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The Instrumentalisation of Child Trafficking: Competing Discursive Constructions between the US Government and QAnon?

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ABSTRACT

Child trafficking has been a primary interest of international actors. The United States has steered its legislation and anchored it in a solid treat narrative. Recent years have seen QAnon construct a competitive framing of the issue. This paper addressed how the established securitisation of the United States was disrupted by QAnon's intervention. It inquired about the nature of the disruption and questioned whether and how both actors entered a competitive securitisation dynamic over child trafficking. This has been done through the lens of discourse analysis to operationalise securitisation theory and evaluate the prominence of its three criteria: the framing of the threat, audience acceptance and subsequent measures. It found that the United States securitisation was being contested by QAnon's attempt at securitising the issue from below. While the attempt has only been partially successful, QAnon successfully established itself as a legitimate competing narrative actor. However, adherence to QAnon's narrative is on the rise and attention should be given to its evolution to prevent further damage to the government's rule of Law. The discursive competition processes have also impacted the perception of child trafficking and its subsequent mitigation by perpetrating stereotypes and misconceptions, a reminder of the potentially harmful consequences of securitisation. The present research contributed to the nascent literature on securitisation from below by providing a process through which a non-state actor can attempt a bottom-up securitising move. It studied securitisation from below not independently but in relation to the dominant securitisation and provided insights on their connection. Finally, it highlighted further research pursuits in securitisation from below: the changing nature of speech acts due to social media and the role of identity.

Keywords

QAnon, securitisation from below, child trafficking, counter-securitisation, United States, social media, non-state actor, frame contests, audience trust

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CT	Child Trafficking
CS	Copenhagen School
CNCS	Corporation for National and Community Service
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DOJ	Department of Justice
DOT	Department of Transport
DSA	Department of State Archive
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
N.Y.C	New York City
OJJDP	Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
THB	Trafficking in Human Beings
TVPA	The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act
TWHPBOA	The White House President B. Obama Archives
TWHPGBA	The White House President G. Bush Archives
TWHPJBA	The White House President J. Biden Archives
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States (of America)

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CHAPTER 1- INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE PRESENCE OF CHILD TRAFFICKING IN POLITICAL DISCOURSES

Child trafficking (CT), as a phenomenon and a crime, falls under the wider umbrella of [trafficking in human beings THB. The first international regulation of the trafficking of persons was the International Agreement Against White Slavery in 1904 (Gallagher, 2010, p.13). It required authorities to gather information regarding procuring “women and girls for immoral purposes abroad” (United Nations Treaty Series 1, 1904). The underlying goal of this anti-trafficking measure was the proper repatriation of migrants (Gallagher, 2010, p.13). With CT remaining a further point of notice, THB was soon further designated as a security issue by the international scene under the anti-trafficking agreements of the League of Nations, such as the 1921 International Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children (Gallagher, 2010, p.14). In 2000, the UN created the Palermo Protocol or the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Howard and Lalani, 2008). In this ellipse of time, the definition of THB was contentious, especially in dividing the nature of human smuggling versus the trafficking of women and children versus prostitution (Gallagher, 2010, p.25). These difficulties in defining, by law, the nature of THB and the answering policies have also been present in the U.S.’ treatment of the phenomenon (Gallagher, 2010, p.26). The present research proposed this brief timeline to demonstrate that, in political discourses, anti-trafficking discourses cannot be isolated from the topic of CT.

The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) defines TBH as:

“a. sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18

years of age; or, b. the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery” (DHHS, 2017)

It is difficult to obtain precise data on THB due to the secretive nature of the crime and its global and international scale (Polaris, 2021; Fong & Cardoso, 2010, p.311). It is an elusive crime that does not lend itself to easy quantification. Research regarding CT and youth trafficking is even more scarce (Fong & Cardoso, 2010, p.311; Sapiro et al., 2016; National Human Trafficking: Training and Technical Assistance Center, 2018). The Global Estimates of Modern Slavery (2022) places the number of persons afflicted by modern slavery at 50 million people a day. World’s Children (2020) estimates that two-thirds of trafficked individuals are forced into labour: more than 10 million adults and 4 million children. They estimate children to represent 27% of trafficking victims. This data is seconded by Save the Children (2018), which also estimates two-thirds of child victims to be girls, with 120 million girls worldwide suffering from sexual exploitation. They have an estimation of 1.2 million children affected by THB. Anti-Trafficking International (2023) estimates victims to be around 14.2 million worldwide and for trafficking to be the second largest international criminal enterprise as a \$150 billion industry. In the U.S., they place the average age of exploitation at 12-15 years old, including selling infants of three months old, and the total number of 100 000 trafficked children. In the U.S., the National Human Trafficking Hotline (2021) received 51 073 substantive contacts: 6% of the victims were originally from the U.S., and 88% were of unknown origins. They reported a 40% increase in reports in 2020 compared to 2019. The U.S. Department of State (2021) reports a 98.66% increase in online enticements in 2020 compared to 2019 and alerts to the amplification of online traffickers. Polaris (2017) recognises, on American soil, the involvement of children in forced labour, including forced begging, and in informal brothels, where boys are a growing percentage. They are also used to

create child pornography content. In their 2020 report, compared to 2019, Polaris has identified a 22% increase in online recruitment, a 47% increase in victims being recruited by a family member or a caregiver, and a 22% increase in recruitment realised by an intimate partner. The Bureau of Justice Statistics describes the number of persons prosecuted for THB to have increased from 729 in 2011 to 1,343 in 2020, thus an 84% increase.

Notwithstanding the potential inaccuracy in the presented statistics, THB and CT have been demonstrated to be a consequent phenomenon globally and in the United States. It has been present in political discourses as early as 1904 and is subject to research and quantification by NGOs and governmental departments. The occurrence of CT in media and political discourses has soared with the advent of QAnon, as the organisation has extirpated itself from the fringes of the internet to invade mainstream platforms with discourses and narratives around CT in the construction of a frame parallel and often contradictory to the one of the U.S. government.

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Preliminary research on the mutual relationship between the U.S. government security frame for CT and QAnon has produced scarce results. Evident links have been made between the two entities, as QAnon, in its discourse, has framed the government – with the exemption of Donal Trump – as one of its adversaries, while said government ended up identifying QAnon as a domestic terrorist threat. Moreover, QAnon’s narrative frame and rhetoric use have also been studied. Still, the potential of a competitive securitisation process has not been researched in this context. This dissertation aims to provide a stepping-stone to fill the gap from an empirical perspective on the shapes securitisation processes can take, how they are imparted, and what their consequences are on the object securitised.

The society we inhabit is now driven by social media. In the U.S., social media platforms have surpassed printed newspapers as their primary source of information (Shearer, 2018). Information consumption through social networks correlates with belief in conspiracy theories (Jamieson, 2020, p.1). Alternative narratives can more easily gain traction through social media without being encumbered by a need for veracity. Cognitive dissonance, the uneasiness felt when two sets of ideas or behaviours enter contradiction, explains why, once a belief is adopted, resistance is met when trying to refute it or admit fault (Aronson and Tavis, 2020). Once contextualised in nowadays' information cycle and its influence on behavioural patterns, the presence of counterfactual information in a myriad of sources and the easiness of having access to those have an undeniable impact on politics, security and their narratives. At least, this is one of the elements the present study will defend. Ideological competition has long existed, but it has only recently reached such a scale and level of sophistication (Nestoras, 2019, p.2). This dissertation will argue that such competition has been echoed in securitisation processes; the modern cycle of information has allowed the said processes to embody a new shape where traditional securitising actors no longer monopolise the definition of security threat. New contenders have now gained access to securitisation processes, and they attempt to fulfil them not through the traditional hierarchical top-to-bottom mechanism but by using the means at their disposal to achieve it counter-currently. Therefore, the present study aims to add to the nascent literature surrounding securitisation from below.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

This journey of thought led to an analysis that will be based on exploring *how the United States government and QAnon have attempted to securitise child trafficking despite or by virtue of having integrated themselves into a competitive discursive process*. The empirical analysis of how the U.S. government and QAnon have concurrently constructed securitisation processes

will enable to elaborate on the developing research surrounding counter-securitisation and securitisation from below. It will bring light to the mechanisms used to create securitisation from below and insert the process within the larger national security and political frame. Subsequently, to propose a well-rounded study of the securitisation process, it will proceed to study the consequences of securitisation. It will search to differentiate the issue as securitised from its larger societal nature to identify the purpose of the objectified threat within the securitisation discourses and how it is consequently affected by discursive competition.

This dissertation will tackle the outlined objectives in the following way. Chapter 2 will provide theoretical bases and knowledge to underpin the following sections. It will present separate studies of the securitisation theory as defined by the Copenhagen School (CS), of the budding literature on securitisation from below, and finally, of the available research on the securitisation of CT. The final discussion section will provide the first links between all those elements. Chapter 3 will thoroughly describe the research design and the methodology employed for the following analysis while highlighting the research's limitations. Chapter 4 will offer a review on the role of CT in political discourses. Then, it will comprise the empirical analyses of whether the U.S. government has attempted to securitise CT, which will be reproduced for QAnon. Once the state of existence of securitisation attempts has been concurred, it will delve deeper into the opposing elements of the discourses. The following section will establish whether there is or not competitive securitisation processes between the two actors in the United States. It will then bring light on the consequences of the competing actors on the object being securitised. Finally, it will summarise the analysis. Chapter 5 will give way to the discussion, where the results of the analysis will be overviewed to deconstruct the mechanisms used during the attempt at securitisation from below. It will also indicate further points of focus that were recognised during

the analysis but were beyond its scope. Lastly, it will draw conclusions from the research and suggest directions for future research on the topic.

CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on securitisation is consequent and multifaceted. Yet, the literature on securitisation from below is scarce. Notwithstanding this, the nascent literature on the subject has demonstrated that securitisation from below has its place within the securitisation theory as a process with substantial impacts, rendering the persistent top-down focus problematic. Similarly, the literature seldom provides links between securitisation and CT. The present dissertation will provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of research. Firstly, it will establish the theoretical elaboration of the securitisation theory along with its defining elements to enable a deeper understanding of the following sections. Secondly, it will analyse the literature on securitisation from below. Thirdly, it will lay out the available literature on the securitisation of child and human trafficking. Finally, it will provide an overview of the overlapping elements between securitisation from below and CT in the case of the U.S.

2.1 THE SECURITISATION THEORY

In the aftermath of the Cold War, discussion arose to contest the traditional focus of security centred on security threats against the state and military actions. It was suggested to widen the scope of security to include military and non-military threats to the state but also to society and individuals with the consideration, for example, of human security (Wæver, 1995, p.50). This approach emphasizes identity and cultural factors. This new trend was heavily criticised (Knudsen, 2001, p.355). The opposing side was advocating for a narrow approach to security and was supported by academics such as Walt (1991).

The securitisation theory was developed amidst this context by two interdisciplinary schools: the Copenhagen School (CS) and the Paris School, the

CS is discursive-focused and the Paris School non-discursive focused, but both share a coherent research agenda (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p.122). The securitisation theory starting point is that security is inherently competitive (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 25–6). The CS postulated that security agendas result from political battles wherein the winner of security debates gets to securitise an issue, relocating it from normal public politics to the politics of urgency, threats and survival (Hammerstad, 2012, p.4). It is founded on a social constructivist approach, wherein security is not objectively real but is the creation of discursive actions (Wæver, 1995). Consequently, a securitising move is when a referent object is presented to an audience as an existential threat that urgently requires counteraction by any means necessary (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 26). For the securitising move to be successful, it means that the threat was transferred to a high priority and “high politics” agenda, which implies an acceptance from the audience that exceptional and emergency measures can be used beyond the limits of normal ordinary procedures and rules (ibid). Securitising moves take the form of speech acts imparted by influential political elites, developed on Austin’s (1962) speech act theory. A speech act is an utterance that presupposes an action: “by saying the words, something is done” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 26). The term security does not need to be explicitly uttered since what matters is identifying an existential threat that requires emergency measures and for the situation to be accepted. Thus, any issue can be framed as one of security as long as the audience accepts it (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 25).

The focus on political elites is founded on the presumption that a securitising move is more likely to be adopted if the speakers hold a position of expertise, power and authority and are seen as legitimate representatives of the group they stand for (Hammerstad, 2012, p.4). Another sign of a successful securitising move is not solely acceptance from the audience but also the significance of it (ibid, p.6); hence, whether the audience has the capacity to act swiftly and to adopt an emergency mode, such as behaviour or policies changes.

Therefore, at a national level, the government remains the central audience as it is the organisation carrying executive power to carry the changes in the security (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 41–42). The CS tends to adopt a statist and governmental bias in their framework (Hammerstad, 2012, p.6). But later researchers have started to consider the empirical implications of securitisation, as it is not always straightforward to figure out which audience acts when, what are the implications of multiple audiences and when these audiences are persuaded (Stritzel, 2007, p. 363). Often, securitisations processes are mapped by studying multiple securitising actors, messages and audiences, with securitising actors and audiences amalgamated, and differing messages born from the same securitisation move (Hammerstad, 2012, p.6).

Early criticism from the political economy school was the overconcern of the theory with words rather than with habitual security policies or even image (Williams, 2003), along with its tendency to be gender-blind (Hansen, 2000). Later criticism centred around the role of the audience, which was considered oversimplified despite its empiric complexity and the difficulty in defining what is an intersubjective relationship (see Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998; Williams, 2003; Balzacq, 2005; and Hansen, 2012). Côté (2016, p.551) was central to contradicting the idea that securitisation is a linear process in which securitising actors “speak at the audience” and establishing that the audience interacts and helps co-determine how and if securitisation takes place, through an intersubjective approach. A successful securitisation depends on the symbiotic relationship between securitising actors deemed legitimate and with sufficient authority who will perform the speech acts (Balzacq, 2011, p.25) and the audience who will accept the “existential threat identification” (Floyd, 2015, p.121). Therefore, it requires formal, institutional and moral support to succeed (Balzacq, 2011, p.9). Indeed, the securitising actor is not a free agent who acts without limitations; it is an authority figure constrained by the degree to which the audience adheres to the constructed boundary between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’, hence what poses a threat and who needs to be protected (Côté, 2016; Bourbeau,

2014). It is, therefore, essential for the securitisation process to connect with the feelings and interests of the audiences, the general public and experts to become an effective call to action (Floyd, 2015; Balzacq, 2005, p.185). The role of the audience in non-democratic countries is also a point that requires further study (Hammerstad, 2012, p.5). Clarifications were also required around the failure of securitisation and the reasons behind it, which has been less researched than successful securitisation moves (McDonald, 2008, p.564; Salter, 2008 and 2011). Hintjens (2019, p.186) postulated that such failure was correlated with crisis periods, where “widely divergent framing of the causes of crisis are likely to arise”. He argues that since a securitisation move cannot succeed if popular and expert audiences do not support it, it always contains an element of risks (ibid). Therefore, securitisation comprises a certain dramaturgical aspect, as securitising actors make moves on a stage that is not certain to receive the desired answer from other players (Salter, 2011). Further points of contestation lie with the narrow focus on the utterances of elites which minimises the role of the broader historical, social, discursive and bureaucratic structures and processes (Huysmans, 2006, p.26). Elite focus means that the securitisation process is mapped through the contestation of threat definition (Huysmans, 2006, p.2) with little emphasis on structural factors and discursive structures with firmly rooted practices and power relations. Nonetheless, the securitisation theory was instated as a legitimate, if contested, theory that explains the uses of security to legitimise policies, practices or legislation that would have been otherwise disputed (Neal, 2009, p.335).

