The Enemy Narrative: How Authoritarian Regimes Use Twitter to Oppress Public Opinion, Evidence from Flight PS752

Emad Rahmanian
Department of Business Management, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran
emad.rahmanian@ut.ac.ir

This research explores the Iranian state narrative through Twitter after the flight PS752 incident. The IRGC downed an airliner jet amid the tension with America creating a narrative battle on social media and social media users tried to counter this weaponization of social media. Understanding this weaponization might help the civil society in the future. Information dominance in social media leads to creatin of a state fabricated truth. To this end, 13517 tweets were scraped using the R program 14 days after the incident. After refining the tweet pool, 4947 tweets were used to identify the state narratives. Thematic analysis and narrative analysis are integrated to obtain a multidimensional understanding. Four narratives are identified, the enemy narrative, the intimidation narrative, the threat narrative, and the fake news narrative. Narratives' functions and structures are also discussed to present a better understanding of these state narratives and how the Internet and social media Are used as a weapon against civil society. The findings reveal how social media might be used to portray a desired propaganda narrative of reality.

Keywords: strategic narratives, political narrative, social media, Twitter, Iran, Flight PS752

I nternet and social media have changed the political climate in our world drastically on an unprecedented scale. In Iran, social media, the internet, and broadcasting channels are under the restricted control of the government. These state-controlled media all are meant to impose the hegemonic political narratives and political propaganda as needed. But the internet allows individuals to challenge the state's narratives by providing a platform to create a counter-narrative.

Unlike the common belief, some scholars are concerned that social media are becoming a threat to freedom of speech and democracy (Tucker et al., 2017). Early use of modern social media for political gains by people goes back to 2009 and Iranian Green Movement in which the government shut down SMS and restricted the internet, therefore social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook became the main tools of protestors for

communication and planning (Thieltges et al., 2018). But first government planned use was in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, when Russia used social and international media to shape international perceptions and narratives (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016). Russia tried to control public narratives by controlling internet discussion using echo chambers, bots and fake accounts (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015). Again in 2017-2018 in Iran, civil unrest took place but this time platforms such as Telegram were the main tool for protestors. After this, the government banned all social networks and applications except Instagram and WhatsAapp. Finally, in 2019, the internet was shut down in Iran for one week leaving Iran behind a curtain.

MEDIA BACKGOUND OF IRAN

Iran has always used media as a tool for oppression (International Federation for Human Rights, 2020). The fully state-owned broadcasting service, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), is under the heavy control of the supreme leader. From 1979, IRIB has broadcasted trials, confessions, and narratives that portray oppositions and dissidents as ideologically or morally corrupt or misled (IFHR, 2020).

Even recently in the early 2010s, state television was the main information source for many Iranians. Wojcieszak et al. (2013) in an extensive study in four major cities of Iran (Tehran, Mashhad, Tabriz, and Shiraz) found out that almost 96 percent of the respondents (based on 1022 fully completed questionnaires) use TV as their main source of information, 55 percent got their news from newspapers, and 51 percent relied on strong interpersonal communications.

However, recent studies show that IRIB's audience has shrunk significantly (International Federation for Human Rights, 2020). Almost 73 million out of 82 million Iranians have access to the internet and almost 64 million use mobile internet. Mobile subscriptions include 124 million which is more than the population (Hootsuite, 2020). According to this report, active social media users in Iran are about 47 million, which is almost 57 percent of the population. Also, 50% of the population (42 million) are mobile social media users. This study also indicates that half of the respondents use the internet and not surprisingly, the news was the second use of the internet after community (Hootsuite, 2020).

Hootsuite (2020) reports that despite the severe crack down on internet and social media, in 2019 Iran had a 2.5 percent increase in mobile social media users (almost 1 million users) and a staggering number of 7 million users increase (18%) in active social media users. The increase in active users of social media indicates that social media are gaining prominence among Iranians. Therefore, considering this vast penetration of social media among Iranians, controlling social media is of vital importance for the Iranian regime.

The Iranian regime uses several methods to control the internet and social media: blocking social media, blocking political, religious, or social contents, pro-regime manipulations, detention of bloggers or users, killing of bloggers or users, and technical attacks against government critics or human rights organizations (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019). Also, in 2019, for the first time, the internet was fully shut down. But in a more subtle way, Iran tries to impose a state narrative of the reality.

Twitter as a Narratives Battleground

Narratives include symbolic actions that convey meaning and have sequences for those who want to create, transfer, and interpret them and are related to both real word and constructed world leading to action (Fisher, 1985). Usually, narratives speak on behalf of the individuals but counter-narratives are selective and people use them to position themselves in relation to hegemonic narratives (Frandsen et al., 2017). Counter-narratives are stories that people tell to resist dominant narratives (Andrews, 2004). Counter-narratives are alternate versions of reality and are defined in relation to narratives they are countering (Frandsen et al., 2017). People on Twitter form narratives interpreting the meaning of individual tweets in relation to a bigger picture or concept (Sadler, 2018). Additionally, through collective action, people on Twitter form narratives. This formation is by the repetition of keywords, hashtags, and connections established through retweeting and liking (Sadler, 2018). Such platforms enable people with different or even conflicting views to form a single recognizable narrative on a subject (Papacharissi, 2015).

Twitter is widely used by governments and is highly renowned for spreading fake news and propaganda (Boshmaf et al., 2011) through bots and fake accounts. These accounts are used to manipulate public opinion and narratives, polarizing people in the political domain (Kollanyi et al., 2016). Analyzing social networks and their effects on

democracy and political debates and even armed conflicts is a growing field of research in recent years, such as studies in France (Ferrara, 2017), Brazil (Arnaudo, 2017), USA (Shao et al., 2017), Russia (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016) and Iran (Thieltges et al., 2018). The use of bots, echo chambers and suspicious accounts in today's politics is indisputable (Boshmaf et al., 2011; Ferrara et al., 2016). Governments use these methods to widely spread political falsehood (Weeks, 2018). Furthermore, bots and suspicious accounts are used as the main tool for online astroturf (or fake grassroots) in smear campaigns (Woolley, 2018) and social spam campaigns and polarization (Ferrara, 2017).

Online political debates occur in an environment that is fundamentally different from the offline world (Ho & McLeod, 2008). These discussions are anonymous (Papacharissi, 2004) and public or semi-public (Wyatt et al., 2000). As politics become more distinct on social media and partisanship has become a social identity, feelings toward political opposition identifiers become more hostile (Tucker et al., 2018). This polarization generates hostility towards political opposition (Huddy et al., 2015; Abramowitz & Webster, 2016).

Narrative and the State

Politicians try to use narratives to pose a certain perception of a specific issue. These strategic narratives are a means to shape the public perceptions and actions of the domestic and international audience (Miskimmon et al., 2014). For example, state media tries to refer to the Flight SP752 incident as a result of American electronic warfare and blame it on American adventurism and intervention in the region (*The New York Times*, 2020; CBS News, 2020). This narrative is even spread by Mohamad Javad Zarif, foreign minister of Iran via his official Twitter account which is illustrated in figure 1. This is not the first time that Twitter is used to establish a fake strategic narrative. Iran used Twitter, even after complete restriction of access for citizens, to impose the narrative that Twitter is a propaganda machine established by USA and Israel, the enemies, to overthrow the Iranian regime (Thieltges et al., 2018).

