

Iranian Political Narratives: A Social Media Analysis

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Introduction

With the growing phenomenon of social media, government figures and political elites have increasingly turned to social media platforms as a way to interact with the public and push their political agendas. Platforms like Twitter allow for this information to be quickly disseminated to the general public in a matter of minutes and this information can be accessed from nearly every corner of the world. Based off that information, social media allows researchers to gain a bird's eye view of what people are saying and feeling across different platforms over time. They can then take that information and quantify the data to better understand current events or assess the impact that certain political events have on the general population. The aim of this research project is to utilize Twitter to analyze how the Iranian political elite craft messages to the Iranian public and then from there, determine whether these narratives are effective in eliciting the desired effects that these political figures hope will occur.

When analysts choose to conduct research on these topics, they normally have some freedom in how they choose their subject and a variety of tools at their disposal-- face-to-face interviews, on-site observations, and even telephone polls. However, if one wanted to do the same in a country with limited freedom of expression like Iran, the barriers are significant and pose a far greater challenge. In recent years, Iranians have incorporated social media platforms, like Twitter, into their daily lives as a way to try to engage in discussion while still preserving a level of anonymity to express their thoughts. Past research into the political discussions and debates of the general public of Iran are limited by the authoritarian nature of the Iranian government, which often censors information and suppresses dissent in the public forum. The online community that has emerged through Twitter is rich with insight as to how people living in the country receive information and has proven to play a significant role in events like the Green Revolution of 2009. This means that there is an alternative source of data which exists for those who wish to learn more about closed societies, like Iran, without having to go directly to the region.

These notions are combined to form the main research question of this project: Are the narratives and messaging employed by the Iranian political elite influential on the public level, is this influence reciprocal, and which narratives are most effective? By answering this question, the paper will provide an accurate description of the online political debate that exists in Iran today as well as an understanding of how political narratives are formed and influence online Iranian audiences. No party can count on a decisive and unassailable advantage in cyberspace, yet certain messaging patterns and narratives may give one group an advantage over another and make predictions for how future events will be played out. This paper begins with a survey of the academic and practical literature regarding a variety of dimensions on the topics of social media and the political environment in Iran. Given the focus specifically on Twitter in Iran, a background on the role that social media has come to play in the country will help to contextualize this research question and our findings. The paper will then go on to lay out our methodology for data collection and will discuss more at length, the programs that were used to collect and analyze more than 2.7 million tweets from Iranian Twitter users. Finally, the rest of

this paper will be dedicated to our research findings. We will provide a breakdown of the four common political factions that exist in Iran based on top narratives, characteristics of use (themes, colors, hashtags, etc.), and common trends and topics. We will then delve into a brief case study on the Ahvaz attack that took place toward the end of 2018.

Literature Review

In preparation for this project, we reviewed previous works of literature that fall into two main categories: the general characteristics of the political sphere in Iran and social media. We will provide a summary of our findings while also drawing attention to some of the debates from previous research in order to set the stage for how our research factors into these areas of study.

Politics in Iran

One of the most popular images used to describe the political environment of Iran is a crossroads; Iran stands at a crossroads between modernity and tradition, reform and conservatism, and democratization and political repression.¹ Unlike many of its neighbors in the Middle East, Iran is one of the few countries in the world with a Shi'a majority. The post-revolutionary Iranian state is constitutionally defined as an Islamic entity, founded on the doctrine of the velayat-e faqih, or the rule of the Islamic jurist. The political system itself is extremely complex; understanding the purpose and character of the various political apparatuses requires one to have knowledge of the theological underpinnings of the Islamic Republic as well as the competing interests of each institution. William Buchta's work *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* is considered to be one of the clearest and most straightforward explanation of Iran's political structure.² RAND has also released reports like *Understanding Iran* to provide analytic observations about the processes, institutions, networks, and actors that define Iran's politics.

Major political institutions in Iran include the office of the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the office of the President and the Iranian Parliament. Each institution has specific functions as well as limitations, which are laid out specifically in the Iranian Constitution. The Iranian Constitution recognizes that Islam is a comprehensive way of life, which serves as the basis of government, and rightfully regulates both worship and society. The position of the Supreme Leader has been written about at length by numerous authors, with many of them choosing to focus on Ayatollah Khomeini, the first Supreme Leader. For example, Majid Mohammadi describes Khomeini's approach to Islam as "a religion which requires both the governmental apparatuses and legal system as necessary parts of its functioning. According to Khomeini, only the enemies of Islam have promoted the idea that Islam has nothing to do with

¹ Esposito, J., and Ramazani, R. (2001) *Iran at the Crossroads*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

² Buchta, W. (2000) *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

politics.”³ In addition to political institutions like the majlis and the presidency, military and paramilitary institutions also exert considerable influence on the Iranian political landscape. These institutions are made up of groups like the volunteer basij militia and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Turning to elected positions, Baktiari’s *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran* provides a useful introduction to the politics of the majlis and the importance of factionalism in the Iranian political system.⁴ Iranian politics has witnessed intense factional debates at two levels. On the one hand, there is the debate between those for and against the Islamic Republic and on the other, factional politics has dominated the atmosphere within the Islamic republic since its birth in 1979. When regimes experience factionism, the system allows for different factions to operate and compete with each other over different interpretations of the revolutions’ ideology.⁵ The Iranian constitution founded a regime with different institutions to avoid the centralization of power in the hands of a single person which led to the emergence of different political groups and parties with conflicting agendas and varying political, cultural, and religious discourses of its revolutionary ideology. After the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the left and right wing Islamic elites transformed into three main political groups. The left-wing Islamists transformed into reformists, while the right-wing Islamists divided into two factions: pragmatists and conservatives.⁶

Although all three factions fall within the pro-Islamic Republic sphere, their approaches to Islam are different. The conservatives are representative of political Islam; they deem that the power of the government is necessary to implement Islamic ordinances. Reformists, on the other hand, differentiate between the functions of the state and that of religion. According to them, Iran is a nation-state, established to maintain the security of the individual and the polity as a whole. Pragmatists make up elitist groups organized around former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and they often oscillate alliances between the conservatives and the reformists.⁷ Aside from these three factions, a fourth, the neo-conservatives or the “hardline conservatives” emerged beginning in 2005 with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. His election brought to power this marginalized minority branch of the conservative faction that was previously excluded from policy-making back during the Iran-Iraq war by the pragmatists. This faction is comprised of younger ideologues closely connected to the revolutionary military forces like the IRGC and the Basij Militia and their worldview is dominated by the events of the 1979 revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini.⁸

³ Mohammadi, M. (2015). *Political Islam in post-revolutionary Iran : Shi'i ideologies in Islamist discourse* . London: I. B. Tauris.

