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How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimise Repression: Framing Mass Killings in Egypt and Uzbekistan

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How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimise Repression: Framing Mass Killings in Egypt and Uzbekistan

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Abstract

How do authoritarian rulers legitimate repressive actions against their own citizens? Even in autocracies with limited accountability, discursive justifications are often put forward to decrease the costs of domestic repression. Although the research depicts state repression as the opposite of legitimation, justified coercion against some groups may generate legitimacy in the eyes of other parts of the population. This paper conceptualises the suggested links between legitimation and repression. It studies the justifications of mass killings by integrating framing theory with recent research on the domestic and international dimensions of authoritarian rule. Given the common threats at the global level and the diffusion of repressive tactics, we assume that discursive justifications of repression in authoritarian regimes change over time, probably due to learning processes. We compare Egypt and Uzbekistan to analyse the government rhetoric in the Rabi'a and Ferghana Valley protest crackdowns, respectively, taking into account the audiences of the framing and the sources of the frames that justify repression.

Keywords: authoritarianism, protests, repression, state–society relations, framing

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How Authoritarian Rulers Seek to Legitimise Repression: Framing Mass Killings in Egypt and Uzbekistan

Mirjam Edel and Maria Josua

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1 Introduction

State power implies the monopoly over the legitimate use of force, which not only serves to uphold political power in general but is also a resource for sustaining a regime by repressing some parts of the population.¹ As human beings rarely accept violence without a good reason, even in relations of domination, the use of repression carries the danger of delegitimising political rule. Therefore, discursive justifications are often put forward to decrease the costs of

1 Earlier versions of this article were presented at the ECPR General Conference in Prague, 7–10 September 2016; the 23rd DAVO Congress in Tübingen, 6–8 October 2016; and the 50th Annual Meeting of the MESA in Boston, 17–20 November 2016. We would like to thank our discussants, Carolin Görzig and Thomas Demmelhuber, for helpful input. Moreover, we thank André Bank and Thomas Richter at the GIGA in Hamburg for their constructive comments.

repression. Besides lowering the cost of repression, justified repression may, in some instances, even serve the purpose of creating legitimacy. From an empirical perspective, legitimacy is not an absolute value shared by the whole population, but rather an empirically observable relation between the ruler and the ruled; therefore, different societal groups may assess regime legitimacy in different ways. Although state repression is often depicted as the opposite of legitimation, coercive actions may serve to generate legitimacy in the eyes of certain segments of the population or international actors.

This paper presents a conceptualisation of the suggested links between legitimation and repression, focusing on discursive justifications and their audiences. Such justifications may be inspired by globalised discourses and targeted at international audiences beyond the domestic public. Recent studies on diffusion among and cooperation between authoritarian regimes have highlighted the international dimensions of authoritarian rule, demonstrating that cooperation between authoritarian regimes and learning processes are rational mechanisms.

Our theoretical approach integrates recent research on the domestic and international dimensions of authoritarian rule with insights from framing theory. We hypothesise that the addressees of legitimation discourses extend beyond domestic audiences to the international sphere. How are repressive policies justified? Who do they repress, and to whom are they justified? We examine the Uzbek and Egyptian governments' rhetoric during and after the two brutal repressive crackdowns of Andijon in 2005 and Rabi'a 'Adawiya Square in 2013. These were extreme instances of high-intensity coercion, often described as massacres, which were highly visible and thus necessitated public justification.² After presenting the frames used by regime elites to legitimise the repression of domestic protest movements, we contrast these findings with the legitimation discourse concerning other targets of repression, as well as with repression in earlier times. The empirical analysis then investigates whether the justification of the repressive policy is a result of international or regional influences, alongside the domestic factors that have proven important in shaping legitimation discourses. In the final sections, we compare the two case studies and consider the results' repercussions for the theoretical considerations we have proposed.

2 Concept

2.1 *How Does Justification Work? Introducing Framing Theory into Autocracy Research*

When the security apparatus turns against certain groups, state representatives often present the target to the public as a threat. In analysing such political communication, framing theory – which is applied in a variety of social sciences, especially media studies, communications, cognitive psychology, and collective action theory – can be useful. Framing denotes the way

2 We focus on one-sided governmental repression rather than the more frequent massacres in the context of civil wars, which exhibit different dynamics and justification narratives.

in which issues are presented: what underlying narratives and what solutions are offered. Thus, “frames select and call attention to particular aspects of the reality described” (Entman 1993: 54). According to Snow and Benford (1988), the core framing tasks are “diagnostic framing,” “prognostic framing,” and “motivational framing.”³ While in political science, framing theory is often applied to analyse social movements, we contribute to the literature centred on governmental frames. Framing approaches have often been used to study discourses in democracies, but some recent works also deal with authoritarian framing (e.g. Jourde 2007; Bondes and Heep 2013; Wooden 2014). Although in authoritarian regimes it is easier to convey certain messages due to censorship and controlled media, this does not automatically predict the results of the framing process. It is crucial to take into account that “frames do not have a single, universal effect” on the recipients (Watson 2012: 298). The framing of repression can have legitimising or delegitimising and deterrent or mobilising effects, depending on the target audience.

To refine our approach, we include two insights from the more recent research on securitisation. First, audiences in autocracies do not necessarily comprise all the citizens of a state. Instead, it may be the elite, or strategically important groups, to whom a security issue is communicated (Vuori 2008: 72). Second, securitising moves may also legitimise actions *ex post* (*ibid.*: 85). The framing and securitisation research strands are closely connected, and some efforts at integrating them have already been made (Carvalho Pinto 2014; Watson 2012). Our main tool is framing theory, into which we include security as one master frame alongside others, as Watson proposes (2012: 281), to account for the higher level of abstraction within framing theory. According to Snow and Benford (1992), master frames are flexible and open to extension and the inclusion of more specific issue frames.⁴

