wolfers' milieu goals, going past the material goals of terrorism while preserving the rational choice framework. The expanded framework argues that ideological and material factors are not sufficient to understand why groups choose terrorism over other means and that groups that engage in terrorism are focused on achieving milieu goals: altering the broader international environment to favour other groups with similar objectives and for their own future course.

While these theoretical models provide crucial insights into understanding the rationale behind choosing terrorism through a rational train of thought, they do not entirely capture the interplay between individual elements and organisational elements in choosing terrorism to achieve its core agendas. To be precise, both the traditional strategic model and Boyle's expanded framework's over-dependency on rational choice has limited its scope to the organisational and collective levels. Even at the individual level, several scholars have restricted their scope by framing individual decisions to use terrorism as a result of collective action (Lichbach 1995; Atran 2003; Boylan 2015). Bringing this gap to attention is theoretically important. While it is true that explaining individual choice to engage in terrorism through group influence has great implications, especially at the societal level, this overlooks the reciprocal dynamic between individuals and groups in resorting to terrorism.

Bypassing this gap is important as both group influence on individuals and individual influence on groups are compulsory elements that make terrorism a credible option. For instance, as Kruglanski and Fishman (2009) explain in their work on psychological factors contributing to terrorism, 'individuals' sense of relative deprivation' and 'humiliation' are factors that allow individuals to embrace radicalisation (ibid.: 8). Yet, theories based on rationalism overlook these important personal or individual psychological factors, given their emotional and irrational nature. The division within the terrorism literature has forced scholarships to assess terrorism through two separate lenses: the rational lens, centred on collective decisions and strategic calculations; and the irrational lens, which emphasises the individual and erratic nature of terrorism.

Though existing literature is successful in recognising the basic factors that pave the way for terrorism, the fragmented analysis of terrorism through rational

and irrational perspectives undermines the critical reciprocal relationship between these two entities. The gap lies in this tendency to evaluate these dimensions separately, overlooking how individual emotional factors and psychological influences can shape – and be shaped – by group-level cohesion as well as strategic objectives. It is worth underscoring that terrorist organisations and their actions by nature are non-static. They vary in motives, capabilities, reachability, ideologies and even tactics. Consequently, while existing strategic models may be analytically and practically sufficient for evaluating rational actors similar to states, they lack the capacity to adequately assess terrorist actors, whose behaviour is highly unpredictable and spontaneous. Accordingly, it is evident that the strategic model is limited to only assessing observable strategic behaviour or at the very best overt strategic tactics of terrorist organisations, making it conceptually thin in understanding the persistence of terrorism.

The limited effectiveness of strategic or rational choice-based models is evident in their theoretical constraints and operational applicability in explaining terrorism. This limitation points to the necessity of a model that captures individual-level factors, organisational dynamics and internal mechanisms enabling terrorism, dimensions for which social psychology provides a particularly well-suited analytical lens. This paper connects this gap by proposing a unified framework rooted in the group cohesion model. This model highlights the reciprocal relationship between individual and group factors and how these factors shape the choice to use terrorism as a credible method. By focusing on the dynamic interaction between individuals and their groups, the group cohesion model demonstrates how individual motivations can shape group cohesion, while the group factors can legitimise and amplify its commitment to terrorism. This integrated approach moves beyond the segregated analysis currently dominant within the terrorism literature, offering a more comprehensive understanding of why terrorism is chosen by these groups.

Group cohesion and terrorism

As mentioned, this paper aims to bridge this gap by utilising a theoretical model: group cohesion, a key concept with roots in the work of Kurt Lewin (1947), a key figure in social psychology. Lewin's pioneering research on group dynamics and his development of field theory in the 1940s laid the groundwork for understanding group cohesion (Adelman 1993). Simply put, group cohesion refers to the factors that enable several individuals to function as a unified group, especially in a hostile environment (Jorgensen et al. 2020). These conditions, reflecting the environments in which terrorist groups operate, allow group cohesion models to explain how such groups make decisions at both individual and collective levels while sustaining operations and preserving their core structure. This model is essential for providing a comprehensive as well as integrated theoretical framework

that explains how individual and group-level dynamics reciprocally interact, offering the field of terrorism a deeper understanding of why terrorism is chosen.

In hindsight, one may believe that terrorism or any other military-related activity is governed primarily through strategy, physical strength, technological capabilities and monetary funding. Indeed, these elements are crucial links that determine the overall activity of terrorist or military groups, but the group cohesion model enables us to dive deep into the group structures that constitute the overall behaviour, dynamics and trajectory at both the individual and group levels. Expanding on this, in his study on cohesion and organisational culture of the British Army, Charles Kirke (2009) introduced a four-dimensional social structure model to visualise cohesion within a British military group. Illustrating the influence of culture in formal and informal settings, the model suggested that a 'highly cohesive British military group can be expected to have, therefore: a clear command structure; a network of durable informal bonds within and among ranks; feelings of belonging to and loyalty towards the group and to any other appropriate group' (ibid: 748). For terrorist groups, integration of both formal and informal engagement between each member and sub-groups is crucial to decide what level or method of terror should be employed to deliver their respective desired outcomes. From this standpoint, the group cohesion model suggests that strong formal and informal bonds are essential for achieving individual and collective consensus, especially when terrorism demands life-altering sacrifices.

Individual attributes play a major role in the decision-making process of a group and its ability to conduct operations effectively. These attributes are a mix of the individuals' desires to remain as part of the group, loyalty and their explicit identification with the group, resulting in generating perceptions that represent high cohesion (Friedkin 2004). In line with the group cohesion model, social identity theory further enforces this notion as more members identify with its group and its goals, the more likely they are willing to 'actively contribute' to the well-being of the group and engage in achieving common agendas (Turner 1986). For many groups, this is achieved through establishing common norms within the in-group. Likewise, members within these groups showcase high levels of satisfaction with their respective roles in the in-group system and engage in more 'organizational citizenship behaviors', further confirming their identity as a part of the group (Keller 1986). In terms of terrorist groups, these groups choose terrorism as a tactic because group cohesion enhances their capacity to bring around a common goal and rationalise extreme actions as necessary for achieving their agendas. This alignment of individual identity with group goals reinforces members' commitment to sustained violent behaviour.

Walking through the principles of group cohesion, Carron et al. (1985) suggest that cohesion could be categorised into two major definitions: (1) group integration and (2) individual attraction to the group. The group integration focuses on

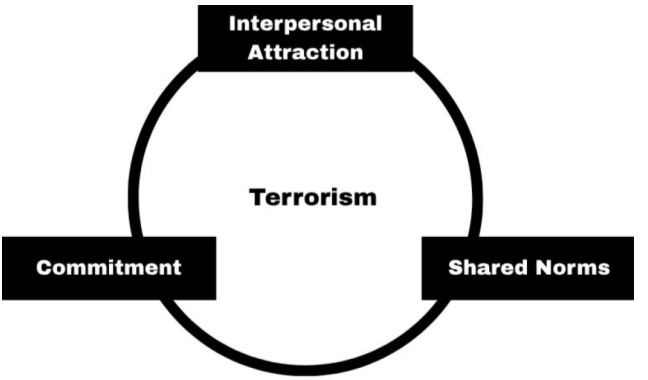
a member's specific perception of the group as a whole, whilst *individual attraction* to the group focuses on the parameters that attracted the member towards the group. The common belief regarding terrorist groups is that new members are recruited through coercive methods. Even though this argument posits some level of truth, many of these members join these groups of their own will, as well as through a volunteer system. This is well clear within terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, in which a huge portion of their members are made up of foreign fighters from Western nations (Benmelech & Klor 2018). A simple look will suggest that using coercive methods in such proximity is virtually ineffective and, most importantly, impractical. As the group cohesion model suggests, first, individuals develop a certain perception of how these groups behave and under what type of agenda they operate. This could range from fighting against a government body to establishing religious or ideological values within a given territory. Following this, certain individuals form a level of attraction to these groups as their personal motivations go in parallel with the given group's agenda and their method of achieving them.

Equally, justice-oriented groups can enforce both the members' emotional and rational sense of justice, especially in ideologically leaning organisations. The broad perceptions of organisational support toward members through a top-to-bottom approach, as well as organisational justice, are powerful approaches in enhancing members' engagement in achieving group agendas with increased levels of *commitment* (Martin 1996). On a similar note, Martha et al. (2008) in their work on 'Group Cohesion as an Enhancement to the Justice-Affective Commitment Relationship' mention the importance of emotional ties in strengthening an organisation, notably in terms of *norm* establishment (ibid.: 742). Therefore, a positive perception of the organisational structure, ideology, procedures, incentives and organisationally-based distributive justice is likely to produce strong emotional engagement for both individuals and the organisation. A dominant view within terrorist groups is that they act as justice-oriented organisations. This is addressed at both the individual and collective levels.

Group cohesion model

The model is grounded in two ways. First, it is consistent with the conventional understanding of group cohesion principles. Second, three elements that consist of both individual and collective essence will be analysed to assess why certain groups choose terrorism. Interpersonal Attraction identifies 'push' or 'pull' factors that facilitate an individual's initial transition into a terrorist organisation. This element specifically focuses on how terrorist organisations utilise trust and social bonding to attract individuals through kinship, religious and socio-economic benefits. Shared Norms lays down how these terrorist groups glorify violence as the most effective and righteous means to achieve their goals and reduce the

Figure 1: Group Cohesion Model



Source: Author

cognitive distance of the members, reinforcing that violence is necessary. This involves focusing on the internal mechanisms of ideological and behavioural alignment through strict indoctrination regimes and in-group interactions to ensure obedience after formal induction. Commitment explains why individuals are less likely to pursue alternative strategies, as they have invested heavily – emotionally and physically – in the group's violent path as it is fostered through shared hardships and rituals. Figure 1 visually represents these three elements as a circular framework, demonstrating how they reciprocally reinforce each other to sustain a group's decision to engage in terrorism.

Methodology

The goal of this paper is to develop a theoretical framework to understand 'why terrorism is desired by certain groups over other means of political and societal courses?' through a psychological lens. Noticing that the notion of terrorism is inherently vague and inconsistent, especially given political connotations, this paper directed its focus toward three of the most outstanding terrorist organisations: Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Three major reasons can be noted for choosing these samples. First, all three terrorist organisations seemingly follow a uniform agenda, which is to combat the growing Western influence within the respective regions as well as to expel foreign forces. Second, these terrorist organisations have reached the status of an international character because of their recruitment of foreign fighters and their operational presence in the global theatre across multiple regions. Finally, all three terrorist organisations are widely known for their violent and indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population, such as public executions, bodily mutilations and suicide attacks.

As of now, theories regarding terrorism have solely focused either on an individual scope or mere organisational level. Conducting a comparative analysis between Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab and ISIS can help trace patterns that contain both individual and organisational essence. Moreover, recognising these patterns will aid in forming a Group Cohesion Model – the main focus of this paper, fusing both individual and organisational elements in answering the stated research question. Additionally, the selected samples are perfect for understanding their continuous growth throughout the globe, even in the face of international pressure and rejection.

