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The Syrian wars of words: international and local instrumentalisations of the war on terror

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a study of the 'wars of words' among selected parties involved in the Syrian conflict. Based on a combination of content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), it examines actors' discourses within the United Nations Security Council (2011–2015), the global arena of confrontation and international legitimisation of armed actions. Here, it investigates their instrumentalisation of the word 'terrorism' and the war on terror narrative, and it explores the dynamics of discursive (de)legitimisation of the use of violence in Syria. The article shows how parties instrumentalised this narrative to criminalise their enemies while legitimising their own violent actions. By doing this, the paper also offers a broader reflection on the global narrative on terrorism, and its different reception and instrumentalisation by core and peripheral actors.

Introduction

This article studies the use of the word 'terrorism' in the political discourses articulated by selected parties involved in the Syrian conflict – ie Syria, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UK, the US and France. Based on the premise that political narratives and labels play a fundamental part in the (de)legitimisation of actors in a conflict,[1] it studies parties' instrumentalisation of the word 'terrorism', and their appropriation of the war on terror (WOT) narrative to (de)legitimise enemies. Tracking their use of this label, the article describes actors' 'wars of words' in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), this being an international arena of confrontation but also of (de)legitimisation of the use of force at a global level.[2]

Several works have focused on the dynamics of the conflict,[3] or the rise of terrorist groups in Syria.[4] However, a theoretical examination of the discourses produced is still lacking. Furthermore, while the use of the label 'terrorism' as a linguistic weapon has been widely examined,[5] this work compares several parties' instrumentalisation and discursive resistance to these narratives. The study of these discourses sheds further light on the political dynamics of the conflict. The mobilisation of the WOT narrative allowed the inscription of the violence used within the global moral duty to counter terrorism – supported and legitimised by the

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UNSC. Through this process, Assad and his allies were provided powerful discursive political tools. Rendered a local front line of the global WOT, the Syrian government's violence became difficult to criminalise – and thus difficult to intervene in. Politically, the mobilisation of this narrative allowed Assad to present himself as a Western ally in the WOT, countering terrorism in the name of the international community. This, for example, permitted him to resist his delegitimisation and counter-calls for a political transition in Syria, and to strengthen his position at the negotiations table where he could stall or reject negotiations with those he defined as 'terrorist enemies'.

Following the Beirut Critical Security Studies School,[6] this article looks at a broad spectrum of actors and adopts a decentred approach to discourses of security and terrorism. It answers the Beirut School's call for a critical analysis that goes beyond the Western-centric preoccupation with powerful actors' discourses showed by the mainstream, and, to some extent, critical approaches.[7] This research thus contrasts global and local actors' political discourses on terrorism in Syria, and it examines their appropriation and instrumentalisation of the Western WOT narrative to provide a decentred reading of these dynamics. By doing so, it highlights peripheral parties' power, their capacity to (re)produce and instrumentalise global discourses, and the consequences of these processes. Overall, the article hopes to modestly contribute to the theoretical reflection on the need to decentralise critical (discursive) studies of security as formulated by the Beirut School.

By addressing these issues together, this article bridges the Beirut School, advocating for a more decentred approach to discourses of security, with critical terrorism studies (CTS), which conceptualises 'terrorism' as a linguistic label and focuses on discourses sustaining the WOT.[8] To do this, it discusses the power of labelling the enemy 'terrorist' as a legitimising narrative of violence. Secondly, it reflects on the UNSC as the locus where political wars of words can take place. Eventually, after some methodological remarks and a brief contextualisation of the Syrian war, the article describes each actor's use of 'terror' and the (sought) consequences of these discursive moves.

'They are terrorists!': labelling enemies to delegitimise them

Political discourses and the politics of naming have an important role in the (de)legitimisation of violence. The application of different labels implies diverse interpretations of actors, their actions, and their legitimacy.[9] Moreover, the possibility of naming the enemy is strictly linked with the political process of designating the enemy itself. The interpretation of specific acts of political violence is a (discursive) political process,[10] and so is the identification – and consequent (discursive) construction – of the enemy.[11] Therefore, conflict dynamics need to be apprehended also 'by studying politics',[12] and the study of a conflict cannot be disentangled from the analysis of discursive processes.

Among the possible descriptions of the enemy, the labelling as 'terrorist' is a particularly powerful process. The word was first used to refer to the French government's violence against its population in the aftermath of the French Revolution – ie the period of *la Terreur*. Therefore, historically, 'terrorism' has been used to identify both states' and non-states' violent activities. However, in the last few decades, the main understanding of this political violence has linked it principally to non-state actors. Avoiding that states may also perpetrate terrorism, in 2005, the UNSC formulated a working definition that bounded terrorism to non-state

actors. Although the UNSC shaped international understandings of the term, its meaning is still at the centre of the political dispute.

These historical shifts and the conceptual confusion surrounding the term allowed the appropriations described in this article – where, for example, actors accused their enemies of 'state terrorism'. These instrumentalisations were driven by the fact that 'terrorism' is a pejorative label[13] which conveys assumptions about the barbarism, immorality and irrationality of the actors perpetrating it.[14] Its application has specific consequences for the interpretation of political violence[15] and, most importantly, on the understanding of its perpetrators' political legitimacy – or lack thereof.[16] The labelling of an act as 'terrorism' neglects violence's political content, and criminalises and delegitimises its perpetrators.[17] The depoliticisation of the enemy's claims – and the legitimisation to fight it – explains why 'terrorism' has been widely used as a 'linguistic weapon' in political 'wars of words'.

