The Propaganda of Iran and its Proxies
A study on the cross-group cohesion of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas

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Abstract
Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Iran has employed a deliberate and successful strategy centered around the use and support of various proxies, notably Hezbollah and Hamas who are part of the Iranian led Axis of Resistance. There is a vast literature that has studied different aspects of this Iranian proxy dimension, but relatively little research has been conducted on propaganda as a unifying mechanism. This thesis thus expanded upon the current literature through a content analysis of the propaganda produced by Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas in order to gain a fuller understanding of how cross-group cohesion has been achieved. The analysis incorporated social identity theory, and identified how the propaganda could be used in accordance with three theoretical dimensions: Identity constructions, Justification for Violence, and Weaponization of the ummah. The findings revealed how cross-group cohesion was achieved through the creation of a dichotomous worldview, consisting of an ingroup that is existentially threatened by an outgroup consisting of the West and Jews. Moreover, they use conspiratorial rhetoric combined with victimhood in order to frame the struggle as an ongoing religious war against Islam. The thesis concludes with a theoretical discussion on the normative assumptions that underpin the propaganda, arguing that the cross-group cohesion is dependent on the creation of shared identities based on victimhood, religious references, and the creation of shared external enemies.

Keywords: Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Axis of Resistance, social identity theory, Islamist propaganda, content analysis
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1. Introduction

The U.S. has described Iran as “the foremost state sponsor of terrorism” (US Department of State, 2016:10), and since 1984 they have been designated as a state sponsor of terrorism (U.S. Department of State, 2020). In their quest for regional dominance, weakening of competitors such as Saudi Arabia, and spreading of the Islamic Revolution, Iran strategically employs proxy groups, notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Both Hezbollah and Hamas, share similarities such as significant domestic political and military influence, opposition to Israel, and participation in the Iranian Axis of Resistance. However, crucial differences exist, including their adherence to different religious denominations (Hezbollah to Twelver Shi’ism and Hamas to Sunni Islam) and varying degrees of dependency on and control by Iran.

Hezbollah was created in the mid-1980s as an organization led by young revolutionaries, from the outset they were sponsored by Iran and Syria with Iran being the leading sponsor (Norton, 2007:34-35). Norton argues that Iran saw the creation of Hezbollah as a “realization of the revolutionary state’s zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled Islamic Revolution” (2007:34). Norton studied their manifesto from 1985, arguing that it “bears strong made-in-Tehran coloration” (2007:35). He identifies key themes that characterized Hezbollah, among which are the belief in Islam as the answer, oppressed versus oppressors, the US as the main enemy with Israel as its “spearhead”, antisemitism and anti-Zionism (2007:36-39). Shi’ism plays a central role in both the formation of Hezbollah and its propaganda. Norton highlights how Hezbollah “appealed to the Shi’a in clearly sectarian

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1 The term used for an anti-Israeli and anti-Western political and military coalition led by the Iranian government.
2 The largest branch of Shi’a Islam. Consists of a belief in twelve divinely ordained leaders, Imam’s, where the twelfth Imam al-Mahdi, lives in Occultation.
3 The largest branch of Islam. Division between Shia and Sunni arose from a disagreement over the succession to Muhammad but has subsequently attained theological and juridical dimensions as well.
4 In accordance with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) the following definition is used: “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.” [https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism](https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism)
5 A term used to denote those who oppose Zionism. In accordance with the Oxford dictionary, Zionism is understood as a political movement that was originally begun in order to establish an independent state for Jewish people, and now supports the development and protection of the state of Israel. [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/zionism](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/zionism)
terms…” (2007:15), whilst also providing insight into the role of martyrdom within Shi’ism and how this has been used by contemporary revolutionaries (2007:50).

In 1988 Hamas published their charter, wherein they describe the ideology of their movement, belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as its goals and enemies (The Avalon Project, 2008). According to Seurat (2022b:105-106), Hamas’ employs a transnational ideology wherein religion plays a pivotal role. Through the use of religion Hamas has been able to differentiate themselves from PLO (Ibid). Through the creation of a strategic alliance with Iran, Hamas tries to emphasize their wish to unite “the Arab and Islamic nation of the Palestine question” (Seurat, 2022b:112). Seurat argues that Iran constituted a “main source of material, political, and military support.”, whilst showing how they minimized the potential internal backlash based on the Shiite identity of Iran (Ibid). Furthermore, Seurat argues that the rapprochement can be understood as a consequence of “the economic and diplomatic isolation of Hamas” among Arab countries (2022b:112-113).

Despite these differences, Iran has been successful in creating cross-group cohesion. To understand the mechanisms employed, and the ideational underpinnings of these groups, it is of paramount importance to study how this cohesion has been achieved. This thesis will enable a study of the mechanisms involved in creating this cross-group cohesion by applying social identity theory upon the propaganda of these groups.

The thesis employs content analysis as its methodological tool, where thematic analysis is an integrated part. The empirical material consists of news articles, translated interviews, and the 1988 Hamas charter, which was thematically analyzed and presented with the help of social identity theory.

1.1. Aim and research question

The aim of this thesis is to, with the help of social identity theory, study how Iran have achieved cross-group cohesion with Hezbollah, and Hamas. To succeed with this aim, the thesis will analyze news articles produced by news outlets tied to these groups along with the 1988 Hamas charter. The thesis shows how these groups employ conspiratorial rhetoric, an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, and politicize religion, in order to achieve cross-group cohesion.

Thus, this thesis seeks to answer the following research question:

- Through the lens of social identity theory, how have cross-group cohesion been achieved between Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas?
2. Literature review

In this chapter the previous research fields this thesis either utilizes, or aims to contribute to, will be presented and critically discussed. The first section will briefly discuss proxy literature pertaining to the concept of control, as well as proxy literature regarding the Middle East. The second section will present the main research field this thesis utilizes, namely the field of media propaganda with a focus on Islamist terrorist groups. The concluding section summarizes the literature review in which the thesis will be situated in relation to previous research, highlighting how the thesis will provide cumulative knowledge within these fields. It is likewise important to emphasize what the thesis will not examine. The thesis does not set out to prove that Iranian control exists from the outset since there is ample previous research that has covered this dimension. Moreover, the thesis will not examine theories connected to proxy literature on control. Instead, it will contribute to this field by displaying how a social identity perspective can be employed to understand cross-group cohesion. Cohesion in this sense should not be understood as the equivalent of control, instead it is understood as a mechanism used to achieve control.

2.1. Proxy literature

Proxy studies have produced a wealth of literature reflecting upon a fundamental problem of proxy warfare – namely whether and how states can maintain control over their proxies and ensure that they act in accordance with the goals of the sponsor (Byman, 2006; Salehyan, 2010; Karlén et al., 2021). Proxy conflicts are prevalent in the Middle East in particular, with there existing a vast literature on the Iranian proxy networks and mechanisms they use (Akbarzadeh & Gourlay, 2024; Jahanbani & Weedon Levy, 2024; Alemzadeh, 2019). There is also a broad literature that has studied Hezbollah (Wimberly, 2015; Levitt, 2013; Norton, 2007), and Hamas (see: Seurat, 2022a; Roy, 2013).

2.1.1. Plana’s concept of control

Sara Plana identifies three sources of power for controlling proxies: material support, international capital, and international status (Plana, 2024:219). She categorizes three types of control: discrete, options-setting, and preference control. Discrete control influences proxy decisions on conflicting issues. Options-setting control shapes choices and actions, regulating supplies and creating dependence. Preference control ensures proxies' preferences align with the state sponsors through leadership changes or ideological adherence. Preference control is viewed as the most effective but costly control mechanism (Plana, 2024:220-222). Plana identifies four elements that she argues needs to be present in order to claim that a state
sponsor has control over a proxy: “(1) the state sponsor’s preferences over proxy behavior, (2) the state’s intent to control that behavior, (3) the proxy’s own preferences and intentions to act, and (4) the proxy’s actions (or inactions)” (Plana, 2024:223).

2.1.2. Iranian proxy strategy

The Middle East has been a prominent arena for proxy conflicts, wherein states use the “asymmetric value of proxy forces to project power and buttress their national security” (Akbarzadeh & Gourlay, 2024:326). Akbarzadeh and Gourlay described Iran as “the most active sponsor of proxy forces in the Middle East”, creating a vast proxy network in the region (2024:327). Of interest for this thesis is their descriptions of the differing relationships to Hezbollah, and Hamas. Hezbollah is the oldest proxy and viewed as the archetype of the Iranian proxy network, whereas their relationships with Hamas is more complex. Their support to Hamas goes back to the 1990s, but with a brief falling out in 2011 following Hamas support to the Syrian opposition (Akbarzadeh & Gourlay, 2024:326-329).

Nakissa Jahanbani and Suzanne Weedon Levy have written about the Iranian proxy strategy, providing “a macroscopic overview of Iran’s proxy activities in various regions…” (2024:340). They present the organizational structure that underpins Iran’s proxy strategy, with the two most important being the IRGC⁶ and IRGC-QF⁷, with the Quds force responsible for “extraterritorial operations for the IRGC” (2024:341). They display how the Iran-Iraq war served as the inception of the Iranian proxy strategy, with Iran assisting the creation of the Iraqi Badr Corps and Hezbollah in Lebanon (Ibid). They argue that the Quds Force has been “the primary architect of Iran’s Middle East proxy network…” (2024:342), although they argue that “the nature of Tehran’s proxy activity in each country differs…” (2024:343). Hezbollah is described as Tehran’s closest ally, with Iran providing both military and ideological training, whereas their support to Hamas is portrayed as material support (Jahanbani & Weedon Levy, 2024:341, 344-45).

2.2. Media propaganda among Islamist groups

There is a vast literature pertaining to propaganda, and especially Islamist propaganda. Kambiz Afrachteh (1981) and Said Amir Arjomand (1986) was used based on their research pertaining the propaganda used by Iran during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Marc Sageman (2017a, 2017b), Phillip Conrad De Bruyn (2022), and Evin Ismail (2022), inspires the overall design of the thesis.

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⁶ Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)
⁷ Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF). Al Quds is also the Arabic word for Jerusalem.
Kambiz Afrachteh studied and described the efficiency of the theocrats’ propaganda and their use of symbolism within this propaganda, both religious (such as martyrdom) and populist (such as anti-imperialist). He argues that a key concept used by the theocrats is the “Zionist-Imperialist conspiracy theory” (Afrachteh, 1981:194). He argued that this propaganda, although not unique to the Islamic Regime and Khomeini, diverted “public frustrations toward an external enemy” and utilized religious explanations such as “God… testing the quality of the faithful” (Ibid). Moreover, he elucidates how the revolution implemented a division of the world into “the Disinherited and the Exploiters” (Afrachteh, 1981:197). Said Amir Arjomand likewise highlighted the role of Shiite traditions and symbolism in the Iranian Revolution. He examines how concepts such as martyrdom, the battle of Karbala8 (680 A.D.), and the return of Mahdi9 was used as part of the revolution (Arjomand, 1986). However, it is important to distinguish between pure theology and the use of theology as part of one's political aims – which can be termed political Islam or Islamist ideology.

Phillip Conrad De Bruyn studied six Islamic terrorist groups and their online communication, examining how their ideology was embedded in digital documents with the aim of influencing “individuals to identify with their beliefs” (2022:180). De Bruyn focused his research upon the type of messaging used by these groups to influence and attract supporters. The study had two stated aims, with the first being to “extract social roles from the online communication of terrorist groups and use these constructs to differentiate the groups from each other.” (2022:186). The second aim was to examine which social roles these groups highlighted, and how the importance of invoking these roles differed between these groups (De Bruyn, 2022:187).