Moving further, given its secretive nature as well as government censorship of sensitive information, collecting necessary data can be a challenging task. In response to these limitations, this paper relies on publicly available secondary data through interviews and media reports in which both current and former members exchange directly about their experiences with the focused terrorist organisations. The desired data were obtained from eight different public media outlets, including Al Jazeera, CNN, CBS, Channel 4, France 24, The Intercept, LADbible and UNILAD, as well as four scholarly research reports, all published between 2009 and 2021. In total, the dataset comprises fifteen interviews and reports, with five sources analysed for each organisation, ensuring both breadth and balance in the analytical process. Given that the data were collected from politically heterogeneous media sources, this paper is uniquely positioned to conduct its analysis with minimal influence from political bias or affiliation. Although this study did not conduct these interviews firsthand, the use of raw and unfiltered testimonies is sufficient to collect valuable information, which enriches this analysis by providing voices directly to the experiences of former and current members. Utilising publicly available sources, interviews and reports allows this paper to address two key research concerns. First, using existing interviews provides access to raw data without prior interpretations, minimising the effects of interpretive bias. Second, sourcing quality data directly from the current and former members further confirms the credibility and reliability of the data.

However, considering the nature of the selected sources, this approach entails two methodological limitations. First, the dataset may possibly be subject to selection bias, as media reporting is often susceptible to information exaggeration and manipulation. Second, the data collected from current and former members are vulnerable to social desirability bias. While former and surrendered members may express regret to facilitate legal leniency and social reintegration, the current members may maintain their ideological stance and commitment for personal protection. Addressing these limitations are important as this paper precisely attempts to manage these biases by analysing varying levels of commitment and loyalty between each member to further validate the model's findings.

Table 1 (see appendix) presents a summary of the data analysed in this study. The collected data were processed through two cycles of coding. In the first cycle,

initial coding was conducted through a careful examination of each interview to identify statements and elements that reflect the three cohesion factors: Interpersonal Attraction, Shared Norms and Commitment. This stage aimed to capture how interviewees describe social interactions, norm establishment and personal dedication, without any predefined order or hierarchy. In the second cycle, pattern coding was applied to detect recurring patterns and to emphasise the cohesion factors across the interviews. Here, the previously initial coded content was reorganised into frames that consist of entry-level, integrative and sustaining cohesion factors, corresponding respectively to why members joined, what integrated them into the organisation and what sustained the organisation's and the individual's survival. Categorising these cohesion factors into frames enables us to break down the circular cohesion process into a recognisable pattern. This highlights how each organisation emphasises specific cohesion factors based on the members' behaviour and the group's internal mechanisms, providing a snapshot of the dynamic interplay unique to each organisation.

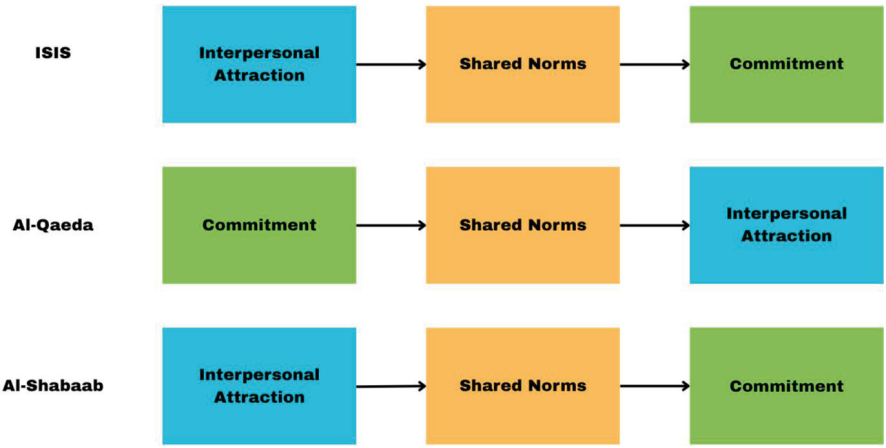
While all three organisations showcase the full spectrum of group cohesion factors, the patterns and emphasis of these elements vary significantly. This variation is not a coincidence; rather, it reflects each organisation's recruitment strategies, ideological foundations and operational methods. This suggests that group cohesion is not static, but a dynamic process shaped by the context in which each terrorist organisation operates. Figure 2 is an illustration of the Group Cohesion Model, visualising the unique evolutionary process and priority of cohesion factors within ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab. While presented in a sequential format to identify the primary catalysts and organisational mechanisms, these factors operate as a reciprocal and dynamic process. This visualisation captures a single iteration of the cohesion loop, such as ISIS's Interpersonal Attraction or Al-Qaeda's pre-existing Commitment, initiates a feedback loop that sustains the organisation's integrity and operational strength.

The following analysis will explore how these organisations engage with these cohesion factors and what kind of implications they possess in terms of internal durability and resistance to external pressure.

ISIS: A loop of vulnerability and violence

To put it bluntly, ISIS has profoundly transformed the global perception of terrorism. Its rise, rapid territorial expansion, ability to attract thousands of fighters across regions and disregard for territorial boundaries have forced scholars to rethink how extremist organisations recruit, radicalise and sustain members. In contrast to earlier extremist Islamic organisations that primarily relied on religious ideology and grievances, ISIS conducted a more strategic recruitment campaign that enabled it to attract fighters based on specific needs, whether rooted in their desire to showcase religious allegiance or more personal incentives such as financial needs.

Figure 2: Group Cohesion factors by terrorist organisation



Source: Author

An outstanding characteristic of ISIS's group cohesion pattern is its preliminary emphasis on interpersonal attraction, which acts as a strong catalyst for recruitment. As pointed out by Prezelj and Zalokar (2023) in their assessment on 'Recruitment models and approaches of Islamist terrorist groups', ISIS recruits new members using four different recruitment models: the net model – targeting homogenous groups that are ready for recruitment process, the funnel model – a step-by-step approach to assess whether a recruit demonstrate the desire to become a member, the infection model – carrying out the recruitment in person as well as one-to-one basis, and the seed crystal model – bottom-up recruitment on online forums or websites.

A similar reflection can also be seen in the collected data, as all the members were recruited through diverse means of strategies, ranging from personal networks, online radicalisation forums and social media platforms. For example, one account collected from a captured ISIS commander (unnamed) describes that he was drawn into the organisation not by ideological means but by financial needs, and most uniquely, his status as a lonely individual also contributed to his participation within the organisation. In his words: 'I don't have anyone. I'm poor. I only have God. It was about money for me' (CNN 2018). This indicates that ISIS deploys a unique mix of attraction strategies that not only address one particular dimension but multiple dimensions. Discussing the recruit's financial or economic needs as a state of motivation requires its own implications. In another interview with Derek Stoffel, two captured ISIS militants, Ibrahim and Sayleen, emphasise that they 'joined the militants to pay' for their family members' medical treatments (CBS 2017). While economic needs may be the primary driver for these individuals joining terrorist organisations, ISIS in this context, the process

of recruitment and subsequent group integration involves social interaction, trust-building and dependence – key elements of interpersonal attraction. Individuals experiencing financial restraints show a special vulnerability to be targeted by ISIS recruiters through financial promises in exchange for the desire to become a member, as seen in Prezelj and Zalokar's recruitment models. Equally, ISIS's global reach in recruitment plays a major role in its ability to sustain a resilient operational bubble. Trevor Aaronson and his interview with American ISIS fighter, Russell Dennison, showcase that Russell held critical views towards non-Muslim Americans prior to joining any extremist organisations and how he developed a positive perception of ISIS due to the actions of the first American suicide bomber in Syria, also known as 'Abu Hariara'. In his words, Russell explains that 'He [Abu Hariara] killed over 250 Syrian army soldiers. I was happy to see this . . . because the brother, he really sacrificed himself' (The Intercept 2021). As Trevor Aaronson reveals later, the decisive factor in Russell's decision to join ISIS, however, was not his pre-existing ideological alignment, but his desire to seek protection from the FBI after the wake of his friend's arrest back in the US. Implications in such cases are laid down rather clearly. This need for security and sanctuary acts as a form of tangible socio-economic benefit, similar to financial benefits, solidifying interpersonal attraction as his entry-level cohesion rather than commitment to an abstract cause.

Once interpersonal attractions have facilitated entry into the organisation, the ISIS members go through a rigorous establishment of shared norms that reshape the members' behaviour and their sense of moral obligation. These shared norms serve to align individual identity with the collective goals of the group and to ensure that the members are obedient to the hierarchical structure of the group. Shared norms can be enforced through formal means such as indoctrination, religious rituals and training sessions, or coercive means such as punishments, surveillance and peer pressure. In many cases, ISIS members are placed in environments where daily routines – eating and praying – are repurposed to enhance the members' loyalty and discipline. Such a blend of symbolic reinforcements and behavioural conditions allows ISIS to put in place a cohesive internal structure that is capable of withstanding hostile actions.

Giving another glance to the interview with Russell Dennison, he places significant emphasis on the fact that 'you have to be very careful how you speak, what you speak, who you speak against', providing evidence that ISIS has placed serious punishments or consequences on whoever dares to violate its codes of loyalty (The Intercept 2021). Correspondingly, the interview with the captured ISIS commander reveals that he was required to engage in sexual abuse towards captured women [sex slaves] as a result of peer pressure and required to conduct routine killings, mentioning that 'if I didn't kill, my commander would be ready with his weapon behind me to kill me' (CNN 2018). In addition to that, a surrendered American ISIS

fighter, Mohommad Jamal, points out that ISIS members spend about '8 hours a day praying and learning about religion' (CBS 2016). This provides a glimpse of both formal and coercive means of ISIS's shared norms enforcement.

Shifting toward the sustaining factor of group cohesion, ISIS demonstrates an extraordinary degree of commitment. However, the data illustrates that there is a contrasting display of behaviour between the captured and surrendered fighters, providing valuable insights into the nature of ISIS's internal commitment. Captured members often displayed a high level of psychological loyalty and ideological discipline, even after being detained. A strong portion of the captured ISIS fighters refused to disclose operational details, refused to openly criticise the group, and on many occasions justified the organisation's course of action. In their interview with CNN, when questioned about their alleged involvement in the imprisonment and torture of several Westerners, two British ISIS detainees, Alexanda Ketey and El Shafee El Sheikh, responded, stating, 'it's just an accusation, legally speaking' (CNN 2018). Such delivery of denial indicates not only their loyalty toward the mission of ISIS but also serves as clear evidence on how these fighters justify violence and crime against civilians with their association with the ideological commitment. Within the same interview, when asked about 'Jihadi John', a British-Kuwaiti ISIS fighter responsible for beheading several captives, El Sheikh described him as 'one of the most loyal friends I had. Trustworthy, honest, upstanding'. This provides further understanding of how both interpersonal attractions and shared norms have blended and reinforced the fighters' commitment to engage with the organisation's mission and, therefore, the survival of the organisation. In a contrasting approach, Jamal's interview showed a clear distance between him and ISIS's ideology, demonstrated dissatisfaction with its mission and expressed regret through sharing valuable information regarding ISIS's internal handling (CBS 2016). This suggests that captured ISIS fighters, unlike the surrendered ones, reflect the volume of commitment active or current members have, mapping out the group's ability to withstand external forces. ISIS fighters' high level of commitment to the organisation's course and the method of executions plays a central role in the organisation's long-term resilience. It enables ISIS to reorganise and survive after territorial losses, as it relies on a core of highly committed individuals who are capable of swaying external pressure.

