

What ‘Corona War’ Metaphor Means in Iranian Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Political leaders’ discourse plays a significant role in directing the public opinion during crises. Hence, this study analyzed 71 speeches delivered by Hassan Rouhani, President of Iran (2013-2021), during the first and the second waves of COVID-19 pandemic (February 20 till August 30, 2020) as the most critical period of the pandemic attack. This study drew upon Lakoff & Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory as its theoretical background, and the analysis of the speeches was comprised of metaphor identification using the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) and metaphor interpretation. The findings of the study reveal employment of metaphorical representations of coronavirus as a discursive strategy to deal with the situation. The main metaphorical representation of coronavirus was framing public cooperation and national solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic as participating in a war. As argued in this paper, the employed metaphors not only remained loyal to general war features, but they also entailed a specific sociocultural image of war for the Iranian people based on their experience and memories of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Finally, this study recommends for future studies to include the specific sociocultural context and historical background of the addressed audience. This provides further insight into what metaphors specifically mean to the addressed audience, which is beyond general metaphor use. This study is hoped to be a small step towards bringing into spotlight the significance of sociocultural aspects and historical background as necessary information to provide in-depth insights into what makes metaphors effective communicative tools to specific audience.

Keywords: Iran; COVID-19; War Metaphor; Public Cooperation; National Solidarity

INTRODUCTION

One of the main concerns in human societies has always been occurrence of pandemics. Pandemics bring panic, death, and chaos to human societies. In such a condition, the role of discourse, particularly political leaders’ discourse, significantly becomes important in directing public opinion (De Rycker & Don, 2013). Political leaders, government officials, and the media try to portray the existing situations to their audience in various ways turning pandemics into a rich source of metaphors (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Rajandran, 2020; Sabucedo et al., 2020; Luporini, 2021; Alkhawaldeh, 2021). As these and many other studies in the literature argue, metaphor is a popular and effective discursive strategy employed in political discourse during pandemics to direct public opinion in line with the government’s policies. Hence, motivated by the significant role of metaphor during pandemics, this study was conducted to explore the use of metaphor in presidential speeches in the context of Iran during the first and the second waves of the current pandemic.

The first case of COVID-19 was announced in Iran on February 20, 2020, about two months after its outbreak in Wuhan-China. Obviously, this was the beginning of a series of measures taken by the government of Iran, like any other government, in facing the pandemic such as closing schools and universities. Soon, the disease reached its peak leading to further measures such as closing shopping centers and certain stores as well as the implementation of

social distancing. The people were advised to stay at home and avoid unnecessary trips and gatherings. It should be noted that in Iran, there was no strict movement control order (MCO) and the government had to rely on people's cooperation.

Another measure taken by the Iranian government was making public statements and speeches providing information about the status of the disease and the necessary guidelines for people. Majority of these speeches came from Hassan Rouhani as the head of the government. It should be noted that particularly during the first and the second waves of the pandemic, which was the most critical period as the virus was still unknown, a large amount of contradictory information was prevalent (especially via social media) in the society influencing public opinion. For instance, there were heated discussions among people about the effectiveness of the government's policies in curbing the crisis and whether they should cooperate with the government's issued guidelines, instructions, and protocols or not. As another example, people had different concerns regarding the future of the pandemic and whether they and their families would survive the pandemic by the end of the year. Some people did not believe in following the guidelines such as stopping their economic activities during the lockdown period and believed that they would not survive the economic challenges even if they survived the pandemic. Thus, arguably, the government's public statements and speeches (besides providing information regarding the status of the disease and the necessary guidelines for people) were an effort to deal with this situation by encouraging public cooperation as well as national solidarity among people. Hence, in such a backdrop, considering the important role of communication between the public and political leaders during crises, this study was conducted to explore the use of metaphor, as one of the most effective communication tools, in President Rouhani's speeches during the first and the second waves of COVID-19 crisis to answer the following question:

How was metaphorical representation of COVID-19 used in President Hassan Rouhani's speeches during the first and the second waves of the pandemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY (LAKOFF & JOHNSON, 1980)

Contrary to the previous beliefs which commonly considered metaphors only at the linguistic level, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) proposed Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) stating that metaphors are a matter of thought and responsible for our cognition. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1980, p.56), "most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured". They argue that most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts, which they respectively called 'target' and 'source'. While target is more an abstract concept in our minds, source is more a concrete object, or an experience understood by a group of people in mainly the same way due to their sociocultural background. Hence, to understand and interpret metaphors we need to have a clear understanding of these sociocultural backgrounds. For instance, in India, or countries in which Buddhism is dominant, it is common to hear LIFE IS A CONTINUOUS JOURNEY, or LIFE IS A CIRCLE, which refers to the fact that while in Christianity death is considered as the end of life on Earth, in Hindu and Buddhist cultures it is only a temporary stage in the cycle of death and rebirth. Furthermore, according to CMT, comprehension of metaphors in our minds occurs as a result of the relationships assigned between source and target domains. For instance, in LIFE IS A JOURNEY, people are travellers, life goals are destinations, and choices in life are crossroads. CMT changed our perspective regarding metaphors and has opened new windows in discourse and critical discourse studies. One of the areas which has been highly influenced by the introduction of

CMT is political discourse. The next section provides an overview of the literature employing metaphor in the context of political discourse.

