The Karabakh Conflict and its impacts on Iran's national and Diplomatic Debates in the Age of Cyber Space

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to understand how cyberspace is used by foreign policy practitioners and the public as a mitigating platform for public diplomacy during regional conflicts. The latest hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan broke out in September 2020 in Karabakh region, which under international law belongs to Baku. Although the Iranian Government supports the Republic of Azerbaijan's rights over the disputed area.But since the conflict began, relations between Tehran and Baku have been strained. The conflict in Karabakh generated waves of Turkic-nationalistic narratives in Baku combined with Turkey's leadership reciting nationalistic poems that many members of the Iranian public view as a threat to their country's territorial integrity. In a unique shift, the Iranian public, including pro and anti-regime activists, utilised cyberspace and social media as a tool to react to the perceived threats and to mitigate the risks to Iran's territorial integrity. This article presents an argument that ccyberspace is being used by conflicting sides to facilitate collaboration and communication between the Iranian public inside the country and their fellow compatriots in the diaspora, allowing them to share information and negotiate a public discourse and to exhibit national sensitivity over the issue. To rtest the hypothesis, the present study is devised to provide a rigorous empirical examination of the socio-political impact of the Karabakh conflict on the Iranian public and the state and how cyberspaceis used to monitor and prevent the escalation of conflicts.

Key words: Iran, Azerbaijan, Cyber-space, Karabakh, Territorial Integrity

Introduction

The last two years have witnessed significant shifting in global politics or what I call the "shocks of post-Covid era". Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022. However, before the invasion of Ukraine, South Caucasus witnessed regional clashes and the re-emergence of an old conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The conflict took place in September 2020 in the south Caucasus. The Azerbaijani forces recaptured vast areas of its own territory from the Armenian troops during what is known as the second Karabakh war which lasted for almost 44 days and ended with a victory for Baku. Although, the Iranian

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Government swiftly reiterated its support for the Republic of Azerbaijan's rights over the disputed area[2], after the conflict began, relations between Tehran and Baku have been strained. Some Azerbaijani newspapers and media outlets made allegations about Iran supporting Armenia.[3] On the other side of the spectrum, Iranian state media outlet and foreign policy practitioners voiced their concerns about the presence of Israel's military near their border, providing logistics support for Azerbaijan.[4]

Touraj Atabaki argues that there is a history behind the question of Azerbaijan in Iran that goes back to the revolt in 1945 in north-west Iran when under the Soviet Union patronage, attempts were made by the Iranian Azerbaijan Democratic party for secession.[5] According to him, in the post-1979 revolution in Iran, there were no political demands within the Iranian Azeri communities for autonomy. The early stance of the Islamic government on the question of ethnicity and ethnic diversity was heard during the vociferous debates over the country's
 new Constitution in the Assembly of Experts (Majlis-e Khobregan). Article 15 of
 the Constitution acknowledges Iran's ethnic diversity and the ethnic communities' fundamental rights to preserve their distinctive identities and cultures.[6] Nevertheless, the concept of ethnic nationalism and calls for autonomy and secession have been contentious and controversial issues within the Iranian streets due to the memories of the foreign interventions in the 1940s and the rise of foreign-backed secessionists under the Soviet supervision in the Iranian provinces of Azerbaijan and Kurdistan.[7]

Although the concept of ethnic minorities, including the Iranian Azeris, is contested, it is not the purpose of this article to delve into the question of Iranian Azerbaijan nor to discuss the history of Iran's relations with the Republic of Azerbaijan since its independence from the Soviet Union or the modus operandi of the conflicts in Karabakh. What interests the author is how cyberspace is being used as a major tool for publicity by both the Iranian statesmen as well as by the Iranian individual internet users and non-governmental activists to shape socio-political debates and counter-debates. This article argues that the Karabakh conflict was a watershed development that predisposed not only the way Iranian senior foreign policy practitioners employ virtual platforms to acquire public diplomacy goals but also the way the public interacts and forges cross-border discourses, supporting their country's territorial integrity.

