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Populism at the UN: comparing Netanyahu's and Abbas's speeches, 2010–19

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ABSTRACT

Populism impacts policy choices and may contribute to fuelling crises and limiting the prospects for conflict resolution. This paper applies a multidimensional populism theoretical framework to compare quantitatively and qualitatively 18 speeches by Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu at the United Nations General Assembly between 2010 and 2019. Our analysis shows that while both Abbas and Netanyahu use populist language—mostly focused on antagonistic, moral and idealised depictions of the 'people' and the 'other'—the latter consistently displayed a greater density of populist references in his UN speeches over the period analysed. Netanyahu's discourses were both more aggressive and exclusionary and made more allusions to religion and securitisation than those of the Palestinian leader. His framing essentialised the 'us' ('the Jewish people') as threatened by an 'enemy'; what he called 'militant Islam'. By contrast, Abbas referred more to borders as a requirement for statehood. Their different communicative frames and language suggest discrepant worldviews. Abbas's speeches reflected a more 'liberal' conception of international relations, relying more on international cooperation, institutions, and regulation to resolve the Palestinian question, while Netanyahu conveyed a *realpolitik* stance and stressed his concerns with external threats and willingness to act unilaterally.

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Introduction

Hamas terrorist attacks and the Israeli invasion of Gaza have brought to the fore the question of why the Oslo peace process failed. The analysis of political discourses helps understand the structures and functions of 'underlying' ideologies and how distinctions between in-groups and out-groups are established.[1] Via the deliberate emphasis or concealment of information aspects in their communications, political leaders shape the individual's sentiments, values and policy choices.[2] The limited efficacy of material solutions in solving the largely identity-based Israeli-Palestinian conflict suggests the need to

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[1]Van Dijk, Teun. A. 'Ideology and discourse analysis' *Journal of Political Ideologies* 11 no. 2 (2006): 115–140.
[2]Nelson, Thomas E., and Donald R. Kinder. 'Issue frames and group-centrism in American public opinion'. *The Journal of Politics* 58, no. 4 (1996): 1055–1078.

turn our attention to the framing strategies that compete to impose dominant interpretations and resolution avenues.[3] The spread of populist frames and ideas, even among mainstream politicians, has contributed to political polarisation and to Manichean portrayals of politics as a struggle between good and evil.[4] These also have an impact on how crises are interpreted and on policy making.[5] Ethno-nationalist politicians use populist frames to promote the sentiment of existential threat and request re-bordering practices and the revision of foreign policy, which in turn may fuel conflict with neighbours and rival states.[6] Populism is not simply a phenomenon that affects the West. The Middle East has been similarly touched by the populist trend.[7] The analysis of populist interpretative frames can also shed light on new and old conflicts in this region.

This article breaks down the speeches of Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas before the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), identifying and comparing populist attributes, as well as the references to borders, religion and security associated with them. The goal of the analysis is to unearth some of the dominant interpretative frames that may be contributing to the entrenchment of the Israel-Palestine conflict in an ideational plane and to the failure of negotiated solutions.

These leaders represent the two antagonistic camps in one of the most prominent and long-lasting conflicts in the world. The United Nations has been a stage used by some populist leaders to disseminate narratives regarding victimhood, conspiracy, and antagonistic conceptions of identity and sovereignty.[8] The choice of speeches at the UNGA is justified not only due to its relevance as an influential forum for debate on conflict-related issues,[9] but also due to the comparability it offers. Both leaders were addressing the same audience and their speeches subject to similar rules and of comparable length.

The speeches analysed took place in a period of surge of populism at both the global and regional levels (2011–2019). The discontent generated by the global financial crisis paved the way for the emergence of protest movements—such as *Occupy*, *Indignados* and the *Arab Spring*— and new left-wing and right-wing political parties that challenged globalisation and the political establishment. The Middle East has also been in a state of upheaval since the uprisings of 2011, when public rejection led to the overthrow of several leaders and resistance by other regimes, resulting in ongoing instability.[10] These

[3]Canetti, Daphna, et al. 'Framing and fighting: The impact of conflict frames on political attitudes'. *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 6 (2019): 737–752.

[4]Mudde, Cas. 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542–563.

[5]Moffitt, Benjamin. 'How to perform crisis: A model for understanding the key role of crisis in contemporary populism'. *Government and Opposition* 50, no. 2 (2015): 189–217, 210; Bartha, Attila, Zsolt Boda and Dorottya Szikra. 'When Populist Leaders Govern: Conceptualising Populism in Policy Making.' *Politics and Governance* 8, no. 3 (2020): 71–81.

[6]Jenne, Erin K. 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy.' *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2021): 323–343; Destradi, Sandra, David Cadier and Johannes Plagemann. 'Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda.' *Comparative European Politics* 19 (2021): 663–682; Olivas Osuna, José Javier. 'Populism and Borders: Tools for Constructing "The People" and Legitimizing Exclusion.' *Journal of Borderland Studies* (2022): 1–24.

[7]Hadiz, Vedi. *Islamic populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[8]Fall, Juliet J. 'Territory, sovereignty and entitlement: Diplomatic discourses in the United Nations Security Council'. *Political Geography* 81 (2020): 102208. Oner, Imdat, and Lana Shehadeh. 'Populist Discourse beyond the Borders: The Case of Erdogan and Chavez'. *Populism* 6, no. 1 (2023): 28–54.

[9]United Nations, 'Maintain International Peace and Stability', https://www.un.org/en/our-work/maintain-international-peace-and-security#:~:text=The%20UN%20accomplishes%20this%20by,one%20another%2C%20to%20be%20effective. (accessed January 18, 2024).

[10]Hinnebusch, Raymond. 'The rise and decline of the populist social contract in the Arab world'. *World Development* 129 (2020): 104661.

are not disconnected domestic initiatives; new international and transnational forms of populism cut across state boundaries[11] and populist discourse is employed to justify antagonistic foreign policy in the region.[12]

Following other scholarly efforts to assess the supply-side populism,[13] this article measures the extent to which populist rhetoric permeates Abbas's and Netanyahu's language and offers a longitudinal account of the way in which their interests and priorities change over time. This article follows the recent calls for a multidimensional approach to the study of populism[14] by dissecting the speeches of Abbas and Netanyahu into several dimensions associated with the concept of populism[15] and analysing also other relevant discursive elements in the processes of populist othering, such as the references to religion, borders and securitisation.

The structure of this article is therefore as follows. First, it provides a brief overview of the literature on populism and how it is relevant in the context of the Middle East. Then, it explains the underpinning theoretical framework and methodology followed by the choice of Abbas and Netanyahu as subjects of analysis. Next, it compares the density of populist, anti-populist, religion, borders and securitisation references, as well as recurrent themes and frames. Finally, it summarises the most relevant findings and limitations of the study as well as the implications for the literature in this area and suggests new research avenues.

The study of populism and its relevance in the Middle East

The recent surge of populism in the political domain has been mirrored with a growing centrality in the social sciences literature. The pioneering 1967 LSE conference 'To define populism' revealed the wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches to the term, as well as the wide diversity of movements termed as populist.[16] The study of populism still faces many challenges. For instance, there is a proliferation of ad-hoc conceptualisations based on single case-studies and a tendency to conflate this term, with other accompanying ideologies such as nationalism and socialism.[17] Populism is also often used in a loose and pejorative sense, and individuals do not voluntarily adhere to this category.[18] There are also disagreements regarding the genus of populism and

[11]McDonnell, Duncan, and Annika Werner. 'From International Populism to Transnational Populism', in *International Populism: The Radical Right in the European Parliament*, eds. (Oxford Academic, 2020); Lamour, Christian. 'The league of leagues: Meta-populism and the "chain of equivalence" in a cross-border Alpine area'. *Political Geography* 81 (2020): 102207; Hadiz, *Islamic populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*.

[12]Holliday, Shabnam J. 'Populism, the international and methodological nationalism: Global order and the Iran—Israel nexus'. *Political Studies* 68, no. 1 (2020): 3–19.

[13]For examples, Norris, Pippa. 'Measuring populism worldwide.' *Party Politics* 26 no. 6 (2020): 697–717; Maurits Meijers, Maurits and Andrej Zaslove. 'Measuring Populism in Political Parties: Appraisal of a New Approach.' *Comparative Political Studies* 54 no. 2 (2021): 372–407; Hawkins, Kirk. 'Is Chavez Populist? Measuring Populist Discourse in Comparative Perspective.' *Comparative Political Studies* 42 no. 8 (2009): 1040–1067.

[14]Wiesehomeier, Nina. 'Expert surveys', in *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*, eds. Kirk A. Hawkins, Ryan. E. Carlin, Levente Littvay and Cristobal Rovira-Kaltwasser (London: Routledge, 2019); Hammeleers, Michael, Desirée Schmuck, Anne Schulz, Dominque Stefanie Wirz, Jörg Matthes, Linda Bros, Nicoleta Corhu, Ioannis Andreadis. 'The Effects of Populist Identity Framing on Populist Attitudes Across Europe: Evidence From a 15-Country Comparative Experiment.' *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 33, no. 3 (2021): 491–510.