In her dissertation Evin Ismail (2022), uses social identity theory in order to demonstrate how the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS politicizes religious identities in their propaganda. This politicization subsequently leads to a dehumanization of those portrayed as enemies and used as justification for the use of violence against them. Her main argument is that “the politicization of religious identities within a war narrative leads to violence.” (Ismail, 2022:212). Moreover, she argues that “perpetrators go through a self-categorization process into a politicized social identity and a martial social identity and that they created an other-imposed political identity onto Jews and, in some cases, Shiites” (Ibid). Of interest for this thesis is the worldview portrayed by ISIS, wherein they believe that there is an ongoing war

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8 A historical battle of religious importance in particular for Shiites, wherein the act of martyrdom is central.
9 Mahdi is known as the Hidden Imam who currently is in occultation but will return to the Shiite community and deliver it from its suffering.
against Islam. Similar to the propaganda studied in this thesis, Ismail found that the Jews and the US/ crusaders/Christians were among the main enemies for ISIS (Ibid). However, ISIS also viewed Shiites as enemies which is interesting since Hamas, who are Sunni, are part of the Iranian Axis of Resistance, Iran who are Shiites. In their attempts to discredit ISIS, Iran describes them as “takfiri”\(^\text{10}\) and claim that Israel and the West create them. This is similar to the findings by Ismail, who note that “ISIS uses antisemitism to discredit and excommunicate its Muslim enemy rivals” (2022:213).

In his research Marc Sageman shows that perceived grievances are tied to politicized identities, which can lay the foundation for violent martial social identities. Moreover, Islamists perceive themselves as part of a shared social identity and often view the world in dichotomous terms between ‘good’ and ‘evil’. Sageman argues that it is this shared social identity that enables collective action (Sageman 2017b:8–9). Marc Sageman’s theory on the turn to violence (2017a; 2017b) was used as an inspiration for the development and application of the theoretical model. Sageman argues that self-categorization and depersonalization are central to collective behavior, meaning that the individual identity is subordinated to the collective identity (2017a:124). Sageman outlines four components of radicalization: moral outrage triggered by recent political events, the adoption of a warlike ideology, individual experiences aligning with this ideology, and mobilization through pre-existing militant networks (2017b:11). According to Sageman (2017:114), radicalization hinges on self-identification. He proposes that radicalized individuals undergo a progression in which they embrace a politicized social identity, initially nonviolent. The shift towards violence occurs when the politicized identity transforms into a martial social identity.

2.3. The cumulative approach to previous research

In this section the cumulative approach to the previous research will be discussed. Thus, this thesis will be situated in relation to previous research, highlight how this research will be used, and how this thesis will provide cumulative knowledge.

2.3.1. Proxy research and the Iranian Axis of Resistance:

This essay addresses a research gap in understanding how Iran achieves cross-group cohesion within the Axis of Resistance through propaganda. It introduces a unique perspective, viewing cross-group cohesion as a control mechanism, particularly focusing on media propaganda as a strategy for preference control. Given Iran's significant global role as a leading sponsor of

\(^{10}\) The process of labelling another Muslim as kafir or murtad (apostate).
terrorism and proxies, gaining insights into the control mechanisms it employs is crucial. The essay argues that ideational convergence and affinity are integral to Iran's proxy strategy, deviating from conventional approaches centered on material or IRGC/IRGC-QF support. Using Hamas as a case study, it emphasizes that shared political goals override competing religious denominations, challenging existing perspectives. Finally, the essay examines how ideology, religious symbolism, and narratives play fundamental roles in achieving cohesion within these groups.

2.3.2. Islamist propaganda
This thesis builds on the work of Afrachteh (1981) and Arjomand (1986), demonstrating Iran's use of religious references, the creation of external enemies, antisemitic conspiracy theories, and anti-Western sentiments. It expands on Afrachteh and Arjomand's research by examining this propaganda from a cross-group perspective, revealing how Hezbollah and Hamas largely adopt a similar framework. The thesis delves deeper into how Iran creates ideational convergence, emphasizing concepts like antisemitism and anti-Western sentiments, showcasing how shared identities foster ingroup cohesion and animosity towards external enemies.

This thesis, unlike the works of Ismail (2022) and Sageman (2017a, 2017b), focuses on understanding how shared social identities are utilized for cross-group cohesion rather than delving into violence, radicalization processes, or perpetrator motivations. While drawing inspiration from Ismail and Sageman, particularly regarding the politicization of religion and the importance of shared social identities, this thesis takes a macro-perspective on cohesion. It argues that groups create a dichotomous worldview to highlight shared struggles and cohesion. Building on De Bruyn's work, the thesis explores the existence of a shared social reality among the chosen groups, examining language use in propaganda to showcase the deliberate creation of shared social identities. This approach distinguishes the study from others in terrorism research, emphasizing understanding these concepts as cohesion mechanisms rather than merely extremist references. The study, focusing on Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, also provides geographical dispersion in its analysis.
3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework implemented in this thesis is a social psychological perspective, drawing from social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel. Social identity theory was introduced to study intergroup relations and behavior, examining the cognitive mechanisms through which social identity is maintained and changed (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A theoretical model has been developed (See section 3.4.) and subsequently applied to the empirical material.

This chapter explores key concepts of social identity theory, drawing from the works of Henri Tajfel, Marc Sageman, Leonie Huddy, John Turner, and Michael Hogg. It introduces four central concepts: Social identity, Social categorization, Self-categorization, and Positive distinctiveness. The chapter then describes the processes of justifying violence using Reicher, Haslam, and Rath's (2008) five-step social identity model. Following this, the concepts of ressentiment, politicization of religion, and martial social identity will be explained. The chapter concludes with the introduction of the theoretical model for application to empirical material and a brief discussion of the theory's application to the study.

3.1. Social identity theory

In this section the four key concepts of social identity theory will be presented and situated in relation to the present research aim. Tajfel et al. originally proposed social identity theory to explain intergroup behavior, creating concepts such as social categorization, social comparison, and psychological distinctiveness (1979). Additionally, Tajfel et al. concentrate on the interplay between individuals and society, exploring how belonging to social groups influences self-image and identity (Ibid).

3.1.1. Social identity

In his definition of social identity Tajfel argues that the emotional significance of group membership is of importance if one wants to understand social identity, stating that:

> For our purpose we shall understand social identity as that part of an individual’s self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership. Social categorization must therefore be considered as a system of orientation which creates and defines the individual’s own place in society. (1974:69)

Hence, social identity pertains to the process of positioning oneself as an interchangeable member, belonging to a specific social group. Sageman argues that to understand political
violence as manifested through collective behavior and violence, one needs to understand the facilitating role played by shared identities (2017b:8). The social identity perspective involves a shift from the individual to the societal level of identification by examining group processes, intergroup relations, and the self-concept (Sageman, 2017b:8-9). It is argued that “this shared social identity both creates and is created by the group” (Ibid). Consequently, these shared social identities influence how events are perceived, with their significance being viewed at the group level rather than at the individual level. Moreover, Sageman states that “a shared social identity transforms the relationship among members of an in-group to enable coordinated and effective collective action.” (Sageman 2017b:8-9).

According to Tajfel a group is defined as such by the perception of “having common characteristics or a common fate only because other groups are present in the environment” (Tajfel, 1974:72). As a result, whereas social comparisons at the individual level center around approaching and connecting with those who possess similar characteristics, societal comparisons at the group level concern the creation of distinctiveness between one’s own group and others (Ibid). A collective social identity can lead to what Sageman terms group prototypes. Group prototypes are those individuals who epitomize the ideals and values of the group and thus serve as role models for others’ understanding of the group's meaning and norms (Sageman 2017b:20). Effective leadership among group prototypes hinges on conveying four fundamental aspects: 1) being one of us; 2) doing it for us; 3) crafting a sense of us; and 4) making us matter (Sageman, 2017b:7).

3.1.2. Social-categorization

Tajfel introduced the concept of social-categorization by developing the work done by Berger (1966:106-107), who asserted that “every society contains a repertoire of identities that is part of the objective knowledge of its members” (Ibid). Building upon this, Tajfel argued that social categorization can serve as a system of orientation that can create and define an individual's place in society (1974:69). Social categorization is dependent upon the psychological reality which society defines and creates; this is the reality individuals need to situate themselves within (Ibid). This can then lead to group formation based on a distinction between the positive values attributed to the intra-group that distinguishes it from the out-group. In connection with this, Tajfel argues that:

Thus, the psychological aspect and consequences of the membership of a group are susceptible to definition only because of their insertion into a multigroup structure. Consequently, social identity of an individual conceived of as his “knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and
value significance to him of his membership” can only be defined through the effect of social categorization segmenting an individual’s social environment into his own group and others. A social group will, therefore, be capable of preserving its own contribution to those aspects of an individual’s social identity which are positively valued by him only if it manages to keep its positively valued distinctiveness from other groups. (1974:72)

In this regard, social identity can be understood by the effect of social categorization. Social categorization enables the comparison between an ingroup and an outgroup, with the individual striving to stay in the ingroup given the positive distinctiveness it provides compared with the outgroup. Hence, social categorization and comparison are intrinsically linked with the construction of social identities, which can in turn facilitate intergroup bias and discrimination.

3.1.3. Self-categorization
Building on Tajfel’s social identity theory, John Turner's self-categorization theory emphasizes the concept of the self in comparison with others and its relevance to social interaction (Turner and Hogg, 1987:42). This theory shifts focus from intergroup discrimination to a more general approach on how individuals collectively function as a group (Ibid). It posits that self-categorization is fundamental and leads to prejudice, group bias, and collective behavior such as terrorism by creating a shared social identity. This social identity is viewed as crucial for collective behavior by simplifying social reality and downplaying intragroup differences. This can potentially lead to the dehumanization of outgroup members, which is considered necessary for moral disengagement in carrying out political violence (Turner and Hogg, 1987:42; Sageman, 2017b:4-8).

When applied upon extremist propaganda and rhetoric, this implies that the ingroup forms a cohesive identity for its members whilst creating stereotypes of their enemies and through this devaluing their lives. According to self-categorization theory, this can be achieved by the simplification of social reality that self-categorization leads to.

3.1.4. Positive Distinctiveness:
The final concept of social identity theory is the concept of positive distinctiveness. Building from the concept of social identity, positive distinctiveness postulates that individuals will seek to create and maintain social identities that provide them with a positive self-image. Positive distinctiveness creates a clear in-group and out-group, where the positive qualities of one's own group are put in relation to the out-group, which can bring with it political
consequences. This can manifest itself in elitism where the elite groups distinguish themselves from perceived outsiders. This stands in contrast to the “outsiders” or low-status groups who instead need to identify and lift up their positive group attributes, or strive to change their negative image (Huddy, 2013:5-6). It is the same mechanisms that preserve the positive distinctiveness of the in-group identity that simultaneously creates negative pictures of out-groups. Thus, this lays the foundation for the creation of stereotypes, both positive and negative, and a “us” versus “them” dichotomy that influences the way the world is portrayed.

3.2. Social Identity Theory and Violence

3.2.1. How violence is justified, a five-step social identity model

Drawing from the work done by Marilynn Brewer (1999) and her ingroup preference theory, Reicher, Haslam, and Rath (2008:1313) developed a five-step social identity model. Whereas the ingroup preference theory delves into the mechanisms of hate, the subsequent model expands upon it. Reicher et al. developed a five-step social identity model that details the processes through which inhumane acts against other groups can come to be seen as right: identification, exclusion, threat, virtue, and celebration (Reicher et al. 2008:1313). The five-step social identity model is presented below:

**Identification:** The identification stage concerns the creation of a unified ingroup. Social identity, predicated on shared category membership, forms the basis for group action. Hence, groups that have attained a high degree of cohesion and power play a pivotal role in ordering social existence, able to both kill and sacrifice for their members (Reicher et al. 2008:1327-1329).