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[2] https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/iran-shows-full-support-for-azerbaijans-territorial-integrity-at-international-conference-2021-3-3-0/

[3] İranın sərhəddəki hərbi təlimləri nəyin mesajıdır? - TƏHLİL (modern.az)

[4] Azerbaijan-Israel relations and Iran's national security concerns – Middle East Monitor

[5] Touraj Atabaki, Ethnic Diversity and Territorial Integrity of Iran: Domestic Harmony and Regional Challenges, *Iranian Studies*, March 2005, Vol. 38, No. 1, Iran Facing the New Century (March, 2005), pp. 23-44

[6] Ibid

[7] For more on the history of Iran in South Caucasus see Marziyeh Kouhi-Esfahani, 2019, Iran's Foreign Policy in South Caucasia, Routledge. Chapter 3

The Iranian Government's digitalised response to the conflict via cyber-space

Shortly after the war erupted between Baku and Yerevan, the Iranian statesmen used traditional media outlets to support Azerbaijan's claim over the Karabakh. In September 2020, Iranian President's chief of staff Mahmoud Vaezi relayed a message to Azerbaijan Deputy Prime Minster that "the stance of the Islamic Republic on Azerbaijan has always been clear and transparent as it has always recognised the neighbouring country's territorial integrity and respected it."[8] During the 44 days conflict, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamanei, in his speech broadcasted by the state media outlet, supported Azerbaijan's right to liberate its occupied territories amid a conflict with Armenia over the Karabakh region. Nevertheless, in his speech, Khamenei indicated Iran's concerns over the instability in its northern borders as he stated, "Azerbaijan has the right to liberate its occupied territories and international borders must be respected, and terrorists should not be present near (Iran's) borders."[9] Khamenei's remarks could be viewed as a substantial gesticulation because Iran's official policy on the simmering conflict between the two former Soviet republics has so far remained "neutral". Having said that, the state's use of traditional media outlet was swiftly overshadowed by the use of cyberspace as the Iranian public became increasingly concerned about the developments and began debating the matter via cyberspace. Before analysing the Iranian state's digitalised foreign policy initiatives towards the conflict and the Iranian public's reactions to it via cyberspace, for our discussion it is crucial to understand the concept of digital society and digitalised and cyber diplomacy.

Barrinha and Renard (2017) argue that cyber-diplomacy sits at the intersection between states and non-states societies and defines it as diplomacy in the cyber domain.[10] Barrinha and Renard highlight that early studies mostly focus on the broader digital transformation without delving into the process of how diplomats use digital space. Having said that, Barrinha and Renard's work merely addresses the diplomatic processes necessary to deal with the emerging global aspects of cyber issues and sees the state as the main unit of study within the digital age.[11] Although public participation in the cyberspace over foreign policy issues has significantly increased in recent years, the literature has remained limited in that regard. There have been numerous articles on cyber-space and digital diplomacy and on how diplomats are taking charge of public diplomacy in the digital age. Yet there have been very limited efforts to conceptualise and compare how individuals shape the foreign policy debates while engaging with one another and with foreign policy practitioners. More clarity on how the public in the digital age use cyberspace to forge national and international debates would be useful to those who practice digital diplomacy.

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[8] Iran reassures Azerbaijan, slams 'rumours' of arms to Armenia | News | Al Jazeera
[9] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-backs-azerbaijan-s-right-to-liberate-karabakh/2029245

[10] André Barrinha & Thomas Renard (2017) Cyber-diplomacy: the making of an international society in the digital age, Global Affairs, 3:4-5, 353-364

[11] Ibid

Ilan Manor provides a clear picture of the digitalisation of public diplomacy as he argues that diplomats and policymakers are influenced by the norms, values and behaviour celebrated by the "digital society"[12]. Manor describes the concept of digital society as timeless and argues that members of digital society have become accustomed to communicating with one another in real time and across great distances. [13] The members of digital society are concerned with learning about local and global events. The foreign policy makers are therefore influenced by digital society's expectations and are required to narrate and comment on regional and local events. He also investigates the values, norms, and behaviours of digital society in order to investigate their impacts on diplomats' behaviour.