2.2 *Types of Discursive Justification*

The justification of repression has rarely been studied by political scientists; nonetheless, we embed some insights from the previous literature in our conceptualisation. Hess and Martin (2006) list different tactics for precluding public outrage after repression, such as blaming the victims or labelling repression as self-defence. Roscigno et al. (2015) study how US agencies justified the massacre of the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890 by framing the group’s practices as a cultural threat. Alex Dukalskis investigates popular protests in China in 1989, Myanmar in 2007, and Iran in 2009–2010 and finds that protesters were blamed as criminals for inciting disorder and for being manipulated by foreigners and “not committed to the regime’s vision of legitimacy,” whereas the security forces and their role in preserving public order were honoured. He thus concludes that authoritarian incumbents “attempt to endorse that repres-

3 As this paper is more concerned with the narratives than with their effects, we focus on the former two tasks.

4 As with other frames, master frames are expected to resonate and thus “work” when they are empirically credible, commensurate with the audience’s experience, and ideationally central (Snow and Benford 1992: 140-141).

sion in ways consistent with their legitimating messages” (Dukalskis 2015: 32). To describe how legitimating messages in authoritarian regimes work more generally, March posits that “[t]he main strategy is to define the entire state in relation to common goals, to define the goals and aspirations as virtually constitutive of the nation as such, and to equate the regime with the proper articulation and realization of those goals through the state apparatus” (March 2003: 229).

A variety of goals or values can be invoked to justify repression. Among the discursive justifications of repression and state violence, two broad directions are distinguishable:⁵ (1) social control, through “conservative” frames that focus on stability and security, and (2) social change, with repression framed as necessary for “progress.” From the perspective of framing theory, these two can be understood as “master frames.” The justifications referring to social change are mainly used in politicised societies where ideologies, especially leftist and communist ones, are important, and/or in early phases of regime establishment that necessitate mass mobilisation. In most of the currently existing authoritarian regimes, personalised rule has been around for a while and is thus rather conservative and demobilising in its strategies. We therefore expect justifications referring to social control and stability to dominate.

The master diagnostic frame can be understood as “endangered status quo.” Governments frame activities by opponents as “harmful behaviour” threatening the status quo. Table 1 below lists the different forms of such behaviour. For each of them, there is a corresponding underlying value which the regime discourse claims is under threat. Strikingly, the actual point of dissent, which often lies in the nature or actions of the regime, is not acknowledged; instead the values are situated on a more permanent level such as the nation or society, as hypothesised by March (2003). The values range from state-related arguments such as national unity, legality, security, stability, and public order to more cultural or social aspects such as societal cohesion and tradition.

In an empirical study, the first task is to detect the frames used. On the basis of a categorisation, changes over time can be detected. Scartozzi’s (2015) evaluation of Assad’s shifts in “strategic narratives” between 2011 and 2014 can serve as an example here.

5 In addition to discursive justifications, procedural justifications of repression exist. For example, the judicial process of a trial can be a justification for a dissident’s repression. At other times, repression costs are reduced through clandestine actions rather than justification (see Edel 2016).

Table 1. Harmful Behaviour and Endangered Values

<i>Endangered value</i>	<i>Diagnostic frame: harmful behaviour (by target of repression)</i>	<i>Prognostic “frame solution”</i>
National unity	Division of society	Mainstreaming society
Societal cohesion	Sectarianism	Mainstreaming society, suppressing minorities
History, tradition, sovereignty	Foreign influence	Insulation against foreign nationals, xenophobia
Legality	Criminal behaviour	Prosecution, judicialisation
Security of state and society	Terrorism/violent behaviour, attacking, intimidating state (representatives & institutions), persons & property	Positive role of military, etc., efficiency and capacity of state security force
Morals	Immoral actions and language	Correction, separation from society
Public order/everyday life	Disruptive behaviour: hindering work, traffic, activities, production	Non-political “normal” life, police as guarantor
Stability	Unrest, demanding change	Non-change

2.3 Targets of Repression and (Its) Legitimation

What the different strands of literature presented above have in common is the importance of targets. In framing theory, the question of resonance, which depends on the perspective of frame recipients, is paramount. In the research on authoritarian regimes, legitimation is viewed as a relational category involving the necessity of legitimacy claims being accepted by target groups. Bank (2004) and Josua (forthcoming) consider, in particular, the difference between strategies directed towards elites and those directed towards the broader population or different societal groups. In their study of repression, Mason and Krane (1989) introduced the useful differentiation of targets according to their numbers and their levels of activism.

In considering the audience for the legitimation of repression, it is the targets of legitimation strategies that matter. On the one hand, there is the *domestic* audience, which can consist of particular groups, such as the regime base, that are subject to selective legitimation attempts or of virtually the entire population, which is subject to broader strategies. On the other hand, various actors at the *international* level might play a role – for example, neighbouring states and the international community as well as regional and international organisations or diaspora populations. Additionally, the targets of repression need to be considered, as this is crucial for the framing a government can use. The discriminatory or indiscriminate application of repression is an important factor for understanding its effects, which

may range from increased mobilisation to effective demobilisation and deterrence. Whether a small, militant group or large parts of the population are repressed yields different opportunities and necessities for justification frames.

2.4 *The International Setting, Legitimation Narratives, and the Addressees of Justification*

What are the origins of frames legitimising repression? The discussion so far has pointed to two factors that shape justifications of repression: First, they are influenced by who the major *addressees* of frames are, and what their dispositions are, as legitimation and framing are relational processes. Second, elites often do not invent their strategies from scratch, but refer to *sources* of inspiration and examples.

Regarding the addressees, we may ask how relevant the international audience is relative to domestic audiences. And, once the most important audiences are identified, what kind of discourse is likely to resonate with them, what narratives are they most likely to accept? One must avoid the tautological trap of assuming that elites always use the frames that are most likely to resonate, as framing literature shows that overly extreme or otherwise unsuitable frames are often used. However, there is reason to believe that elites choose their rhetoric strategically. This should be even more the case when confronted with the challenge of justifying extra-judicial killings. Thus, in line with Dukalski's (2015) argument, we hypothesise that justifications of repression fit with broader legitimation narratives. For example, if a Western audience is a key addressee, issues of importance for this addressee – human rights, rule of law, etc. – are likely to be brought up.