METAPHOR IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Considering the role of metaphor in structuring or re-structuring our perceptions of the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the application of metaphor in political discourse has a long history. However, it was not until 1980 that the use of metaphor in political discourse came into the spotlight. Political discourse is replete with images that frame sociopolitical issues using metaphor. The main purpose of political discourse is persuasion which may not be achieved unless the audience see an image of the world from the perspective determined by politicians. Studies show that exposure to metaphorical framings changes audience's attitudes toward target issues and influence their judgments (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). For instance, Daughton (1993) evaluates 'Holy War' metaphor in Franklin D. Roosevelt's inaugural speech back in 1933 as an effective strategy to 'unify the audience' and 'rehearse shared values' among the audience.

A review of the literature reveals that 'war' is one of the most popular and effective metaphor domains in political discourse employed to encourage public cooperation and unity. Charteris-Black (2004, p.125-126) provides a comprehensive analysis of 'war' metaphor in comparison with sport metaphor: "it [war] involves control of territory; success in it requires physical and mental strength; it requires extensive training; and it is a struggle to survive". Thus, the main ideological stance behind 'war' metaphor is the importance of unity and cooperation among members of a group to achieve success or survival. Steinert (2003) argues that 'war' metaphor conveys high emotion, especially fear and aggressiveness, which, then, persuades a high level of audience's participation to achieve a goal. Steinert (2003, p.266) states that "war is the supreme 'populist moment', the perfect situation to enlist the greatest possible number, preferably the whole nation, to work for a shared goal, thereby causing us to forget small discrepancies and even opposing interests". Flusberg et al. (2018) relate the popularity and effectiveness of war metaphor to its widely shared schematic knowledge that makes it fit many different situations as well as to its urgent emotional tone which motivates action (Steinert, 2003).

'Religious' metaphor is another effective and frequently used metaphor in political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2004; Ivanovic, 2017; Williams, 2018), which is frequently combined with 'war' metaphor (Daughton, 1993; Rogan, 2019). Combination of religious and war metaphors brings more effectiveness to both, for example, as Daughton (1993, p. 439) posits, 'Holy War' metaphor calls for 'unquestioning obedience' and 'inspired, committed action for a morally satisfying victory over *Evil*, which ultimately results in peace, both spiritual and physical'. What makes the combination of religious and war metaphors a customary practice in political discourse seems to be the *Evil vs. Good* dichotomy (Them vs. US) inherent in religious metaphors (Bhatia, 2007; Rogan, 2019) that leaves no choice but to wage war against the forces of evil, as from a religious perspective, evil is not negotiated with but must be completely destroyed. Ivanovic (2017) and Williams (2018) relate the popularity of religious metaphor to the society's religious background. In a somewhat supporting argument, Daughton (1993) evaluates the religious aspect of Roosevelt's 'Holy War' metaphor as an answer to the spiritual needs of the people who needed to be given purpose and direction.

Even though many studies have revealed similar patterns regarding the same metaphor domains – e.g., Good vs. Evil dichotomy in religious metaphors or motivating active participation of people in war metaphors – the meaning and consequences of a metaphor domain is still tied to the sociocultural context in which it occurs. For instance, Lu and Ahrens (2008) compared the metaphor of 'Building' in Taiwanese versus American and British

political discourse to notice that Building refers to ‘the country’s future construction’ in the US and British political discourse, while it refers to ‘the country’s Chinese history and past glory’ in Taiwan. Hence, what many studies seem to have ignored is relating the metaphors to the people’s specific sociocultural values and backgrounds such as their past collective memories, or the specific religious practices among people. As Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argue, the sociocultural context, in which metaphors are formed and perceived, depends on the shared ‘values and experiences’ of people. Hence, as will be discussed, the findings of this study also reflect specific sociocultural entailments in the identified metaphors.

