

# Messaging Soleimani's killing: the communication vulnerabilities of authoritarian states

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The capacity of authoritarian states to manipulate narratives and thereby undermine the authority of western democracies is increasingly emphasized in International Relations (IR) research.<sup>1</sup> Armed with new communication tools and arsenals of deceptive content, authoritarian states have gained offensive potential *vis-à-vis* external competitors through information and hybrid operations.<sup>2</sup> Far less scrutiny, however, has been paid to the ways in which the media environment creates communication vulnerabilities for these same repressive states. Contrary to what the focus of the debate may lead us to believe, autocrats face numerous constraints in the international competition over the narration of events.

Authoritarian states do more with their communication tools than seeking to disrupt democracy in western states. They also promote strategic narratives about the international system and themselves in attempts to increase their power.<sup>3</sup> The aim is to influence how domestic and international publics conceive of actors, settings, conflicts and solutions in international politics. The media's role in such strategic positioning is seldom studied empirically outside the West and in non-English languages. We are therefore left with a skewed and incomplete picture of the communication vulnerabilities of democracies and authoritarian states that are facing off on the international scene.

The present article addresses this research gap through an empirical case-study of Persian-language commentary on the targeted assassination of Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the extraterritorial branch of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps—a crescendo in the conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Mikael Wigell, 'Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: a theory of external interference in liberal democracy', *International Affairs* 95: 2, 2019, pp. 255–75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz018>; Lennart Maschmeyer, 'Subversion, cyber operations, and reverse structural power in world politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 29: 1, 2023, pp. 79–103, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221117051>.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *RussiaGate and propaganda: disinformation in the age of social media* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Josephine Lukito et al., 'The wolves in sheep's clothing: how Russia's internet research agency tweets appeared in US news as vox populi', *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 25: 2, 2020, pp. 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219895215>; Darren L. Linvill and Patrick L. Warren, 'Troll factories: manufacturing specialized disinformation on Twitter', *Political Communication* 37: 4, 2020, pp. 447–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1718257>.

<sup>3</sup> Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Forging the world: strategic narratives and International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

between Iran and the United States. The 3 January 2020 drone strike against Soleimani at Baghdad airport, on the orders of US President Donald Trump, was totally unexpected, breaking with precedence, and raised fears in the Middle East and beyond that a military confrontation might follow. World leaders expressed their concerns and, with the exceptions of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, there was little overt support for the attack. According to the then UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnès Callamard, the killing of General Soleimani was 'unlawful'.<sup>4</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran lost a valued commander in the strike. Simultaneously, however, it gained an opportunity to score points in the narrative battle and win sympathy at home and abroad. Trump's escalatory attack played into the Iranian state narrative that Iran is resisting western 'imperialism' and standing up for the oppressed in the world. Iran's former ambassador to the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, described it as 'an obvious example of state terrorism'.<sup>5</sup> Given that the US has designated Iran as a 'state sponsor of terrorism', this was a chance to turn the tables in terms of rhetoric. The Islamic Republic has also placed the 'martyred' Soleimani at centre stage in its communication with domestic audiences. Pictures of the general appear everywhere; he is hailed as a national hero and a symbol of the revolutionary cause.

The media plays a central role in this narrative battle, and Iran and the US fund satellite channels in the English, Arabic and Persian languages.<sup>6</sup> However, the present-day media environment is unpredictable and difficult for states to control. Iran practises stiff media censorship, but the flammable combination of social media and satellite television has undermined the state's monopoly over the means of communication.<sup>7</sup> The Iranian state narrative is therefore routinely challenged by competing interpretations of events. One important supplier of counter-narratives is Iranians in exile, who figure as commentators in international media and are well known to Iranian viewers. Despite a ban on satellite dishes and widespread satellite jamming, the Islamic Republic has been unable to stop a large proportion of the population from consuming satellite TV.<sup>8</sup>

In this article, we study commentary and debate on Soleimani's killing on the two leading satellite news channels targeting Iran and the Iranian diaspora at the time of the attack: BBC Persian and Iran International. We ask how commentators on the channels made sense of Soleimani's killing and subsequent developments, and, specifically, if they rallied around the Iranian flag. BBC Persian and Iran Inter-

<sup>4</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce, 'The killing of Qassim Suleimani was unlawful, says UN expert', *New York Times*, 9 July 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/09/world/middleeast/qassim-suleimani-killing-unlawful.html>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 8 August 2023.)

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Nichols, 'Iran tells UN it reserves right to self-defense over Soleimani killing', Reuters, 3 Jan. 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iraq-security-blast-iran-un-idUKL1N2981OT>.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wastnidge, 'The modalities of Iranian soft power: from cultural diplomacy to soft war', *Politics* 35: 3–4, 2015, pp. 364–77, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12084>; Constance Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy: social media and Iran–US relations', *International Affairs* 93: 3, 2017, pp. 545–62, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix048>.

<sup>7</sup> Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, *Blogistan: the internet and politics in Iran* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Fardin Alikhah, 'A brief history of the development of satellite channels in Iran', *Global Media and Communication* 14: 1, 2018, pp. 3–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517734251>.

national were based in the United Kingdom and provide 24/7 news and current affairs coverage. They invite experts from around the world to comment on current events and are widely watched by Persian speakers both inside and outside Iran. BBC Persian is funded by the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and claims to have full editorial independence. Iran International was established in 2017 and is privately owned. The channel officially states that it is owned by Volant Media Ltd, but questions have been raised over its funding and editorial independence. It is claimed that Iran International is linked to the Saudi Arabian royal family, but the channel denies these accusations and insists that it produces content in a 'transparent, impartial, and accountable' manner.<sup>9</sup>

The remainder of this article is divided into six sections. The first introduces the communication vulnerabilities of authoritarian states in situations of international conflict. The second explains our research methodology. The third situates Qasem Soleimani within the Islamic Republic of Iran's identity narrative. The fourth gives contextual information about the commentators. The fifth analyses the commentators' narratives around four critical events. The sixth presents conclusions.

## **The communication vulnerabilities of authoritarian states**

Strategic communication is a fundamental component of interstate political competition and conflict. As outlined by Colley, states promote 'selective interpretations of the past, present and future' to obtain a range of objectives including influencing great powers, maintaining alliances, overcoming military opponents, countering radicalization and building domestic support for military interventions.<sup>10</sup> Miskimmon et al. define strategic narratives as 'tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for the international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment'.<sup>11</sup> When other actors buy into the narratives promoted by a state, the latter's legitimacy and power are heightened.