In addition, both the international and the domestic context are not only (potential) addressees of justification but often also inspire elites. At the international level, discourses on human rights and democracy have become salient, while at both the regional and the international levels repressive tactics and their discursive justifications have diffused.

In recent years, a general trend of talking about terrorism and stepping up repression has been witnessed worldwide. This discourse has diffused, shifting the repertoires of authoritarian leaders, consciously or unconsciously, towards less democratic window-dressing and more self-confident assertions of their power. Therefore, we expect changes, and probably also learning processes (Levy 1994), in authoritarian regimes' legitimation discourses. The recent literature on authoritarian learning argues that learning processes are facilitated by international linkages – in a modification of Way and Levitsky's democracy-centred concept – that optimise repression (Leenders 2016; Heydemann and Leenders 2014). Linkages are especially strong between countries that are geographically proximate or similar in regime type. But especially for security-related issues, robust linkages also exist between the West and the Arab world regarding the exchange of surveillance technology and military hardware (*ibid.*). Thus, sources of learning include neighbouring countries or other regional states, similar states in other parts of the world, and remote hegemonic players. The country's own past also

offers important contextualised lessons. Learning may relate to positive or negative examples – that is, learning from success or failure.

Table 2. Factors Shaping Justification Patterns

	Domestic	International
Addressees	Base of legitimacy, frame resonance	International allies, acceptable discourse
Sources	Learning from history	Learning from abroad

2.5 Research Design and Case Selection

This paper proceeds comparatively by looking at the link between legitimisation and repression in two authoritarian regimes, Egypt and Uzbekistan. In many ways, the states are trend-setters and very typical in their regions, representing paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg 2006: 232 f.). They have the largest number of citizens in the Arab world and Central Asia, respectively. Both Egypt and Uzbekistan are key allies of Western powers in the global war on terror and have had phases of intense confrontation with domestic Islamic movements, militant and peaceful. The countries in both regions are predominantly Muslim and have a poor record of maintaining civil and political liberties.

We investigate each state's justification of its most brutal repressive incident in recent decades, each of which has been referred to as the respective country's "Tiananmen Square" (RFE/RL, 9 June 2005; *The Guardian*, 16 August 2014). Despite the generally high level of repression that these countries have in common, the crackdowns in the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan in 2005 and in Rabi'a 'Adawiya Square in Egypt in 2013, which resulted in hundreds of deaths, were extraordinary and led to a ranking of 4/4 on the Political Terror Scale for the year of the mass repression. By comparing similar instances of repression, we hold an important factor constant, as different types of repression require different narratives. We choose highly visible, lethal, and extra-judicial repression, which necessitates great justification efforts.

The cases differ with respect to the regime phase during which the repression incidents occurred: In Egypt, a new post-coup military regime tried to get rid of the former incumbents, while in Uzbekistan, Karimov had ruled for 16 years. One can hypothesise that depending on the regime phase, justifications for repression will differ. Furthermore, the repression literature suggests that the expertise of elites and the history of cooperation between a state's security organisations will influence repressive patterns (Davenport 2007; Pereira 2005). In Uzbekistan, the security services are most prominent, in part due to their roots in the KGB, whereas in Egypt in 2013, directly after the coup, the military was dominant.

We use a paired comparison with the aim of developing new hypotheses that elucidate the justification of repression. Our qualitative analysis of discourses draws on publicly available sources such as scholarly works, newspaper articles, blogs, and reports. We have exam-

ined public statements made by officials before and in the aftermath of violent protests to extract the justifications presented to the public. The laws according to which protesters were prosecuted and the accusations made in court also offer insights as to how repression was justified, and are complemented by information on legal proceedings in the case of arrest and subsequent trial. This allows us to capture both the justification of repression proper and the engineered narratives about events more broadly.

3 Empirical Analysis

In the following, we first describe the repression in the most relevant episodes of high-intensity coercion in Egypt in 2013 and Uzbekistan in 2005 and outline the frames that regime elites used to legitimise it. We then contrast these findings with the legitimisation discourse on other targets of repression and in former times. Finally, we relate the justifications of the repressive policies to domestic and international sources and addressees.

3.1 *Egypt*

3.1.1 *Repression of the Muslim Brotherhood*

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has had a mixed history in its relations with the Egyptian state. Since 1952, phases of state repression have alternated with periods of toleration. At the same time, militant jihadism has challenged the state at various times, peaking with the assassination of President Sadat in 1981 and again during the 1990s. While during times of greater toleration the Muslim Brothers have played a role in formal politics through participation in parliamentary elections, at other times its members have faced arrest. The 2011 uprising and Mubarak's ouster were a game changer. The MB was the best organised group and won the parliamentary elections with over 40 per cent of the seats. It also won the presidential elections, and Muhammad Mursi took up office in June 2012. However, the group's attempt to monopolise power and rule in an exclusive manner led to mass mobilisation, which was fuelled by the army, and resulted in a military coup on 30 June 2013 that was broadly supported by societal groups. The MB didn't want to give up easily on its elected offices, and many of its activists and other Mursi supporters staged sit-ins; some also attacked security forces. The coup brought about a drastic reversal of the MB's position and MB politicians were arrested on a large scale. The most brutal instances of repression took place on 14 August 2013 with the forceful clearance of the Rabi'a 'Adawiya and Nahda Square protest sites, events that have since often been described as massacres. Armoured vehicles, special forces from the Interior Ministry, and snipers on the roofs of military buildings fired at

peaceful civilians, shooting and in part even burning an estimated 1,000 people to death.⁶ Many protesters were arrested. The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed in September and declared a terrorist organisation in December 2013, in what was just the beginning of the repression that has since drastically narrowed the public sphere and heavily affected the media, NGOs, and universities. Army commander-in-chief and coup leader al-Sisi tightened his grip on power and was elected president in May 2014.