Moreover, after 9/11, the labelling of the enemy as 'terrorist' usually implies an attempt to inscribe the fight against it within the global WOT, the international counterterrorism operations mainly against (Islamic) non-state armed groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Qaida.[18] Waged against the enemies of humanity,[19] the WOT is a military, ideological and discursive enterprise which has profoundly shaped armed interventions and global understandings about the legitimate use of (extreme) political violence.[20]

The WOT is usually seen as a discursive enterprise articulated by core discursive entrepreneurs – ie Western states – spread to and received in the peripheries.[21] Despite maintaining the core–periphery distinction, this article highlights peripheral actors' power to resist or instrumentalise global narratives. As the Syrian case shows, multiple decentred hegemonic centres may emerge in the (re)production of global discourses –from both core and peripheries. Nevertheless, core discursive entrepreneurs may become bound to the discourse they have produced. Contrastingly, peripheral actors may be able to instrumentalise the discourse in a way that exceeds these boundaries – eg Assad in the Syrian context.

Discourses and practices are strictly intertwined, and discourses can produce concrete political outcomes. Inscribing a conflict within the WOT implies encompassing it within this global campaign, justifying extreme military operations and exceptional violent measures against what has been defined as the enemy of humanity, but also (trying) to legitimise this violence in the eyes of the international community. Specifically, the language of counter-terrorism has been used to justify and legitimise military operations in, among other places, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.[22] These dynamics become specifically relevant within a war context, where various parties compete for the legitimisation –at both an international level and a national level – of their violent actions. Here, (de)legitimisation processes affect the implementation of armed operations against the opponents,[23] the support of the international community, and the inclusion or exclusion from peace negotiations.[24] It is, consequently, in these contexts that the use of the WOT narrative can be strictly linked to the delegitimisation of the 'enemy'.[25] Therefore, in a conflict, the labelling of the opponent as 'terrorist' can be defined as a 'powerful contextualised political choice'.[26] Focusing on the Syrian war, this article explores these political choices in the context of the UNSC.

The UNSC as the locus of the 'wars of words'

Despite recent criticism for its difficulties in dealing with the war in Syria and other regions,[27] the UNSC is still among the most powerful international institutions with the power to create normative obligations for its members. The body has 15 members, five of which are permanent. However, according to the UN Charter, all UN Member States can join a meeting if their interests are affected by the topic under consideration.[28] This was the case for the meetings under study, joined by, among others, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Chapter VII of the UN Charter empowers the organ to determine what constitutes a 'threat to international peace and security' and tasks it with the decision of what (binding) measures to implement against it. Therefore, the body not only is entitled to 'confer or to withhold approval of acts of violence',[29] but also has the power to decide what constitutes a threat to peace and security at an international level. Considering that the identification of the enemy is a political process, joining a UNSC meeting implies taking part in the negotiations for the designation of a global enemy. By encompassing states' violent actions within the global collective authority, the organ can authorise and legitimise the use of violence.[30]

Here, the discursive disputes over the labelling of an act of violence are aimed at the international legitimisation of countermeasures and their institutionalisation. Moreover, these wars of words are aimed to depoliticise the enemies and delegitimise their voices within the international political sphere – eg the UNSC. In the case under analysis, for example, actors' political discourses sought the delegitimisation of their enemies or their exclusion from the UN-backed peace conference Geneva Talks on Syria's negotiations table.[31] Some actors also pursued the legitimisation of their violent actions, calling for the inclusion of the armed groups they were fighting in the UN list of designated terrorist groups – discursive moves that were somewhat resisted by other parties, as the article will show.

The UNSC's shared understanding of terrorism focuses on a kind of violence carried out by 'Islamic-inspired', non-state groups such as ISIL and al-Qaida.[32] Nevertheless, the lack of a universally shared definition of this violence and the porousness of the discourse on international terrorism allowed the instrumentalisation of the WOT narrative by the various actors analysed. However, not all parties' discursive attempts produced a global institutionalised answer. This depends on the UNSC's favourable reception of these labelling moves and is linked to various aspects, such as the council's established understanding of terrorism, but also members' power and their capacity to instrumentalise global narratives. It is these discursive attempts at instrumentalisation of the WOT narrative that the article describes. Before discussing these processes, however, a brief contextualisation of the Syrian conflict needs to be made.

The Syrian conflict (2011–2015)

Since its beginning in March 2011, the conflict in Syria reached a high level of complexity caused by the many actors involved and their many competing interests. In a great simplification of extremely complex political dynamics, the following lines will only highlight elements relevant for the contextualisation of this research. Therefore, this article will, to some extent, 'betray the complexity of Syrian society and the conflict itself'.[33] It will be guilty of

reproducing powerful parties' voices and their interpretations of reality while silencing less powerful actors – ie militias, Syrian population, and specific groups censured by their discourses.[34]

The Syrian war began with a series of protests by the population in March 2011.[35] Despite their peaceful nature, the government's response was very bloody and violent; it involved opening fire on the population and strong and violent repression.[36] This led to a quick radicalisation and polarisation of the conflict, with the formation, in the following years, of various armed groups and militias.[37] The extremely violent nature of the conflict and the government's repression gradually aroused the concern of the international community.

Simplifying political dynamics, in Syria, local and international actors' postures were shaped both by political concerns towards the conflict and by economic and political interests in the region.[38] Parties' diverging positions towards the Assad administration allowed their division into two blocs – each of which instrumentalised the WOT narrative in different ways. This division, however, does not imply that parties in the same bloc shared a political agenda or cooperated among themselves.[39] On the contrary, states pursued different – at times, clashing – interests and had different approaches towards the conflict. Therefore, this classification is based mainly on their different posture towards Assad's government. Among the actors analysed here, Russia and Iran were Assad's supporters. These countries' political efforts were aimed at keeping Assad in place while criminalising any opposition to the Syrian government.