Current-day narrative battles play out in a multilayered, media-saturated environment where a multitude of actors compete for agendas and attention.<sup>12</sup> De Graaf et al. maintain that this media ecology empowers the weaker sides in international conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Smaller states can influence the domestic debate of great powers through new types of media. Moreover, the literature on hybrid warfare observes that democracies are vulnerable to the influence campaigns of autocracies, which find opportunities to spread disinformation, sow fear and insti-

<sup>9</sup> Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Concern over UK-based Iranian TV channel's links to Saudi Arabia', *Guardian*, 31 Oct. 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/31/concern-over-uk-based-iranian-tv-channels-links-to-saudi-arabia>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Colley, 'Is Britain a force for good? Investigating British citizens' narrative understanding of war', *Defence Studies* 17: 1, 2017, pp. 1–21 at p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2016.1256209>.

<sup>11</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Forging the world*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Romy Fröhlich, *Media in war and armed conflict: dynamics of conflict news production and dissemination* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Andrew Hoskins, *War and media: the emergence of diffused war* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Beatrice de Graaf, George Dimitriu and Jens Ringsmose, eds, *Strategic narratives, public opinion and war: winning domestic support for the Afghan war* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015).

gate unrest on digital platforms.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, a nascent literature on media and authoritarianism is focused on how digitalization strengthens the ability of states to monitor and repress domestic opposition.<sup>15</sup> The takeaway from this literature is that autocracies gain from digitalization, whereas the above-mentioned scholarship on hybrid warfare emphasizes the vulnerabilities of democracies to foreign actors' influence campaigns. Authoritarian states are hence portrayed as being in an overall position of strength.

We question this idea that authoritarian states are winning the communication battle, demonstrating that they have important vulnerabilities as well. Specifically, we show that the combination of domestic opposition and international conflict confronts them with a major challenge. We focus on the case of Iran and the role of media commentators in the diaspora that engage with the Islamic Republic's strategic narrative.

The IR literature focusing on US–Iran relations predominantly examines the reciprocal demonization through discourse and its consequential impact on the countries' interactions. Scholars argue that the US political and media discourse regarding Iran portrays it as an 'international aggressor'<sup>16</sup> and a threat to international security,<sup>17</sup> employing 'Otherization'<sup>18</sup> as a defining characteristic. Likewise, studies suggest that Iranian media and state discourses construct an image of the US as 'the great Satan',<sup>19</sup> 'enemy', 'hypocrite' and a 'global arrogant and colonial power'.<sup>20</sup> The connection between this discursive battle and the US–Iran relationship, characterized by 'mistrust' and 'violence',<sup>21</sup> has been a central point of discussion in the literature. However, these studies primarily focus on how state actors, predominantly right-wing factions in the US and hard-liners in Iran, along with media representations construct the 'discursive field'<sup>22</sup> in which US–Iran relations

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *RussiaGate and propaganda*; Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, 'The global organization of social media disinformation campaigns', *Journal of International Affairs* 71: 1.5, 2018, pp. 23–32, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/global-organization-social-media-disinformation-campaigns>; Maria Snegovaya, *Putin's information warfare in Ukraine*, Russia Report 1 (Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2015), pp. 133–35.

<sup>15</sup> Tiberiu Dragu and Yonatan Lupu, 'Digital authoritarianism and the future of human rights', *International Organization* 75: 4, 2021, pp. 991–1017, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000624>; Seva Gunitsky, 'Corrupting the cyber-commons: social media as a tool of autocratic stability', *Perspectives on Politics* 13: 1, 2015, pp. 42–54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714003120>; Marc Owen Jones, *Political repression in Bahrain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *What is Iran? Domestic politics and international relations in five musical pieces* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Foad Izadi and Hakimeh Saghaye-Biria, 'A discourse analysis of elite American newspaper editorials: the case of Iran's nuclear program', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 31: 2, 2007, pp. 140–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859906298073>.

<sup>18</sup> Elham Kadkhodaei and Zeinab Ghasemi Tari, 'Otherising Iran in American political discourse: case study of a post-JCPOA Senate hearing on Iran sanctions', *Third World Quarterly* 40: 1, 2019, pp. 109–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1513786>.

<sup>19</sup> William O. Beeman, *The great Satan vs. the mad mullahs: how the United States and Iran demonize each other* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Ehsan Bakhshandeh, 'How mainstream Iranian newspapers portray the West: the influence of anti-westernism and anti-Americanism', *The Journal of International Communication* 20: 2, 2014, pp. 184–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2014.948034>.

<sup>21</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'Discourse and violence: the friend–enemy conjunction in contemporary Iranian–American relations', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 2: 3, 2009, pp. 512–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539150903306238>.

<sup>22</sup> Adib-Moghaddam, 'Discourse and violence'.

unfold. This limitation results in a monolithic representation of the discursive field, disregarding the influence of other actors. We foreground the role of the Iranian diaspora community and international Persian-language media, providing a different perspective on the discursive interaction. Given the connection between discourse and action emphasized in the literature, we contribute to understanding how the Iranian exile community may influence US–Iran relations.

The existence of diaspora communities can be an asset for states endeavouring to strategically advance their position in the world. Diasporas are held to facilitate public diplomacy if they maintain ties with their country of origin and share the views of the government in question.<sup>23</sup> The potential for synergies is strong when the country of origin and the country of residence are both democratic. However, for authoritarian states, the narrative battle is complicated by the fact that many actors who have fallen out with the state live in exile. Instead of amplifying the narratives of their country of origin, fugitives of authoritarian states may push for tough policies (such as sanctions) towards their country of origin.<sup>24</sup>

In situations of international conflict, this means that authoritarian states face a narrative battle on two fronts: not only do they engage in an information war with hostile states, but they also have to confront communication attacks from within their national community. These two fronts may intersect if rival states exploit the diaspora's grievances against the oppressive regime in the country of origin. Recognizing that criticism carries more weight when it comes from the nationals themselves, it is a common strategy for states to support opposition groups in countries with which they are in conflict. In some cases, the diaspora may willingly embrace and propagate the narrative of the adversary state due to their disillusionment with the government back home. In the following analysis, we demonstrate how these dynamics hindered the Islamic Republic of Iran's influence in the Persian-language media sphere following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani.

## Methodology

Our study employs a qualitative media content analysis to examine the framing of the events surrounding the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and its aftermath by commentators on the BBC Persian and Iran International news channels. The data collection period spans from 3 January 2020 (the day of the attack on Soleimani) to 12 January 2020 (one day after Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps admitted shooting down a flight operated by a Ukrainian civilian airline on 8 January). Due to the unavailability of news archives on these news channels' webpages, we retrieved the video data posted on their Telegram channels, including breaking news, expert analysis, roundtables and video footage taken by locals in Iran. As the scope of this study is limited to how commentators on the channels made sense of

<sup>23</sup> Robin Brown, 'Public diplomacy, networks, and the limits of strategic narratives', in Miskimmon et al., *Forging the world*, pp. 164–89; Nicolas Blarel, 'India: The next superpower? India's soft power: from potential to reality?' *LSE Research Online*, 2012, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/43445>.