Figure 1: Zarif's tweet Mohamad Javad Zarif, foreign minister of Iran, using Twitter to reinforce the state strategic narrative (Zarif, 2020)

Enemy and being under influence of the enemy, the USA in most cases, is one of the most important discourses in the strategic narrative used by the Iranian regime. Doshman (the enemy) is almost central to any Iranian strategic narrative. The enemy is ever-present in narratives and shapes the state propaganda. The enemy is to blame for protest all over Iran for fuel price hike (Malekian & Finnega, 2019), for the Ukrainian plane incident, and for protest over economic demands (Cunningham, 2018).

Since 2001 and legislated by the Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCRC), Iran enforces ISPs (Internet Service Providers) to employ some filtering systems. After the disputed 2009 presidential election and the rise of social platforms, mainly Facebook and Twitter, as tools of communication for protestors and dissidents, the government tried to devise a response. First, it shut down mobile services and SMS during protests and after the initial brutal crackdown, it filtered platforms such as Google Chat, Yahoo Messenger and Viber. As the protest grew and became nationwide, Facebook and Twitter became the most influential tools of communication for protesters. At this time Ayatollah Khamenei directly addressed Twitter and Facebook as a means of American intervention in Iran's domestic affairs. As a response to this situation and considering the ineffectiveness of the

filtering strategy, government decided to change strategy and engage directly with social media. The government's main tactics on Facebook were:

1. Fake accounts: creating fake accounts to infiltrate users' circles
2. Provocation: writing provocative comments to encourage responses and interactions
3. Monitoring and reporting: to spot and report trends and active users. (Article 19, 2017)

Again in 2017 and 2018 protests erupted all over in Iran due to economic situations and issues. During this time, Telegram was the main platform for communication and sharing and dissemination of information resulting in filtering the service. Again in 2019, Iranians took to the streets due to the economic situations and a hike in gas price overnight. This time the government completely shut down the internet for 7 days. This shut down was ordered by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and imposed by the Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology (ICT).

Since 2018, the Iranian regime has tried to duplicate their Facebook strategy on Twitter. Like Russia, Iran uses bots and fake accounts to influence the narratives on social media (Thieltges et al., 2018). There are official complex and multilayered structures in the Iranian government in charge of controlling cyberspace. Organizations such as the High Council of Cyberspace, Cyber Defense Command, and Iran's Cyber Army are among those set up after the first major use of social platforms and the internet by people in 2009.

Cyber Defense Command was set up in 2010 shortly after the 2009 civil unrest and is under the supervision of the Passive Civil Defense Organization, which is a subdivision of Joint Staff of the Armed Forces. The High Council of Cyberspace was established in 2012 by the direct order of Ayatollah Khamenei for instituting high-level policies on cyberspace. Iran's Cyber Army is another organization consisting of professional hackers and specialist in IT. These organizations formulate campaigns to smear any group, person, or narrative that is undesirable. According to the report by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Stronski & Ng, 2018), they routinely focus on different internal targets such as government officials, reformists, cultural and media figures, and many more. This time the Iranian regime tried to pose state fabricated narrative on the shoot-down of the Ukrainian flight by IRGC.

Ukrainian Flight Incident

On January 3, 2020, around 1 a.m. local time (22:00 UTC 2 January) American drones attacked Baghdad International Airport and assassinated Qasem Soleimani, Iranian major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, secretary-general of Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iraqi militia. In retaliation, on January 8th, Iran launched a ballistic missile attack on American Ayn Al-Asad Airbase located in Erbil, Iraq, in an operation called "Martyr Soleimani". According to American sources, the attack started at 1:34 a.m. local time and ended by 4:00 a.m. local time. This attack was reportedly telegraphed in advance through Iraqi intelligent forces and undisclosed intelligence agents. This operation had no casualty except one, the Ukrainian flight SP752. Ukraine International Airlines flight SP752 was an international flight from Tehran to Kiev on January 8. At 06:12 local time (02:42 GMT), the flight took off from Imam Khomeini International Airport and shortly after, the airliner, Boeing 737-800, was shot down by Tor M1 surface to air missile (SAM) missile launched by IRGC resulting in the death of all 167 passengers and 9 crews (Oliphant et al., 2020). First, there was uncertainty about the cause of the crash.

Shortly after the news breaks out, a journalist comes up with a theory that the plane was downed by an Iranian SAM missile mistakenly. His tweets are available in figure 2. Gradually evidence begins to back up the theory, a picture of an exploded missile head comes up. At this stage, although the theory seemed plausible, users cast doubts on the missile theory either because there was not enough solid evidence to simply because it was too shocking to be believed. But a video ended all debate, an unknown person filmed the moment of missile impact on the plane. This video spread all over the country through social media on an unprecedented scale. The tweet, which shared the video for the first time, is presented in figure 3.

Behnam Gholipour
@beehnam

تردید ندارم که #بوئینگ ۷۳۷ متعلق به اوکراین را قرارگاه #خاتم‌الانبیاء ارتش که در آماده‌باش کامل بود به عنوان پرنده ناشناس تشخیص داده و سرنگون کرده است. درباره این مساله به تفصیل نوشته‌ام.

Translate Tweet

8:47 PM · Jan 8, 2020 · Twitter Web App

451 Retweets   3K Likes

Behnam Gholipour @beehnam · Jan 9
Replying to @beehnam

به شکل و شمایل و شیارهای ظرف غذای یک‌بار مصرف دقت کنید در این دو عکس. شبیه به هم نیستند!؟

☐ 184   ⟲ 16   ♡ 231

Figure 2: Left: I have no doubt that the Ukrainian Boeing 737 was downed by Khatam-ol-anbia Command[1] which was in full alert as a foreign unidentified flight. I wrote in details (Gholipour, 2020a).
Right: Look at the food packaging, aren't they the same? (Gholipour, 2020b)

Several scenarios were developed to explain the fatal incident. In one scenario, the plane was shot down because Iran Air Defense Forces were at full alert and an operator mistakenly launched the surface to air (SAM) missile. Another scenario accounts for the notion that Iranian forces did not close the airspace to create a human shield as a deterrent against possible American retaliation after operation Qasem Soleimani and fully operational SAM missile detected the civilian plane as an enemy and shot it down. Shockingly, finally it was revealed that not one but two missiles were launched on the plane. For three days after the incident, no authority took responsibility. Finally, on 11 January, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the Aerospace Force of IRGC, held a televised press conference and admitted their full responsibility for shooting down the plane with two SAM missiles, allegedly having it mistaken it for a cruise missile.

Meanwhile, during these three days, the propaganda machine understood the necessity of immediate action to manipulate and distract people. State-backed accounts tried to manipulate the public narrative by tweeting fake news and disinformation campaigns. This article attempts to analyze the tweets and fake narratives to shed light on the efforts to use strategic fake news to manipulate the public domain in favor of

political hegemonic narrative. This article studies the different aspects of the strategic narratives imposed by the Iranian regime on the Ukrainian flight incident and to categorize them to have a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Figure 3: the video that shows the launch and impact of the missile (Gharib, 2020a)

METHODOLOGY

This study applies the Vaismoradi et al. (2013) and Floersch et al. (2010) approaches to integrate thematic analysis and narrative analysis. Essentially, this method provides a multidimensional understanding of state strategic narratives, whereby thematic analysis and narrative analysis are applied to the same body of qualitative data to illustrate how they make meaning.