METAPHOR AND HEALTH

One of the human experiences which is responsible for a large number of conventional and novel metaphors, especially in political discourse, is diseases. As an example, ‘cancer’ is probably one of the oldest, most frequently used, and widely researched metaphors in political discourse (Potts & Semino, 2019), which came into the spotlight after the publication of Sontag’s (1978) ‘Illness as Metaphor’. As another example, SARS, which started in China in 2002, is a more recent experience. Threatening to become a new pandemic in countries such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, SARS soon became the source of many novel metaphors. Chiang & Duann (2007) studied how the metaphor of SARS was used in three Taiwanese newspapers to construct ideological other- versus self-image. They argue that SARS AS WAR was used to elicit solidarity, loyalty, and a sense of responsibility among people as well as to blame China for economic challenges of Taiwan (Chiang & Duann, 2007, p.595). A closer look at the literature, in fact, reveals that framing pandemics as a war is a quite common way to portray the severity of the pandemics and as a result to call for public cooperation and national solidarity to curb the crisis (e.g., Chiang & Duann, 2007; Rajandran, 2020; Luporinin, 2021; Alkhawaldeh, 2021).

With the spread of COVID-19, as the new pandemic, many studies have been conducted on the ways politicians and the media in various parts of the world have portrayed COVID-19. For instance, Rajandran (2020) investigated how the Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore frame COVID-19 as a war to evoke a sense of alarm regarding the threat and severity of this pandemic. He argues that framing coronavirus as an invisible, common, and dangerous enemy by Prime Ministers of Malaysia and Singapore was used to encourage public contribution and solidarity. In fact, enemy identification is one of the main features of war metaphors requiring obedience and defense from the audience (Sabucedo et al., 2020). In another study, Luporini (2021) investigated how coronavirus is framed in China Daily and in The Wall Street Journal headlines and subheadings via metaphors, nominalizations, and evaluative language in general to find out that war is one of the key metaphors used in the studied corpus. Similarly, Alkhawaldeh (2021) investigated persuasive discursive strategies employed by Jordanian government in fighting COVID-19 one of which was the use of metaphor, especially war metaphor, as the prevalent metaphor in the studied corpus. Hence, while COVID-19 as a war has been reported as one of the strategic persuasive methods to call for people’s harmony and cooperation in various parts of the world, I also would like to contribute to the body of the literature by providing an analysis of the use of war metaphors in the context of Iran as they appeared in the speeches delivered by the Iranian President addressed to the public during the first and the second waves of the pandemic.

METHODS

DURATION OF STUDY

The duration of the study encompassed a period of six months (February 20 till August 30, 2020) from the first case of the disease until the end of the second wave of coronavirus outbreak in Iran. The selection of this period was due to its significance as a critical time in Iran when coronavirus was still an unknown phenomenon causing the highest level of tension and panic among the public making its metaphorization the most significance. Furthermore, during this period there were various conflicting information in the society – mainly disseminated through social media – regarding the dangerous nature of COVID-19 as well as regarding the government's ability to control the situation. Some people believed that closing the businesses was unnecessary, while some others believed that the government's instructions needed to be followed. Some people believed that COVID-19 is not as dangerous as it is shown and even referred to it as a joke, while others disagreed with them. This had caused lack of cooperation among some people as well as levels of disharmony among people. Hence, in such a context, President Hassan Rouhani, as the head of the government, made public speeches regarding COVID-19, its dangers, and the actions that needed to be taken by the people to deal with this situation. This study investigated the use of metaphor in these speeches.

DATA COLLECTION

There were two criteria for collecting the speeches: (1) the speeches were made by President Rouhani, and (2) the speeches were delivered during the period of the study (i.e., February 20 till August 30, 2020). The speeches were collected from three main Iranian news agencies websites including Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), which is the Iranian government's official news agency website, as well as Iran's Metropolises News Agency (IMNA) and Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA), which are two of the main Iranian news agency websites. Hence, to ensure the access to all speeches, these three news agencies were sufficient. Firstly, it needs to be mentioned that mostly the same speeches were found on the three websites, in which case only one was considered. Secondly, these news agencies were only used as a source to download the texts of the speeches, and their interpretations of and commentaries on the speeches were not involved.

Considering the above-mentioned criteria regarding data collection, during the six-month period, a corpus of 196,310 words in Persian, covering 71 speeches delivered during this period, was collected. In terms of the translation of the selected metaphors, the author used the assistance of an authorized translator – an expert translator legally qualified to carry out certified translation of official documents – just to make sure the translations were as close to the original text as possible. Translation was conducted at the end of the study and only for the purpose of presentation of the findings. The translator did not participate in any parts of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The first stage of data analysis was identifying metaphors. Since this study only focused on 'coronavirus metaphorization', to provide a systematic search, using the software package of AntConc, the search was limited to four keywords directly related to coronavirus: *corona/coronavirus*, *COVID-19*, *virus*, and *disease*.