<sup>24</sup> Nikola Mirilovic, 'Regime type and diaspora politics: a dyadic approach', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14: 3, 2018, pp. 346–66, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orw038>.

Soleimani's killing and the developments that followed, we focused on interviews, expert analysis, roundtables, and other forms of programmes in which external commentators participated.

During the data analysis process, we watched the programmes, and converted the videos to text through Fars Ava, an automatic speech recognition platform. We then checked the accuracy of the texts and translated them into English. The data was categorized based on the date, name of the commentator, gender, position, background, affiliation and/or political orientation. The next step was to identify the topics that were discussed during this period. We structured the empirical analysis around the four most salient events: 1) the attack on Soleimani and the question of whether it constituted an act of terrorism; 2) Soleimani's funeral; 3) Trump's announcement of 52 targets in Iran, including cultural sites; and 4) the downing of the Ukrainian civilian flight.

A methodological limitation of this study is that the data were retrieved through the Telegram channels of the news organizations, which may not include all the programmes broadcast on BBC Persian and Iran International in this period. However, they included a significant number of programmes and were, at least, the programmes that the channels chose to make accessible to the public through Telegram, which is widely used in Iran. Another limitation of this study is the exclusion of social media, where a wider range of actors is involved in constructing narratives around events.<sup>25</sup> We should take into consideration that the voices we studied in this research are the voices of established authorities, who may act as advocates for certain viewpoints.<sup>26</sup>

## Qasem Soleimani and the Islamic Republic of Iran's identity narrative

Miskimmon et al. distinguish between narratives at three different levels. First, international system narratives describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. Second, identity narratives set out what the story of the state or nation is, and what values and goals it has; and third, issue narratives set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished.<sup>27</sup> In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the international system narrative and the identity narrative are closely interlinked. The state defines itself in opposition to the western-led world order, which it portrays as profoundly unjust. This posture has roots in the 1979 revolution and the anti-imperialist discourses that inspired the revolt against the Shah.<sup>28</sup> Iranian

<sup>25</sup> Yevgeniy Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation', *International Affairs* 94: 5, 2018, pp. 975–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy148>.

<sup>26</sup> Bo Laursen and N. Leila Trapp, 'Experts or advocates: shifting roles of central sources used by journalists in news stories?', *Journalism Practice* 15: 1, 2021, pp. 1–18.

<sup>27</sup> Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: communication power and the new world order* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 76–80.

<sup>28</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'Islamic Utopian romanticism and the foreign policy culture of Iran', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14: 3, 2005, pp. 265–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920500280623>; Rahman Ghahremanpour, 'Iran looking west: identity, rationality and Iranian foreign policy', in Rouzbeh Parsi and John Rydqvist, eds, *Iran and the West: regional interests and global controversies*, special report (Stockholm: FOI—

revolutionaries' seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in November 1979 sparked a direct confrontation with the superpower, locking the two countries in a conflict spiral. Iran presents its domestic and foreign policies as 'resistance' against US interference in the Middle East and Zionism. It poses as the leader of an anti-colonialist movement representing the 'downtrodden' in the region and the wider Muslim world. This narrative has earned Iran huge influence in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen, where actors sharing its world-view dominate the political process.

At home, the state identity narrative has less traction because of the people's lived experience with clerical rule. The Islamic Republic's revolutionary discourse no longer resonates with the majority of the population. Iranians are concerned with mounting everyday problems and have lost their taste for grand ideological schemes. Critics of the Islamic Republic charge their leaders with pursuing their foreign policy agenda at the expense of the national interest. There is a counter-narrative to the state's emphasis on Islam and resistance that focuses on the grandeur of the Iranian civilization and its pre-Islamic roots.<sup>29</sup> For the most radical exponents of secular nationalism, Islam is an alien religion that was imposed on Iran through the Arab conquest.

Seeing the popularity of its revolutionary identity decline, the Islamic Republic has attempted to connect with Iranian nationalism to increase its appeal.<sup>30</sup> Although originally opposed to nationalism, it welcomes patriotism when combined with support for Islamic rule.<sup>31</sup> Qasem Soleimani was an asset in this respect, because he embodied the ideals of the revolutionary discourse while being promoted as a symbol of the power of Iran. Of a modest upbringing, Soleimani was pious, composed, courageous, committed to the fight against the US and the 'Zionist enemy' and devoted to the Supreme Leader. He also scored points with the broader population by leading the battle against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). During the years when ISIS ravaged Mosul and other Iraqi cities, the militant organization provoked both anger and fear in Iran. The Islamic Republic used Soleimani in communication campaigns intended to spur popular support for itself and its policy abroad. Propagandists spread pictures of him at the front line and stories about the awe he inspired among people, intentionally building his charisma. His following went well beyond the usual crowd of the clerical regime's supporters.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the charismatic Soleimani was promoted as a defender of Iran and a symbol of the country's prestige. He was an important part of the Islamic Republic's attempt to build support in parts of the population that did not share its politico-religious

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Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2011), <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--3168--SE>.

<sup>29</sup> Hussein Banai, Malcolm Byrne and John Tirman, *Republics of myth: national narratives and the US–Iran Conflict* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022).

<sup>30</sup> Narges Bajoghli, *Iran reframed: anxieties of power in the Islamic Republic* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, 'State identity in Iranian foreign policy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43: 4, 2016, pp. 613–29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2016.1159541>.

<sup>32</sup> Arash Azizi, *The shadow commander: Soleimani, the US, and Iran's global ambitions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

views. The Iranian state considered him a ‘national hero’ and a ‘manifestation of patriotism’ who sacrificed his life to save ‘Iranians’ life and honour’.<sup>33</sup> The national hero narrative was constructed through two main arguments: 1) Soleimani as a prominent actor in the fight against terrorism, and 2) Soleimani as a figure who represented the entire nation, regardless of political divisions.

Iranian officials and state media portrayed Soleimani as the most important ‘anti-terrorism’ figure in the region, who ‘exposed the ugly face of western interference in both Syria and Iraq’.<sup>34</sup> They praised him for ‘putting an end to Daesh’<sup>35</sup> and maintaining ‘peace’ in the country.<sup>36</sup> Soleimani was nicknamed ‘Commander of hearts’ (*sardar-i dilha*) due to having good relationships with a variety of actors ranging from reformists to hard-liners and being dear to the entire Iranian and Muslim nation. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani called him a ‘moderate’ figure on the first anniversary of his death, stating: ‘he was neither on this line nor on that line, he was neither right nor left ... no faction can consider martyr Soleimani as its own ... martyr Soleimani is a national hero and an honour for the entire nation of Iran, for the nations of the region and for revolutionary Muslims’.<sup>37</sup> The authorities called on the people of Iran ‘of all orientations’ to show unity in the face of the attack.<sup>38</sup> Iranian state media claimed that Soleimani’s assassination would result in the ‘unity of Muslims’ as well as the ‘unity of the Iranian nation’.<sup>39</sup>

In short, the Iranian state framed Soleimani as a national hero who saved Iran from ISIS and was loved by Iranians from all segments of society. In what follows, we analyse how commentators on Persian-language international media engaged with this narrative, and the extent to which they promoted or challenged it.