Collection of Data

All the data used in this paper are public and publicly available and do not pose a threat to any user's safety or anonymity. To build the data set, tweets were scraped using the R program. Data were collected 14 days after the incident, on 21st January. The eight

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[1]The Islamic Republic of Iran Air Defense Force (Persian: نیروی پدافند هوایی ارتش جمهوری اسلامی ایران) is a branch split from IRIAF that controls

most prominent hashtags (#) were used to scrape pro-regime tweets trying to fabricate fake narratives. To increase the span of scraped tweets, hashtags in Persian and English were chosen. A total number of 13,517 were scraped. Details of scraped tweets are presented in table 1.

Table 1 *Details of scraped tweets*

Description	Hashtags	Number of scraped tweets	Total number of favorites of scraped tweets	Total number of retweets of scraped tweets	Total number of mentions of scraped tweets
Hashtag in Farsi (English translation)	‫من_هم_سپاهی_ام‬# (I am an IRGC member too)	446	919	19307	74
	‫پرواز ۷۵۲‬ # (flight 752)	2080	18637	163093	177
	‫انتقام_سخت‬ # (hard revenge)	1026	4524	166659	309
Hashtags in English	#HardRevenge	1904	2709	69283	1558
	#IranPlaneCrash	1977	2873	487764	1218
	#PS752	2071	4034	250607	656
	#QasemSoleimani	2077	2794	332847	726
	#sardarhajizade	1936	5080	42815	229
Total		13517	41570	1532375	4947

Please note the presented hashtags are not exhaustive. Hundreds of duplications were found either by bots or by the cyber army, but for the purpose of this study, a small sample was used to facilitate a qualitative analysis. Also, some hashtags were used both by the people and by the cyber army. After collecting tweets, all English tweets were removed. Also, tweets were searched and scanned for any duplication and possible retweets with minor changes in the tweet, almost 9917 tweets were acceptable. Furthermore, the body of tweets was scanned again to identify and remove tweets that

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Iran's military land-based air defense established in 2008.

included our terms, but was not explicitly related to our topic of interest (e.g., "مترو انقلابی ام آرزوست (I'm longing for a revolutionary subway)"). At this stage, 4316 tweets remained.

Coding of Tweets

Atlas.ti version 8 was used to code tweets. All tweets are in Persian and in order to be represented in the article, they are translated. Although in the previous section, tweets were scanned for any irrelevant tweets, again they were searched to spot any irrelevant tweets. The first fragments of tweets or a complete tweet were selected as "Quotes". Quoting helps the researcher to immerse in the data and spots any irrelevant tweets. This process elicits a formatted body of text, which will be used in coding.

The second step is a critical step in methodology which includes selecting, coding, and clustering. Selected quotes were revisited to select the final body of the quotes. Then codes were assigned to the quotes. In a constant process of reading, rereading, and comparison wording for codes were refined. In the next step, an organized assembly of codes was drawn together allowing the researcher to create themes and draw a conclusion. Finally, 40 codes were identified, and almost after coding one-fourth of the tweet, saturation was reached.

Keyword Popularity

The most commonly used word is General (سردار) which is repeated 1498 times followed by Hajizadeh (حاجی‌زاده) which is used 1028 times. The next 8 words are revenge (انتقام, 933 times), flight 752 (پرواز ۷۵۲, 597 times), Ghasem Soleimani (قاسم سلیمانی, 444 times), Sepah, which means corpse in Persian and is a shorter version of IRGC (سپاه, 384), Iran (ایران, 290 times), America (آمریکا, 271 times) and finally Ukrainian (اوکراینی, 234 times).

Themes

Following Vaismoradi et al. (2013) and (Braun & Clarke, 2006), this study applies a thematic analysis that tries to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). After coding all the data, it was trying to search for themes by collating codes into potential themes. The next step is reviewing and naming themes. Themes are presented in figure 4 schematically and the results are presented in table 2.
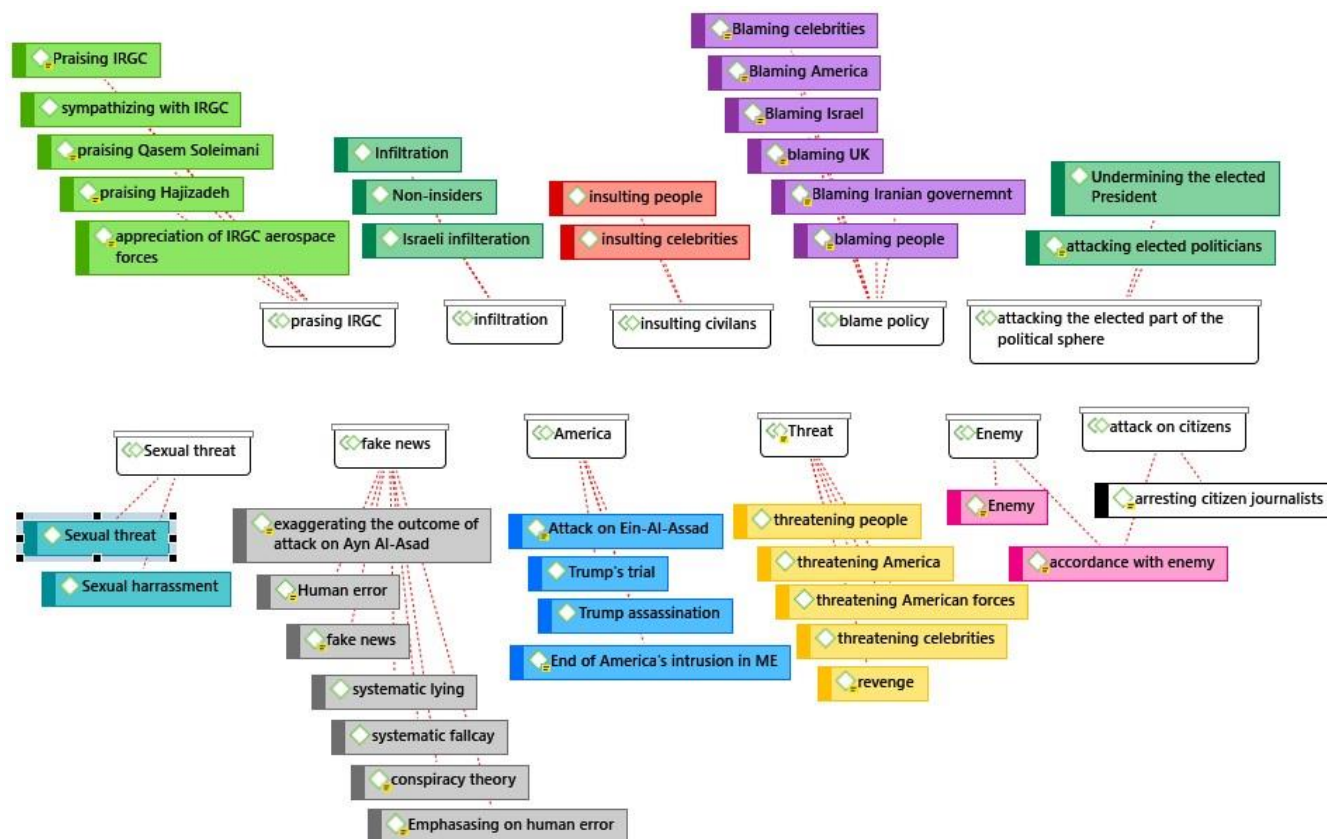
Figure 4: Themes and codes. Direct export from Atlas.ti