The other bloc was composed of the UK, the US, France and, at a more regional level, (Sunni) Qatar, and (Sunni) Saudi Arabia, all strong advocates of government change, and thus seeking Assad's delegitimisation. Violent events such as the Ghouta attack with sarin gas in August 2013 marked these parties' anti-Assad political rhetoric, which peaked between 2012 and 2014.[40] Despite a failed attempt to intervene in the country in the aftermath of Ghouta,[41] the Western posture was mainly one of non-direct interference, marked by the unwillingness to 'marshal political resources and capital' in Syria.[42] Petrol monarchies also avoided intervening directly, but sponsored proxy groups countering Assad, as they considered the conflict an opportunity to compete for regional hegemony.[43]

While the international confrontation divided the Permanent Members of the UNSC, at a regional level, the religious line 'gave the conflict a Sunni–Shia flavour and fitted into a regional struggle which had flared since the American occupations of Iraq'.[44] However, the central question for all actors was legitimacy – to govern, to intervene, to use violence and to join the negotiations.

Moreover, since its very beginning, the conflict was marked by the presence of local and regional armed militias.[45] These were also highly polarised. Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias supported the Syrian government. Groups under the umbrella term 'opposition' were fighting it and received a different kind of recognition and legitimisation by the international community. Some of these were (Sunni) Islamic militias supposedly sponsored by the petrol monarchies.[46] Among them, the groups that received more attention in the discourses analysed are *Ahrar as-Sham* and the Islamic Front coalition which included *Jaysh al-Islam*.

The presence of the terrorist groups *Jabhat an-Nusra* – the Al-Nusra Front (ANF) – and, above all, ISIL drastically changed the dynamics of the conflict. A branch of al-Qaida in Syria until 2016,[47] the ANF fought at times with *Ahrar as-Sham* and others, showing that it had allies on the ground – and at the negotiations table. In contrast, ISIL was strategically distant from the other militias.[48] The group grew particularly strong in 2013–2014 and declared its

Islamic Caliphate in 2014. The various attacks it perpetrated locally and internationally, its control of territories rich in natural resources, and of supply routes and major corridors, and its claims to a sovereign Caliphate challenging Syria's and Iraq's sovereignty and borders placed it at the centre of international concern.[49]

The timeline analysed here – 2011–2015 – represents a period of political and military stalemate. In 2013–2014, ISIL's emergence changed the landscape of the conflict. The presence of the new threat allowed Assad to present himself as the only bastion against ISIL, a posture which led to a reluctant international acceptance of his government as 'the less evil'.[50] Russia also capitalised on the situation and intervened in the country in September 2015 – thus breaking the stalemate and changing the conflict dynamics from 2015 onwards. Many of these elements are observable in the political discourses analysed, and they are illustrated after some methodological remarks.

Studying the labelling of 'terrorism' in the UNSC: methodological remarks

Methodologically, the study is focused on how the term 'terrorism/terrorist' has been employed as a 'linguistic weapon' within the political discourses produced in the UNSC meetings about 'The situation in the Middle East (and Palestine)'. I analysed meetings between March 2011 – ie the moment when the Syrian conflict entered the Council's agenda – and December 2015 – ie a year when ISIL was particularly active locally and internationally. This time frame captures the main shifts in the political dynamics of the conflict (to date, 2019). For reasons of space, I narrowed the selection of actors to those representing the two main political postures mentioned above at a local and an international level – ie Syria, Iran and Russia on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, France, the UK, and the US on the other.

The analysis is based on a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA)[51] and content analysis.[52] Although some authors argue that these two methods are incompatible,[53] I consider that their combination provides a stronger approach to the study of political discourses.[54] Focusing on their declarations about Syria, I have tracked actors' use of the word 'terror*' – eg terrorism, terrorist(s), terror – to understand how it was employed. In other words, I analysed the variations in the use of the word 'terror*' in terms of its referent object – ie the labelled subject – to highlight the various patterns in its use.[55] CDA was then applied to understand the consequences of this labelling. This codification was triangulated with keywords in context and clusters analysis, to reinforce the consistency of the coding.[56] After the first codification, a codebook was compiled to illustrate the results into graphs.[57] This is presented in Table S1 of the online Supplementary material.[58] Not illustrated here for reasons of space, mentions of armed groups were also codified because these reflect parties' concerns on the ground.

Wars of words on Syria: the use of 'terrorism' in the UNSC

The UNSC held 51 meetings on Syria (2011–2015). Symbolic of the dynamics of the conflict, two peaks can be observed. The first is 2012 when the situation in Syria started receiving greater international attention. The second is 2015 when ISIL was particularly active locally and internationally. Despite not being a UNSC member during these years, Syria is the country that registered the highest number of appearances, joining the meetings through article

37 of the UN Charter. The country needed to discursively legitimise its actions and defend its position, while at the same time dismissing others' accusations. The Syrian government never surrendered to its criminalisation and presented itself as the only legitimate interlocutor throughout the whole conflict. Seeking legitimacy from within, Syria's presence in the UNSC was aimed at presenting itself as a full member of the international community, thus resisting others' delegitimising discursive attempts.

Figure S2 (in the Supplementary material) illustrates the general use of the word 'terror*'. Reflecting its main internationally agreed conceptualisation, it was mainly used to refer to non-state actors.[59] However, mentions of 'states sponsoring terrorism' and 'state terrorism' can also be observed. References to the 'ghosts of state terrorism'[60] represent a strategic appropriation and instrumentalisation of the WOT narrative, too. As mentioned above, the idea that states can perpetrate terrorist violence contradicts the internationally established understanding of the concept and the UN's official conceptualisation.[61] The use of these concepts is thus also representative of parties' attempts to demonise their enemies. Contrastingly, results for silences (Ø) reflect attempts not to refer to terrorism in Syria, whose presence would have implied the need for military action in the country because of the international duty to counter terrorism.

Symbolic of the conflict dynamics, the diachronic comparison of the results (Supplementary material, Figure S3) highlights 2013–2014 as a shifting moment. The first years were marked by silences and shy references to state terrorism – mainly used to demonise Assad. ISIL's Caliphate changed international concerns and rendered the use of 'terror*' mostly reserved to identify non-state actors. ISIL was also the most mentioned non-state actor, followed by ANF and al-Qaida.