[15]Olivas Osuna, José Javier. 'From chasing populists to deconstructing populism: a new multidimensional approach to understanding and comparing populism.' *European Journal of Political Research* 60, no. 4 (2021): 829–853.

[16]Berlin, Isaiah. 'To define populism', *Government and Opposition* 3, no. 2 (1968): 137–179.

[17]Hunger, Sophia, and Fred Paxton. 'What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science.' *Political Science Research and Methods* 10, no. 3 (2021): 617–633.

[18]Freeden, Michael. 'After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology'. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22, no. 1 (2017): 1–11.

whether populism should be considered a matter of degree or nature,[19] and discrepancies concerning the specific attributes or subdimensions that parties and leaders should display to be classified as 'populist'.[20] Much of the literature draws on experiences from both the West and the Global South.[21] With a few exceptions,[22] the politics of the Middle-East have rarely been examined from a populism lens.

Ontological disagreements led over time to the development of different research traditions. While some experts define populism as a 'thin-centred ideology',[23] others consider it as political strategy employed by personalist leaders to reach and exercise power,[24] or focus on the discursive and performative nature of the phenomenon.[25] Populism has been described as a 'flexible mode of persuasion', a 'peculiar negativism', often directed against the elites, but sometimes also against elites and minorities and as an illiberal conception of democracy.[26] Despite these meaningful discrepancies, most experts recognise a similar core of attributes, such as Manichean interpretation of society, anti-elitism, people-centrism, and moralism, and consider populism as a social construction.[27]

Populism has an important socio-cultural and relational dimension that can help shed light on political conflicts, such as those in the Middle East. Populism entails a process of creation and recreations of identities, shaped by the interactions between 'the people'—and their leaders—with the 'nefarious other'.[28] Hence, the association between populism

[19]Bonikowski, Bart and Noam Gidron. 'Multiple Traditions in Populism Research: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis.' *APSA Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26(2), (2016): 7–14. https://scholar.harvard.edu/bonikowski/publications/multiple-traditions-populism-research: 8–9.

[20]Olivas Osuna, 'From chasing populists to deconstructing populism'.

[21]Berlin, 'To define populism'; De la Torre, Carlos. *Populist Seduction in Latin America* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010); Pirro Andrea.L., Paul, Taggart and Stijn Van Kessel S. 'The populist politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: Comparative conclusions'. *Politics* 38, no. 3 (2018): 378–390; Ramiro, Luis and Raúl Gomez, 'Radical-left populism during the great recession: Podemos and its competition with the established radical left'. *Political Studies* 65 no, 1_suppl (2017): 108–126; Lebow, David. 'Trumpism and the dialectic of neoliberal reason'. *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 2(2019): 380–398; Zaslove, Andrej. *The re-invention of the European radical right: Populism, regionalism, and the Italian Lega Nord*. (2011, Kingston: MQUP); Barrio Astrid., Oscar Barberà O. & Juan Rodríguez-Teruel, 'Spain steals from us!' The 'populist drift' of Catalan regionalism. *Comparative European Politics* 16, no, 6, (2018): 993–1011; Subramanian, Nerendra. 'Populism in India'. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27, no. 1, (2007), 81–91; Resnick, Danielle. *Urban poverty and party populism in African democracies*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[22]See, for example, Yilmaz, Ihsan. 'Far-right populists in power and transnational repression of dissidents.' in *Handbook of Middle East Politics*, ed. Shahram Akbarzadeh (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023), 73–88; Dorraj, Manochehr. 'Populism and Corporatism in the Middle East and North Africa'; Elçi, Ezgi 'The rise of populism in Turkey: a content analysis.' *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019): 387–408; Filc, Dani. 'Populism in the Middle East.' in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (London: Routledge, 2018), 385–401.

[23]Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist'.

[24]Weyland, Kurt. 'Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics'. *Comparative politics* 34, no. 1; (2001): 1–22, 14.

[25]Jagers, Jan, and Stefaan Walgrave. 'Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium.' *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3, (2007): 319–345; Ostiguy, Pierre and Benjamin Moffitt. 'Who Would Identify With An "Empty Signifier"?' In. *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*. eds, Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza and Benjamin Moffitt. (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[26]Kazin, Michael. *The populist persuasion: An American history* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Canovan, Margaret. *Populism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 294; Müller, Jaan-Werner. 'The people must be extracted from within the people: Reflections on populism.' *Constellation* 21 no. 4(2014): 483–493; Pappas, Takis S. *Populism and Liberal Democracy: a Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[27]Kim, Seongcheol. 'Taking stock of the field of populism research: Are ideational approaches 'moralistic' and post-foundational discursive approaches 'normative'. *Politics*, (2021): 492–504; Olivas Osuna, 'From chasing populists to deconstructing populism', 833–835.

[28]Moffitt, Benjamin. *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016) 17–25; Ostiguy, Pierre. 'A Socio-Cultural Approach'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*., eds. Cristobal Rovira-Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa-Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 17.

with nationalism, religion and 'civilizationism'.[29] Populism is also closely related to crises, which in the Middle East have become more prevalent since the uprisings of 2011. Many studies show that populist movements usually appear within a crisis context. Populism thrives in periods of political, social and economic crisis because the crisis erodes trust in political representative, fuels grievances and serves as a justification for radical measures.[30] Crises are discursively constructed and reconstructed through populist narratives of discontent and blame. Populists spectacularise social, political and economic problems, in particular, those related to borders and security—as well as the failure to address them—to propagate the sense of crisis, to harvest the discontent of 'the people' and turn them against a dangerous 'other'.[31]

Within the Middle East, Filc suggests that populism has served as a transformative political project that brings into the political system and processes previously excluded social groups and makes use of anti-elitist, nationalistic sentiment as well as popular sovereignty, reifying the people.[32] Previously, Middle East populism was associated with leaders who were initially outsiders or portrayed themselves as such. The mid-twentieth century figures like Ataturk in Turkey, Reza Shah in Iran and Gamal Nasser in Egypt claimed their legitimacy from the will of the people and following their rise to power, sought to refashion the contract between state and society by increasing the size of the public sector and public employment opportunities and greater state activism in the economy and public service provision.[33]

More recently, in the current century, powerful figures such as Iran's Ahmadinejad, Turkey's Erdogan and Israel's Netanyahu have used populist discourse and style to reach power and justify their policies.[34] The invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 unleashed a kind of moral populism in the shape of Islamist, sectarian and ethnonationalist movements.[35] Religion became a pillar in the populist appeal in the region. The term 'ummah', or community of believers, gradually replaced 'the people' in populist rhetoric in some Muslim countries.[36] Similarly, in Israel populist right-wing discourses conflated Jewishness with the *demos*, as a way of demarcating the people's boundaries.[37]

Beginning in 2011, widespread social unrest led to uprisings which overthrew several of the region's rulers before instigating a backlash. That resulted in armed insurgencies in Syria, Yemen and Libya and counter-revolutionary measures to contain the social forces unleashed in Bahrain and Egypt, the latter through a military coup in 2013. Since then,

[29]Brubaker, Rogers. 'Between nationalism and civilizationism: The European populist moment in comparative perspective'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191–1226.
[30]Roberts, Kenneth. 'Populism, political mobilizations, and crises of political representation'. In *The Promise and Perils of Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
[31]Moffitt, 'How to perform crisis', 210.
[32]Filc, 'Populism in the Middle East', 385–6.
[33]Dorraj, 'Populism and Corporatism in the Middle East and North Africa'; Filc, 'Populism in the Middle East'.
[34]Ansari, Ali. 'Iran under Ahmadinejad: populism and its malcontents.' *International Affairs*, 84, no. 4 (2008): 683–700; Jonathan Leslie. 'Netanyahu's Populism: An Overlooked Explanation for Israeli Foreign Policy.' *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2017): 75–82 2017; Filc, 'Populism in the Middle East'.
[35]Theros, Marika and Mary Kaldor. 'The logics of public authority: understanding power, politics and security in Afghanistan, 2002–2014'. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7 no. 1 (2018): 1–22; Dodge, Toby, Zeyneb Kaya, Kyra Luchtenberg, Sarah Mathieu-Comtois, Bahra Saleh, Christine van den Toorn, Andrea Turpin-King. and Jessica Watkins. 'Iraq synthesis paper: understanding the drivers of conflict in Iraq.' *Middle East Centre Paper Series*. LSE Middle East Centre and Conflict Research Programme, (2018): 1–25,4.
[36]Hadiz, *Islamic populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*.
[37]Ben Porat, Guy and Dani Filc. 'Remember to be Jewish: Religious Populism in Israel.' *Politics and Religion* 15, no. 1 (2022): 61–84.

states and societies have become increasingly fractured, leading to a range of transnational tensions and proxy conflicts.[38] Social disconnection from rulers has turned the region into fertile grounds for the dissemination of populist discourses based on the demonisation of an 'other' and the victimisation of 'the people', that is usually displayed as abused by unscrupulous domestic and international elites and ethnic minorities.