Then, the author used Pragglejaz Group's (2007) Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to examine the extracted keywords. Following MIP, I read the whole text word-by-word and examined the selected four keywords closely in the context of their respective paragraphs

to see whether they were subject to metaphorization or they were simply used in their literal meaning. For instance, the word ‘virus’ in the sentence “*we are involved in a world war with this virus*” is portrayed as an enemy; and thus, public involvement in taking action against the virus is portrayed as participating in a world war; however, the word ‘virus’ is literally used in the sentence “*our doctors are working on a cure for this virus*”. As another example, in the sentence “*our people faced an unwanted war with corona*” the word ‘corona’ is subject to metaphorization; while the sentence “*statistics show that the deaths caused by corona have been reduced by 25 %*” uses the word ‘corona’ in its literal meaning.

Then, to ensure the reliability of the collected data by the author, the data were examined by an Iranian metaphor scholar familiar with the political system under study, who reported the same results with 100% agreement (Kappa=1). Since both examiners (i.e., the author and the Iranian metaphor scholar) were native speakers of Persian language, there was no question of second language limitation in judging whether the keywords were used metaphorically or literally.

The next level of analysis was interpretation. According to Fairclough (1989), “*interpretation is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction – with seeing the text as a product of a process of production*” (p. 26). In this process, the producer of the text takes social values, beliefs, and background knowledge of the audience into consideration in producing the text. From this perspective and based on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the identified metaphors were interpreted based on the ‘context’, and the addressed ‘audience’ to understand the purposes and functions of metaphors as well as their general and specific sociocultural meanings in the context of the study, i.e., Iran, by establishing a relationship between metaphors literal and contextual meanings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section will report and interpret the main findings of the present study. After analyzing the collected speeches and identifying the employed metaphors in them, as can be seen from Table 1, ‘war’ metaphor, as one of the most frequently employed and one of the broadest metaphor domains in political discourse (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Flusberg et al., 2019; Rajandran, 2020; Alkhalwaldeh, 2021; Luporini, 2021), was similarly found to be the main source domain to conceptualize coronavirus in Rouhani’s speeches.

TABLE 1. frequency of metaphorical and non-metaphorical use of the studied keywords

Keywords	Total No. of the identified keywords	Total No. of metaphorical uses of keywords	Total No. of metaphorical uses of keywords in war domain
Corona	543	117	67
Covid-19	17	4	4
Virus	347	134	74
Disease	318	76	45
Total	1225	331	190

It needs to be mentioned that the words ‘corona’ and ‘COVID-19’ were commonly used in combination with ‘virus’ and ‘disease’ (e.g., corona disease in Extract 2, or coronavirus in Extract 3). However, in order to be systematic in counting, in such cases each keyword was counted separately. Furthermore, as can be seen from Table 1, war metaphors composed about 57% of the metaphorical uses of the keywords (190 out of 331), which is quite significant, as the rest of the 40% were distributed across various metaphors such as *CORONA AS BUSINESS*, *CORONA AS AN UNINVITED GUEST*, *CORONA AS AN EXAM*. Finally, as can be seen from Table 1, the keyword ‘COVID-19’ was the least used keyword in a metaphorical sense. In

further analysis, it was revealed that the keyword 'COVID-19' was mainly used when giving scientific or medical facts about the pandemic or the disease. Even though this word was rarely used in a metaphorical sense, all of the 4 metaphorically used cases belonged to the war domain, which again shows the significance of war metaphors in the studied speeches.

This section will provide a report of the main features of CORONA AS A WAR metaphor and will interpret its use with reference to a few extracts. The date of the delivery of the respective speeches is presented at the end of each extract in the format of 'dd-mm-yy'. Each extract in Persian is followed by its translation in English.

Extract 1 (Persian):

گرچه در این روزهای دفاع از جان انسان در برابر کرونا در ایران و همه جای جهان، بنا به پروتکل‌های بهداشتی و اجتماعی، امکان نمایش رژهی سربازان ایران وجود ندارد اما شهروندان ایران در خانه و همه فعالان اقتصادی و اجتماعی در محل کار، مانور اقتدار ملی «مدافعان وطن» و «باوران سلامت» را به چشم می‌بینند... روزی دشمن پیش چشم شما عیان بود و مقابله با دشمن آسان‌تر بود. اکنون دشمن پنهان است و در صف مقدم این جبهه پزشکان و پرستاران ایران در حال جنگند... جهان این جنگ را فراموش نخواهد کرد. انسانی‌ترین جنگ تاریخ که در آن همه انسان‌ها و همه ارتش‌ها برای انسان‌ها می‌جنگند. این رژه تاریخی از صد رژهی مناسب‌تری برتر و زیباتر است.

