

Polarization in the Turkish Press: Framing the Social Movement in Iran

Ali Çağlar Karabıyık

 ORCID: 0000-0002-5264-7418

Tekirdağ Namık Kemal University, Turkey

Abstract: This study examines the framing of the social movement in Iran launched on 29 December 2017, by analyzing the news texts of six national Turkish newspapers. It discusses the movement in the context of news framing, focusing on problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. The findings suggest that each newspaper has reported the social movement in Iran quite differently. The most obvious difference is that the left-wing, anti-government press mainly explained the events in terms of political, economic, and social factors while the right-wing, pro-government press attributed the events to ‘foreign forces’ and reflected the dominant discourse of political power while framing the news. Thus, the way Turkish newspapers frame a social movement outside the country reveals the intense polarization in the Turkish press.

Keywords: News framing; news discourse; polarization; social movement in Iran; Turkish press.

INTRODUCTION

This study analyzes how the Turkish press has framed social events that started in Mashhad, Iran, in the last days of 2017 before spreading rapidly throughout the country. It has been reported that about 42,000 people participated in demonstrations across 80 Iranian cities, at least 20 people died, hundreds were wounded, and about 3,700 people were arrested. On 29 December 2017, a group of people in Iran started protests against the government. Over the following days, two opposing groups were formed after government supporters also got involved.

On the one hand, these events can be assessed in relation to a transformation in social movements. According to Della Porta and Diani (2006, p. 66), “[s]ocial movements not only aim at specific policy changes or the replacement of specific political elites but at broader transformations in societal priorities, in the basic mechanisms through which a society operates.” Whereas ‘old’ social movements

(identified by Marxist theory) were mainly based on the working-class and focused on economic interests, ‘new’ social movements go beyond economic issues to gender, race, environmentalism, human rights, etc. (see Buechler, 1995). From this perspective, events in Iran can be evaluated in relation to other new social movements, such as the ‘Arab Spring’ in the Middle East and North Africa, or the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey.¹

On the other hand, events in Iran can be discussed from the perspective of a power struggle, specifically the conflict between reformists and conservatives. The Iranian Islamic Republic has a complex state administrative structure that includes the President (Hassan Rouhani) and the Supreme Leader (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). In response to the protests, Rouhani, known as a reformist, said, “The Government should open space for criticism and protest” whereas Khamenei rejected concessions to the demonstrators to protect the Islamic Republic and to intervene with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps if necessary (BBC, 2017).

Carragee and Roefs (2004, p. 228) argue that “analyzing the interaction between the news media and social movements helps to expose ideological struggle and contestation.” Accordingly, the main objective of the study is to show how the Turkish press framed the development of events in Iran, especially the extent of differences in news frames between pro – and anti-government newspapers. The findings indicate that specific newspapers had very different discourses on the nature of the events, their causes, and the identification of the events’ actors. Thus, this study reveals once again the existing polarization in the Turkish media regarding a social movement occurring outside the country.

TURKEY’S POLARIZED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The Turkish media sphere is characterized by a deep polarization between pro – and anti-government press. Many studies (e.g. Bayram, 2010; Çarkoğlu & Yavuz, 2010; Çarkoğlu et al., 2014; Doğu & Mat, 2019; Iseri et al., 2019; Özçetin & Baybars-Hawks, 2018; Panayırıcı et al., 2016; Yıldırım et al., 2021) have shown that the Turkish media is sharply polarized, especially in terms of press-party and political parallelism. Parallelism means that “media tend to be structured and aligned according to competing parties and ideologies in the country concerned” (McQuail, 2010, p. 241). Press-party parallelism, coined by Colin Seymour-Ure (1974), describes the degree of partisanship whereby the structure of the media system parallels the political system. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 28), who refer more broadly to political parallelism, argue that this concept has

¹ The Gezi Park Protests, which started in Istanbul in late May 2013, became one of Turkey’s largest social movements.

several different components, including media content, organizational connections between media and political parties or other kinds of organizations, the tendency for media personnel to be politically active in political life, the partisanship of media audiences, and the role orientations and practices of journalists.