Table 2 *Thematic analysis results*

#	Theme	Codes	Example (in Persian)	Example (English translation)
1	America	• Attack on Ein-Al-Assad • End of America's intrusion in ME • Trump assassination • Trump's trial	ترامپ به مرگ طبیعی نخواهد مرد.	Trump will not die of natural causes.
2	attack on citizens	• accordance with enemy • arresting citizen journalists	آمریکا درحال اختلاف انداختن بین مردم هستش و بعضی از مردم با تفکر غربی فکر میکنن اونا مارو دوست دارن آمریکایی ها برای بزرگ کردن کشورشان حاضرن همه کارکنن حتی سپهبدهای کشورمونم تروریست صدا کنند.	America is dividing people and some people with western mindset think west love us. America does anything to make that country great even calling our Generals terrorist.
3	attacking the elected part of the political sphere	• attacking elected politicians • Undermining the elected President	این جوریه آقای روحانی داره پیش میره امروز فرداس که سردار حاجی زاده رو مجبور کنن بیاد مسئولیت جنگ جهانی اول و دوم رو هم گردن بگیره تا مبادا به تریپ قبای بعضیا بر بخوره	It seems that President Rouhani will force General Hajizadeh to take responsibility for WWI and WWII so some don't get upset.

#	Theme	Codes	Persian	English
4	blame policy	• Blaming America • Blaming celebrities • Blaming Iranian government • Blaming Israel • blaming people • blaming UK	مانده ام حالا که تقریبا دخالت آمریکا و اسرائیل و همراهي خط نفوذ داخلي در سقوط هواپيماى اوكرايني محرز است و عدم پاسخگويي شوراي عالي امنيت ملي در اين حادثه و جاخالي دادن ايشان واضح و مبرهن است چرا مطالبه گري نمي كنيم	Now that the role of America and Israel and the non-insider and infiltrators in shooting down the plane and irresponsibility of Supreme National Security Council undeniable why we remain silent?
5	Enemy	• accordance with enemy • Enemy	دشمن و شبکه نفوذش در داخل را دیدید؟سپهبد قاسم سلیمانی را با ترور فیزیکی حذف کردند و حالا بدنبال حذف سردار حاجی زاده با توطئه پیچیده شبکه نفوذ منافقین نام آشنا و غربگرایان در داخل هستند	Did you see the trick and treachery and infiltration network of the enemy? They neutralized Soleimani physically and now want to remove Hajizadeh by an elaborate conspiracy of insiders and westernist.
6	fake news	• conspiracy theory • Emphasizing on human error • exaggerating the outcome of attack on Ayn Al-Asad • fake news • Human error • systematic fallacy • systematic lying	سردار حاجی‌زاده اگر ما بلافاصله اطلاع رسانی می‌کردیم سیستم پدافندی ما فشل و امنیت مردم به خطر می‌افتاد	Hajizadeh said if we announced the incident immediately it would have compromised or defense system and people's security
7	infiltration	• Infiltration • Insiders • Israeli infiltration	از موضوع جنگ الكترونیک و سامانه امریكا و واحد ۸۲۰۰ اسرائیل برای خرابكاری نیز نمی توان غافل شد کما این که این مسئله سابقه دارد	We cannot overlook electronic warfare and Israeli 8200 unit in sabotage though it is not unprecedented.
8	insulting civilians	• insulting celebrities • insulting people	معلوم نبود الان چكمه سربازی كدوم كشور داشتن مارو له میكردن من طرفدار مطلقه سپاه و مقام معظم رهبری هستم به خدا قسم اگه قسم ما مشكل ما مشكل دارن از بی عرضگی خودشونه.	We don't know what foreign force were crushing us under their boots. I totally surrender to IRGC and Leader. I swear to god that if there is any problem in the country it is because of people incompetency.
9	praising IRGC	• appreciation of IRGC aerospace forces • praising Hajizadeh Praising IRGC • praising Qasem Soleimani • sympathizing with IRGC	ما از نیروی پدافند شما خطا دیدیم اما خیانت ندیدیم خطای سهوی بود.	We saw error from your defense force not treason. It was not intentional.
10	Sexual threat	• Sexual harassment • Sexual threat	وقتی داعش به دانشگاه‌ها حمله میکرد دختران جوان را برای جهاد النكاح جدا میكرد! كاش بعضی ها میدانستند که اگر سلیمانی ها و حاجی زاده ها نبود الان ناموس‌هایشان توسط داعش برای جهاد النكاح جدا میشد!	When ISIS attacked the universities they separated young girls and raped them! If it was not for Soleimani and Hajizadeh, your mother and sisters were being separated by ISIS to be raped.
11	Threat	• Revenge • threatening America • threatening celebrities • threatening American forces • threatening people	۱۷۴ نفر که چیزی نیست ۸۰میلیون ایرانی فدای اسلام و استقلال وطن سپاه خیلی بیشتر از این ها به گردن ایران حق دارد	174 people do not even worth it, 80 million people may die for Islam and independence. We owe Sepah much more.

FINDINGS

In the next step, themes are interconnected to create narratives. Using the Twitter platform and tweets to understand political information war and narrative, especially in the political domain, is not unprecedented. For example, Jones (2017) used Twitter to examine the weaponization of social media and the nature of non-western propaganda in the Persian Gulf Crisis in 2017. Also, Cunningham et al. (2015), tries to examine ISIS's online presence and narrative on Twitter.

In order to find the narratives' structure, it is imperative to ascertain how themes and codes are intertwined to create a meaning of state strategic narratives and means of oppression. Four types of the narratives were identified: intimidation, enemy, threat and fake news.

The Intimidation Narrative

In this narrative, the main plot is to intimidate and silence people. This narrative includes five themes: insulting civilians, praising IRGC, sexual threat, attack on citizens, attacking the elected part of the political sphere. This narrative tries to dictate the strategic narratives of the state by putting pressure at three levels: at a personal level on civilians, at an organizational level by glorifying IRGC, and at the national level by undermining the elective part of the Iranian political context.

The main purpose of this narrative is to increase the cost of criticizing for ordinary people. Insulting and threatening other accounts on social media platform is a dominant method for Iranian cyber army. By enforcing this narrative, those who are critics of the Iranian regime are linked to foreigners and enemies. This tweet highlights the plot of this narrative:

> "*The only factor that harms the country and the regime is infiltration which is followed by those mercenaries especially some celebrities*".