Al-Qaeda: From pre-existing commitment to organisational consolidation

Al-Qaeda holds a special place in the history of terrorism, for rather well-known reasons. Its most infamous operation – the 11 September 2001 terror attack on the US – fundamentally transformed global security policies, leading to the US-led 'war on terror' and the creation of international counterterrorism practices (Huddy et al. 2002). Although the founding father of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden,

was eliminated by US Navy SEAL Team Six on the morning of 1 May 2011, and the organisation came to a *de facto* end, its ideology still remains as fragmented smaller organisations. In terms of understanding this exceptional ability to survive over three decades of counter terrorism efforts, the Group Cohesion Model has captured a unique pattern, reflecting on Al-Qaeda's leadership, strategies and operational methods. While ISIS's group cohesion process progresses from interpersonal attraction to shared norms and then to commitment, Al-Qaeda presents a more reversed pattern, beginning its group cohesion pattern with commitment.

This change in dynamics can be attributed to two major reasons. First, interviews with former and active Al-Qaeda members indicate that individuals who joined the organisation were committed to its cause and the ideology of Al-Qaeda, well prior to their formal induction. In comparison to ISIS fighters, where a considerable portion of the fighters were motivated to join as a result of financial needs, Al-Qaeda members showed more ideologically driven motivations in their participation. In his interview with LADbible (2021b), former Al-Qaeda and ex-jihadist, Manwar Ali, explains his thought process before joining Al-Qaeda as: 'I wanted to be meaningful and I felt I was doing the right thing, because after all, it is in support of the victimized. I didn't believe, I mean non-Palestinians, non-Muslims in general, people, human beings have rights, feelings.' This chain of reasoning lays down a clear foundation that Manwar's was considerably influenced by his extremist ideological views and later reinforced his decision to commit to these views by becoming a part of Al-Qaeda. A similar pattern of experience can be seen in former Al-Qaeda member Aimean Dean's description of himself before formal induction into the organisation (LADbible 2021a). He explains that as a religious student, he joined a Bosnian Jihadist organisation at age 16 in 1994, believing his participation in the defence of Muslim civilians was an honourable act. This further confirms what has been established and detected under the Group Cohesion Model. As shown by both Manwar's and Aimean's interviews, the element of commitment was firmly established prior to the individual's induction into Al-Qaeda, through their affiliation with extremist Islamic ideologies, exposure to indoctrination and their belief in the necessity of challenging the socio-political system against seemingly threatened Muslim communities.

Continuing onward, in the same vein as ISIS, the integrative phase of Al-Qaeda's group cohesion analysis is reserved for the element of shared norms. However, the data suggest that there is a striking difference in the method by which these two terrorist organisations enforce shared norms in their respective members. Whilst ISIS follows a punishment-oriented shared norm establishment, Al-Qaeda indicated a greater emphasis on ideological indoctrination and strong inter-relations. This can also stem from the previous description, given that the members already showed outstanding characteristics of commitment even before their participation in the organisation. To elaborate more on this notion, attention

will be directed once again to the interviews of Manwar and Aimean, where the testimonies of both individuals reflect a normative environment influenced less by coercion and more by ideological reasoning. For instance, Manwar explains that 'the camp was wonderful. I will never forget the brotherhood, the sense of relief, so warm and welcoming' (LADBible 2021b). For many, the term 'brotherhood' illustrates a strong bond between individuals, which can be labelled as exceptional or even outstanding. Manwar's narrative of Al-Qaeda as a safe place for individuals with similar values and ideological compatibilities suggests that the organisation excelled at developing a strong basis for norm enforcement that is free from compulsion. Crucially, this brotherhood extends beyond surface-level social bonding and instead represents a carefully designed standardisation of Al-Qaeda's in-group interactions following members' ordination. This structural reliance on standardised social environments can be recognised as a primary reason why Al-Qaeda is capable of achieving high levels of internal cohesion with less coercion pressure. When questioned about the moral reasoning behind targeting civilians, Aimean explains that 'this is why we have the indoctrination lessons, the religious, ideological indoctrination in order to tell us that there are no civilians as far as our enemies are concerned [the West]' (LADbible 2021a). Ideological and religious indoctrination is at the forefront of norm establishment. A careful comparison between ISIS and Al-Qaeda proposes that despite a clear difference between how each organisation establishes its respective norms, both organisations are seemingly following a similar path pertaining to dehumanising certain groups of the population – non-Muslims and Westerners. To this point, most insights have been drawn from individual and former Al-Qaeda members, and high-ranking members reflect very well on how these norms in discussion have been presented at an organisational level. In his interview with Peter Arnett in 1997, Osama Bin Laden mentions that 'in our religion it is not permissible for any non-Muslim to stay in Arabia' and that 'we do not guarantee their safety' (CNN 2011). With similar respect, another interview with a senior Al-Qaeda member, who goes by Abdullah, notes that 'we don't want to kill people [but] if good people die in these bombings that's not our fault. It's a sign that it's their time to meet Allah' (France24 2009). Through and through, the concept of jihad, the framing of enemies and the use of violence against civilians (even if it's unintended) are consistently justified through religious interpretations, allowing an environment where such actions are rationalised and morally mandated. These shared norms operate at both the individual and organisational level: for individuals, they provide a lens through which actions are legitimised; for the organisation, they ensure internal consistency, loyalty and cohesion.

Al-Qaeda's sustaining factor in group cohesion is allocated toward Interpersonal Attraction. In general, one would expect a terrorist organisation to begin its life cycle or operational process through a recruitment initiative. In that regard,

Al-Qaeda shows a striking difference in how the organisation wants to portray as well as present itself and how the organisation wants to reach its targeted groups or individuals. The group cohesion analysis recognised two major perspectives of Al-Qaeda's recruitment process. First, the organisation emphasises heavily on the suffering of the Muslim populations in the regions. Moving the attention once more to the interview with Osama Bin Laden, he explains that he declared jihad against the US because 'the US government has committed acts that are extremely unjust, hideous, and criminal through its support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and Arabia. The US is directly responsible for those who have killed in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq' (CNN 2011). These expressions speak directly to whoever experienced any type of injustice, humiliation (indirect or direct) or loss in the face of the US or its allies' counter-terrorist operations. This was greatly illuminated through Manwar Ali's confession of joining Al-Qaeda as a way of fighting back against the status quo, or in other words, the West. A parallel portrayal can be seen in Al Jazeera's one-on-one interview with the organisation's third in command, Mustafa Abu-Yazeed, in which he 'urged the Muslim world not to forget about the fight [of Al-Qaeda]' and 'call on them to support the Jihad' (Al Jazeera 2009). Second, Al-Qaeda leadership figures play a crucial role in fostering interpersonal attraction by presenting themselves as principled and morally composed leaders. Contrary to what most would believe, Aimean Dean explains that the way Bin Laden spoke was very powerful yet soft spoken, and that he did not give the impression of an individual who shows traits of a power-hungry or crazy person. He further emphasises that Bin Laden was 'sincere' in his presence and he was 'very clear about his aims and goals' (LADbible 2021a). These are all outstanding characteristics of a role model for individuals and groups that follow extremist Islamic values, which also acts as an asset for the organisation to lure in individuals with high levels of commitment. Therefore, to some extent, Al-Qaeda's interpersonal attraction is rather a means of attracting individuals who are already committed to the cause.

Al-Shabaab: The interplay of coercion and ideology in fostering cohesion

Among the three organisations, Al-Shabaab is distinguished by its high level of operational secrecy, making information collection exceptionally challenging. This can be attributed to the fact that, unlike ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabaab operates mainly in Somalia, a country which is widely considered a failed state (Menkhaus 2014). With a lack of functioning central government and a fragmented military force, Al-Shabaab was able to thrive while preserving its secretive nature. Given this notable ability to operate in secrecy while being one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisations, Al-Shabaab exhibits group cohesion patterns that the Group Cohesion Model identifies as striking similar to those of ISIS.

While the group cohesion patterns between ISIS and Al-Shabaab are similar, the collected data suggest a crucial distinction in the nature and intensity of the mechanisms on each stage, especially Al-Shabaab's heavy reliance on coercive methods. For Al-Shabaab, the initial stage of group cohesion, interpersonal attraction, which acts as the entry-level cohesion, can be divided into three different approaches: religious purpose for participation, hijacking for recruitment and poverty as a tool of deceptive recruitment. First, religious purposes for participation serve a significant initial draw for many new Al-Shabaab recruits. In his analysis of interviews with current and former Al-Shabaab fighters, Richard Barrett (2018), through Global Strategy Network (TGSN) and Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS) surveys, explains that a good portion of these members join the organisation with the expectation that Al-Shabaab operates in the name of Islam. One of the oldest participants of the TGSN survey mentioned that he joined the organisation 'because Al-Shabaab was fighting to protect Islam' (ibid.: 322). Barrett further emphasises this by pointing out that about half of the participants in both TGSN and ISS surveys provided some kind of religious purpose for joining Al-Shabaab. Elaborating on this perspective, in his (2012) interview with 15 former Al-Shabaab members, Muhsin Hassan reports that two interviewees explained that 'they [Al-Shabaab] convince you that joining Al-Shabaab is your religious duty and that is what Islam requires of someone in your position'. In the same interview, one interviewee went a step ahead and responded that 'my father bought me a gun and brought it home. He said that if he were me . . . he would be at the front line of the battle and not at home' (ibid.: 19). Highlighting a strategy that goes beyond its organisational borders.

Second, information collected from these interview-based reports underscores that apart from luring in new members through religious interpretations, Al-Shabaab actively engages in recruiting members through hijacking and kidnapping. In his interview with eight former Al-Shabaab members from Kenya, Gabriel Toole (2023) reveals that Al-Shabaab has designed an intricate system of deception and coercion to bring young Kenyans into the organisation. Out of the eight interviewees, four (Barack, Mossi, Saleem and Omari) were recruited to the organisation through coercive strategies such as hijacking, kidnapping and drugging. While Barack was kidnapped with narcotics, Mossi, Saleem and Omari were kidnapped at gunpoint. Their interviews also show that apart from Barack, who was able to escape from the kidnappers after two weeks of entrapment, Mossi, Saleem and Omari eventually agreed to join the organisation in the face of financial promises.

This also brings the third approach to the discussion: poverty as a tool of deceptive recruitment. Jumping back to Toole's interview analysis, former Al-Shabaab members Mossi, Saleem, Omaro and Swaleh testified that initially the recruiters promised to send millions of shillings (Kenyan currency) to their families, and upon their return, they discovered that their families had not received money. The

role of financial manipulation has been a consistent topic throughout this analysis, as shown in ISIS as well as Al-Qaeda. Financial vulnerability is not only easy to manipulate, but financial promises are also attractive for financially crippled individuals in these socio-economically wrecked regions. As shown in both Hassan's (2012) and Barrett's (2018) interviews, being a member of Al-Shabaab allowed these individuals to earn as much as USD 150 monthly, and senior members joined the organisation in the hope of better opportunities.