Extract 1 (translation):

Although in these days of **defending** human life against **corona**, in Iran and everywhere in the world, due to healthcare and social protocols, the parade of the Iranian soldiers is not possible, Iranian citizens at home and all those involved in economic and social activities at workplace can see the **Maneuver of National Strength** of 'the defenders of the country' and 'helpers of health'... One day, the **enemy** was visible, and it was easier to **fight** against the **enemy**. Now, the **enemy** is hidden; and in the **frontline of this battlefield**, the Iranian doctors and nurses are **at war**... the world will not forget this **war**: the most humane **war** in the history in which all people and armies **fight for** human lives. This historical **parade** is superior and more beautiful than one hundred parades to celebrate special occasions. (17-04-2020)

Extract 2 (Persian):

مبارزه با بیماری کرونا، با فداکاری‌ها در دوران دفاع مقدس قابل قیاس است. آنچه واقع می‌شود در این روزها باید ثبت و درست نقل شود، شبیه آن روایت فتح که چه جور جنگ بیان شد و توضیح داده شد، باید این روزهای زیبا، این زیبایی‌ها، این متانت‌ها، ایثارها، فداکاری‌ها و این غم‌همدیگر را خوردن و کنار هم بودن در تاریخ ما بماند و ماندگار باشد.

Extract 2 (translation):

Fight against **corona disease** is comparable with the sacrifices during **The Sacred Defense (TSD)**. Whatever happens during these days must be recorded and narrated correctly, like '**the Narration of Victory**' that explained and narrated the **war**: these beautiful days, these beauties, these dignities, sacrifices, devotions, sympathies, and staying next to each other must be permanently recorded in our history. (13-05-2020)

Extract 3 (Persian):

حادثه‌ای که آدم چیزی از آن نمی‌داند و برای او تاریک است، دشمنی است که در تاریکی حمله کرده است. او را نمی‌بینیم در ظلمات و تاریکی به ما شمشیر می‌زند و نمی‌دانیم کیست و از کجا آمده است. ویروس کرونا یک دشمنی بود که هنوز هم درست او را نشناختیم: یک دشمن جدید با شیوه جدید و با نحوه تهاجم جدید.

Extract 3 (translation)

An event that one does not know anything about and is dark is an **enemy** that has **attacked in the dark**. We do not see him **wielding his sword** at us in the darkness and we do not know who he is and where he came from. The **coronavirus** is an **enemy** that we still do not know for sure: a **new enemy** with new tactics and with a new method of invading. (28-04-2020)

Extract 4 (Persian):

در طول حیات بشر همواره دفاع و مقابله در برابر دشمن یکی از زیبایی‌های زندگی انسان‌ها بوده است و امروز این زیبایی را هم در مقابله با دشمن عیان و هم در مقابله با دشمن پنهان به خوبی مشاهده می‌کنیم... دشمنی پنهان و پنهان به جنگ همه بشر آمده است. این جنگ، جنگی جهانی است اما نه نیمی از جهان با نیمی دیگر؛ که این ویروس پنهان، با همه‌ی جهان در جنگ است. اکنون گویی همه‌ی جهان وطن ماست و ما در همه جای جهان با یک دشمن می‌جنگیم و همین نکته، این جنگ را مقدس‌تر ساخته است.

Extract 4 (translation):

Throughout the human life, **defense and fight** against the **enemy** has been one of the beauties in people's lives. Today, we can see the same beauty both in the **fight** against the visible enemy and in the **fight** against the hidden enemy... A hidden and secret enemy has come to **war** with all humans. This **war** is a world **war**, not half of the world with the other half, but this hidden virus is at **war** with the whole world. As if the whole world is our country now, and we are at war against the same enemy all over the world, and this has made this **war** more sacred. (17-04-2020).

Extract 5 (Persian):

"سربازان بشریت" با رزم جامه ای یک سان و یک رنگ، بلکه بی‌رنگ و بدون تعلق به یک کشور، در سراسر کره زمین جامه‌ی سپید پوشیده و به جنگ دشمن بشریت رفته‌اند و با فداکاری و از خودگذشتگی در حال مبارزه با آن هستند. در این رزم مشترک، همه ما در یک جبهه هستیم. همه ما خواهان پیروزی نوع انسان بر دشمن مشترک یعنی این ویروس مرگبار هستیم.