An important part of this plot is sexual threat and harassment, which have destructive elements, given that Iranian culture is very conservative and traditional on sexual matters. This agent provocateur, like strategy, entices people in online debates to hostility which obliterates the original topic. For example, this tweet uses this narrative plot to entice users:

"*You haven't seen ISIS and sex jihad[2], and haven't seen your "namus[3]" is being sold, and your wives and children are not raped in front of you. Brave General Soleimani and Hajizadeh and IRGC.*"

Celebrities, like other civilians, were under pressure. Considering their audience and their role in spreading the information and news, in these narratives they are under threat as well. This narrative sends a message to famous people like actors, directors, and athletes that if they want to be able to work in Iran, they should keep silent. For example, this tweet refers to people and celebrities who were tweeting about the incident as in figure 5:
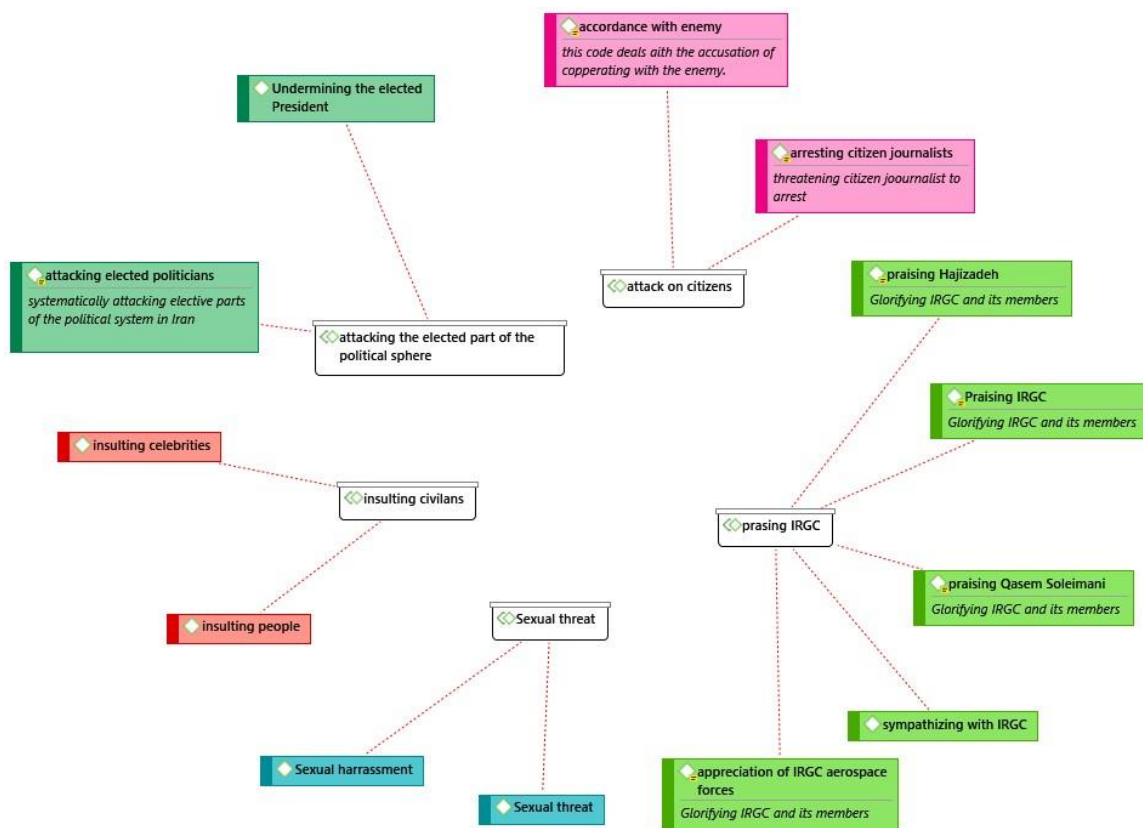

Figure 5: The intimidation narrative network of themes.

"*These people are not comparable to the member of IRGC. These people hang out with*

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[2] Arabic: جهاد النكاح, Romanized: jihad al-nikah, Persian: جهاد نکاح, Romanized: jahad ol-nekah) refers to the purported practice in which terrorist group such as ISIS use willing Muslim women as sex slaves (Rinehart, 2019).

[3] the concept recognized in some circum-Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Central and South Asian cultures and usually translated as "honor." One way to understand namus is to regard it as patrilineal sovereignty, particularly reproductive sovereignty. After an "honor killing," a "defense of honor" explanatory narrative is told by both perpetrator and community alike (King, 2008)

traitor spy celebrities, they are hyenas and vultures and what they do is good for nothing, I am a Sepahi".

The other form of this narrative is glorifying the IRGC. Again, this plot tries to silence other voices by praising and appreciating the IRGC at and extreme level and turn any criticism into treason. To this end, a major plot of this narrative was appreciating IRGC and its commanders, the major culprit of the incident. For example, this tweet might shed some light (rough translation):

"General Hajizadeh I am so sorry that we couldn't defend you against those who can't tolerate the unity of the people and your attack on the Untied State, you are not alone."

By this plot, the cyber army, while IRGC was under heavy criticism by Iranian people, tried to change the direction of the twitter narrative from the demand of justice to "they don't deserve appreciation". This narrative deviates users of social media from their true cause and reduces their effort to denial or stating the obvious. Also, these efforts, puts IRGC in such a high position that any criticism is the criticism of the regime itself as stated in this tweet:

"I think we should deploy those insulting to IRGC to the border, or even Iraq, and these are my suggestions: Mahmoud Sadeghi[4], Mohamad Reza Aref[5], Sadegh Zibakalam[6], Hessamedin Ashena[7]".

This incident was a good opportunity for appointive parts of the Iranian political sphere to fully attack those elected by the people. This plot is associated with a greater strategic plot of the Iranian regime which promotes revolutionary ideology and tries to prove the elective part ineffective.

The Enemy Narrative

This narrative is almost central to the ideology of the Iranian regime. In this narrative, every problem is the outcome of enemy's action which, based on the problem, could be America, Israel or even Shah's loyalists. The enemy narrative's plot is four-fold:

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[4] Mahmoud Sadeqi is an Iranian lawyer, jurist, academic and reformist politician and former member of the Parliament of Iran representing Tehran, Rey, Shemiranat and Eslamshahr electoral district.
[5] Mohammad Reza Aref is an Iranian engineer, academic and reformist politician who was the parliamentary leader of reformists' Hope fraction in the Iranian Parliament, representing Tehran, Rey, Shemiranat and Eslamshahr.
[6] Sadegh Zibakalam is an Iranian academic, author and pundit described as reformist and neo-liberal.

infiltration, enemy, blame policy, and America. The enemy narrative's networks is depicted in figure 6.

The infiltration plot implies that when the Iranian regime fails at an organizational level it is definitely due to a non-insider or infiltrator. Infiltration is either in IRGC which led to shooting down the plane by infiltrator to defame IRGC or in elected government or even the president himself:

"Hard revenge means cutting the hand Of America and its infiltrator such as Rouhani from the region".

"In these days be very careful about the infiltration network which is trying to change people's mind and create negotiation-revenge bipolarity in the grassroots"

"A few important questions: 1-whos said that cruise missiles are coming toward Iran? 2- Who is responsible for miscommunication between operator and command center? 3- Who permitted the flight? 4-why the footage is presented by Nariam Gharib, Iran International network employee for the first time? I smell treason"

This plot, systematically, tries to acquit IRGC of the shooting down the plane and accuses others as the chief culprit. The purpose of this plot is to alter the online debates from putting pressure on the regime and jurisdiction system to proving that IRGC committed this crime. The enemy plot highlights the role of the enemy in the situation and puts the spotlight on the others to hide the role of IRGC:

"Trump ordered the attack, so maybe shooting down the plane was part of their plan"

Like other plots in the enemy narrative, blame policy is an effort to deviate attention from IRGC to others countries like the UK and even Iranian people and government.