Like the other two terrorist organisations, for Al-Shabaab, the integrative cohesion factor is reserved for developing shared norms between its members. Rigorous religious indoctrination has been a key element throughout this analysis. Out of all the Al-Shabaab interviews, Toole's (2023) interviews with the former Al-Shabaab members provide the most detailed information regarding life in the Al-Shabaab camps and what kinds of procedures these individuals had to go through. Two former members, Saleem and Swaleh, explain that the initial training starts with Islamic lessons, daily prayers and establishing rules of camp (ibid.: 1357–1358). After the basic training, the recruits are sent on missions such as raids, from which many would not return. In Swaleh's words, 'once every week, they must do a raid. And you know people who are being sent, the small boys who have come now, they were going on the worst ones'. The interview next indicates that along the same lines as ISIS, Al-Shabaab also follows strict rules with punishments in various manners. In another interview with two friends who joined Al-Shabaab, Hamidi and Issa recall that each individual was given a specific time in which to complete their tasks, and failing to do so would potentially get them killed. In their words:

> They will say, "this one will take you a week for that job to be complete." If you fail they will cut [off] your finger. If you fail again, now they come and they will chop the whole hand. And if you fail and they see that you don't have one hand, eventually they will just kill you. (ibid.: 1361)

According to these interviews, the rules were clear: Any failure to comply with Al-Shabaab's directives would inevitably lead to execution.

Commitment emerges as the sustaining factor in Al-Shabaab's group cohesion process. Al-Shabaab's and its members' commitment to its goals can be understood at two levels. As seen again and again, the topic of religion in terrorism is complex, though very much foundational because of its ability to mould an organisation's goals to an individual's own life goals. Jamal Osman's interview with Al-Shabaab's spokesperson, Sheikh Ali Dhere, states that:

> Our objective is to free our country. To govern our people under Islamic Law. And to free our people, our country, and our religion . . . . When they

> kill our people, we kill theirs . . . . All Muslims should support each other. And we welcome any of them who accept our invitation. (Channel 4 2013)

The lack of hesitation to threaten or inflict violence on the civilian population demonstrates the organisation's commitment to achieving its goals by any means necessary. The role of religious interventions does not stop here. In Toole's (2023) interview with Swaleh, he points out that Al-Shabaab engages in a type of filtration process to ensure that members show real interest in Islam. Otherwise, the ones that do not show any real interest in Islam will be sent on more dangerous missions. In his words, 'even if you are the best at training, but you are not a Muslim, you will be put at the warfront' (ibid.: 1358). This allows the organisation to utilise members who show real commitment to its cause, which can be crucial in missions such as suicide attacks and assassinations.

Next, Toole's interviews uncover a unique feature of Al-Shabaab in comparison to ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The excessive use of drugs among its members. Apart from Saleem, who escaped the Al-Shabaab camp just after one month, every other interviewee mentioned the regular use of drugs such as cocaine by Al-Shabaab members. Abdul, one of the former Al-Shabaab members, explains the use of drugs: 'they have something they gave us, something that made us not fear anything. I don't know what it was. It was something we ate. It made us feel invincible' (ibid.: 1358). This extensive administration of drugs to its members showcase a major strategic aspect of Al-Shabaab's internal controls. By fostering drug addiction among its members, Al-Shabaab creates an environment where drug dependency functions as a form of currency, allowing members to be compensated with drugs in exchange for fulfilling the group's objectives. From another aspect, as the organisation relies largely on deception and violent coercion, it indicates a clear deficit in genuine commitment and loyalty within its members. This also presents a membership base that may lack satisfaction with the organisation's mission. As a result, Al-Shabaab's reliance on drugs represents a unique mechanism to artificially impose commitment where organic commitment may be lacking. For the organisation, this ensures that its members are committed to its cause and use drugs as a control mechanism. This creates a state of coercive commitment, where the members' dedication to the group's violent path is rooted in their desperate physical and mental dependency on the organisation for survival.

Discussion

Pulling all these together, the Group Cohesion Model shows that the choice to choose terrorism is not a simple rational decision that is fundamentally based on a cost-benefit approach, nor is it limited to individual psychology to seek revenge or belonging. As Brent Ellis (2003) showed in his framework to guide counterterrorism policymaking, 'the implications of the complexity of contemporary

terrorism are significant' (ibid.: 1), reaffirming this paper's speculations in regard to the complex dynamic interplay between individual and organisational elements in choosing terrorism as a continuous desirable strategy.

The analysis of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab very well reflects the complexity of these terrorist organisations. For one, the respective Group Cohesion Models for these organisations are shown to be varied in respect to their recruitment strategies, goals, operations, group structure and in-group interactions. While ISIS' and Al-Shabaab's group cohesion patterns put initial emphasis on Interpersonal Attractions, then Shared Norms and finally Commitment, Al-Qaeda's group cohesion order stands as Commitment, then Shared Norms and lastly Interpersonal Attractions. The analysis suggests that this change in the positions between Interpersonal Attraction and Commitment is attributed to one major reason. It is the nature of individuals who choose to join these organisations. Whereas individuals affiliated with ISIS and Al-Shabaab often join these organisations due to financial desperation or societal pressure to conform to religious norms, those associated with Al-Qaeda have been shown to join out of prior ideological commitment and genuine allegiance to the group's objectives. In other words, Interpersonal Attraction functions as an entry-level factor when individuals are drawn to the group by tangible, socio-economic benefits like compensation, a sense of belonging or protection from external threats. In contrast, commitment acts as the entry-level factor when individuals are already dedicated to the group's abstract cause or ideology prior to their formal induction. This does not imply that all individuals who join ISIS and Al-Shabaab lack ideological commitment or are driven solely by financial hardships or social coercion. Nevertheless, the composition and motivational profile of recruits in these groups differ significantly from those of Al-Qaeda.

Remarkably, in the Group Cohesion Model patterns of all three terrorist organisations, Shared Norms were placed in a unique, uniform position. Close analysis of each organisation explains that, regardless of the motive to join the respective organisation, once recruited, new members should go through a thorough norm establishment process that is distinctive to each organisation. Shaping these recruits to behave and think in parallel to the organisation's goals and, most importantly, the method of fulfilling the stated goals, not only reinforces their decision to perceive engaging in terrorism as legitimate but it also crystallises using terrorism as the primary method of conduct. As there is a clear and direct reciprocal interplay between the individuals and the organisation at this stage, the element of dehumanisation also plays a major role in this mesial cohesion factor.

Clinging to a singular, one-dimensional analysis of terrorism is a deliberate invitation to blind ourselves to its true complexity and resilience. The findings of this paper underscore the critical necessity of a multilevel approach to evaluating terrorism, which integrates both individual factors and organisational factors. The

very persistence and adaptability of groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab may stem from this critical gap, as traditional analyses have often failed to integrate both individual and organisational dynamics into a one robust framework.

It is important to clarify that this paper does not argue that group cohesion is the single best and only way to evaluate the complex nature of terrorism. On the contrary, the model acts as a foundational tool to illuminate the interconnected dynamics of individual and organisational factors, filling a significant gap in the terrorism literature that has historically viewed these elements in isolation. Integrating social psychological elements, such as group cohesion, into the fields of political science and international relations to study terrorism is a unique contribution of this paper. Though such interdisciplinary methods are still gaining traction, the findings suggest that this is not only appropriate for understanding terrorism but a necessary step for further development of terrorism studies. A key finding of this paper is that the Group Cohesion Model's application varies across the respective organisations, in which it does not assume that these organisations operate with the same individual triggers or internal processes. Given this complexity, a rigorous, context-based analysis of each organisation remains necessary even to properly lay out their Group Cohesion Models. Clarifying that, the Group Cohesion Model is intended as a stepping stone and a foundation for future multi-dimensional approaches to understanding terrorism.

Policy implications for countering terrorist proliferation

The conventional approaches for counter-terrorism are fragmented and largely fail to account for the varied internal dynamics that sustain different terrorist organisations. This paper, which identified distinct Group Cohesion Models for groups like ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Al-Shabaab, suggests that a more nuanced multi-approach strategy that accommodates preventative and offensive approaches is required to achieve effective results.

A key takeaway of this paper's Group Cohesion Model is that terrorist organisations often leverage Interpersonal Attraction by exploiting underlying factors such as poverty, trauma and lack of opportunities to attract new members. This highlights the necessity of preventative policies that address these specific vulnerabilities. The 2004 Aceh, Indonesia, tsunami reconstruction programmes, the economic incentives of the 1998 Good Friday Agreements and development programmes in Mindanao, Philippines, are great examples of how simple economic interventions can greatly reduce the public need to affiliate with radical groups or separatist organisations. Although these programmes were not targeted at countering terrorist organisations or global terrorist organisations such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab, the underlying factors driving individuals toward terrorism remain the same, offering valuable lessons to be learned. On top of that, the exploitation of religion as a tool for influencing individuals to join extrem-

ist organisations emerges as a significant observation throughout this paper's analysis. Such tactics go past national or regional borders, making terrorism prevention operations exceptionally difficult. Recognising this difficulty, terrorism prevention operations should expand beyond governmental institutions and cooperate with civil societies and religious institutions. In this approach, the Indonesian Counter-terrorism Agency's (BNPT) multi-dimensional initiative to tackle radicalisation with the cooperation of the largest Muslim organisations in the country, Nahdlatul Ulama, should be taken as a great example. Schmidt (2021) points out two major counter terrorism or extremist initiatives of Nahdlatul Ulama: challenging extremist interpretations of the Quran through a video documentary and contesting extremist views on social media. While the exact effectiveness of such initiatives is hard to measure, the gradual decline of terrorist activities in the country and zero terrorist incidents in 2023 surely illustrate the broader capabilities (US Department of State 2024).

Next, a similar level of strategic emphasis should be allocated to dismantling the recognised integrative cohesion factor in each organisation. This paper's analysis indicates that Shared Norms contain a unique static position in the integrative frame across all three models, where rules, norms and collective resolve is crystallised. Terrorism preventative operations and deradicalisation programmes by themselves aren't adequate to dismantle active terrorist organisations, particularly international ones. A measured and balanced use of force, particularly military strategies aimed at leadership elimination, is a crucial part of disrupting the internal structure and cohesion of these organisations. Elimination of key figures, such as Al-Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and ISIS's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019, proved effective not just by removing a commander, but by dismantling the ideological and structural bonds that hold these groups together.

However, military actions should be employed with caution and should be designed to incorporate law enforcement-centric models, which are capable of breaking the cycle of creating new grievances. Simultaneously, non-violent strategies are necessary to capitalise on internal dissatisfaction and encourage defection. This requires customised de-radicalisation programmes that are capable of conducting offensive operations against the group's ideological control. For groups similar to ISIS and Al-Shabaab, whose norms are enforced through punishment-oriented coercion, government bodies should develop clear pathways to encourage members to defect from organisations, ensuring their protection and amnesty to counteract the fear of persecution. Additionally, for the organisations whose norms are built more on ideological indoctrination and a strong sense of belonging, programmes must work in cooperation with religious and social mentors to dismantle the strong moral mandate that legitimises violence. Such actions address the very core of a group's cohesion, and the importance cannot be overstated. Advocates for non-violent counter-terrorism strategies should

recognise that globally active terrorists, if left unchecked, can rapidly expand their capabilities to a point that threatens global security in unimaginable ways.