However, securitisation is seldom celebrated, as the CS equates it to a normatively regressive process. It has the inherent problematical mindset of security with its perpetuation of threat-defence logic, and desecuritisation is encouraged (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p.29; Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 107). Once an issue has been securitised and the process legitimised to the extent of institutionalisation, entering a process of desecuritisation or evacuating the sphere of crisis-handling of the issue will be arduous (Jutila,

2006; Hansen, 2012). It is not facilitated by the lack of guidance on how it should be implemented or the lack of academic research on the subject. Nonetheless, it is defined as securitisation in reverse, with the referent issue returned to everyday politics under the aegis of democratic norms (Wæver, 1995). Still, desecuritisation entails a normative dilemma (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 105). Huysmans (1995) identified three desecuritisation pathways: objectivist, constructivist and deconstructivist. But the explanation of the desecuritisation process remained an arduous task. Hansen (2012) built upon it and proposed four tactical approaches: change through stabilisation, replacement, re-articulation and silencing. Following the lead of Paterson and Karyotis (2022, p.108), this dissertation will consider desecuritisation holistically as one of the contesting modes against security. Balzacq (2015) recognises four modes of contestation, each linked to various tactics and strategies: resistance, desecuritisation, emancipation and resilience. The mode of resistance is of particular interest for this research since it focuses on the persisting contests associated with the security agenda. “To resist is to deliver a counter-force” (Balzacq, 2015, p.13), which may be desecuritisation but may also refer to how resistance to security policies can produce other security policies.

Counter-securitisation is one such form of resistance. It was first developed by Stritzel and Chang (2015) and was meant to be used in the military sector, but it can adapt to other dynamics of society (Wæver, O. as seen in Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 106). Counter-securitisation participated in replacing the vision of securitisation as a decisive process with a vision of it as a competitive iterative one. Indeed, it was operationalised as a process wherein elite actors challenged the governmental security frame, or at least the dominant one, by implementing their own. This antagonistic process reverses core elements of the dominant frame but maintains the same referent object, effectively engaging in a “framing contest” (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 106). It questions *which* group is being defended, *who* has the authority to speak

for it, and *what* are the threatening phenomena (ibid). It is a battle of legitimacy and authority wherein securitisation is not a singular transformative act but a prolonged and brittle political game (Stritzel and Chang, 2015, p. 549). This action-reaction game implies securitising actors that sustainably try to legitimise their position and propose policies while continuously delegitimising the other actor and desecuritising their agenda (Stritzel and Chang, 2015, p. 552). While this process can be between the traditional securitising actors and the referent object that reverse the message, it can also be “framing contests within the host society” (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 109). Securitisation from below is a form of counter-securitisation and will be presented in the following section.

2.2 SECURITISATION FROM BELOW

The CS saw securitisation as a linear top-down intersubjective process where elite actors, having social capital and authority at their disposal, are using speech acts to obtain the favour of the audience and enact extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p.31-33). In contrast, securitisation from below requires ordinary citizens and activists – grassroots actors – to invest themselves in a warning campaign to alert communities and convince elites that society is under existential threat (Hammerstad, 2012, p.3). ‘Grassroots level’ are securitising actors like “community leaders, vigilante groups, local political actors and administrators, criminal networks and gang” (Hammerstad, 2012, p.6). These groups can become significant securitising actors even when facing resistance from the traditional securitising elites (ibid, p.7). To summarise, securitisation from below is a slow-going and chaotic process that was proven to be potentially dangerous for the state's stability and the referent object's human security (ibid). In its analytical grid, Hammerstad (2012, p.7) proposed the following measure of the degree of success for securitisation from below:

- ◇ “Weakly successful securitisation: Broad segments of the community feel threatened but do not have the power to influence political elites. The

securitisation can nevertheless be successful in the sense that actions take place at grassroots level (vigilantism, local action, etc.)

- ◇ Partially successful securitisation: Grassroots audiences accept the threat. But it depends on the particular political culture whether grassroots acceptance leads to actions in security mode – by grassroots actors themselves or eventually by governments.
- ◇ Successful securitisation: Accepted/reflected in popular perception and mood. Broad social support of the security elite’s claim for the need to instigate security policies to deal with the pronounced threat.”

Traditional elites are the significant audience for securitising actors from below; said elites often react once the securitising move becomes challenging to their authority (Hammerstad, 2012, p.22).

Therefore, the audience is one of the foundations of counter-securitisation and securitisation from below. Indeed, elites can perceive something as not being a threat or frame it in a particular way that will not be aligned with the frame attributed by the “grassroots level of securitisation” whose actors are part of the elites’ audience (Hammerstad, 2012, p.3). The securitisation process is fulfilled only if the audience accepts and integrates it (Watson, 2012, p.284). But an audience is diverse and plural (ibid). Acceptance from the audience is not automatic. As the audience is those the securitising actors try to convince (Wæver, 1995, 2000; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p.41), the legitimisation of securitising actor and the institutional support is part of an intersubjective process (Côté, 2016). Therefore, the securitising actor needs to conserve sufficient authority and legitimacy to be able to clearly define “for whom security becomes a consideration in relation to whom” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p.18); if not, it can become a crucial issue and open the door for desecuritisation and counter-securitisation. This can lead to clashes between parts of society and politics and result in securitisation attempts, led by disempowered marginalised groups, despite the elites’ attempt at framing the issue: this is what Hammerstad (2012, p.3) named a securitisation from below.

A discourse openly in opposition to the dominant narrative framing, trying to gather support and having consequences on the adhering group behaviour, such as violent acts, constitutes an attempt at securitisation from below (Beurskens, Creutziger and Miggelbrink, 2016, p. 174). Such competing discourse is often born from a reformulation of the identity as being the victim of a threat, under attack, without protection from the government (ibid). From these emotions and perceptions is born a discourse that can spread through multiple layers of society, forming a self-administered group that can forsake the rule of law and engage in competition with the state authority on the referent object due to a disbelief in the politics and the police (Hammerstad, 2012; Beurskens, Creutziger and Miggelbrink, 2016).

Securitisation from below has been linked with the concept of ontological security (Ejdus and Rečević, 2021, p. 29), which is the basic need of humans for predictability in the social order (Erikson, 1968; Laing, 2010). Its roots are in the confidence one has in the continuity of their relationships with others, along with daily routines (Ejdus and Rečević, 2021, p. 29). This enables the routinisation of “self-identity narrative that help in "creating a protective existential sphere where fundamental questions are no longer asked” (ibid). Ontological security falters under critical situations or disruption of the established routines (Giddens, 1979, p.124). On a contextualised individual level, the state provides the framework for stabilising routines and self-identities (Abulof, 2015; Krolikowski, 2008; and Marlow, 2002). But, the state is not the sole representative of ontological security, which can be found in other sub-groups, such as alliances (Greve, 2018). When polities face critical situations and routines are no longer sustained, ontological insecurity arises and contaminates the public discourse (Ejdus and Rečević, 2021, p. 31). This affects ontologically insecure individuals who initiate the spreading of existential questions in horizontal and vernacular networks. This interferes with the usual feedback loops, enables the emergence of anxiety, and can lead to a tipping point (ibid). It impacts the “conscious or unconscious exchanges of emotion within a

social environment” (Ross, 2014, p.1). These emotional contagions are not isolated as communities interact continuously; therefore, emerging interpretations of situations will meet, compete, and spread. A dramatic shift in behaviours and self-perception will follow in certain groups (Ejdus and Rečević, 2021, p. 31). Therefore, securitisation from below problematises collective identity, raises existential questions, and generalises anxiety.

Instead of classic speech acts, daily life is infiltrated. The securitising move is often propagated through rumours that circulate outside of established institutions (ibid) and tends to be supported by digital collective action (Benett and Segerberg, 2012). This vision of how securitisation from below spreads amongst layers is like Hammerstad’s (2012, p.24), who offered the insight that, in securitising moves from below, speech acts are not needed: other avenues of communication should be considered, like rumours. They are defined as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger, or potential threat and that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2007, p.13). Rumours are a symptom of beliefs and attitudes and can shape them considerably (DeClerque *et al.*, 1986). They can incite racial and ethnic tensions and can trigger riots (Knopf, 1995; Horowitz, 2001). Therefore, rumours represent the ideal tipping agent to create ontological insecurity from below and concurrent securitisation from below: spread to fend off anxieties, they unintentionally scale them up. Elites can then ignore or suppress the securitisation from below until it either fades or leads to a new tipping point (Ejdus and Rečević, 2021, p. 32).

2.3 SECURITISATION OF HUMAN AND/OR CHILD TRAFFICKING

There has scarcely been research on CT and securitisation, if any. This section will therefore focus on the larger umbrella term of THB.

“Central to the problem of policing THB is the difficulty in clearly identifying the threat that THB poses to a State” (Europol, 2003). The IOM (Laczkó and Thompson, 2000, p. 19) defines THB as the most imperilling form of irregular migration for the state due to an unrelenting complex scale growth associated with weapons, drugs and prostitution. THB, by gaining traction and visibility in the political field, has been placed on a security continuum, as defined by Bigo (1996, p.263), linking “illegal migration, drug trafficking, terrorism, and organised crime” (Aradau, 2004, p. 252). This security continuum exists at the intersection with a humanitarian discourse that focuses on victims and their rights; the discourse is reframed by the need to care for trafficked individuals (ibid, p. 253). They, along with the traffickers, are a source of insecurity. But victims are concomitantly rendered insecure themselves (ibid). Two approaches, one born from the EU’s security actors and the other from NGOs, are intertwined inside the governing body despite their antithetical clashing: a “politics of pity” and a “politics of threat” (ibid, p.254). The transformation of those immanent contradictions is related to the use of emotions in politics, which guide and limit policies and are transformed into governing technologies: victims call for sympathy and solidarity, offenders for impassibility (ibid, p.255). This approach has been criticised by social constructivists such as Lupton (1998, p.18), who claims emotions are shaped by social institutions and doubts their transformative influence. Yet, Boltanski (1999) reframes those objections as being strategy guidelines for the use of pity during governmental interventions. For said interventions to be successful, the subject ought to be disunited from the construction of danger (Connolly, 1999, p.129). Therefore, it can only consist of the non-dangerous (Aradau, 2004, p.259). Only those who answer “Who are you” with socially accepted innocence are deemed worthy of sympathy (Dozema, 2002, p.22). The efforts are redirected towards those responsible for the trafficking (Aradau, 2004, p.261). Those elements are reattached to the “politics of risks” by identifying those in society at higher risk of being victimised. Those at risk become mutations of

subjects of sympathy with embodiments of permanent potential danger (ibid, p.269). Measures are consequently upheld to support victims with their trauma while simultaneously limiting the possibility of dangerous behaviours and clear consequences if the border of risk is crossed (Aradau, 2004, p.274; Wilie, 2006, p.11).

This polarisation of TBH securitisation cleaves TBH as a threat to national and global security due to organised crime and illegal migration, and one against human rights and human security, with states positioning themselves between the two poles depending on their governing culture (Jackson, 2006, p.303; Buayairugsa, 2019, p.35; Yuen, 2019; Magugliani, 2018; Miller and Baumeister, 2013). For example, some Central Asia states, while having pushed aside the human rights aspect of the crime, have started securitisation THB on the security continuum of illegal migration, borders security and crime, with a state-centric vision (Kelly, 2005; Buayairugsa, 2019, p.33; Yuen, 2019), as it was done in the West (Jackson, 2006, p.305). Others in Central Asia framed it through the associated terrorism threats (ibid). In the region and worldwide, securitisation of THB has gained in salience due to the transboundary menace it represents, which affects national security (Bales, 2005, p.27). Nevertheless, securitisation on a global level has faltered, in part due to the ambivalence of Central Asia states, which are exposed to a security dichotomy: the adverse effects of THB are facing positive ones, such as work resources for countries with high poverty levels and, at times, direct revenue for the states (Jackson, 2006, p.309). Therefore, the global securitisation of THB has met two main obstacles: accordance in motivations between states and difficulty in identifying “real” versus “perceived threats” (Jackson, 2006, p.303). This latest point has been amplified by the difficulty in defining and observing THB due to its secrecy and adaptability, along with political sensitivity on the international level, resulting in challenges in the research and a lack of empirical studies (Hemming, 2008, p.2). It gave way to myths and

beliefs to resurface during the securitisation attempts, notably in the West, such as the white trade (Hemming, 2008, p.15) and the assimilation of THB with terrorism (Hemming, 2008, p.3-4). Some scholars, such as Wylie (2006, p.9), suggest that the targeting of migrants through policies oriented towards border security has left them further exposed to exploitation. She associates the state-centred reinforcement of borders with the failure to recognise the roots of migration – poverty – and the fact that most trafficked individuals are migrant workers, especially women and children. As they see their chance of legally entering a country lower, they become more susceptible to being exploited by traffickers (ibid, p.12). She further argues that the insecurity lived by the victims of trafficking grows exponentially as they come to fear not only their trafficker but the state as well (Wylie, 2006, p.14).

Finally, regarding CT specifically, the threats it represents, beyond organised crime and terrorism, have been highlighted as being their uses in commercial sexual entertainment, farm and domestic household work, plantation, and hard labour industries. In addition, they can be forcefully trained as child soldiers and consequently be exploited through hard labour and sex work for armed groups or forced marriage for girls (DOS, 2013, p.17). In its shape, the securitisation of CT has been following the lines of the one for THB, as children are often associated with women in the literature and policies (Buayairugsa, 2019; Magugliani, 2018; and Wylie, 2006).

2.4 DISCUSSION

The securitisation of CT, as a part of THB, is not new to national and international securitising actors. As Wylie (2016) has shown, it is often used as a further means to securitise organised crime, migration and terrorism; framing the existence of THB on a security continuum. But a peculiar characteristic of its securitisation is the use of emotions to facilitate the securitising move (Aradau, 2004): powerful affects, like pity or protective instincts, are used as

political tools to manoeuvre the audience's acceptance and to polarise the issue between the duty to aid victims and the risk the crime and by the extension the victims themselves represent to the state. Yet, little attention has been given to how such an emotion-charged subject could be used by actors external to the state.

The Covid crisis, an unprecedented event, represented a moment of ontological insecurity both for governments and their citizen. It opened the door for QAnon-related content to spread further and wider (O'Connor et al., 2020, p.46-53; Gallagher, Davey and Hart, 2020, p.9). Rumours, online and offline, started circulating and pushed forward theories close to the core of QAnon's creation, one of which regarding CT (Gallagher, Davey and Hart, 2020, p.12-16; O'Connor et al., 2020, p.18-24). The U.S. was the largest content-producing country (Gallagher, Davey and Hart, 2020, p.9). QAnon built on pre-existing distrust toward the government to increase it exponentially and build up a divide between individuals of the population sensitive to QAnon's narrative and the U.S. government (Conner and MacMurray, 2021). The present dissertation argues that such a context is adapted to further research the mechanism of securitisation from below and its empirical existence. It contains both a securitising stance from the traditional governmental actor, a grass-roots actor aiming to show the fault in this stance and to promote a new securitising move, and a referent object with plenty of controversies and potential emotional effects which could favour the adherence to the audience to the counter-securitisation attempt. It argues that QAnon engaged the U.S. government in a framing contest akin to an attempt at securitisation from below. The present research will add to the existing body of literature by building on the current findings to assess the QAnon/ U.S. government relationship through the prism of securitisation from below.