3.1.2 *Justification of Repression*

The main narrative the new government brought forward was that the Rabi'a 'Adawiya Square protesters consisted only of Muslim Brotherhood supporters, who acted violently and amounted to terrorists. In addition, the disruption of daily life and public order were contrasted with the security of state and citizens. Then-prime minister Beblawi "justified the use of force saying that Morsi loyalists had been sowing chaos around the country, 'terrorising citizens, attacking public and private property'" (*Daily News Egypt*, 14 November 2013). He stressed "the spread of anarchy and attacks on hospitals and police stations" (*The Economic Times*, 15 August 2013).

One justification strategy was to depict the police forces as defending their own lives as well as the state and its institutions. Therefore, the number of policemen killed was highlighted and probably exaggerated, while the number of victims among the protesters was downplayed. Arguments of self-defence were employed, with protesters accused of having shot first. Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim explained that the police forces "were surprised by protesters who started firing live ammunition" and added that "'clear instructions' were given to security forces to limit use of weapons to teargas after protesters had been told to leave by loudspeakers" (*Ahram Online*, 15 August 2013).⁷

Framing protests as terrorism is a tried and tested narrative from the "war on terror." Even before the peak of the crackdown, on 24 July, al-Sisi had asked "all honest and trustworthy Egyptians" to "come out to give me the mandate and order that I confront violence and potential terrorism" (*The Guardian*, 24 July 2013). During a news conference on 17 August, presidential adviser Mostafa Hegazy said, "We are facing a war launched by extremist forces escalating every day to a terrorist war" (*Al Jazeera English*, 17 Aug 2013). During the broadcasting of his statement, the headline "Egypt fighting terrorism" was visible on screen.

6 Prime Minister Hazem Beblawi spoke of a death toll "close to 1,000" in Rabi'a 'Adawiya Square and Nahda Square together, and the National Council for Human Rights counted 624 civilians plus eight policemen killed in Rabi'a Square. Other estimates are higher, including Human Rights Watch figures. The organisation has stated that "a minimum of 817 people and more likely at least 1,000" persons were killed (HRW 2014).

7 However, the discourse on this issue was not consistent among all officials and at all times. Furthermore, according to the Interior Ministry's planning of the forceful dispersal, the death of some thousand protesters was expected beforehand (HRW 2014).

In the following months, similar wording and topics dominated government discourse and legislative amendments. Corresponding charges were raised in the trials against many citizens who had been present at Rabi'a 'Adawiya Square. The defendants, who ranged from high-ranking Muslim brethren to photojournalists, were accused of "forming an armed gathering of more than five people that endangers public safety and security [...] premeditated murder of security personnel, vandalizing private and public property, forcibly occupying buildings, obstructing traffic, terrorizing the public, and restricting citizens' right to freedom of movement and personal safety" (*Mada Masr*, 14 August 2016).

The broader discourse directed towards the domestic audience has since concentrated on the issue of terrorism. The public prosecution office released a statement in August 2015 officially labelling the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group and holding it liable for the violence that occurred on 14 August, as well as throughout the duration of the sit-in.⁸ In a televised March 2014 speech, in which al-Sisi declared his candidacy for presidency, he made terrorism the most prominent issue, stating, "My fellow citizens! We are threatened by the terrorists [...] by parties who seek the destruction of our life, safety and security. It is true that this is my last day in uniform but I will fight every day for Egypt free of fear and terror. [...] we'd rather die before Egyptians are terrorized" (*Al-Jazeera English*, 26 March 2014).

Besides the frame of terrorism, the reference to a legal basis for repression seems to be vital in the justification of such measures. While the violent crackdown was still ongoing, government representatives declared that the crisis was being handled via "security measures within the framework of law" (*Al Jazeera English*, 17 August 2013). Later on, al-Sisi referred to the rule of law and non-interference with judicial processes when questioned on his country's human rights record (*Washington Post*, 12 March 2015). Because depicting repressive measures as being in accordance with legislation seems to be a priority, it comes as no surprise that since Mursi's ouster, a strategy of judicialising repression has been pursued (Grimm 2015: 2). Most important among these initiatives are the 2013 protest law, the anti-terror legislation, and the new constitution. As with other cases of authoritarian legislation, they are formulated in vague language and offer new regulations for judges to apply in unfair trials, as well as legalising administrative sanctions by police and military forces.⁹

3.1.3 Other Targets and Justification in Former Times

Harsh repression accompanied by a security and terrorism discourse is not a new phenomenon in Egypt. During the wave of repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s its

8 Similar wording was chosen by censored media and the Tamarrod movement, which spoke retrospectively of "the events of June 30 against injustice and terrorism" (*Mada Masr*, 3 December 2013).

9 Having illuminated the justifications of repression, it is important not to overlook covert, deliberately unjustified repression, which expanded alongside the intentionally justified repression. The most obvious example of attempts to cover up repression were the discourses on the Rabi'a massacre itself, in which the number of protesters killed in the streets was downplayed.

members were frequently accused of attacking buildings and people; the terminology of terrorism was introduced in the domestic context at that time. Instead of talking of political violence (*'unf siyāsī*) or assassination attempts, as under Nasser and Sadat, the term terrorism "*irhāb*" gained traction. In 1992, the first Egyptian anti-terror law was passed. While under Mubarak many political opponents and bloggers faced administrative arrest for terrorism and/or drug charges, during the interim military rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in 2011–2012 a typical accusation against protesters was "thuggery," with a thug defined as somebody "displaying force or threatening to use force against a victim" (HRW, 24 January 2012).

Since the coup, the discourse centring on terrorism, security, and extremism has become a cover to justify not only the repression of MB activists but the entire crackdown, which has hit the whole spectrum from Islamists to the liberal opposition, the media, and NGOs. All activities of the April 6 movement, which played a key role in the 2011 uprising, have been banned on grounds of "espionage and tainting the state's image" (*Al Jazeera English*, 28 April 2014). NGOs and other associations have been further restricted by an amendment to the criminal law that punishes any foreign financing. Most repression of other targets is not separately justified, but rather tied to the well-known frames: the media has been censored via the anti-terror law of August 2015, which criminalises the publication of "false news or statements on terrorist acts or counterterror operations contrary to official Ministry of Defense statements."