Syria

As observable in Figure S4 of the Supplementary material, the Assad government's main use of 'terror*' was to refer to non-state actors and states sponsoring terrorism. This is symbolic of the Syrian discursive political strategy of linking any actor that interfered with the government with 'terrorism', to criminalise it internationally and legitimise violent answers against it under the banner of the WOT.[62] The Assad government's instrumentalisation of the term was observable since the very beginning of the conflict, and results for Ø are thus very low. Already in 2011–2012, the Syrian government used it to criminalise the popular protests and to legitimise its exceptionally violent repression, arguing that 'Peaceful demonstration is a basic right guaranteed under Syrian law. [...] But what [...] no State can accept is terrorism'.[63]

The high results for 'state sponsors' reflect the denunciations of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's involvement, among other countries. Referring to 'terrorism fuelled from abroad',[64] Syria denounced these countries for 'sponsoring [...] terrorists [...] and describe(d) such terrorists as a moderate opposition'.[65] By linking the petrol monarchies with terrorism, the Syrian government was attempting to delegitimise their involvement in the conflict, but also their voices in the Council. Their link with (the sponsoring of) terrorism was aimed at criminalising and securitising them as actors within the dichotomic narrative of the global WOT, where either you are with the terrorists or with the ones fighting them – ie the international community, represented here by the UN.

Instrumentalising the WOT narrative, the Syrian government used 'terror*' to depoliticise and criminalise non-state groups fighting against it. Aiming at Assad's destitution, these

militias' use of armed force challenged the sovereign nature of the Syrian state and its monopoly of force – and thus its power and legitimacy. The argument that 'Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaish Al-Islam have reached an agreement with the Al-Nusra Front, which is an organisation on the Security Council's (terrorist) list'[66] is representative of the attempts to link these militias with internationally designated terrorist groups and thus have them included in the UN list of designated terrorist groups. Associating 'ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist groups that are allied with those two organisations'[67] would have internationally criminalised them, and legitimised the fight against them as part of the WOT. It would also have delegitimised and depoliticised their violence, excluding them from peace talks and sparing Assad from negotiations about his power.

The results for 'label' (Supplementary material, Figure S4) are symbolic of Syria's denunciation of other actors' insistence 'on using the terms "armed opposition", "non-State armed groups" or just "armed groups" in describing armed terrorist groups'.[68] The Western terrorist/moderate dichotomy was mainly discursive rhetoric because not only did organisations fight together on the ground, many of them underwent a gradual Islamisation throughout the conflict.[69] Moreover, they challenged principles of international law, such as states' monopoly of power and the illegality of non-state actors' use of armed force. Hence, they were blurring the distinction between 'moderate' and 'terrorist' non-state actors' violence. Consequently, Assad's instrumentalisation of the WOT was somewhat difficult to resist for other actors because it fitted well within the international conceptualisation of terrorism. Justifying its actions by recalling international standards, Syria sharply remarked that 'groups carrying weapons outside of State authority […] can only be called terrorist groups, according to the Security Council's definition in this regard'.[70]

Syria discursively resisted any legitimisation of the opposition, arguing that 'there is no lawful terrorism and sinful terrorism – no halal and haram – just as there is no moderate and extremist terrorism'.[71] Assad's administration repeatedly claimed that it was 'fighting filthy terrorist groups on behalf of the whole world',[72] or that 'In Syria, we are fighting terrorism on behalf of humanity'.[73] The government denounced the political differentiation between organisations of similar nature, thus encompassing its enemies within the 'phenomenon of international terrorism' and seeking their international criminalisation. This appropriation of the WOT narrative allowed the government to present itself as the local front line in the global WOT and thus to (attempt to) justify its violence in the eyes of the international community while maintaining its power and legitimacy.

Iran

An ally of Assad's Shia/Alawite government, Iran's position was defined by its economic and geopolitical interests in the region, safeguarded by Assad's rule. The Persian country backed the Syrian administration from the very beginning through Hezbollah and, since 2013, through direct intervention.[74] Although the country was not a UNSC member in the years under analysis, its presence was still registered in 15 meetings.

Illustrated in Figure S5 (Supplementary material), Iran's results for   are representative of the country's involvement in the first few years, backing outsider militias and local *shabiha* (Syrian paramilitary groups).[75] Its silences can be interpreted as attempts not to have these groups labelled as terrorists – specifically, not to have Hezbollah listed as a terrorist organisation by many UN members. Its non-state character and its use of armed force would have

made it difficult to resist its condemnation as a terrorist group. Therefore, Iran did not mention any of these militias, and the only non-state groups it referred to were ISIL and ANF (as in mentions of 'non-state'; Supplementary material, Figure S5).

Furthermore, due to its precarious global position,[76] Iran needed to avoid accusations of sponsoring terrorism abroad, which could have delegitimised its position even further. Unlike Syria, it showed caution in accusing other countries of sponsoring terrorism, and it did not link any group to specific sponsors. Through claims of a general nature, it argued, for example, that 'There are numerous efforts by certain States to further complicate the situation in Syria by providing financial assistance and arms to armed groups'.[77]

Nevertheless, Iran still tried to have the opposition criminalised, delegitimised and, above all, excluded from the negotiations table. In January 2014, before the Geneva Peace Talks II, the country called on the international community to place 'the question of combating terrorism on the agenda of the second Geneva Conference on Syria'.[78] Assad and his allies sought to frame the event as a conference to combat terrorism, a move that gave them discursive space to reject negotiating with the groups they depicted as 'terrorists'. This allowed them to call for the exclusion of the 'terrorist opposition' from the Peace Talks – thus attempting to shield Assad from losing power in the negotiations.