**Exclusion:** In the exclusion stage, targets are defined as external to the ingroup. By using the example of Nazism, Reicher et al. (2008) illustrate how it enabled the exclusion of groups such as Jews. This was achieved not only through the denial of positive benefits, such as citizenship and belonging to society, but also far-reaching negative sanctions (Ibid).

**Threat:** The threat component involves portraying targets as risks to the ingroup identity, where a shift from withdrawing benefits to active hostility aligns with viewing outgroups as threats. The emphasis is not only on the characteristics of these groups but also on the implications of ‘their nature’ for ‘us’ (Reicher et al. 2008:1331). Consequently, this may lead to a reasoning that states that only one group can exist since it is in fact the very ‘nature’ of the outgroup that constitutes a threat to ‘our way of life’. As such, a violent struggle between these two incompatible groups may ensue where the goal is that only one group can survive (Ibid).
Virtue: Virtue concerns the advocating of the ingroup as exclusively good. Expanding on the Nazism example, we could see that Jews were defined as threatening and alien. Hence, the German ingroup virtue actively fueled outgroup hatred (Reicher et al. 2008:1336).

Celebration: Celebration, which is an expansion of the concept virtue, explains how the eradication of the outgroups is viewed as a moral obligation to defend ingroup virtue. Sageman argues that genocide is celebrated once ‘they’ are framed as opposites and enemies of ‘us’ in a dualistic ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ worldview. Under these conditions the eradication of the outgroup preserves ingroup virtue, a key aspect of modern terrorism (Reicher et al. 2008:1336). Innocent people are redefined as enemies, and their killing is viewed as a sacred ritual (Reicher et al. 2008:1337). In this context, ‘soldiers’ are considered morally strong, whereas those refraining from violence are viewed as immoral.

3.3. How the ummah is weaponized

Three intertwined concepts are central to understanding how propaganda is used in order to weaponize the collective oppressed, imaginary, ummah\(^{11}\). These are the following: Ressentiment, Martial social identity, and Politicization of religion.

Ressentiment: Ressentiment stems from the feeling of shared grievances or injustice wherein an external enemy is assigned the blame for this (van Stekelenburg, 2013:227). Ressentiment is often linked to revenge-seeking ideologies and movements, invoking emotions such as contempt, shock, and outrage (TenHouten, 2018:52). When applied upon an Islamic context this is often framed as an ongoing war against Islam, wherein the world is divided into two social categories - Muslims and the rest. In this context Jews and the West are often portrayed as evil and enemies of Islam and Muslims and held responsible for the suffering of the collective Muslim ummah.

Politicization of religion: The politicization of religious identities stems from the thinking regarding politicized social identities, wherein political grievances are used to divide people into two distinct categories (Sageman, 2017a:117-118). Politicized religious identities involve reconstructing them within a political framework, where “political” refers to the acquisition and use of power in a society. These identities are constructed or imagined based on perception rather than inherent essence (Hawley, 2017:169). If we apply this reasoning upon the propaganda of Islamists, we can note that both Islam and Judaism have been politicized

\(^{11}\) Is an Arabic term used to describe the broad collective Muslim community.
and framed as part of an ongoing war. This framework is used to mobilize the collective ummah against the perceived threat posed by Jews and the State of Israel.

**Martial social identity:** Sageman postulates that it is only once a martial social identity has been adopted that an imagined political community will turn violent (Sageman, 2017b:14). Martial social identity is a self-categorization process that involves the use of violence as a legitimate defensive measure to protect the individual's imagined community, with individuals reimagining themselves as soldiers. Sageman highlights three prerequisites for violence to occur; the intensification of hostility between the state and its community, which encompasses an escalating radicalization of discourse; their growing disillusionment with nonviolent legal tactics; and a heightened moral outrage in response to new state aggression against their community (Sageman 2017a:130). Sageman argues that to attain support extremists will exaggerate the threat and danger posed by outside groups, whilst also discrediting rivals for their inability to protect the ingroup because of their weakness (Sageman, 2017). In the context of Islamism, the concept of martyrs and references to wars plays a significant role in the creation of, and propagation for martial social identities. Martyrdom is portrayed as an inspirational act wherein the individual has sacrificed themselves for a just cause, which “instantly endows them with virtue and cleanses their reputation of any previous flaws” (Sageman 2017a:140–141). According to Sageman, the war narrative can enable these self-identified soldiers to transition from acting in a perceived defensive manner and instead go on the offensive (2017:144-145).

3.4. Theoretical model

Table 1. The Theoretical Framework of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Construction</th>
<th>Justification for Violence</th>
<th>Weaponization of the Ummah</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-categorization</td>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>Ressentiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social categorization</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Martial Social identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identity</td>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>Politicization of religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive distinctiveness</td>
<td>Virtue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Celebration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The thesis utilizes a model inspired by both Evin Ismail’s dissertation (Ismail, 2022), and also social identity theory in general. Ismail uses social identity theory to demonstrate how the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS politicizes religious identities in their propaganda. This politicization subsequently leads to a dehumanization of those portrayed as enemies and used as justification for the use of violence against them. Her main argument is that “the politicization of religious identities within a war narrative leads to violence.” (Ismail, 2022:212). The theoretical model is thus made up of three dimensions; Identity Construction, Justification for Violence, and Weaponization of the Ummah.
4. Methodology

In this chapter the method of analysis will be presented and critically discussed. The chapter will be divided into three main sections. The first will discuss the chosen methods and the philosophical approach. The second will display the process involved in the collection and subsequent analysis of the empirical material. The third section will discuss the methodological limitations, the process of reflexivity employed, and ethical considerations that were had in relation to the thesis.

4.1. Method of analysis

The method used in this thesis is based on qualitative analysis, and more specifically content analysis. Content analysis is used to facilitate the analysis of the empirical material, and particularly the chosen quotes. A secondary methodology used, thematic analysis, was used as an integrated part of the content analysis. Thematic analysis was used to lay the foundation for the categorization of the empirical material, which was coded into four distinct thematic categories.

Content analysis, originally developed by Max Weber for the analysis of media content, involves a methodical investigation of texts (Kuckartz, 2014:29-30). For this thesis, thematic analysis was used as an incorporated part of the content analysis, hence serving as a complement to the content analysis (Kuckartz, 2014:29). Thematic analysis is often used as part of qualitative research, enabling the identification and analysis of themes found in the material (Nowell et al., 2017:2). A theme is here defined as the result of the coding process (Saldaña, 2013:14). Content analysis was chosen as the method since it enables the analysis of underlying meaning and nuances in the material (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014:28).

Moreover, given that content analysis is centered around systematically studying texts (Leavy, 2017:146), it aligns well with the objectives and material of this thesis. Qualitative content analysis is centered around interpretive analysis, wherein coding is performed based on interpretation, classification, and analysis (Kuckartz, 2014:33-34). Qualitative content analysis, as defined by Roller and Lavrakas, is an interpretative approach to coding that systematically reduces content to identify themes and extract meaningful interpretations of data (2015:232). In the next chapter the steps involved in the analysis will be presented.

4.1.1. Pragmatic approach

The philosophical worldview employed in this thesis is the pragmatic (Creswell, 2009:10-11). In accordance with a pragmatic approach, which is concerned with “what works”, this employs several methods in order to answer the research question. In this regard, it can...
employ diverse methods, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, focusing on research outcomes and solutions as well as practical implications (Patton, 1990; Creswell, 2007:23). There are several variants of pragmatic approaches (Cherryholmes 1992; Creswell 2007:22) and diverge from deterministic and structuralist approaches (Creswell 2007:23). Therefore, the researcher selects methods, techniques, and research procedures that align with their needs and objectives (Creswell 2007:23).

In this thesis, the initial step was to collect and read as much propaganda from these three ‘groups’ (Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas). Following this initial step, the importance of cross-group cohesion became evident leading to the identification of identity constructions as fundamental for this cohesion to maintain. Contemporary social science can be divided between structural explanations and agency-based explanations (Della Porta and Keating, 2008:3). The pragmatist school is inherently anti-essentialist (Rorty, 1980), whereas structural explanations often gravitate toward deterministic perspectives on society. Hence, this thesis employs an agency-based explanation since it complements the social identity perspective used. It displays how the creation of ingroup versus outgroup identities are created in relation to each other, and how this facilitates collective action based on agency both within the ingroup and towards the outgroup. Finally, it can offer further depth and explanations for the causes as to why contemporary Islamism uses antisemitism, constructed war narratives, and religion as mechanisms to achieve cross-group cohesion.

4.2. Collection and analysis of the material

Before describing the steps taken to collect and subsequently analyze the empirical data, the sources of the texts chosen must first be discussed briefly. Furthermore, the selection criteria along with saturation will be described.

Data for this study was gathered from articles published by two distinct websites: IRNA (The Islamic Republic News Agency), affiliated with the Iranian state, and Al-Manar News, tied to Hezbollah. Originally, the English website for the Qassem Brigades, Hamas's military wing, was intended as a data source. However, due to the shutdown of its English websites following the October 7th terror attack, alternative sources were used, including an English translation of the 1988 Hamas Charter and translated speeches and interviews by MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute). The selection of these sources was based on feasibility and research aims, focusing on media propaganda as a cohesion mechanism. The chosen websites directly tied to the groups aimed to capture their discourses effectively. Republished articles, where Al-Manar simply mirrored an IRNA article, were excluded to
ensure material reflected each group's unique propaganda. Data collection concluded on November 29, 2023.

The data collection process employed search words derived from previous research and logical derivations, focusing on Iran and affiliated groups' use of religious symbolism, narratives, and ideological affinity. The search words included "Axis of Resistance," "Takfiri terrorists," and "Zionist entity." Following empirical material coding, categories/themes aligned with social identity theory and cross-group cohesion were developed: Antisemitism and anti-Zionism, anti-USA and anti-West, Religious references, and Community creation. Data collection spanned from 2018 to 2023, with an extended period for Hamas due to the absence of English websites. For Hamas, the 1988 Charter and material from MEMRI were used, maintaining the 2018-2023 timeframe. MEMRI republished older articles, and if relevant to the study, they were included, with their publication date clarified before analysis.

Saturation, often seen as a point where further data collection or analysis becomes unnecessary, is crucial in interview and human studies (Saunders et. al., 2018:1893). Benjamin Saunders et al. emphasize the varying relevance and meaning of saturation, particularly in relation to the role of theory (2018:1898). This thesis adopts inductive thematic saturation, focusing on the identification of new codes or themes within the data and the emergence of new theoretical insights (Ibid). It is essential to recognize that achieving "completeness" in saturation is an unattainable ideal. Instead, saturation implies reaching a point where the researcher deems further data unnecessary to contribute to the theory or categories (2018:1900-1901). Saunders et al. describe this as an ongoing, cumulative judgment rather than a pinpointed moment (Ibid). To ensure inductive thematic saturation, this thesis continuously developed categories/themes during the coding process, stopping data collection when these categories were adequately explored. In the third and fourth phases of data collection, saturation concerns were integral, with each coding step considering saturation. Articles in these phases were excluded if they did not contribute new value to the study.

4.2.1. Collecting the material
To achieve a rigorous and transparent process the data collection was divided into four phases. It is important to note that for each phase I used the logic of thematic analysis and looked for recurring themes, as well as reviewing those themes at the end of each phase.