Extract 5 (translation):

The "**Soldiers of Humanity**" wearing similar **armors** of the same color, or even without color and without belonging to any special countries, are dressed in white uniforms all over the globe and have gone to **war** against the **enemy** of humanity and are **fighting** against it with sacrifice and selflessness. In this common battle, we are all on the same front. We all want the human race to **win** over our common enemy, this deadly virus. (20-03-2021)

As can be seen in the above extracts, war metaphors portrayed coronavirus as an enemy, and fighting against corona as a war. In this war, hospitals were portrayed as battlefields, doctors and medical crew as the frontline soldiers and the defenders of the country, and people as active supporters behind the frontline. War metaphors generally reflected similar features, which will be discussed from the two perspectives of general war features as well as specific sociocultural features of war in the context of Iran, as follows.

i) General war features

From a general war perspective, these metaphors implied a strong sense of 'urgency of the audience's active cooperation and unity' by highlighting two features of coronavirus as an enemy. Firstly, these metaphors took a quite emphatic tone by framing coronavirus as an enemy that is quite difficult to defeat. Various adjectives were employed to convey that COVID-19 is an enemy that is quite difficult to defeat. For example, COVID-19 was framed as a deadly enemy مرگبار, an invasive enemy مهاجم, or a dangerous enemy خطرناک. However, among all of the adjectives that were employed provide an image of COVID-19 as an enemy that is difficult to defeat, this feature was mainly conveyed by adjectives that referred to its *hidden* and *unknown* nature (e.g., a hidden enemy پنهان, a secret enemy نهان, an unknown enemy ناشناخته, an invisible enemy نامرئی, a new enemy جدید). In terms of the *hidden* nature of the coronavirus, it was portrayed as 'a hidden' or 'a secret' enemy (e.g., Extract 1 and 4). In these cases, coronavirus was sometimes compared with a visible and powerful enemy (e.g., *one day, the enemy was visible, and it was easier to fight against the enemy. Now, the enemy is hidden:* Extract 1) in order to emphasize the difficulty of war against coronavirus. In terms of the *unknown* nature of the coronavirus, it was portrayed as a new enemy with new invading tactics (e.g., Extract 3). In fact, both features (i.e., being hidden and unknown) reflect the country's situation at that time. During the period under study, which coincides with the first and the second waves of the pandemic, some people were panicked while some others did not take the pandemic (and therefore the government's guidelines) seriously. Hence, reference to the hidden and unknown features of COVID-19 not only invites people to take the matter seriously but also invites them to get united against an unknown enemy and take immediate action instead of panicking.

Secondly, war metaphors frequently referred to coronavirus as the common enemy of not only Iranian people but all human beings such as: "*the world will not forget this war: the most humane war in the history in which all people and armies fight for human lives*" (Extract

1); “we are at **war** against the same enemy all over the world” (Extract 4); or “In this common battle, we are all on the same front. We all want the human race to **win** over our common enemy” (Extract 5). Employing the inclusive ‘we’ here, which not only refers to people but also includes the government (the government and the people) and even moves further to include all humanity all over the world is aimed to create a strong sense of belonging and unity among the audience by introducing a supreme goal to be achieved by this unity.

These features of coronavirus as a hidden, unknown, and common enemy were obviously a call for public active cooperation and national solidarity. In other words, if your enemy is my enemy, we must join forces; and if our common enemy is difficult to defeat, there are even more reasons for us to join forces. Thus, war metaphors were used to encourage public active and immediate cooperation as well as unity. A glance at the literature reveals similar findings across various studies. Hence, it can be argued that war metaphors were loyal to general war metaphor features, namely introducing or identifying a common, dangerous, and implacable enemy implying a ‘struggle for survival’ condition and calling for people’s active participation and unity (Steinert, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2004; Flusberg et al., 2019; Rajandran, 2020; Sabucedo et al., 2020; Rajandran, 2020; Alkhawaldeh, 2021).

ii) Specific sociocultural war features

Secondly, from a specific sociocultural perspective, the used metaphors represented a very specific image of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, called **Defa-e Moghædæs** (دفاع مقدس) to be translated as ‘**The Sacred Defense**’ (TSD). Iran-Iraq War was declared by the Saddam administration upon Iran, on 22 September 1980, and ended on 20 August 1988, after Iran accepted the UN-brokered ceasefire. Today, the memory of TSD is a sacred one: an imposed war for which many youths were killed [martyred]; many places were destroyed; and many sacrifices and devotions were made. While war metaphors remained loyal to general war metaphor attributes (e.g., Steinert, 2003; Charteris-Black, 2004; Flusberg et al., 2019), they specifically referred to this familiar experience and highly emotional memory, a few instances of which are presented and discussed below.

For one instance, reference to war against the enemy of the country as *a beautiful* experience is one of the emotional references to TSD experience: “*these beautiful days, these beauties, these dignities*” (Extract 2); or “*throughout the human life, **defense and fight** against the **enemy** has been one of the beauties in people’s lives. Today, we can see the same beauty ...*” (Extract 4). It needs to be mentioned that such phrases are reminders of the epic and heroic actions of people such as taking up guns and fighting next to the soldiers.