CHAPTER 3- RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

This chapter will establish the layout of the research design and the methods employed throughout the research. The underlying aim is to appraise how a non-state actor can attempt counter-securitisation through a bottom-up process. To do so, a fixed variable was chosen: CT. The reasoning behind such a choice and the case selection process will be explored. The research will assess, through the process of securitisation, how the State actor and the non-state actor engaged in parallel discursive narratives. Thereupon, the nexus of those narratives will be studied to gauge the potential existence of competition between the two actors and, by extension, the presence of a securitisation/counter-securitisation dynamic. This will be done through an analysis of the U.S.' securitisation of CT, which will be compared to QAnon's attempt at securitising the issue. This will culminate in assessing how both coexisting securitisation frames impact the other and their common environment, namely the U.S. and its population, by competing to assert a dominant narrative. Stemming from this assumption, it will, lastly, analyse how the parasitic nature of QAnon's counter-securitisation and the state-focused securitisation of the government negatively impact the object securitised, effectively instrumentalising it to an end.

Firstly, this section evaluates how the chosen research design fits the research question and its philosophical foundations. Secondly, it will present the specificities inciting the choice of the United States as the case study. Thirdly, it will detail the analytical procedure to establish the U.S.' securitisation of CT. Finally, it will explain how QAnon's rhetoric will be analysed and how it will be operationalised as a desecuritisation and potential counter-securitisation.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The present research will select an embedded qualitative single case study design. The research design was chosen with care by reason of the central research question: *How the United States government and QAnon have attempted to securitise child trafficking despite or by virtue of having integrated themselves into a competitive discursive process?* Answering this point will enable the author to assess whether an opposing narrative framing carried by a bottom-up process can give sufficient traction to a non-state actor to desecuritize the dominant top-down securitisation discourse, effectively derail governance, and undermine the rule of Law. This will drive the following discussion on how competitive discourses give way to competitive securitisation processes, both in materiality – narrations and framing – and in shape – ascending and descending –. The result of such a mechanism on the object on which securitisation is being established will also be discussed.

The most appropriate manner to breach this matter was assessed by following Yin's (2018) parameters. His categorisation of research designs specifies three criteria that ought to be met to select a case study design. A *how* or a *why* question, little or no control over the behavioural chain of events, and contemporary study focus instead of historical (Yin, 2018, p.9). The first requirement, the research question form, was acknowledged and respected. This research aims to explain how a certain continued behaviour – narrative framing – held by two different parties led to a specific result – competitive securitisation – within a limited context existing in one country. Therefore, the intrinsic explanatory nature of a how question was favoured as the suitable conductor for the research's goal. Regarding the second criterion, few elements were controllable by the researcher. Most of the events studied had already happened, and their circumstances were fully developed. As for the more recent developments to the case, such as the resurgence of QAnon, the researcher had no means nor intentions of getting involved nor interfering with the natural

progression of current affairs. The only control the researcher used was by observing the unfolding of events from the beginning of the research in December 2021 until now, June 2023. Therefore, the second criterion is also fulfilled. The reader can be, in turn, safely reinforced in the knowledge that embracing historical or archival analysis as the research design would have been ill-advised. Contemporary is a “fluid rendition of the recent past and the present” (Yin, 2018, p.12). It is safely assumed that the recurrent egregious behaviours of QAnon followers and the enduring narrative of the movement constitute past and present events with a lasting effect on the American society and government, which is worth studying. As all three abovementioned criteria are met, the present research's most fitting approach is a case study research design.

Finally, extensive considerations were given as to whether this research fitted better an embedded single case study or a multiple case study. A case study design is a “systematic inquiry into an event or a *set of related events* which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest” (Bromley, 1990, p.299). Based on this definition, an embedded single case study was deemed the most adequate. Indeed, the U.S. was regarded as a single case study because the counternarrative actor, the one virulently and pervasively contesting the dominant narrative, QAnon, was born and bred in the United States. While it has spread to other countries and been adapted to their specificities, QAnon was primarily an American creation that reached a height of influence seldom seen before for a conspiracy theory. This born-and-bred aspect of the movement and its symbiotic relation with the U.S. government and other social layers are crucial for fully understanding the case. It is the ideal ground for the research question to be expanded upon and answered comprehensively. The present research is structured around three axes: the securitisation discourse of CT by the U.S. government, the securitisation discourse of QAnon, and the competitive nexus between the two discourses. These axes embody different subunits,

enabling the researcher to focus alternatively on diverse salient aspects within one more significant case (Scholz and Tietje, 2002, p.9-10).

Concerning the philosophical underpinnings, case study research is a convoluted definitory case. When employing a case study design, various authors have argued in favour of a certain degree of malleability regarding the adopted philosophical stances (Ragin, 2013; Takahashi and Araujo, 2020, p.103). Case study research design is depicted as an all-encompassing mode of inquiry, allowing it to accommodate most epistemological positions (Yin, 2018, p.16). When evaluating the role of case research, scholars have taken to constructivist and postpositivist stances. Amongst those scholars, Stake (2005) adopted constructivism and Yin (2018) postpositivism. The former is of interest for the present research. Indeed, the anti-foundationalist ontological position (Boblin *et al.*, 2013, p.1269) asserts the belief that one's vision of the world is socially constructed and unambiguously influenced by one's role in the said world (Marsh and Furlong, 2002, p.19). Consequently, constructivist researchers declare reality to be subjective and constructed. They strive to capture how various subjects can affect and enlighten the studied topic (Yin, 2018, p.16). The central topic of the present research is securitisation. Securitisation is, as its creators explicitly defined it, a social construction of security shaped alongside and by society's needs (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p.24).

Case study research has often been subjected to concerns. Experienced scholars questioned its rigorousness, especially compared to experimental research (Seuring, 2008, p.128). To determine whether a study is of outstanding quality, four elements must be inquired while designing and conducting the research: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability (Yin, 2018, p.42).

Construct validity demands the elaboration of a valid operational set of measures enabling the establishment of a verifiable chain of evidence (Takahashi and Araujo, 2020, p.107). This work will fulfil this requirement by relying on a broad pool of sources of evidence and critical references to published studies. Internal validity pertains to the nature of the relationships between the elements of the research and their evaluation to determine whether they are spurious or causal. This element is primordial for the present research, as the single case study is not exploratory but explanatory (Yin, 2018, p.45). The internal validity of the present research is expected to adhere substantially to high-quality standards as it will assess how one referent variable can be not only included in multiple securitisations attempts but how, consequently, those attempts can collide and embed themselves in a competitive synergy affecting the rule of law and the referent variable. In addition, qualitative and quantitative studies have shown the causal relationship between QAnon's spread of its misinformed narrative and increased governmental distrust, as will be examined in Chapter 4. The present research might encounter a relevant obstacle in the form of external validity. External validity is the degree to which a study renders the generalisation of its results possible, hence producing results that can be implemented beyond a single case analysis. Yin defines such occurrence as "the opportunity to shed empirical light on some theoretical concept" (2018, p.38); nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the present research will most likely suffer from low generalisability. Further elaboration on this issue will be conducted in the limitations section. Finally, reliability, the last requirement, is "the extent to which measurements are repeatable" (Drost, 2011, p.105). Reliable studies allow fellow researchers to track the research steps and elicit the same findings upon retracing them and applying the same procedures as the original work. Regarding case study research, Yin (2018, p.46) denotes that such procedures signify enabling external researchers to study the same case repeatedly and not solely to replicate the same findings by analysing another case. For this study to

guarantee reliability, the following sections will detail why the case was chosen and the methods that will be adopted to answer the research question.

3.2 CASE SELECTION

The United States embodies the perfect biome containing all the elements constructing the present research: old roots in anti-trafficking laws with the ensuing securitisation discourses cohabiting with the soil that saw QAnon grow.

The United States' long-standing anti-trafficking position is interwoven with the 13th Amendment of its Constitution, which barred slavery in 1865 (U.S. DoJ, 2023). The government's interest in the subject rose again with the Mann Act in 1910 (History Editors, 2020). It appears as if the U.S. population has had an interest in THB: Presidential interventions on the subject started as early as 1998, which was swiftly followed by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000 (U.S. DOJ, 2023) and by some States' initiatives such the State of Washington's first law in that regard in 2003 (NCSL, 2020). Federal involvement was cemented in the following decades, with The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (TVPRA, 2008), for example, along with stronger collaboration with foreign actors to classify THB as not only a national threat but also a global one (Bush, 2003). Therefore, the present research will defend the idea that the U.S. government has constructed a grounded narration around what THB is and how it threatens the security of the Nation. Yet, despite decades of presidential narrative, the country has been influenced by a counter-narrative (Buntain, Barlow and Johns, 2022; Sommer, 2023). This anti-securitisation rhetoric will be scrutinised through the criteria characterising successful securitisation processes.

The U.S. invested \$87 million in 2021 to combat THB and help the victims (U.S. DoJ, 2021), which was increased to \$90 million in 2022 (U.S.

DoJ, 2022). Overall, the American budget for anti-trafficking has grown exponentially since 2011 (Office for Victims of Crime, 2022). The money invested in anti-trafficking policies is greater than the UN's budget of \$9 million (UN, 2022) and the European Union's budget of €35 million from 2014 to 2020 and its €13 million provision for 2022 (European Commission, 2022). Therefore, the U.S. funding geared towards prevention, prosecution, protection and victims' aid is comparable to no other. These investments have been promoted through speech interventions from securitising actors with the legitimacy and authority to frame the subject. Despite that, a narration claims that Trump became president because he could no longer stomach evil politicians being at the root of "children being kidnapped, drugged, and raped while leaders/law enforcement of the world turn a blind eye" (Q, 2017, No.149467638) has gained millions of loyal followers throughout the country (Russonello, 2021).

There appears to be an evident mismatch between what the government of the U.S. has tried to construct as a frame surrounding THB and CT—definition, source of the threat, governmental investment, policies and special measures – and the narratives a consequent part of the population adheres to. The reasons such a divide engrained itself in American society are worth exploring. The present dissertation will strive to identify the mechanism of securitisation upheld by QAnon based on the U.S. government's to evaluate the presence, or absence, of a competitive securitisation from below trying to remodel the American field of politics and security.

3.3 METHODS OF ANALYSIS

The present dissertation will be divided into three analytical sections: proving the securitisation and counter-securitisation, analysing their dynamics, and determining their consequences on the object securitised. To verify the assumption of competitive securitisation, the first procedural step in the analysis

chapter will be to evaluate whether and how securitisation did happen. The securitisation attempts of the U.S. government will be studied through each president's intervention since the first appearance of CT in speech acts. From this depiction, a governmental overarching securitisation tendency will be inferred with presidential fluctuation of focus points in the narrative and subsequent outcomes. This will enable this research to go beyond the fractures of presidential governance to delve truly into state governance and national narrative without minimising the impact of each presidential term. The same approach will be used to assess the measures taken. The operationalisation of securitisation theory will enable this by isolating its three main elements and gauging their presence. The same logic will be established to study QAnon's attempts and outcomes. For both the operationalisation of securitisation and desecuritisation/counter-securitisation, the media coverage of the attempts was bountiful, which ensured that all relevant speeches, oral or written, were accrued through archival search. Whilst this does not ensure exhaustivity, the elements not found are to be considered obscure in nature with little, or peripheral, impact on the framing dispute surrounding CT in the U.S. between the government and QAnon. This approach favours analytical rigour and fairness (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 100), as it is "better to have a limited set of texts and a complete representation of securitisation instances than a large set from which the authors pick at liberty" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 178). In total, 114 documents were analysed for the U.S. approach, and 39 were selected as genuinely relevant to the case. For QAnon, 500 drops were analysed. Therefore, the two different discourses will be defined through this research before being compared and contextualised to create an interwoven frame. Finally, the rapport between the securitisation and the counter-securitisation will be studied and placed in the previously created frame to analyse their consequence on each other and the nature of their relationship.

Chapter 5 will address the competitive securitisation and the securitised objects' position in narratives and defend the idea that those are instrumentalised within an overarching political or social intent and not out of genuine concern for the afflicted area. Chapter 6 will discuss the competitive securitisation process, especially regarding the two approaches studied here: top-down and from below. Bottom-up securitisation remains understudied, whereas this author argues that in the age of social media, fast pace and far-reaching communication, and political mistrust, it may become more prominent.

3.3.1 OPERATIONALISING SECURITISATION

As exhibited in Chapter 2, a securitisation process is shaped by three elements that need to coexist: the identification of an existential threat through speech act; the audience's acceptance of the threat along with the measures promoted by the securitising actor; and the adoption of extraordinary measures as a response to the existence of the threat (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Empirical analyses have shown that the securitisation process does not exist in a bubble separated from the political climate but is embedded in the overarching prolonged political axis established by the securitising agent through “multiple iterative, contextually contingent interactions between actor(s) and audience(s) regarding a single issue over time” (Côté, 2016: p. 552). Furthermore, the three criteria occurrence is not needed in this sequence as the process is fluid. Speech acts can occur before or after the adoption of extraordinary measures, and the acceptance by the audience is confirmed instantly or further along the process. Therefore, the success of securitisation relies on the coexistence of the three elements and for them to be implemented in a shared construction of security meanings through deliberative repetitions.

3.3.1.1 The securitising move constructing a threat

To evaluate whether the first condition occurred within the securitisation process, its framework will be studied through the presidential speeches or of

official representatives of the president, focusing on TBH and CT. Indeed, speech acts' relevance is prevalent in the securitisation theory (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998), and discourse analysis is its "obvious method" of study (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 176). No other method ensures as effectively the understanding of language in its function beyond its form or structure itself (Brown and Yule, 1983; Potter, 2004, p.610). The function of language represents one of the main focuses of securitisation theory. Furthermore, discourse analysis is deemed the most appropriate approach due to the tendency of human beings to attempt persuasion not always in an explicit manner but through less direct ways to convey requests along with the attribution of specific nuances to their words (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p.32). This aligns with the unnecessary of explicitly uttering the term "security" to proceed with constructing a securitisation process (Kamradt-Scott and McInnes, 2012, p.96). One phenomenon can be explicated and justified in various ways; it relates to the reader's responsibility to extract the true meaning of the speech by analysing it in its original context through discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, p.33-5).

To ensure the proper explanation of the unexplicit meaning and to isolate the speaker's real intentions, three questions will guide the analysis:

- ◇ "What is this discourse doing?
- ◇ How is this discourse constructed to make this happen?
- ◇ What resources are available to perform this activity?" (Potter, 2004, p.610)

This procedure will enable the interpretation of how President Clinton to President Biden, from their position of authority, could construct CT and THB as security issues. Patterns in the President's speeches will be identified to dress the picture of the depiction of the issue as a threat to national security. To do so, the researcher will rely on intratextual analysis guidelines derived from Balzacq (2010, p.43).

- ◇ “What kind of action [does the] text want to achieve (assertive, commissive, expressive, directive, or declarative)? What representations are created by this or that particular action? What are the communicative purposes and domains of relevance of the text?”
- ◇ Which heuristic artefacts are favoured, for which meanings (metaphors, pictures, emotions, analogies, and so forth)? What “map” of world politics does it present?
- ◇ What kinds of interactions are generated?”