Manor highlights the importance of using social media by foreign policy practitioners during a crisis. He argues that the use of Twitter to secure foreign policy achievements both at home and abroad is one example of digital technology's impact on public diplomacy.[14] This is because the same social media platforms, such as Twitter attract domestic and foreign audiences. In other word, social media and cyber-space platforms provide an easy way for foreign policy makers to convey their official statements, engage with other states and more importantly to influence digital public opinion and react to public's expectations.

During the 44 days war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran's Supreme Leader made a statement via Twitter, supporting Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and warning about the presence of "terrorists" near the Iranian border. This was the first foreign policy statement by the Islamic Republic's leadership via cyber-space about the developments in Karabakh.

Figure 1.1: Iran's Supreme Leader statement about the Karabakh conflict during the 44 days war. [15]

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[12] Ilan Manor, 2019. The Digitalisation of Public Diplomacy. Palgrave. p.31
[13] Ibid. 33
[14] Manor, p.8
[15] https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1323587412384190464

Two factors shaped a perception of threats within the apparatuses of the Iranian government about the developments in Azerbaijan. Even though Tehran supported Baku's rights over its territory in Karabakh, there was news floating in cyber-space about the presence of Israeli military advisors near the Iranian borders.[16] The second vital factor was related to Turkey's leadership galvanising Turkic nationalism within Azerbaijan. On 10 December 2020, shortly after the triumph of the Azerbaijani troops, Turkish president Receb Tayyib Erdogan sparked rage in Iran by reciting a popular Azeri poem in Turkish and electrifying Turkish nationalism within the region. A line from Azeri poem "Aras": "they tore the Aras [river] and filled it with rocks and sticks, I will not be separated from you, they separated us forcefully".[17] One day after the incident, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif protested the incident via Twitter. He tweeted in both Farsi and English. His tweet in Farsi stated, "President Erdogan was not informed that what he ill-recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas … from [the] Iranian motherland."

> **Javad Zarif** ✔
> @JZarif · Follow
>
> به اردوغان نگفته بودند شعری که به غلط در باکو خواند مربوط به جدایی قهری مناطق شمالی ارس از سرزمین مادریشان ایران است! آیا او نفهمید که علیه حاکمیت جمهوری آذربایجان سخن گفته است؟ هیچکس نمی‌تواند در باره آذربایجان عزیز ما صحبت کند.
>
> 6:40 AM · Dec 11, 2020
>
> ❤ 13.4K   💬 Reply   ⬆ Share
>
> **Read 4.4K replies**

Figure 1.2 Iranian foreign minister twitting in Farsi reacting to President Erdogan's comments on Aras poems.[18]

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[16] https://www.dw.com/en/iran-warns-israel-over-presence-in-azerbaijan/a-59424164

[17] https://www.memri.org/reports/anti-turkey-statements-iran-–-part-iii-erdoğan-undermining-irans-territorial-integrity#_edn4

[18] https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1337286075082035201?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1337286075082035201%7Ctwgr%5Ec7c5c334cb82d0799df190022de304cb4690c187%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fd-39144266043223274889.ampproject.net%2F2301261900000%2Fframe.html

> **Javad Zarif** ✔
> @JZarif · Follow
>
> Pres. Erdogan was not informed that what he ill–recited in Baku refers to the forcible separation of areas north of Aras from Iranian motherland
>
> Didn't he realize that he was undermining the sovereignty of the Republic of Azerbaijan?
>
> NO ONE can talk about OUR beloved Azerbaijan
>
> 6:17 AM · Dec 11, 2020
>
> Read the full conversation on Twitter
>
> ❤ 5.7K　　💬 Reply　　↑ Share
>
> **Read 3.6K replies**