⁴ Baktiari, B. (1996) *Parliamentary Politics in Revolutionary Iran*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

⁵ Albloshi, H. (2016). *Eternal revolution : hardliners and conservatives in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris.

⁶ Raket, E. (2009). *Power, Islam, and political elite in Iran a study on the Iranian political elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad* . Leiden ;; Brill.

⁷ Hossein S. Seifzadeh. (2003). The Landscape of Factional Politics and Its Future in Iran. *Middle East Journal*, 57(1), 57-75.

⁸ Golkar, S. (2017, Fall). “Configuration of political elites in post-revolutionary Iran”. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 23, 281-292.

Given that there so many political parties with various alliances and goals in Iran, it has been argued that the political factions are the ones who represent the different ideas on economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues. Members tend to express their views through social media, Friday prayers, and debates and when they speak about different factions, they do so in an indirect way, which makes it difficult to make clear judgements about their statements. However, the most important indicator to show which individual or organization belongs to which faction is how an individual or organization sees itself.⁹ The most fundamental issue of conflict between these factions is the nexus between politics and religion. All pro-Islamic factions support the fusion of politics with religion and yet, various factions disagree about the extent and mechanisms of this fusion. Some scholars make the argument that because of their cultural reluctance or structural inabilities to adapt to the imperatives of global politics, these political factions and their influence in Iran is meager and increasingly on the decline.¹⁰ However, history has shown that these political factions will commonly “realign” themselves so as to better adapt to the current atmosphere and maintain their control.¹¹

Finally, it is worth touching on the power structure that exists in Iran and where the political elite factions fall in comparison to others. In “The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” Iran’s political structure is “not constructed like a canopy, in which removing the central pole causes its collapse; rather, it is built on many independent, rival, parallel column of power that hold they system together.”¹² Similarly, the Iranian political system is also seen as involving two sets of power relations: official and unofficial relations.¹³ the unofficial organization is commonly referred to by scholars, such as William Buchta, as “rings of power” that increase in size from the inner to the outer circles and that interact to varying degrees. The central ring of the system is typically referred to as the “patriarchs,” who sociopolitically tend toward the conservative beliefs. They represent the regime’s most powerful decision-making body and serves as its central nervous system. These patriarchs collectively control not only their own specific ring of power, but also a large portion of the remaining political spheres. The second ring consists of high-ranking government officials, state functionaries, provincial governors, and administrators. The third ring of power comprises individuals who control various entities and organizations, like the revolutionary foundations; diverse security bodies; and leading members of the press and the media. These diverse groups form the power base of the system and propagate ideology. The final, most outer ring is made up of individuals who in the past played an important role in the system; these former elites operate on the fringes of the system between the state and civil society. The political factions discussed earlier usually fall

⁹ Moslem, M. (2002). *Factional politics in post-Khomeini Iran* (1st ed.). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

¹⁰ Buchta, W. (2000) *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*. Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

¹¹ Smyth, G. (2015). “A Realignment of Iran’s Political Factions Underway as Elections Loom.” *The Guardian*. 11 December 2015.

¹² Alamdari, K. (2005) “The Power Structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Transition from Populism to Clientelism, and Militarization of the Government”, *Third World Quarterly* 26 (8).

¹³ Kamrava, M. and H. Hassan-Yari (2004) “Suspended Equilibrium in Iran’s Political System”, *Muslim World* 94 (4), p. 495.

into the third ring; however, in reality the faction presence is spread throughout all four rings. In doing research, most descriptions of this informal power structure as “rings of power” tend to overlook or leave out the role that the general public has and how they factor in to this dynamic.

Social Media

The use of social media in authoritarian regimes has generally been studied through one of two lenses-- either that of collective action or that of enabling dissent or the formation of what one scholar, Nancy Fraser, dubs “counterpublics.” She argues that counterpublics are formed as a response to the exclusions of the dominant publics and that their existence better promotes the ideal of participatory parity.¹⁴ For those who support collective action, social media sometimes helps to resolve common dilemmas of participation such as high opportunity costs, the linking of geographically diffuse individuals with common interests, and problems of information scarcity. However, collective action is scarce in authoritarian countries like Iran because the chance to freely express oneself is severely limited. And yet, at the same time, social media encourages individuals through the nature and the structure of its programs to share as much information as possible with one another. For large-scale collective actions in authoritarian societies, individuals are much more likely to act if a substantial number of individuals in their social networks do so as well. For the political elites that exist within these authoritarian regimes, many have come to recognize the “threats” posed by digital technologies and have responded by creating elaborate narratives and architectures of control. Iran in particular has aggressively pursued total mastery of its digital public sphere.

Equally worth exploring is the “social” aspect of social media, especially given the research of this project, which explores how these Twitter “communities” interact and engage with one another. The novelty of social media can be identified as a new set of social practices, ranging from usability and design to participation and convergence, which may or may not entail political implications. The question of whether social media platforms give relative tactical advantage to the public or to the government is a question that has been the subject of debate. Some researchers in the field, like Amy Mitchell, Heather Brown, and Emily Guskin from the Pew Research Center, have challenged the particular importance of social media in the Arab Spring and whether or not it was an effective tool as it pertains to mobilization both online and offline.¹⁵ On the other hand, the regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia or the Chinese government’s efforts, suggest that governments and political elites can either build parallel networks of supporters on social media or use the state’s power and authority to interfere with the public and spoil any attempts at challenging state policy.

According to the Twitter CMO, Leslie Berland, Twitter is the “place to see what’s happening.”¹⁶ Twitter is meant to be about questions and answers, conversations, and what’s

¹⁴ Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*, (25/26), 56-80.

¹⁵ Mitchell, A., Brown, H., and Guskin, E. (2012). “The Role of Social Media in the Arab Uprisings.” *Pew Research Center Journalism & Media*. 28 November 2012.

¹⁶ Kapko, M. (2017). “Twitter CMO Finally Explains the Purpose of Twitter.” *CIO US*. 09 January 2017.

happening and what people are talking about; Twitter is one of the top news app in the world.¹⁷ Users of the website see it as a way to connect to friends and get in-the-moment updates on things that interest them through the use of hashtags. When major events occur, Twitter ignites with real time information that is able to a large audience in a short amount of time through a simple hashtag or retweet. On the contrary, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg developed Facebook while he was a student at Harvard University initially just as a social networking site for the university's students. Facebook's mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected."¹⁸ On it's website, the company explains that it believes that increased connection between people will lead to better understanding between disparate groups. While the two platforms share many similarities when it comes to the "social" part of social media, Twitter and Facebook differ when it comes to its intended purpose-- Twitter is more focused on being connected to information in the world whereas Facebook is about being connected with friends and family.