Phase one
Here, I present the process applied to collecting the empirical material. The first phase involved collecting material for the Iranian propaganda since it is Iran that is the leader of the Axis of Resistance. The search word employed for the Iranian propaganda was “Axis of Resistance” based on the aim of the study, which was to study how cross-group cohesion was achieved. Hence, Iran as the leader of the Axis of Resistance served as the basis from which the initial themes, and subsequent search words for Hezbollah and Hamas were derived from. The search word produced 252 unique articles within the chosen period. Based on this, a first selection was done wherein relevant articles and related quotes were saved in a “raw data” document.

Phase two
The second phase consisted of conducting a first selection of relevant material for Hezbollah and Hamas. Based on the first phase, two new search words were added meaning that three search word were used: Axis of Resistance, Takfiri terrorists, and Zionist entity. By using the search function at Al-Manar I looked at 100 articles for each of the search words, spanning the whole period of 2018-2023 (29th of November). Based on this, a first selection was done wherein relevant articles and related quotes were saved in the same “raw data” document. For Hamas, the first selection process was a bit more complicated. As previously mentioned, the original news source chosen, as well as their other English sites, was shut down following the October 7th terrorist attack. Instead, MEMRI was used as the first source wherein the same search words, accompanied with “Hamas”, were used. The search word “Axis of Resistance” produced 150 documents, Takfiri terrorists 8 documents, and Zionist entity 212 documents. The second source was an English translation of their 1988 charter. Since the use of search words was not possible on this material based on the fact that Axis of Resistance was created after 1988, Takfiri terrorism is primarily connected to ISIS, and they did not use the term “Zionist entity”. I instead looked for quotes that corresponded with the thematic categories. Based on this, a first selection was done wherein relevant articles and related quotes were saved in the same “raw data” document.

Phase three
The third phase consisted of processing the material and organizing it into each of the thematic categories, which emerged as part of the ongoing coding process, as well as rereading the material if it was unclear whether it should be kept in. Here, another selection process was employed upon the material wherein saturation considerations were used to exclude quotes and articles that did not add any new value. A new document was created for
this to make sure that the originally selected material would remain so that, if need be, I could go back to these articles.

**Phase four**

Like the previous phase, the saturation process was reevaluated in order to make sure that the chosen quotes were exhaustive and captured the propaganda of the groups and thematic categories. A third document was created wherein the final selected quotes were coded into the corresponding thematic categories. The aim of collecting material was to use material that would enable the study of the narratives of these groups, and how their cohesion could be understood from a social identity perspective.

4.2.2. Analyzing the material

As previously mentioned, this essay employed content analysis as the analytical method with thematic analysis an integrated part of this (Kuckartz 2014:29). The analysis consisted of five steps to attain a rigorous analysis. These steps will be presented here.

1) **Engaging the material**

In the first step, I familiarized myself with the material by conducting several readthroughs to grasp the overall context. Following this the initial units of analysis, coding, and interpretation were determined (Leavy, 2017:147). Recurring themes—e.g., martyrdom, fraternal or religious ties, and antisemitism were recorded in a separate document which was kept to maintain a record of my thoughts. I searched for both similarities and differences to map out what initially seemed like the main mechanisms used to attain cross-group cohesion, and the role that social identity constructions played in this.

2) **Deciding the units of analysis**

The second step consisted of determining the units of analysis, understood as “chunks of data” (Leavy, 2017:147), and conducting an initial coding. For this thesis, the units of analysis were based on the search words: Axis of resistance, Takfiri terrorists, and Zionist entity. Hence, the unit of analysis consisted of quotes, often consisting of several paragraphs to ensure they were contextualized, derived from these search words.

3) **Generating codes**

In this step, the coding of the material was manually conducted to ensure that the researcher maintained control over this process since it often consisted of interpretations. The coding process often begins with generating literal codes like concrete ideas, with these developing through continuous data analysis. These initial codes were meant to be descriptive, serving as the first cycle of coding (Leavy 2017:147; Saldaña 2013:88). Following this a second cycle, or pattern coding, is introduced to create more explanatory codes that identify themes of
explanations (Leavy 2017:147; Saldaña 2013:88). The codes were created to make sure that they were relevant for the research question and not interchangeable (Nowell et al. 2017:6). However, there were instances where the chosen quotes would overlap between the categories, such as antisemitism versus religious references, or when it was too unclear which category they should belong. This was solved by creating the code “others” which was used in these instances, these codes were re-analyzed as the last step.

4) **Categorization into themes**

By identifying common themes that emerged during the coding process, involving a more advanced and in-depth engagement with the material, the data was organized into four thematic categories: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism, Anti-USA and Anti-West, Religious references, and Community creation. This constituted the step of pattern coding, wherein the first cycle of coding was condensed and transformed into fewer and more impactful units of analysis. This served as a cognitive map that enabled the understanding of the material from a social identity perspective. In this process, I used these thematic categories in order to search for specific messaging belonging to each category. An example of this is the shared use of war narratives and martyrdom as part of the category “religious references”, using specific quotations in order to build a preliminary thematic structure. In this phase, the names and definitions of the themes and categories were finalized (Nowell et al. 2017:10). This involved analyzing each theme's narrative, examining their relevance to the research question, and identifying their significance (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012). The chosen themes of this thesis were interesting because they highlighted how various mechanisms and messaging were used to attain cross-group cohesion. Moreover, they enabled an in-depth analysis to be conducted through content analysis. By conducting a final scrutinization of the coding and the categories it became apparent that the two previous categories, Anti-USA, and Brotherhood, needed to be broadened. This was since the hatred expressed was also explicitly targeted towards the West in general, hence the creation of Anti-USA and Anti-West. Moreover, “Brotherhood” was an obtuse category that fails to capture the nuances of the propaganda, hence the use of “Creation of community” as the category instead.

5) **Final analysis**

In this step, I chose the most representative and informative quotations belonging to each theme with these serving as the basis for the analysis. These quotations were contextualized and analyzed in accordance with the theoretical model. It was of utmost importance that religious references, such as specific hadiths, were contextualized. Next, I interpreted the themes and associated quotations with this consisting of both a general analysis as well as an
analysis of chosen quotes. The propaganda of these groups was presented according to these thematic categories and analyzed in accordance with the theoretical model, noting both similarities and differences between the groups. Two quotes were chosen for each group and each thematic category. If the quotes were too short several quotes were used to enable an analysis and ensure that they were analytically useable.

4.3. Limitations, reflexivity, and ethics

4.3.1. Methodological limitations

The thesis acknowledges methodological limitations, including the sample's representativeness and the language barrier, but mitigates these by using English sources affiliated with the groups, MEMRI translations, and Yale's translation of Hamas’ 1988 charter. It is crucial to note that the proposed theoretical framework and findings are not intended to be understood as an all-encompassing explanation for how cross-group cohesion can be attained. Moreover, the sample of texts examined as part of this thesis represents only a small portion of relevant statements from these groups and their representatives. As such, the thesis can only provide a limited sample of comments pertaining to issues of relevance for this thesis. While thematic analysis allows categorization, content analysis provides detailed attention for exhaustive contextualization, and the use of existing theories prevents data fitting, enhancing the study's depth and rigor (Esaiasson et al., 2017, p.113).

4.3.2. Reflexivity

Throughout the analytical process, acknowledging my own positionality and background through reflexivity was necessary. Reflexivity is an important part of research that requires the author to conduct ‘subjective’ interpretations. Considering the nature of the empirical material, much of the language and rhetoric used by these groups goes deeply against my own world view. Yet, to surmount the challenges linked with analyzing material that uses extremist language and conspiracies, I consistently took breaks during the process to distance myself from the material to make sure that I did not let my personal beliefs influence the research process. By applying an iterative process, wherein I revisited my findings several times, I tried to identify and remove any embedded assumptions I might have that could negatively impact the analysis.

4.3.3. Ethical considerations

Given the thesis's focus on extremist propaganda, ethical considerations were paramount. To avoid serving as a tool for extremists, their narratives were critically analyzed and
contextualized, addressing potential unnoticed messaging. Providing quotes without context was deemed unethical, and while it was impractical to situate religious references within broader Islamic debates, significant references were briefly described with clarifications on origin and contextual usage. Despite inherent ethical concerns, the author contends that analyzing sensitive issues is crucial, as it helps understand extremist mechanisms and facilitates countering the spread of myths and conspiracies.
5. Findings and analysis

In this section the empirical material will be presented, analyzed, and discussed in accordance with the theoretical model presented in chapter 3. The empirical material will be thematically presented based on the categories they were coded into, followed by an analysis and discussion in accordance with the theoretical model. The empirical analysis will consist of both an overarching discussion of the material in with the theoretical model, as well as an analysis of the chosen quotes analyzed per group. Two quotes per group and per category were chosen to enable an in-depth discussion and application of the theoretical model. If the quotes were too short several quotes were then chosen to enable a fruitful analysis and discussion. The analysis will highlight both the similarities and differences between the groups to provide greater analytical depth.

5.1. Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism

5.1.1. Iranian propaganda

Following an analysis of the Iranian propaganda, discursive patterns indicated clearly that they consistently used antisemitic and anti-Zionism sentiments. In accordance with the theoretical model, these sentiments enable an Identity construction consisting of the creation of an ingroup versus an outgroup. The creation of an ingroup and an outgroup also fulfills the first two criteria within the Justification for Violence, namely identification and exclusion. Sageman argues that simplification and dehumanization are common tactics used as part of self-categorization (Sageman, 2017b:8). This is evident in the Iranian propaganda, for example by describing Israel as “the cancerous tumor of Zionism [...]” (IRNA, 2020b). This is arguably a part of the Iranian aims to create a shared social identity wherein Israel is the outgroup enemy. The creation of a shared social identity enables what Sageman calls “coordinated and effective collective action” (Sageman, 2017b:8-9).

Through the creation of a dichotomous worldview, the Justification for Violence can be achieved more easily. In relation to this we can see how Iran prescribes negative stereotypes to Israel and Jews. For example, in the excerpt below the Iraqi Cleric Sheikh Ali al-Asaadi is interviewed by IRNA. Al-Asaadi is the chairman of al-Nujaba's political board, an Iraqi Shiite paramilitary group that is a part of the Axis of Resistance. Al-Asaadi proclaims that:

As a prelude to the answer to this question, I should note that all know that the Zionist Lobby, being active in all Western countries, especially in the US, has managed to control the most important decision-making centres of the world like the UN Security Council. This has allowed the Zionist Regime to breach
international resolutions absolutely freely, as it is sure that those in charge of such decision-making centres are trained by the world Zionism. (Abolghasemi, 2020).

Here we can see that Al-Asaadi refers to an antisemitic conspiracy based on the notion that Jews acts as an ‘invisible hand’ by controlling other countries, international organizations, and controlling the world. In accordance with the Justification for Violence we can note that Zionism is described as a global conspiracy and threat to the ingroup (Reicher et al., 2008). Moreover, by the utilization of this antisemitic myth Iran expresses ressentiment towards Jews and thus creates a shared enemy in the form of “global Zionism”. In accordance with the theoretical model ressentiment is often portrayed as an ongoing war against Islam and Muslims. Although this quote does not explicitly state that there is an ongoing war against Islam, this conspiracy is often used in order to proclaim that Jews controls the world. This indicates that Iran is trying to convey a dichotomous worldview consisting of the external enemy, “global Zionism”, and use this as the foundation for justifying violence against Israel and Jews.