To assess the securitisation of CT, the period will elapse from the first mention of TBH and CT by a president until the current president. This will enable the researcher to study the alteration of the narrative framing within the government while highlighting the overarching governmental narrative beyond presidential terms, to better, in the subsequent step, compare it to QAnon’s narrative. To find the interventions related to securitisation, the archives of each president were analysed through keywords such as “human trafficking”, “girl”, “modern slavery”, and “child trafficking”. Then, each president’s name associated with the same keywords was looked at on search engines. The analysed speech acts for each president will be the following:

President Clinton, with the first mention of TBH, including CT, in US politics “*Memorandum on Steps To Combat Violence Against Women and Trafficking in Women and Girls*” on March 11, 1998; then “*Statement by the president on illegal child trafficking through adoption*” on October 6, 2000; and, finally, “*Statement on Signing the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000*” on October 28, 2000.

President Bush’s “*President Bush Addresses United Nations General Assembly*” on September 23, 2003, which constitutes the principal speech act and the first genuine attempt at a more effective securitisation; then “*President Announces Initiatives to Combat Human Trafficking at first National Training Conference to combat human trafficking*” on July 16, 2004; “*President Signs H.R. 972, Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act*” on January 10, 2006; and, finally, “*President Signs H.R. 4472, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006*” on July 27, 2006.

President Obama's Presidential Proclamations "*National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2011*" on December 31, 2010; "*National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2012*" on December 31, 2011; "*National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2013*" on December 31, 2012; "*National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2014*" on December 31, 2013; "*National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2015*" on December 31, 2014; "*National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month 2017*" on December 28, 2016; "*Remarks by President Obama in Town Hall with Young Leaders of the UK*" on April 23, 2016; "*Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Lee of Singapore in Joint Press Conference*" on August 2, 2016; "*Press Conference by President Obama, Washington Convention Center*" on April 1, 2016 and, finally, "*Remarks by the President to the Clinton Global Initiative*" on September 25, 2012 which was one of the pillars of the President discourse and subsequent speech acts.

President Trump's "*Executive Order on Combating Human Trafficking and Online Child Exploitation in the United States*" on January 31, 2020; "*Trump Signs Law Aimed at Curbing Sex Trafficking*" on April 11, 2018; "*Trump signs order to combat human trafficking*" on January 31, 2020; "*President Trump Delivers Remarks on Human Trafficking*" on October 11, 2018; "*Remarks by President Trump After Briefing with Joint Interagency Task Force-South, NORTHCOM, and SOUTHCOM*" on April 19, 2018; "*Remarks by President Trump to Law Enforcement Officials on MS-13*" on July 28, 2017; "*Remarks by President Trump at Signing Ceremony for S. 756, the "FIRST STEP Act of 2018" and H.R. 6964, the "Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018"*" on December 21, 2018; "*Remarks by President Trump After Meeting with Congressional Leadership on Border Security*" on January 4, 2019; "*Remarks by President Trump in Signing Ceremony for S. 1862, the "Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act"*" on January 9, 2019; "*Remarks by President Trump in Meeting on Human Trafficking on the Southern Border*" on February

1, 2019; “*President Donald J. Trump Proclaims January 2018 as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month*” on December 29, 2017; “*Presidential Proclamation on National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, 2019*” on December 31, 2018; “*Proclamation on National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, 2020*” on December 31, 2019; “*Proclamation on National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, 2021*” on December 31, 2020; and finally, one of his last speech act on the subject with the “*Proclamation on National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, 2022*” on December 31, 2021. Three videos of his utterances were also looked at: *President Trump Delivers Remarks on Human Trafficking* on October 11, 2018 (C-SPAN); *Trump Signs Law Aimed at Curbing Sex Trafficking* on April 11, 2018 (Associated Press); and *Trump Signs Law Aimed at Curbing Sex Trafficking* on January 31, 2020 (CNBC Television).

President Biden’s “*Remarks by Vice President Harris at the President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons*” on January 25, 2022; “*A Proclamation on National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, 2022*” on December 30, 2022; and, finally, the most recent speech “*A Proclamation on National Human Trafficking Prevention Month, 2023*” on December 30, 2022.

3.3.1.2 Audience acceptance and adoption of extraordinary measures

The securitisation theory innovated the security field by promoting the idea that threats are constructed through intersubjective mechanisms between securitising actors, individuals or groups with the social authority to enunciate security speeches, and the audience (Côté, 2014, p. 541). Indeed, the securitisation’s creators explained the intersubjective nature of the theory as threats to society being defined “among the subjects” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 31). The definition of intersubjectivity has caused debates among scholars experienced in securitisation theory and the audience’s range of

action. One such debate is how the relationship between said theory and the concept of intersubjectivity has impacted the role given to the audience, which was blurred further through conflicting representation and empirical and theoretical analysis. In its conceptualisation of the audience, the present research will build on Côté's (2016) work. It will reject the claim that the audience is "unimportant or irrelevant to the production of security meaning" (Côté, 2016, p. 554) and will instead frame it "as an active agent within an iterative and deliberative securitisation process" (ibid). To do so, the present research will, to the best of its ability and within the scope of this work, pay great attention to the following elements when researching and analysing the audience's involvement:

- ◇ Were there elements the audience disagreed with during the securitising move?
- ◇ Did the audience's actions modify the securitisation process outcomes? Was their reaction considered by the securitising actor?
- ◇ Was the audience's influence over the securitisation process impacted by:
 - the use of power relative to the securitising actor (Hayes, 2013; Balzacq, 2005) and their perceived legitimacy.
 - level of perceived knowledge (Curley and Herington, 2011) and who the audience sees as holding or gatekeeping such knowledge.
 - access to information (Bright, 2012; Vuori, 2008; Collins, 2005): the audience's level of knowledge of what goes behind the political scene and the intent and motivations behind the securitisation.
 - unity (Hayes, 2012; Hughes, 2007; Roe, 2008): if the audience is consolidated into one community.

- intensity of engagement (Collins, 2005; Wilkinson, 2007): the level of the audience's investment in the perceived threat and their collective construction of it.

The acceptance and reception of the audience will be assessed through university-led polls, reactions to the audience during videos of speech acts, the renewed presence of the mention of THB in party platforms as the continued and sustained presence of the subject in political discourses framing it a security issue and national threat pertain to the non-rejection of its securitisation by the audience. Finally, the online sources explicitly referring to the American public reaction to THB and to CT will be analysed.

To assess whether the third criterion of securitisation was met, the implementation of specific laws, acts and task forces will be studied. They will be shown parallel to the legitimate securitising actors' – the successive Presidents – framing of the subject. Fiscal reports and indications from the State Department and the DOJ over the same period will be taken into consideration. They will be used to corroborate the general outcomes of the securitisation attempt and the extraordinariness of the responses. Conclusions will be drawn from the ensemble of data collected.

3.3.2 OPERATIONALISING DESECURITISATION/COUNTER-SECURITISATION

This section explores the opposite approach to securitisation. To establish a proper parallel, it will follow the same criteria and the same methods described in the previous paragraphs. This decision was founded on the leeway associated with empirical research of desecuritisation/counter-securitisation due to restricted existing literature, as mentioned in Chapter 2. To follow through with the analysis, the present research will echo the research of Paterson and Karyotis (2022). To draw parallels and study how migration was subjected to securitisation and counter-securitisation in UK society, the authors applied the same analysis method as was done for the securitisation processes to the

presupposed counter-securitisation. The authors argue that desecuritisation is one manner of contesting security which can take the shape of resistance, hence the application of a counterforce. One such counterforce can take the form of counter-securitisation, which uses speech acts in a battle over legitimacy (p. 108). Therefore, using the same parameters as securitisation is deemed appropriate.

3.3.2.1 The securitising move constructing a threat

As seen earlier and as defined by the CS, discourse analysis is the evident method to study security. The CS pushes aside quantitative technics and convoluted linguistics in favour of a straightforward technique: reading the speech in search of arguments “that take the rhetorical and logical form defined here as security” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 177). Regarding the sources used, the CS practical approach to not focus on obscure texts was followed (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p. 177).

According to the CS, elite interventions directed towards large audiences tend to be analysed (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 110), and such was the method used in the analysis of the U.S. government securitisation attempt with the study of presidential speeches. But this is where the present research stumbled upon a challenge. QAnon’s speech acts have the particularity of embracing a shape that differs widely from the government’s ones. Indeed, in the case of the “Q drops”, establishing narrative purposes relies principally on leading questions presenting as messages to be deciphered (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, p. 22; Sommer, 2023, p. 13). As for the drops themselves, thousands of them were posted on 4chan, and they never ceased to increase when changing platforms – 8chan, 8kun – (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, p. 21). Two of the criteria of the CS method were consequently easily identifiable. Firstly, all of Q’s interventions targeted a large audience, as the audience from internet posts can reach millions of people. In fact, in 2022, 4chan had 11 million

monthly American visitors and 22 million global ones (Smith, 2023), while 8kun visitors are estimated to be around 500 000 monthly (Greengard, 2023). And Qanon's followers constructed their debate room through other wide-reaching media outlets such as Youtube, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, and Telegram (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, p. 22). Secondly, the prominent elite actor pushing forth the security discourse was Q, as he was the one at the origin of the movement (Sommer, 2023, p. 18). Masculine pronouns will be used to refer to Q, as most of the research on Q's identity has focused on male individuals, and the latest results point towards two men being behind Q's creation (Binder, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 2022). Other actors, often influencers prior to QAnon's birth, along with some who became influencers through spreading Q's narration, could be considered elite actors. However, due to the plethora of raw data available regarding QAnon's discourse, the present research has decided to focus solely on Q's drops. While the presence of other actors will be studied along with the strategies used to further spread the narration and inquire about the level of organisation within a seemingly decentralised and disorganised movement, such inquiry will be implemented later in Chapter 4. The present research was comforted in this approach by Hammerstad's (2012, p.24) and Ejodus and Rečević (2021, p. 32), who found that securitisation from below seldomly, if ever, relies on speech acts. Instead, it uses means such as non-verbal acts and rumours supported by online communities.

The discourse analysis per se will henceforth be conducted by reading the data comprised on the website QAlerts (<https://qalerts.app/>) and the non-securitised dataset of it (<https://qalerts.app/data/json/posts.json>) and on the 4chan archives on the politically incorrect thread where Q's messages started (<https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/148136485/#148143562>). The research

will also refer to the Q drop dataset¹ created by Q's followers, which references posts from October 2017 until October 2020. This dataset was found in Tian's (2021) chronology and word clouds analysis. Tian found the dataset on the image board of 8kun; the present research confirmed this claim. This dataset led to another one (<https://www.qanon.pub/>) that was also considered during the analysis. Through those primary sources, keywords such as "child", "children", "traffic", "human trafficking", "pedophile", "pedo", "sex", "child sex trafficking", "evil", "cabal", "child trafficking ring" were looked for. Once Q's interventions were selected, the same analysis method used for the U.S. government was applied. Over 500 hundred posts were analysed before pinpointing 87 posts related to children, 29 posts to trafficking, and 23 posts to paedophilia that were assuredly written by Q.

3.3.2.2 Audience acceptance and adoption of extraordinary measures

The audience acceptance of the counter-securitisation of QAnon will be measured and studied through documents relating to the number of followers variation since the creation of QAnon to this day, as well as the credence level of QAnon narration in the general American population. Such documentation includes polls, statistics, and datasets.

The central pillar to study the third criterion requirement will be the criminal or unlawful acts perpetrated in the movement's name. Indeed, as QAnon is not an official organisation or a government, there are no reports or fiscal declarations to consult to establish variation in behaviour. The present research asserts that the "take action" policy promoted by Q and amplified by its supporters constitutes a deviation from normal behaviours and, therefore, represents extraordinary measures and securitisation outcomes. The overall

¹ The dataset link was placed in the notes due to its length :
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11MhW-P-9e19dg_cTjutwtliQGMfL8jfH3SOaLZSBV2g/edit#gid=1596710080

success of the securitisation move from below will be analysed using Hammerstad's (2012, p.7) analytical grid presented in Chapter 2.

3.4 METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL REFLECTIONS: CHALLENGES AND LIMITATION

The present research was faced with two main challenges. First, few speech acts and news articles refer directly to CT. Indeed, CT legally falls under the umbrella of THB; the two concepts' data tend to be deeply intertwined. Therefore, the researcher took the executive decision to analyse results for the keywords "child trafficking" and "human trafficking" when looking through sources. From this point on, the use of the term THB will always comprise CT unless specified otherwise. The second challenge was the range of available documents to gauge audience reaction to the U.S. government's securitisation of CT and THB. No national polls were found. The researcher recognises the limitations of such means of study as lacking in statistical data and, therefore, affecting the accuracy of the upcoming analysis. The choice to pursue this research nonetheless was erected on the overall social consensus on CT and on the research's entrenched belief that not pursuing the research would be detrimental to the nascent studies on bottom-up securitisation.

Methodological limitations of this dissertation entail the use of a case study design. Indeed, non-positivist research tends to be more criticised (Takahashi and Araujo, 2020, p. 107), especially the inherent limitation of single-case studies' generalisation capacity. Nevertheless, the research explicitly addressed that its goal lies not in elaborating conclusive results applicable to populations or contexts; rather, it expands on an existing theory by producing an analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018, p. 20). Another related issue is that the U.S. has been led by different personalities ever since the first denomination of THB as a security issue. The personality of each of those individuals does not equate to one of the other: those variations can make outlining a common policy direction within the same state appear unachievable

(see Caprara and Vecchione, 2013; Gerber *et al.*, 2010). But personal traits cannot be assessed outside of its broader governance context. Indeed, the options available to the Presidents exist within a limited system characterised by checks and balances. Admittedly, the executive branch dominates the decision-making process relating to national security. Still, the other branches of government and the entirety of the bureaucratic structure construct and maintain a brake on the leeway of its actions (Deeks, 2016, p.68-9). Presidential decisions will further be constricted and influenced by the complexity and layered nature of the American system (Edelson, 2016). The main objective of the present research is to determine whether concurrent discourses of securitisation of the same object are engaged in a competition or are happening solely simultaneously. As much as this is the highlighted goal, the present study forasmuch remains embedded in a research process aiming to produce significant results that could serve as guidelines for this resurging pattern once suitably adapted to the substituted context. Yin (2018, p.21) highlights this as an advantage of case study research: such a design permits not only to verify whether something works but also how it does.

Pertaining to the ethical aspects of this research, a high standard was ensured using secondary and tertiary sources: no human participation was required to collect data. While Q's drops could be considered personal data, they have been gathered and analysed as speech acts. Regarding the reaction of the population to Q's posts and narration, these were extracted from primary and secondary sources. This was due to the ban of QAnon from most online media platforms and as part of a process to simplify and accelerate data collection. Consequently, no ethical approval was needed for this research. Nonetheless, additional potential biases could arise belonging to the researcher. A data collection bias has been consciously averted by trying to incorporate varied information and resources which would go against the initial statement to confirm its veracity. The researcher strived to avoid a design bias by

meticulously and attentively planning the research in accordance with well-established academic standards, as presented earlier. Nevertheless, the underlying motivation of the research – providing an empirical argument proving that a competitive securitisation was installed in the U.S. between a governing actor and a decentralised one – means that a confirmative bias cannot be completely ruled out. To counterbalance this, the researcher actively and repeatedly examined the design and methods to ensure a rigorous analysis.