3.1.4 *Justification in the Domestic and International Contexts*

Egypt's Islamist opposition has, as a whole, previously experienced periods of harsh repression, especially after the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, when members of the jihadist group that plotted to kill him were executed, and in the so-called civil war of the 1990s. The pattern of first initiating a crackdown, then rhetorically introducing certain narratives before introducing legislation to convict the defendants of terrorism and holding trials against them in military courts was already existent in the 1990s.

Within the international context, the Egyptian military has had ample opportunity to cooperate with the United States on domestic counterterrorism in recent years. These experiences have certainly contributed to framing the country's main concerns as extremism and terrorism. Egypt has stepped up this discourse on the international stage, as is apparent from its speeches to the UN General Assembly, where these topics now make up the lion's share as opposed to the buzzwords of stability and peace that were typical in the 1990s and the first decade of this century.

The intensified use of terrorism rhetoric also appears to be a result of diffusion and learning processes. A successful terrorism discourse has taken place in Syria, where Bashar al-Assad has partially convinced the international audience of the opposition's terrorist nature, not least by influencing domestic circumstances to prompt a shift towards more extremism.

Given such examples, where even the fiercest repression can find some cover under a terrorism discourse, combined with domestic experiences and the general impression of the worldwide discursive success of the terrorism narrative, it is no wonder that the interim military government took up this frame to justify the Rabi'a massacre.¹⁰

Both discourses, directed towards the domestic audience and the international audience, have used the frames "security," "order," and "terrorism" to a large extent. However, in the first months after the crackdown, "legality" was more prominent. This is reflected in the government's rhetorical support for investigations of the incidents, and in the emphasis placed on the adherence to law in discussions with Western media, especially by Prime Minister Hazem Beblawi. However, even in media channels directed mainly towards Western audiences, the focus on terrorism became larger over time. In March 2015, al-Sisi stressed the dangers of terrorism and state collapse, and offered his interpretation of the Muslim Brotherhood: "The Muslim Brotherhood is the parent organization of extreme ideology. They are the godfather of all terrorist organizations. They spread it all over the world" (*Washington Post*, 12 March 2015).

3.2 *Uzbekistan*

3.2.1 *Repression under Karimov*

Ever since independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has adopted a sceptical stance towards religion, in particular Islam, in spite of a rich cultural heritage that has been partly appropriated by official discourse. President Karimov feared that pan-Islamic tendencies would threaten the citizens' loyalty towards the state, and religious organisations have thus faced tight restrictions, forcing them underground (Ilkhamov 2001: 42). Non-official versions of Islam are referred to interchangeably as "political Islam," "extremism," "Islamism," "Salafism," "radicalism," "Wahhabism," and "Jihadism" (Peyrouse 2016: 2), and such labelling has even extended to Protestant Christians (*ibid.*: 4).

In the 1990s, a militant Islamist movement, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), formed in opposition to Karimov's rule. It joined the Taliban in Afghanistan and was crushed after the 2001 war.¹¹ Another Islamist group seeking to build an Islamic society, albeit by peaceful means, is Hizb ut-Tahrir. Finally, the so-called Akromiya movement is devoted to spiritual bettering. Regime agents blamed all of these organisations for perpetrating lethal attacks in Tashkent in 1999 and 2004. However, observers doubt the official narrative about Islamist terrorism, arguing that the bombings were part of a power struggle between different factions of the security apparatus that represented competing clans vying for position to succeed the recently deceased president. Uzbekistan gained new international allies after 2001 by joining the global war on terror, primarily against Afghanistan. The strict closure of

¹⁰ However, copying discourses has its limits, since talking about sectarianism – as in Syria or Bahrain – would resonate poorly in the Egyptian case due to the population's relative ethno-religious homogeneity.

¹¹ The United States declared the IMU a terrorist organisation in 2000.

the political sphere continues to keep oppositional activists in exile or imprisoned, with the latter facing brutal torture.

In May 2005, security forces perpetrated a massacre in Andijon in the Fergana Valley. Local protests were first triggered by an unfair trial against 23 middle-class entrepreneurs who were charged with being members of the Akromiya. The trial was monitored by 1,000 to 4,000 people outside, an unusual gathering of people.¹² On the last day of the proceedings, the judges announced that the defendants would be imprisoned indefinitely without a verdict. Enraged family members and friends stormed the prison and freed them and others during the night. The group joined protesters in occupying the regional administration building in Bobur Square on 13 May and publicly denounced social and political injustice. Throughout the day, snipers and security forces from all branches mowed down hundreds of protesters, perhaps even a thousand.¹³ Citizens from Andijon who tried to flee to the nearby Kyrgyz border were met with gunfire by Uzbek guards (*RFE/RL*, 14 November 2005).

According to some sources, the military and intelligence agencies took over functions from the Ministry of Interior, assuming control of its anti-terror units, and indicating a power struggle from which the intelligence service emerged victoriously (Burnashev and Chernykh 2007: 71).¹⁴ The EU and US reacted by imposing sanctions, which led to a swift realignment with Russia through intensified collaboration in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (*ibid.*: 72). As a sign of goodwill, the death penalty was abolished in 2008, although severe and occasionally lethal torture continues to this day. The number of political prisoners is currently estimated at approximately 10,000.

3.2.2 *Justification of Repression*

The Uzbek government's primary justification for the Andijon repression was that it was acting in defence of the population against armed criminals. Karimov accused the protesters of using women and children as human shields. The main narrative focused on Islamism, which was becoming increasingly embedded in the global discourse on the war on terror. In a press conference on 14 May, the president blamed the Akromiya for the events and portrayed it as Hizb ut-Tahrir's local branch, although the two movements have no connection. Karimov drew a parallel to the unrest ensuing after the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan two months before, insisting on the existence of foreign funding and the participation of foreigners seeking to establish a "Muslim Caliphate" (Karimov 2005). Intercepted phone calls from protesters to Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan were cited as proof of international connections (*ibid.*). Later, the Foreign Ministry added the IMU to the list of suspects (*Registan*, 17 May

12 As all information about the Akromiya as an organised body goes back to non-public sources the government presented in court rather than authentic material, the group's existence is questionable (Kendzior 2006).