Figure 1.3 Iranian foreign minister renouncing President Erdogan's misinterpretation of a poem that was perceived in Iran as a threat to the country's territorial integrity.[19]

According to Arzu Geybullayeva, since the summer of 2022, pro-government newspapers in Azerbaijan have been more vocal about calls for succession and Azerbaijan stepping up its support for a "national-liberation movement" in what they call "Southern Azerbaijan". [20] The news about Azerbaijani troops attempting to move beyond Karabakh region into the Armenian Zangezour corridor and attempts to change the internationally recognised borders further provoked the Iranian leaders to convey warning messages to their counterparts in Azerbaijan and Turkey via cyber-space. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei engaged with the subject matter via Twitter and warned about any plans for altering the geopolitics of the region and internationally recognised borderlines. The Supreme Leader's tweet about the developments near the Iranian border could be interpreted as an official foreign policy statement at its highest level.

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[19]https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1337280285398999041?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1337280285398999041%7Ctwgr%5E42e1bb64536ebdd1267327282037b720f52646c5%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fd-8284108293833324547.ampproject.net%2F2301261900000%2Fframe.html

[20] https://globalvoices.org/2022/11/10/tensions-between-azerbaijan-and-iran-peak-again/

Figure 1.4- Reports from Experts on Azerbaijan media outlet targeting Iran's territorial integrity

> **Khamenei.ir**   …
> @khamenei_ir
>
> We are pleased to see #Karabakh return to Azerbaijan. Of course, if there is a policy intended to block the Iran-Armenia border, the Islamic Republic will oppose it, for this border is a 1000s-year-old connecting route.
>
> 1:15 pm · 19 Jul 2022

Figure 1.5- Iranian Supreme Leader's statement about any attempts to change the borders by Azerbaijan. [21]

In addition to digitalised protests by the Iranian foreign policy makers, Iran launched hybrid responses by conducting a large military drill near the country's border with Azerbaijan while reacting to the development via cyber-space, in a show of force amid tensions with its neighbouring country also partly linked to the latter's close ties with Israel.[22] Furthermore, Iran's Foreign Ministry summoned Turkey's ambassador to Tehran over Erdogan's remarks, defining them as "interventionists remarks." The Turkish envoy was told that "the era of territorial claims and warmongering and expansionist empires has passed," according to an official statement.[23] Other Iranian statesmen also entered the debate via cyber-space, warning that the territorial integrity of Iran is the state's official red line. The chairman of Iran's Expediency Council, Mohsen Rezai tweeted about Iran's ownership of the lost territories and about the fear that ferment among Iran's ethnic minorities could lead to internal war in the country: "If Erdogan was referring to Greater Iran in his reading of the poem about Aras - it is true," implying re-unification of Azerbaijan with Iran.[24]

Shortly after the tension between Iran and Turkey became viral throughout social media platforms, the Turkish foreign minister, in a phone call with his Iranian counterpart, assured that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had full respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iran and was not aware of the sensitivities surrounding the poem read out and considered it only in connection with Lachin

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[21] https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1549367329435303938

[22] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/1/iran-army-holds-drill-near-azerbaijan-border-amid-tensions

[23] https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2020/12/11/iran-protests-to-turkey-over-meddling-poem-recited-by-erdogan

[24] https://www.memri.org/reports/anti-turkey-statements-iran-–-part-iii-erdoğan-undermining-irans-territorial-integrity#_edn4

and Karabakh, and therefore read it at the Baku ceremony.[25] The impacts of digital technologies on public diplomacy can be seen in how the Iranian policymakers reacted to the incidents and made official statements via cyber-space.