Shifting from the social aspect of social media, connectivity is another key feature of the internet. Twitter is considered to be one of the most popular social networks in Iran, despite being blocked in the country and having to compete with other popular apps like Telegram. Iranians from all different age groups ranging from 18 and under to 65 and up, make up part of the user population on the website. In a survey conducted with Twitter users in Iran, the top two main reasons for why Iranians use twitter are "to meet new people" and for "hobby and entertainment."¹⁹ additionally, about 51.6% of the user population, on average, views Twitter as a trusted news source.²⁰ Facebook is considered the second widely used social media platform in Iran after Instagram. Regarding the number of Facebook users in Iran, there is no official statistics from Facebook or the Iranian government. However, according to Internet World Stats, Iran has more than 17.2 million Facebook users as of June 2016. In a survey conducted on Facebook usage in Iran, the two main reasons for why Iranians use Facebook are for "hobby and entertainment" and for "chatting with friends and family."²¹ Fewer Iranians view Facebook as a trusted news source, at only 46.2% on average.²²

The internet and social media websites like Facebook and Twitter make it possible for those living abroad to maintain ties more closely and routinely with family or those living in their homeland-- and even the possibility to have significant impact on discourses, strategies, and actions back home. The Iranian diaspora has a rich history and it is estimated that there are anywhere from four to five million Iranians who are currently living abroad. The United States is one of the top countries for where these Iranians choose to relocate, but others have resettled in places like Europe, Turkey, and other countries in the Persian gulf. As far as the groups that make up the diaspora, there is a large number of Iranian students, who travel abroad for an

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Moscaritolo, A. (2017). "Facebook Has a New Mission." *Entrepreneur*. 23 June 2017.

¹⁹ Jafari, H. (2017). "Infographic: Twitter Usage Statistics in Iran." *Techrasa*. 02 August 2017.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Azali, M. (2017). "Infographics: Facebook Usage Statistics in Iran." *Techrasa*. 16 August 2017.

²² Ibid.

education as a Western-educated Iranian can earn significantly more, religious minority groups like the Zoroastrians and the Baha'i, in addition to a large number of the Iranian middle class who fled the country during the 1979 revolution and its aftermath. For countries like Iran, where substantial numbers of ethnic Iranians live abroad, social media have a clear utility for uniting activists and dissenters in the west with citizens in Iran. At the same time, these social media websites allow for foreign governments to connect to a larger, international audience. From there, both the public and the government have the opportunity to comment on public affairs, to form groups and networks, and to press their narratives or demands of the state. In particular though, the political elite are in a far more advantageous position than the public when it comes to doing so. This is why we believe that the political elite in Iran are able to produce and elicit narratives that have an effect on the general public and shapes conversation both online and offline.

Background

Traditional media in Iran such as newspapers, television, and radio are often territorially-bound, and are thus subject to national laws like libel and censorship, and political-economic power structures. Traditional media only provides one-way conversation-- the viewpoint of the organization or party member who is sharing it.²³ There is no room for the continuation of discussion or a way to know how others interpreted those same events. On the other hand, social-networking media sites like Twitter are often decentralized, non-hierarchical and contain user-generated content allowing researchers to gain a more transparent point of view of the internal dialogue that is occurring within the country in response to a variety of events. Despite legal bans of these platforms over the years geared toward the public, politicians and officials ranging from Ayatollah Khamenei to members of city councils have turned to create twitter accounts, through which they continue to disseminate a distilled version of their political messages. Thus, social media allow scholars to analyze the direct interactions between the public and officials on sites like Twitter.

For the Iranian public, social media serves as an alternate space for political contestation and cyberspace as a political sphere. Cyberspace is framed as representing a new “political street” for Iranian students and youth to consolidate their presence and challenge the authorities through their actions and use their increasing digital media expertise to challenge dominant norms of the state and create and promote alternative cultural values and informal norms.²⁴ Whether it be to spread information, organize demonstrations, conduct surveillance, or sway public opinion, social media is used in a variety of ways that drives political developments and shapes political landscape in Iran. When it comes to the most popular forms of social media in

²³ Ems, L., & Ems, L. (n.d.). Twitter's place in the tussle: how old power struggles play out on a new stage. *Media, Culture & Society*, 36(5), 720–731.

²⁴ Golkar, S. (2016). “The Whole World Is Texting: Youth Protest in the Information Age”. *Comparative Education Review*, 60(1), 188–192.

Iran, Twitter, Facebook, and text messaging are all highly popular nodes of correspondence and networking for Iranians. On Twitter, tweets posted in Iran are typically either in Persian; in Persian transliterated into English; or in some alternative language, most often English. It is impossible to determine how many Iranians use Twitter; researchers have had difficulties quantifying how many users are writing in Persian as opposed to English or other languages.²⁵ Additionally, hashtags can help in tracing the formation and effectiveness of narratives. Hashtags were introduced as a way to create groups, and it became an aggregator, a way to search a topic, and by bringing focus and attention to posted content, a way to measure the range and popularity of a topic on the social media platform. Negar Mottahedeh highlights the usefulness of hashtags in her work *#Iraelection* and supports this by showing how the *#iranelection* hashtag that began after the 2009 elections went from being a localized practice among smaller groups on Twitter to becoming an international practice in writing posts more generally²⁶.

The rise of social media in Iran can be traced to 2006, but it only really became a major focus of both Iranian and foreign state attention after the 2009 presidential election in Iran and its aftermath of massive demonstrations.²⁷ Both popular and scholarly accounts have shown that social media provide many with the opportunity to expand their protest activities and to spread news in the face of government censorship. What has remained under examined, however, is the Iranian state's broader strategies vis-a-vis social media.²⁸ Akhavan raises the concept of "soft war" as the elite response to the events of 2009. This discourse entered discussions soon after the election fallout with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei specifically addressing it a number of times in his speeches. In soft war, state actors are concerned that Iranian value and belief systems are being targeted by Iran's enemies as part of a larger strategy of overthrowing the current ruling structure. Because of that, elites will use various media forms to attract the target society toward the values of those carrying out the soft war. In this sense, what the Iranian state has called soft war has been a routine part of state discourses and policies since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.²⁹ Although authorities had banned access to Facebook during the run-up to the elections, users found ways around restrictions and, during the demonstrations after, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Ahmadinejad's political rival, used Facebook to contact supporters and the outside world. As Ahmadinejad was calling protesters "football hooligans," and portraying a negative image of the protests to the press, the messages that were relayed via social media showed the protests to be peaceful in reality.³⁰

²⁵ Elson, S. (2012). *Using social media to gauge Iranian public opinion and mood after the 2009 election*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND National Security Research Division.