It is appropriate to briefly mention the aforementioned studies related to polarization in Turkish media. Bayram's (2010) article "Political Parallelism in the Turkish Press, a Historical Interpretation" reviews political parallelism in the Turkish press from a historical and comparative perspective, covering the period from the 1830s to the 2002 elections. He states that, overall, political parallelism in the Turkish press is at moderate to high levels.

Çarkoğlu and Yavuz's (2010) article "Press-party Parallelism in Turkey: An Individual Level Interpretation" aims to measure the level of partisanship for readers of major newspapers in Turkey. Their findings suggest that the Turkish newspaper coverage appears to become more partisan within the first five years of the AKP² tenure.

The article "Press-Party Parallelism and Polarization of News Media during an Election Campaign: The Case of the 2011 Turkish Elections" by Çarkoğlu et al. (2014) examines press-party parallelism during the 2011 national elections in Turkey. The Authors focus on two indicators of press-party parallelism: (1) respective "voice" given to the two leading parties, calculated as the ratio of news that quoted sources from the incumbent Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) to the leading opposition party Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi³ (CHP), and (2) news articles' tones toward AKP and CHP. The results indicate that there is a clear divergence in voice given to respective parties by opposition and conservative newspapers.

Doğu and Mat's (2019) article "Who Sets the Agenda? Polarization and Issue Ownership in Turkey's Political Twittersphere" analyzes the correspondence of issues between the media and political agendas, with a particular focus on polarization. The authors compare the issues on the media and political agendas in Turkey through Twitter. Findings indicate political parallelism is the major factor in defining the relationship between the issues and accounts.

The article "The Sphere of Consensus in a Polarized Media System: The Case of Turkey During the Catastrophic Coup Attempt" by Iseri et al. (2019) examines how The July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey has shaped the editorial policies of news media outlets in a highly polarized media system. This article hypothesizes that, mainly due to the peculiarities of the Turkish media system, even at the time of a catastrophic event, the framing strategies of media outlets converge only to a limited degree on a sphere of consensus.

2 Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AK Parti / AKP), Justice and Development Party (ruling party).

3 Republican People's Party (CHP, main opposition party).

Özçetin and Baybars-Hawks's (2018) paper "Framing the Russian Aircraft Crisis: News Discourse in Turkey's Polarized Media Environment" analyzes how the downing of a Russian aircraft by a Turkish F-16 jet on 24 November 2015 was framed by pro-government and anti-government newspapers. The analysis of the news frames utilized by four Turkish newspapers underlines the fact that in a polarized media environment news frames are highly politicized and the distinction between news frames and official discourse is frequently blurred. The Authors state that in more polarized and less free media environments news frames of pro-government news outlets tend to follow and be directed by the way events are framed by political actors and dominant political discourses.

The article "Political Agency of News Outlets in a Polarized Media System: Framing the Corruption Probe in Turkey" by Panayırıcı et al. (2016) aims to determine the stances of media outlets during the critical 17 December corruption probe in Turkey. This study investigates Turkey as an under-studied mediascape with polarized characteristics, with particular reference to the political scandal caused by the 17 December 2013 corruption probe, which is predicted to have increased political parallelism dramatically. The findings not only confirm earlier studies on 'press-party' parallelism, but also reveal 'press-sociopolitical camp parallelism' in Turkey's polarized media system.

Yıldırım et al. (2021) analyze the content of news coverage of political parties across four consecutive national election campaigns in Turkey (2002, 2007, 2011, and 2015) to track changes in press-party parallelism in their article "Dynamics of Campaign Reporting and Press-Party Parallelism: Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism and the Media System in Turkey." According to Yıldırım et al. (2021, p. 18), their analyses provide evidence for rising press-party parallelism over 13 years, from the first election that brought the AKP to power in 2002 through the three subsequent election campaigns that witnessed the rise of the AKP to a dominant position.