Anne-Marie Slaughter in her book "the Chessboard and the Web" rightly reminds us how fast is the speed with which information can travel across relatively flat networks (such as Twitter and other social media platforms) and how such cyber networks can empower individuals through what she defines as "power with network".[26] The speed of sending messages throughout different layers of digital society, including diplomatic strata as well as individual internet users, explains why popular platforms within cyber-space are excessively used by foreign policy makers at the time events develop. In other words, digital platforms allow for real-time communication, which can be particularly useful in fast-moving diplomatic situations. In this regard, cyber-space is used by foreign ministers and high-ranking officials to underline their governments' positions on a crucial issue as it develops rapidly. This can be clearly viewed in the case of the Iranian governmental digital antiphon to the perceived threats by the developments alongside Iran's border with Azerbaijan. In what follows, we can have a comparative analysis of how the cyber-space is used by individuals concerned with national and regional events.

Iranian Digital Public and Reaction to the Conflict

Within hours of the announcement about Erdogan reading an Azeri poem, many Iranian individuals and non-governmental activists employed Twitter and Instagram to voice their frustration and resentment and to castigate the "provocative" gestures against Iranian territorial integrity. The instantaneous reactions of the Iranian public to the developments alongside the border with Azerbaijan exhibit the speed at which public diplomacy is practiced in the age of virtual space by the public. Ilan Manor rightly argues that while some people learn about the world through Facebook, others turn to bloggers or traditional news sites. "Gone were the days when diplomats could communicate with large segments of a foreign population through a small number of newspapers".[27] In other words, senior diplomats and foreign policy practitioners in the new digital age have lost their monopoly over diplomatic communications as NGOs, Civil society organizations, and individual bloggers could circulate public diplomacy messages online.[28] In this regard, the new actors of public diplomacy, such as individual bloggers and non-governmental activists, transmute the digital world into an antagonistic amphitheatre in which various players contend for the attention of the digital audience while trying to influence their understanding of global events.[29] This can be seen in how the Iranian public reacted to the perceived threats from Baku to their homeland's territorial integrity.

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[25] https://www.commonspace.eu/news/nationalist-poem-sparks-diplomatic-tension-between-iran-and-turkey

[26] Slaughter p.164
[27] Ibid. 12
[28] Ibid
[29] Ibid

Numerous hashtags flooded social media among Iranian individuals since President Erdogan recited the nationalist poem. Various hashtags in Farsi were traded within cyber-space, such as #باشاسین_ایران (long live Iran), #erdogan_kapa_ceneni (Erdogan made a mistake), as well as other hashtags in Farsi with the words *Aran* and *Shervan* (regions within today's Azerbaijan), جمهوری_باکو# (Baku Republic), and English hashtags #iran. The languages used via the hashtags were mainly referring to the history of Iran and the treaties of Gulestan (1813) and Turkmenchai (1828) between Iran and Imperial Russia in which Russia ceded today's Azerbaijan from Iran's Imperial state during the Qajar dynasty.[30] Other hashtags were narrating and reiterating national unity amongst Iranian ethnicities and how many Iranian Azeris defended Iran during the Iran-Iraq war by naming well-known martyrs from the Iranian province of Azerbaijan. Some Iranian social media users marched further and called for the return of Azerbaijan to its Motherland, Iran. Echoing the Iranian publicvoices, some Iranian popular cinema celebrities entered cyberspace to engage with their followers over the subject matter. Navid Mohammedzadeh, an Iranian actor, used hashtags about Iran and Azerbaijan, and his comments defending Iranian territorial integrity received more than three hundred thousand likes.[31]

Hashtags can be a powerful tool for social media users and the digital public to draw attention to a particular issue or a common cause. Iranian internet users, particularly many of whom have Azeri origins, use social media and stormed cyber-space with hashtags about unity amongst Iranians over defending Iran's territorial integrity. Having said that, employing hashtags and debating the matter via the cyber-space was not monopolised by the Iranian public inside Iran. Many Iranians in the diaspora exhibited their solidarity with their fellow citizens inside Iran and demonstrated their resentment against perceived threats to their motherland's territorial integrity by interacting through cyber-space.