²⁶ Mottahedeh, N., & Negar, M. (2015). *#iranelection: Hashtag Solidarity and the Transformation of Online Life*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

²⁷ Faris, N and Rahimi, B. (2015). *Social media in Iran: politics and society after 2009*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

²⁸ Akhavan, N. (2015). *Social media in Iran: politics and society after 2009*. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

²⁹ Akhavan, N. (2013). *Electronic Iran: the cultural politics of an online evolution*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

³⁰ Tait, R. (2009). "Iranian Elections: Ahmadinejad's 'Dirt and Dust' Jibe Rebounds." *The Guardian*. 18 June 2009.

However, social media can also be used by the Iranian government to suppress voices, filter information, and spread propaganda. The long-standing political leaders and elites in power attempt to impact social movements and communication in the region by mobilizing their own resources including the massive use of national broadcasting agencies and newspapers. In many cases they impose heavy media filtering including the temporary shutdown of internet connections in order to restrict citizens' access to available information and, in particular, to disrupt communication discourse.³¹ The access to and posting of information on social media within Iran has become one of the main points of tension in the ongoing battle between Iranian authorities and the general public. During the 2009 Green Revolution, the regime was engaged in a "proxy war" with the anti-government supports; access was restricted to sites like Youtube, Facebook and Twitter in addition to traditional international news outlets like the Guardian and the BBC. In order to regain access, people in Iran began to use "proxy servers."³² A proxy server is a software that can be run on any computer; it allows an individual to "share" their computer and by extension, their internet access, with a stranger, regardless of location. Thus, a person in Iran could use a proxy server to access unfiltered, uncensored versions of social media sites since the request to access those sites would be going through the proxy host instead of directly to the website that is most likely blocked within the country. However, one of the main downsides to these proxies is that once proxy lists are announced on other websites, the Iranian government could go in and immediately identify and blacklist them. Today, proxy servers are still actively used in Iran and easily accessible through a quick search on the internet. While the government continues to try to stifle freedom of expression, the Iranian people continue to find new ways around these bans to express their opinions.

Methodology

This project is broken into two key components: the targeted collection of tweets and hashtags, and the general collection of trends in Persian twitter usage. To ensure that the full diversity of mainstream opinion is included, accounts and hashtags have been evaluated based on formal criteria (such as party affiliation or official position) as well as content analysis. Data collection is carried out on Twitter using the Social Feed Manager (SFM) developed by the Scholarly Technology Group of the George Washington University Libraries.³³ SFM automatically collects and saves all targeted information, such as tweets or hashtags, at regularly scheduled extraction times. Additionally, SFM is able to collect more data that is available during regular use, such as unique user identification (independent of changeable usernames), tweet type (original, reply, or retweet), and sorted hashtags, media files, and other information

³¹ Shirazi, F. (n.d.). Social media and the social movements in the Middle East and North Africa. *Information Technology & People*, 26(1), 28–49.

³² Christensen, C. (2009). "Iran: Networked Dissent?" *Counterpunch*. 02 Jul 2009.

³³ George Washington University Libraries. (2016). Social Feed Manager. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.597278>

that must otherwise manually organized. This allows for effective and efficient analysis of both tweets and the user's typical usage.

Collection is focused on following data groups: general Persian-language Twitter usage, current events hashtags, political movements hashtags, public officials and personalities, and the general public. All accounts and hashtags entered into SFM for collection have been entered into a spreadsheet prior to its addition to the feed manager for record keeping and potential use in later analysis. For each entry, we have entered information into the mandatory fields of username, date acquired, collection set, and type of account (e.g. official, general public). Additionally, the following information was added if possible: name, political affiliation (as demonstrated by self-description), position, titles, and gender. If the account was deleted or made private, the data was removed from active collection and listed in the spreadsheet. Data and quantitative analysis skills that the group did not previously possess was learned through GW course work (e.g. IAFF 6501 Quantitative Analysis for International Affairs Practicum) and consultation with and instruction by the SFM team at George Washington University Libraries. Persian-language analysis capability has been provided by Daniel Schnur. As of the spring of 2019, his proficiency in reading in Persian was assessed as Level 3 on the ILR scale, which denotes general professional proficiency.

Accounts of Iranian officials and public figures were selected for general collection based on whether they either hold (or have held) public office, lead a major organization, or are a thought leader on issues related to politics. Thought leadership is defined as having some verifiable credential of expertise on an issue and sufficient public standing so that their opinions and views may be widely disseminated. Such a credential could be: the account must also have at least 1000 followers. Any account of an elected official that appears to be genuine and aimed at communicating with a domestic audience will be included. All other accounts must generally meet the following criteria: majority of tweets are in Persian, the account is at least 3 months old at time of selection, and there is reasonable certainty that the account is tweeting from inside Iran.

General public accounts were collected in order to determine what a sample of Iranians, who are politically-engaged and using twitter, are discussing and how they discuss it. These accounts are based on meeting the following criteria: majority of tweets are in Persian, the account is at least 3 months old and has tweeted in that period, has at least 50 tweets, the account tweets regularly (at least once a week, approximately), the account tweets about political and current events, approximately half or more of tweets are original (i.e. not retweets), and the user can be reasonably inferred to be in Iran. Because many users often regularly retweet content, especially content which is political in nature, accounts were included that might not meet the criteria of having a majority of original content if they tweet frequently and their retweets deal with political or current event issues. These retweets also help to assemble several case studies of "networks" representing various points of the political spectrum, much in the same way the hashtags previously discussed. Through studying online behavior within these networks, trends in how users are influenced, how they communicate their opinions, and how messages spread

will be demonstrated to provide a micro-level comparison to the macro-focus of the general hashtag collection.