CHAPTER 4- THE SECURITISATION OF CHILD TRAFFICKING: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The CS has expounded on securitisation, but its concept can be briefly summarised as the presentation to an audience of an issue defined as “an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure” (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998, p.24). The utterance of an issue as a high-priority threat is crucial for a securitisation move. Behind such a move lies the justification that if not handled swiftly, the issue could endanger the nation's survival to the point of rendering anything else completely irrelevant, as chances to respond to other situations would be eliminated unless the first issue is settled. Therefore, once claimed as a security matter, the issue is removed from the non-politicised or publicly politicised management sphere it belonged to. The standard hierarchy of procedures has been overridden in the name of security: the securitising actor can adopt extraordinary measures to deal with it (ibid).

Objectively speaking, beyond the risk of nuclear annihilation that nourished the politics of the Cold War, most securitised contemporary threats do not attain the original meaning of an *existential* level of danger (McInnes and Lee, 2006; Kamradt-Scott and McInnes, 2012). Research suggests that the threshold would be more realistic and accurate if threats were defined as *extreme* or *exceptional* (Kamradt-Scott and McInnes, 2012, p.97-9). This would ensure that the three criteria defining securitisation endure as valid, enabling the securitisation process to remain successful in the post-Cold War era with a slightly adapted threshold of threat recognition.

This chapter will analyse data to verify the validity of the starting assumption enounced in this dissertation. First, it will use document analysis and discourse analysis to present QAnon's use of CT in its narrative to create a discourse opposing the U.S. government. Then, using the securitisation theory methodology, it will first employ discourse analysis and document analysis to assess whether securitisation attempts of CT were made by the U.S. government and by QAnon and to gauge whether they were successful. Then, the two equivalent analyses will be used to establish whether competing securitisation processes exist in the U.S. Lastly, it will assess the consequences of the securitisation attempts on CT.

4.1 CHILD TRAFFICKING: A HOOK

This section will provide an overview of CT to understand how it has been used as a hook to draw in more QAnon's followers and incite them to forfeit the rule of Law.

Relationships exist within a framework of ideology (Howitt, 2002, p. 222). The degree to which a relationship will be deemed inappropriate often comes from the social and ideological frame of such a relationship (ibid)². Paedophiles' ideological framing of their sexual contact with children has been excluded from social narratives (ibid, p. 223). Deemed as offensive to the majority, they are heavily sanctioned and silenced (ibid). The rationalisation of paedophiles is beyond the scope of this research and will not be expanded upon. Nonetheless, this social exclusion of such a narrative has led to a profound lack of knowledge regarding the mechanism of paedophilia and its practitioners, both in academic circles and in public ones (ibid, p. 222). This lack of understanding³

² Due to the emotionally charged subject that is child abuse, the researcher would like to specify in this note that child abuse is in no way condoned by this research.

³ Understanding is here understood in its scientific form of breaking down a phenomenon to have access to its mechanism through the use of scientific knowledge and empathy, not as a form of condoning sympathy.

has fed the general hatred of paedophiles (Howitt, 2002, p. 225-6). It is associated with fear, leading to rejection, harassment, victimisation and discrimination of the offender by members of a community wherein that member resides (Tewksbury, 2005, p. 68). Most of the reactions to sex offenders are based on popular beliefs that lack substance (Quinn, Forsyth and Mullen-Quinn, 2004). They are consequences of emotional reactions and myths while lacking research and facts (Tewksbury, 2005, p. 68). Such phenomenon applies to QAnon's community, and it serves as one of the pillars of understanding the level of adoption of QAnon's narrative. Indeed, the present research argues that QAnon has been using, consciously or unconsciously, CT as a hook to widen its audience and reel them into the movement and that the issue itself has been a tool to facilitate QAnon's followers forfeiting the rule of Law and resorting to violence.

Ever since child abuse rose to the surface and was deemed a national emergency, there has been a concurrent morbid attraction for the subject (McDonald, 2012, p. 586). Child sexual assault has gained a salience unfathomable before, a symptom of a cultural fascination (Kincaid, 1998, p.6). The exploitation of a child's body is a tale that keeps on being consumed: not solely to try to solve the issue, but almost as a social compulsion for the horror and disgust they solicit (ibid). Furthermore, the public's conception of paedophiles as violent perpetrators who take children by force remains firmly anchored in the collective mind (Howitt, 2002, p. 233). This perception, much like the public tales regarding child trafficking, is misaligned with the broader empiric realities and more on par with the atypical case. Such misrepresentation and moral panic are not new to QAnon's cabal theory: satanic panic and the sexual trafficking of children and/or their ritual desecration have been a recurring theme in American society since the 1980s (Breland, 2019; Vrzal, 2020; Kaplan, 2021; Argentino, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Soto-Vásquez and Sánchez-Santos, 2022) and find some roots in social anxieties around the lack

of accountability those in power experience and the confirmed cases of child abuse committed by the elite (Breland, 2019). Other origins of paedophile conspiracies are found within the ontological insecurity associated with changes to the social order or reframing a political opponent and can be found as far back as the first century before Christ (ibid).

QAnon is an online conspiracy that appeared in 2017 and aggregated multiple other conspiracies, such as Pizzagate (Fitzgerald, 2022). It soon developed into a widespread network online and offline (ibid). Its affiliates participated in the 2021 U.S. Capitol Attack (Farivar, 2021) and, before, in violent rallies against the government (Suber and Ware, 2021). The movement has been said to cause radicalising effects on par with those produced by jihadi groups (The Soufan Center, 2021). It has polarised narratives about the 6th January Capitol attack, spread anti-governmental sentiment and encouraged violent acts towards governmental bodies (ibid). And, at the core of its discourse reside CT.

Before QAnon, one such example of using public relations to child abuse – and by extension, CT – especially by painting the left as groomers and abusers, is the case of Anita Bryant, who portrayed sexual minorities as child abuse perpetrators to smother a campaign of civil right extension toward those minorities (Bjork-James, 2022). Such tactics were reprised in the following years. It has proven to be quite effective as it enables the discussion to reframe extremist movements as valorous protectors of the powerless: children. It transforms a political opponent into a moral enemy; it enables the demonisation of selected adversaries, which endanger the cornerstone of democracy (ibid). Political debate and choice are no longer perceived as fair, and the political process loses some of its legitimacy in the eye of those who partake in the demonisation. It serves to discredit any contestation to the upheld narrative and further cement the idea that all those who oppose the movement's growth and discourse are among the adversaries, anchoring deeper distrust to all those non-

in-group (Hannah, 2021). CT specifically has been used in such discourse as little information is made available due to the secrecy of the crime: it offers a data void that can easily be exaggerated and leveraged (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p.6). It is also one of the easiest ways to succeed in demonising opponents, as child abuse is deeply frowned upon (Breland, 2019).

Beyond political leverage, the use of CT in QAnon's advertisement has enabled surprising communities to integrate the movement. At the front of this phenomenon is the role of women. This occurrence has been researched in depth by Bloom and Moskalenko (2021) in *Pastels and Pedophiles: inside the mind of QAnon*, as well as by other researchers (North, 2020; Crawford and Argentino, 2021a, 2021b and 2021c; Bracewell, 2021). The researchers have shown that women have played a key role in disseminating QAnon's narrative because they felt compelled by a moral duty to ensure sufficient propagation of this 'knowledge' of child abuse which for many of them is the reason they started to adhere to the discourse. Pastel QAnon is an example of women getting involved in QAnon due to CT disinformation and then spreading credence in the movement through softer means – clean aesthetics and pre-existing spiritual and health-focused pages –. They reached new populations previously unfamiliar with QAnon and increased the target audience. This strategy was also supported by QAnon followers taking over #SaveTheChildren, first started by the eponymous NGO to spread awareness about myths and legends surrounding CT (Dickson, 2022; Buntain, Barlow and Johns, 2022). It used images of abused children – the children-in-need motif often used by charities and religious organisations – to mobilise the effects of fear and anger evoked by such graphic depictions while linking them with U.S. gender politics and social fears. This campaign became a visual medium recruitment campaign for QAnon (Buntain, Barlow and Johns, 2022, p.2) and a gateway for newcomers to be exposed to QAnon's discourse (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 2). This campaign started during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time of high volatility in U.S. politics and of

higher ontological insecurity (Dickson, 2022; Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021, p.93). Furthermore, the audience interacts more with the media used to convey these messages when a presumed paedophile is ‘exposed’ or named (Dickson, 2022), which appears to align with the previous findings (Tewksbury, 2005, p. 68): sexual offenders will induce high levels of emotions that tend to contribute to violence and harassment. Overall, QAnon’s narrative on CT has tapped into the human psychological need to belong to an in-group; it gives its proponents a sense of empowerment, a purpose, and a community (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2022, p.549). A community that encourages, legitimises, and justifies the use of violence (Amasaringam and Argentino, 2020).

4.2 THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT’S SECURITISATION DISCOURSE: A TOP-DOWN PROCESS

In this step of the analysis, the securitisation of CT by the U.S. government will be evaluated. The starting point will be the first presidential utterance on the subject, made by Clinton in 1998. Key points will be presented for each presidential term’s framing narrative, and continuity/changes will be notified before briefly giving a global governmental framing of the issue. The concept of security continuum exposed in the introduction will be central to the following analysis.

4.2.1 ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY AND THE SHAPE OF THE THREAT

The authority of the securitising actors has been established thanks to their position as Presidents of the U.S. or as their official representatives.

Clinton (1993-2001)

From his first address (Clinton, 1998), Clinton has associated CT with women’s rights. He associates “an issue of global importance” with “women and girls” and “Taliban”, demonstrating his will to intertwine trafficking with transnational crime and terrorism. CT is restricted to girls and is described as an

“international problem” with national ramifications, and while migration is not named per se, Clinton references women and girls coming to the U.S. hoping for a “decent job”. In this first-ever utterance on CT, the president links a politics of pity with a politics of security by engaging women and girls as victims that need to be cared for and defended against traffickers while calling for stricter and clearer legislation against traffickers, movements of humans, and fiscal fraud. In his second utterance (Clinton, 2000a), he specifically addresses the issue of CT concerning intercountry adoption: this framing will not be repeated by further presidents. His final utterance, during the creation of one of the central laws mitigating THB, the TVPA (Clinton, 2000b), integrates the notion of trafficking as an international “scourge” that requires international actors to take special measures to stop and overall “tougher sentences”. It incorporates the upcoming American anti-trafficking strategy and describes trafficking as a “global crime” with a special mention of “child sex trafficking”.

Therefore, Clinton engaged in a framing of CT centred around its sexual aspects and girls. His discourse presents victims as defenceless while opening the doors to a securitisation focused on transnational crime, international actors, fiscal fraud – and corruption – while advising for severe repression of the crime. But, while the threat is deemed important, it is not characterised as extreme.

Bush (2001-2009)

Bush's (2003) first address on THB was in front of the UN General Assembly, he opened the subject by talking about terrorists and their merciless attack on women and children. This could be a continuation of Clinton's earlier connection between THB and terrorism. But THB was not the focus during the section on terrorism, it was reprised later when it highlighted the sex trafficking of “girls” and children “as young as five” and linked it with organised crime. Importance was given to the monstrous nature of the crime against the most innocent members of society. The word “evil” was employed for the first time

to define TBH and CT. The U.S. was associated with a primordial role in fighting trafficking, and the focus remained on the sexual exploitation of children. Finally, the issue was deemed to “require urgent attention and moral clarity” and need “decisive action”. His following utterances kept the same notions: innocence and evil, the special role of the U.S. in its mitigation, organised crime, international actors, and, underlying but not named, migration. In 2004, Bush introduced his speech by mentioning the “innocent victims that have been brought here”, indirectly referencing migration. He went on to describe victims as being women and children before describing law enforcers as fighting “against evil” and doing God’s work, this notion was reprised in a subsequent speech where he referred to THB as a “perverse form of evil” and “unspeakable evil” (Bush, 2006a). Further emphasis was put on CT in association with innocence loss and the depravity of the traffickers. This appears aligned with the political instrumentalisation of emotions by calling on the pain of vulnerable individuals and swiftly following with reference to migration and organised crime. On domestic grounds, Bush talked about “aggressive law enforcement action” and about the U.S. being “on the hunt” while offering to the victim the “protection and generous heart of America”. Migration had an underlying presence. Bush introduced the word “pedophile” two times. He referenced Cuba, its authoritative regime and Castro’s pride in sex tourism and advocated a democratic Cuba where no child would have to finance a “failed revolution” through sex work, painting Cuba as a threat. He introduced new grants to law enforcement and victims. The American government was set apart as having a particular duty: THB is “an affront to the defining promise of our country” and a “shame to our country”; this argument was repeated in another speech (Bush, 2006a) and oriented toward the protection of children being an American duty in another (Bush, 2006b). This later utterance was oriented explicitly towards CT. It addressed online security and child pornography and focused attention on individual sex offenders instead of organised crime while intertwining CT with child abuse.

In summary, Bush's utterances have heightened the degree of threat of human and child trafficking, especially during his intervention in front of the UN General Assembly (Bush, 2003) and subsequently by insisting on the importance and the duty of American work and involvement in its mitigation. The vocabulary used to describe the measures taken is war-like and aggressive. Bush mentioned terrorism but did not focus on it, while migration was still placed in filigree thorough the speeches but not overtly named. CT used to justify American international interferences will be a recurrent theme with the following presidents. Child and human trafficking were securely framed in a duality of Evil vs God's work, and offenders moved to an out-group. Therefore, this research sustains that the true securitisation of CT started under Bush's presidency.

Obama (2009-2017)

Obama made more utterances about CT. In his presidential proclamations for national slavery and trafficking prevention month (Obama 2010, 2011, 2012b, 2013, 2014, and 2016b), Obama has had recurrent themes. He is the first president who regularly introduced THB victims as being more than women and children, deviating from the norm seen so far. He put less emphasis on children, especially on the sexual exploitation of children. This changed slightly in 2011 when he brought forth the notion of borders: he emphasised the victims as children but still gave weight to other populations. In 2010, he did not establish trafficking on a security continuum nor correlated to organised crime. He emphasised civil rights and how THB is a "horrific trade" but lessened the tone of emergency and the notion of extreme threat. He introduced the idea of linking anti-trafficking measures and defending human rights with the safeguarding of American national identity. In 2012, he escalated further the degree of importance of trafficking by naming it "one of the greatest human rights abuses of our time", and recommending domestic and international actions, along with victim support. More details are given

regarding the abuse endured by the victims “bought, sold, beaten and abused, locked”, and the vocabulary used employed more pathos “hidden in darkness”, “debasement of our common humanity”, and “erase modern form of slavery from the face of this earth”. The ligation of THB mitigation with national identity perdures along with victim support. In 2013, Obama introduced his proclamation by talking about children as child soldiers or “in brothels” and closed it by talking about them as well. He linked THB with organised crime for the first time and started employing bellicose vocabulary such as “combating” and “fight”. The role of the U.S. was emphasised and set apart, as the U.S. “is shining a light on the dark corners”. This tendency was reprised in 2014, when Obama described America as a “beacon of hope”. Migrants are overtly mentioned for the first time, while children are mentioned less but conclude the speech. The emphasis on national identity remains, while THB becomes a threat that “tears are our social fabric, debases our common humanity, and violates what we stand for as a country and a people”. In 2016, the same patterns remain: migrants, a tear in the social fabric, focus on victim help, mention of children but not insistently, and foreign campaigns. Domestic campaigns are expanded upon, along with measures to ensure the U.S. does not profit from forced labour, and Obama mentioned the special task forces and measures deployed to deal with the issue, presenting them as a success. In a press conference (Obama, 2016a), Obama grouped for the first-time THB with the threats of terrorism and criminal activity by designating them as crimes committed by international organisations. In a conference in Singapore (Obama, 2016c), he associates fighting THB with maintaining “security standards” and trade security. This idea was echoed in his speech to Young Leaders of the UK, where he emphasised the need to protect trade deals by erasing THB and child labour (Obama, 2016b). In his utterance to the Clinton Global Initiative (Obama, 2012a), Obama linked THB with global health standards and human rights. He emphasised CT and how “our children are not for sale”. Migrants were mentioned especially related to facilitating the obtention of visas to ensure

victims remain on American soil to prosecute traffickers. The threat of technology and its federal use are underlined. THB is described as an “injustice, an outrage”, and the dominant role of the U.S. is once again highlighted. International endeavours are insisted on. Traffickers are described as “predators”, warlike vocabulary is employed, and stricter measures against traffickers are supported. Obama discussed trade security and ensuring that no American money goes towards THB. THB is again designated as “one of the great human rights causes of our time”, against which the U.S. is leading the fight in accordance with God.