Discussing the role of oppositions and communities in the diaspora, Bernal makes a valid point that digital technologies lead to both de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation as their narrative can signal demarcation lines between diasporas and their country's government .[32] In my examination of the Iranian diaspora's use of social media, I argue that such platforms create vertical virtual public domain where socio-political issues are pondered and discussed and government narratives are both disseminated and contested. During the Karabakh conflict, Iranian diasporas used these platforms to rally socio-political support for their country's territorial integrity against perceived threats to their homeland's territorial integrity. In this regard, the borders of the nation-state stretched into overseas demesnes and social media had a re-territorialising weight as Iranian diasporas became a virtual conservatory of Iran.

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[30] For more on the history of Iran in South Caucasus see Marziyeh Kouhi-Esfahani, 2019, Iran's Foreign Policy in South Caucasia, Routledge. Chapter 3

[31] https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/amp/572156/
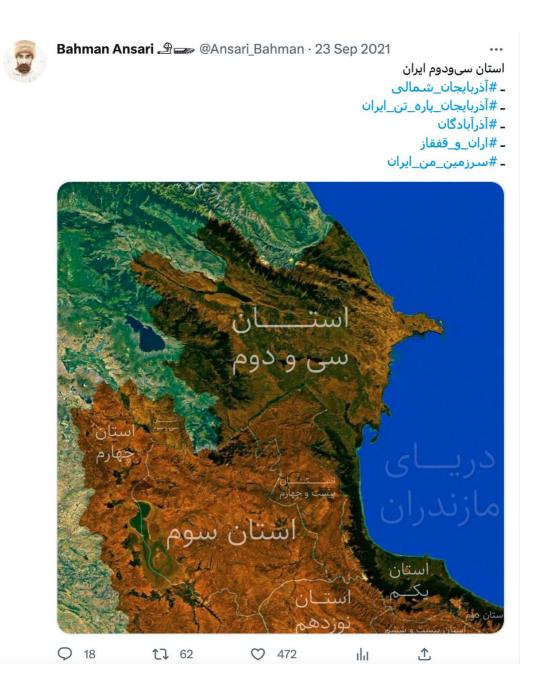
[32] Bernal in Ilan Manor 2019. p. 38

Figure 1.6- An Iranian social media user uses the hashtag Aran and South Caucasia, calling on Azerbaijan to unite with Iran and "return to its motherland".[33]

When Iranians in diaspora use cyber-space to castigate their government's lack of "appropriate" actions in defending their homeland's territorial integrity, this could have a de-territorialisation impact, gesticulating delineation contours between diasporas and their government. According to an Iranian anti-government

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[33] https://twitter.com/hashtag/آذربایجان_پاره_تن_ایران?src=hashtag_click

newspaper in the diaspora "in the absence of having a national government", people take initiatives in their own hands via cyber-space and to defend the country's territorial integrity".[34]

Iranian publics, including those who are regarded as anti-government activists' admonition of the threats to Iranian borders, also demonstrate that the virtual space is now contested fields in which opposing non-governmental activists, concerned individuals as well as state officials and state-run media outlet stimulate their recitation of national and regional events while contesting over the responsiveness and provision of virtual public. Manor rightly argues that the digital society is predicated on dialogue and not monologue. Members of the digital society do not merely absorb information; they comment on it, edit it, redistribute it, and engage with its authors.[35] When it comes to safeguarding the nation's territorial integrity, diplomacy is no longer monopolised by senior diplomats discussing secret matters throughout the long corridors of power, and this is because diplomacy is no longer hidden from the public eyes and ears.

In the case of reacting to foreign narratives threatening Iran's territorial integrity, many members of the Iranian public have turned to social media to voice their concerns and express national unity over the cause. In the absence of evidence of two-way interactions between state authorities and the digital public in the diaspora, the Iranian diasporas use cyber-space to signal messages across the borders that the territorial integrity of their homeland is their red line. To this end, cyber-space provides platforms for citizens, especially those in the diaspora to express their concerns, interact and engage with their fellow countrymen and women, and forge national discourses. In doing so, many Iranian Internet users turn to various social media platforms and attempt not to confine their activities only within classical social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. To this end, Clubhouse as one of the new platforms within cyber-space, gained popular currency amongst the Iranian digital publics. Clubhouse allows users from around the world to engage and talk to one another lively without censorship. Clubhouse facilitates live voice interactions using their own country's official language to interact with one another.