General Persian-language Twitter usage was carried out using the SFM Sample Stream feature during the two weeks before and after the re-imposition of U.S. oil sanctions on November 4, 2018 in response to the withdrawal of the U.S. from the Iranian nuclear deal. The sample stream collects 1.5 percent of worldwide tweets when activated. This enormous volume of data was then narrowed down to only tweets in Persian using the ‘language’ datafield provided with the raw data. The importance of focusing solely on tweets written in Persian is so that the information gathered represents what is being talked about in the native language of Iran from Iranians themselves. While some tweets are written in English, the true meaning of the story or information can get lost in interpretation and it makes it a bit more difficult to assess whether the account comes from a subject who lives in the region. Small-scale testing has shown that this sample stream method can effectively differentiate between Persian and similar languages that are common on Twitter such as Arabic. At the conclusion of data collection, information was then transferred from SFM to the Kibana interface, where a majority of the data analysis was carried out. The Kibana interface is a part of an ElasticStack server that has been customized for examining social media data, making it easy for analysts to see graphics such as tweet frequency or the top hashtags for a given time period.

Current events hashtags were regularly updated during the data collection phase of the project in order to capture any unpredicted events and political discussions that may have arisen. This was done by monitoring Iranian news and general twitter usage at a minimum of once every day. Events were chosen based on if they are or are likely to elicit significant political dialogue. The hashtags used to collect against these events are the most general hashtags used about them to ensure as wide of a collection of opinion as possible. Specifically, the website program *Trendsmap* allows analysts to visualize where hashtags are emerging and which ones have gained traction. The political movement hashtags that were selected are general political hashtags often used by a political camp over time and not directly linked to a specific event or issue. Some of these were selected based on analysis of the most common hashtags by individuals known to have a certain political outlook. Other hashtags were selected based on their known political relevance. For example, the hashtag #روحانی (#rouhani) is used across the political spectrum when discussing the actions of or opinions about President Hassan Rouhani.

By using hashtags in this research project, one can begin to notice several “networks” that develop between users who make use of certain hashtags and their interactions with other followers who hold similar views. From there, it becomes easier to trace where different hashtags originate from in addition to gaining a broader look at the dialogue and narratives that are taking place within each network. These hashtags are also used to determine how directly and immediately users are influenced. For example, if #Rouhani usage paired with negative language or hashtags across the overall sample or among conservative users following a negative op-ed written by a political opponent of Mr. Rouhani, the degree and speed of the influence of that opponent can be measured. Similar inferences can be made to determine the associations users

are making between events, issues, and figures. Taking the #Rouhani example, if the usage of that hashtag increases following an economic event, it can be inferred that users are closely associating Mr. Rouhani with that event, rather than some other public figure, and would warrant further analysis.

Through the application of the methodology described above, over 2.7 million tweets have been collected over a period of approximately six months through the SFM. While the data itself was collected over approximately six months, it contains some tweets over five years old due to various collection methods within the SFM. This paper will use data that is at most two years old in order to demonstrate broader trends over time. When discussing specific trends or patterns discovered, the specific period analyzed will be identified. Additionally, although collection was targeted to Tweets in Persian in order to ensure that the intended audience was inside Iran, a significant amount of English hashtags were incidentally collected. Unless otherwise noted, all hashtags or Tweets in any language other than Persian have been removed in the calculation of the metrics and statistics used in this paper. Analysis of this data has been carried out through the use of several software programs including Kibana, Gephi, and SPSS. Additionally, *Trendsmap* has been utilized for both analytic capabilities as well as access to a separate database of Twitter trends, such as the most popular accounts, tweets, and hashtags, dating back over a ten-week period. The following section is a breakdown of the results of our findings based on this information and what it tells us about the messaging and narratives of the Iranian political elite on Twitter.

Findings

2018 was a year marked by protest in Iran. Shopkeepers, truck drivers, and teachers repeatedly struck and terrorist attacks and international sanctions all drove public discussions to remarkable levels, including on social media. Despite legal prohibitions of Twitter, this public discussion can be seen unfolding across the political spectrum on the social media platform, and not purely restricted to those one might expect to be more willing to use illegal, or at least taboo, social media platforms. Both politicians and regular citizens across the political spectrum utilize Twitter to discuss current events and disseminate information.

Before diving further into these trends of use, a clear definition of what makes up the Iranian political spectrum is necessary. In the common, Western, lexicon terms such as ‘hardliner’ and ‘moderate’ are used to describe both individuals and indistinct political groups and coalitions. As a result, there is an understandable debate and frustration within the Western Iran-watching community as to practicality and precision of such terms. While this is a topic that undoubtedly merits further study by itself, this paper will utilize a simple descriptive spectrum made up of two ends and four subcategories.

The ‘left’ end of the spectrum will be made up ‘reformists’ and ‘pragmatists.’ An individual would be considered a reformist if he were to call for significant reform of the structure of the Islamic Republic. Examples of reformists would be Mohammad Khatami and the

Islamic Iran Participation Front. A pragmatist may well be aligned with some reformists but is primarily differentiated by a greater willingness to work within the current structure and laws of the state and by placing an emphasis improving the condition of the country through the most practical means. Current president Hassan Rouhani is a prime example of a pragmatist in that he has supported some liberalization causes but has primarily focused on improving the economic and geopolitical circumstances of Iran through engagement with the international community, in contrast with the notions of the “resistance economy” and self-sufficiency promoted by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the right-side of the spectrum.

On the right, nationalists correspond to pragmatists in that their primary concern is practical condition of the state and country as opposed to the structure of the state and the ideological and theoretical underpinnings of it. Former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a perfect example of this group. Finally, principalists are ideologically committed to the the founding-concept of *valiyat-i faqih* and other religious and political theories that have lead to the current shape of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei is the most notable member of the group but former presidential candidate and recently appointed head of the judiciary Ebrahim Raisi is another perfect example.

The Iranian “Twittersphere”

In order to determine what if any influence political elites have over narratives on Twitter, it is important to establish a baseline of how Iranians are using the platform. To begin with, even without any advanced quantitative methods, given enough time and examples, several trends and characteristics of the Iranian “Twittersphere” become apparent to an informed observer. Quantitative assessments are extremely useful, it is important not to overlook these more descriptive characteristics, not least because it is these aspects which with the user is interacting and observing, and while this paper does focus on quantitative data, the manual review and selection of hundreds of accounts by the researchers has lead several observations the manual review and selection of hundreds of accounts by the researchers has lead several observations related to profile design which merit mention. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Iranian twitter users have developed identifiers and design trends which, whether intentional or not, can signal their general political outlook. One clear example of such an identifier is the seedling emoji which came out of the so-called ‘Green Revolution’ of 2009, which had a widely-discussed social media component, and has survived on the accounts of some reformists who took part in that movement. Similarly, some reformists have selected green color themes for their accounts. On the other side of the spectrum, users who have expressed support right-wing ideas and issues tend to post a significant amount of religious or sometimes graphic images. These images range from those of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei or martyrs, which can often be seen on official government websites, to more graphic images of victims of military or terrorist attacks. Religious and pro-regime slogans are also often featured prominently as the cover photo of these accounts.