Turkey has also emerged as a key country in discussions over polarization (Aydın-Düzgüt & Balta, 2019; Somer, 2019) both politically (e.g. secular/Islamist) and socially (e.g. Turkish/Kurdish). As Siebert et al. (1956) point out, the press adopts the form of the political and social systems in which it operates. Hallin and Mancini (2004) identify three types of media systems: *democratic corporations*, *liberal*, and *polarized pluralist*. According to Panayırıcı et al. (2016, p. 552), Turkey's media system matches the characteristics of the 'polarized pluralist model' including high media integration into party politics (or political parallelism) and state intervention, along with low media commercialization and journalistic professionalism. Several factors that influence press-party parallelism and partisanship in a media system are in play in Turkey, such as commercialization, clientelism, political polarization, ties between media and political

institutions, and newspapers' judgments about reader preferences (Çarkoğlu et al., 2014, p. 299).

In the 1980s, there were significant political, social, and economic transformations in Turkey, which also affected the media sector. With the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, traditional media ownership, such as family-owned companies whose main profession was journalism, was replaced by major media conglomerates who principally operate in finance, trade, banking, etc. According to Kaya and Çakmur (2010, p. 533), the media in Turkey is sharply concentrated in two major camps. On one side, is the mainstream media, primarily concerned with increasing profits through higher circulation and ratings; on the other side, is a conservative, Islamist, pro-government media that chiefly functions to disseminate these viewpoints. Since the mid-2000s, Turkey's media, whether Islamist or mainstream, has become strongly pro-government. One of the most important factors in the formation of the Turkish media industry is government-induced changes to media ownership structure, specifically because a significant portion of the mainstream media was acquired by pro-government groups. As Özçetin and Baybars-Hawks (2018, p. 39) put it, the ruling AKP / AK Parti has created its own media.

Media polarization should also not be considered separately from the challenges to democracy and freedoms. Yesil (2016, p. 13), who defines Turkey's political system as an 'authoritarian neoliberal order', notes that "Turkey's media system is marked by the combination of state power with the power of capital, and authoritarian state control with neoliberal elements." Similarly, Akser and Baybars-Hawks (2012) define the Turkish media system as 'a model of neoliberal media autocracy'. Freedom of the media and media independence are weak in Turkey (see Çarkoğlu & Yavuz, 2010; Çarkoğlu et al., 2014). According to Çarkoğlu and Yavuz (2010, p. 618), ensuring media independence in Turkey would require two changes: "first, [the] media has to be free from political pressures in order to function well. Secondly, it has to be distanced from partisan loyalties as much as possible for the purposes of objectivity." International organizations and think tanks have criticized Turkey's situation. Freedom House's (2022) global freedom scores, for example, rate Turkey's status as "Not Free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties while the RSF⁴ (2022) World Press Freedom Index for 2022 ranked Turkey 149 out of 180 countries in 2022.

4 Reporters Sans Frontières / Reporters Without Borders.

FRAMING THEORY AND RESEARCH

Framing theory grew out of cognitive psychology (Bartlett, 1932), anthropology (Bateson, 1972), and sociology (Goffman, 1986 [1974]). According to Nelson et al. (1997, p. 567), “[f]raming is the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy.” In media and communication studies, framing assumes that the way an issue is characterized in news reports can influence how it is understood by audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11). It can also help us to understand how citizens make sense of political, social, and economic issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2011).

The principal elements of the framing concept are selection, salience, and, if necessary, exclusion. In Entman’s frequently quoted words, to frame an item is to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (1993, p. 52). According to Goffman (1986, p. 21), frames enable us “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” information and events. A media (news) frame is a “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard, 2001, p. 100). Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 3) suggest that “media discourse can be conceived of as a set of interpretive packages that give meaning to an issue.” In other words, meaning and reality can be reconstructed in many different ways.⁵ As media packages, frames shape news content.