In some cases, Iran is vocal about their calls for actions against Israel. In the following excerpt we can see how the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, threatens the very existence of Israel and using the antisemitic epithet ‘Zionist entity’. He states that:

“The first mistake and step made by the Zionist entity will be its last, and there will no longer be this thing called the Zionist entity to even take another step,” said Raisi. (IRNA, 2023)

This statement is one example which, arguably, aligns with the overarching rhetorical structure of Justification for Violence. By using the antisemitic epithet, ‘Zionist entity’, Raisi delegitimize the very existence of Israel and portrays them as an outgroup threat and enemy. This is framed within a war narrative in accordance with the threat criteria in the Justification for violence, and thus justifying the use of violence against this perceived enemy. This indicates that Iran is trying to ascribe Israel the role as an outgroup enemy, and in extension justifying the use of violence against them.

5.1.2. Hezbollah propaganda
Similar to the Iranian example we can clearly see that Hezbollah is striving to create a dichotomous worldview, wherein Israel and Jews are portrayed as occupiers as compared with the righteous struggle, they are a part of. In the following excerpt we can see how Sayyed Nasrallah, the Hezbollah Secretary General, creates a dichotomous world view where he
distinguishes between the rightful owners of ‘Palestine’ and the occupiers in the form of Israel. He proclaims that:

“The only solution for the enemy entity is to leave Palestine to its people and real owners, otherwise the fighting will continue generation after generation,” Sayyed Nasrallah said, doubting if a new Israeli generation will have the chance to live in the Zionist entity. (Haidar, 2023a)

In accordance with the understanding of ressentiment within an Islamist context, Nasrallah employs a war narrative as part of his speech. This would suggest that Nasrallah is deliberately laying the foundation for the weaponization of the ummah. Sageman argues that a martial social identity can be achieved through a self-categorization process wherein violence is used to protect the imagined community (Sageman, 2017a:140-145). In the above excerpt we can see how Israel is explicitly portrayed as an enemy, and that there is a perceived ongoing war that will continue until their demise. Moreover, he uses a war narrative that is framed as paramount for the survival of the ingroup, and through this justifies the use of violence. This implies a goal of cementing a social identity based on a dichotomous world view.

Another aspect of the propaganda is the use of political and antisemitic slogans. In the following excerpt we see how Nasrallah uses the phrase “from the sea to the river” which is a commonly used political slogan that calls for the liberation of Palestine from the perceived Israeli occupation. In this context it should be understood as a call for the dismantling of the state of Israel, accompanied by underlying antisemitic views. Nasrallah proclaims that:

“Axis of Resistance is sincere and fully ready to engage in the battle to liberate Palestine from the sea to the river.” […] “Imagine if Palestine is without ‘Israel’… It’s not a dream but rather an inevitable fact Inshallah,” Sayyed Nasrallah said. (Haidar, 2023b)

Here, Nasrallah emphasizes the unity within the Axis of Resistance and uses the antisemitic slogan calling for Palestine to be liberated “from the sea to the river”. The demise of Israel is portrayed as an “inevitable fact”, which is undoubtedly part of a war narrative. This is, arguably, in accordance with the creation of a martial social identity wherein Sageman argues that the war narrative can enable self-identified soldiers to transition from acting in a perceived defensive manner and instead go on the offensive (2017a:144-145). This indicates that Nasrallah utilizes these strategies as a mechanism to attain and promote cross-group
cohesion. Moreover, in accordance with the criteria for Identity construction we can see how Hezbollah is trying to highlight the unity within the Axis of Resistance. This is arguably in line with the criteria for positive distinctiveness, wherein the unity in victimhood constitutes the positive distinctiveness and constitutes an ingroup virtue. These factors suggests that Hezbollah is using the victimhood of the Palestinian struggle to both maintain the cross-group unity, as well as form the basis for the creation of a martial social identity.

5.1.3. Hamas propaganda

At the basis of all the three overarching dimensions within the theoretical model—Identity construction, Justification for Violence, and Weaponization of the Ummah—is the creation of an ingroup versus an outgroup. Hamas’ propaganda differentiates itself partly from the Iranian and Hezbollah propaganda in that they are the primary protagonist against Israel. Although Iran and Hezbollah are vocal in their support, both active such as the use of violence against Israel but also passive in the form of rhetorical support to Hamas, the struggle they support is intrinsically the Palestinian struggle. However, there are striking similarities between the identity construction of social reality between these three groups. Like Iran and Hezbollah, Hamas creates a dichotomous worldview consisting of the righteous ‘soldiers’ fighting against the “plundering entity, the so-called 'Israel'.” (MEMRI TV, 2023a). The creation of this shared identity and worldview can facilitate collective actions (Sageman, 2017b:8). In this case the ingroup would consist of those who support the Palestinian struggle, and the outgroup would consist of Israel, Jews, Zionism, and those who support it.

Like Iranian propaganda, Hamas frequently reference a global antisemitic conspiracy. In the following excerpt from 2008, we see how Hamas Culture Minister 'Atallah Abu Al-Subh reference the ‘First Protocol. The ‘First Protocol’ is a reference to the, disproven, Protocols of the Elders of Zion which is an antisemitic conspiracy describing a Jewish plot for global domination. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was a Talmudic scholar and influential Rabbi who passed away in 2013. Al-Subh states the following:

The Evil of the Jews That We See Around the World is Based on the First Protocol […]

"Everything we see in the Arab region and around the world – the evil of the Jews, their deceit, their cunning, their warmongering, their control of the world, and their contempt and scorn for all the peoples of the world, which they consider to be animals, cockroaches, lizards, snakes, and despicable maggots that need to be stepped on… […]

"Like [Rabbi] Ovadia [Yosef] said… The Jews say all these things, especially in the first of these protocols.” (MEMRI TV, 2008b)
Sageman argues that dehumanization and depersonalization are used as tools to create outgroup stereotypes, which can facilitate the use of violence (Sageman, 2017b:8). In accordance with this we can see how Al-Subh frames the Jews as in possession of world control and uses a dehumanizing language to describe them. Moreover, we can note how negative stereotypes are ascribed with the aim of dehumanizing Jews, framing them as an existential threat, and justifying the use of violence against them. The creation of existential threats is an important part of the Justification for Violence, wherein the external threat is portrayed as ‘evil’ in their very nature (Reicher et al. 2008:1331). We can see how Al-Subh does not distinguish between ‘innocent’ Jews and ‘guilty’ Jews, instead they are all redefined as enemies (Reicher et al., 2008:1337). Under these conditions a logical consequence would be that it becomes a moral obligation of the ingroup to fight against this threat (Reicher et al., 2008:1336-1337). When Hamas states “Everything we see in the Arab region and around the world – the evil of the Jews, their deceit, their cunning [...]” we can see how Hamas uses victimhood and expresses ressentiment towards the Jews. As predicted by the ressentiment concept, the struggle against Jews and Israel is portrayed as part of an ongoing war against. Jews are portrayed as warmongers and in possession of control over the world. In summary, what this quote suggests is that antisemitism is used as part of the Hamas propaganda to create a shared identity. This identity is subsequently used as part of the Justification for Violence, wherein the struggle against Jews is portrayed as existential. Hence, they laid the foundation for the Weaponization of the Ummah by using a war narrative wherein the righteous ‘soldiers’ are fighting against a dehumanized and depersonalized enemy.

Another aspect of the Hamas propaganda is their direct calls for action and revolution against Israel, or the Zionist enemy which they often frame it as. In the following excerpt we can see a quote from the “Fence Cutters’ Unit” during the Gaza "Return March". The Gaza Return March, during 2018–2019, was a Hamas supported event that called on Gazans to gather near the border with Israel and to march on the border. The “Fence Cutters’ Unit” proclaims the following:

Allah willing, today we shall enter our occupied lands, and ignite a revolution against the Zionist enemy, in order to proclaim, loud and clear, that this enemy is destined for perdition, and that what was taken by force will be regained by force alone. We are about to liberate our blessed Palestinian land, which was plundered from us by the enemy by force, and from which the enemy will be driven out by force alone. (MEMRI TV, 2018)
Here we can see how it is framed as it only being through violence that Israel can be defeated, and Hamas goals can be attained. The threat dimension suggests that Hamas would portray violence and the destruction of the outgroup as justified, and the only means of ensuring the survival of the ingroup and its ambitions. Moreover, we can see how religion is politicized and used in order to frame the struggle in religious terms. They refer to ‘Allah’ as a source of power by stating that “Allah willing” they will liberate Palestine. Moreover, they describe Palestine as “our blessed Palestinian land” which can, arguably, be seen as reference to the perceived religious importance of Palestine. This indicates that Hamas views violence and the eradication of Israel, and its inhabitants, as the only way of ensuring their survival and as predestined to succeed.

5.2. Anti-USA and Anti-West

5.2.1. Iranian propaganda

Following an analysis of the Iranian propaganda, discursive patterns indicated clearly, an attempt to frame America and the West as enemies of Islam, the Axis of Resistance, and the Middle East region as a whole. As previously mentioned, the very foundation for identity constructions, justifying violence, and weaponizing the ummah, rests upon the creation of an ingroup and an outgroup. Sageman argues that a shared social identity “both creates and is created by the group” and that this influences how events, and the world are perceived (Sageman, 2017b:8-9). In relation to this we can see how Iran portrays America as “the world’s largest terrorist state” (IRNA, 2018a), and as colonial in their very nature (IRNA, 2019a). Through rhetoric like this Iran creates a simplified and dichotomous worldview consisting of the righteous ingroup, and the outgroup constituting a threat. In the excerpt below we can see how Hassan Rouhani, then the Iranian president, delivered a speech during an International Islamic Unity Conference under the theme of “Quds, Axis of Unity Among Ummah”. He states the following:

Disagreement between the World of Islam and the United States is on the issues of freedom and slavery, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Saturday at an international Islamic conference in Tehran. (IRNA, 2018b)

Through the analysis of this quote, several aspects of the theoretical model can be identified. Firstly, we can see how Hassan Rouhani creates a division between Islam and the United States, portraying the US as an outgroup. This follows the logic of the creation of
distinctiveness between one’s own group and others (Tajfel, 1974:72), and enables the
correction between an ingroup and an outgroup. Through this positive distinctiveness, Iran is
trying to highlight the differences between the ingroup and the outgroup (Huddy, 2013:5-6).
Furthermore, Iran is portraying this as an ongoing war where the World of Islam are
defenders of freedom and fighters of slavery, whereas the United States is a bastion of ‘evil’
that represents the opposite values. Moreover, as argued by Reicher et al. (2008:1331-1332),
outgroup threats must be actively constructed and are often done so by portraying them as an
incompatible group. Furthermore, we can note that Rouhani insinuates that America is against
freedom and a proponent of slavery which is incompatible with the World of Islam in this,
constructed, reality. In accordance with Reicher et al., argument pertaining to celebration
(2008:1336), once conditions such as these have been created, a logical continuation is that
the ‘soldiers’ of the World of Islam must actively fight against this existential threat posed by
America to their very way of life. These aspects indicates that Iran is actively trying to frame
their conflict with America as part of a broader conflict between the World of Islam and
America. As displayed by this analysis, this identity construction can lay the foundation for
justifying the use of violence against America.
Another aspect of the Iranian propaganda towards America and the West is their accusations
that ISIS is a Western creation. An example of this is when IRNA conducted an interview
with David N. Yaghoubian, a professor of history at California State University. Following
below is an excerpt from the interview:

The United States does not support the normalization of Syria’s relations with other countries because such
normalization represents the ultimate failure of the US dirty war in Syria, in which it spent billions of dollars
in support of takfiri terrorist groups to overthrow the Syrian government, divide the country’s territory, and
seat a puppet regime in Damascus friendly to Israeli apartheid and Golan Heights annexation. The continued
illegal military occupation of Syrian territory and theft of its natural resources under the risible pretext of
fighting terrorist groups, along with the maintenance of an array of illegal secondary sanctions are simply the
only means through which the US empire can attempt to remain a relevant, albeit toxic player in Syria, and
represent yet another example of American imperial desperation. (Abolghasemi, 2023)

When analyzing the following quote, one can note how Yaghoubian tries to create a social
reality based on a religious dichotomy. In this context, he accuses America of supporting the
Islamic State in their fight against the Muslim world in general and Syria in particular. He
uses politicized religious language by using the term takfiri terrorist groups. Takfiri terrorists
is a term used by Iran and others to describe the Islamic State. Takfir can be described as a process invoking “otherness” upon other Muslims, defining them as kafir or murtad (apostate) (Kadivar, 2020). Yaghoubian uses religion and religious identities as tools in order to frame the struggle against America as part of a broader religious struggle. In accordance with the arguments presented by Sageman (2017a:144-145), a logical continuation of this framework is that self-identified ‘soldiers’ could be weaponized. Hence, through the framing of the struggle against America as part of a broader religious struggle martial social identities can be invoked and awakened, and through this weaponization of the collective Muslim ummah can be achieved. As in previous examples, the issue is framed within the logic of a dichotomous worldview where there is an ongoing war between the ingroup and the outgroup. This suggests that politicization of religious identities plays a key role in the Iranian attempts to mobilize their supporters and achieve cohesion through the creation of an external enemy.