While there are cosmetic differences in the accounts of everyday Iranians depending on their ideological affiliation, statistical analysis of tweets and hashtags reveals that there are overarching trends that apply to the sample of everyday Iranians and the Iranian ‘Twittersphere’ as a whole. First among these trends is the sample’s strong tendency to react to current events. For example, between end of January and the end of March 2019, there were eight days on which at least one verifiable strike or protest occurred. Statistical comparison of these dates with the daily volume of tweets that contained the hashtags “#اعتصاب” or “#اعتصاب_سراسری,” which translate as ‘strike’ and ‘widespread strike,’ were very strongly correlated to each other. While such results could be anticipated, its statistical confirmation affirms that Iranians are discussing events as they happen. This is further seen in the topics of hashtags they are using.

In order to better understand how Iranians on Twitter interact with politics, a sample of approximately 300 politically-engaged Iranian (PEI) twitter accounts was collected following the methodology previously described in addition to the random Sample Stream collection. The volume of tweets over time of these two samples were shown to be positively correlated to a statistically significant degree. As Appendices 1 and 2 show, the top hashtags within both the Sample Stream collection (gathered between October 20, 2018 and January 1, 2019) and the collection of selected politically engaged Iranians (gathered between March 21, 2017 and March 21, 2019) many of the most frequently used hashtags are political in nature. In fact, 24 and 25 of the top 50 hashtags of the Sample Stream collection and PEI collection were political in nature.

One hashtag in particular stands out at or near the top of both samples: “#براندازم” which translates to “I’m subversive.” Often used by expatriate groups in opposition to the Islamic Republic, including by those wishing to bring back the Pahlavi monarchy, the high number of uses in the Sample Stream collection might otherwise be attributed to these groups if it was not for its presence in the PEI collection. Because accounts were specifically and rigorously screened to minimize the possibility of the inclusion of accounts tied to these expatriate groups, it can only be concluded that this message is finding an audience within Iran. Although, as it is not feasible at this time to determine the sentiment of thousands of cases of use of a hashtag in Persian, such a high number of uses can not be ignored.³⁴ Although this particular hashtag is generally connected to particularly radical political views, both collection sets have multiple other hashtags dealing with protests and strikes, which, as will be discussed later, are not engaged with nearly as much by political elites.

However, while it can be difficult to generalize sentiment, some of the top hashtags are engaging with these issues in a way much more sympathetic to the Iranian government. Hashtags translated as “#Holy Mission of the Revolution,” “#Fraudulent Plot,” and “#I am a Basiji” all demonstrate that the political conversation on Twitter among the non-elite is not restricted to those whom observers in the West may expect, namely, Reformists. “#Fraudulent Plot,” literally “فتنه تغلب,” is of particular interest in this case because it both is used by those against recent protests and is the title of a book written by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, showing that while there

³⁴ Although there is software which can automatically analyze the sentiment of large quantities of Tweets, at present, this capability does not extend to Persian text.

may be external messaging coming into the ‘domestic’ Iranian twitter community, current state leaders also enjoy some degree of respect, if not outright influence.

Whereas the high-volume hashtags tended to be general and relate to broader issues, favorite and retweet date revealed a different characteristic. The most liked and retweeted tweets (which are statistically very significantly highly correlated to each other) dealt with much more specific, with hashtags such as ‘health minister,’ ‘Mohammad Behnia,’ and ‘Representative of Hate’ (referring to a scandal with a member of the Majlis). Additionally, the most popular these hashtags are more directly frontational to the government of Iran than the most populous hashtags addressing topics such as the ‘where is your father’ online campaign, ‘government with a gun,’ and Article 44 of the Iranian Constitution which addresses the division of the economy and the state’s role in it.³⁵

As mentioned early in this paper, the re-implementation of U.S. oil sanctions against Iran presented this project with a rare opportunity to predict a time when social media might increase, particularly usage around political issues. As a result, the Sample Stream collection was specifically set up to begin just over two weeks before sanctions resumed. Indeed, it turned out that there was a statistically significant increase in usage on November 4, however, as Appendix 3 shows, it was not the largest spike scene during the collection period. This is consistent with the fact that only hashtags international themes make only 4-6 percent of the top 50 hashtags across samples. Furthermore, only one hashtag related to the sanctions, “#تحریم,” literally meaning sanctions, was in the top 20 hashtags of the PEI sample as the fifth most frequently used hashtag during the 31 day period around Nov. 4 (15 days before and after), and no related hashtags were among the top results in the Sample Stream for that same period. The virtual absence of any real hashtags dealing with international matters, let alone those that so directly affect Iranians, demonstrates that when communicating among themselves on social media, ordinary Iranians are much more concerned with their down domestic state of affairs and issues.

Overall, the Iranian Twitter dialogue among the general public is not nearly as restrained from addressing or engaging with issues and narratives that are not flattering to the state compared to traditional media. While this result does substantiate the common theory that social media is an effective alternative to conventional media for populations in countries with high levels of censorship, it also will serve as a sharp contrast to what the political elite are discussing.

The Political Elite

As previously stated, both left- and right-wing leaders in Iran use Twitter, it should be noted that during the initial account-identification and collection period of the research, it was discovered that officials and politicians towards the left of the Iranian political spectrum, were more likely to have identifiable twitter accounts than those on the right side of the spectrum. However, one potential partial explanation for this is the simple fact that the current executive administration is populated by those on the left and a future right-leaning administration would

³⁵ Islamic Republic of Iran. (1989). *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Retrieved from Majlis.IR: https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/content/iran_constitution

therefore create more right-wing officials, who might then be more either more likely to have accounts or increase their presence and notoriety. While this paper is primarily interested in the general characteristics of the use of social media in political communication in Iran and not political factionalization, the imbalance in use across the political spectrum must be noted because of the current potential skewing influence and room for change in trends in the future if the current equilibrium shifts.