In general, populist frames have been employed to create unity in the increasingly fragmented societies in the region.[39] However, the reliance on ethnic and religious frames to solidify a common identity and sense of belonging, as has been the case in the Israel-Palestine conflict, can be associated with significantly less willingness to compromise in negotiated solutions.[40] These essentialist interpretations of society pave the way for the surge of conspiracy thinking, fears for existential threats and inter-group distrust that can serve to fuel conflict and hinder peace. Moreover, the Middle East provides examples of how populist rhetoric is used to construct narratives of oppression as means to delegitimise and dehumanise the neighbour and justify securitisation and interventionist foreign policy.[41] Therefore, the analysis of the populist discursive trait in Abbas's and Netanyahu's speeches may help understand some of the ideational factors that may have contributed to the escalation of violence and may preclude a peaceful resolution.

Measuring populist language

Through the analysis of political communications, populist ideologies and discourses may be identified empirically.[42] Content analysis is a technique that has been repeatedly used to capture the degree of populism in the discourses of political leaders.[43] This methodology produces quantifiable evidence about a set of categories by a systematic analysis of a set of texts.[44] Our approach differs significantly from most previous studies on the supply-side of populism that have either relied on the use of software to count certain keywords or used the 'holistic grading' technique that entails experts assigning a single populism score to a text according to their degree of populism.[45] Both methods struggle to capture the multidimensionality of the populism construct.

[38]Kamrava, Mehran. 'Mulitpolarity and instability in the Middle East.' *Orbis* 62, no. 4 (2018): 598–616.

[39]Hadiz, Vedi. 'The New Islamic Populism.' *Global Dialogue*, 19 November 2011, https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/the-new-islamic-populism/; Hadiz, Vedi. 'Islamic populism and the politics of neoliberal inequalities.' In *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Müller, Jan-Werner. *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Rogenhofer, Julius Maximus and Ayala Panievsky. 'Antidemocratic populism in power: comparing Erdoğan's Turkey with Modi's India and Netanyahu's Israel.' *Democratization* 27, no. 8 (2020): 1394–1412.

[40]Canetti et al., 'Framing and fighting', 748.

[41]Baun, Dylan. 'Populism and war-making: Constructing the people and the enemy during the early Lebanese Civil War era'. In *Mapping Populism: Approaches and Methods*, eds. Amit Ron and Majia Nadesan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Holliday, 'Populism, the international and methodological nationalism'.

[42]Kriesi, Hanspeter. 'The populist challenge'. *West European Politics* 37, no. 2 (2014): 361–378, 364.

[43]For example: Jagers and Walgrave, 'Populism as political communication style'; Hawkins 'Is Chávez populist?; Elçi, Ezgi. 'The rise of populism in Turkey: a content analysis'. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*' 19 no. 3 (2019): 387–408.

[44]Krippendorff, Klaus. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (London, Sage, 1980), 21.9.

[45]Hawkins, 'Is Chávez populist?'; Olivas Osuna, José Javier and Jose Rama. 'Recalibrating populism measurement tools: Methodological inconsistencies and challenges to our understanding of the relationship between the supply- and demand-side of populism'. *Frontiers in Sociology* (2022), https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2022.970043; Rooduijn, Matthijs and Teun Pauwels. 'Measuring populism: comparing two methods of content analysis'. *West European Politics* 34 (2011): 1272–1283.

Ours is a more fine-grained effort to assess the degree of populism and anti-populism. Specifically, we compare the density of populist features across five dimensions that synthesise the most influential conceptualisation in the literature:[46] (1) an antagonistic depiction of the polity; (2) a moral interpretation of the people; (3) an idealised construction of society; (4) popular sovereignty; and (5) reliance on charismatic leadership (see Appendix Table A1).[47] Syntactic units, usually sentences, are recorded and classified whenever they match the criteria corresponding to at least one populist or anti-populist attribute which entails an intensive manual coding work facilitated by MAXQDA software. These dimensions are deeply intertwined, and therefore often sentences are coded in more than one category.

Populist dimensions are treated as conceptual continuums between negative ('populist') and positive ('anti-populist') poles (Table A1).[48] Anti-populist features provide another element for comparison across the leaders analysed. An assessment of the degree of populism may not only take into consideration populist features but also those which may indicate a more 'pluralist' or 'liberal democratic' ideology, discourse, or attitude. The 'anti-populist' category used in this project refers to a 'pluralist' or 'liberal democratic' standpoint.[49]

In the Middle East, Filc has argued that populism emerged from the interaction between elites-driven modernisation, local problems derived from globalisation, religion and ethno-national conflicts.[50] With that in mind, we also decided to code other discursive traits, such as allusions to religion, borders, and securitisation. We did so because populists often demonise, scapegoat and even dehumanise the 'other', while claiming righteousness is often rooted in religious morality.[51] Additionally, populism in the Middle East has often been deeply embedded in religious narratives.[52] Meanwhile, the 'border' and 'populism' are mutually constitutive concepts: (re)bordering narratives and practices are based on and feed into populist attitudes and discourses.[53] Borders help produce shared understandings of identity and a sense of inclusion and exclusion. They contribute to the dichotomisation of the social space separating individuals in groups, 'the people' and 'the other'. Given the central role of border conflicts in the Middle East and especially Israel-Palestine, we deemed it relevant to record explicit references to them. Similarly, securitisation includes explicit references to domestic security dangers such as terrorist attacks or potential attacks from neighbouring countries and policies meant to tackle them. Securitisation is commonly used by populists in other arguments.[54]

[46]Including, Canovan, Margaret. *Populism* (Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt Publishing, 1981): 294; Taggart, Paul A. *Populism* (Maidenhead, Berkshire, Open University Press, 2000): 3–5; Weyland, 'Clarifying a contested concept': 4–11; Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist,' 543; and Laclau, Ernesto. *On populist reason* (London, Verso, 2005).
[47]Olivas Osuna, 'From chasing populists to deconstructing populism,' 836–841.
[48]Goertz, Gary. *Social Science Concepts: A User's Guide* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006): 27–35.
[49]Pappas equates populism to 'democratic illiberalism'; Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy*: 34. Many authors emphasize the 'anti-pluralist' nature of populism, e.g. Hawkins, 'Is Chávez populist?': 1046, 1050; Müller, Jan-Werner. *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
[50]Filc, 'Populism in the Middle East', 398.
[51]Berlet, Chip and Matthew N. Lyons. *Right-wing populism in America: Too close for comfort*. (New York: Guilford Publications, 2000): 7–8.
[52]Hadiz, *Islamic populism in Indonesia and the Middle East.*
[53]Olivas Osuna, 'Populism and Borders'.
[54]Wojczewski, Thorsten. '"Enemies of the people": Populism and the politics of (in)security'. *European Journal of International Security* 5, no. 1 (2020): 5–24.

Abbas and Netanyahu

Examining the extent of populist (and anti-populist) language as well as its subject matter deployed by the Israeli and Palestinian leaders is pertinent for several reasons. One is that the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, represent the two antagonistic camps in one of the most prominent and long-lasting conflicts in the world. Another is that the two have been in power for all of the decade following the effective end of the Oslo peace process; since 2010 there have been no substantive peace talks between the two sides. Therefore, studying the language and the tone within it can reveal much about the priorities that each side makes in relation to their own conflict as well as in the wider Middle East region.

At the same time, it is important to note that Netanyahu and Abbas were not specifically chosen to be examples of populist leadership. Rather, they were chosen as the most representative figures in each of the two sides of the conflict. Moreover, we chose speeches through which the two could be directly compared, that is the opening sessions of the UNGA. Netanyahu spoke at eight UNGA opening sessions (2011–18) and Abbas at all ten during the decade (2010–19). The frequency of their speeches provides an opportunity for longitudinal study, making it possible to contrast the extent to which populist attributes filtered into their speeches. Speeches at the UNGA have an advantage that they are time-limited, thereby ensuring a broadly similar sized text corpora and that the speakers' audience is the same. UNGA speeches may be considered a good test case to detect populism as given the audience's diplomatic profile, speakers may be less susceptible to populist entreaties than in a speech given at a political rally.