13 The death toll is highly contested. State figures speak of only 187 victims, but human rights organisations estimate several hundred, maybe 700, to be closer to the truth (*New York Times*, 12 May 2015).

14 The defence and interior ministers were shuffled out of government soon afterwards.

2005). Only a year later, Karimov indirectly acknowledged the existence of socio-economic problems as a cause of the protests and removed the province's governor (*RFE/RL*, 19 October 2006).

The government wanted to transmit its own reading of events to an external audience. It pursued a sophisticated approach, with the Uzbek Embassy in the United States distributing a video in support of the government narrative to think tank scholars in an effort to win over Western academics. However, parts of this "documentary" were also used inside Uzbekistan in a propaganda video that was frequently broadcast on television in the summer of 2005 (Kendzior 2006: 546). Journalists and human rights activists whose accounts of the Andijon events deviated from the official story were defamed and persecuted as supporters of international terrorism. Independent news websites were shut down in order to erase alternative narratives as part of a carefully orchestrated "information black-out" intended to enforce the official version (Moore 2007: 315).

While in the first press conference after the Andijon events Karimov did not directly accuse the protesters of being terrorists themselves, over time the official rhetoric shifted towards this terminology and the judicial accusations were based on the anti-terror legislation, which is vague enough to prosecute dissenters (Megoran 2008: 20). In court, the charges filed against arrested activists included "terrorism, attacking the constitutional order, murder, the organization of a criminal band, mass disturbances, the taking of hostages, and illegal possession of arms and explosive materials" (*HRW* 2005: 38). Most of the defendants pleaded guilty, which testifies to the horrible torture in Uzbek prisons – which can also extend to the prisoners' relatives (*RFE/RL*, 21 September 2005). The forced testimonies reflected the confused approach of authorities, who did not focus on a coherent narrative, but rather on a "vast conspiracy involving – in no particular order – the BBC, *RFE/RL*, Chechen military instructors, NGOs, training camps in Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent, and extremists linked to Al-Qaeda [who] aimed to spark a Georgia/Ukraine/Kyrgyz-style revolution in Andijon in order to transform Uzbekistan into an Islamic state that would serve as the launching pad for a drive to establish a worldwide caliphate" (*RFE/RL* 28 September 2005). The defendants were not able to obtain their verdicts, rendering them unable to appeal (*Fergananews* 27 February 2006). In addition to journalists, poets who wrote songs about the massacre were arrested for insulting the president (Kendzior 2007: 325 f.). Two citizens who possessed a cassette with the song were handed even harsher sentences.

Not all repression was justified. The government downplayed the number of citizens killed to 187, well below the estimates from other sources of between 600 and 1,000 victims. Moreover, Karimov insisted that "not one peaceful citizen" had been shot (Kendzior 2007: 317), especially not women and children. Witnesses reported that dead women and children were hidden from the public and that only male victims were made available for identification in the makeshift morgues (*BBC*, 17 May 2005). Justifications of repression reached their limits when it came to obviously innocent victims.

3.2.3 *Other Targets and Justification in Former Times*

Already in 2000, members of the political opposition were tried on charges of terrorism, as anti-terror legislation had been introduced early on in Karimov's rule. The legal basis "defined terrorism as 'socially dangerous wrong doing' while Article 244 of its Criminal Code draws together in its proscription 'the activities of religious organisations, movements, sects and others which support terrorism, drug trafficking and organised crime'" (Horsman 2005: 201). The definition sees terrorism even in ideological goals, such as the future establishment of a caliphate, without the exertion of violence (ibid.: 202).

Lumping different dissenting groups together is a trademark of Karimov's writings, where the words "opposition" and "radical" are usually used together "as if to suggest that [...] all opposition is by definition radical" (March 2003: 224). While terrorists allegedly underwent training abroad as early as 1995 (Horsman 2005: 203), in Karimov's 1997 book terrorism did not figure as prominently as religious fundamentalism (Karimov 1997).

The judicial system "has always identified political opposition as a criminal conspiracy aimed at destabilizing Uzbekistan and the whole of Central Asia. The Karimov strategy for neutralizing opposition relie[d] upon the concept that Uzbek Islamism is wholly 'imported' from outside the country, borne by missionary infiltrators" (Ilkhamov 2001: 41). In February 1999, first the Lebanese Hizbollah then Hizb ut-Tahrir were blamed for the Tashkent car bombings, before the IMU and a secular politician in exile were indicted in court (Horsman 2005: 203). "Television stories about the aftermath of the February 1999 bombings or current events were juxtaposed on a split screen with images of armed Islamic militants fighting in Tajikistan and Afghanistan to illustrate the government's message that Uzbekistan could be next in the region to face a militant Islamic Opposition" (HRW 2004: 32). Both in the 1999 and the 2004 bombings, rival clans dominating different security services were suspected of being behind the violence (Collins 2002: 148). After the IMU had been crushed in the Afghanistan war, the court ruling found Hizb ut-Tahrir guilty of organising the attacks of 2004 (Horsman 2005: 204). Ilkhamov (2004) suspects that "[t]he regime effort to tie Hizb-ut-Tahrir to the bombings, coupled with the arrest campaign, indicates its plan to tie all forms of protest to terrorism." In sum, given the positive international recognition for counterterrorism, "a kind of controlled terrorism, when duly ascribed to its Islamist adversaries, might be acceptable and even desirable for the regime" (Ilkhamov 2004).

3.2.4 *Justification in the Domestic and International Contexts*

To a large extent, the justification pattern used after the Andijon events picked up on previous discourses. While the Uzbek government has always employed a tough approach towards Islamists, it enhanced its embryonic anti-terror discourse and even exploited it on the international scene after 9/11 to receive financial support. After the 2004 attacks, the government referred to the perpetrators as representing "*jamoats*," which can be read as a reference to Egypt's Gamaa Islamiyya, which fought the Egyptian government in a civil war during the

1990s and later joined, in part, al-Qaeda. This was a deliberate framing directed at the international community “with US backing for Egypt’s ‘war on terrorism’ in mind” (Ilkhamov 2004).