## Who were the commentators?

Most commentators were male Iranians based in western countries (see figures 1 and 2). The balancing of different backgrounds varied somewhat between the two

<sup>33</sup> IRNA News Agency, ‘haj qasim, qahraman-i mili va tajali-yi vatan parasti’ [Haj Qasem, national hero and manifestation of patriotism], 3 Jan. 2023, <https://irna.ir/xjLpkS>.

<sup>34</sup> Sonja van den Ende, ‘General Soleimani: A superhero who stood up to reveal the ugly face of western interferences’, *Tehran Times*, 4 Jan. 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/456592/General-Soleimani-a-superhero-who-stood-up-to-reveal-the-ugly>.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Khamenei’s letter to Soleimani on 21 Nov. 2017: ‘pasukh-i rahbar-i inqilab bi namiyyih qasim suliymani darbariyyih payan-i siyariyyih da’ish’ [The response of the Leader of the Revolution to Major General Qasem Soleimani’s letter about the end of ISIS rule], Khamenei.ir, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=38249>.

<sup>36</sup> Tasnim News Agency, ‘sardar suliymani dar payami bi imam khaminiyi payan-i da’ish ra i’lam kard’ [General Soleimani officially announced the end of ISIS in a message to Imam Khamenei], 21 Nov. 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/08/30/1579491>.

<sup>37</sup> President.ir, ‘ra’is jumhur dar jalasiyyih hiy’at-i dulat: shahid qasim suliymani qahraman-i mili, sardar-i shuja’ [The president stated in a cabinet meeting that martyr Qasem Soleimani was a national hero and a courageous commander], 4 Jan. 2020, <https://www.president.ir/fa/118888>.

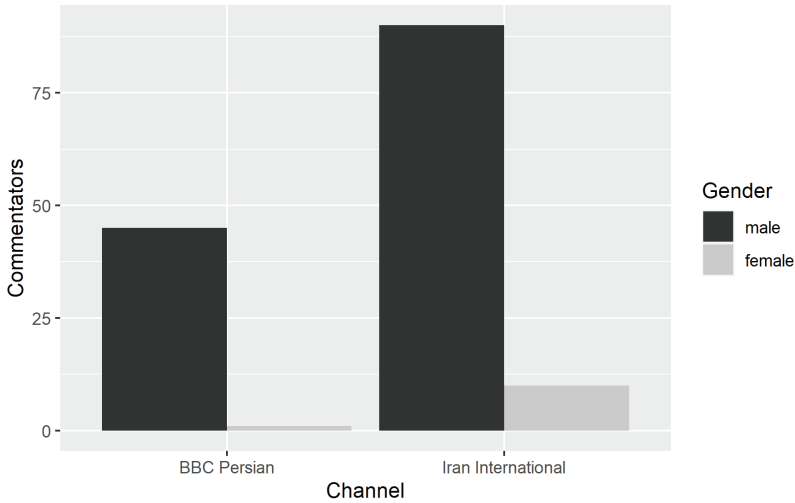
<sup>38</sup> Fars News Agency, ‘i’lam-i amadegiyyih farmandiyyih sipah-i imam riza baray-i intiqam-i sakht’ [Commander of the Imam Reza Revolution Guard Corps declares readiness for ‘harsh revenge’], 1 March 2020, <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13981013001504/>.

<sup>39</sup> Irna, ‘shahadat-i sardar suliymani zamin-i saz-i itihad-i milat-i iran va musulmanan-i jahan shud’ [The martyrdom of General Soleimani has paved the way for the unity of the Iranian nation and Muslims around the world], 6 Jan. 2020, <https://www.irna.ir/news/83623236/>.

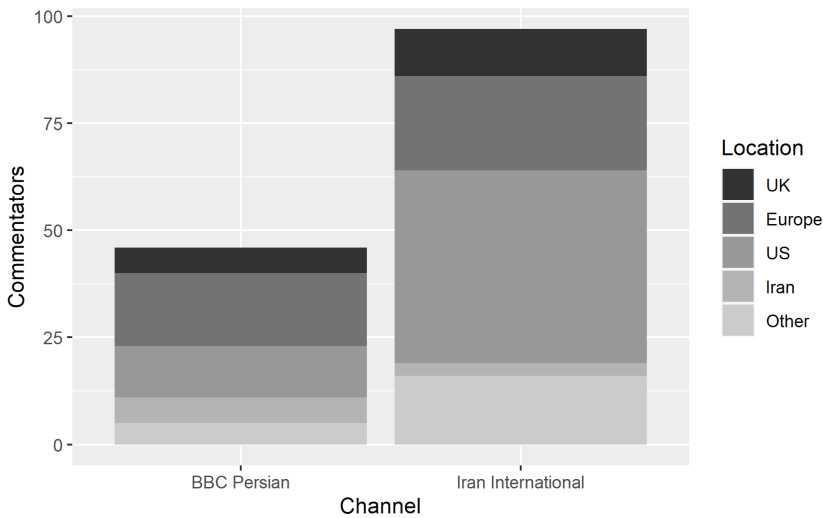


channels. BBC Persian included slightly more voices from inside Iran<sup>40</sup> and under-represented women more severely.<sup>41</sup> Iran International has the larger proportion (45 out of 100) of US-based commentators: only three called in from Iran, while eleven were based in other non-western countries.<sup>42</sup> The location of four of the commentators was not identifiable.

**Figure 1: Commentators by channel and gender**



**Figure 2: Commentators by channel and location**



<sup>40</sup> The total number of commentators taking part from inside Iran (both channels combined) was nine out of 146.

<sup>41</sup> Only one of the 46 commentators who appeared on BBC Persian was a woman.

<sup>42</sup> Including Afghanistan, Israel, Iraq, Malaysia, Tanzania, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The commentators comprised media practitioners and journalists, academics and researchers, activists, analysts and experts in the areas of politics, security, strategic relations, international relations and the Middle East. While no current Iranian state officials were present, some former state officials took part in the programmes. These included former Iranian embassy staff, former Iranian parliamentarians and former politicians from the Pahlavi (Shah) era. Former and current state officials from other countries, such as Mike Pompeo and Morgan Ortagus (formerly of the US Department of State), Afghan parliamentarians, a former adviser to the US National Security Council (Gary Sick), a former adviser to Trump (Kirsten Fontenrose), and a former British ambassador to Iran (Richard Dalton) also appeared in the programmes.