Obama brought a change to the securitising move. While he seemed to lessen the danger of the threat in his 2009 utterance, he raised it again in the following years. He oriented his move towards human security, human rights and trade security while calling upon the American identity as did his predecessors. International measures were supported, and international actors not fighting THB were highlighted. His mentions of migrations didn't encourage fear but pushed for legal migration, especially to promote prosecution. The notion of evil was dropped from his utterances, even if he mentioned the U.S. duty's affiliation with God's will.

Trump (2017-2021)

Trump has been the more prolific president in his utterances on THB. In his first utterance (Trump, 2017a), Trump introduced the notion that THB is worse now than ever before in history, which he reiterated numerous times (C-Span, 2018; Trump, 2018a, 2018b) and linked it directly with protection against migration and internet. In his first proclamation (Trump, 2017b), he described THB as a “horrific practice” and a “sickening crime” that plagues “innocent victims”, whereas he and his administration drive out “the darkness human traffickers cast upon our world”. The vocabulary used is grandiose, with slight religious references, which is only furthered by Trump bringing back the notion

of “evil”. He aligned THB with organised crime, health issues and, more lightly, migration, while maintaining the special role the U.S. holds in mitigating the issue. Whereas, when addressing the border interagency task force (Trump, 2018a), he sustained that there is a THB crisis and linked it with the necessity of having a wall to control migration. When speaking to the Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking, he brought forth the cyber threat aspect of THB. He reinforced the idea of it being a “horrible evil”. In his first proclamation (Trump, 2018c), he used bellicose vocabulary and pathos with terms such as “barbaric”, “combat”, “confront”, “abhorrence”, “fight”, “take aggressive action”, and “battle”. He also clearly stated that THB threatens “our Nation’s security, public health, and the rule of law”, which had never been expressed as explicitly by his predecessors, and continued saying so (2018c, 2020a, 2020d; CNBC Television, 2020). He associated THB with organised crime, cyberthreats and migration and did so again in later speech acts (Trump, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020d; CNBC Television, 2020). For the first time during his presidency, he addressed specifically the case of CT and framed it as “sexual”. He referred to the notion of evil and God. Further proclamation saw the same trend, with the notion of evil, mentioning children without being too insistent on it and focusing on victims' support (Trump, 2019c, 2020d; CNBC Television, 2020). After Meeting with Congressional Leadership on Border Security (Trump, 2019a), he reinforced the need for border security by describing THB vividly using stereotypes “three and four women with tape on their mouths and tied up, sitting in the back of a van or a car” and fed common fears by being consciously vague and worrying “what they do with usually the women — sometimes children — that they’re trafficking with, and in, you don’t want to know about.” This trend and the perpetuation of stereotypes and of there being an unprecedented crisis were reprised in further utterance to reinforce the need for stronger migration measures (Trump, 2019b):

“Human trafficking. It really hits a nerve. We’re talking about, in many cases, women and children grabbed, thrown into the backseat of a car, or thrown into a van with no windows,

with no — any form of air. Tape put across their mouths. And they're brought across the border. And they don't go through checkpoints; they go through the emptiest spot they can find, with no walls, with no fences.”

Overall, Trump insisted on sex trafficking and how trafficking would never end if borders were not fully secured and did so repeatedly, especially when meeting with task forces or border agents. Border securitisation was less insisted on during his proclamation. He consistently maintained the narrative of evil. He acted in favour of victim aid but insisted less on organised crime in favour of migration. He did not emphasise CT as much as his predecessors. He directly mentioned that the Democratic would deny the need for a wall but were wrong about it, using THB to contest opposing political discourse on migration (Trump, 2019b). International measures were supported and international actors not fighting THB were highlighted. He used thorough all his utterances aggressive vocabulary to describe both his administration's actions and the offenders, such as “monsters”, “vicious”, and “violent” (CNBC Television, 2020). Trump claimed to have the best records of arrest – which was later disproven (TracReports 2020) – and overtly said to have ordered the federal agencies to “go out and do what you have to do” without limits (CNBC Television, 2020). Therefore, Trump engaged in a more powerful securitising move where THB was explicitly designated as a national threat needing extraordinary measures to be contained. He kept Obama's orientation towards human security but lessened it along with trade security and organised crime to focus his move on associating THB with migration and cyberthreats and, to an extent, with the democratic party.

Biden (2021-nowadays)

Biden's administration first utterance was made by Vice-President Harris (2022). He did not engage with the notion of evil but mentioned children “as young as five” being brought into tunnels to be trafficked. THB was associated with “combating transnational criminal organizations and on

combating the money laundering” that goes with it, framing THB as a “lucrative business” and a “heinous crime”. A “sense of urgency” was associated with domestic trafficking. The vulnerable groups were extended to minorities (racial, LGBTQI+, indigenous, disabled) along with migrants and children in the foster care system. Victim aid was emphasised. In his first proclamation, Biden (2021) associated THB with human rights and equality, illegal financing, victim support and labour rights. He established anti-trafficking measures to promote “humane migration” and extended the vulnerable groups as well. The trend was followed in the next utterance (Biden 2022), wherein he condemned the “inhumane practice” of THB and engaged his administration to curb it while helping survivors. Mention was made of the U.S. disengaging itself from trafficking-born trade such as the Uyghur forced labour. In both utterances, Biden emphasised the vital role of the U.S. and its moral duty to end it.

Overall, Biden maintained the securitisation of the issue but focused it on human rights and inclusion, fair trade and organised crime. No specific attention was given to CT. Migration was mentioned in a more subdued manner than during Trump’s era, but THB was associated often with human smuggling. International measures were supported, and international actors not fighting THB were highlighted. Cyber threats were not talked about. While Biden talked about inhumane practices and immoral ones, he did not overtly associate THB with national security.

Overall

The threat of THB was placed on a security continuum between migration and organised crime and sometimes human smuggling through the diverse presidencies. The degree of importance of both varied depending on the president. International actors not bending their knees to international rules on THB were also identified as threats. Terrorism and cyberthreat were identified and then abandoned. Traffickers were identified as an out-group threat to the

social and moral order and, therefore, the nation. The notion of evil was recurrent except within Obama's and Biden's discourses, but all presidents engaged with the narrative that the U.S. has had a unique role in leading the fight against THB, both abroad and on domestic soil. This element has enabled to appeal to a national identity and has facilitated the acceptance of the securitising moves.

4.2.2 AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

The audience will be explored in three ways: the general population (polls and articles), the utterance attending audience, and the political audience (party platforms).

A 2014 poll (Barbu, 2015) conducted with 1,253 adults showed 60% thought TBH was a serious problem in the U.S., and 46% had heard or read about it, even if only a third considered it extremely widespread. A 2017 poll (Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, 2017) conducted with 1,000 adults demonstrated 86% support for the continuous governmental effort to train law enforcement in TBH. A 2021 poll (Orlando, Lucio and Rapp-McCall, 2021) with 1,167 adults highlighted 76% being aware of TBH, with 88% believing it to be serious and 48% following it closely. In 2023 (EINPresswire, 2023), 46% of the public considered TBH to be in the top three most problematic crime in the U.S., with younger Americans being more concerned. 51% reported having some or a lot of knowledge about the issue, and 20% thought it was present in their city; 59% got information from traditional media and 39% from social media. These polls show an increase in interest and danger-perception regarding TBH over the years, especially since 2017, correlating with the firmer securitising move from Obama and Trump.

Among the speech act analysed uttered directly in front of an audience, the audience consistently showed involvement and approbation through verbal assent, emotional gestures – crying, smiles, nods – and applause.

The political audience seems to have accepted CT and TBH as national security threats. Party platforms from the Democratic and Republican parties from 2000 until today were analysed. From 2004, THB and CT appear in the Republican's party platform, and, from 2008, in the Democratic's as well. By 2012, both parties mention CT specifically, with an insistence in the Republican's. TBH and CT remain identified as central preoccupations for both parties to this day, testifying to continued interests from political actors in the subject and its lasting representation as a national threat.

4.2.3 SUBSEQUENT MEASURES

Clinton's first steps in securitising CT were swiftly followed by a national plan, the 3P – prosecution, protection and prevention –, and the implementation of an interagency specialised task force, the National Worker Task Force, tasked with prosecuting traffickers and training Federal Laws enforcers (Clinton, 2000b). His administration funded national awareness campaigns and financed the DOJ's Child Protection Initiative to focus on child sexual abuse. Internationally, the U.S. invested in campaigns linked with migration which, interestingly, had not been the main focus point in Clinton's speech: \$3.1 million in Ukraine, \$400 000 in the Czech Republic, and \$400 000 in Bulgaria (U.S. DSA, 2000). Bush followed in Clinton's footsteps but heightened the investment. He invested \$14 million in law enforcement, \$4.5 million in organisations helping victims and more than \$295 million in international aid. He promoted interagency cooperation and a new model state law, new training resources and increased investigations (DOJ, 2004). New task forces were created, such as Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces (Bush, 2006b) and others in Philadelphia, Phoenix, Atlanta, and Tampa (TWHPGBA, 2006).

During his presidency, Obama created the Federal Emergency Management Agency to handle the care and repatriation of the massive influx

of migrant children. The DHS declared a Level IV out of 5 readiness conditions and opened processing centers, while the AmeriCorps was created, a DOJ and CNCS initiative to root out trafficking victims and the perpetrators (TWHPBOA, 2014). Obama administration financed the Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, which improved prosecution capacity along with victim-identification, especially with the creation of the Victim Assistance Database. He convened the first U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking, consisting of former victims. The Congress approved the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act. signed by the President that gives U.S. Customs and Border Protection more power. (Pope, 2017). Obama also issued an Executive Order to prevent forced labour and assert more control over contractors' behaviours (Obama, 2021).

Trump remodelled the Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons and created the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. He supported the DHS' Blue Campaign and the DOJ's Anti-Trafficking Coordination Team (ACTeam). The DOT committed a \$5.4 million grant to intercept trafficking in transport (Trump, 2019d). He increased collaboration with Mexico through the ACTeam and the U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Human Trafficking Enforcement Initiatives. He signed laws and executive orders against online exploitations of children by facilitating interagency data sharing and increased border patrols and investigations (Trump, 2020a). Trump released the National Action Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (Trump, 2020d).

Biden dismantled some of Trump's policies through executive orders but maintained most of those surrounding CT despite claims of the opposite (Fichera, 2022; O'Rourke, 2023). He did replace the Threat Mitigation Working Group with the United States Council on Transnational Organized Crime and updated the National Plan. He created the Human Smuggling and Trafficking Task Force, the Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force, and many prevention programs. The DOJ funded \$87 million towards anti-trafficking policies and to

sustain the Joint Task Force Alpha that manoeuvres in South America. The DOS restarted the Trilateral Working Group on Trafficking in Persons with Canada and Mexico to mitigate migration (TWHPJBA, 2022), devoted \$15 billion to border security, and launched Operation Sentinel to focus on THB rings at the border (TWHPJBA, 2021).

The DOS (2021) Trafficking Report, fiscal year 2020, gives an idea of the magnitude of U.S. investment in anti-trafficking measures. In 2019, the DOJ provided more than \$21 million to finance Enhanced Collaborative Model (ECM) task forces, more than \$17.7 million in 2020, and \$22.3 million in 2021, with a further \$5 million for training and technical assistance. In 2020, the DOJ provided \$74.6 million for victim assistance – compared to \$73.3 million in 2019, \$3.48 million in 2003 (DOS, 2004) and \$23 million in 2008 (DOS, 2008) – including \$14.9 million for CT victims. It also awarded \$3.6 million for training and technical assistance. The DOT awarded \$50 000 toward anti-trafficking measures. Congress, in 2020, made available \$92 million for foreign assistance, which was more than the \$72.2 million in 2003 (DOS, 2004). The U.S. increased the number of T visas given to victims willing to prosecute, despite an increase in mistrust towards the government (DOS, 2021). In 2021 (DOS, 2022), DOJ, DHS and DOL pursued investigations and prosecution support with the ACTeam. They provided \$2.4 million to develop strategies and models supporting prosecution and victims' aid. Victim assistance decreased to \$60 million, with \$13 million dedicated to children. Congress made available \$99 million to international aid. In 2022, the Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs announced \$90 million fund to combat trafficking dedicated to victim support and task force reinforcement (Office of Public Affairs, 2022).

Regarding CT, the OSCE (Richmond, 2019) has supported Ministerial Decisions such as the 2017 Strengthening Efforts to Combat All Forms of Child Trafficking and the 2018 Strengthening Efforts to Prevent and Combat Child Trafficking, Including of Unaccompanied Minors and has promoted

technological advances such as facial recognition, search warrant to study social media and analysis of big financial data. Therefore, social control, surveillance and data access legislation are being promoted.

To summarise, the entire budget of the U.S. to counter trafficking has known yearly variations but remains on an increasing tangent since the first utterance in 2004. In the fiscal year 2021, the annual budget was around \$161.500 million, which according to other countries' investments exhibited in the report, is the highest national investment. Much of it is dedicated to international aid and coordination, especially regarding migration and humanitarian aid; domestic funding is split between supporting growing numbers of task forces specialised in migration and organised crime and TBH, helping victims and controlling trade agreements. In parallel, CT has enabled higher levels of control of online data and surveillance while facilitating the acquisition of warrants to secure and analyse said data and share it among agencies. The audience appears to have supported the diverse securitising moves, even during the controversial Trump era. TBH and CT have been well implemented in the sphere of urgent security and placed on a security continuum associating trade protection – organised crime – migration – human security.

4.3 QANON'S SECURITISATION DISCOURSE: A BOTTOM-UP PROCESS.

4.3.1 ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY AND THE SHAPE OF THE THREAT

QAnon is often described as a disorganised non-hierarchical movement (Hanley, Kumar and Durumeric, 2022). But, while it is decentralised and non-hierarchical, QAnon presents a certain level of organisation, which enabled it to make a conscious progression toward legitimacy. The present section will give a brief overview of QAnon's rise to 'fame' before diving into its framing of CT as a threat.