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Tharindu Yashintha Herath Karunasena is pursuing a Bachelor of Social Science in International Relations at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. His research interests lie in terrorism and extremism studies, particularly the psychological and organizational dynamics that shape violent non-state actors. He is especially interested in examining why groups choose terrorism, focusing on both rational and emotional drivers of political violence. He advocates for a multidisciplinary approach to International Relations, integrating insights from psychology to better explain patterns of radicalization, group cohesion, and strategic decision-making

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Appendix

Table 1: Statements from current and former members of ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab categorised by Group Cohesion Factors

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
9 April 2018. CNN. CNN sits down with the ISIS ‚Beatles'	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Interviews with British IS detainees Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee El Sheikh show their continued allegiance to ISIS was driven by negative experiences with the American military, loyalty to Islam, and admiration for fellow IS members.
15 February 2018. CNN. Stacey Dooley: Face To Face With An Isis Commander	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	A captured ISIS commander stated he joined due to poverty and reliance on God, described being pressured into sexual abuse, and claimed he killed under threat from his commander.
29 December 2017. CBS News. Face to Face with ISIS members: Derek Stoffel's reporter's notebook	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Captured ISIS members Ibrahim and Sayleen said they joined to fund medical treatment for sick relatives; Ibrahim admitted his boss killed defectors, while Sayleen denied harming anyone and showed notable restraint in criticizing ISIS.
19 March 2016. CBS. American ISIS member being interviewed by FBI	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Indoctrination through religious education and prayer routines
15 July 2021. The Intercept. An American ISIS Fighter Describes the Caliphate's Final Days — and His Own	ISIS	Interviews	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Russell, a captured ISIS fighter, described daily life as solitary and militant, with strict caution in speech and strong group norms for security. He viewed capture as worse than death, criticised non-Muslims in the US, sought refuge in ISIS-held Syria, and praised Abu Huraira, a US ISIS fighter, for killing over 250 Syrian soldiers.

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
15 February 2021. LADbible, UNILAD. Life As A Spy Inside Al-Qaeda	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Aimean Dean, a former Al-Qaeda member turned Western spy, joined out of a rebellious desire to defend civilians, trained under Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and was influenced by Osama bin Laden. He described indoctrination justifying civilian deaths and noted many recruits were drawn to such groups before joining.
4 November 2009. FRANCE 24. interviews an Al Qaeda militant	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	They claimed bombings were easy despite city security, using widespread resources and suicide bombers. On civilian deaths, they echoed Aimean Dean's account, framing casualties as unavoidable and predetermined by Allah if people obstructed their goals.
3 May 2011. CNN. Osama Bin Laden declares jihad in 1997 CNN interview	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Bin Laden justified their mission by condemning U.S. actions in Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and its occupation of Arabia, calling it the holiest Muslim land. He stated that while American civilians were not targeted, non-Muslims must leave Arabia.
22 June 2009. Al Jazeera. Exclusive interview with al-Qaeda third in command	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Mustafa Abu-Yazeed stated their mission is to seek happiness for all humanity and offered a truce if the U.S. meets conditions like leaving Muslim nations, stopping support for Israel, and releasing prisoners. He urged Muslims to continue supporting the Jihad.

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
5 September 2021. LADbible. I Lived In A Jihadist Camp In Afghanistan	Al-Qaeda	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Shared Norms*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	Manwar Ali joined Al-Qaeda, believing talk wouldn't change reality and that fighting was necessary to support the victimised. He didn't see rights for non-Muslims and aimed to promote Jihad over politics. He described the camp as welcoming with strong brotherhood, hared purpose, and a sense of escape. Many who joined Al-Qaeda were already committed to the cause, attracting others to their agenda
1 December 2013. Channel 4 News. Al-Shabaab: Exclusive interview with Sheikh Ali Dhere	Al-Shabaab	Interviews	*Commitment*	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	Sheikh Ali Dhere stated their goal is to free their country, governed by Islamic law, and expel foreign forces. Regarding a Kenyan mall attack, he said it was retaliation after warnings were ignored. He called on all Muslims to support their fight and welcomed anyone who joined. No clear signs of shared norms emerged from the interview.
August 2012. Mushin Hassan. Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of al-Shabab and Somali Youth	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Youth joined al-Shabab due to unemployment and easy pay for low-effort work, pressure to avoid appearing weak, and anger over bombings by UN forces. Many sought revenge and protection after abuses by government soldiers. Joining also offered reputation, identity as defenders of the country and religion, and was framed as a religious duty. Humiliation and victimisation were key factors.

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
2018. Micheal Keating and Matt Waldman. War and Peace in Somalia	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	High-ranking Al-Shabaab leaders joined in seeking an Islamic government and opposing foreign forces, often alongside friends. Foot soldiers ranged from teens forced or promised education to adults motivated by defending Islam. Religious beliefs and the promise of brotherhood strongly attracted young men, while many joined with friends for camaraderie. Economic hardship also drove recruitment. Those joining for religious reasons likely showed stronger commitment than those motivated by poverty.
September 2014. Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile Radicalisation and al-Shabaab recruitment in Somalia	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Most Al-Shabaab recruits joined between ages 15-29 as fighters, motivated by religious beliefs and economic hardship. Nearly all saw Islam as under threat, with anger fuelling their involvement. Some, like Ahmadey Kusow, joined due to marginalisation and lack of livelihood. Peer influence also played a role, as with Abdi, who was persuaded by a friend. Many trusted clan leaders, and stayed because they felt a sense of belonging.
30 December2020. Gabriel Toole. Research Note: Deception, Drugs, and Death: Interviews with survivors of Al-Shabaab's youth recruitment trap in Kenya	Al-Shabaab	Reports	*Interpersonal Attraction*	*Shared Norms*	*Commitment*	Al-Shabaab recruiters in Kenya commonly used money and manipulation—through friendships, fake romances, and promises of wealth—to lure boys, sometimes after orcibly kidnapping them. New recruits underwent physical training, religious indoctrination and were often given drugs like cocaine and heroin, creating

Source	*Group*	*Type of Data*	*Entry-level Cohesion Factor*	*Integrative Cohesion Factor*	*Sustaining Cohesion Factor*	*Key Themes / Observations*
						dependency. Those less committed to Islam were assigned to more dangerous roles. The group combined extremist teachings to enforce norms with drug use to deepen members' physical and mental dependence, strengthening control and commitment.

Sources: Secondary data compiled by the author from media interviews and research reports including CNN (2011, 2018), CBC (2016, 2017), The Intercept (2021), LADbible (2021a), FRANCE 24 (2009), Al Jazeera (2009), LADbible (2021b), Channel 4 (2013), Hassan (2012), Keating & Waldman (2018), Botha & Abdile (2014), and Toole (2020)

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Research article

The External Political Impacts of Rescheduling Iraq's Debts Post-2003

Rand Luay Abdalhudee

University of Baghdad, Iraq, ORCiD: 0000-0003-3759-0836, corresponding address: rand.louay@copolicy.uobaghdad.edu.iq

Abstract

After 2003, Iraq underwent a profound political and economic transformation, accompanied by various challenges, including the burden of accumulated external debt. The post-regime government restructured Iraq's debt within the framework of the 'Paris Club' and through bilateral negotiations with creditor countries. The debt rescheduling aimed to alleviate the financial burden and reintegrate Iraq into the global financial system, but this process was conditional upon implementing economic and political reforms. External political factors played a crucial role in debt rescheduling. Decisions regarding rescheduling were influenced by the political motives of major powers seeking to achieve strategic gains in Iraq. Additionally, the United States and its partners imposed conditions related to reconstruction, regional stability and the safeguarding of their strategic interests in the post-war era. These political interventions affected the course of the economic process and sparked discussions about national sovereignty and the influence of external powers in shaping Iraq's economic policies. The study, conducted through a descriptive–analytical method, concluded that the rescheduling of Iraq's debt was more than just an economic process; it reflected the deep interconnection between international politics and economics in the context of rebuilding a post-conflict state.

Keywords: *debt rescheduling, foreign policy, external debt of Iraq, political game, oil, sovereign decision*

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Introduction

'Resolving Iraq's debt crisis is as much a political challenge as an economic one – it is tied to the stability of the region and the global fight against extremism' (Former US Secretary of State James Baker 2004).

The severity of the external debt crisis transcends economic and social aspects, threatening the independence of political decision-makers due to increasing foreign pressures and interventions. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent regime change led to significant geopolitical and economic consequences, with Iraq's enormous external debt, amounting to USD 120 billion, emerging as a critical issue.

The international response to Iraq's debt restructuring was shaped by differing political positions and creditor interests. While some countries actively supported the post-2003 reconstruction process and favoured extensive debt relief, others – many of whom were among Iraq's largest creditors – approached the process more cautiously. Rather than seeking to maximise gains from Iraqi debt, these creditors were primarily concerned with minimising their own financial losses and addressing domestic fiscal and accounting constraints associated with debt write-offs. As a result, the negotiations reflected not a simple divide between supporters and opponents of Iraq, but a complex interaction between geopolitical considerations, creditor exposure and domestic financial limitations.

This study aims to analyse Iraq's 2003–2006 sovereign debt restructuring as an exceptional case of politically driven debt relief, demonstrating how the rescheduling of Iraq's debt after 2003 was influenced by creditors' financial incentives. At the same time, it reveals the obstacles that prevented the consideration of Iraq's debt as odious.

Therefore, this study assumes that the process of rescheduling Iraq's debt was successful, as Iraq received significant debt relief from creditor countries. However, addressing the issue of Iraqi debt through negotiations was a political game among creditor nations, each gambling with Iraq's fate to achieve their own interests and desires within the country.

In this study, a descriptive–analytical approach was employed to reach the conclusions. This research method relies on the collection of data from various sources, including literature reviews and government reports. In this context, the foreign policy pursued by creditor countries towards Iraq during the rescheduling process has been described through a critical analysis of the available written sources. This method is appropriate for this research as it provides a deep and comprehensive understanding of the political dimensions of external debt, without the need to conduct experiments or collect field data. It also allows the

researcher to draw evidence-based conclusions and provide a rational explanation of the phenomena under consideration.

This study is significant as it offers an analytical perspective on an Iraqi experience that is rarely discussed from the viewpoint of international political economy, despite its important implications for understanding the relationship between the foreign policy of major powers, managing sovereign financial crises and rebuilding countries in the post-conflict phase. From this standpoint, the research constitutes a qualitative addition to the literature that addresses sovereign debt as a political phenomenon as much as it is financial.

Thus, this paper will explore the external political impact of Iraq's debt rescheduling after 2003, focusing on three main aspects: First, the background of Iraq's debt and its characteristics. Second, the paper will investigate the foreign policy approach of Iraq's main creditor countries regarding the issue of Iraq's debt. Finally, the paper will detail the debt rescheduling process itself, presenting the dynamics of negotiation and the power plays involved, as well as providing a brief description for the rescheduling results.

Theoretical framework: Concepts of debt rescheduling

Aggarwal (1996) defines the process of restructuring as a game between two opponents: The first is a single debtor, while the second is a group of creditors. This process involves intervention from other creditor governments and international organisations, such as the IMF, to consider how the actors will achieve a balance in the desired outcomes.

The term 'external debt rescheduling' refers to the process whereby the debtor country approaches its creditors to request an extension. Among the options that can be pursued are initiating negotiations to reach an agreement on deferring repayment of either the principal debt or the interest. The purpose of rescheduling is to provide the debtor state with a new perspective on its local budget and to give it enough time to rectify its situation so that it can repay later. Any change in the due date of the debt and deferral of repayment occurs because the creditor country decides to grant the debt additional time. This way, the creditor country can receive its money instead of getting nothing, as the debtor country will not cease payments. At the same time, the debtor country can utilise the grace period to adjust its financial and commercial conditions, primarily correcting the fiscal deficit, which was the reason for seeking external financing (Abdul Qadir 2010).