A significant difference between the two channels is that the commentators on BBC Persian did not participate as members of a political organization, nor were they introduced by their political affiliation. Nonetheless, we identified the political orientations of six commentators on BBC Persian.<sup>43</sup> Eight out of 100 commentators on Iran International participated with explicit political affiliations.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, we identified the political orientations of another six commentators.<sup>45</sup>

Overall, monarchists—who tend to support western intervention in Iran and international sanctions against the country, were more frequent guests on Iran International, participating in nine programmes in our study. By comparison, monarchists took part in only one on BBC Persian. Similarly, three members of the Iran Transition Council<sup>46</sup> and two members of the United Republicans of Iran<sup>47</sup> commented in programmes on Iran International while they did not appear on the BBC. Leftist groups, which often oppose foreign intervention and international sanctions, had no presence on Iran International and appeared only once on BBC Persian. Members of the People's Mojahedin Organization were absent from both media channels, although it is unclear whether this was a matter of the news media's policies or the organization's own choice.

<sup>43</sup> A member of Iran Revival (Farashgard) participated as a 'political activist'; a member of the Council of Nationalist-Religious Activists of Iran (*shuray-i fa'alan-i milli mazhabi*) attended as a 'political activist'; two commentators with reformist political orientation participated as a 'political activist' and an 'analyst'; a member of the Organization of Iranian People's Fedaiyan—an Iranian left-wing opposition political party in exile—participated as a 'political activist', and a member of the National Front of Iran took part as a 'political analyst'.

<sup>44</sup> Two members of Iran Revival, three members of the Iran Transition Council, a member of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, and the secretary-general of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan.

<sup>45</sup> Two monarchists (one of them took part in five programmes as a 'political analyst'), a member of the Iranian Secular Democratic Party, a member of the Council of Nationalist-Religious Activists of Iran, a former member of Iranian Liberal Students and Graduates with pro-US political orientation (who participated as an adviser to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies), and a member of the United Republicans of Iran.

<sup>46</sup> The Iran Transition Council is devoted to 'transition from the Islamic Republic to a democratic secular government based on [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights], the preservation of territorial integrity and unity of the country'. See <https://iran-tc.com/en/about-us>.

<sup>47</sup> The United Republicans of Iran are committed to 'republicanism, secularism, and liberal democracy'. See <https://jomhouri.com/jomhouri/>.

## **Narratives around four critical events**

The year 2020 started dramatically for Iran and its international relations. Soleimani's killing was only the first in a series of events that sparked intensive media coverage and debate. On the day of the attack, the focus of commentary was who Soleimani was, his position in the political system and in Iranian foreign policy, his relationship with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and his role and activities in other countries in the region. In the following days, the conversation turned to the future of the conflict between Iran and the US, Iran's revenge and likely response to the killing, and the likelihood of a war between the two countries. On Iran International, there was debate about the impact of the killing on the overall political climate in Iran, internal power dynamics and the state of opposition movements.

Soleimani's funeral was held from 4 to 7 January and was attended by huge crowds in cities in Iran and Iraq. One of the burial processions resulted in a stampede and the death of no fewer than 56 mourners.<sup>48</sup> Over this period, the discussion in the satellite media revolved around which groups of people took part in the funeral, the polarization in Iranian society, and differences in how people viewed Soleimani and the regime.

In a series of tweets starting on 4 January, US president Trump threatened to attack 52 targets in Iran, including cultural sites. This sparked much controversy on the two channels. The issue was discussed in relation to international law, war crimes and the cultural heritage of Iran. Trump's purpose in making the threat was also discussed by various commentators.

On 5 January, Iran announced the fifth step in the reduction of its commitments under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Following this, the future of the nuclear deal was discussed in the programmes. Likely spillovers of tensions between Iran and the US on Iraq and the consequences for US troops in Iraq were frequently referenced. Another topic of debate was the denial of a visa by the US to Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif which would have enabled him to attend a UN Security Council meeting.

On 8 January, Iran targeted the al-Asad airbase in Iraq, where US forces were stationed. A few hours later, the Ukrainian civilian flight was shot down in Iran. The attack on the al-Asad base sparked much commentary. There were also discussions about why the plane had crashed, and Iran International broadcast video footage of a missile hitting the plane, recorded by local people.

On 11 January, Iranian officials admitted that the aeroplane had been accidentally shot down. This admission met with harsh condemnations from commentators, who highlighted the lack of trust between the government and people in Iran and the resulting 'legitimacy deficit' of the regime.

On 11 and 12 January, reports and video footage of protests in different cities and universities were broadcast. Commentators debated the reaction of the inter-

<sup>48</sup> Michael Safi and Bethan McKernan, 'Iran: dozens dead in crush at Suleimani burial procession', *Guardian*, 7 Jan. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/07/qassem-suleimani-burial-iran-general-home-town>.

national community, the influence of international pressure and the fact that pressure from public opinion had led Iranian state officials to admit their fault. In the following content analysis, we take a closer look at four of these events.

### *An act of terrorism?*

As mentioned above, Soleimani's killing was condemned by Iranian officials as a case of 'state terrorism'. Several commentators made the same assessment. Hamid Asefi, a political analyst based in Iran, told Iran International: 'The political assassination of Soleimani is a provocative act and is of a terrorist kind: no national and Iranian forces accept this'.<sup>49</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, a prominent Iranian-born professor based in New York, also characterized the US strike as an 'act of terrorism'. He said: 'Normally, you would bring an act like this to the UN Security Council. If another country had done it, you would accuse it of fomenting anarchy'.<sup>50</sup> Experts who approached the question from the perspective of international law regretted that the US had ruined the possibility of a legal process against Soleimani. Saied Bagheri, a UK-based researcher in international law, affirmed that the US's 'targeted terrorism' contravened international law, and believed that Soleimani should have been put on trial.<sup>51</sup>

Other commentators highlighted the negative consequences of the attack for the future of Iran and its regional neighbours. A few explicitly echoed the Iranian state narrative and referred to Soleimani as a 'national hero'. This was more commonplace on BBC Persian than on Iran International. But even on Iran International, Mohammad Sadegh Javadi-Hesar, a journalist from Iran, stated: 'Condolences to Iranians for the martyrdom of Soleimani ... Soleimani and the Quds force have stood in the way of the US agenda in the region'.<sup>52</sup> Many of the commentators who considered the killing an act of terrorism criticized both Iran and the US. Reza Alijani, a political activist residing in France, emphasized that 'the battle between the US and Iran is not a fight between right and wrong. It is a battle between two excessive powers (*ziyadikhahan*), one big and one small, or 'imperialists' as we would refer to them previously'.<sup>53</sup>

Criticism of the US was thus part of the commentary on BBC Persian and Iran International in the immediate wake of Soleimani's killing, although it was often coupled with rebuke of the Iranian state. It was evident that many observers were disturbed by the unexpected escalation that had occurred. On the other hand, there was a parallel criticism of Soleimani and the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps. A forthright group of commentators argued against the views presented thus far—notably against the proposition that the US strike was an act of terrorism. They charged that Soleimani had himself been a terrorist. The commentators labelled the Quds Force commander variously as a person involved

<sup>49</sup> Iran International, 3 Jan. 2020. <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44311> (at 00:18–00:29).