Despite the existence of the Oslo peace process, negotiations were not a prominent feature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict during 2010–19. There were only sporadic efforts to do so in 2010 and 2013–4.[55] Violence, when it did occur, was largely between Israel and the Islamist Hamas group in Gaza. The confrontation between Israel and Hamas highlighted the political fracture within the Palestinian polity during the period. Since 2007, the occupied Palestinian territory has been split, with President Abbas and his pro-Oslo Fatah party being in control of the West Bank and Hamas which rejected Oslo and controlled Gaza.[56]

Abbas has been president of both the quasi-Palestinian state, the Palestinian National Authority, and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) since 2005. His involvement in Palestinian politics began as a member and co-founder of Fatah in the late 1950s, which a decade later became the majority nationalist and relatively secular faction of the PLO. Abbas has a reputation for being moderate and pragmatic, having been committed to dialogue and negotiation with Jewish left-wing groups since the 1970s and when he took charge of the PLO's international relations in 1980. He served as former Fatah and PLO leader Yasser Arafat's prime minister and succeeded Arafat upon his death. His rise was helped by the fact that he enjoyed strong international support when he first became

[55]There are numerous accounts and surveys of the Arab-Israeli and, more specifically, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that are available and which include overviews of the Oslo process and negotiations. Among them include: Tessler, Mark. *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Bickerton, Ian and Carla Klausner. *A History of the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. 9th ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); and Bakkour, Samer. *The End of the Middle East Peace Process: The Failure of US Diplomacy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

[56]For more on the Israel-Hamas conflict, see *Reuters*. 'Hamas and Israel: a history of confrontation'. 14 May 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-israel-history-confrontation-2021-05-14/; Arsenault, Joshua and Or Honig. 'Israel-Hamas: From national liberation to partial deterrence stability'. *Deterring Terrorism: A Model for Strategic Deterrence*, ed. Eilli Lieberman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

leader, but his status with the Palestinian public has been damaged by the inability to restart negotiations and what is seen as a willingness to concede to Israel.[57]

Netanyahu first emerged as a leader during the Oslo period in the 1990s. The leader of the Likud party, he opposed Oslo and sought to slow it down. His support came from the settler population and the religious and nationalist rights. He was elected prime minister for the first time in 1996. He was defeated in the 1999 election but served as a minister in subsequent administrations before returning as prime minister in 2009 until 2021; after losing power in 2021–22, he was re-elected prime minister in November 2022. Netanyahu's premiership had three main goals: not to make concessions to the Palestinians; to prevent Iran from developing its nuclear programme; and ensuring that the US would not abandon its traditional support for Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[58] These concerns come across strongly in the speeches analysed.

Comparing populist features in Abbas's and Netanyahu's UN speeches

This section combines a quantitative analysis of the speeches with a qualitative analysis of the segments coded. Netanyahu and Abbas presented their positions at the UNGA opening sessions between 2010 and 2019 in contrasting ways.[59] Netanyahu's language and choice of words was overall more populist than Abbas's (Figure 1 and Appendix Table A3). Abbas, for his part, used proportionally more anti-populist language than Netanyahu did. The Israeli prime minister displayed a higher density of populist allusions (Figure 2). Looking at the sentiments expressed within the speeches themselves, when both leaders employed populist language, it was largely captured in the antagonistic and moralistic dimensions rather than in the idealisation of society, popular sovereignty or charismatic leadership (Figure 2). The dynamics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and external events such as the lifting of sanctions on Iran and the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016 seem to have shaped the content and degree of populism of their speeches.

The depiction of the 'other' as a morally corrupt antagonist is used to disseminate narratives about interest-based threats—i.e. security and economic threats—and identity-based threats—threats to culture, traditional lifestyles, democracy or to other forms of domestic government.[60] Competing ethno-nationalist leaders can simultaneously play the role of the arrogant majority and an exploited minority, depending on the context of reference.[61] These leaders may act as messianic and transcendental saviours of the people and end up superseding the authority of the usual representative political institutions.[62] Netanyahu was especially prone to this. When it came to anti-populist language, both Abbas and Netanyahu made more use of this in the antagonism dimension than in any of the others, although Abbas also did so more than Netanyahu in relation to sovereignty, society, and morality (Figure 3).

[57]BBC. 'Profile: Mahmoud Abbas'. November 29, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20033995; Al Jazeera. 'Profile: Mahmoud Abbas'. December 6, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/6/profile-mahmoud-abbas.
[58]Caspit, Ben. *The Netanyahu Years*. (New York: Macmillan, 2017).
[59]The raw data in the figures that follow are set out in Appendix 2 and 3.
[60]Hogan, Jackie and Kristin Haltinner. 'Floods, invaders, and parasites: Immigration threat narratives and right-wing populism in the U.S.A., UK and Australia'. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36 no. 5 (2015): 520–543.
[61]Mostov, Julie. *Soft Borders: Rethinking Sovereignty and Democracy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[62]Finchelstein, Federico. *From fascism to populism in history*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), xxxvi, 183.

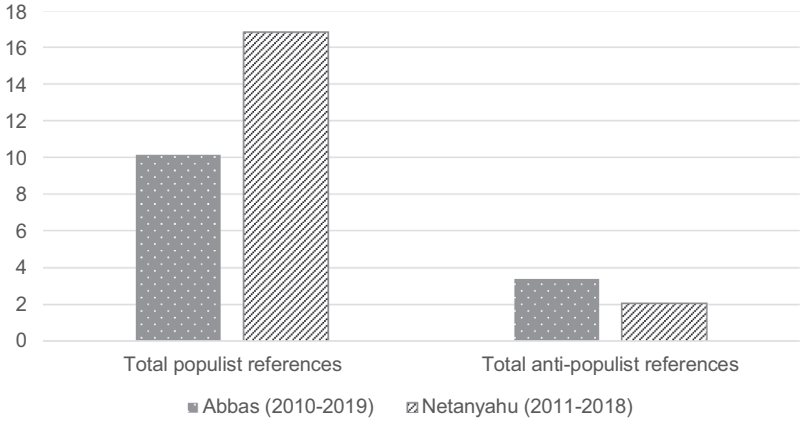


Figure 1. Populist and anti-populist references per 1000 words by leader.

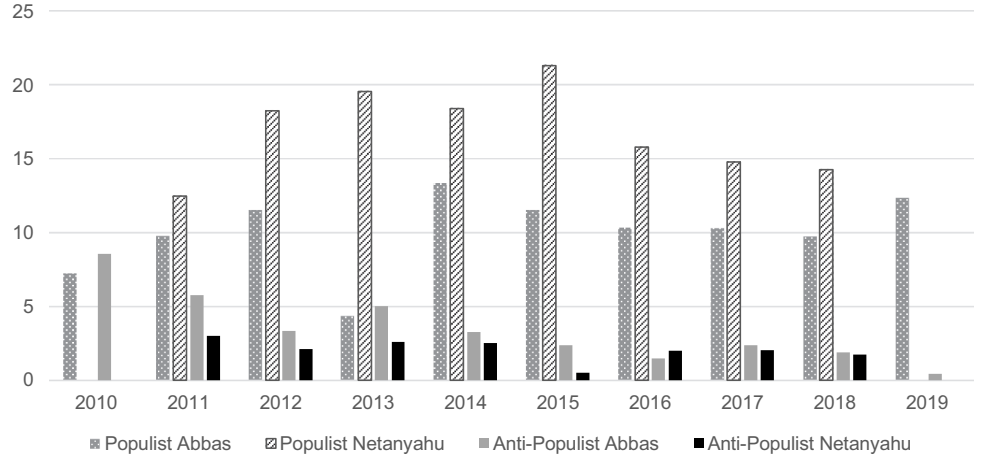


Figure 2. Populist and anti-populist language per 1000 words by leader, 2010–19.

In terms of the content and target of Netanyahu's and Abbas's speeches, there were notable differences that can be visualised with a word and trilemma clouds (Figure 4). Abbas's speeches were dominated by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and claimed that Israel was denying the peace process and the Palestinians their rights and statehood. Meanwhile, Netanyahu widened the scope and paid greater attention to Iran and other security threats rather than to the Palestinians.

For Abbas, the UNGA was a forum to not only highlight the injustice of the Palestinians' situation but to pursue international law and appeal to member states to honour their support for the peace process. Consequently, during the decade Abbas's speeches were often in line with his campaigns, including demanding recognition of Palestinian statehood, Palestinian entry into international organisations like the International Criminal Court and backing proposals from states like France to host an international conference on the Palestinian question.