Russia

Russia was also an important ally of Assad's government.[79] More than by ideological considerations,[80] the country's interests in Syria were linked to geopolitical concerns of Western expansion in the region and scepticism towards a military intervention[81]; the possible expansion of Salafist-jihadism and the consequent destabilisation of its areas of influence[82]; and economic and military interests.[83] Presented in Figure S6 (Supplementary material), results for Russia show how the first few years of the conflict were marked by silences (Ø). These reflect the lack of condemnation of Assad's violence, seen as a quick solution to the rebellions. His repression was discursively justified as proportionate and legitimate because Assad's soldiers, it was argued, 'have been fighting not unarmed men, but combat units, including the so-called Free Syrian Army and extremist groups, including Al-Qaida'.[84]

When Russia used 'terror*', it referred mainly to non-state actors. Since the very beginning, discursive attempts were made to delegitimise and criminalise the popular opposition, which 'no longer hides its extremist bent and is relying on terrorist tactics'[85]. Russia mentioned 'terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front',[86] discursively linking the militias on the ground with international terrorism, seeking their global delegitimisation and criminalisation.

Similarly to its Arab ally, Russia accused the Gulf countries of being 'those who sponsor or train terrorist fighters in the region',[87] thus criminalising their involvement in the conflict at an international level. Moreover, arguing that 'Attempts to divide terrorists into good and bad groups are unacceptable',[88] Russia denounced that 'the West approved the actions of terrorists because they formed the backbone of the opposition to President Al-Assad'.[89] The country criticised Western references 'to entities that are on the Security Council sanctions lists, including the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State, as "the opposition"'.[90] Russia was thus resisting Western acceptance of these armed groups – and its ambiguous application of 'terror' (results for 'label' in Figure S6) – and it was criminalising

their labelling as the 'opposition' by linking them to internationally recognised terrorist groups.

Stating that 'Their list of good guys now included the Al-Nusra Front',[91] Russia attempted to delegitimise Western postures on the conflict, linking them to international terrorism. Furthermore, in an attempt to condemn and delegitimise previous and future Western interventions, it specified that the 'invasion of Iraq and then the external interference in the conflict in Syria, including flirting with the armed opposition […] (led to) the emergence of a new threat, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant […]'.[92] Russia's efforts were thus aimed at criminalising the armed opposition, but also at delegitimising the Western position at an international level – and thus enhancing its own, which (supposedly) respected the UN's official position on international terrorism.

The country also resisted the involvement of the opposition in the Peace Talks on Syria, arguing that 'there is no place for terrorists, whatever their affiliation, at the negotiating table'.[93] Russia was focused on keeping Assad in power without him being required to negotiate his position. It thus dismissed the negotiation processes, arguing that instead of fighting terrorism, 'What are our Western colleagues proposing instead? They are offering talk, which is good for naïve people'.[94] Capitalising on these accusations and instrumentalising the presence of 'international and regional terrorism'[95] as manifestations of the same phenomenon, Russia justified its official intervention in the country in 2015.

Russia legitimised its armed operation by inscribing it within 'the joint fight against terrorism'.[96] Calling for the creation of a 'broad anti-terrorism front […] with the support of everyone on the planet who opposes terror',[97] Russia instrumentalised the dichotomic understanding of the WOT to confront the Western-led coalition against terrorism in Syria. Arguing that 'The so-called coalition has refused to cooperate with Damascus and Tehran, which are logical allies in the fight against terrorism in the region',[98] the country was criticising and delegitimising Western policy in the region, while at the same time reinstating Russia's allies' legitimacy and its own – depicting itself as the country leading international counterterrorism in Syria, and trying to enhance its international position.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Despite their different policies and attempts to gain predominant influence in the region,[99] Qatar and Saudi Arabia shared a similar posture towards Assad and are thus discussed together. They were driven by their economic interests,[100] as for both states, Assad's fall would have implied the possibility to contain Iran and expand an Islamist agenda in the region through a new (Sunni) Syrian government.[101] Therefore, both countries supported Salafi Islamist opposition groups such as *Ahrar al-Sham* and the Islamic Front.[102]

Despite their few appearances in the Council, their political use of 'terror*' is representative of their demonisation of Assad. Already in 2012, they denounced that 'the Syrian authorities […] described unarmed demonstrators as armed and terrorist groups. As a result, some in Syria have had to resort to self-defence, which is a legitimate right […]'.[103] They were thus resisting Assad's labelling of these groups as terrorists and legitimising the groups' actions by describing them as self-defence. In doing so, they were also disassociating themselves from accusations of sponsoring terrorism, legitimising their involvement.

These Arab states never mentioned any of the opposition groups, but repeatedly criminalised Hezbollah – ie Syria's and Iran's (Shia) ally on the ground. Both countries mentioned this group more than they mentioned ISIL and ANF, and repeatedly referred to the presence of 'extremist groups cloaked falsely in religious garbs, such as Daesh/Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al-Qaida, Hizbullah'[104] to encompass Hezbollah within the international terrorism phenomenon and their actions against it within the WOT. It is in this light that references to terrorist non-state groups should be read.

Nevertheless, their strongest attacks were aimed at exposing the 'horrible crimes and terrorism carried out by the regime in Syria'.[105] Both countries denounced the Syrian government's 'insistence on pursuing a security solution and State terrorism'.[106] Delegitimising him as sovereign – ie tasked with his people's protection – Assad was depicted as a threat to his population, and it was argued that 'the Syrians believe that the main problem is State terrorism'.[107] The two petrol monarchies thus called for 'establishing a transitional authority (which) […] would spare the world the dangers of terrorism'.[108]

The accusations of state terrorism were aimed at demonising Assad as a ruler, but also at delegitimising him as an international actor. The political transition was depicted as a matter of international security in the WOT context, and his government was criminalised and demonised through these accusations of terrorism. The Arab countries were thus trying to expel Assad from the international community and delegitimise his voice in the UNSC. Depicting Assad's violence as 'state terrorism', however, reflects a Saudi and Qatari instrumentalisation of the WOT narratives. As mentioned above, the international discourse on terrorism constructs this as non-state actors' violence. Internationally, state terrorism is not a recognised concept.[109] Therefore, accusing the Syrian government of 'state terrorism' represents a peripheral instrumentalisation and appropriation of the WOT narrative, and exceeded the internationally established boundaries of the discourse – focused on non-state actors' violence. Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as peripheral countries, could exceed the discursive space of the WOT. In contrast, Western countries, the leading discourse entrepreneurs, were more constrained by it.