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[7] Hesamodin Ashna is an Iranian politician and advisor to President Hassan Rouhani. He is also the head of Center for Strategic Studies. Ashna is described to be in Rouhani's inner circle and associated with the Moderation and Development Party.
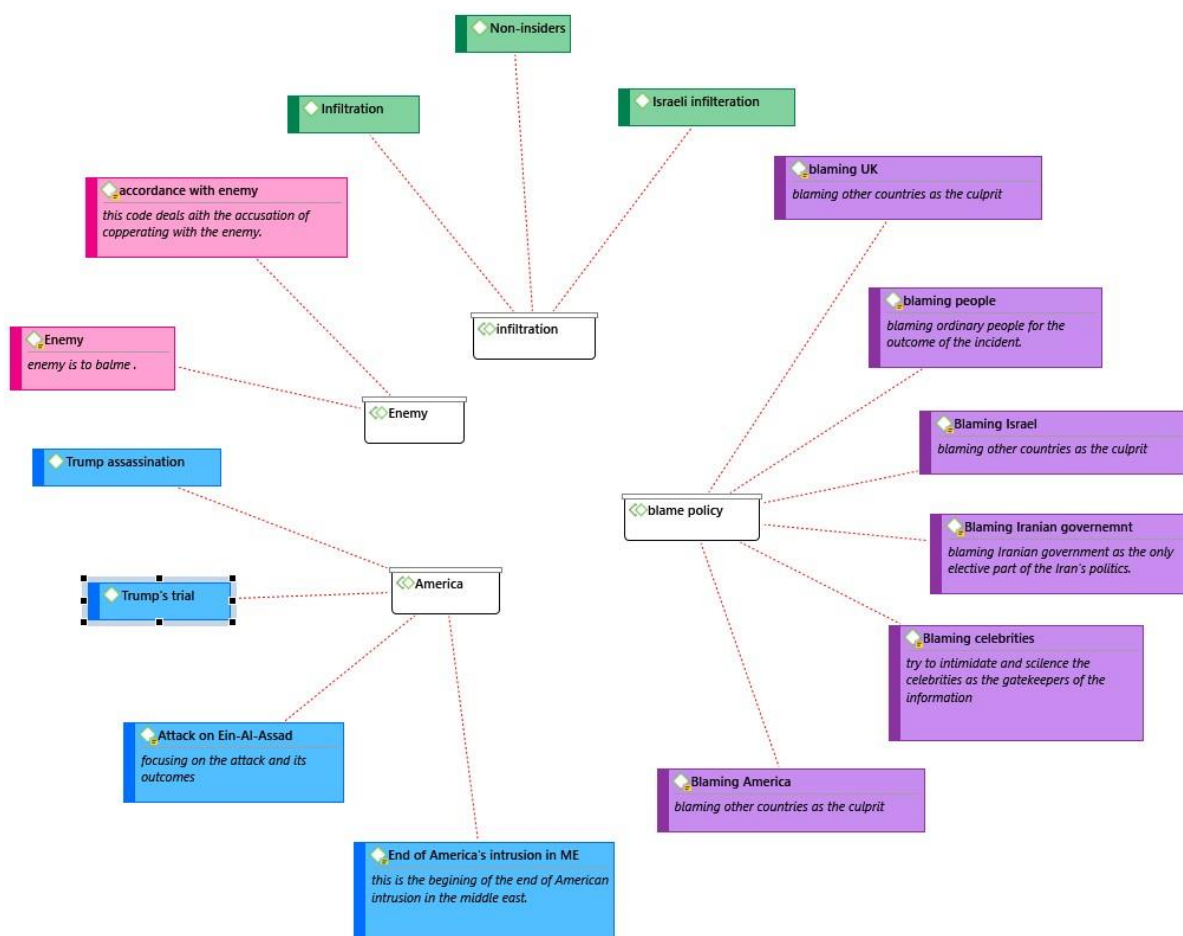
Figure 6: The enemy narrative network of themes.

"*Although IRGC accepted the human error and apologized and promised compensation, people still focus on the Ukrainian flight and make America and UK satisfied*"

Since in the Iranian regime paradigm, America is the great devil, blaming America is not unprecedented. Blaming America is the dominant narrative since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Here again, the cyber army tried to blame America for shooting down the plane and linked the critics and users asking for justice to America:

"If the great devil was our friend, it didn't suffer our people for years, didn't impose sanctions on us. If we are wise enough, we don't show a green light to the enemy and do not befriend him. The enemy is the enemy and those who take the enemy's side are getting paid by it".

This tweet summarizes the core plot of this narrative: if you criticize the Iranian regime, you are filled with envy. In conclusion, this narrative tries to position the enemy as the culprit and silences critics by linking them to the enemy; you are either with us or with the enemy.

The Threat Narrative

The main purpose of this narrative is to highlight the act of revenge and threat. The revenge is directed towards America and the threat is aimed at Iranian people and celebrities. As discussed previously, the Iranian regime uses the threat to choke any dissident voice. The threat to attack America or hard revenge (انتقام سخت), the exact word used by the Iranian supreme leader, also is an effort to counter the anti-regime and anti-IRGC user-made narrative prevalent on twitter. This narratives' network is as in figure 7:
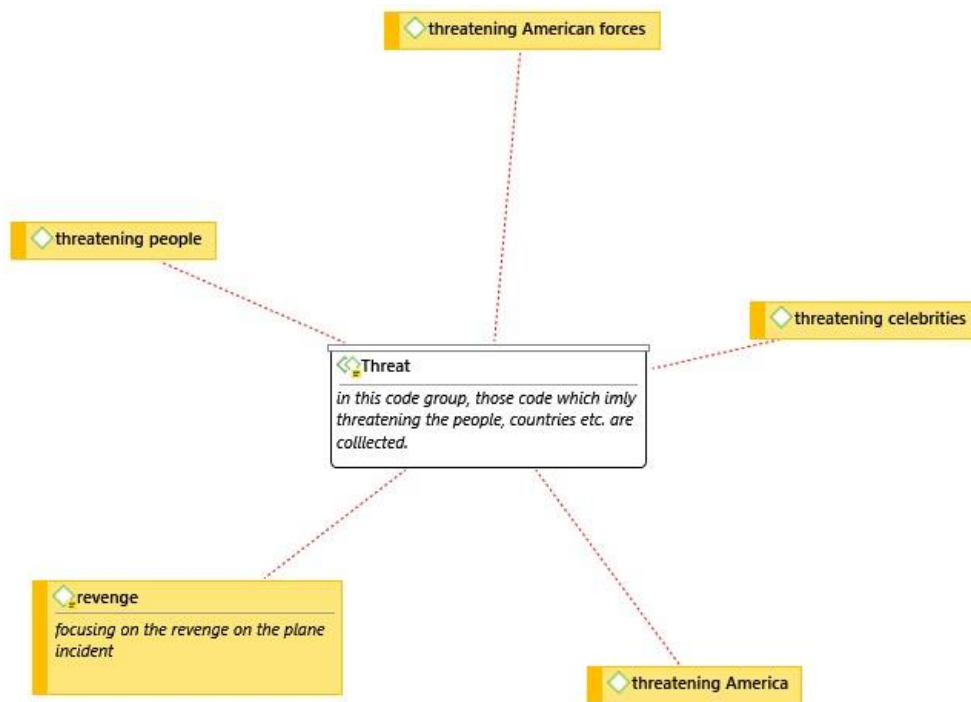

Figure 7: The threat narrative network of themes.