5.2.2. Hezbollah propaganda

There are striking similarities between the Iranian propaganda and Hezbollah’s propaganda, in relation to their framing of the fight against ISIS. The same mechanisms that Iran utilized to create a shared Identity, Justify the use of Violence, and weaponize the ummah, can be found in Hezbollah’s propaganda. In the following excerpt we see a statement released by Hezbollah’s Media Relations Office, denouncing an attack which targeted a bus carrying Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps personnel in Iran. They state the following:

“It’s well known that the Takfiri terrorist gangs, who are created, funded and backed by the US, Israel and their allies in the region, are behind this hideous suicide attack.”

“These criminal gangs, who were annoyed by the scene of mass rallies on the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution victory, wanted to send a message in blood. A message that reflects the true image of the systematic terror led by the US administration.” (Al-Manar TV, 2019)

Here we see how Hezbollah follows the Iranian propaganda by claiming that the US and Israel created ISIS. In accordance with the argument presented by Sageman in relation to social identity (2017b:8), we can here see that Hezbollah is trying to position themselves as a member of an Iranian led ingroup. Tajfel argues that a group is defined as such by the perception of “having common characteristics or a common fate only because other groups are present in the environment” (Tajfel, 1974:72). In conjunction with this, one could argue that Hezbollah has bought in to the Iranian social reality construction wherein America is an existential threat that represents terrorism. A logical continuation of this would highlight how
this “groupthink” can facilitate collective behavior and action, in accordance with Sageman’s arguments (Ibid). By expressing support to Iran’s dichotomous social reality, Hezbollah is emphasizing the existence of a distinction between the righteous ingroup and the evil outgroup. America is ascribed negative stereotypes, such as supporting ISIS and as being a bloodthirsty threat, and the reality is simplified accordingly. Shared social identities influence how events are perceived, often moving the events to a group level of reasoning (Sageman, 2017b:8-9). This can be seen in the above excerpt where Hezbollah’s allegiance with Iran influences how they perceive the terrorist attack and the belief that America is supporting ISIS. Moreover, this is in line with the logic of ressentiment, wherein Hezbollah shared in the grievance of Iran because of the actions of the external threat. This indicates the cohesion within the Axis of Resistance whereby Hezbollah has bought into the same narrative as Iran, claiming that ISIS is the creation of the US and Israel.

In a comparable manner they have also explicitly accused Europe of being complicit in the creation of ISIS. In the below excerpt from an Al-Manar article they state the following:

> The Western-Zionist employers of ISIS in the past months have trained, equipped and prepared other types of their mercenaries to carry out various types of sabotage operations, but all of them were identified and destroyed […] The silence of Europeans as the alleged advocates of human rights regarding the recent terrorist attack, along with the joy of their affiliated media in this regard, is not only another clear example of their hypocritical stance and double standards but can also show another address of the Takfiri terror creator and sponsor club. (Al-Manar TV, 2023b)

Here we can see how Hezbollah is creating the foundation for an ingroup versus outgroup struggle. In accordance with positive distinctiveness as proposed by the theoretical model, Hezbollah is trying to create negative pictures of the outgroup. Moreover, positive distinctiveness can enable the creation of stereotypes and a ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy. In conjunction with this, it can be argued that Hezbollah is trying to achieve exactly this by distinguishing between the terrorist supporters in the West and the righteous Axis of Resistance that have fought against them. Victimhood is another key aspect of the theoretical model that can be identified in the above excerpt. Hezbollah emphasizes the terrorist attacks that have targeted them and their allies and claims that the West have been sponsoring these activities. These aspects indicate that Hezbollah have fully bought into the Iranian framing, and that they are actively trying to propagate for this constructed social reality as an objective.
truth. A logical continuation of this would be that the foundation for the Justifying the use of violence, and the Weaponization of the Ummah, has been laid.

5.2.3. Hamas propaganda

Like the propaganda of Iran and Hezbollah, Hamas is framing the conflict against America and the West as part of an ongoing war. To showcase this the following quote has been chosen. This quote is from a Friday sermon in 2008 by Yunis Al-Astal, a Hamas MP and cleric. He states the following:

"Today, Rome is the capital of the Catholics, or the Crusader capital, which has declared its hostility to Islam, and has planted the brothers of apes and pigs in Palestine in order to prevent the reawakening of Islam. This capital of theirs will be an advanced post for the Islamic conquests, which will spread through Europe in its entirety, and then will turn to the two Americas, and even Eastern Europe. (MEMRI TV, 2008a).

When applying the analytical model several aspects are of interest here. We can see how Hamas is situating their hatred in their broader struggle against Israel and Jews, and as part of a religious struggle. Hamas accuses Catholics of being enemies of Islam, responsible for the creation of Israel, and as predestined to fall following the ‘Islamic conquests’. As proposed by the Identity construction category, they employ a simplification of reality, and both depersonalize and dehumanize their enemies. Moreover, to justify their violence, they frame it as an existential struggle wherein Catholics are trying to “prevent the reawakening of Islam”. Hence, in accordance with the reasoning presented by Reicher et al. (2008:1331), this struggle is framed as a violent struggle between two incompatible groups where only one can survive. Within this context they also use ressentiment to invoke a martial social identity among their members. A logical continuation of this would be that to protect the ingroups virtue, it is the duty of their members to fight back (Reicher et al. 2008:1336-1337). In accordance with the theoretical model, we can also note the use of historical and religious references, framed within a broader war narrative. This primarily corresponds with the last category of the model, Weaponization of the Ummah. They try to weaponize the ummah both by dehumanizing the Jews, calling them ‘brothers of apes and pigs’, and politicizing religion by invoking Islamic conquests as a part of their movement. Finally, they invoke a martial social identity by using war narratives that could be understood as calls for Muslim ‘soldiers’ to take to arms.

However, the main difference between the three groups is the fact that Hamas often situate their hatred towards America and the West as part of their struggle against Israel and Jews.
Their hatred towards America often consists of underlying antisemitism. This can be seen in the following quote, where Hamas Interior Minister Fathi Hammad proclaims that:

Hamas will receive its means of survival, its arms, and its supporters from where it is least expected, because the hatred for the Jews is on the rise, and people who hate the Jews find no [other] way to fulfill their hatred of the Jews and of the Americans – the Americans too have become abhorred throughout the world, because of their corruption, for they are led by the Jews – and they will support us. (MEMRI TV, 2010)

Here we see how Hamas creates a dichotomous worldview wherein America is controlled by Jews, highlighting the use of antisemitic tropes by Hamas. This can be seen as part of a broader self-categorization process by Hamas wherein they simplify reality (Sageman, 2017b:8). Moreover, they employ dehumanization of Americans by claiming that they are controlled by the Jews, a group that is hated throughout the world. Sageman argues that such dehumanization processes are “necessary as a mechanism of moral disengagement to carry out political violence.” (Ibid). By framing America as controlled by Jews they spread conspiracies and delegitimize any US actions as part of this Jewish conspiracy. Moreover, they try to spread a shared resentment wherein Jews and America are the culprits, to attain support for their world view.

5.3. Religious references

5.3.1. Iranian propaganda

The discursive patterns of the Iranian propaganda indicated that Iran frequently used religious references. There are several similarities with the propaganda of the previous categories. They create a dichotomous and simplified worldview where you have the righteous Muslims fighting against the ‘evil’ Jews and their lackeys (IRNA, 2020c). This follows the logic of self-categorization, wherein dehumanization and a simplified reality is employed (Sageman, 2017b:8). Moreover, Muslims are portrayed as a cohesive ingroup fighting for the liberation of the Holy Sites currently occupied by the ‘evil’ and conniving Jews (IRNA, 2020a). This follows the logic of positive distinctiveness wherein social reality is portrayed as consisting of an ongoing war against Muslims and Islam. Here, the victimhood of the oppressed ummah serves as a central mechanism and constitutes the positive distinctiveness which is used to achieve cohesion. In accordance with the Justification for Violence, we can see how Iran frames the violent struggle as the only means to protect the ingroup. A continuation of this is the logic of celebration, which argues that under these circumstances the eradication of the outgroup preserves ingroup virtue (Reicher et al. 2008:1336). Two longer excerpts have been
chosen in order to showcase this and enable an in-depth analysis. The first is an excerpt from the IRGC in which they mourn the death of their “glorious commander” Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Quds force. They proclaim that:

The glorious commander of Islamic forces was martyred in a US helicopter attack on Friday morning at the culmination of his lifelong efforts to promote the path of God.
Meanwhile, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei announced three days of public mourning on the martyrdom of the Commander. (IRNA, 2020d)

This quote can be understood as an Iranian attempt to hail Soleimani as a group prototype. Sageman defines a group prototype as someone that epitomizes the ideals and values of the group and thus serves as role models for others’ understanding of the group's meaning and norms (Sageman 2017b:20). With this in mind, we can see how Iran hails Soleimani as a “glorious commander” that promoted the “path of God”, clearly indicating an attempt to frame Soleimani as a group prototype. Moreover, the quote also corresponds with all aspects of the category, Weaponization of the Ummah. In accordance with Ressentiment, Soleimani is hailed as the ideal ‘soldier’ that had fulfilled his duties in defense of the, perceived, victimized ummah. The creation of Soleimani the martyr invokes Hawley’s constructed politicized religious identity (2017:169), and can showcase how martyrdom is portrayed as an inspirational act that thereby facilitates the development of martial social identities among the Muslim ‘soldiers’ (Sageman 2017a:140–141).