One interesting aspect of the presence of political elites on Twitter is how other users interact and respond to them. Within the sample, users demonstrated a sort of etiquette in how they would interact with different accounts. Curiously, in the past year users seemed much more willing to reply to tweets from Ayatollah Khamenei's accounts, at a combined rate of 20.72 percent of all replies, while retweets of those accounts represented only a very small percentage of retweets in the sample. Additionally, as previously mentioned his most recent recent book, titled *Fatneh Taqhalob*, is connected with dismissal of the legitimacy of some public protests and was a top hashtag in all the long-term collections and was the fourth-ranked hashtag within the complete Sample Stream collection. Conversely, the top two retweeted accounts within the sample group are an anonymous account tweeting conservative messages named and themed after the Iranian film 'Bodyguard' with 27 percent of sampled retweets, and Masoumeh Ebtekar, the current Vice President for Family and Women's Affairs and former English spokesperson for the take over of the U.S. Embassy, with 6.61 percent.

In addition to the general public figures, officials, and politicians collected, a smaller sample of 30 accounts of high level officials (constitutional office holders, ministerial level officials, and the heads of constitutionally-created bodies) as analyzed to determine how their engagement with narratives differs from other political-engaged Iranians on twitter. Most broadly, the frequency at which these officials engage with narratives, measured through their use of hashtags, As Appendix 4 shows, many of the hashtags top hashtags used during the past two years are political in nature, do not seem dramatically different than the other samples at first inspection. Indeed, to some degree both the officials examined and the general sample population are discussing the same issues.

Of the top 50 hashtags within the officials sample, the percentages of hashtags related to religion, international affairs, specific individuals, and national identity were similar to those of the Sample Stream and PEI collections. The percentage of hashtags political in nature was smaller, but not significantly so. More broadly, 48 percent of the top 50 percent of hashtags used by the general sample during the research period were also by the sample of high level officials. Although this is a seemingly substantial amount of cross-usage, statistical analysis reveals that there is no statistically significant correlation between how much the general sample is engaging with a hashtag and how much officials will use it. The disconnect between narratives engaged with by the officials and the general Iranian Twitter community becomes more glaring when examining the difference in rankings of use of hashtags between the sample of top officials and the Sample Stream data. In comparing the ranking of the most used hashtags by the officials to the ranking of the same hashtags in the Sample Stream data, a statistically significant, slight

negative correlation was discovered. This shows that while top Iranian officials maybe engaging with the same general types of topics as the general public, the degree to which they engage with certain narratives has no effect on how much the public engages with those same narratives.

Ahvaz Attack

While analysis of broader trends is extremely important, it is also useful to examine cases to understand the dynamics at play. On September 22, 2018 in the south-western city of Ahvaz, gunmen opened fire on an Iranian military parade, killing at least 25 people and injuring 60 people.³⁶ There was a series of conflicting reports in addition to claims of responsibility, ranging from a low-profile anti-government Arab group in Iran's Khuzestan region, the Ahvaz National Resistance, to the Islamic State.³⁷ The political elite were quick to respond with harsh comments condemning the attacks and swaying the narrative. Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif blamed "terrorists paid by a foreign regime; Iran holds regional terror sponsors and their US masters accountable³⁸," while Ayatollah Ali Khamenei condemned the attack and blamed "US-backed regimes in the region for the 'plot'."³⁹ At the same time, people took to Twitter and used hashtags like "رژه_اهواز#" (#Ahvaz_Parade) or "اهواز_تروریستی_حادثه#" (#Ahvaz_Terrorist_Incident) to share information and news as it was unfolding. Unsurprisingly, this was accompanied by a massive spike in the tweets, with more than 20,000 hashtags being used about the attack on that day alone and the hashtag "اهواز#" (#Ahvaz) being used nearly 95,000 times over the next week. Over the next week, there was a statistically significant, moderate correlation between the hashtags used by officials and those about Ahvaz within tweets written in Persian. However, this is including English hashtags and seven percent of the hashtags used by officials were in English as well as six of the top ten, and the majority dealt with international issues. Even though this marked a period when officials were more in tune with the broader narrative, they were not able to maintain this trend nor carry over any influence on domestic issues.

Conclusion

Since the massive public demonstrations in the wake of the 2009 presidential election, a common consensus has emerged around the notion that social media is becoming more and more intertwined with Iranian political life. Collection and analysis of nearly three million tweets has not only proven this, but also shown that domestic politics and current affairs are a primary topic for Iranians engaging with each other on Twitter. This conversation is not as skewed towards

³⁶ Kamali Dehghan, S. (2018). "Terrorists Kills Iranian Children and Soldiers in Military Parade Attack." *The Guardian*. 22 September 2018.

³⁷ "UN Chief Offers Condolences Over Attack in Iran." *U.S. News*. 22 September 2018.

³⁸ "Iran Military Parade Attacked by Gunmen in Ahvaz." *BBC News*. 22 September 2018.

³⁹ Georgy, M. (2018). "Iran's Khamenei Blames Gulf Arab States for Military Parade Attack." *Reuters*. 22 September 2018.

reformists as one might expect either. Any list of top hashtags shows that there is a genuine diversity of opinion both within Iran and online.

This is a realization that the the political elite in Iran are coming to as well. Despite bans and obstacles making access to social media inconvenient at best, and regular discussions of new ones, the dialogue happening on Twitter remains so robust that even some of those considering the bans have accounts and regularly engage with the affairs of the day. However, the political elite in Iran do not enjoy the same influence over narratives on Twitter that they do over traditional media. The Iranian population on Twitter has been shown, statistically, to respond strong to whatever even is happening in the country at the time, and equally has been shown not to respond to the messaging and narrative put out by the political elite. While further research is required to better understand how Iranians feel about the narratives they engage with, it is beyond a doubt that Iranians will engage with the issues of the day and on their own terms.

Through these hashtags, or narratives, one can begin to see what issues matter the most to both the political elite and the public in addition to which ones appear to be gaining traction or being overlooked. While the goal of this research paper is to shed light on these narratives that exist and the relationship that exists between the public and the elite on Twitter, these narratives could be applied on a broader scale to potentially address the current political climate of Iran or even to compare the narratives on Twitter to that of other social or traditional media outlets. There remains much to be learned about the internal dialogues of Iran, but it is our hope that this research has begun to lift some of the fog that covers the country when it comes to the use of social media and how people are actively engaging with the government through social media. With a larger time period to conduct research and collect data, it would be fascinating to see how these narratives evolve over the next few years and whether or not the relationship between the Iranian political elite and the public shifts, for better or for worse.