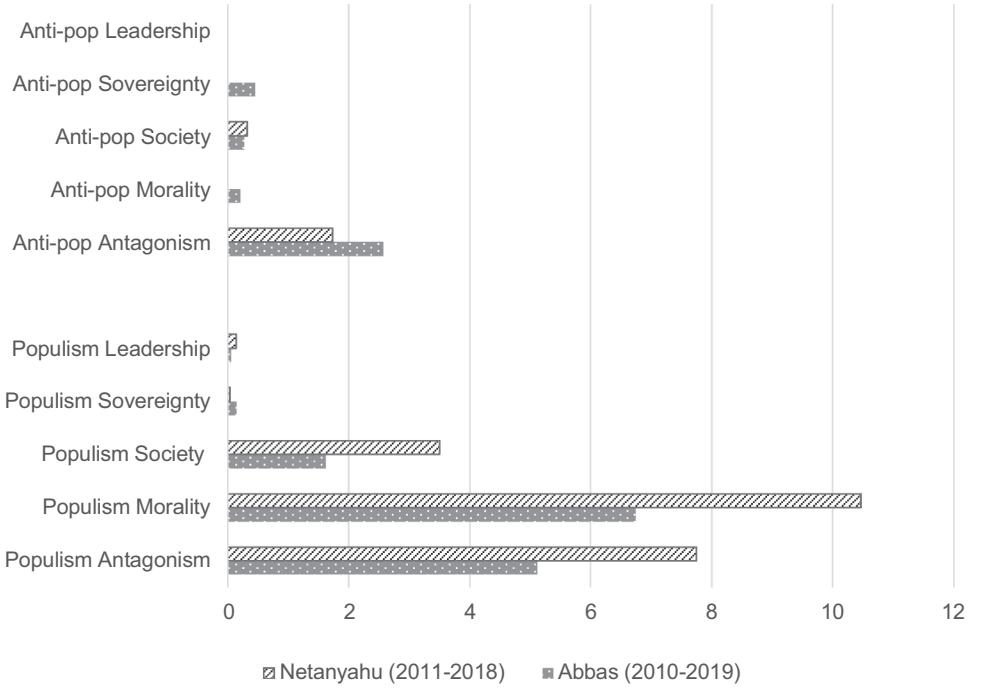
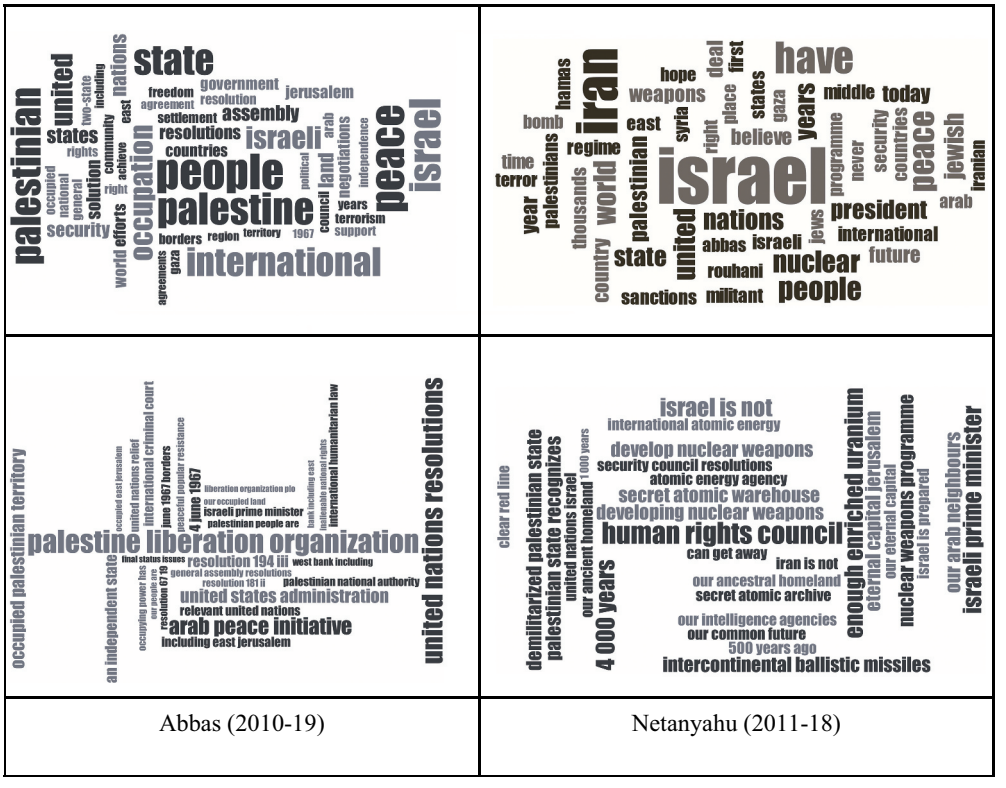


Figure 3. Types of populist and anti-populist references per 1000 words by leader.

Abbas's willingness to accommodate the international community helped mitigate the degree of populism in his discourses. He frequently incorporated references to peace initiatives, treaties, agreements and international organisations, which were the terms he often used; indeed, 'negotiation' got 68 mentions and 'negotiations' 14 alongside 52 references to the 'two-state solution'. This suggests a less confrontational style.

Yet even if Abbas's speeches were less populist than Netanyahu's, he also employed that style occasionally. Antagonism and morality were the dominant populist discursive attributes of both leaders (Figure 3). In 2010 and 2014 the degree of populism in Abbas's discourse was higher than in the rest of the period. In 2010, for instance, he reported to the UN that 'this [Israel's behaviour] is the result of the expansionist and hegemonic mentality that still prevails in the ideology and policies of Israel, the occupying Power, whose standard policy is non-compliance with internationally legitimate resolutions, including those of the General Assembly and the Security Council.' In 2014, he claimed 'This culture of racism, incitement and hatred was glaringly apparent some months ago in an appallingly despicable crime committed by fascist settlers, who abducted Mohammed Abu Khdeir'.

Abbas also utilised moralistic language to portray the Palestinians as virtuous and deserving victims of Israel. In 2010, he pointed out that 'despite the historic injustice that has been inflicted upon our people, their desire to achieve a just peace that guarantees the realization of their national rights in freedom and independence has not and will not diminish'. Abbas emphasised this moral hierarchy by referring to Israel's 'colonial occupation' (2014, 2017, 2018) in what he claimed to be 'the last occupation in the world' (2011).



Abbas (2010-19) | Netanyahu (2011-18)

Figure 4. Word and trilemma clouds of leaders' speeches.

Another way that Abbas highlighted Palestinian virtue was by stressing the preparedness to exercise self-restraint in the face of considerable provocation. For instance, in 2010, he claimed '[o]ur wounded hands are still able to carry the olive branch picked from the splinters of the trees that the occupation forces uproot every day'. In 2012, he said that 'I speak on behalf of an angry people who feel that while they demand their right to freedom, adopt a culture of peace'. Two years later, in 2014, he explained that '[e]ven as we watched the ongoing and escalating Israeli violations, we exercised incredible self-restraint, silencing our cries and tending to our own wounds in order to give the American efforts the best possible chance for success'.

Abbas sometimes relied upon a populist idealisation of society and its past that helped underpin the abovementioned victimhood narratives. For example, in 2011, he referred to 'the strength of this defenceless people, armed only with their dreams, courage, hope and slogans in the face of bullets, tanks, tear gas and bulldozers' and that 'my people will continue their epic steadfastness and eternal survival journey in their beloved land, every inch of which carries evidence and landmarks affirming their roots and unique connection to the land throughout ancient history' (2011). Populist references to popular sovereignty and personalistic leadership were minimal in his UNGA speeches (Figure 3).

Arguably, what comes through Abbas's speeches is the disparity between the Palestinians' and Israel's relative power. Even if he was unable to gain practical assistance, moral suasion was vital. Perhaps for that reason, his language was less populist and more

temperate. His discourses provide frequent examples of anti-populist references and a more constructive tone than that of Netanyahu. For example, he repeatedly made references to reaching agreements with Israel: 'the Palestinians and Israelis, are partners in the task of peacemaking' (2013); '[o]ur hand remains outstretched to those interested in peacebuilding' (2016); and '[o]ur hand will remain extended for achieving peace through negotiations' (2019). Abbas insisted often on the 'two-State' solution and on mutual recognition: 'ultimately the two peoples must live and coexist, each in their respective State' (2012). There were many references to collaboration with other international players such as the UN and other countries, which revealed a more liberal conception of international relations.

In contrast to Abbas's speeches, Netanyahu focused less on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and more on what he perceived as the larger security threats which Israel faced, namely, Iran and its nuclear programme as well as its support for 'militant Islam' incarnated in groups such as Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Netanyahu portrayed himself and his country as isolated and standing against an existential threat before the passivity of the international community: 'So how does one protect such a tiny country, surrounded by people sworn to its destruction and armed to the teeth by Iran?' (2011). His language was generally more direct and unnuanced than that of Abbas; for instance, he warned that 'Iran and Hezbollah set up new terrorist cells in cities throughout the world' (2015), that his 'Iranian friends will be free from the evil regime that terrorizes them' (2017) and refers to 'Iran's campaign of carnage and conquest throughout the Middle East' (2018) (Figure 4).

Netanyahu discursively sought to discredit and dehumanise Iran and its leadership. For instance, in 2013, he claimed 'Ahmadinejad was a wolf in wolf's clothing, Rouhani is a wolf in sheep's clothing—a wolf who thinks he can pull the wool over the eyes of the international community' (2013). In 2015, he rhetorically asked the UN, 'Does anyone here really believe that a theocratic Iran with sharper claws and sharper fangs will be more likely to change its stripes?'. Then, in 2017 he stated, 'I warned that, when the sanctions on Iran would be removed, Iran would behave like a hungry tiger unleashed—not joining the community of nations, but devouring nations one after the other'.