The first level of authority QAnon gained was through Q's claim of being an insider with top-level military clearance and Deep State knowledge (Hyzen and Van den Bulck, 2021, p.181). QAnon's growing authority was then solidified by developing in-group solidarity while favouring out-group rejection and violence through social media use (Zhang et al., 2022, p.4). It used the moral panic associated with CT and the previously mentioned co-opting of the #SaveTheChildren hashtag and posters (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 2). It framed CT around an elite cabal discourse and spread its content – misinformation, unreliable statistics, unverified authoritative information and conspiracies – by using mainstream social media, moving away from the fringe (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 4; Bleakley, 2021), relying especially on women influencers to be laundered into the mainstream (North, 2020; Crawford and Argentino 2021a, 2021b and 2021c; Bloom, 2022). The misinformation and disinformation were layered with factual information, which facilitated its spreading and believability (Starbird *et al.*, 2019). It coalesced its biggest wave of followers around the idea of terminating CT (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 2). In fact, the word movement has been used so far to describe QAnon, as Lim (2018, p.105) defined a movement as a “network of organised, yet informal social entities that collectivise based on common purposes and solidarities in the pursuit of societal change”. QAnon fulfils this definition: its members have been engaged in online and offline activism around CT and have proposed solutions, admittedly founded on misinformation and conspiracy theories but framed within a network structure and organising tactics nonetheless, aligning it with the digital era's social movements (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, the movement is an amorphous phenomenon, an interconnected and well-developed digital presence with real-life incidences, but that remains decentralised (Hanley, Kumar and Durumeric, 2022). But it does present a certain level of organisation and strategic thinking: to spread their narrative, they exploited recommendation algorithms of social media, as well as topical hashtags and group suggestions (Forberg, 2021). This degree of organisation

has enabled the movement to integrate echo chamber radicalisation as part of its strategy (Priniski, McClay and Holyoak, 2021) but to move beyond it: it developed into a political movement with its own internally coherent epistemology and empiricism (Miller, 2021). Such sophistication enabled QAnon to be carried by ideological entrepreneurs critical to its mainstreaming (Hyzen and Van den Bulck, 2021, p.185) and to be inserted into political campaigns (Crawford and Argentino, 2021a, b, c). This move was crucial in QAnon's gaining authority and spreading, along with Trump's support of it and of affiliated candidates (Bloomberg, 2020; Trump 2020c, 2020d, 2020e; Bleakley, 2021, p.523). Marjorie Taylor-Green and other Congress candidates even swore an oath to become active members of QAnon and bring down the child-trafficking-and-eating cabal (Travis, 2020a, 2020b). This gain of legitimacy culminated in Q's election as one of the 25 most influential people of 2018 (Time, 2018).

To spread its narrative, QAnon does not engage in first-hand experience (Hughey, 2021). It encourages its followers to look for drops and autonomously find meaning and connection (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020, p.6; Bloom and Moskalenko, 2021), leading to second-hand discussions via Qdrops and QAnon-related content established by the most prominent supporters (Hughey, 2021). Its rhetoric's cornerstone is the othering and boundary-building between those who belong to the group and the outsiders, which is a radicalisation feature adopted by a large spectrum of actors such as political parties, terrorist organisations and social movements (Çelik, Bilali and Iqbal, 2016; Loadenthal, 2019). Long-standing practices and places do not legitimise this discourse. QAnon's presence is recent and mainly digital, with affiliates meeting online to find public gatherings conducted by experienced and prominent supporters where events are interpreted through the lens of QAnon's narrative (Argentino, 2020).

Through his drops, Q insisted on the cleavage between ‘they’ and ‘us’ in posts relating to CT or child abuse, along with the notion of evil. On August 11, 2018, when talking about Bill Maher, a QAnon-identified paedophile, he said: “These people are SICK! You people are a DISEASE. We, THE PEOPLE, are the CURE”. On November 1, 2017:

“The pedo networks are being dismantled. The child abductions for satanic rituals (ie Haiti and other 3rd world countries) are paused (not terminated until players in custody). We pray every single day for God’s guidance and direction as we are truly up against pure evil”.

On September 2, 2020, Q listed political figures, 2 Republicans and 20 Democrats, involved in child abuse and CT, disseminating distrust. The post of 28 March, 2020 contains all the elements of QAnon narrative: the notion that there is a community of patriots, an in-group, followed by mistrust in mainstream media and fear of elites, a reference to an evil that took over America, the need to restore the “old glory” and to protect children, before ending on a rallying call of being patriots needing to rise and fight. This idea is not new, as on July 25, 2018, Q proposed for every affiliate to take the following oath:

“I [name] do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God.

<https://www2.fbi.gov/publications/leb/2009/september2009/oath.htm>

Remember. You owe it to your country. To yourself. To your children. We stand with you. The time is now.”

The link cited led to the history of oaths in the FBI. This associates the oath taken to QAnon with a legitimate governmental oath. On August 28, 2018:

“Patriot -A little perspective...Patriots are dying to defend this great country and the FREEDOM she provides. CHILDREN are being kidnapped, tortured, raped, and sacrificed in the name of PURE EVIL. Stay the course. We are FIGHTING a deeply entrenched enemy. Think LISA BARSOOMIAN (Smile). 2018 WILL BE GLORIOUS.”

When an anon answered, “Will be glorious? In my humble opinion sir, it ALREADY is.” Q replied, “In our opinion, until those responsible are dead and/or suffering, it shall remain 'will be'.” demonstrating the movement's call to act is often related to violence. On April 24, 2018:

“We are in this together. No fame. This is about taking back our FREEDOM and saving our Children/people from the EVIL that has plagued our country/world for so long.”

A clear framing appears through these examples and the hundreds of other posts. From the first drop (HCR extradition), Q referred to the Pizzagate conspiracy that started the child sex trafficking cabal rumour (Tian, 2021). It was weaved throughout the following drops but not always clearly stated, which is on par with Q's preferred communication methods. However, clear roles are given by using sensational bellicose vocabulary and pathos. Qanon represents patriotism, freedom, truth, and its members are encouraged to fight and possess arms to regain lost American glory. Children are the innocent victims of the elites. They are leveraged to gain loyalty as involvement in QAnon is owed to them. The threat is the elites: famous, rich and political people, especially Democrats and the left, and all of them are agents of evil. In ‘The Armor of God’ on May 11, 2020, Q summarises the enemy as such “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” These are the elements pertaining to CT and representing a threat in Q's narrative.

4.3.2 AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

The first element to consider regarding audience involvement is the copy of Storm is Here⁴ where QAnon affiliates were invited to answer Q's riddles. The answers given insist on CT and the cabal more than Q did overtly.

Secondly, some elements of the political audience appear to have accepted the narrative: 107 congressional candidates supported it in 2020 (Kaplan, 2020), and 36 QAnon supporters ran for Congress in 2022, including 2 elected (Zitser and Ankel, 2021).

Thirdly, a series of polls demonstrate the degree of narrative acceptance. An analysis of polls from 2018 to 2020 showed that QAnon's support has been meagre but stable (Enders *et al.*, 2022). In 2019, 5% of voters believed in QAnon (Emerson Polling, 2018). In 2020, from February to September, the number of adults having heard about QAnon went from 23% to 47%; among them, 41% of Republicans and 7% of Democrats said it was a good thing for the country (Mitchell *et al.*, 2020). Another study found that 10% of adults believed in QAnon, hence 26 million (Lowles, 2020). But when QAnon was rated on a 101-point feeling thermometer, it rated amongst the lowest political groups with 22 points (Enders and Uscinski, 2020). In 2022, one in five Americans, 41 million, still believed in the theories despite Trump's presidential loss (PRRI, 2022).

Regarding CT itself, 55% of Trump supporters and 5% of Biden's believed in the CT narrative in 2020 (Graeme; 2020). 50% of Americans think CT equates to 300,000 or higher children, 44% much higher; 35% think elites are engaged in massive CT, more than the numbers of Americans adhering to QAnon (Uscinski and Enders, 2021). In another study, 15% adhered to the CT

⁴ https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/11MhW-P-9el9dg_cTjutwtliQGMfL8jfH3SOaLZSBV2g/edit#gid=1596710080

narrative, 20% agreed that a storm is coming to restore rightful leaders, and 15% agreed patriots may need to resort to violence (PRRI, 2021). Polaris (2021) found that 21% of adults identify as QAnon believers, and 41% believe in a cabal CT ring.

Considering everything, the statistics demonstrate a stable and increasing belief in QAnon. Its narrative found an accepting audience, some who might have been convinced beforehand, some who fully adopted the movement. Therefore, millions of Americans accepted and still support QAnon's narrative on CT.

4.3.3 SUBSEQUENT MEASURES

The securitising move's subsequent measures are twofold: action taken by affiliates and policy changes.

First and foremost, no policy changes on CT aligned with QAnon's narrative happened. But, political candidates did adopt its discourse, Trump supported their identity as American-loving paedophile-fighting patriots, and the FBI declared it a domestic terrorist threat.

Secondly, some affiliates rallied behind the take-action injunction and committed violent acts. The 6th January Capitol attack is a prime example. But, despite its unprecedented scale, it was not an isolated case. QAnon has been associated with threats, vandalism and violent acts. In May 2018, a man claimed he had found a CT ring and searched through it with his armoured group while citing Q. In June 2018, a man in an armoured truck blocked traffic, demanding the release of confidential documents in the name of QAnon (McCarthy, 2020). In April 2020, an Illinois woman travelled to N.Y.C. to save the children by assassinating Biden (Summer, 2020). From 2018 to 2023, 68 violent acts were correlated with QAnon's adhesion (Start, 2023), while another source claims 48

cases from 2016 to 2020 and 93 cases in 2021 (Argentino and Crawford, 2022), all in all, an increasing number.

Therefore, QAnon's securitisation form below was partially successful: it was accepted by grassroots members and partially accepted by governmental representatives. But it did not affect governmental securitisation focused on organised crime and migration instead of on an evil cabal (Hammerstad, 2012, p.7).

4.4 A COMPETITIVE SECURITISATION PROCESS IN THE UNITED STATES REGARDING CHILD TRAFFICKING?

This section will address whether the U.S. hosts a competitive securitisation process to frame CT. It will first address a competing discourse that engaged its followers in disregarding the rule of law. Then it will study the contest of frames within a securitisation process.

4.4.1 EVIL VS GOOD: A COMPETING DISCOURSE BEYOND THE RULE OF LAW

Policymaking cannot be separated from discourses; discourses cannot be separated from identity (Dotty, 1996, p.242). Adhering to the discourse surrounding CT has enabled proponents of QAnon to enter a 'good VS evil' dichotomic view of the world (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 15). This affects their sense of identity, their relation to the world surrounding them, and their interpretation of its event. It justifies misinformation and disinformation, as all information is deemed necessary to protect children; as Q said "Disinformation exists and is necessary" (Q, 2017a). This perception of the environment is central to facilitating belief in Q's theories (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 15). It also enables the affiliates to share a social connection and moral consensus, giving them a sense of acceptance and community: through social media connection, they create a shared reality that cannot be contested as any contestation reinforces belief (ibid). The dichotomy is used to cement relationship-relevant behaviours and beliefs as shared reality prevails when the

adopted perspective is kept simple, consistent and unambiguous (Jost *et al.*, 2008, p. 173) while reinforcing the impression of being special and chosen as Qanon proponents set themselves apart from outsiders (Hardin and Higgins, 1996). It enables the reconstruction of their sociopolitical identity (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 16).

Absorbing a Manichean stance has enabled QAnon to gather more followers and make them into devouts, especially by embracing a messianic vision of QAnon in a Christian dualism and apocalyptic dynamic (Vrzal, 2020; LaFrance, 2020; Argentino, 2020; Hardy, 2021; Kline, 2021; Bruke, 2020; Pettipiece, 2021). It describes QAnon as engaged in a battle between the forces of Evil led by Satan and the forces of Good protected by God (Vrzal, 2020, p.46). In the analysed narrative, the global Satanic cabal drinking the blood of trafficked children is the government, especially democrats, and other elite, such as Hollywood celebrities. Donald Trump and Q were transformed into messianic prophetic figures with the agency to triumph over Satan and its cohort (Hardy, 2021). This discourse is far from CT being assessed on a security continuum encompassing migration, terrorism and transnational crime. The counter-narrative aspect of QAnon's discourse cannot be denied.

The counter-narrative adopted by QAnon engages its supporter in an ultimate battle for freedom and against oppression. This apocalyptic thinking and QAnon's theology – a revisited vision of Christianity with other spiritual influences (Meltzer, 2021) – has had deep radicalising impacts on QAnon's affiliates since it religiously justifies and legitimises violence (LaFrance, 2020; MacMillan and Rush, 2021; Hardy, 2021; Kline, 2021). This violence is perceived as just and pure to help free the U.S. of demoniac forces (Kline, 2021). The rule of Law and the government's authority, for QAnon's followers, are inconsequential. The fact that Donald Trump did not contest QAnon's claim but encouraged it (Trump, 2020b, 2020c) has facilitated adherence to forsaking

normalised national order. It became an element of the discourses' competition: it shifted the threat's frame and delegitimised national identities.

4.4.2 A CONTEST OF FRAMES

The present study argues that QAnon's security narrative is embedded in the power view of the security dilemma based on Buzan's (1984, p.119). "Sovereignty and anarchy represent the opposite ends of the same political phenomenon: the claim of sovereignty by the actors in the system automatically defines relations among them as anarchic" (p.113): QAnon claimed legitimacy. Its relation to anarchy is "the political dividedness of the system", meaning "the interest of the units are largely opposed, instead of just being separated, and therefore that relations among them must tend to be hostile". While Buzan (1984) has applied the concept of anarchy to international relations, the present study finds it adequate to transcribe the position of QAnon within its country: they do not recognise the authority of the government – beyond Donald Trump– they claim to be true partisans and representants of the American sovereignty, non-recognised structures are described as competitive enemies in a warring frame, and the U.S. defence of its integrity is perceived as retaliation that threatens the survival of QAnon.

The two securitisations hold competitive power because, on the surface, they address the same level of aggregation. Using Buzan and Wæver (2009) classification of levels of analysis/aggregation, both narratives appear comprised at the civilisation level. Both refer to what they, as the American nation, stand for and wills to become. Although, when delving deeper into the narratives' analysis, other aggregation levels appear. As shown previously, the governmental securitisation of THB has always been correlated with other items on the political agenda: terrorism, trade, transnational organised crime, money laundering, and migration. It can be argued that, under Obama and Biden, the securitisation attempt adopted an individual level by focusing on survivors in

its narrative. As for QAnon's securitisation attempt, it remains firmly anchored in individual agglomeration, both in substance and in promises. Joining the fight will transform followers' identities. Its roots in religion could also place it on a global or "divine" scale: protecting children and destroying the current elites represents the destruction of evil and, therefore, helps the greater good and promotes the salvation of humanity. It is to be noted that both discourses – except under Obama and Biden– weaved together CT, evil, God, and the special role of Americans in stopping CT, mobilising the audience through the same elements.

This is where another obvious point of contention exists between the two narratives and where originally stemmed a one-way competition of QAnon's discourse with the U.S. government. Indeed, since the beginning of its creation, QAnon established itself as being *against* the government and *for* its demise. It "exposed" the U.S. government as the main antagonist and threat to the prosperity of real patriots and their children. This research has called QAnon's attempt at securitising CT parasitic because it latched on the government's narrative to build its antithesis of it while being devoid of policies or ideas that could effectively resolve the danger and impacts of CT.