The West

The political discourses of France, the UK and the US had a similar evolution over time (see Supplementary material, Figures S8 and S9). Advocates of Assad's deposition in favour of a more 'Western-friendly' government, these countries' position was ambiguous throughout the conflict.[110] A military operation seemed closer in 2013–2014;[111] however, the memories of previous interventions[112] and the unclear political succession of Assad[113] rendered these countries hesitant and cautious about direct involvement against the government. Eventually, in 2014–2015, their concern shifted drastically towards ISIL – and the references to 'non-state actors' exponentially increased (Supplementary material, Figure S9).

The first few years of the conflict are marked by 'silences'. Discursively constructing Syria as a local front line of the WOT would have rendered calls for intervention difficult to resist for these countries. References to 'terrorism' in Syria would have conveyed the necessity to intervene because of the global moral responsibility to counter terrorism. As a fight articulated and led mainly by these countries, a Western failure to intervene to counter international terrorism in Syria could have undermined these states' legitimacy within the WOT.

Therefore, the West refrained from using this label in an attempt to avoid the internation-alisation of a local/regional conflict, and the construction of Syria as a site for intervention.

Moreover, these silences also reflect the avoidance of labelling the 'moderate Syrian oppo-sition'[114] as 'terrorists'. These militias were key actors for the West as 'These moderate groups are the only forces fighting […] Al-Assad's tyranny'.[115] Seeking their legitimacy by linking them with the population's claims – and thus people's support of their violence – the West advocated for 'not conflat[ing] this moderate opposition with terrorist groups […] There are millions of Syrians who want a peaceful and democratic future and legitimate forces that are fighting for their interests'.[116]

The 'moderate' umbrella term gradually encompassed armed actors fighting through guerrilla techniques with allies such as *Ahrar al-Sham*.[117] Despite their (Islamic) non-state nature which reflected the main understanding of 'international terrorism', Western countries resisted the labelling of these groups as 'terrorists', arguing that they were 'the very groups that we need to bring to the negotiating table'.[118] Reproducing official international desig-nations, the three countries only defined as such UN-recognised terrorist groups – ie ISIL, al-Qaida and ANF – and Hezbollah – reflecting the US and EU's posture.

Somewhat constrained by the Western interpretation of terrorism as non-state violence, their accusations of Assad (Supplementary material, Figure S8) were not explicit. However, references to his use of 'weapons of terror',[119] and his 'policy of terror against civilians'[120] carried out through 'tools of terror',[121] still linked the Syrian government with state terrorism. Aimed at delegitimising him as ruler, these accusations allowed exceptionalising Western responses. Peaking in 2012 and 2014 (see Supplementary material, Figure S9), the references to the 'the Al-Assad regime's reign of terror'[122] reflect the criminalisation and delegitimisation of his government, but they were also laying the ground for a possible military intervention under the banner of the WOT. In this sense, this was a Western instrumentalisation and strategic use of the WOT narrative too. Its use here recalled the instrumentalisation made to legitimise previous interventions in countries such as Iraq, Sudan or Afghanistan to counter terrorism.[123]

In 2013–2014, ISIL captured Western concerns about the situation in Syria. Shifting the use of 'terror*' towards a more mainstream conceptualisation, mentions of Assad's terrorism declined and references to 'non-state' terror exponentially peaked (see Figure S9). By 2015, when ISIL carried out critical international attacks, it was considered that, in Syria, 'The enemy is known, namely, Daesh'.[124] This, however, did not imply Assad's legitimisation as ruler. It was argued that 'Atrocities committed by his regime […] played a key role in spurring the emergence of ISIL and other terrorist groups'[125] and that 'the root cause (of terrorism) in Syria is the brutality of the Al-Assad regime'.[126]

Linking Assad to ISIL's emergence denied Western responsibility for the violence in Syria – this being, for example, the 2003 intervention in Iraq, or the lethargy towards the Syrian conflict. It was also ruling out Assad as a possible ally in the WOT, delegitimising his violent actions in the name of countering terrorism. Rejecting the understanding of Assad as a local bastion against ISIL, these countries argued that 'The fight against Daesh cannot be separated from a political transition'.[127] They thus still advocated for a political transition encompassed within the WOT. Nevertheless, these declarations represented political rhetoric laying the ground for future 'after ISIL' anti-Assad actions, but did not respond to any political involvement in this regard.

ISIL being their primary concern, Western countries made it clear that, before any other action in Syria, 'First, there is a need for a resolute and determined fight against terrorism

and Daesh'.[128] These declarations allowed them to carry the WOT narrative into Syria, implementing it according to their priorities. The fact that ISIL represented their main preoccupation made these countries return to a more mainstream reproduction of the WOT discourse – ie centred on non-state actors. Shifting the focus allowed them to intervene in Syria to counter this group. It also permitted them to discard calls for intervention against Assad. Still depicted as an illegitimate ruler, he was no longer the focus of the WOT discourse, as an intervention to facilitate a political transition in Syria was not a Western priority.

Conclusion

Dynamics of (de)legitimisation are key in armed conflict as they are linked to actors' power and authority at local, regional and international levels. Focusing on their political use of the 'terrorist' label in the UNSC, this article has explored parties' wars of words to legitimise their involvement in Syria. Here, states have sought the delegitimisation of their enemies, while attempting to justify their use of violence against them, and to institutionalise and globalise their violent responses through the power of the UNSC. These aspects reflect actors' attempts to maintain their power and authority, or at least to gain greater legitimacy to defend their involvement in the conflict at the negotiations table. In this light, and seeking to enhance their position at an international level, all of them have instrumentalised the powerful narrative of the WOT and somewhat discursively inscribed their violent actions within the international enterprise of counterterrorism.