Despite the increasing popularity of framing research, theoretical and methodological disagreements and problems continue (see Borah, 2011; Hertog & McLeod, 2001), so that no widely accepted methodological approach has yet emerged. Framing studies draw on both quantitative (e.g. traditional content analysis, Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) and qualitative methods (e.g. discourse analysis, Pan & Kosicki, 1993). There are two basic approaches to defining news frames: *deductive* and *inductive* (de Vreese, 2005; Matthes & Kohring, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The deductive approach examines frames that are predefined and applicable to different topics whereas, in the inductive approach, the frames are obtained from the data during the analysis. Frames

5 For example, in his seminal work, Robert Entman (1991) compared two similar air disasters. One was the Korean aircraft (KAL 007) shot down in 1983 by a Soviet plane; the other was an Iranian civil flight (Iran Air 655) shot down in 1988 by a US naval vessel in the Persian Gulf (McQuail, 2010, p. 381). Entman reached striking findings. The reasons, reporting tone, and identification of the air incidents were framed quite differently in the US media.

that are only pertinent to specific topics or events can be labeled ‘issue-specific frames’⁶ (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54).

Framing theory is very fashionable for social movement research for many years. Moreover, a substantial literature, called the movement framing literature, has emerged. As Benford (1997, p. 415) states that “the term ‘frame’ has become a cliché in the study of social movements.” According to Benford and Snow (2000, p. 612), not only has the framing concept been applied most extensively to the substantive study of social movements, but interest in framing processes in relation to the operation of social movements has animated an increasing amount of conceptual and empirical scholarship.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The data for this study comprise reports from six daily national newspapers belonging to media groups representative of the Turkish press: *Evrensel*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Hürriyet*, *Habertürk*⁷, *Star*, and *Yeni Akit*. The samples were news reports about Iran over a 10-day⁸ period between 30 December 2017 (one day after the events’ began) and 8 January 2018, when the issue lost prominence. The reports were all from the front pages of each newspaper since this page is particularly significant (Clayman & Reisner, 1998, p. 178). The newspapers were chosen by considering two main criteria: *ideological positioning* and *political intimacy*. Yetkin (2011) was used as the reference to define ideological positioning as follows: *Evrensel* (radical left), *Cumhuriyet* (left-of-center), *Hürriyet* and *Habertürk* (centrist), *Star* (right-of-center), and *Yeni Akit* (radical right). Each newspaper’s political intimacy was defined in relation to previous studies of Turkey’s media industry and media-state relations, particularly Adaklı (2013), Gencil Bek (2011), Kaya (2009), Kaya and Çakmur (2010), Sönmez (2014), and Topuz (2003): *Evrensel* and *Cumhuriyet* (anti-government), *Hürriyet* (unclear)⁹, *Habertürk*, *Star*, and *Yeni Akit* (pro-government). Table 1 summarizes the ideological positioning and political intimacy of the newspapers in this study.

6 See Benford (1997, pp. 414–415) for an extensive list of specific movement frames.

7 It has ceased newspaper publishing.

8 The events began on Friday, December 29, 2017. Among the examined newspapers, *Hürriyet* published the first news report about the events on December 30, 2017, whereas the other newspapers first reported it on December 31, 2017, or later.

9 Not being anti-government or pro-government prominently. Sönmez (2014, p. 101) mentions *Hürriyet*, which belonged to Doğan Media Group until April 2018, as “resisting AKP power, partly.” *Hürriyet* sometimes supported the government and adopted a concept of broadcasting that varies according to the political situation. *Hürriyet*, regarded as the ‘flagship’ of the Turkish press, was acquired by the Demirören group in March 2019, known for its closeness to the government.

Table 1. Ideological positioning and political intimacy of the newspapers

political intimacy	ideological positioning		
	radical left left-of-center	center	radical right right-of-center
anti-government	<i>Evrinsel</i> <i>Cumhuriyet</i>		
unclear		<i>Hürriyet</i>	
pro-government		<i>Habertürk</i>	<i>Star</i> <i>Yeni Akit</i>

Source: Author

HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research hypothesizes that Turkish media organizations will take a polarized stance even in a social movement abroad due to the press-party parallelism in the context of news framing. The following three research questions were addressed to understand how the Turkish press framed the social movement in Iran:

- *RQ1*: Are there similarities/differences between pro-government and anti-government newspapers in framing events in Iran?
- *RQ2*: Are the ideological positioning and the political intimacy of the newspapers visible in their news framing practices?
- *RQ3*: Do the differences in framing between newspapers reveal polarization in the Turkish press?