Another function of this narrative is to encourage the supporters of the regime. After IRGC took full responsibility and IRGC top-ranked officers visited the family of the victims of the flight compulsorily, the cyber army tried to impose the "we will take revenge" narrative:

> *"From this morning, no place on earth is safe for American terrorist forces, the dawn of the victory is near"*

> *"General Hajizadeh, while visiting the family of a victim of the flight, promised they will avenge the blood of the martyrs of the flight from America"*

Threatening dissidents, people, and other country is a major tactic that the Iranian regime uses to oppress civil society. Whenever the Iranian regime is under pressure internationally or internally, the threat is a weapon to silence people.

The Fake News Narrative

From the very first moment, the Iranian regime started to spread fake news. Different fake news, systematic lying, conspiracy theory are among these fake news. The network is presented in figure 8.
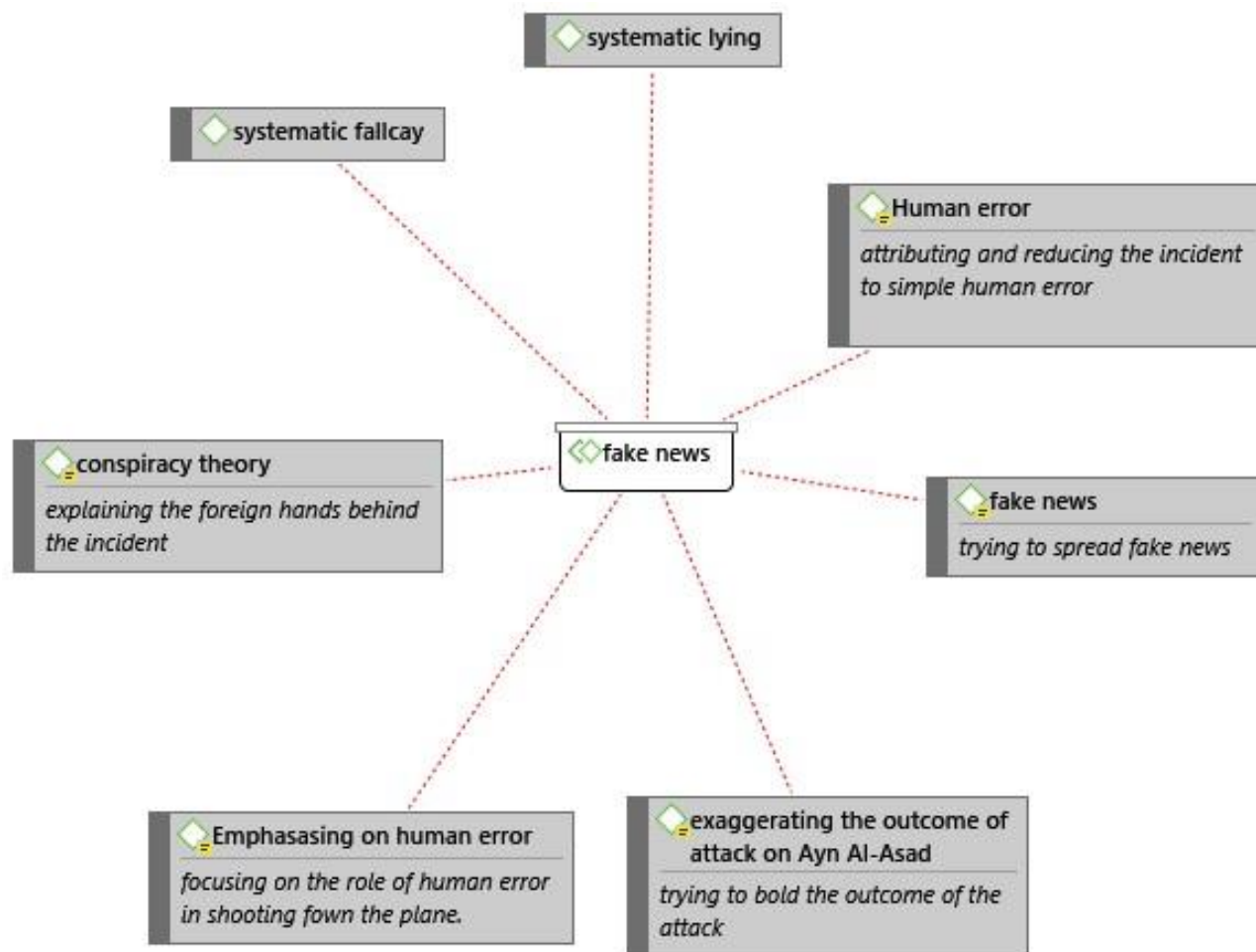

Figure 8. The fake news narrative network of themes.

First, the cyber army tried to come up with a different theory for the crash. One of these theories was since the price of petrol in Iran is extremely low, some passengers smuggled petrol in their luggage. This theory first was circulated in messaging platform such as Telegram and then reinforced by spreading through Twitter, referring to Telegram as the reference. An example is provided in figure 9.

Figure 9: Left: the news circulating in Telegram platform, English translation: is the secret of Ukrainian flight crash in the luggage passengers? Some news highlights the difference in the price of petrol in Iran and Ukraine encouraged some passengers to smuggle petrol in their luggage. It is a possibility that the smuggled petrol in Boeing 737 caused the explosion. Right: the technical failure in the plane was confirmed by Iranian expert, but not by Ukrainian experts and since the flight was Ukrainian, we had to accept their call. The petrol is much cheaper in Iran and some tried to smuggle it.

Another plot was a fallacy. For example, they tried to blame the government for not restricting access to the sky that night, although it is not their duty to do so. For example, this tweet implies that IRGC asked the Supreme National Security Council to clear the sky, but the Iranian government did not:

"General Hajizadeh and General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran did their duty in asking the Supreme National Security Council to clear the sky. They know their duty and they sacrifice their lives for Nezam[8]"

Human error was another fake news which was debunked after IRGC claimed the responsibility. First, the cyber army reduced the incident to a simple human error.

"Operator committed a mistake decided at his own discretion and acted accordingly"

But soon after it was revealed that two missiles were fired, they reinforced the human error theory.

"Our unity is damaged by treason not error. In appreciation of 42 years of safeguarding Iran's sky, we stand with you. I am a Sepahi too".

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[8] Nezam literally means system and hardliner and conservative use this word to refer to Iranian regime and appointive parts whenever they want to differentiate between themselves and the government and elected parts.

Spreading conspiracy theory was another plot in the fake news narrative. For example, this tweet tries to impose the narrative that America is behind the incident:

"We all know that this is the conspiracy of America, and even though if it isn't, we hold Sepah dear because they are soldiers of Imam Zaman[9]"

The final major plot in the fake news narrative was exaggerating the outcome of the attack on Ayn Al-Asad. In this plot, the cyber army tried to pbliterate the incident by spreading fake news about the attack:

"After ten days since the attack on Ayn Al-Asad, America is reporting the casualties gradually. Didn't they say nothing happened?"