<sup>50</sup> BBC Persian, 4 Jan. 2020. <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56067> (at 00:28–00:55).

<sup>51</sup> Iran International, 4 Jan. 2020. <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44390>.

<sup>52</sup> Iran International, 7 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44677> (at 00:25–02:23).

<sup>53</sup> BBC Persian, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56246> (at 00:58–01:13).

in 'creating and promoting terrorism in the region'; 'one of the main actors in charge of unconventional struggles'; 'a member of a network that is a tool for Shia fundamentalism'; 'similar to ISIS'; 'Shia Daeshi', and; 'Shia terrorist'. In line with this view, they reasoned that his killing should not be judged by conventional standards. For example, Ammar Maleki of Tilburg University in the Netherlands responded to Abrahamian's intervention on BBC Persian by asserting:

Whether his killing was an act of terrorism or not depends on how we view the killings of people like [ISIS leader] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi from a legal perspective. We can apply the same view to the killing of Soleimani. If one considers the killing of Al-Baghdadi, who headed a fundamentalist Sunni group that fought for creating an Islamic state, as a terrorist act, then, one can also consider the killing of Soleimani, who headed a group that fought for the domination of Shiites in the world, or at least in the Middle East, an act of terror.<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that Maleki did not explicitly cheer on the assassination. He stated that Soleimani was 'responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity [and] should have been put on trial in an international court'. In so doing, Maleki stood out from other commentators who unreservedly celebrated the US strike. Certain of these jubilant observers described it as 'delivering justice for one of the biggest terrorists in the last two decades, and killer of children', and 'a big triumph for Trump that will increase his popularity among Iranians'. They saw the killing as an act with positive consequences for Iran and for the region. Specifically, they claimed that it would weaken the Iranian state's authority, benefit the Iranian people and internal movements, and ultimately lead to regime change. Majid Mohammadi, a US-based political analyst, saw the strike as 'the consequence of the Islamic Republic's expansionism' and proclaimed that it would 'strengthen internal movements [and] give people more courage to encounter the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, which is a terrorist organization'.<sup>55</sup> Kamran Matin, a senior lecturer in IR at the University of Sussex, stated: 'this is probably heart-warming for the people who were massacred by the Islamic Revolution Guard in the streets of Iran, just a few weeks ago, it will increase their motivation in future protests.'<sup>56</sup>

Taken together, Iranian commentators were divided in their response to General Soleimani's killing and did not unanimously rally around the flag. Some were outraged and explicitly said that, if a war broke out, they would take up arms to defend Iran against aggression. However, a number of the commentators considered the attack justifiable and beneficial for the Iranian people.

### *Soleimani's funeral*

During Soleimani's funeral, people turned out en masse in five Iranian cities, suggesting a rallying-around-the flag effect. In any case, the Iranian state promoted the idea that the gatherings were a sign of national unity. On BBC Persian, this

<sup>54</sup> BBC Persian, 4 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56072> (at 01:07-02:00).

<sup>55</sup> Iran International, 3 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44296> (at 04:02-04:16).

<sup>56</sup> Iran International, 3 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44319> (at 01:54-02:16).

interpretation received some support. Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, a reformist based in Iran, said that ‘the funeral of Qasem Soleimani gathered everyone from the middle class and the deprived classes to groups that are relatively far from the system, and were thankful to him. It was a show of national unity and was effective in covering part of the problems that have emerged because of the inefficiencies of the system’.<sup>57</sup>

However, this was far from being the dominant position. Especially on Iran International, most commentators rejected the claim put forward by the Iranian state. Instead, they attributed the mobilization of the population to a combination of the Iranian state’s propaganda and the popularity of the *person* who was Soleimani. Hossein Alizadeh, a former Iranian diplomat, considered the funeral gatherings as ‘sympathy’, and not unity:

Khamenei calls this national unity and for me the word national is important, you cannot say that the people came out for the regime. But was it really a unity? I do not think so, it was sympathy and convergence (*hamhisi va hamgirayi*), ... and probably national gratitude for what Soleimani did in defending the borders of Iran.<sup>58</sup>

Hassan Hashemian, a journalist based in the Czech Republic, insisted on the propaganda aspect of the public gatherings, disputing that they were spontaneous:

This crowd has no political value in my opinion. Hitler also took his crowd to the streets. Mussolini the same. Stalin took his crowds to the streets ... We must look for democratic institutions such as elections, political parties and free media to evaluate the freedom of the people.<sup>59</sup>

The commentators made frequent comparisons with the repression of protests in Iran in November 2019 and the silence subsequently imposed on society. They pointed out that the families of the victims of state violence had been prevented from organizing public funerals for their loved ones. In a heated exchange with Dariush Sajjadi, who had praised Soleimani for his ‘patriotism, his effort in the imposed [Iran–Iraq] war, and his contribution to the fight against Daesh’, sociologist Hossein Lajevardi attacked the idea of ‘national unity’ in the Islamic Republic, instead describing a deep divide between state and society:

One can always be sorry for the killing of an individual, but I refer to Khamenei who said that ‘we have never seen anything but good from him’. In reality, the only good he did was for the promotion of the regime and ideology of the Islamic Republic. To Sajjadi who says that millions of people participated in his ceremonies, I ask: were the families of the 1,500 or so people killed in the November protests part of the people you saw [in the funeral], or the 60 million who live in poverty in Iran. Those whom the regime say were ‘led by outside forces’, were they not part of the Iranian nation?<sup>60</sup>

For commentators such as Lajevardi, Soleimani was no soldier defending the Iranian nation from outside threats; he was a defender of the regime and had

<sup>57</sup> BBC Persian, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56276> (at 02:53–03:20).

<sup>58</sup> Iran International, 8 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44823> (at 00:21–01:24).

<sup>59</sup> BBC Persian, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56280> (at 04:28–04:56).

<sup>60</sup> BBC Persian, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56261> (at 02:34–03:58).

been the second most important person involved in internal repression. These commentators denied that the Islamic Republic was acting in the national interest. In their eyes, the regime was only fighting for itself. Referring to the deaths of over 50 mourners in the funeral processions, Ali Afshari, a former member of the student organization Tahkim-e Vahdat, charged that the Iranian regime was in conflict with its own people: 'This regime does not even care about its supporters ... this is a regime that is not based on national and popular interests, but on dictatorship and corruption'.<sup>61</sup> In sum, the commentators did not rally around the flag at the time of Soleimani's funeral.