METHOD

There is neither a coherent theory nor any consensus about analyzing media content (McQuail, 2010, p. 340). However, framing research in media and communication studies provides a rich theoretical area, especially for analyzing the news. Moreover, as Benford (1997, p. 410) states “the framing perspective has made significant contributions to the social movements field”, which is why the present paper benefits from framing theory and its methodology. This study was inspired by Entman’s (1993) framing conceptualization, which argues that frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Accordingly, the four basic functions of news framing are, respectively,

problem definition¹⁰, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. From this perspective, it is clear that several framing elements or devices can constitute a frame. Scheufele and Scheufele (2010, p. 120) note that “problem definition and its causal interpretation are likely to be core elements of a media frame at the textual level (e.g. a newspaper article)”. In this study, *problem definition* includes what the issue is or how the movement and its actors are labeled. *Causal interpretation* identifies the actors who are responsible for the incidents and their reasons. *Moral evaluation* refers to the moral arguments (e.g. moral judgments, justifications, accusations, etc.) articulated in the news. Finally, *treatment recommendation* refers to propositions for resolving the crisis.

ANALYSIS

The analysis is based on Entman’s linguistic approach for measuring media frames (see Matthes & Kohring, 2008). Scheufele and Scheufele (2010, p. 112) also call it the ‘journalistic approach’ to framing. In this approach, “frames are identified by analyzing the selection, placement, and structure of specific words and sentences in a text” (Matthes & Kohring, 2008, p. 260). Entman adds that,

frames can be detected by probing for particular words and visual images¹¹ that consistently appear in a narrative and convey thematically consonant meanings across media and time (Entman 1991, p. 7)

This study presents a qualitative analysis of news frames, focusing on the discursive structures of news texts. Special attention was given to news report headlines and leads, following Pan and Kosicki (1993, p. 59), who argue that “a headline is the most salient cue to activate certain semantically related concepts in readers’ minds; it is thus the most powerful framing device of the syntactical structure. A lead is the next most important device to use”.

¹⁰ Problem definition as a framing function is equivalent to Snow and Benford’s (1988, p. 200) diagnostic framing which refers to the identification of the problem.

¹¹ Only news articles were considered; opinion columns, news photographs, and cartoons were excluded.

FINDINGS

FREQUENCY OF THE NEWS

An aggregate of news reports (N=34) about the new social movement in Iran during the 10 days between 30 December 2017 and 8 January 2018 were revealed in the six newspapers: *Hürriyet* (n=8), *Star* (n=7), *Evrensel* (n=6), *Cumhuriyet* (n=5), *Habertürk* (n=5) and *Yeni Akit* (n=3).

NEWS SOURCES

In news framing research, the news source is crucial to reveal the media's political stance: "sources and the information they provide in the news story – either directly in quotes or sound bites or indirectly to the reporter covering – undoubtedly influence news framing" (Dimitrova & Strömbäck, 2011, p. 608). News sources are also 'frame sponsors' (see Entman, 1991; Gamson et al., 1992; Reese, 2001) which define whose voices are heard in the news. The political elites are particularly prominent sponsors of news frames (Entman, 1991, p. 7).

Almost half of the identified news reports (n=16) were based on the statements of political actors in Iran, such as government authorities, political elites, and state officials. The most frequently quoted figures were President Hassan Rouhani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Thus, these newspapers frame the issue mostly through the words of official authorities, followed by non-governmental actors (experts, institutions, etc.), and finally citizens. Indeed, citizens were never used as sources for the reports in *Hürriyet*, *Star*, and *Yeni Akit*. There was also wide variation: *Star* referred to official persons and institutions in 5 out of 7 news texts whereas *Evrensel* did this in only 1 out of 6. Overall, pro-government newspapers tended to exclude alternative or critical voices about the events in Iran.