Appendix

Appendix 1

Top 25 Hashtags from the Sample Stream Collection between Oct. 10, 2018 and Jan. 1, 2019	
Original Hashtag	Translation
ایران	Iran
حب_الحسین_یجمعنا	Our love of Hossein
براندازم	I'm Subversive
فتنه_تغلب	Fraudulent plot
خاکریزهای_برخط	Online trenches
هفت_تپه	Haft Tapeh

بسیجی_ام	I am a Basiji
پایان_شیطان	End of the devil
فولاد_اهواز	Ahvaz steel
اسماعیل_بخشی	Esmail Bakhshi
چله_عزت	Chaleh Azat
میدان_میلیونی	Million Square
قدرت_پوشالی	Fragile power
اعتصاب_سراسری	Widespread strike
اربعین_حماسه_ظهور	Advent of Arba'een epic
مهمان_داریم	We have a guest
اعتراضات_سراسری	Widespread protests
استخدام_بنفش	Recruit Purple
اعتصامات_سراسری	Widespread protests
فتنه_تحریم_ساز	Sedition paving the way for sanctions
اليمن_مظلومية_وانتصار	Yemen is oppressive and triumphant (Arabic)
اقتدار_سپاه	Power of the IRGC
پرسپولیس	Persepolis

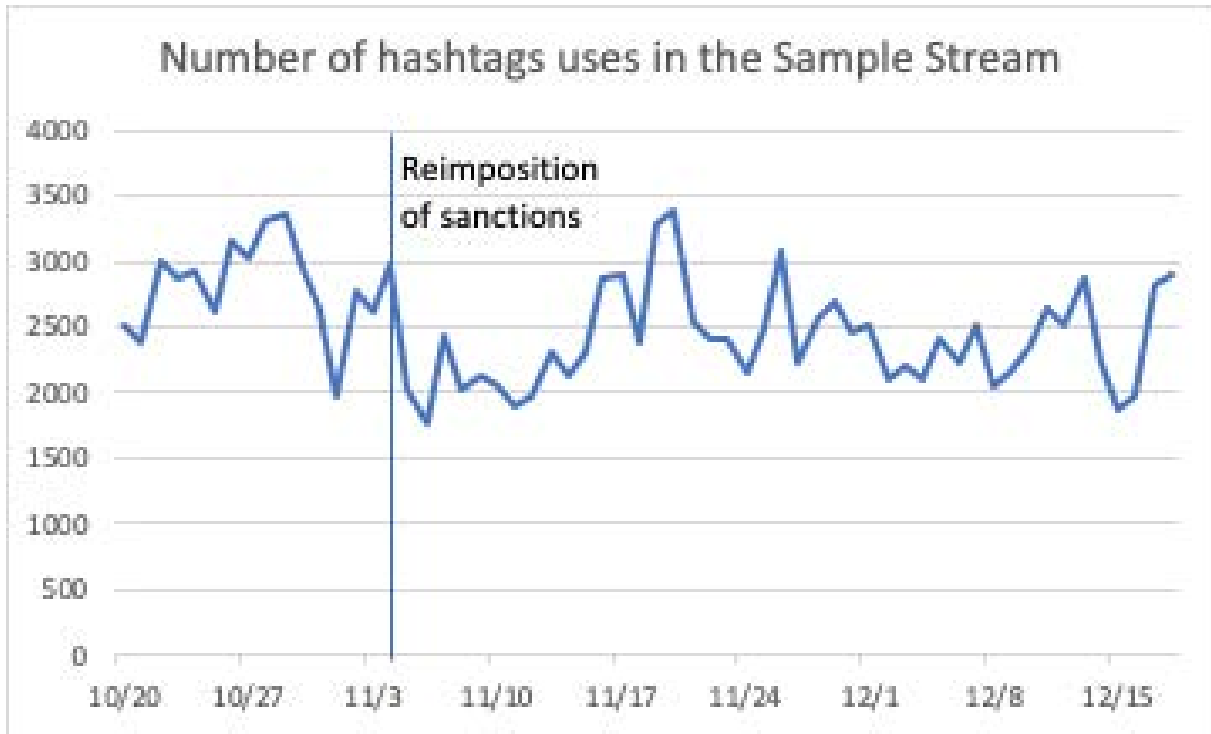
اربعين	Arba'een
رشتو	Roshto

Appendix 2

Top 25 hashtags from the general collection sample from March 21, 2017 to March 21, 2019	
Original Hashtag	Translation
براندازم	I'm subversive
ایران	Iran
گام_دوم_انقلاب	Second step of the revolution
چهل_سال_سازندگی	Forty years of building
بعثت_انقلاب	Holy mission of the revolution
روحانی	Rouhani
فتنه_تغلب	Fraudulent plot
حب_الحسین_یجمعنا	Our love of Hossein
بهار_مهربانی	Spring of kindness
مهمان_داریم	We have a guest
شاد_درسایه_امنیت	Happiness in the shadow of security
برجام	JCPOA
اعتراضات_سراسری	Widespread protest

اعتصاب_سراسری	Widespread strike
اللهم_عجل_لوليك_الفرج	Oh, God! Make Mahdi's coming sooner (Arabic)
ایلام_ما	Our (city) Ilam
فتنه_تحریم_ساز	Sedition paving the way for sanctions
ظریف	Zarif
اربعین_حماسه_ظهور	Advent of the Epic Arba'een
بسیجی_ام	I am a Basiji
احمدی_نژاد	Ahmadinejad
امید_به_دلقکها	Hope for clowns
رشتو	(used for tracking treads, not a narrative)
ترامپ	Trump
لیبک_یا_خامنه_ای	Yes to Khamenei (Arabic)

Appendix 3



Appendix 4

Top 25 hashtags from 30 accounts of senior officials from March 21, 2017 to March 21, 2019	
Original Hashtag	Translation
ایران	Iran
گام_دوم_انقلاب	Second step of the revolution
برجام	JCPOA
مناظره	Debate
راهی_که_باید_رفت	The path that must be taken
انقلاب_اسلامی	Islamic Revolution
رئیس	Raisi
گزارش_به_مردم	Report to the people
حق_الناس	Right of the people (Arabic)
آمریکا	America
کربلای_چهار	Karbala four
امام_حسن_عسکری	Imam Hassan Askari
ترامپ	Trump

ارتش	Army
جوانان	Youth
مردم	People
اربعین	Arba'een
یک_جزء_یک_نکته	One component one point
انتخابات	Elections
انقلاب	Revolution
پیام_حسین	Message of Hossein
اسلام	Islam
عراق	Iraq
فرهنگیان	Teachers
سپاه	Sepah (IRGC)

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