### *Trump's threat against Iranian cultural sites*

Trump's warning that he had listed 52 locations he would hit if Iran sought revenge for Soleimani's killing provoked a strong rebuke from the commentators. There was close to consensus among the solicited experts that it was unacceptable to include cultural sites on the list of potential targets. The commentators objected that the cultural sites were part of Iran's national identity. Some expressed that such an attack would be a war crime. Arash Aramesh, a security analyst based in the US, lamented: 'Trump does things that are illogical ... Iranian people are proud of their culture, their poetry, although they are discontented with the regime ... targeting cultural centres is a war crime'.<sup>62</sup>

A few commentators came to Trump's defence by interpreting the tweets in ways that made them look less threatening. Mehran Ansari, a member of the exile opposition network Farashgard, told the BBC:

I'm not the spokesperson of Trump, but he clearly said that he has a lot of respect for the Iranian people and culture in his speech about the killing of Soleimani. If we combine this with his Norouz greeting two years back, I don't believe he will strike Persepolis ... look at Afghanistan, is it the US or Taliban that has destroyed Afghan cultural sites?<sup>63</sup>

A fellow Farashgard member, Hamed Shibani Rad, seconded this reasoning and concluded: 'I don't think his tweet can be considered a war crime'.<sup>64</sup> However, these were the outliers in the commentary on this topic. The prevailing view was that Trump had crossed a red line by threatening to bomb Iranian cultural sites. The commentators interpreted the US president's tweets as an aggressive act against the Iranian nation. That said, they did not give the Islamic Republic a free pass either. While condemning Trump's intimidation, most commentators saved some of their criticism for the Iranian state. For example, the above cited experts who denounced Trump's tweets as a war crime argued that the Iranian state's aggressive behaviour was recklessly putting Iran's cultural heritage at risk. Hossein Aghai said:

The key question is whether the Islamic Republic wants to risk the lives of 80 million Iranians for the sake of Soleimani: do they want to incite the US? ... We should ask the

<sup>61</sup> Iran International, 10 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44963> (at 00:48-00:53).

<sup>62</sup> Iran International, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44557> (at 01:38-03:05).

<sup>63</sup> BBC Persian, 5 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56167> (at 02:34-03:34).

<sup>64</sup> Iran International, 5 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44478> (at 03:22-03:30).

Islamic Republic why they have let the situation degrade to the point that the US president questions the culture of the country.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, Arash Aramesh affirmed: 'The Islamic Republic can sacrifice the Iranian people's interests ... for the sake of preserving the regime'.<sup>66</sup> Some commentators considered Trump's action to be beneficial for the Iranian state and against the interests of the Iranian people. Mohsen Milani, professor of politics at the University of South Florida, conveyed such a view:

Trump's tweets and killing of Soleimani have been the biggest help for the Iranian regime in the last three years. Hundreds of people participated in ceremonies in Iraq, a country that attacked Iran under Saddam Husayn, or in Ahvaz where people previously protested against the regime. This shows that Iranians, who have a rich culture of 2,500 years, unite when they feel that their country is at risk.<sup>67</sup>

To conclude, the commentators reacted very negatively to Trump's threat and even decried it as a 'war crime'. Only a few disagreed and provided excuses for Trump. The experts perceived the risk of strikes against cultural sites as a menace for the Iranian nation. In other words, the commentators rallied around the flag on this question, contrary to the previous examples.

### *The downing of a civilian flight*

The Islamic Republic's bid for hearts and minds following the killing of Soleimani was dealt a severe blow after the shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger flight by the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps on 8 January 2020. For three days, the Iranian state sought to hide the truth of what had happened. When it was forced to admit guilt, Iran's strategic narrative foundered, and all rallying around the flag was lost. The commentators showed no mercy with the committed error and deceit, and took the tragedy as a proof that the state was cut off from the Iranian people. Ali Mazrouei, a former Iranian parliamentarian living in Belgium, said to BBC Persian: 'I do not think there is a greater catastrophe for a country than to be ruled by lies'. The experts considered the shooting down of the plane as a sign that the Iranian state and people had lost all common ground. In Mazrouei's words:

[The Iranian state] needs to trust the people. It needs to recognize all the people and not divide them into regime insiders and outsiders. It needs to open the way for all people who have different opinions and lifestyles but live in a land and in a house called Iran so that they can find their representatives in the political system.<sup>68</sup>

The issue of trust between the Iranian state and people was at the centre of discussions, and commentators maintained that the regime propaganda around the killing of Soleimani had collapsed. Behnam Gholipour, a journalist based in the Czech Republic, reasoned:

<sup>65</sup> Iran International, 5 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44529> (at 00:08-01:13).

<sup>66</sup> Iran International, 6 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44557> (at 03:30-03-37).

<sup>67</sup> Iran International, 5 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/44527> (at 00:30-01:25).

<sup>68</sup> BBC Persian, 11 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56866> (at 04:57-05:30).



## *Messaging Soleimani's killing*

The Islamic Republic has tried to reinvent itself through Soleimani ... but after this event, a new wave of protests calls the legitimacy of the regime into question ... They show that the gap between society and the state in Iran is still wide.<sup>69</sup>

Saeid Moeidfar, a professor of sociology at the University of Tehran, was asked if he thought that Iranians would rally around the flag in case there was a full-scale war with the US, as many had predicted after Qasem Soleimani's funeral. He replied:

There are two kinds of societies, one in which solidarity is stable, another which relies on 'collective passion' (*shuri jam'i*)... What we saw over the past days was entirely built on collective passion. If there is a war, our society will not have the necessary internal cohesion to stand together.<sup>70</sup>

Referring to the protests that broke out after the government admitted that it had shot down the airliner, the commentators insisted on the state's inability to create long-lasting unity between different groups of people. Faraj Sarkohi, a journalist and author based in Germany, maintained:

[Some] have claimed that Soleimani's huge funeral ceremonies made up for the schism between the people and the regime that was caused in November, but yesterday's demonstrations show that this is not the case. True, they were fewer than the ones who attended the funeral of Soleimani, but those who came [to protest against the regime] defied great fear and should be recognized as making a determined choice to show up.<sup>71</sup>

In short, the commentators unanimously assailed the Iranian state narrative after the downing of the Ukrainian flight, deploring a deep divide between the regime and the people.