FINDINGS RELATED TO FRAMING ELEMENTS

PROBLEM DEFINITION: DEFINITION OF EVENTS AND ACTORS

The newspapers defined the movement quite differently, although the events were mostly framed as 'action' and 'protest' or at least as a 'street movement'. *Hürriyet* most frequently used the 'action' frame, and it appeared in all the other newspapers except *Evrensel*. Whereas anti-government newspapers framed the events from the protesters' perspective as 'people's action', 'rebellion', and 'street movement', pro-government newspapers preferred more aggressive frames like 'attempt', 'dirty trick', and 'sedition'.

Considering the definition of the actors, the most framed actors were ‘pro-government’ or ‘pro-regime’ supporters, particularly in *Habertürk* and *Star*, whereas *Evensel* did not use these terms at all. The next most frequent frames were ‘regime’ and ‘agent’. *Hürriyet*, and the pro-government *Star* and *Yeni Akit* used ‘agent’ to describe supposed bad actors leading the events whereas anti-government newspapers used ‘regime’ to describe Iran’s government. More neutrally, all newspapers except for *Yeni Akit* framed the social movement actors as ‘protesters’ at least once. However, pro-government *Habertürk* and *Star* also framed them negatively as ‘armed activists’ and ‘vandals’. The least used actor frame was ‘pillager minority’, which only appeared in *Hürriyet*.

CAUSAL INTERPRETATION: ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

Three main factors influenced the events: *local dynamics*, *foreign forces*, and *political factors*. Regarding local dynamics, the primary responsible actors were pro-government or anti-government groups. *Yeni Akit* was the only newspaper that did not attribute the causes of the events to these local dynamics. Most frequently, the newspapers drew on ‘pro-government supporter’ and ‘protester’ frames to explain the causes of the events in terms of local factors. However, these were used positively or negatively depending on the newspapers. For example, the report headlined “Millions support the Regime” (*Rejime milyonluk destek*, *Star*, January 6, 2018) used the ‘pro-government supporter’ frame positively in stating that pro-regime millions have condemned the US administration that supports the protests in the country. Conversely, the news headlined “Iran’s Mullahs take to the streets” (*İran’da mollalar sokağa çıktı*, *Cumhuriyet*, December 31, 2017) used the ‘pro-government supporter’ frame negatively because of the Mullahs’ show of strength against the Regime’s opponents.

About one-third of stories (n=10), especially in pro-government newspapers (*Star* and *Yeni Akit*), also attributed responsibility for the events to foreign forces, such as the USA, the UK, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Israel, or agents controlling non-state elements. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the same view, for example when *Hürriyet* (January 4, 2018) quoted Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu: “The supporters are Trump and Netanyahu.” The most important components of these alleged foreign forces were actors framed as ‘agents’, as can be seen in the following headlines: “Agent bullets for activists in Iran: 2 dead” (*İran’da eylemcilere ajan kurşunu: 2 ölü*, *Star*, January 1, 2018), “Mike¹² the Muslim! started quickly” (*Müslüman! Mike hızlı başladı*, *Star*, January 1, 2018), “Trump’s stooges in Iran” (*Trump’ın İran’daki maşaları*, *Star*, January 4, 2018), “The Lawrences¹³ now on stage in Iran as well” (*Lawrence’lar şimdi*

¹² Referring to Michael D’Andrea.

¹³ Referring to Thomas Edward Lawrence, also known as “Lawrence of Arabia”.

de İran'da sahnede, Yeni Akit, January 3, 2018). Conversely, leftist and anti-government newspapers claimed emphatically that foreign forces played no role in the incidents.