QAnon achieved a difficult feat: it is extremely arduous for individuals to gain the legitimacy necessary to attempt securitisation processes (Buzan and Wæver, 2009, p. 255). While QAnon represents by no means the opinion of half of the American population, it has become a diffuse organism that survived its own predetermined demise after Trump's loss. It kept political support in Congress and with political agents and international allies. QAnon was cradled by social media and transformed from an apocalyptic political wraith to a fledging organised political actor. While still rejected in places, it gained sufficient traction for its narrative to persuade individuals to take steps to disregard the rule of Law and governmental monopoly of violence and to try to impede political and legal processes. This dissertation argues that the breaking

point from one-way competition to active competition is when the government of the U.S. officially recognised QAnon as an organism representing a threat against the national order. This process started with the FBI classification of QAnon as a domestic threat in an Intelligence bulletin mentioning their narrative surrounding CT (FBI, 2019), fortified by Resolution 1154 of the House of Representatives (Davis, 2020; Rep. Malinowski, 2020), which condemned not only QAnon as an organisation but enjoined to reject its ideas and QAnon's narration surrounding CT. It culminated with the House Homeland Security assessing QAnon as a domestic terrorist threat, again mentioning QAnon's narrative on CT during the hearing (Committee on Homeland Security, 2021). This research does not argue that the classification of QAnon as a terrorist threat was solely due to their competitive narrative on CT. It defends the idea that such narration was part of the deliberative process; and that the rejection of QAnon's idea itself constitutes the government's acknowledgement of the impact and legitimacy of QAnon in some American citizens' eyes and, therefore, of the partial success of its counter-securitisation which exists competitively in relation to the state's. Partial success because, while it gained traction within grassroots audiences and a certain measure of influence, it did not influence the U.S. government's securitisation. QAnon has gained some political supporters, including some who accessed Congress, and it attained a level of recognition when the U.S. government recognised this influence. Still, no official policies or presidential discourses changed to include QAnon's narrative. Therefore, following Hammerstad's (2012, p.7) analytical grid, the securitisation from below was partially successful but successfully competitive.

4.5 CONSEQUENCES OF COMPETITIVE SECURITISATION ATTEMPTS ON CHILD TRAFFICKING

This section will provide the last step to a thorough analysis of the securitisation process by naming some of the consequences of the two opposing attempts on the actual mitigation of CT. In academic literature, the securitisation

theory has been associated with a critical stance on its practical outcomes, often deemed negatives. As exploring in-depth the consequence of securitisation is beyond the scope of this study, it will provide a non-exhaustive analysis. This decision has been taken to anchor securitisation processes and the securitisation theory in its holistic and systemic context.

Once an object is securitised, its perception is altered by the frame it has been ensconced in. Therefore, the way policies and public opinion interact with it is through a looking glass that alters the object's original shape. Its nature becomes what has been securitised. Both securitising moves have had impacts in perpetuating misconceptions regarding CT and partially hindering its mitigation.

The U.S. government associated CT predominantly with organised crime and migration. However, in many regions, CT and TBH are perpetuated by disorganised crime, with various traffickers' profiles. Rare are the organised networks dealing with it (Feingold, 2005, p.28). The severe sanctions approach selected by the U.S. has yet to prove that prosecution has a significant impact on aggregate levels of trafficking, while sanctions against international actors could lead to decreasing levels of partnership and information sharing (ibid, p.30). Similarly, as explained in Chapter 2, securitising TBH through border control and migration tends to re-victimise victims and make them more vulnerable to trafficking (ibid, p.27) while the nation security frame plays on the population's fear of migration (Farrel and Fahy, 2009, p.624). The current framing of CT exposes children to governmental bodies that identify them as juvenile prostitutes or illegal aliens (Walts, 2012). It focuses on sex trafficking, failing to engage with child labour properly (OJJDP, 2016), with foster care children (UNICEFUSA, 2021) and with recovery support (Polaris, 2023). These concerns increase when the government, despite its discourses and policies, ignores warnings and consciously lets children be exploited on U.S. soil (Hannah, 2023).

QAnon's narrative has harmed the mitigation of CT. It exposed children mistaken for victims to harassment (Contrera, 2021). It promotes misconception and distorts reality, orientating attention away from true trafficking perpetrators (Nipper and Wicks, 2020). QAnon's injunction to act led to a plethora of false tips to law enforcement, straining already over-solicited teams and insufficient funds, decreasing the available help for victims and endangering them further (Seitz, 2020; Rajan *et al.*, 2021).

CT was instrumentalised for political gain to the detriment of child protection (Evans, 2020). Moral and political approaches to the protection of children do not enhance child protection: it has been proven to be detrimental to it and can blind parents or individuals to the first real signs of abuse or trafficking (Khazan, 2022; Bjork-James, 2022). Therefore, the impact of securitisations on CT remains a double-edged sword that brings the issue to light while blurring its perception.

4.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has proceeded with analysing the applicability of the securitisation theory's three criteria of success in the case of the United States' government securitisation of CT and QAnon's concurrent one. It evaluated whether securitisation took place and, by extension, if counter-securitisation was implemented as well, before studying them through a competition prism. It found that from competitive discourses QAnon and the U.S. government became entangled in a competitive securitisation process. QAnon did not fully succeed in securitising CT from below, but it did establish itself as a competitive narrative actor.

However, the future does not prohibit QAnon from gaining more affiliates and, therefore, more political traction, as it beneficieate from scandals such as Hunter Biden's FBI disinformation during the investigation on his laptop (Gigot, Strassel and McGurn, 2023). It could also strengthen its hold on

politics through its permitted return on Twitter (Kaplan, 2023) and the narrative it started spreading again on the platform (Center on Extremism, 2023; Kaplan, 2023).

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

5.1 A COMPETITIVE SECURITISATION PROCESS: RESULTS

This section will address the findings and implications of the analysis. It will present further points of attention resulting from the research.

5.1.1 AUDIENCE TRUST AND MISTRUST

QAnon intervened in a period, starting with the Covid crisis, where the general American audience was more prone to losing trust. Present in society was a loss of trust in science, a rapid shift in gender roles, and normative ideas about legal and moral authorities of government and religion were being shattered (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2022, p. 548). A climate of distrust predisposes adherence to conspiracies (Radnitz, 2021, p.10). QAnon offered a mass ‘unfreezing’, a renewed sense of identity and a community that could be trusted (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2022, p. 548) carried by a narrative frame of CT whose political efficiency had already been proven (Breland, 2019). It built itself a hermeneutics of suspicion, leading to greater confusion and mistrust (Butters, 2022, p.16). Therefore, in a time of crisis and generalised mistrust, QAnon exploited spaces vulnerable to conspiracy theories and misinformation (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 2). This use of social media platforms was supported by their own algorithm, as was the case of Facebook, the structure intervening after the movement's radical growth but pushing forth its post during its momentum (Lima, 2021). Notwithstanding that it was once declared to be a misinformation-fed digitally mediated collective delusion (Moorhouse and Malone, 2020), QAnon has established itself as a civic and political action with a concrete action-taking philosophy grounded in misinformation (Moran and Prochaska, 2022, p. 2). QAnon’s instrumentalising government's distrust and establishing itself as trustworthy was also carried by the political figures who adhered to the narrative, out of strategy (Zister and Ankel, 2021) – Lauren Boeber, Jo Rae Perkins – or of true belief – Marjorie Taylor Greene, who wrote

about conspiracies before QAnon (Green, 2017; Zadrozny, 2020), Sydney Powell, etc. – (Crawford and Argentino, 2021a, b, c). The distrust of authority merged into a distrust of fact, facilitating QAnon’s narrative acceptance (Hannah, 2021, p.3).

The example of QAnon shows the importance governmental distrust plays in counter-narratives and, thus, counter-securitisation. Public distrust in governmental bodies makes the population more willing to forcefully change the political system. Anti-government sentiment and organisational ideology are central to that end (Lee *et al.*, 2022). This corresponds to what QAnon provided: a context of delusion supported by social media, politicians and celebrities, wherein violence was justifiable (Holoyda, 2022). It discredited the establishment, bolstered anti-elitism and redefined its followers' identity by introducing an existential threat and increasing a sense of marginalisation (Chandler, 2020): it gained trust where mistrust resided to pursue a securitising move.

5.1.2 TOP-DOWN VS FROM BELOW

The from-below approach intends for securitisation to be acted on first by individuals, then by the state. But, it is very difficult for individuals to establish the wider security legitimacy needed to properly enter a securitisation process (Buzan and Wæver, 2009, p. 255). Such phenomena have yet to be thoroughly researched. The present analysis has tried to demonstrate how a top-down and from-below approaches have a symbiotic relationship. One is the result of governance and the other of countering such governance. In the case of QAnon, it directly attacked government members to delegitimise them and rally more people to its cause. Just securitisation (Floyd *et al.*, 2022) recognises how non-state groups facing existential threats from a state unjust or oppressive may engage in securitisation. Yet it does not consider how said groups can perceive the state as oppressive. From their moral standpoint, QAnon’s

proponents feel morally legitimate to engage in counter-securitisation discourses. Securitisation from below speaks to a profound dissatisfaction with governments' treatment of an issue. It presents an opportunity for counter-current narratives to gain traction and incite change. While outsiders can objectively decide if such securitising move is moral or not, it feels just to the actors involved in it and incites them to disregard governmental authorities and leaves little leverage to the State to control their behaviour. Therefore, securitisation from below is the reverse reflection of top-down securitisation: it reveals the limits and weaknesses of the attempt and of the actors. It represents a rich research opportunity to better comprehend the functioning of top-down securitisation and audience active involvement but holds the potential to be a national threat.

5.2 FURTHER POINTS OF FOCUS

This section will address the elements that were noted during the research and could be of importance for further research but were beyond the scope of this dissertation. They will therefore be addressed in a limited and brief manner. Nonetheless, they remain compelling potential areas of depths to this research and to securitisation theory research that ought to be highlighted.

5.2.1 NEW FORMS OF SPEECH ACT: ONLINE PRESENCE

The online presence and new dissemination of narratives on social media should be of importance to research as they have already proven to be implicated in tentative to overthrow governmental authority, such as the events of January 6th 2021 and have allowed the movement to metastasise at increasingly fast speed (Bloom and Moskalenko, 2022). It demonstrates that fruitful speech acts no longer need to be traditional. QAnon thrived by enabling its followers to be anonymous and disinhibited while giving them purpose and an in-group to belong to. It stirred interest by using codified communications necessitating the audience to be involved and active in its decipherment. It relied solely on social

media to establish its rhetoric and be shared. Its securitising move, while maybe not impossible, would have struggled and stagnated without the magnitude of social media use.

Following the growing trend of news sources and the growing use of social media, counter-narratives might find it easier to reach larger audiences and, by using misinformation and suspicion hermeneutics, to infiltrate daily lives. Therefore, facilitating securitisation from below attempts for grassroots actors.

5.2.2 COUNTER-SECURITISATION AND IDENTITY

Identity invocation in securitisation processes can be used as a way to feed the securitising move (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 105). Such invocation automatically activates defensive reflexes by introducing the presence of ‘others’ who threaten ‘our’ way of life by having access to finite resources and undermining social cohesion and public order (Huysman, 2000, p.769). Yet, identity is neither fixed nor definitive, and its invocation was refuted to be consistently associated with a negative attitude towards was supposedly threatens it. Indeed, identity can be used as a referent object to contest the dominant securitisation narrative. This can lead to a framing contest between different conceptualisations of identity that could have an impact not only on policies but also on the public understanding of the self in relation to others. This understanding helps to legitimise different reactions and approaches to the perceived threat, where the potential for counter-securitisation lies (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 120). These elements were observed during this research. Indeed, QAnon built the identity of the ‘patriots’ combating the ‘others’ who are ‘evil’ and who threaten the real patriot’s way of life. It used identity-based conspiracies to incite fidelity and violent acts (FBI, 2019). In this framing, CT is no longer the referent object, identity is. But interestingly, the narrative of CT is used to build a conceptual identity, and the identity narrative

is used to build the concept of CT, ie. CT is the work of evil forces in the government, elites and the Democratic party. It is the duty of *real patriots* to stop it, for their values are the protection of children, the resistance against evil and the greater good: no matter the pushback, they know what is right and what is good, and they will fight for it, as they are the pure ones. But, also, *only real patriots* can see how society is corrupt, how the elites abuse children by trafficking them, children that are white and violently taken out of their homes by strangers who will satisfy their immortality quest by drinking their blood: only real patriots will intervene and take action to stop the hidden abuse of trafficked children.

While the role of identity in relation to counter-narrative was denoted, it was beyond the scope of this research. Nonetheless, as it played a role even in the securitisation of CT, it was deemed significant to address it here. The present research believes that future investigations on QAnon and securitisation would gain value by including identity in their research design. Simultaneously, it is additional supporting empirical evidence to the already existing research on identity and counter-securitisation.

CHAPTER 6- CONCLUSION

The present dissertation aimed to assert whether the U.S. was the host of competitive securitisations and how it happened. Its conclusion is the following.

If the government of the United States and QAnon are seen in a synergy frame, which is the argument proposed to frame top-down securitisation in relation to from below, then the government would be the centripetal force working to maintain state security and hegemony. QAnon would then serve as the centrifugal force, appearing seemingly out of nowhere but thoroughly bred by the political, social, and economic soil of the U.S., to derail the current political circle along with its supporters' life into a sphere where they could exert more control and redefine their identity. Amidst ideological and identity struggles, economic downturn and overall social instability, part of the American society found themselves unmoored. Lost in life's unrelenting waves, QAnon offered those individuals a hook: CT. Once bitten, as the string recoils, a narrative unfolds, allowing them to represent the ultimate Good and a sense of direction in their fight against Evil. As the American government happens to be part of this apocalyptic Evil, dissension and social struggle arise. This shifting of frame and change of legitimate authoritarian figures constitutes an attempt at a competing counter-securitisation. The State discourse no longer holds omnipotent power, which gives leeway for QAnon followers to hinder the course of political events – the Capitol assault – and to spurn the government's rule of Law through the execution of crimes that, in QAnon's supporters' eyes, become legitimate and lawful. The government's actions to securitise CT, when ordered by any other government agents than Trump, are perceived through a prism which transmutes them into acts of maintained perpetration of Evil. It effectively traps governmental deradicalisation outreach behind a delusional wall. QAnon could have been solely a counter-current philosophy of thoughts,

but the concretisation of those thoughts into the American social and political space embeds it in a partially successful bottom-up counter-securitisation process.

This case study demonstrated how securitisation from below can happen: a context of distrust, the choice of a referent object emotionally charged, rhetoric giving little possibilities for contestation and addressing the same level of aggregation, the opportunity to belong to a group, and political support. Further research points would benefit the literature on securitisation from below, such as the use of social media and subsequent change in speech acts and the role of identity. Society and means of communication are fast evolving: deemed as rare, attempts at securitisation from below could become more frequent. Studying them and their interaction with the original securitisation matters to ensure the referent object is mitigated efficiently.

Securitisation from below was proven to be significant, as securitisation is not an immutable process. It is changing in shape and can be studied as a series of shifting relationships between multiple audiences and actors (Hammerstad, 2012, p.23). It is profoundly iterative and competitive (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Proceeding on the assumption that securitisation can only be driven by political elites and not across layers of actors and audiences at various levels of influence and power would be detrimental to the enrichment of the theory and the study of the empirical reality. Through securitisation from below, marginal groups succeed in being heard, not by the persuasiveness of their arguments but by the violence of their methods. The potential threat they represent to the rule of Law, domestic stability, and the state monopoly on violence (Hammerstad, 2012, p.26) cannot be denied by the securitising elites. Neither should it be denied by the academic field. This justified the choice of the present research to go “beyond the elite discursive environment” (Paterson and Karyotis, 2022, p. 121) and encourages further research.

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