The West was an important addressee, if not the main one, of this discourse. Indeed, Western partners took the alleged presence of Islamists seriously and supported Uzbekistan’s anti-terror fight for geostrategic reasons. The international interest in a “stable” neighbour for Afghanistan diminished the danger of external criticism (Omelicheva 2007: 385). In general, the global war on terror has become a convenient blueprint for justifying state violence (Stevens and Jailobaeva 2010: 99). Western assistance to Uzbekistan peaked in 2002, when the police and intelligence services alone received USD 79 million in aid from the United States (*The Guardian*, 26 May 2003). Of the security services that participated in the Andijon crackdown, one special counterterrorism unit had also received training in the United States (*New York Times*, 18 June 2005). Only two weeks before the Andijon events, the *New York Times* reported that the US rendition programme had sent terror suspects to Uzbekistan for interrogation on a frequent basis between 2001 and 2004 (*NYT*, 1 May 2005). Through the events in 1999 and 2004, the Uzbek government had already learned it could get away with blaming terrorists for creating unrest without too many questions being asked, and it designed its rhetoric in 2005 accordingly. However, this lesson did not hold in the extreme case of the regime violence in Andijon, and both the United States and the EU imposed sanctions.

Uzbekistan’s leadership thus looked for alternative partners. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides a regional platform for cooperation on the security level, which was strengthened in the summer of 2005. China, as one of the SCO members, refers to “three evils” in its discourse to justify repression: extremism, sectarianism, and terrorism. These issues are at the top of the SCO agenda. Interestingly, the businessmen whose release was demanded in the Andijon protests were accused of very similar crimes: “extremism, fundamentalism and separatism” (*OSCE ODIHIR* 2005: 6). In a case of assistance from abroad, Russian officials backed the Uzbek government’s claims by asserting that the dead of Andijon were “militants, comprising bandits, Islamist radicals, and Taliban fighters’ [who had] infiltrated from Afghanistan” (*RFE/RL*, 19 May 2005).

One primary goal of the increased repression in 2005 was diffusion-proofing, to avoid the colour revolutions that had taken other former USSR states by surprise. Neighbouring Kyrgyzstan had been the latest and closest country where unrest had spread from disgruntled communities and “resulted in the president’s decision to vacate office” (Koesel and Bunce 2013: 759). Thus, in his above-mentioned press conference, Karimov (2005) took pains to refute any similarity with the colour revolution protests, to the point of denying that people had assembled in a square. The president was trying to learn from others’ failures in this case.

The Uzbek approach towards terrorism is, according to Horsman, rooted in its Soviet legacy. Horsman cites the “ideological and arbitrary definition of terrorism, the ‘criminalisation’ of the terrorist, the portrayal of vast and usually externally inspired conspiracies against the state and the call for popular mobilisation against the threat,” as well as the court trials,

as displaying similarities to the 1930s (Horsman 2005: 208). This could be a result of political socialisation, as Karimov was the final Communist Party first secretary in Uzbekistan.

4 Comparative Evaluation

4.1 *Similarities and Differences in Frame Contents*

The most striking similarities in the frames used in Egypt and Uzbekistan are the references to violent behaviour and terrorism. In both cases, the claim that the opponents were armed criminals who had fired before the security forces opened fire was central. The danger to security figured prominently, and the ascription of terrorism was extended to justify the repression of civilians who were not only unarmed, but also definitely not Islamists.

Interestingly, in both countries the terrorism frame gained importance over time, rendering it the most popular *ex post* legitimisation of repression. In Uzbekistan, terrorism was not even mentioned in Karimov's first press conference on Andijon, but it subsequently became one of the major accusations in the trials and the surrounding discourse. In Egypt, the framing of terrorists was already brought up in preparation for the crackdown, and it loomed large in state-controlled coverage of the events.

The two cases also display some differences in terms of the frames employed. In Uzbekistan, the assertion of foreign influence even amounted to the claim that Taliban fighters were on the scene. Also, outlandish conspiracy theories and allegations of radicalism were unique to Uzbekistan. In Egypt, by contrast, anarchy and the disruption of normal life through the week-long occupation of a public square were prominent narratives. Furthermore, the rhetorical reference to the legality of repressive means was common, and new legislation was passed as the new regime imposed its own rules and sought legitimacy through legality.

Table 3. Legitimation of Repression in Egypt and Uzbekistan

	Endangered values	Diagnostic frames
Egypt 2013	Security Public order Legality (Unity)	Terrorism Violence against (property of) state and citizens Disruption of everyday life (traffic, production) Extremism
Uzbekistan 2005	Security Public order Sovereignty Legality	Terrorism Radicalism and extremism Foreign influence Attacking the constitutional order

4.2 Sources of Learning and the International Context

It is impossible to understand the prominent role terrorism assumed in the discourses of both countries without taking into account the diffusion of “war on terror” rhetoric and practices, as epitomised in the countries’ vague laws for dealing with terrorism. Both Egypt and Uzbekistan had already had already used terrorism discourses, and could thus exploit their own knowledge and routines. Together with previous collaboration with the United States in “fighting terror,” this experience may have encouraged both governments to further expand this discourse – for example, to write it into the constitution as a state goal or promote it internationally, as al-Sisi did.

Furthermore, the respective regional neighbourhoods offered negative examples that were exploited rhetorically to validate the need for repression. To some extent, these cases of civil war and popular upheaval influenced the elite’s threat perceptions, while they were also instrumentalised as justifications for harsh measures. Regarding civil war, Tajikistan served as a cautionary tale for Uzbekistan, while Egypt was able to choose from a range of violent conflicts in the region, including those in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Both governments were able to point to the increasing challenge of jihadism, withholding the fact that the practices of authoritarian rulers were the dominant initial cause of the conflict in these neighbouring countries. From the perspective of counter-diffusion, the danger of protests was paramount, as demonstrated by the Colour Revolutions and the Arab Uprisings, with Kyrgyzstan representing the key negative example for Uzbekistan and Egypt’s own recent history being telling in that case. The latter is ironic, for without the 2011 protests, there would not have been direct military rule in the first place, and even the military coined its 2013 coup the completion of the Tahrir “revolution.”