Political factors represented by the government or politicians were less frequently held responsible for the progression of the events than local dynamics and foreign forces. Only anti-government newspapers *Evrensel* and *Cumhuriyet* blamed the political authorities, framed as the 'regime'. They also framed Iranian government policies as antidemocratic, oppressive, and outdated. In contrast, *Star*, *Yeni Akit*, *Habertürk*, and *Hürriyet* ignored political factors when explaining events in terms of either local or foreign factors.

According to the reports, the movement can be explained in terms of three issues: *economic problems*, *regime disaffection*, and *social demands*. Except for *Yeni Akit*, which ignored the economic background to the events, the newspapers frequently referred to economic problems and regime disaffection. Pro-government newspapers, especially *Star*, gave regime disaffection as the most important reason for the events whereas anti-government newspapers referred to social demands as the trigger. Among these demands, *Evrensel*, *Cumhuriyet*, and *Hürriyet* mentioned freedom, democracy, and human rights. These demands were often associated with young Iranians, such as, "Iranian students say freedom" (*İranlı öğrenciler özgürlük diyor*, *Cumhuriyet*, January 1, 2018).

MORAL EVALUATION

Morality is a relative concept, especially regarding cause-effect relationships as each newspaper's perspective on these reflects its moral assessment. Accordingly, anti-government newspapers emphasized the natural and expected side of events in Iran whereas pro-government newspapers justified the government's harsh attitude towards the social movement. Therefore, the anti-government press normalized the protests as 'people's action' while suggesting that protesters were threatened with death by pro-regime groups and the government. In contrast, pro-government newspapers highlighted that protesters had occupied state institutions, set many workplaces and vehicles on fire, and clashed with the police.

TREATMENT RECOMMENDATION: SOLUTION TO THE CRISIS

Only 6 out of 34 reports mentioned solutions to the crisis or suggestions for normalization. Any possible solutions were related to the causes. Pro-government newspapers, which blamed the events to foreign forces, reported Iranian government statements like 'no tolerance for vandals' or 'no opportunity to focus on evil'. That is, government suppression of the protests would prevent foreign forces from achieving their goals. Conversely, anti-government newspapers, which blamed the events on economic problems, regime disaffection, and social demands, emphasized the discourses of US President Donald Trump, such as "time

to change” or the Iranian Labor Party, such as “the call for organized struggle” or “reform is not enough, the Regime must be changed”. Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which supported Iran’s government, made moderate statements intended to reduce tension.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated polarization in the Turkish press through its reporting of the social movement in Iran that started on 29 December 2017. Framing analysis was used on 34 front-page news stories covering a 10-day period during the events from six Turkish national newspapers belonging to different media groups and different ideological trends. The language of the news reports was analyzed in terms of four framing functions: problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

Overall, leftist and centrist newspapers allocated more space to these events in Iran than Turkey’s right-wing press. Regarding the sources of discourse, newspapers generally based their reporting on official sources whereas there was little use of civilian sources. This indicates that journalists in Turkey report such events from a limited perspective.

Despite being frequently described as a ‘protest’ and ‘action’, the movement was often framed with highly negative expressions like ‘attempt’, ‘dirty trick’, ‘sedition’ in right-wing and pro-government newspapers: – e.g. “Dirty trick in Iran this time” (*Kirli oyun bu kez İran’da*, Star, January 2, 2018). Frames associated with leftist jargon, such as ‘people’s action’, ‘rebellion’, and ‘street movement’, were naturally only preferred by the left-wing press. According to left-wing newspapers, the main actor responsible for the events was the current ‘regime’, framed as an ‘oppressive’ and ‘pro-capital regime’.