When alluding to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Netanyahu also used predominately moralising and antagonistic language, which he combined with a Manichean interpretation of Palestinian society. In 2011, he claims that '[w]e want them to give up the fantasy of flooding Israel with millions of Palestinians' (2011) and that '[t]he real tragedy is that the Palestinians are not only trapped in the past, but their leaders are poisoning the future'. A feature of this was his regular lamentation that there was no partner for peace and arguing that Palestinian would not recognise Israel. For instance, in 2011 he claimed that 'the Palestinian State would not allow any Jews', the 'refusal of the Palestinians to recognise a Jewish State within any border' and that '[t]he truth is that Israel wants peace with a Palestinian State, but the Palestinians want a State without peace'. To further make the point and dismiss Abbas as not worth engaging with, in 2014 he stated: 'I suppose it is the same moral universe in which a man who wrote a dissertation of lies about the Holocaust and who insists on a Palestine free of Jews—Judenrein—can stand at this rostrum and shamelessly accuse Israel of genocide and ethnic cleansing' and, in 2018, that 'President Abbas proudly pays Palestinian terrorists who murder Jews', and that '[h]is Palestinian National Authority imposes death sentences on Palestinians for selling land to Jews'.

Speaking in the wake of the conflict in the summer of 2014, Netanyahu asserted that 'Israel was using its missiles to protect its children; Hamas was using its children to protect its missiles'. This illustrates the efforts to describe the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a moral divide—moral superiority/inferiority—in an even more explicit fashion than Abbas does. Another Hamas reference also serves as an example of the 'othering' populist logic by the Prime Minister of Israel: 'I implore everyone to stand with the [killed Israeli soldier] Hadar's parents, with us, with all that is decent in our world against the inhumanity of Hamas, which represents all that is indecent and barbaric' (2016). These discourses resonate with some of those recently used to justify the bombing and invasion of Palestinian territories after the Hamas terrorist attacks on 7 October 2023.

Although the Palestinian political scene was split between Fatah and Hamas, with Abbas having little influence over the latter and its control of Gaza, Netanyahu often blurred the two, and connected the latter to Iran and 'militant Islam'. For instance, he argued that 'ISIS and Hamas are branches of the same poisonous tree (. . .) Isis and Hamas share a fanatical creed (. . .) Hamas shares the global ambitions of its fellow militant Islamists' (2014).

Netanyahu strongly criticised the UN and tried to delegitimise it. For instance, he argued that '[b]y investigating Israel rather than Hamas for war crimes, the United Nations Human Rights Council has betrayed its noble mission to protect the innocent' (2014), that 'the United Nations was obsessively hostile towards Israel' (2015), and that 'the United Nations has deserved every scathing word (. . .) The United Nations, which began as a moral force, has become a moral farce' (2016). Again, this negative interpretation of the UN may help understand the comments and disregard demonstrated by Netanyahu after the new outbreak of violence from late 2023.

Moreover, he also adopted a populist angle to describe society. Ahistorical and oversimplified depictions of the past, intertwined with religious references, served to justify confrontational and exclusionary policies. For example, Netanyahu claimed: 'We are ancient people, we date back nearly 4,000 years to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (2013) and 'History, archaeology, and common sense all make clear that we have had a singular attachment to this land for over 3,000 years' (2014). At the same time, he suggested a dichotomy between modernity—Israel and the West—and medievalism and radical Islam. He claimed that 'a great battle is being waged between the modern and the medieval' (2012) and that 'civilization will ultimately triumph over the forces of terror' (2016). This discourse resembles 'civilisationist' discourses employed by populist radical right parties in Europe.[63]

Although morality, antagonism and reductionist depictions of society emerge in the speeches of both leaders, the density of populist references is much higher in the case of the Israeli leader, who employed a more aggressive and hyperbolic style. Whereas Netanyahu's language was focused on the threat of Iran and Islam, including Hamas, and less on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Abbas's were dominated by his people's struggle with Israel and the peace process.

[63]Brubaker, 'Between nationalism and civilizationism'.

Leaders' references to religion, borders, and security

In addition to populist and anti-populist traits, we also coded the references to borders, securitisation and religion in the two leaders' speeches. This was relevant given that much of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Oslo peace process and negotiations are based around such issues. Again, Netanyahu outstripped Abbas when it came to making religious and securititisation remarks—about twice as dense. Only on the density of border references did Abbas outscore Netanyahu, by making nearly four times the number of references (Figure 5). Netanyahu references to securitisation and religion grew sharply in 2014 right after the Gaza War with Hamas and Islamic Jihad (Figure 6).

Netanyahu used religion to construct an idealised and homogeneous 'people' and a (populist) *demos,* associating the terms 'Jews', 'Jewish' and 'Israeli', and implicitly excluding non-Jewish peoples like Arab Israelis and minorities residing in the country.[64] This is in line with the perennial account Netanyahu uses to describe the creation of Israel, emphasising the biblical origins of the Jewish people and their connection to the land—the 'Jewish State of Israel'—that dates back thousands of years.[65] This religious/mythical interpretation of society can be observed in the word cloud (Figure 4). It helped legitimise political claims and victimhood narratives. For instance, Netanyahu reached out to the past when he claimed that Jews today 'went to Israel to start a new life in our ancient homeland. Together we have transformed a bludgeoned Jewish people, left for dead, into a vibrant, thriving nation, defending itself with the courage of modern Maccabees, developing limitless possibilities for the future' (2013) and that '[f]or centuries, the Jewish people have been demonised with blood libels and charges of deicide. … Today, the Jewish State is demonised with the apartheid libel and charges of genocide' (2014).

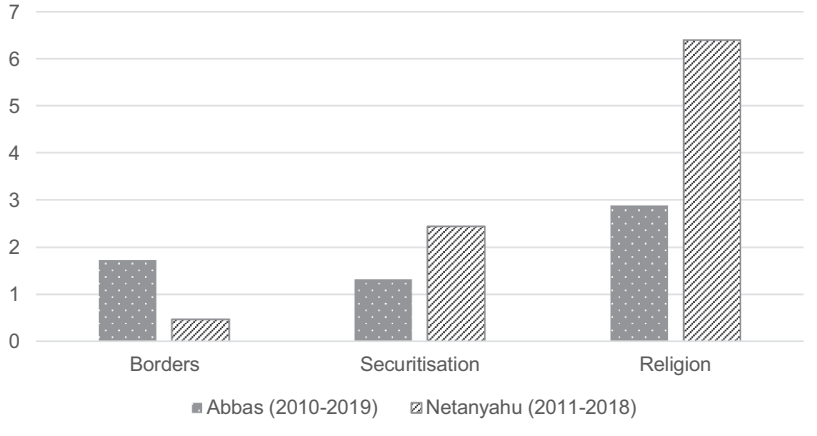


Figure 5. References to religion, borders and securitisation per 1000 words and by leader, 2010–19.

[64]Müller, 'The people must be extracted from within the people'.
[65]Smith, Anthony. D. *The nation in history: historiographical debates about ethnicity and nationalism*. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000): 49–50.

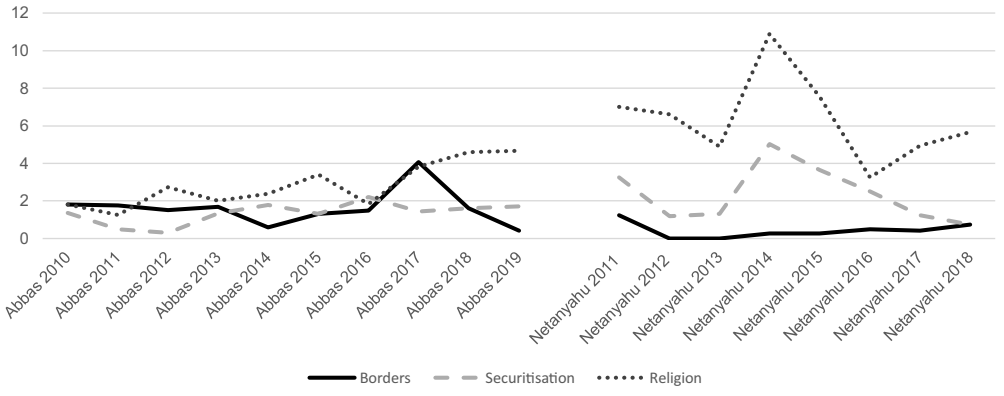


Figure 6. References to religion, borders and securitisation per 1000 words and by leader, 2010–19.

As mentioned earlier, religion is also a fundamental element in homogenising the depiction of the 'other' as an 'enemy', making repeated references to militant Islam and blurring the boundaries between Iran, Islamist terrorist groups (like the Islamic State or Al-Qaeda) and Palestinian citizens and authorities. Through their association with terrorism, Netanyahu was trying to delegitimise other actors in the region—and anyone who does not oppose them. Netanyahu went so far as to claim that 'a malignancy is now growing between East and West, it seeks not to liberate, but to enslave; not to build, but to destroy, that malignancy is militant Islam' (2011). He also warned the UN of a 'savage assault by militant Islamists, who are forcing millions of terrified people to flee to distant shores' (2015). He also used historical allusions that have a particular resonance in relation to Jews and Israel. In 2014, for example, he summoned up the image of the Third Reich: 'The Nazis believed in a master race. The militant Islamists believe in a master faith'. Then, a year later, in 2015, he claimed 'The days when the Jewish people remained passive in the face of genocidal enemies, those days are over'. These religion-based victimhood narratives are similar to those used currently by Netanyahu's government in their justification for their attacks on Gaza.