Another aspect of the religious references used by Iran pertains to their framing of the ongoing war against Israel as predestined to lead to the victory of the Muslims. In the following excerpt the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi proclaims that:

Based on divine promises by the God and his messenger Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), the liberation of Quds is definite. (IRNA, 2022)

Here we see how President Raisi uses religious references as part of their plight for the liberation of Jerusalem (Al-Quds). In accordance with the theoretical model, we can see how religion is politicized and the struggle against Israel is framed as part of an ongoing religious war. This enables the creation of martial social identities wherein ‘soldiers’ see it as their religious duty to act for the liberation of Jerusalem. This indicates the vital role that religion plays in the creation of social identities and how the war narrative is portrayed as inherently religious.
5.3.2. Hezbollah propaganda

As was the case with the Iranian propaganda, Hezbollah uses religious references as part of their propaganda and as mechanisms to create a shared social identity. Hezbollah hails martyrdom as a righteous act that their members should strive towards, stating that the names of martyrs “must be written in gold” (Haidar, 2018). Moreover, they compare Soleimani with “Malek Al-Ashtar the most loyal companions of the first Shiite leader, Imam Ali (a.s.).” (Al-Manar TV, 2020). These examples correspond to various aspects of the theoretical model.

Firstly, the use of war analogies is a common feature in order to create a shared identity, for example by proclaiming the positive distinctiveness of the ingroup. Secondly, this type of rhetoric can be used to justify the use of violence. In this regard we can note that they create a unified ingroup that is compared with an external threat which, according to Reicher et al. (2008:1331), can enable an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ existential struggle. Lastly, Sageman argues that martyrdom and the propagation of an ongoing war can facilitate the creation of martial social identities (Sageman, 2017a:140-145).

Two excerpts have been chosen in order to showcase how Hezbollah employs religious rhetoric as part of their propaganda. In the first excerpt Sayyed Nasrallah comments on the death of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis. It reads as follows:

Sayyed Nasrallah congratulated the top Iranian commander for embracing martyrdom “in the school of Imam Hussein (a.s) and Sayyed Zeinab (a.s).” […] “We will raise General Suleimani’s flag in all the battlefields and the victories of the Axis of Resistance will augment thanks to his blood.” (Haidar, 2020)

Nasrallah celebrates the martyrdom of Qasem Soleimani, claiming that he follows the “school of Imam Hussein (a.s) and Sayyed Zeinab (a.s)”. This can be understood as part of the process of proclaiming Soleimani as a group prototype (Sageman 2017b:20), emphasizing how martyrdom is something to strive for and as playing a key role in the victories of the Axis of Resistance. Consequently, the politicization of religion in this context is used as a tool in order to weaponize the collective Muslim ummah to follow in Soleimani’s footsteps.

Moreover, Sageman argues that martyrdom and the propagation of an ongoing war can facilitate the creation of martial social identities (Sageman, 2017a:140-145). This excerpt is an ideal example of his this can be invoked using propaganda. It also showcases how they try to achieve cross-group cohesion by celebrating the sacrifice made by the Iranian general. The second excerpt highlights how they use religious language in order to create a shared social identity and unity within the Axis of resistance. The following is an article published by
Al Manar pertaining to a meeting held between Nasrallah and leaders of Palestinian ‘resistance groups’ following the Hamas terrorist attack on October 7th. It states the following:

A photograph from the gathering revealed a tableau that encapsulated the spirit of resistance and highlighted the vulnerabilities of the enemy. The tableau featured Quranic verses that serve as a symbol of the resistance’s strength, with the passage, “They will not fight you all except within fortified cities or from behind walls.” (Al-Manar TV, 2023a)

Here we can see how religious rhetoric is used as an intrinsic part of the Axis of Resistance, for example by referring to Surah12 Al-Hashr13 – 14. This Surah is often used in an antisemitic manner, describing the conflict between the Muslim ummah under Muhammad and the Jewish Banu Nadir tribe. This is an example of how religious references are used in a politicized manner, by utilizing a pronounced antisemitic Surah that portrays an ongoing war against Jews. This suggests that both use religion to show cross-group cohesion, but also as an intrinsic part of the weaponization of the ummah by referencing Surah that glorifies war.

5.3.3. Hamas propaganda

As has been the case with the previous categories, there are striking similarities between the propaganda of Iran and Hezbollah with that of Hamas. For example, they hail martyrdom as an ideal by stating that “Jihad is its path and death for the sake of Allah is the loftiest of its wishes.” (The Avalon Project, 2008). This can, as previously mentioned, facilitate the creation of martial social identities (Sageman, 2017a:140-145). The main differences lie in the fact that Hamas’ propaganda is often delimited to their struggle against Israel and Jews, which also reflects itself in their propaganda. Two excerpts have been chosen to highlight this. The first is an excerpt from the 1988 Hamas charters wherein they use a Hadith14, Sahih Muslim 2922 from The Book of Tribulations and Portents of the Last Hour, which calls for the killing of Jews:

"The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews), when the Jew will hide behind stones and trees. The stones and trees will say O Moslems, O Abdulla, there is a Jew behind

12 A Surah is the equivalent of "chapter" in the Qur’an.
13 Hashr means ‘exile’ or ‘banishment’. Hence, the name of the Surah can be translated as “The exile” or “The banishment”.
14 A Hadith is a collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunna), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Quran.
me, come and kill him. Only the Gharkad tree, (evidently a certain kind of tree) would not do that because it is one of the trees of the Jews.” (related by al-Bukhari and Moslem). (The Avalon Project, 2008)

When applying the theoretical model, we can clearly identify a strong correspondence with Justification for Violence and Weaponization of the Ummah. We can see how they use this reference to proclaim coherence within the ingroup towards an external outgroup, this cohesion can enable them to kill and sacrifice for their members (Reicher et al. 2008:1327-1329). Although Jews are not portrayed as existential threats in this Hadith, it is portrayed as a religious duty to kill Jews. In line with the virtue and celebration criteria, which argues that the eradication of the outgroups is viewed as a moral obligation to defend ingroup virtue (Reicher et al. 2008:1336-1337), we can see how argue that “The Day of Judgement will not come about until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews) [...]”. Furthermore, we can see how they politicize religion by using it as a tool by creating a dichotomy between the enemy, the Jews, who becomes the sacrificial lambs that the Muslims must slaughter to invoke the Day of Judgement. This follows the logic proposed by Sageman wherein he argues that political grievances are used to divide people into two distinct categories (Sageman, 2017a:117-118). Moreover, the use of explicit references to war can, according to Sageman, facilitate the creation of martial social identities (Sageman, 2017a:144-145).

Another common feature of Hamas’ propaganda is references to historical battles, and the use of religious slogans. The following is an excerpt from the Gaza Return March wherein the “Fence Cutters Unit” employs the Khaybar chant, created by the founder of Hamas, Ahmed Yassin, during the First Intifada in the late 1980s. The Khaybar chant is a reference to the 7th century Battle of Khaybar. During this battle Muslim forces led by Muhammad defeated the Jews of the Khaybar oasis. It goes as follows:

"We are walking on the path of Allah. We want to raise the banner. May Islam regain its glory. May the Al-Aqsa Mosque regain its purity. Let our blood be shed.
Crowd: "Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews!"
Fence Cutters’ Unit Member 2: "The army of Muhammad has begun to return!" (MEMRI TV, 2018)

The usage of this chant highlights several aspects that correspond with the category, Weaponization of the Ummah. The chant consists of several references to war in that the battle of Khaybar coincided with the annihilation of Jewish tribes, this war narrative can facilitate the creation of martial social identities (Sageman, 2017a:144-145). Moreover, they glorify violence and see martyrdom as something to strive for, which likewise can lead to
martial social identities (Sageman, 2017a:140-141). They create a dichotomy between the ‘soldiers of Islam’ and the Jews that will be slaughtered. This can be understood as part of their Identity construction, wherein they dehumanize the Jews. This can be understood as part of both self-categorization and positive distinctiveness. In relation to self-categorization, they have created a cohesive identity for the ingroup, whilst creating stereotypes of their enemies and through this devaluing their lives. This follows the logic of positive distinctiveness, wherein the narrative of an ongoing war can serve as a “us” versus “them” dichotomy that influences the way the world is portrayed.

5.4. Community creation

5.4.1. Iranian propaganda

Following an analysis of the Iranian propaganda we can clearly identify how they, in their propaganda, tries to create a shared cross-group identity. Sageman argues that terrorist’s engagement in this type of violence is driven by group motives (Sageman, 2017b:8-9). This can be seen in their vocal attempts of achieving cross-group cohesion, stating that they have held “different conferences and seminars to maintain synergy and solidarity” (IRNA, 2019b). Furthermore, self-categorization can be applied upon this propaganda, with it constituting a swift process that creates a simplification of our environment by establishing categories based on common attributes (Sageman, 2017b:6). This can be seen in their attempts to create a dichotomous worldview wherein Israel seeks to “sow division” whereas Iran strives for “unity and harmony” (IRNA, 2023). They frame support to the Palestinian struggle as a duty for Muslims (IRNA, 2019d), which can be seen as a process used to justify the use of violence against Israel (Reicher et al. 2008:1336-1337). Two excerpts have been chosen to showcase how Iran uses their propaganda to create a community. The following is a statement by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran on Khorramshahr ‘Liberation Day’. Khorramshahr is an Iranian port city captured by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, and subsequently recaptured by Iran in 1982. They proclaim that:

The Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas resistance movement’s victories over Zionist regime in 2006 and 2008-2009 wars, Iraq and Syria victories over Takfiri terrorist groups as well as Ansarullah victories in Yemen have been inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran said in a statement. (IRNA, 2018a)

Here we can see how Iran uses the 1979 Islamic revolution in order to take credit for the ‘success’ of their Axis of Resistance allies. This can be viewed as Iran trying to frame their
revolution as a group prototype, but with group prototype instead viewed from a macro perspective. In line with the reasoning of Sageman (2017b:20) we can see how they use their 1979 revolution as epitomizing the ideals and values of the group, in this case the Axis of Resistance, and thus serving as a role model for the struggles of their allies. This suggests that Iran is adamant at ensuring that they remain the ‘leader’ of the Axis of Resistance, and through this maintaining their own self-categorization as the leader and their positive distinctiveness of the same.

Iran is likewise using a religious language when trying to invoke a shared Muslim identity, and as a mechanism to weaponize the ummah. In the following excerpt the Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, states the following:

> All the problems of the Islamic world are solvable in the light of unity and cohesion. Relying on God Almighty and His absolute power and trusting in the abilities and capabilities of the Islamic world is the way to save the Islamic Ummah, and not trusting the controlling and hegemonic powers. The Islamic Republic of Iran has pursued a policy of good neighbourliness and harmony and opened its arms of brotherhood and friendship to all Islamic countries. (Mohammadzadegan Khoei, 2023)

Here we can see how Iran tries to achieve cross-group cohesion with the whole Islamic World. By invoking a war narrative, they try to maintain the positive distinctiveness of the ingroup and create an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ social reality (Huddy, 2013:5-6). The identification process emphasizes how a cohesive group can facilitate the killing and sacrificing for their members (Reicher et al. 2008:1327-1329). In a comparable manner we can see how they have created an external outgroup (Ibid), in which the “controlling and hegemonic powers.” cannot be trusted. Hence, they fulfill the identification and exclusion criteria of the Justification for Violence category. Finally, we can see how they laid the foundation for the Weaponization of the Ummah by highlighting shared ressentiment and politicizing religion. Ressentiment stems from the feeling of shared grievances or injustice wherein an external enemy is assigned the blame for this (van Stekelenburg, 2013:227). In relation to this we can see how Iran politicizes religion by portraying an ongoing war against Islam, and states that the Islamic ummah needs to be saved. This can only be achieved unifying the ummah under a shared, Islamic identity, an identity in which Iran are the leader.