As another example, reference to the visible enemy such as: “*one day, the enemy was visible and easier to fight against*” (Extract 1), is a reference to Saddam’s Regime. While the war with the visible enemy was quite difficult and took eight years of active cooperation, and solidarity; now that the virus is hidden and unknown it obviously requires a higher level of public cooperation and national solidarity.

As another TSD element, the phrase “**Manovre Eghtedare Melli**” (مانور اقتدار ملی) which is translated as “**Maneuver of National Strength**” (Extract 1), is in fact the Army Day slogan, which was used here to frame the heroic actions and services of medical crews. Army Day is an annual event, held on April 17, when military forces participate in a parade and maneuver with the slogan of ‘**Maneuver of National Strength**’. This is an important day to commemorate and appreciate the efforts, sacrifices, and devotions of Iranian soldiers in protecting the borders, especially during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, and a showcase of the military power of Iran.

As another example, reference to “**Narration of Victory**” (Extract 2) is another reference to TSD. It should be noted that the **Narration of Victory** or **Revayæte Fæth** (روایت فتح) is the name of a documentary series composed of 63 episodes on Iran-Iraq War. This

documentary showed happenings of the war, interviews with the soldiers, and war scenes. It gained great popularity among people and was played on IRIB TV1 for three years until the death of its filmmaker (who was both its author and narrator) by a landmine explosion in 1993 while filming. Extract 2 not only clarifies what is expected from the people: “*sacrifices, devotions, sympathies and staying next to each other*”, but it also takes a very persuasive and emotional tone by creating a positive image of all these hardships as a pleasant and nostalgic experience: “*these beautiful days, these beauties, and these dignities*” which “*must be permanently recorded in our history*”. In other words, COVID-19 as a war in this extract contains a persuasive emotional tone, which is similar to the same persuasive emotional tone assigned to TSD.

Another TSD element reflected in anti-corona war is its ‘unwanted or imposed’ nature: “*a hidden and secret enemy has come to war with all humans*” (Extract 4). Another name used for TSD is ‘**The Imposed War**’ (**جنگ تحمیلی**). In other words, the Iran-Iraq war is either a *Sacred Defense* or an *Imposed War*. Getting involved in a war and defending the country against an invader are two completely distinctive things even if they refer to the same thing. While getting involved in a war may not be approved by all, ‘defense’, as a natural and logical reaction against an invader’s attack to one’s home, is a sacred and highly admired action. This feature of TSD was present in other metaphors too. For instance, on 28 April 2020, right before mentioning Extract 3, President Rouhani provided the following detailed account of how TSD was imposed on people, and how people, who were unaware of its occurrence, were taken by surprise. Then he moved to Extract 3, to compare how coronavirus is similar to TSD in this regard:

در جنگ تحمیلی هم اینطور بود به جز عده خاصی که احساس می کردند ممکن است احتمالاً با جنگ مواجه شویم، مردم عادی جامعه ناگهان در ۳۱ شهریوری که همه بچه ها خودشان را آماده کرده بودند که فردا صبح به مدرسه بروند و عده‌ای ساک خود را جمع کرده بودند و عازم حج و مکه بودند و درست در شرایطی که مردم تصور نمی کردند با جنگ مواجه شوند، در ساعت حدود ۲ بعدازظهر روز ۳۱ شهریور با یک بمباران مواجه شدند و تمام مرزهای غربی کشور و بخشی از مرزهای جنوبی کشور مورد حمله و تهاجم قرار گرفت. غافلگیری در مورد آنچه قبلاً روی آن فکر نشده و آمادگی وجود ندارد، خیلی سخت است ...

“It was the same in the imposed war, except for certain people who felt that we might face war, on September 22nd [1980] the other people had prepared their children to go to school the next day, and some had packed their suitcases to go to Mecca for Hajj, and just when the people did not expect to face a war, they were bombed at around 2 pm on September 22nd, and all the western borders of the country and parts of the southern border of the country were under attack. It is very difficult to be taken by surprise by what has not been thought of before and for which there is no preparation...”.