## **Conclusion**

A nascent literature in IR is preoccupied with the manipulative communication behaviours of autocracies and the vulnerabilities of democracies to such acts. We have turned our attention to a different aspect of the issue, documenting the communication vulnerabilities of an authoritarian state during international conflict. At a critical point in time, when Iran had suffered a military strike from the US against its most high-ranking commander for external operations, and it mattered greatly to control the narrative, the Iranian state failed miserably in this task. Even though President Trump's decision to take the famous commander's life was widely denounced as an egregious breach of international law, Iran did not manage to promote its strategic narrative on two of the platforms that mattered the most in the Persian-language media sphere. Instead, it ended up provoking a storm of criticism from commentators shortly after the attack when the truth emerged about the shooting down of the Ukrainian civilian flight.

<sup>69</sup> Iran International, 12 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/IranintlTV/45144> (at 00:03-01:12).

<sup>70</sup> BBC Persian, 11 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/56974> (at 08:37-09:24).

<sup>71</sup> BBC Persian, 12 Jan. 2020, <https://t.me/bbcpersian/57041> (at 01:09-02:10).

These findings call for a reassessment of assumptions regarding the communication strengths and weaknesses of democracies and authoritarian states. The literature's predominant focus on democracies has created blind spots with regard to the predicaments faced by authoritarian states. The aspect that receives the most attention is that democracies' reliance on public opinion and free media makes them vulnerable to the subversion strategies of authoritarian states. As one contributor to this journal maintains, authoritarian states can set up shop in the media environments of democracies and weaken their resolve by driving wedges into the fault-lines of existing cleavages.<sup>72</sup> An often implicit corollary to this assertion is the idea that authoritarian states are unrestrained by public opinion and are in full control of the media environment in their own countries. That *may* be an accurate description in some states, but is far from always the case and should be treated as an empirical question. Concerning Iran, we have shown that satellite TV provides viewers with fiercely critical assessments of the government's performance. Others have documented that social media undermines the information monopoly of the regime.<sup>73</sup> Although Iran is an authoritarian state that practises stiff media censorship and puts journalists behind bars, it cannot stop critical commentary and reporting from reaching ordinary people in the country.<sup>74</sup>

While public opinion in authoritarian states may have a less inhibiting influence on the government's decision-making compared to democracies, authoritarian states still need to legitimize their actions, particularly in the context of international competition for hearts and minds. Consequently, they require communication strategies that go beyond disinformation and distortion. In this dimension, authoritarian states exhibit more weaknesses than strengths. We have highlighted some of these weaknesses. First, authoritarian states produce domestic opposition and cause people to leave the country, resulting in deep internal cleavages and hostile diasporas in many cases. Diasporas influence the reception of authoritarian states' narratives abroad. While the diaspora communities of democracies tend to amplify state narratives, exiles who have fled repression will often obstruct the strategic communication of the country of origin. Moreover, in the interlinked media environment, diasporas can influence the domestic public debate.

Second, opposition to authoritarian states among the nationals of a country can be exploited by foreign adversaries, posing a security risk in situations of interstate conflict. As much as authoritarian states may aim to use wedge tactics to weaken democracies, they suffer from internal divisions that in some cases exceed by some distance the cleavages found in democracies. With the aid of transnational media, these divisions can be harnessed as weapons. Saudi Arabia's support for Iran International is a case in point. When Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to re-establish

<sup>72</sup> Wigell, 'Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy'.

<sup>73</sup> David M. Faris and Babak Rahimi, *Social media in Iran: politics and society after 2009* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015); Banafsheh Ranji, 'Shaping news waves and constructing events: Iranian journalists' use of online platforms as sources of journalistic capital', *New Media & Society* 23: 7, 2021, pp. 1936–52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820925457>.

<sup>74</sup> According to a 2021 survey, internationally produced media are widely consumed in Iran: Gamaan (The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran), 'Iranians' attitudes toward media: a 2021 survey report', 5 April 2021, <https://gamaan.org/2021/04/05/iranians-attitudes-toward-media-a-2021-survey-report>.

diplomatic relations in March 2023, one of the reported conditions was to soften the coverage of Iran on Iran International.<sup>75</sup>

In the narrative battle we have examined, the Islamic Republic faces opposition from within its national community in parallel with its confrontation with the US. It has to fight on two fronts and is therefore disadvantaged. The Iranian state did not benefit from a significant surge in patriotism among commentators; in fact, some openly applauded the attack on Soleimani. Despite the superpower escalating the conflict to the point where the possibility of war was real, few commentators came to the Iranian state's defence. The commentators actively counter Iran's narrative and discredit its legitimisation claims. They particularly criticize the identity narrative that portrays political Islam as being aligned seamlessly with the nation's values and aims. In the Iranian state narrative, Qasem Soleimani was a national hero, fighting terrorism, who was cherished by Iranians from all walks of life. He was a bridge between the state Islamist ideology and Iranian nationalism, as explained. However, in their counter-narrative, the commentators reject this claim and dissociate the identity of the Islamic Republic from the identity of the nation. They depict Soleimani not as a symbol of Iran but as the representative of an authoritarian regime. Accordingly, they did not univocally react when the Iranian commander was killed. Only when Trump threatened to bomb Iranian cultural sites did the commentators rally around the flag.

Lastly, the substance of communication is crucial. The prevalence of corruption and fear hampers the performance of many authoritarian states. Moreover, they face trust issues due to their reliance on secrecy and deception. As a result, they may struggle to capture the audience's attention for the messages they convey. Furthermore, the exposure of lies can lead to communication disasters. The crisis triggered by the downing of the Ukrainian civilian flight serves as a prime example. After Iran International had broadcast footage of a missile hitting the plane, which had already been shared on social media, the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps was forced to admit that it had mistakenly shot it down. However, it had initially disseminated blatant lies about the tragedy. Iran would have been better advised to adhere to the golden rule of crisis communication and tell the truth from the outset. However, such an approach was unlikely in the authoritarian state that is Iran. The communication vulnerabilities discussed here are inherent in the operation of most authoritarian states.

The policy implication is to promote a global, open and fact-based media environment. Free media remains a condition for democratic progress around the world. This article serves as a reminder of the significance of international media in sustaining critical debate in authoritarian states. It is crucial that people gain access to the internet and reliable news sources in their own languages. We encourage further research on what produces communication vulnerabilities in authoritarian states (and what does not). State capacity, factionalism, political

<sup>75</sup> Summer Said, Stephen Kalin and Benoit Faucon, 'China plans new Middle East summit as diplomatic role takes shape', *Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-plans-summit-of-persian-gulf-arab-and-iranian-leaders-as-new-middle-east-role-takes-shape-357cfd7e>.

culture, the size and location of diasporas, and international alliances and adversaries are some factors likely to influence an actor's position. It would be a mistake to assume that all authoritarian states are alike, are internally coherent, and possess a master plan, along with the necessary skills and resources to execute it. In reality, the political situation in most countries is both messier and more fragile.