5.4.2. Hezbollah propaganda

Like the Iranian propaganda, Hezbollah uses a war narrative to create a dichotomous worldview. The struggle against the West and Israel is portrayed as an ongoing war, with
Hezbollah stating that “Tens of thousands will join our side in any war…” (Moughnieh, 2018). In a similar manner they also released a video hailing the unity of the ‘resistance factions’ in “defending Al Quds” (Al-Manar TV, 2023c). Two excerpts have been chosen to display how Hezbollah tries to create a shared community among the Axis of Resistance factions. The following is an article about a meeting between Sayyed Nasrallah and Ismail Haniyeh, Head of Hamas’ politburo, wherein they discussed operation Al-Quds Sword. Al-Quds Sword was a military operation launched by Hamas in 2021 against Israel. They proclaim that:

The two sides stressed the strength of the brotherly relations between the two Resistance groups and its importance on the consistency of the Axis of Resistance. (Al-Manar TV, 2023c)

Here we can see how Nasrallah and Haniyeh try to highlight a cross-group cohesion. The rhetoric used corresponds to the theoretical model, when understood as part of Identity construction. Tajfel (1974:69), argues that social identity is often an emotionally charged process used by individuals to position themselves as part of a distinctive social group. In conjunction with this we can see how Nasrallah and Haniyeh describe their relations as “brotherly”, and in accordance with Sageman we can see how this shared identity is the consequence of social constructions (Sageman, 2017b:8-9). This creation is the consequence of having, perceived, common characteristics and common fate (Tajfel, 1974:72). Finally, a logical continuation of this can be, in accordance with Sageman’s argument (2017b:6), the enabling of collective behavior against their shared external enemy.

The creation of a dichotomous social reality is another key aspect of Hezbollah’s propaganda. In the following excerpt we can see Nasrallah distinguish between an ingroup, the Axis of Resistance, and an outgroup in the form of Israel and America. The proclaims:

In response to accusations from America and Israel, Sayyed Nasrallah clarified that the components of the axis of resistance are defenders of their original homelands, not mere proxy groups. He contrasted this with the Zionists, whom he characterized as intruders and occupiers in the region. (Salami, 2023)

In accordance with the theoretical model, we can identify how Nasrallah justifies their struggle against Israel and America by creating an external enemy that is ascribed negative stereotypes and values. In this context Israel and America constructed to be existential threats (Reicher et al. 2008:1332), and as such their violent struggle is a necessity since these are incompatible groups (Reicher et al. 2008:1331). Nasrallah portrays a dichotomy between
‘homeland defenders’ and ‘intruders and occupiers’, utilizing the concept of victimhood as part of this in accordance with Positive Distinctiveness. Moreover, this can lay the foundation for a martial social identity to emerge where Muslim “soldiers” and martyrs are hailed as saviors of this supposed victimized ummah. Moreover, he uses resentment and creates the basis for a martial social identity wherein the Axis of Resistance is portrayed as righteous defenders and ‘soldiers’. This suggests that Nasrallah is using the concept of the uniquely positive ingroup as compared with the unequivocally evil outgroup, to both justify their use of violence and weaponize the ummah.

5.4.3. Hamas propaganda

As with the previous categories there are similarities between the propaganda used by Iran and Hezbollah as compared with Hamas’ propaganda. In accordance with the first category within the model, Identity construction, the propaganda tries to create a dichotomous division of the world. The following is an excerpt from an interview the former Hamas Political Bureau chairman, Khaled Mashal, made to the Yemeni show Al-Mahriah TV. The speech was made 3 days after Hamas launched its terrorist attack against Israel on October 7th. In this speech he proclaims that:

"We should take to the streets and the city squares in Arab and Islamic cities, as well as in cities everywhere where there are [Islamic] communities. There is a call [for demonstrations] this Friday – the Al-Aqsa Deluge Friday. […] "First of all, I address the countries neighboring [Israel] – Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. I appeal to all of the people, the men and women there – both on the official and popular level. Your duty is greater than that of others because you are the closest to Palestine. (MEMRI TV, 2023b)

Here we can see how Hamas tries to use their October 7th terrorist attack to mobilize Islamic communities all over the globe. In accordance with the theoretical model, we can see how Hamas celebrates their own terrorist attacks to create a shared identity and proclaims that support to their struggle is a duty for their neighbors. A logical continuation of this would be that eradication of Israel is viewed as a duty and moral obligation (Reicher et al. 2008:1336-1337). Furthermore, we can see how they identify the three concepts within the Weaponization of the Ummah dimension. They insinuate resentment towards Israel for the suffering they have inflicted upon them, and as being the prerequisite for their struggle and their calls for demonstrations. On the emotional level this quote could be understood as invoking emotions such as contempt, and outrage, which corresponds with the theoretical model (TenHouten, 2018:52). Moreover, they employ a politicized religious identity in order to call for the support of the Muslim world. It is this shared politicized religious identity they
try to invoke to mobilize the ummah in worldwide demonstrations against Israel. This suggests that Hamas tries to convey a cross-group Islamic identity, like the way that Iran calls for Islamic unity. An implication of this is that Hamas can weaponize the ummah. However, in comparison to the Iranian propaganda which call for Islamic unity in general, we can note that Hamas’ calls for Islamic unity to achieve their political goal of liberating Palestine from the Israeli occupation.

Expanding on this difference between the Iranian and Hezbollah propaganda on the one hand, and Hamas’ propaganda on the other hand we can note that differing views towards nationalism. Iran and Hezbollah down-play the role of nationalism and instead focus their messaging on a cross-group regional or Islamic identity. Although Hamas also highlights a shared Islamic identity and the importance of regional cooperation, this is often situated in relation to their own struggle. The following excerpt from the 1988 charter highlights how Hamas uses nationalism as part of their propaganda. They proclaim that:

> Nationalism, from the point of view of the Islamic Resistance Movement, is part of the religious creed. Nothing in nationalism is more significant or deeper than in the case when an enemy should tread Moslem land. Resisting and quelling the enemy become the individual duty of every Moslem, male or female. A woman can go out to fight the enemy without her husband's permission, and so does the slave: without his master's permission. (The Avalon Project, 2008)

Here we can see how Hamas uses nationalism as tied to the Palestinian cause, framing this as a creed and duty for every Muslim and all the regional countries. When applying the theoretical model several aspects can be identified in conjunction with the above quote. We can see how Hamas employs a simplified dichotomous worldview, consisting of an ongoing war against Islam which can invoke positive distinctiveness and enable the creation of martial social identities. Consequently, this dehumanization of the perceived enemy can lay the foundation for the use of violence (Sageman, 2017b:8). In accordance with the theoretical model, we can see how Hamas politicizes religion by equating it with nationalism. The religious struggle is situated as part of a victimhood employed by Hamas, wherein they struggle against an unwelcome enemy that is, allegedly, occupying Muslim land. Hence, displaying a ressentiment towards these external enemies (Sageman, 2017a:117-118). This ressentiment is subsequently used as a mechanism to weaponize the ummah, as predicted by the theoretical model. The theoretical model proposes that “Martial social identity is a self-categorization process that involves the use of violence as a legitimate defensive measure in order to protect the individual's imagined community”. In relation to this we can see how
Hamas is trying to weaponize the ummah by proclaiming that their struggle is a defensive one and constituting an existential struggle. This indicates that Hamas is deliberately using nationalism and religion to create a shared identity among Muslims, and as a means to weaponize the ummah against the perceived intruders.
6. Conclusions

The thesis sought to answer the following research question:

- Through the lens of social identity theory, how have cross-group cohesion been achieved between Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas?

The findings uncovered striking similarities between the propaganda of these groups. They expressed a dichotomous worldview consisting of the righteous but oppressed ummah, which is the victim of an ongoing religious war against Islam wherein Jews and the West are the perpetrators. This threat is portrayed as existential, where the only solution that can ensure the survival of the ingroup is to employ violence against these external enemies. For example, Hamas portrays violence and the eradication of Israel, and its inhabitants, as the only way of ensuring their survival and as predestined to succeed. Moreover, religious references are used to create a shared identity and as a common framework that ties these groups together, creating cross-group cohesion. The Palestinian struggle in particular is framed in religious terms, wherein it is described as a religious duty and as predestined to succeed. Furthermore, by using antisemitic tropes and conspiratorial rhetoric these groups have successfully created a shared identity centered around ressentiment and victimhood. This facilitates the justification for violence and enables the creation of martial social identities, wherein ‘soldiers’ view it as their duty to join the struggle.

The main difference between these three groups is that Hamas’ organizational existence is centered around the struggle of liberating Palestine from the, perceived, Israeli occupation. Hamas uses religious nationalism to create a shared identity among Muslims, and as a means to weaponize the ummah against the perceived intruders. However, this is limited to creating unity towards the Palestinian cause. In contrast, Iran and Hezbollah have broader goals and ambitions, which can be seen when Iran claims that “all the problems of the Islamic world are solvable in the light of unity and cohesion”. Moreover, Iran is adamant at ensuring that they remain the ‘leader’ of the Axis of Resistance, and through this maintaining their own self-categorization as the leader and their positive distinctiveness of the same. These factors showcase how their goals are broader than the Palestinian struggle.

6.1. Cumulative value and theoretical implications

The main argument of this thesis is thus that cross-group cohesiveness is achieved using a common core of perceived enemies, and the construction of fraternal and religious ties. In conjunction with previous research, this thesis has contributed to a deeper understanding of
why and how contemporary Islamism uses antisemitism, constructed war narratives, and religion as mechanisms to achieve cross-group cohesion. Moreover, it has shown how the competing religious denominations between Iran and Hamas are subordinate to their shared political goals, deviating from Jahanbani and Weedon Levy (2024) by arguing that there is an ideological coherence between Iran and Hamas. This can be seen in their shared worldview, the Iranian attempts to connect the success of Hamas with their revolution in 1979, and the use of a shared religious framework. Furthermore, it expands on the work done by Afrachteh (1981) and Arjomand (1986) by showing how Iran still employs religious symbolism and references, conspiratorial rhetoric, and a war narrative, as part of their propaganda. It further developed the knowledge of Afrachteh (1981) and Arjomand (1986) by studying this propaganda from a broader, cross-group perspective. It provided a greater depth regarding how Iran has been able to create an ideational convergence centered around concepts such as antisemitism and anti-Western sentiments.

There is an inherent risk involved when one conducts research based on interpretations in that it can be construed as subjective. However, this claim is easy to mitigate by situating one’s own research in relation to previous research, theory, and implementing a cumulative approach, which I have done.

This thesis has shown how the cross-group cohesion between Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, is dependent on the creation of shared identities based on victimhood, religious references, and the creation of shared external enemies. The theoretical implications of this are that the cohesion among the groups are inherently ideational rather than material, meaning that the ties between these groups cannot be viewed merely as dependent on material support. Ideational cohesion is stronger, and subsequently, more difficult to combat since it is not dependent on the existence of a particular actor and their material support, but rather on a shared worldview and ideas. In this sense, propaganda serves the role of spreading this worldview, recruiting supporters, and mobilizing this support into a martial social identity among their supporters. These supporters view themselves as ‘soldiers’, soldiers who belong to a unified group but can act as independent organisms in order to both spread the message and act in order to attain the perceived goals of the group.

6.2. Future research

Although the findings shed light on how Iran have exerted control over their proxy groups through the use of propaganda and cohesion, this is still an understudied and undertheorized area. Future areas of research could therefore expand and develop a framework wherein
media propaganda could constitute a dimension of proxy control. An undertaking of this nature would require expanding the timeframe of analysis considerably in order to capture developments and changes over time. Moreover, it would require expanding the number of groups studied in order to create a robust study. In summary, this thesis has provided knowledge of how media propaganda, centered around the creation of a shared reality, constitutes one strategy that can be implemented to attain the third control mechanism, preference control.
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