Abbas did not use religion in as synonymous a manner to describe 'the people'. He referred to 'Palestinians' and the 'Palestinian people' more often than he did to 'Muslims'. Moreover, he did not tie his people's past to a religious one, but instead focused on more secular reasons for the Palestinians' present situation by alluding to the 1948 *Nakhba* (the 'Catastrophe') and the suffering and occupation experienced by the Palestinian people since. In 2014, he denounced 'an attempt to brand the conflict as religious' and in 2017 he stressed that '[o]ur conflict is political, not religious, so let us leave religious issues out of the equation … our problem is with the Israeli colonial occupation, not with Judaism as a religion'. Nonetheless, the religious dimension of the conflict was not completely absent from his discourse. For instance, in 2012, Abbas noted that Palestinians 'are facing relentless waves of attacks against our people, our mosques, our churches and monasteries, and our homes and schools', and in 2019, he pointed out 'the result will be a religious war'. He also employed religious allusions such as the use of the term 'martyrs' and 'Holy' as well as the very frequent references to God—for example, 'God almighty tells us', 'God's gift to humanity' and 'God is with us'.

References to borders were much more salient in Abbas's speeches. If Abbas refused to see the conflict with Israel as primarily religious, he stressed how it could be resolved through the use of borders to create two states. In Abbas's view, borders need not separate, but rather facilitate, exchange between peoples. In 2013, he invited the Israeli side 'to make the culture of peace reign, to tear down walls, to build bridges instead of walls and to open wide roads for connections and communication'. He also overcame an antagonistic depiction of the other by using the term 'neighbours'. For example, in 2016, he defended that 'the State of Palestine and the State of Israel can coexist alongside each other, in peace and security, as good neighbours, each within secure and recognized borders'.

Yet Abbas seemed to recognise how important borders were for the goal of reaching full statehood and alluded frequently to those defined in 1967 after the Six-Day War. The notion of Israeli occupation was also strongly tied to that of the trespassing of borders. In 2010 for instance, he noted that 'the occupation is racing against time to redraw the borders of our land according to what it wants and to impose a fait accompli on the ground that changes its realities and features and that is undermining the realistic potential for the establishment of the State of Palestine.' In 2017, he asked the UN, 'where are the borders of Israel that Member States are recognizing? How can Member States recognize a State that has no borders? Israel has not even decided on its own borders'. Indeed, he drew attention to their non-existence to account for Israel's (mis) treatment of his people. Abbas's words arguably had a purpose to highlight the Palestinians' suffering and indicate an implicit moral superiority vis-à-vis Israel while also stressing that his alternative approach would involve a less exclusionary stance towards the 'other'.

In contrast, Netanyahu referred to borders as boundaries that separate Israel from its enemies and largely linked to securitisation messages. For example, in 2011 he claimed that 'we must first erect a sturdy barrier to keep the crocodile out, or at the very least jam an iron bar between its gaping jaws'—once more playing on the dehumanisation of the other. Netanyahu's security concerns were mostly directed at Israel's larger security risks and especially the role of Iran and its nuclear programme, rather than on a Palestinian threat. Iran was also significant for its proxy support for groups fighting Israel directly, such as Hamas and Hezbollah (Figure 4). He used the word 'Iran' 283 times, 'Iranian' 31 and 'Iranians' 4 times, while referring to 'Palestinian' 66 times, 'Palestinians' 39 times and 'Palestine' only 9 times. He also mentioned Syria 26 times and Lebanon 20 times during the decade.

Netanyahu's security concerns and underlying *realpolitik* conception of international relations were expressed repeatedly. In 2011, he claimed that 'to defend itself, Israel must therefore maintain a long-term Israeli military presence in critical strategic areas in the West Bank'. In 2013, he vowed that 'Israel will never acquiesce to nuclear arms in the hands of a rogue regime [Iran] that repeatedly promises to wipe us off the map. Against such a threat, Israel will have no choice but to defend itself. I want there to be no confusion on this point: Israel will not allow Iran to get nuclear weapons. If Israel is forced to stand alone, Israel will stand alone'. In 2015, he affirmed that 'Israel will continue to respond forcefully to any attacks against it from Syria'. Netanyahu justified his policy stance by claiming to be a sort of last bastion fighting 'fanaticism' and 'terrorism'.

It is noteworthy that Abbas was also, and more emphatically, referring to the fight against terrorism and extremism, to dissociate his government from the accusations made by Netanyahu. Securitisation is a less salient theme and he usually advocated for a more international collective approach to achieve peace and security than the Israeli Prime Minister. Netanyahu used references to religion and securitisation to reinforce a typically populist construction of 'chains of equivalence'[66] to homogenise a heterogeneous reality. He tried to unite 'the people' against an 'enemy'—'militant Islam'—that subsumed a variety of different 'others'. Conversely, Abbas's use of references to borders did not seem to follow a populist logic of articulation. The analysis of religion, borders and securitisation references in their UN discourses also help us to understand their stances and policy proposals to resolve the current crisis. Netanyahu's essentialist interpretation of borders as barriers that defend against an enemy that wanted to eradicate the 'Jewish people' seem incompatible with that of the two-state solution that Abbas defended and implied some collaboration and permeability across borders.

Conclusion

This article deconstructs and compares the speeches of the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, before the UN General Assembly between 2010 and 2019, using a populism analytical framework. This approach allows us to identify patterns in the discursive construction of the interplay between 'the people' and 'the other' and help identify key divergent features in the framing of the Israel-Palestine conflict which are likely hindering the success of a peaceful resolution.

Our computer-assisted content analysis revealed that both leaders present their peoples as victims and idealise their attitudes vis-à-vis the current conflict. However, Netanyahu's discourses displayed a significantly higher density of populist references than those of Abbas throughout the period analysed, as well as less focus on the Palestinians as the Israelis' principal security threat. The qualitative assessment also showed that his style was also more aggressive and uncompromising than that of the Palestinian leader. Indeed, while Abbas focused on the challenges facing the Palestinians and their search for international support, Netanyahu emphasised external threats from the region that went beyond the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, including both state (such as Iran and Syria) and non-state (such as Hamas and Islamic State) actors. That Netanyahu did so may account for Israel's unwillingness to move on the peace process, while Abbas's appeal to the international community at the UNGA indicated Palestinian dissatisfaction with the state of affairs.

While it was certainly the case that Netanyahu resorted to populist statements more often than Abbas did, it is also the case that both tended to use antagonistic depictions of the polity and Manichean interpretations of their societies and the challenges they faced to establish a moral hierarchy in which they stood above 'the other'. This 'other' is more explicitly described as an enemy by Netanyahu than by Abbas, who presented himself as someone invested in finding a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In their UN speeches, these leaders made less appeal to

[66]Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; Olivas Osuna, 'Populism and Borders'.

popular sovereignty and charismatic leadership, which is common among other populist leaders. But this may be due to the specific nature of the audience they address—namely, international representatives at the UNGA. Netanyahu's more hyperbolic style was riven with efforts to demonise and de-humanise the 'other', which was rare in Abbas's interventions.

Throughout the period analysed, we also find important variations in the intensity of populism. Historical events, such as the rise of extremist groups like the Islamic State from 2013, the Gaza War in 2014, and the new stance and communication policy in the US after Donald Trump's election, may explain some of the evolution and disparities observed in discourses of these leaders. Abbas may have wanted to portray Palestinians as more moderate and restrained than other Middle Eastern players opposing Israel. Netanyahu may have wished to convey a sense of determination and adopt a more confrontational and independent stance vis-à-vis the international community—which he perceived as a hindrance or check on some of Israel's defence and security policy decisions. These distinct stances resonate with those performed by these leaders in the midst of the Israel-Hamas war.

Another notable feature is the abundant presence of religious imagery in the two leaders' speeches—although in a more frequent and antagonistic manner by Netanyahu than Abbas. Netanyahu's use of such language may be explained in part by his religious conception of the state and the Israeli religious political right that constitutes a domestic audience that shares the idea that his country is facing existential threats from outside. Netanyahu used religious allusions to legitimise some of his policies and aspirations, as well as to construct 'chains of equivalences' to bundle together several different actors into a somewhat unique threatening and undeserving 'other', often referred to as 'militant Islam'.