When it comes to understanding the different justifications detected in our analysis, the divergent international partners play an important role. China and Russia, as major authoritarian powers with a communist past, are geographically proximate and have close linkages to Uzbekistan. Thus, we see Russia backing Uzbek discourses or the diffusion of the Chinese frame of the “three evils.” While Uzbekistan also cooperated closely with the United States on security issues, Egypt’s relations to the United States are less balanced by other great powers. Accordingly, Egypt has long been sensitised to follow a certain discourse on the rule of law and human rights.

4.3 Domestic Context

Other differences did not result from international linkages, but rather from the specific domestic context. The fact that foreign influence was used to frame Uzbek but not Egyptian protesters can, on the one hand, be read as a buzzword directed towards international actors who do not really know what is going on inside the opaque country (for similar arguments see Jourde 2007). On the other hand, it testifies to the paranoia of a young nation that cannot accept the frustration of a neglected segment of the population and seeks to blame foreign elements. In Egypt, such contentions were impossible to make, as the Muslim Brotherhood is

a genuinely indigenous organisation that even predates the republic. The highlighting of the right to “normal” life in Egypt can be seen in the context of the enduring political mobilisation since the Arab Spring and the profound changes that have brought with them economic and emotional strain for many citizens.

The differences in regime phase – that is, the timing of repression in Egypt immediately following a coup, as well as the fact that society had been politically mobilised in the previous years and witnessed various regime transformations – had little impact on the discourses. Based on this finding, we hypothesise that terrorism and stability discourses are likely to be used under both extraordinary and “normal” conditions of contention.

In our cases, the diverging weight of security institutions did not play an important role, either with regard to discourses or to actual repression. Although in Uzbekistan the security services prevail and in Egypt the military is dominant, the general approach to repression and its justification are strikingly similar. Only in the details of the trials do we find differences resulting from the institutional set-ups, as well as from the broader legitimisation discourse: in Uzbekistan, more emphasis was put on radicalism and conspiracies, whereas the Egyptian military, depicting itself as the guarantor of national and state security, stressed threats to state property and made multiple references to “the rule of law,” something which has been a widespread discursive tool since President Sadat’s rule.

5 Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the links between legitimisation and repression by analysing the justifications of the crackdowns on mass protests in Egypt and Uzbekistan in 2013 and 2005, respectively. It has argued that examining the addressees of official discourses and the sources of learning are central to understanding the governmental framing of opponents and repressive events. We suggest that combining the current research on authoritarianism with the framing approach provides scholars with conceptual and theoretical tools to investigate the discourses of autocratic rulers at such critical points in time, while also taking international influences into account.

We have found that a mixture of domestic conditions and the international dimension of learning best illuminates the evolution of the frames employed in the cases of Egypt in 2013 and Uzbekistan in 2005. On the level of broad types of frames, the justifications offered for the crackdowns were very similar. In both countries, the security and stability of both the state and society were framed as the main endangered values, whereas protesters and the groups they were allegedly affiliated with were accused of criminal behaviour, terrorism, extremism, violence, and disruption. The allegations brought forward corroborate Dukalskis’s (2015) findings from other cases. A status-quo-preserving master frame was plausible in Uzbekistan after decades of Karimov’s rule, while in post-coup Egypt, the same master frame was indicative of the dire need to consolidate military rule. Although the rulers in both coun-

tries feared political protest by large masses of citizens, the threats they claimed to face tied in with the global diffusion of the “war on terror” discourse. The terrorism frame is not a universal tool – it was notably not used after the Tiananmen Square massacre (Vuori 2003) – but it seems to be a popular justification in the current century. International diffusion effects apparently play a large role in the choice of the general direction of frames.

Looking at the more specific justification frames, including differences between the Uzbek and the Egyptian case, there are indications that the domestic audience and domestic sources have a large impact. This could be because this kind of broader framing is embedded in the respective regime’s legitimisation strategies. When it comes to the more fine-grained details of the framing, the international audience appears to also become important. The “fine-tuning” can be regarded as a second step in the elites’ discourse strategy where they consider additional audiences and potential negative reactions from the international sphere. For example, the stronger Egyptian focus on legality was to some extent directed towards a Western audience, whereas the foreign interference frame that was prominent in Uzbekistan echoed narratives prevailing in its regional surroundings.

Our findings also help to test and refine theoretical arguments on the international factors stabilising authoritarian rule. Large-scale repression events are often unprecedented situations; therefore, investigating their justifications constitutes a least likely case for demonstrating learning. Once more, learning from abroad is triggered by geographical and system proximity, as epitomised by the negative Kyrgyz example. In the absence of sufficient proximity, we do not find discourse convergence. Linkages to authoritarian great powers through regional organisations were used to underscore regime discourses and resolve isolation on the international scene.

The framing of protesters and Islamist movements as threats to security is a highly relevant topic in need of further empirical investigation. The two case studies would merit an even more detailed comparison. While we have illuminated the *contents* of frames in Egypt and Uzbekistan, more in-depth study could compare the framing situations and forms, possibly focusing on which rhetorical patterns dominate in which situations and how the dynamics of the interaction with opponents unfold.

Another path worth pursuing would be to examine the *effects* of the legitimisation of repression. On the international level, the impact could be measured as military support or, if resonance is low, sanctions and counter-framing. In the domestic sphere, the mobilising and radicalising effects, as well as counter-framing, represent an important area to study. Harsh repression has often led to the radicalisation of some, turning false accusations into self-fulfilling prophecies. Besides the effects on the persecuted persons, the frames’ (non-) resonance with the audience would be also a crucial topic of study. The counter-framing by opposition activists indicates that the question of where the “real” threat to security comes from is highly contested. In his song about the events in Andijon, Uzbek poet Dadaxon Hasanov sang: “We know who the terrorist is” (Kendzior 2007: 325).

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