The economic researcher Rieffel (1985) likens the process of debt rescheduling to a circus, dividing it into three rings. The first ring involves negotiations between the debtor government and the IMF to obtain a balance of payments loan in exchange for adopting a well-defined set of economic policies designed to eliminate the payment problem. The second ring begins when the debtor government negotiates with the creditor government to alleviate the burden of

servicing the due debts and obtain new financing. Finally, the third ring involves negotiations between the debtor government and private sector creditors to alleviate debts and secure favourable financing.

Rescheduling should not be considered a one-time game; rather, the actions taken by either party, whether adjustments or concessions, are not the only moves in this game. Future moves will depend on how one party responds to these actions. Such responses could be retaliatory, such as the seizure of financial assets by debtors, restricting trade credits or preventing future loans by creditors. Therefore, actors must consider how their moves could lead to potential future changes that may be against their interests (Aggarwal 1996). Debtors and creditors interact strategically, meaning that the options presented cannot be adopted without understanding the opponent's policy. These theoretical insights provide a useful framework for analysing Iraq's debt.

Iraq's debt

Debt is defined as 'the value of existing and distributed obligations, at any point in time, of residents in a particular country towards non-residents to pay the principal with or without interest or to pay interest with or without principal' (Al-Abbas 2004). To describe debt, several conditions must be considered; these debts must be legally documented and recorded as commercial papers, treaties or protocols. The agreement should clarify who the creditor is, who the debtor is, the agreed amount and whether this amount is a debt or a material (i.e. essential) obligation from the creditor. In addition, the document must include the agreed interest rate. As well, it must contain actual dates. Furthermore, it must include fixed expenses. Finally, the payment structure must be defined within this agreement, such as the grace period (the additional time that the creditor can obtain from the debtor) and the maximum payment limit. This point is crucial because, without defining the debt repayment structure, these debts are considered non-repayable grants (Jiyad 2001).

Historical background

The 1980s marked a dangerous turning point for Iraq's economy. After experiencing the highest levels of economic growth in the 1970s, where oil production rose from USD1 billion in 1970 to USD 26 billion in 1980, the government decided not to invest this wealth in infrastructure, labour and production. Instead, it chose to initiate a war with Iran (Alnasrawi 2001). This war lasted eight years and was fully supported by the United States, as America feared that Iraq and its oil resources would fall into the hands of Iran, which would be difficult to control (Toussaint 2017). The member countries of the Paris Club, concerned about the Islamic revolution in Iran, collaborated with the Gulf Cooperation Council by providing financial support and oil sales to Iraq. However, the war caused a drop

in oil prices from USD 26 billion to USD 10 billion, leading to a shock for the Iraqi economy, which relied on exporting a single product: oil (Tabaqchali 2018). Thus, Alnasrawi (2001) stated that this situation plunged the economy into multiple problems, making it unable to revive itself without borrowing, especially since the Gulf Cooperation Council countries could no longer continue their support. Consequently, Iraq sought loans from sovereign creditors such as Western countries, the Soviet Union, former Eastern Bloc countries and private international lending institutions like banks. The debts and financing from Gulf countries and members of the OECD, as well as the Soviet Union and Western countries, prevented the economy from collapsing completely. Thus, Iraq became a debtor nation, using borrowed funds to militarise society, as it was still engaged in the war against Iran.

After the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, Iraq became acutely aware of its debt problem. It found itself transformed from a creditor to a debtor state, as the Gulf Cooperation Council countries began to demand repayment of the financial assistance they had provided during the war, claiming that these were not aids but loans extended by the Council countries to enable Iraq to continue the war (Tabaqchali 2018). This situation is often cited in the literature as one of the factors that led Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait, after his request for a complete write-off of these debts was refused by the Kuwaiti government (Ghalib 2003). According to Toussaint (2017), Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was not without reason; ambiguous United States diplomatic communications may have contributed to Iraq's perception, which misled him into believing that the matter did not concern them. This invasion resulted in the complete ruin of relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Al-Zaidi 2024).

Following the invasion of Kuwait and the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq, which lasted for 14 years, Iraq entered a new phase of debt characterised by war reparations and the accumulation of significant overdue interest on the debts that Iraq had not paid due to the economic sanctions imposed on it (Tabaqchali 2018).

The most important characteristics of Iraqi debts

Lack of clarity and documentation. There are no government records documenting the size of the debts; some official documents have been stolen, and creditor countries do not recognise the true figures of the debts. Financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund do not possess statistical information about Iraqi debts, as they have not been present in Iraq since the 1980s (Adams 2004).

War debts. The debts were incurred to finance wars and strengthen Iraq's defence system. Part of this debt was support provided by countries during the Iran-Iraq War, including debts from Gulf countries, while another portion was used to purchase missiles, fighter jets and helicopters, including debts owed to France and Russia.

Oil concessions. Numerous reports from debt committees formed after the fall of the regime indicate that several countries benefited from Iraqi oil concessions in exchange for debts. Among these countries is Russia, which has been reported to have signed numerous contracts worth hundreds of billion dollars with foreign oil companies, including Chinese, Russian and French firms. Notably, Russia, which sold weapons to Iraq on credit, had a 23-year deal to rehabilitate Iraqi oil fields. Additionally, France maintained a close relationship with the Iraqi government since the 1970s, increasing its military sales during the Iran-Iraq War, where it strongly supported Iraq. Iraq imported anti-ship missiles and fighter bombers from France, while the Majnoon and Nahr Omar oil fields were allocated to a French company partially owned by the French government.

Systemic Debts. While some debts were legitimate, they did not serve the interests of the Iraqi people; rather, most were used to benefit the dictator and enhance his immense wealth. Saddam Hussein admitted after his capture that he had embezzled USD 50 billion from Iraqi state assets and transferred it to his foreign accounts (Adams 2004). Therefore, Iraq's debt may be characterised as consumer debts used since the last century to finance wars, conflicts and crises, none of which were developmental in nature aimed at uplifting the income of the Iraqi people (Saleh 2020).

Therefore, Iraq's debt may be characterised as having features consistent with the concept of 'odious debt'. The term 'odious debts' was first introduced by legal scholar Alexander Nahun Sack in 1927. He defined odious debts as those incurred in the interest of the ruling authority and against the interests of the people, with the creditor nations being aware of this purpose at the time. (Howse 2007).

There is no universally accepted definition of odious debts to date (Howse 2007). However, three essential elements are generally agreed upon to legally characterise debts as 'odious'. First, the people do not consent to the borrowing. Second, the proceeds of this borrowing are not for the benefit of the people or the state. As well, the lending state is aware of these facts at the time of lending (Weiss 2011).

Foreign policy towards Iraq's debt

Al-Ramadhani (1991) defines foreign policy as

> the political behaviour adopted by decision-makers at a certain time in relation to other international players, outside the territorial borders of their state, with the aim of achieving one of the components of national or collective interest, or developing or defending it.

The economic situation in any country is considered one of the most important factors influencing its foreign policy, as the priorities of foreign policy vary

depending on the prevailing situation. If a state enjoys economic prosperity, it can exercise foreign policy freely, without constraints or external pressures. Conversely, a weak economy leads to a weak foreign policy, making it ineffective (Al-Rubaie & Al-Amri 2019). Thus, the economic capabilities of a state are essential components in building and forming its power, serving as a crucial tool for implementing foreign policy. The purpose of this economic tool is to achieve the greatest possible objectives, which can take two forms: offering incentives or imposing sanctions (Al-Rubaie & Al-Amri 2019).

Iraq's external debt has significantly shaped its foreign policy over the past decades, especially after 2003. Iraqi governments have sought to restructure debts and reduce their burdens as part of a strategy aimed at enhancing Iraq's international standing and achieving economic stability.

The foreign policy of creditor countries towards heavily indebted nations, such as Iraq, is often linked to economic and geopolitical interests. For major creditor countries, such as members of the 'Paris Club', this policy serves as a means to secure their financial claims while supporting political and economic stability in debtor nations, which in turn serves their strategic interests.

In Iraq's case, the foreign policy of creditor nations varied. The coalition countries, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, were keen to provide significant debt relief to Iraq due to political considerations. These countries sought to alleviate Iraq's debt burden substantially to help stabilise the country after the conflict. Conversely, some non-coalition countries, those who opposed the United States' occupation of Iraq – particularly European nations and Russia – represented in the Paris Club, were less willing to grant extensive debt relief.

The United States of America

Following its occupation of Iraq the United States faced a series of challenges that needed to be addressed (Ali & Jassem 2024), one of which was the debt that Iraq was suffering from – not the debt itself, but the consequences of the debt. Resolving the debt issue was a priority for the US administration at that time. The United Sates government, from President Bush to members of Congress, consistently stated in every conference regarding Iraq that the Iraqi people should not bear these debts, as they were incurred by a dictator who used them for militarisation and his own enrichment while oppressing the Iraqi people. From a moral standpoint, these debts should be cancelled by the countries involved (Momani & Garrib 2010). However, these statements were not as straightforward as they suggested, as a range of motivations underpinned a vigorous defence of debt cancellation.

The US expressed a desire for Iraq to achieve democratic transformation and state-building, with reconstruction being a key component. The concept of state-building has evolved in recent years to include the development of state institutions to become self-sufficient (Hameed 2022). However, one of the main

obstacles to achieving this goal was the accumulated debt on Iraq. Therefore, the United States focused its efforts on resolving this debt issue, as it could not bear the idea of leaving Iraq without accomplishing its goals (Dobbins et al. 2003). From the American perspective, the reconstruction of Iraq could not occur without alleviating the 'debt overhang' (Hinrichsen 2019). The greater Iraq's debts were, the longer it would have taken to recover the costs of reconstruction for the occupied state. The goal was to enable the countries that participated in the war against Iraq to begin reconstruction immediately without using these funds to pay off debts.

According to Michael E. O'Hanlon, a prominent foreign policy expert at the Brookings Institution, another reason for the United States' support for the restructuring of Iraq's debts was the Americans' desire to win the hearts and minds of Iraqis and to demonstrate to the Arab world that they were not there to serve Western oil interests. Imposing these debts under the new regime would have been tantamount to punishing the Iraqi people (Pan 2005). Additionally, the United States aimed to politically leverage countries that opposed the war, particularly Russia, France and Germany, as they anticipated that this would serve as a pressure tactic on these countries to reconsider and support the war in Iraq, thereby legitimising the occupation of Iraq (Toussaint 2017).

Furthermore, the United States did not want to bear the costs of bringing democracy and reconstruction to Iraq alone. They believed that just as there was a coalition to wage war, there should be a financial coalition to share the economic responsibility. There was also concern about public pressure and taxpayers objecting to the idea that their money would solely be used for the reconstruction of Iraq.

Finally, the most significant motive behind the issue of restructuring Iraqi debts was Iraqi oil. The United States strongly supported United Nations Resolution 1483, especially regarding the nationalisation of Iraqi oil, as this resolution would enable global oil companies, particularly American and British ones, to enter Iraq and operate in the oil sector without fear of creditor control. This also increased their efforts to alleviate debts through negotiations with creditors instead of having the US Treasury request that Congress allocate funds to cover Iraq's debts indirectly, as they could not bear to see this money go to other countries (Hinrichsen 2017).