Highlighting their use of the WOT narrative, this research also reflects on actors' instrumentalisation of global discourses. The decentralised analysis showed how core discourse entrepreneurs are somewhat bounded by the discourse they created. In contrast, peripheral actors can, to some extent, exceed its discursive boundaries. In the case under analysis, for example, Qatar and Saudi Arabia referred to Syrian state terrorism to delegitimise Assad, while Western actors were somewhat constrained by the definition they implemented of terrorism as non-state actors' violence.

These clashing discursive moves fell outside the mainstream understanding of terrorism and thus did not generate a global institutional answer. Rather, they generated 'wars of words' regarding who was the terrorist – and who has the right to counter them – in the Syrian conflict. When in line with mainstream understandings, peripheral actors' appropriations of the WOT and the inscription of their fights within global discourses became somewhat difficult to reject and dismiss. In the Syrian case, Assad's inscription of its fight against (Islamic) non-state militias within the WOT to legitimise his violence could be resisted, as in the case of Western countries. However, it was also hard to counter, as it somewhat reflected the characteristics of the discourse.

Overall, this article sheds some light on the discursive realm of the Syrian war, but it is also a modest attempt to highlight the importance of political discourses when studying conflicts. Political discourses can become powerful discursive tools and have real consequences on conflict dynamics. They can affect the legitimisation of violent actions and in (re)producing actors' legitimacy. As discussed in relation to the Syrian case, parties' legitimacy can influence the international community's support, the deployment of military interventions, and even actors' inclusion or exclusion from peace negotiations. Therefore, the analysis of the discursive realm of a conflict is not a mere theoretical exercise, but can deepen the

understanding of war and peace processes by critically analysing and deconstructing them. While this article hopes to make a modest contribution to this debate, further research is needed on the spread of global discourses and their (re)articulation by peripheral actors in relation to dynamics of legitimisation of violence.

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

Alice Martini is an associate researcher at the Autonomous University of Madrid, Spain, and co-convenor of the Critical Studies on Terrorism Working Group (CTSWG-BISA). She is the author of multiple publications on global discourses on international terrorism and co-editor of *Encountering Extremism* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

Notes

1. Barrinha, "Political Importance of Labelling"; and Bhatia, "Fighting Words."
2. Welsh and Zaum, "Legitimation and the UN Security Council."
3. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*; Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*; Sorenson, *Syria in Ruins*; and Abboud, *Syria*.
4. Lister, *Syrian Jihad*; and C. Phillips, "Sectarism and Conflict in Syria."
5. Barrinha, "Political Importance of Labelling"; Bhatia, "Fighting Words"; Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah, "Liberation Struggle or Terrorism?"; Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves"; and Schroeder, "Bandits and Blanket Thieves, Communists and Terrorists."
6. Abboud et al., "Towards a Beirut School."
7. Ibid., 278–80.
8. Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.
9. Ibid.; Barrinha, "Political Importance of Labelling"; Bhatia, "Fighting Words."
10. Kalyvas, "Ontology of 'Political Violence'"; and Jackson and Dexter, "Social Construction of Organised Political Violence."
11. Cuadro, "De Enemigos Reales y Absolutos."
12. Jabri, "Revisiting Change and Conflict"; as quoted in Barrinha, "Political Importance of Labelling."
13. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 23.
14. Schmid, "Definition of Terrorism," 74.
15. See, among others, Baele et al., "What Does the 'Terrorist' Label Really Do?"; and Woods, "Framing Terror."
16. Townshend, *Terrorism A Very Short Introduction*.
17. Stohl, "Old Myths, New Fantasies," 9.

18. Martini, "International Barbarians and Global Civilisations."
19. Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.
20. Fernández de Mosteyrín, "La Guerra Contra El Terror."
21. Martini, "International Barbarians and Global Civilisations"; and Kundnani and Hayes, "Globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism Policies."
22. Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*; Holland, *Selling the War on Terror*; Pérez Herranz, *La Lógica de la Fuerza*; and Clausen, "Justifying Military Intervention."
23. Barrinha, "Political Importance of Labelling"; and Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.
24. Toros, "'We Don't Negotiate with Terrorists!'"
25. Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, 157.
26. Barrinha, "Political Importance of Labelling," 167.
27. Aurobinda Mahapatra, "Mandate and the (In)Effectiveness."
28. See eg article 32 or article 37 of the UN Charter.
29. Imber, "Reform of the UN Security Council," 330.
30. Welsh and Zaum, "Legitimation and the UN Security Council."
31. The Geneva Talks on Syria took place in 2012, 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2018 (to date, ie 2019).
32. Martini, "International Barbarians and Global Civilisations."
33. Abboud, *Syria*, 2.
34. For example, the Kurds and the Kurdish ethnic group are almost never mentioned within the discourses. Only one reference was registered in relation to the 'Kurdish volunteers' when referring to the militias on the ground.
35. Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms*; and Sorenson, Syria in Ruins.
36. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 39; and Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms*, 32.
37. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 64–8; and Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms*, 33.
38. C. Phillips, *Battle for Syria*.
39. Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*; and Abboud, *Syria*, 120–61.
40. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 61; Lister, *Syrian Jihad*, 163.
41. Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms*, 25.
42. Abboud, *Syria*, 137.
43. Ibid., 144; and Hughes, "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare."
44. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 112.
45. Hughes, "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare."
46. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 81.
47. In July 2016, detaching itself from al-Qaida, the organisation renamed itself *Jabhat al-Fateh al-Sham*.
48. Lister, *Syrian Jihad*, 185; and Abboud, *Syria*, 107.
49. Abboud, *Syria*, 106–7; and Martini, "El Terrorismo Global."
50. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 208; and Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 169.
51. Fairclough and Wodak, "Critical Discourse Analysis."
52. Neuendorf, *Content Analysis Guidebook*; and Weber, *Basic Content Analysis*.
53. Neuendorf, *Content Analysis Guidebook*, 53.
54. Eriksson and Giacomello, "International Relations, Cybersecurity, and Content Analysis", 211; and N. Phillips and Hardy, *Discourse Analysis*.
55. Weber, *Basic Content Analysis*, 3.
56. Ibid., 44.
57. Eriksson and Giacomello, "International Relations, Cybersecurity, and Content Analysis," 214.
58. All tables and figures are provided in the online Supplementary material for editorial reasons.
59. Schmid, *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*; and Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*.
60. Jackson, "Ghosts of State Terror."
61. Martini, "International Barbarians and Global Civilisations," 317–8.
62. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 10; and Sorenson, *Syria in Ruins*.
63. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 6711 (S/PV.6711), February 4, 2012, p. 14, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.6711 (accessed December 10, 2019).

64. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7605 (S/PV.7605), January 15, 2016, p. 18, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7605 (accessed December 10, 2019).
65. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7180 (S/PV.7180), May 22, 2014, p. 16, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7180 (accessed December 12, 2019).
66. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7369 (S/PV.7366), January 28, 2015, p. 5, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7366 (accessed December 12, 2019).
67. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7452 (S/PV.7452), June 29, 2015, p. 5, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7452 (accessed December 12, 2019).
68. S/PV.7369, 5.
69. Abboud, *Syria*, 139–43.
70. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7394 (S/PV.7394), February 26, 2015, p. 22, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7394 (accessed December 12, 2019).
71. S/PV.7452, 5.
72. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7560 (S/PV.7560), December 15, 2015, p. 24, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7560 (accessed December 12, 2019).
73. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7476 (S/PV.7476), June 29, 2015, p. 6, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7476 (accessed December 12, 2019).
74. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 116.
75. Abboud, *Syria*, 132.
76. Adib-Moghaddam, *Iran in World Politics*.
77. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 6816 (S/PV.6816), July 25, 2012, p. 13, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.6816 (accessed December 12, 2019).
78. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7096 (S/PV.7096), January 20, 2014, p. 31, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7096 (accessed December 12, 2019).
79. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 13.
80. Abboud, *Syria*, 130.
81. Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention."
82. Abboud, *Syria*, 130–2.
83. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 13.
84. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 6734 (S/PV.6734), March 12, 2012, p. 10, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.6734 (accessed December 12, 2019).
85. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 6627 (S/PV.6627), October 4, 2011, p. 4, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.6627 (accessed December 12, 2019).
86. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7164 (S/PV.7164), April 29, 2014, p. 14, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7164 (accessed December 12, 2019).
87. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7222 (S/PV.7222), July 22, 2014, p. 19, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7222 (accessed December 12, 2019).
88. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7588 (S/PV.7588), December 18, 2015, p. 5, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7588 (accessed December 12, 2019).
89. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7281 (S/PV.7281), October 21, 2014, p. 16, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7281 (accessed December 12, 2019).
90. S/PV.7394, 16.
91. S/PV.7180, 12.
92. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7490 (S/PV.7490), July 23, 2015, p. 21, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7490 (accessed December 12, 2019).
93. S/PV.7588, 5.
94. S/PV.7180, 12.
95. S/PV.7096, 24.
96. S/PV.7560, 12.
97. S/PV.7588, 5.
98. S/PV.7281, 17.
99. Abboud, *Syria*, 121–6; C. Phillips, *Battle for Syria*.
100. Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 122.
101. Ghoble, "Saudi Arabia–Iran Contention"; and Nuruzzaman, "Qatar and the Arab Spring."

102. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, *Burning Country*, 122; Álvarez-Ossorio, *Siria*, 120. The Arab countries supported other groups too. For example, Saudi Arabia supported the FSA when it was considered a secularist organisation to counter the spread of Islamist trends in the Syrian opposition.
103. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 6757 (S/PV.6757), April 23, 2012, p. 16, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.6757 (accessed December 12, 2019).
104. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7419 (S/PV.7419), March 27, 2015, p. 69, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7419 (accessed December 12, 2019).
105. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7360 (S/PV.7360), January 15, 2015, p. 56, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7360 (accessed December 12, 2019).
106. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7007 (S/PV.7007), July 23, 2013, p. 46, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7007 (accessed December 12, 2019).
107. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7540 (S/PV.7540), October 22, 2015, p. 3, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7540 (accessed December 12, 2019).
108. Ibid.
109. Martini, "International Barbarians and Global Civilisations," 317–8.
110. Abboud, *Syria*, 135–38.
111. Martini and Estébanez, "El Rechazo Del Conflicto."
112. Marrero Rocha, "La Responsabilidad de Proteger."
113. Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms*, 205.
114. France, S/PV.7419, 8.
115. UK, S/PV.7222, 18.
116. UK, S/PV.7007, 27.
117. Abboud, *Syria*, 139–43.
118. USA, S/PV.7540, 20.
119. France, S/PV.7540, 28.
120. France, S/PV.7164, 16.
121. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 7038 (S/PV.7038), September 27, 2013, p. 4, https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.7038 (accessed December 12, 2019).
122. UNSC, Security Council Meeting 6710 (S/PV.6710), January 31, 2012, p. 14. https://undocs.org/en/S/PV.6710 (accessed December 12, 2019).
123. Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*; Holland, *Selling the War on Terror*; Pérez Herranz, *La Lógica de la Fuerza*; and Clausen, "Justifying Military Intervention."
124. France, S/PV.7560, 23.
125. USA, S/PV.7281, 11.
126. UK, S/PV.7540, 30.
127. France, S/PV.7360, 32.
128. France, S/PV.7560, 23.

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