Lastly, another feature of TSD reflected in anti-corona war is its sacredness. For instance, as can be seen in Extract 4, the word ‘**sacred**’ [**moghædæs**] (**مقدس**) is used which is a key term assigned to TSD (The Sacred Defense). In fact, one of the factors which made TSD sacred was the unity of all people and the sacrifices they made for a greater cause, namely defending their country. The same feature can be observed in the war against coronavirus: “*As if the whole world is our country now, and we are at war against the same enemy all over the world, and this has made this war more sacred*” (Extract 4). As can be seen here, not only the war against coronavirus is referred to as a sacred war, but also this war is mentioned to be ‘more sacred’. As can be seen in this extract, the increased level of sacredness of this war is due to its global aspect which requires a higher level of unity against the same enemy than war at a national level. Since TSD was a national war, even it can be implied that COVID-19 war is even more sacred than TSD for it requires a higher level and larger scope of unity than TSD. Hence, unity against the same enemy is what makes this war sacred. This sacredness of war (an element of TSD, which is transferred to anti-corona war) conveys a sense of religious obligation. Hence, a more sacred war conveys a higher level of religious obligation. Reference to the sacredness of a war is a discursive strategy to emphasize people’s cooperation and unity

in that war (Daughton, 1993). A sacred war is between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil. In this sense, coronavirus is the Evil. Thus, those who fight against coronavirus are the forces of Good, and those who are breaking the rules, avoiding cooperation, and causing national disunity are among the forces of the Evil. Reference to the sacredness of a war creates a religious obligation for the people to be cooperative and to get united under the flag of the forces of Good by proposing an Evil vs. Good dichotomy (Bhatia, 2007; Rogan, 2019) which has a quite emphatic tone in encouraging people's cooperation and national solidarity (Daughton, 1993).

In sum, not only this metaphor remained loyal to general features of war metaphors (Chiang & Duann, 2007; Flusberg et al., 2019; Rajandran, 2020; Sabucedo et al., 2020; Alkhawaldeh, 2021; Luporini, 2021) but it also created a specific image of 'war' for Iranian people. In other words, besides the shared schematic knowledge of 'war' across many nations such as "*involving a conflict between opposing forces, requiring strategic decisions to be made about how to allocate resources, and having identifiable winners and losers*" (Flusberg et al., 2018, p. 4), this metaphor includes specific sociocultural meanings of war for Iranian people as "*involving a defense against an unwanted or imposed attack; requiring making sacrifices, devotions, sympathies, resistance, endurance of hardships, and staying together; until achieving victory*". From Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) perspective, it can be argued that war metaphors – with metaphors being a cognitive as well as a discourse device – are deeply rooted in the cultural background of a nation and as a result their interpretation must be based on the specific sociocultural context and the historical background of the nation this metaphor is addressed to. From this point of view, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, pp. 4-5) state:

"Try to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing ground. Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently".

Now let's try to imagine a culture where war is not merely killing each other, where war is a divine test, where war is viewed as making sacrifices, devotions, sympathies, resistance, endurance of hardships, and staying together, and as a beautiful humane experience when one dies for the sake of defending others, then a different image of war is presentable. A look at the history of humans shows that all nations have been engaged in wars. How do they view and perceive war? Do they have the same feeling about war? Thus, metaphors, not only war metaphors, have to be discussed in the very specific sociocultural context and the historical background of the nation they are addressed to. This is what seems to be lacking in the literature.

CONCLUSION

This study was an analysis of the way coronavirus, as a novel and one of the most impactful concepts of the twenty-first century, was metaphorized in Iranian president's speeches to encourage 'public cooperation' and 'national solidarity' during the first and the second waves of coronavirus pandemic, when coronavirus was a new and unknown concept and the prevalence of contradictory information regarding this new concept in the society had caused disharmony and had reduced public cooperation among people. War metaphor, being one of the main metaphor domains in political speeches, was the main metaphor used in the context of the study. The analysis of the war metaphors revealed that while they were loyal to general war features of introducing a powerful common enemy, portraying the current situation as a

struggle for survival, and calling for public active cooperation and unity, they also created a sociocultural specific image of war for Iranian people based on their memories and experience of Iran-Iraq eight-year war. While these metaphors, from a general war perspective, called for people's active participation and unity, their specific reference in the context of this study defined this public active participation and unity as *making sacrifices, devotions, sympathies, resistance, endurance of hardships, and staying together*.

Given the novelty and impact of COVID-19 crisis, this study provides insights into how figurative language can be utilized as a communication tool in a political leader's discourse to encourage public cooperation and national solidarity as two necessary features required during this period. Furthermore, this study provides insights into effective role of metaphor as a significant tool to direct public opinion. Finally, this study provides insights into the use of war metaphor, not only from a general perspective, but also from a sociocultural specific point of view as the main contribution of this study to the field.

While few studies have investigated sociocultural specific applications of metaphors, as the findings of the study reveal, this appears to be a very significant aspect of metaphor use calling for further research in this regard, particularly war metaphors as one of the broadest and most popular domains in political discourse during crises. In other words, while war metaphor has been extensively studied in the literature, these studies basically focus on the general features of war, while it would provide interesting and valuable data to study war metaphor from a specific sociocultural perspective to see what this metaphor specifically means for people in a specific country. It is hoped that this study paves the way for further studies in this field.

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