The United States paid significant attention to the issue of debt. For two years it undertook numerous and substantial steps to eliminate Iraq's debts, beginning with the end of Saddam Hussein's regime on 22 May 2003, and the adoption of UN Resolution 1483. This resolution included several provisions related to building a modern state and contained many articles clarifying the process of addressing debts and compensations. In Addition to Article 16 and Article 21 (which was mentioned before), Article 15 established the Development Fund for Iraq to rebuild the economy, reform basic structures, continue disarmament, cover the costs of civilian administration and support other purposes beneficial to the Iraqi people.

This fund was to be managed by the Coalition Provisional Authority under the supervision of an international advisory and monitoring body, collecting all of Iraq's revenues from oil and petroleum products, remaining funds from the oil-for-food programme, frozen Iraqi assets and other economic resources from the previous regime. UN Resolution 1483 was criticised by supporters of international law for its ambiguity, as it allowed the Security Council to deviate from some traditional rules of occupation law (Zwanenburg 2004).

This resolution was a dual decision alongside the executive order issued by the US president on the same day, titled Executive Order 13303, aimed at protecting the Development Fund for Iraq. The goal was to safeguard Iraqi assets during the reconstruction period, specifically protecting Iraqi oil and gas revenues and any related financial instruments or transactions from seizure or legal actions. The intent was to ensure that oil revenues were directed towards rebuilding Iraq rather than being claimed by foreign creditors or litigants. This executive order provided extensive legal protection to prevent these properties from being targeted by creditors or claimants seeking compensation for actions taken by the Iraqi regime. Without this protection, the reconstruction of Iraq could have been delayed or undermined due to claims from international creditors or individuals seeking compensation for damages. Although this decision provided immediate financial security, it was also used as a tool by the United States to exert its influence, and the continuation of this order to this day serves as a means to maintain its influence in Iraqi politics and its strategy in the region, highlighting Iraq's weakness and dependence on the United States (Abbas 2024). This order remains in force today, renewed annually by the US president (President Biden renewed the order protecting Iraqi funds in March 2024) (Halou 2024).

In April 2003, the US Congress granted Iraq USD 2.5 billion for the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund, followed by an additional USD 18.4 billion aimed at assisting in the reconstruction of Iraq and helping the Iraqi government develop a democratic, stable and prosperous state, at peace with itself and its neighbours, enjoying the benefits of a free society and a market economy (United States Department of State). President Bush threatened to use his veto if the aid he wanted to send to Iraq was declared a loan rather than assistance by Congress (Pan 2005).

The matter did not stop at the protection and nationalisation of Iraqi assets but extended to the initiation of negotiations with creditors on behalf of Iraq. President Bush was personally invested in these negotiations, to the extent that he appointed James Baker, a prominent figure in the position of US presidential envoy to alleviate the burden of Iraqi debts. Baker's mission was to negotiate with Iraq's creditor countries to erase or reduce Iraqi debts, and he undertook a tour that included more than ten countries, resulting in the Paris Club creditors' agreement on debt restructuring (Momani & Garrib 2010).

The United States built its argument in negotiations with the Paris Club on the basis of Iraq's strategic importance to the West, as Iraq posed a security threat to these countries and was a destabilising force in the Middle East. Therefore, economic recovery could achieve security stability in Iraq and, consequently, stability in the Middle East, which represented a priority for these countries, considering it a matter of national security (Damle 2007).

Baker was chosen because he was an expert in the Middle East and had strong diplomatic relations with world leaders, as well as being one of the close associates of President George W. Bush, underscoring the importance of this issue to the United States (Pan 2005). In a final step in December 2004, the United States announced the complete cancellation of Iraq's debts, aiming to encourage other countries to do the same as negotiations at the Paris Club began (Weiss 2011).

Paris Club and the International Monetary Fund

The Paris Club is an official forum established in 1956, consisting of numerous members who play a central role in resolving debt for developing and non-developing countries. Indeed, the Paris Club acts as the first rescue agency, conducting operations to rescue public creditors' loans for political purposes and motives. They bury their mistakes in the process of 'organized debt rescheduling'. The club comprises permanent members, prospective members, participating members assigned for specific purposes and observer members. These members met to discuss debt issues and reach conclusions regarding countries that are unable to meet their repayment obligations and require new conditions to reschedule their external debt. The club operates according to six fundamental principles established by creditor countries to guide the terms of debt restructuring for any nation. These principles are as follows: *solidarity*, where creditors negotiate collectively; *consensus*, meaning that decisions are adopted with the agreement of all parties; *information sharing*, which ensures transparency through the exchange of data; *conditionality*, whereby debt treatment is linked to the implementation of economic reforms; a *case-by-case approach*, which takes into account the specific circumstances of each country; and *comparability*, which ensures that all creditors are treated equitably (Paris Club n.d.).

The Paris Club countries were the most significant creditors of Iraq, whose loans contributed to financing the Iran-Iraq War, the 'Anfal' genocide and the economic crisis of 1990 (Alexander 2004). These loans were largely overlooked until negotiations began in 2003, when Iraq's debt to Paris Club countries doubled because the Paris Club calculated interest on the debt from 1992, during the sanctions on Iraq, when Iraqi assets were frozen abroad and the United Nations controlled Iraqi oil revenues (Toussaint 2017).

As negotiations began in 2004, Adel Abdul Mahdi, who was then the Iraqi minister of finance in the interim coalition government, based his negotiations on

the economic importance of Iraq to the member countries of the Paris Club. His first argument was about oil prices; if Iraq did not receive debt relief, the burden of debt servicing would impact oil prices, thus burdening the member countries. Additionally, debt relief would assist in the reconstruction of Iraq, establishing new commercial activity for the member countries and consuming their imports (Damle 2007). The United States attempted to convince member countries of the Paris Club to treat Iraq similarly to heavily indebted poor countries and to write off Iraq's debts without categorising it as a HIPC by excluding the rule and including the principle of non-poor heavily indebted countries (Looney 2003).

Indeed, representatives of debtor countries agreed to address Iraqi debt with the aim of ensuring its long-term sustainability, given the creditors' awareness of the country's exceptional circumstances and its limited repayment capacity in the coming years relied extensively on IMF reports. They announced an ad-hoc treatment known as the Evian Initiative (Paris Club 2004). This was due to the fact that, under the traditional Paris Club rules, Iraq's oil and gas reserves rendered it ineligible for the HIPC programme (Weiss 2011).

During this conference, the Paris Club announced the Evian Initiative, which stipulated that the country would be referred to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an analysis of its debt repayment capacity. If the IMF determined that the country was experiencing a temporary liquidity problem, its debts would be rescheduled. However, if it was unable to repay these debts due to a lack of resources, the country would qualify for debt cancellation (Buchheit et al. 2018). This initiative is regarded as the most generous yet also politically charged (Momani & Garrib 2010) because it stipulated that Iraq would receive 'comprehensive debt treatment' and unconditional reductions, supporting an unconventional sustainability analysis for heavily indebted countries (Weiss 2011). However, it required a debt sustainability analysis (DSA) to be conducted by the IMF, which was brought in as a party in the rescheduling process because it is responsible for establishing the DSA, upon which the rescheduling process would be based. Hinrichsen (2019) expected the results to be favourable, as Iraq is a middle-income country that could potentially repay its debts from oil revenues.

Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA) is employed to assess a country's long-term capacity to bear its debts. The IMF and the World Bank conduct this analysis to determine whether a country's debts are sustainable, meaning whether the country can continue servicing its debts without resorting to rescheduling or bankruptcy. The analysis relies on forecasts regarding economic growth, government revenues, debt servicing costs and other factors that may affect the country's ability to repay its debts. If the DSA indicates that a country's debts are unsustainable, the IMF may recommend measures such as debt restructuring or relief (Hinrichsen 2019).

Members of the Paris Club considered the DSA results produced by the IMF to be unrealistic because they assumed a fixed price for oil indefinitely, which was

slightly lower than actual prices. By the time the IMF announced the DSA results, the price of oil had doubled (Hinrichsen 2019).

Non-Paris Club Countries

Bilateral debts owed to non-Paris Club countries constitute a significant component of Iraq's external liabilities and pose considerable challenges to achieving comprehensive debt restructuring. Debts owed to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries constitute a significant portion of Iraq's external debt, primarily divided between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The exact value of these debts and the terms of their settlement have not been finalised, as Iraq considered them gifts from these countries in exchange for its defence, as previously mentioned in this study. Moreover, these loans and aid from the GCC were not formalised through standard agreements, and none of the parties retained official documents or written records to verify and clarify these amounts (Tabaqchali 2018).

In 1991, the United Nations issued Resolution 705, which stipulated that the compensation imposed on Iraq due to its invasion of Kuwait should be paid directly from Iraqi oil, without exceeding 30% of Iraq's oil exports. This resolution was amended twice. The first amendment in 2000 reduced the percentage to 25% (Hinrichsen 2021). Following the end of Saddam Hussein's regime, on 22 May 2003, the United Nations issued Resolution 1483, which contained provisions related to state-building and clarified the handling of debts and compensations. Article 16 of the resolution suspended the 'Oil-for-Food' programme, meaning that compensation no longer operated according to Resolution 705. Article 21 further reduced the percentage of oil revenues deposited into the Compensation Fund to only 5% (United Nations Resolution 1483).

After the formation of the new Iraqi government, official delegations began visiting Kuwait to persuade it to either cancel the debts or restructure them similarly to agreements with the Paris Club, as these compensations represented a heavy burden on Iraq and impeded its reconstruction and security efforts. Although Kuwait played a significant role in facilitating meetings with the new Iraqi government and consistently expressed support for building a new Iraq free of dictatorship, (Shehab 2025), it categorically refused to cancel or reschedule the debts for various reasons, such as the fact that Saudi Arabia and Kuwait consider the compensation debts as reparations, meaning that Iraq's increased oil production could affect global oil prices negatively. This is something that Saudi Arabia and Kuwait do not want to happen, as they would have to reduce their oil production to stabilise global oil prices, thus incurring losses both from reduced production and from not receiving payments from Iraq (Looney 2003). Moreover, there is a growing fear of Iranian influence infiltrating Iraqi politics, particularly among Shiite Iraqi leaders, which is especially concerning for Saudi Arabia, as it fears this influence could extend to the Shiite minorities within its

territory. Finally, The Gulf States wanted Iraq to bear the price; Kuwait did not wish to forgive Iraq, as it had not forgotten the burden of aggression when Saddam Hussein attempted to annex Kuwait (Momani & Garrib 2010). In fact, Iraq's debts received no relief from the GCC countries, and the country continued to repay them until Kuwait's debts were fully settled in 2022.

Beyond Gulf States, Iraq's bilateral debts extend to a range of other non-Paris Club countries, which also play a significant role in shaping its overall debt profile. All of these countries are members of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which provided an advantage for the restructuring of Iraq's debt. This is because the sustainability analysis imposed by the IMF (DSA) assumed the application of the 'comparable treatment' principle, which facilitated obtaining preliminary approvals from bilateral creditors. This meant that even if some creditors did not proceed with restructuring their debts, they would not obstruct the overall restructuring process. Indeed, many countries began settling their debts according to Paris Club terms, although the timelines varied, with some countries requiring longer periods than others (Hinrichsen 2019).

Steps and procedures taken by Iraq

The parties agreed to consider Iraq's debts as sovereign debts, meaning that the debts were issued by a sovereign entity obligated to repay the value of the bonds along with the associated interest. Despite the fact that Iraq's debts share significant characteristics with odious debt, all American attempts to cancel Iraq's debts have failed for several reasons.