Netanyahu's references to borders were usually tied to a securitisation logic and a *realpolitik* conception of foreign affairs and more frequently focused on Iran, its nuclear programme and the possibility of mass destruction of weapons in the hands of radical groups. Abbas was also concerned with security and repeatedly alluded to the need to fight terrorism—probably to disentangle Palestinians from the evil 'other' Netanyahu attempted to recreate in his messages. Abbas made borders a more central element in his discourses, but he projected a different understanding of their relevance and nature. He considered them as indispensable to achieve statehood but not as elements that would impede exchanges between neighbouring nations. The ethno-religious essentialist frames by Netanyahu help explain his interpretation of the conflict as an existential threat and the unwillingness to accept a compromise solution. The question therefore arises over the extent to which these two cases represent the character of the wider turn towards populism, both within the Middle East and more generally. Certainly, this article suggests that populism is a feature of political leaders in this region. Even a theoretically less conducive setting, like the UNGA, where speakers address international elites, serves to illustrate the existence of underlying populist logic in political speeches. This only reiterates the extent to which the populist shift was a global one and therefore not restricted to the Global North, where much of the study and analysis to date has focused.

While the UNGA speeches offer a consistent and extensive corpus to analyse the two leaders' discourse, we noted a limitation; namely, that the forum is less responsive to populist rhetoric. To this, it may also be added that the language directed to such an

international audience may differ substantially from a domestic one. Additional research would be needed to establish to what extent the content and style of their domestic discourses rely similarly on populist attributes to those identified here. It seems clear that the interpretative frames used by the Hamas leadership differ widely to those used by Abbas and are likely reflecting a more essentialist view of 'the people' and of Israel as an enemy to whom no concessions can be made.

Although both leaders dominated their polities between 2010 and 2019, we need to be cautious in claiming they are very representative of the Middle East political class. Netanyahu, for example, is the leader of a country which is treated as a pariah by many in the region due to its sociological composition and distinct political system. Abbas, meanwhile, may represent an Arab polity, but as a nation without a state, it makes him distinct from most other heads of government in the challenges he faces and therefore voices. Abbas's words constitute only one part of two very different factions and approaches to state building in the Palestinian political scene[67]; Hamas leadership in Gaza would likely disagree with many of his messages. As for Israel, Netanyahu represents a nationalist sector that has sought to weaponise the ethno-religious divide[68] that hardly reflects the views of many other Israelis.

Looking ahead, there is scope for further development of the study. This may include both drilling deeper into the rhetoric of the selected individuals themselves, to include other forums and settings in which they speak. Indeed, comparing their use of language in other environments may reveal the extent to which the antagonism and morality dimensions are paramount when it comes to making populist assertions, or whether some of the other dimensions are raised in importance, such as appeals to popular sovereignty and charismatic leadership. In addition to these two leaders, there is scope to compare them with those of other political leaders and political traditions within their polities, for example, with leaders from other political parties, like the left-wing Labor Party in Israel or Hamas in Gaza. This may serve to better contextualise our findings. The study could be extended beyond the specific cases of the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, to include others from around the region.

Finally, in addition to the supply-side component of the populist marketplace—political discourses and performances—experts should direct their efforts to study the demand-side of populism—citizen's attitudes and beliefs—in the Palestinian National Authority, Israel, and other countries in the region if they aspire to understand Middle Eastern populism and compare it to that found elsewhere.

In sum, our paper demonstrates that Netanyahu's speeches fit much closer to the attributes commonly agreed upon the literature on populism than those of Abbas, and his antithetical construction of 'the people' and 'the other' is more exclusionary in nature. Both leaders rely heavily on morality and on idealised/simplistic interpretations of their society in their 'othering' processes which present their compatriots as innocent victims of aggression. While Abbas makes constant calls to multilateral cooperation and the possibility of a mutually agreed solution to the conflict between 'neighbours' respectful of international legality, Netanyahu adopts a more pessimistic 'realist' conception of

[67]Ghanem, As'ad. 'Palestinian Nationalism: An Overview'. *Israel Studies* 18, no. 2 (2013): 11–29.
[68]Rogenhofer, Julius Maximilian, and Ayala Panievsky. 'Antidemocratic populism in power: Comparing Erdoğan's Turkey with Modi's India and Netanyahu's Israel', *Democratization* 27, no. 8 (2020): 1394–1412.

international relations and presents the conflict as cultural ethno-religious one. This stance, which is likely mirrored by the Hamas leadership, appears to be less conducive to a compromise solution to the conflict and may have facilitated the new escalation of violence.

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Appendix

Table A1. Summary of populist and anti-populist features coded.

	Populist features	Anti-populist features
Antagonism	Dual and antagonistic description of polity: 'us' vs 'them', 'the people' vs 'the elite' or 'the other' (migrants, minorities, intellectuals, etc.).	Complex and nuanced (non-antagonistic) depiction of the polity. Endorsement or approval of political, legal and economic establishment. Claims for gradual change.
	Rejection of political, legal and/or economic establishment. Claims for radical change. Confrontational tone, militaristic terms.	References to working together with political opponents and reaching agreements.
Morality	Moral interpretation of actors. Moral distinction and hierarchy (superiority and inferiority). Claims against the legitimacy of the other actors. Victimisation/blame discourses.	Political actors are not classified according to their moral standing. The legitimacy of political opponents and their ideas is acknowledged.
	Ad-hominem critiques and negative emotions. References to ill-intentioned, unfair or immoral behaviour or political opponents.	Critiques not focused on the proponent's personal attributes or motives but on their actions or policy proposals (usually backed by empirical evidence).
Society	Idealisation of society. Anti-pluralist depiction of 'the people' focused on identity, nationhood and/or ahistorical 'heartland'. References to unity and singularity, hyperbolic descriptions.	Complex and nuanced depiction of society and history. Pluralist portrayal of the people. References to diversity of views and interests. Utilisation of empirical data to back claims.
	Emphasis on difference with 'the other' and in-group homogeneity. Exclusionary claims. Emotional language.	Emphasis on commonalities with 'the other' and in-group heterogeneity. Recognition of a common space. Inclusive claims
Sovereignty	Absence of limits to popular sovereignty. Majoritarian logic. The 'will of the people' is expected to prevail over laws, minority rights and institutions.	Popular sovereignty limited by laws and formal rights. Emphasis on representative democratic tools. Complexity in decision-making is acknowledged.
	Preference for direct democracy tools. Praise of referendums, public consultations and mass mobilisations.	References the protection of minority rights and interests and to institutional and legal checks on the will of the majority.
Leadership	Leaders voice 'the will of the people' and represent their interests. Non-mediated relation with the people. Leaders are described as more important than political parties.	Leaders' relations with people is mediated by institutions. Political parties represent people's interests. Parties and other institutions are expected to control and be heard by political leaders.
	Focus on the actions, decisions and ideas of leaders. Idealisation of their achievements. Charisma takes precedence over expertise.	Focus on the actions, decisions and ideas of political parties and institutions, not simply those of individuals.

Source: Olivas Osuna 2021.

Table A2. Speeches analysed and number of coded references.

Leader	Date	Words	Populist references	Anti-populist references	Borders references	Securitisation references	Religion references
Abbas	25/9/10	2215	16	19	4	3	4
Abbas	23/9/11	3987	39	23	7	2	5
Abbas	27/9/12	3297	38	11	5	1	9
Abbas	26/9/13	2983	13	15	5	4	6
Abbas	26/9/14	3372	45	11	2	6	8
Abbas	30/9/15	3813	44	9	5	5	13
Abbas	22/9/16	2709	28	4	4	6	5
Abbas	20/9/17	4180	43	10	17	6	16
Abbas	27/9/18	3698	36	7	6	6	17
Abbas	26/9/19	2351	29	1	1	4	11
Netanyahu	23/9/11	3998	58	7	5	13	28
Netanyahu	27/9/12	3334	36	5	0	4	22
Netanyahu	1/10/13	3060	63	8	0	4	15
Netanyahu	29/9/14	3581	82	2	1	18	39
Netanyahu	1/10/15	3842	66	9	1	14	29
Netanyahu	22/9/16	3984	60	8	2	10	13
Netanyahu	19/9/17	2432	61	7	1	3	12
Netanyahu	27/9/18	4055	50	12	3	3	23

Table A3. Summary of coded segments and results.

	Total Abbas (2010–2019)		Total Netanyahu (2011–2018)	
Words per transcript	32,605		28,286	
Number of speeches	10		8	
	Coded segments	Coded segments/1000 words	Coded segments	Coded segments/1000 words
Antagonism—Pop	167	5.12	219	7.74
Morality—Pop	220	6.75	296	10.46
Society—Pop	53	1.63	99	3.50
Sovereignty—Pop	5	0.15	1	0.04
Leadership—Pop	2	0.06	4	0.14
Total populist reference	447	13.71	619	21.88
Anti-pop Antagonism	84	2.58	49	1.73
Anti-pop Morality	7	0.21	0	0.00
Anti-pop Society	9	0.28	9	0.32
Anti-pop Sovereignty	15	0.46	0	0.00
Anti-pop Leadership	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total anti-populist reference	115	3.53	58	2.05
Religion	94	2.88	181	6.40
Borders	56	1.72	13	0.46
Securitisation	43	1.32	69	2.44