This emphasis mainly had two purposes: First, casting doubts on the incidents and second, accusing any critics of accordance with the enemy plotting to undermine Iranian victory against American forces.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, a systematic approach was used to examine how the Iranian regime used narratives on social media, specifically Twitter, to oppress civil society, after shooting down Ukrainian Flight 752. Using scraped tweets from Twitter, this qualitative study applied the integration of thematic and narrative analyses method to identify themes and combine them into structures of narratives to provide an insight into how governments and states use different discourse to create a narrative to oppress. This paper reveals how authoritarian regimes might use social media to impose their strategic narratives on their populace.

For the Iranian regime, Twitter always has been a sword of Damocles, enabling civilians and protestors to express their voices amid tensions and crises. Twitter has always played an important role in politics in Iran. The disputed 2009 Iranian presidential election and 2018 civil unrest (Burns & Eltham, 2009; Thieltges et al., 2018) and social bots and debates on Twitter (Thieltges et al., 2018) have been studied before. Not

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[9] Hujjat Allah ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi (Arabic: حُجَّة ٱللَّٰه ٱبْن ٱلْحَسَن ٱلْمَهْدِيّ, Ḥujjat Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan al-Mahdīy)[a] the 12th Imam in Shi'ism believed to be Qa'em or redeemer (Encyclopedia Iranica, 2019)

surprisingly, it was found that the strategic narratives around Flight 752 incident also manipulated reality and oppressed civilians.

Although these narratives have different plots, they share the same goal, altering reality. This overwhelming ideological and political agenda underlying the narratives indicate this fact that social media and platforms like Twitter, still play an important role in people's resistance against hegemon narratives of the state.

The main purpose of the Iranian regime and its agents and proxies in social media is establishing a narrative of reality. Silencing, discrediting, and smear campaigns are parts of this purpose. Although spotting narratives and their underlying themes is valuable, understanding how authoritarian regimes use these narratives to oppress is more valuable. Findings of this study show that various tactics the Iranian regime used to create a new narrative of the incident.

The Humiliation and Demoralization

One purpose of this manipulation machine is to oppress civilians and social media users. Several themes and narratives are interpretable within this tactic. Insulting civilians and sexual threats are aimed at humiliating and provoking civilians. Demoralizing and targeting hope and dignity of people is designed to send a strong message that they (those targeted) have no recourse. Spreading anger and fear is to stop them from tweeting and demanding justice or their civil rights. This tactic is used to silence people on social media. In this case of online hostility, users get trapped in an online debate which is a distraction from the main topic.

Celebrities who have a broader reach are more prone to the effect of this strategy. The cyber army uses fake accounts and trolls to defame and threaten celebrities as opinion leaders on social media. Smear campaigns against celebrities are orchestrated on social media, newspapers, and IRIB simultaneously. The Iranian regime wants to break people on social media, scattering them into nonaligned groups to control them more efficiently.

The Blame Game

This tactic is used to blame everyone except the chief culprits. This projection method is seen in infiltration and blame policy. With this strategy, the Iranian regime tries to alter the reality of the incidents and link them to other agents. Blaming America and UK or even Israel as the minds behind this incident, or any other incident, is an

endeavor to put the spotlight on them instead of IRGC. Blame policy is mainly used to draw attention away from the real culprits. It is done directly through foreign agents or indirectly through infiltration. In infiltration, the cyber army tries to blame non-insiders or outsiders in Iranian organizations as the culprits in order to acquit those responsible for the incident. Infiltrators are not usually declared to the public and the infiltration plot is gradually dismissed.

Surprisingly, this tactic is not limited to foreign countries or organizations, Iranian people and celebrities are targeted as well. With this in mind, the Iranian regime tries to put pressure on people. In this case, the main narrative was to blame people and celebrities due to the election of Hassan Rouhani as president. although, it is not clear how electing Rouhani as president and the incident are related, us, this plot was heavily used.

The Affiliation with the Enemy

The enemy is central to many narratives. In general, the enemy is used as an umbrella term to refer to an unknown entity but in this case, America was the main enemy. Hence, the cyber army tries to prove an affiliation and connection between people and the enemy with the statement: you are either with us or with the enemy. This old method is reproduced in new forms of narratives on social media and users are accused of cooperation with the enemy. With this strategy, any act of information distribution or demand for justice is in line with the enemy's goals and must be punished. This tactic justifies the oppressive and suppressive measures against civilians. For example, IRGC claimed that it arrested the person that filmed the video of the incident and sent it to journalists, for espionage. His or her whereabouts are still unknown. However, Nariman Gharib, who first posted the video on Twitter claims that IRGC has arrested the wrong person (Gharib, 2020b).

The threat

Threat is another tactic used to oppress civil society. The aim of the threat is to overshadow the responsible individuals and organizations and also divert the attention of users. The threat could be towards a foreign country, in this case, America, or citizens perceived of affiliation with the enemy.

Altering The Reality Strategy

One of the main purposes of such efforts is to alter reality. Authoritarian regimes, aware of the power of social media, try to alter reality and manipulate the masses by spreading fake news. In this case, Iran tried to alter reality by spreading fake news through traditional and modern media. Social networks, including Twitter, were among those influential media through which falsehood was spread. The Iranian regime systematically weaponized fake news to create a new reality in two ways: altering the cause of the incident and magnifying other incidents to overshadow the main incident. First, the cyber army focused on theories such as infiltration, treason, human error, and foreign attacks to alter reality. After the truth about the shooting emerged, the authorities tried to deflect by focusing on other things such as the attack on Ein-Al-Assad (Please provide some information about this) or the number of American casualties.

This Iranian regime uses this tactic to create an alternative reality in order to manipulate the mind of its supporters as well as civilians.

Glorifying The IRGC

Glorifying the IRGC is to oppress any criticism by linking any critics to the enemies of the state. In this sense, cyber army and fake accounts praise and glorify IRGC in a way that users dare not criticize.

In conclusion, these findings on the structures and dynamics of the state strategic narrative provide some insights and evidence for state-backed intentional disinformation tactics and campaigns to impose a specific interpretation of reality and ideology to undermine Iran's civil society's righteous demands. Unlike many disinformation tactics which aim to spread confusion (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014) as a way to control the society, these narrative are an attempt to alter reality. Also, considering the limitations on IRIB foreign TV and radio broadcasting channels imposed by foreign governments and legislative bodies, and also their costs, social media is a cost-effective tool that can be operated inside Iran with a global and online reach. IRIB is under US sanctions since 2013 and Iran uses many proxies or seemingly unconnected sources on other social media such as Facebook to whitewash the Iranian regime. Although Facebook has deleted many pages connected to Iran, the same pattern is observable on Twitter. Early initiatives from Twitter might prevent these networks of content mills and spammers.

DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study should be interpreted within its limitations. First, the number of hashtags scrapped is limited and increasing hashtags might be beneficial in enriching and broadening the findings. Also, the number of tweets is limited as well. Scrapping more tweets gives a better landscape on themes and tactics. Finally, replicating this study in other social media such as Instagram which is more visual might help us to have a better understanding of this phenomenon. This study provides ample evidence of the weaponization of social media by authoritarian regimes and denotes the importance of social media intervention in a similar situation especially orchestrated by governments which have a history of violating human rights.

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