From an Economic perspective, Iraq is considered a middle-income country because it possesses oil resources that could potentially be used to pay off debts, unlike poorer countries that lack natural resources to settle these debts. However, relying on oil resources during the state reconstruction phase will significantly impact the economic needs for rebuilding (Weiss 2011). Furthermore, claiming that these debts are odious complicates future relief efforts, especially as Iraq prepares for reconstruction, making the process slower and more difficult than using clearer and more straightforward criteria for remaining in the financing arena (Howse 2007).

Politically, Iraq does not want to tarnish its reputation by being seen as a debtor that shirks its debts, thus facing credit issues in the future. As a new political authority, it is hard to imagine when it will need to align with another creditor (Damle 2007). Additionally, the International Monetary Fund rejected this principle because adopting the odious debt doctrine could be used as an excuse by all types of creditors, whether private or public, to refrain from lending to any regime facing internal problems or external wars, believing that the successor government will evade payment legitimately using this approach (Weiss 2011). There has also been a lack of transparency in distinguishing odious debts from other state debts.

In addition, and from a legal standpoint the moral argument used to declare Iraq's debts as odious contains elements that contradict the strict conditions of international law, which stipulates that the new government must succeed in fulfilling the obligations of its predecessors (Buchheit & Gulati 2008). This also negates the view that countries that lent to Saddam Hussein were complicit with the dictator through financing oppression against the people, thus the people deserve to have these debts erased (Buchheit & Gulati 2008).

Furthermore, bilateral government creditors have rejected the odious debt principle based on the idea that creditor countries were involved in financing the dictator, as they are commercial lenders who justify their position by claiming they were not diligent in investigating debtor countries. They tend to sell equipment, especially military equipment, and if they had been diligent, they would not have sold it (Buchheit & Gulati 2008).

With the change of regime, the Iraqi government began preparing to cooperate with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and commit to the economic reforms that the Fund imposes in exchange for debt relief (Dominick 2004). Despite the harsh conditions imposed, which especially affected ordinary Iraqis, such as increased gasoline prices, taxes on manufactured goods and reduced consumer subsidies, this was the only solution to gain the trust of the Paris Club, as it would set goals and deadlines for Iraqi reform efforts (Momani & Garrib 2010). Two months after Iraq agreed to the IMF's conditions, it received a reduction of 80%. The Paris Club agreement was implemented in three phases, where parts of Iraq's debts were cancelled upon the successful completion of each phase. In the first phase, 30% of the debts owed to Paris Club members were immediately cancelled, representing a cancellation of USD 11.6 billion from a total of USD 38.9 billion owed to Paris Club members. In the second phase, another 30% of Iraq's debts were cancelled upon the commencement of the new IMF programme, known as the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA), which was scheduled to start at the end of 2005. In the final phase, 20% of Iraq's debts to the Paris Club were cancelled upon meeting the conditions of the new SBA agreement with the IMF (which was scheduled to end in September 2008 but was achieved in December 2008 under a new SBA agreement signed in December 2007) (Momani & Garrib 2010).

With the establishment of the constitutional Iraqi government in 2005, new steps for rescheduling were announced by Ali Allawi, the minister of finance at that time:

Debt simplification. The rescheduling process began with a decision from the Iraqi government stating that all creditor issues would be treated equally and that payments would be made to each creditor without discrimination. This was necessary because the debt contracts contained different treatments and interest rates. The repayment rate was determined based on the London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR) plus 75 basis points.

Debt swapping. Allawi then decided that the idea of debt swapping and issuing bonds was preferable to paying commercial creditors in cash. The goal was to exchange old debts for new debts through bonds, which would help Iraq develop a creditor profile in international markets and establish a price benchmark for its debts. This process was successful, as Iraq managed to swap its debts at a rate of 100%, despite objections from some creditors and concerns within the Iraqi government about the fear that issuing bonds would restrict Iraq's movement.

Cash payments to small creditors. The government offered a deal to those who owed small amounts up to USD 35 million, stating that it would pay 10 cents for each dollar owed (Chung & Fidler 2006).

Impact of debt rescheduling on Iraq's macroeconomic performance 2003–2009

Debt rescheduling emerged as a key mechanism aimed at alleviating financial pressures and supporting economic recovery. This section examines the impact of debt rescheduling on Iraq's macroeconomic performance during the period 2003–2009.

Creditworthiness. Debt rescheduling helped Iraq maintain a stable credit level of B, which indicates moderate fiscal risks for at least 10 consecutive years. This means Iraq will be a more attractive destination for investors seeking a stable and safe investing environment. This will lead to an influx of capital and investment into Iraq, enhancing economic growth and offering new job opportunities to the Iraqi people. Iraq has not defaulted on its financial obligations for the past 20 years, and according to the Iraqi Ministry of Finance, Iraq maintains a creditworthiness level according to the S&P credit rating agency (Iraqi Ministry of Finance 2024).

Economic stability and living standard. Debt repayment contributes to reducing the debt burden of the state budget, which opens up space for the government to spend more on basic needs such as education, health and infrastructure. Debt repayment does not merely signify the alleviation of the debt burden but represents a significant opportunity to enhance economic reforms. Iraq should utilise this opportunity to reschedule its economy and diversify its revenue sources away from total dependence on oil, enabling it to achieve sustainable and balanced economic growth (Abdul Wahaab & Ali 2024). An IMF report (2007) indicated that 'the substantial debt reduction under the Paris Club agreement improved Iraq's fiscal space, allowing higher public investment and reconstruction spending, which supported non-oil GDP recovery'.

Fiscal stability. The Iraqi government recorded a budget surplus of approximately 11–12% between 2005, due to reduced spending, which allowed for the allocation of these funds to oil investments on which Iraq relies completely. The oil sector in 2008 witnessed significant growth, with production reaching 2.3 mil-

lion barrels per day; however, the harsh security situation impeded investment progress. (IMF 2008)

Monetary policy. Although the political situation in Iraq hindered the achievement of desirable results from the rescheduling process, some positive outcomes emerged, albeit less than expected. For example, according to the IMF report (2007), the prices of the Iraqi dinar rose by 12.5%, with a gradual increase of 2.5% continuing thereafter. Demand for the Iraqi dinar also began to rise, as the volume of currency in circulation increased by approximately 20.5%. Simultaneously, cash sales of the dollar in the foreign exchange auction witnessed a significant decline, contributing to the Central Bank's ability to accumulate substantial reserves.

Inflation. Iraq's reliance on oil as its sole source of income led to a weakened economic state. This was primarily due to the country's decision to barter oil instead of selling it to acquire food and medicine. According to an International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, per capita income dropped from USD$3,600 in the 1980s to USD 200 in the 1990s, resulting in extreme poverty and a rapid and significant rise in unemployment levels. However, Iraq did not experience significant inflation in prices despite the effects of the war, as prices were subsidised, particularly for essential goods such as energy, water and certain food items. Inflation reached 23% in 2001, which is considered relatively moderate for the Iraqi economy. Debt rescheduling helped the government control fiscal policy, and consequently, consumer inflation did not exceed 15% in 2003, following a sharp increase at the end of 2002. Inflationary pressures declined substantially by 2008, reaching 6.8% (IMF 2003–2009)

Enhancing international community trust. Timely debt payments reflect Iraq's commitment to its international responsibilities and enhance its standing in the international sphere. When the government meets its financial obligations, it sends a powerful message to the international community that it is a trustworthy and stable partner. Indeed, the commitment to paying government bond interest helped to bolster trust in the Iraqi economy. This was conducive to facilitating the issuance of future debt at that time and contributed to improving the quality of core assets held by state-owned banks, thereby supporting the government's ability to manage its financial resources after restructuring (IMF 2003). The Iraqi government approved laws allowing the private sector to import petroleum derivatives.

Gross Domestic Product. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) experienced significant growth due to increased oil production, particularly after the lifting of sanctions on Iraq. However, this growth was more closely linked to factors related to reconstruction, oil prices and improvements in overall stability, resulting in outcomes lower than initially expected. The results achieved as a result of restructuring, which encompassed all the aforementioned factors, contributed to an increase in per capita income.

Iraq showed economic improvement after 2006 as a result of the rescheduling process through secure a new fiscal environment. However, the political and security situation in Iraq reduced the expected results, as the country faced setbacks such as the civil war in 2006, political imbalance within the government in 2007, the entry of ISIS and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Thus, positive progress is contingent upon institutional reforms and security stability. Currently, Iraq's external debt is considered stable, as the remaining external debts do not pose a risk to the country, being scheduled over long periods with low-interest rates (Al-Dabbagh 2023). Meanwhile, Iraq continues to suffer from the dominance of oil over its economy (Saleh & Jabr 2022). On 15 August 2024, the financial advisor to the prime minister stated that Iraq's current debts amount to only USD 9 billion, and the country meets its obligations periodically through the annual allocations provided by the general budget for debt servicing (Qatar News Agency 2024).

Conclusion

The external political impacts of Iraq's debt rescheduling became evident during the initial period following the occupation, particularly regarding American efforts to declare Iraq's debts as odious. However, creditor countries were reluctant to forgo the 'cake' without benefiting from it. Although Iraq's debts could morally qualify as odious, as they were incurred by a dictator for war purposes, military buildup and personal luxuries – much of the funding having been provided by creditor governments to Saddam Hussein during his war with Iran – the absence of a clear provision in international law regarding the odious debt doctrine prevented Iraq from shedding its debts. The matter was left to negotiations between creditor countries and Iraq, which allowed for political manoeuvring.

The United States gambled all its leverage with creditor countries, especially the Paris Club, which included many nations opposed to the American war in Iraq. The primary American objective was to negotiate with these countries to reconsider their support for the war. This led to President Bush's decision to nationalise oil, thereby protecting Iraqi oil revenues from being used to settle debts and allowing American and British oil companies to operate freely in Iraqi oil fields without interference from creditor nations.

The Paris Club countries completely rejected the final cancellation of debts and handed Iraq over to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF imposed reforms that significantly affected the Iraqi populace, but the sustainability analysis results provided by the IMF were not as these countries had hoped. It highlighted that the burden of external debts was unsustainable, even with high economic growth rates. Debt servicing hindered any possibility of achieving financial stability or investing in essential infrastructure. Consequently, Iraq received an 80% reduction, with Paris Club countries accusing the IMF of being under the United States' influence.

In conclusion, the process of rescheduling Iraq's debts was successful, with Iraq receiving significant debt relief from creditor countries. However, the negotiations were political bargains where each country sought to maximise its benefits, with oil serving as the primary leverage in the pressure between creditor countries, the United States and Iraq. This situation reflects the weak financial management of the country, as the Iraqi government has been unable to invest financial resources during periods of economic prosperity (when oil prices are high). The debt issue will persist in Iraq as long as it relies on a single source of revenue without political and economic plans to utilise these resources during times of economic prosperity. Additionally, it was a missed opportunity to declare Iraq's debts as odious, despite the political support and pressure exerted on creditor countries by the United States. However, under the Iraqi Freedom from Debt Act (2003), the United States did declare the debt odious.

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Rand Luay Abdalhudee is a lecturer and researcher in the Department of Political Science at the University of Baghdad. Her research interests focus on international relations, gender and humanitarian studies.

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