The right-wing and centrist newspapers framed the actors as ‘agents’ in the context of foreign forces. These foreign forces appeared in the background while economic problems or freedom demands were presented as their pretext. Newspapers differed regarding the causes of the events. One perspective was that the events had turned into an anti-regime movement due to economic, social, and political demands. Another was the desire of the foreign forces to overthrow the government. The right-wing and pro-government press attributed the events either to foreign forces or anti-regime forces. From this perspective, economic and social reasons or demands were not the main factors behind the movement; they were softened by right-wing / pro-government press through descriptions like “so-called innocent wishes” (Star, January 1, 2018), or “the show started with rebellion against egg prices” (Habertürk, January 2, 2018). It seems that the ‘foreign forces’ discourse is also adopted by the pro-government press,

as it is a political discourse frequently used by the ruling party in Turkey. For instance, especially during the election campaigns President Erdoğan regularly points out that ‘foreign forces’ and the opposition as the reasons for the failures or negativities while appropriating the successes to himself and his party’s policies in his political discourses (Karabiyik, 2021, p. 6).

While the newspapers mostly explained the new social movement in terms of local dynamics, they clearly diverged regarding the specific factor. Leftist and anti-government newspapers focused on political factors, e.g. “The cause of the rebellion in Iran: the pro-capital Islamic Regime” (*İran’da isyanın nedeni: sermaye yanlısı İslamî Rejim*, Evrensel, January 3, 2018) whereas centrist, right-wing and pro-government newspapers blamed foreign factors, e.g. “The West is behind the sedition in Iran” (*İran’daki fitnenin arkasında Batı var*, Yeni Akit, January 2, 2018) or “The Western origin copied coup” (*Batı kaynaklı kopya darbe*, Star, January 2, 2018). Thus, our analysis revealed a meaningful relationship in the right-wing and pro-government press between framing the events as ‘attempt’, ‘dirty trick’, or ‘sedition’ and the actors as ‘agents’, ‘armed activists’, ‘vandals’, or ‘pillager minority’.

The pro-government press also occasionally associated the Iranian movement with the Arab Spring, – e.g. “Trump Spring in Iran” (*İran’da Trump Baharı*, Star, December 31, 2017) or the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey, – e.g. “Streets witness Gezi-like uprising scenes” (*Gezi kalkışması benzeri manzaralara sahne olan sokaklar*, Star, December 31, 2017), “The Gezi spirit rose from the grave” (*Gezi ruhu hortladı*, Star, January 2, 2018), “Soros¹⁴ Gezi protesters now in Iran too” (*Soros’un ‘Gezi’cileri şimdi de İran’da*, Yeni Akit, December 31, 2017). Significantly, these six newspapers had previously framed the actual Gezi Park Protests in 2013 with similar lexicalizations as the movement in Iran, – e.g. “Dark forces at work” (*Karanlık güçler iş başında*, Yeni Akit, June 3, 2013) or “The people resist” (*Halk direniyor*, Cumhuriyet, May 31, 2013). In other words, Turkey’s anti-government press regarded both Iran’s new social movement and Turkey’s Gezi Park Protests as legitimate people’s movements whereas Turkey’s pro-government press evaluated them as Western-backed revolts that used local collaborators. Erbaysal Filibeli (2016), who analyzed news reports on the Gezi Park Protests, concluded that the Turkish media mostly used conflictive and discriminative language while the news discourse of the pro-government press mirrored the government’s own discourse. This approach is also evident in their news framing regarding the Iranian movement.

This study showed that the events in Iran that could be addressed in the context of new social movements were framed quite differently by specific Turkish newspapers. This sharp difference reflects polarization and press partisanship

14 Referring to George Soros.

in Turkey. Levendusky (2013, p. 612) describes partisan media as opinionated media that not only report the news but offer distinct perspectives. At least two conclusions can be drawn from our study. First, the Turkish newspapers analyzed here reported events in Iran without properly scrutinizing their economic, social, or political background. Besides, their news coverage rarely mentioned the political responsibilities and solution proposals of the Iranian government. Second, the news framing practices of each newspaper depended strongly on its ideological positioning and political intimacy. Thus, the Turkish newspapers convey political discourses whether or not they support the government.

LIMITATIONS

The present study had several limitations. First, it only analyzed a few newspapers while neglecting other mass media. Thus, the findings cannot yet be generalized. To extend the findings and conclusions of this study, the reporting of other events should be examined and comparative studies should be considered. Such a comprehensive research will contribute to literature concerning framing and social movements.

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