The presence of some Iranian politicians and pro-regime activists in the same virtual rooms as anti-regime activists has made this platform even more attractive to the Iranian digital public. Clubhouse, the invitation-only app billed as "a space for casual, drop-in audio conversations," has attracted users from many parts of the world. The app became popular when Iranian officials took to the app on March 31 to explain a 25-year, $400 billion agreement with China, one of them invited Zarif to join.[36] The conversation gradually shifted from China's deal to Azerbaijan's threatening Iranian territorial integrity in September 2020. In a virtual room discussing threats from Azerbaijan and Erdogan's reciting a poem, the author of

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[34] https://kayhan.london/1399/09/21/222448/

[35] Ibid. 12

[36] https://www.npr.org/2021/04/23/988816176/in-iran-clubhouse-means-unfiltered-chats-even-with-top-officials-but-for-how-lon

this paper listened to debates between Iranian pro-government activists and the opposition activists in the diaspora, both agreeing that patriotism and defending territorial integrity are the red lines for the Iranian publics. Many Iranian Clubhouse users inside and outside the country congregated in rooms to exchange ideas about perceived threats to their homeland's territorial integrity. A social media user, on condition of anonymity, stated to me that as an Iranian Azeri, I felt morally obliged to be active in cyber-space, particularly via clubhouse to demonstrate that Iranian Azeris are ready to defend their borders. He also stated that he and his comrades believe that the Iranian government is not doing enough and is preoccupied with consolidating its power within the country rather than serving the national interest.[37]

Conclusion

The concept of Cyber-space in IR is a new phenomenon. Although there are some academic works about the digitalised diplomacy, however, most of them focus on how foreign policy practitioners began utilising the cyber domain and how Ministries of Foreign Affairs procure and facilitate diplomacy via virtual space. Yet there is still more to be done to address the role of individuals in influencing the foreign policy debates via cyber-space beyond state-dominated apparatuses.

This paper attempts to offer a different departure point by comparing the digitalisation of public diplomacy by both the state and the individual activists within cyber-space. The existing IR literature has largely neglected not only the role of cyberspace in formulating public diplomacy but, more importantly, the role of the public in shaping people-to-people diplomacy through cyber-space. This paper attempts to demonstrate that in the case of safeguarding the notion of territorial integrity of Iran, there is an unwritten consensus between the state and the individual activists. In other words, there has been cooperation without coordination within the cyberspace between opposing sides over a nationally recognised cause.

Cyber-space, in this regard, brings people together and facilitates the ground to find a common linkage. The common linkage that binds many Iranian individuals within cyber-space is Iran's territorial integrity despite disagreements over what shape of governance their country should register. Anne-Marie Slaughter makes a valid point that social media and other technological platforms make it possible to democratise both power and action to a far greater extent than ever before in human history.[38] The impact of network participation on contributors in many networks is rooted in a fundamental human desire to be connected to others and to be recognised by them as a peer.[39] Through cyber-space, people in the diaspora can interact and connect with their fellow countrymen and women in groups. Cyber-space allows individuals to forge debates over foreign policy debates without shaping hierarchies in charge of the debates. This is what I call "peer-to-peer diplomacy" in comparison to public diplomacy, which is defined by Anne-Marie Slaughter

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[37] Interviewed via Clubhouse in October 2022
[38] Ibid. p.199
[39] Anne-Marie Slaughter, p.98

as 'people to people diplomacy" conducted by the governments only to engage foreign public in dialogue.[40] Having said that, Dina Matar rightly reminds us that the agency of activists within cyber-space could not be neglected. She argues that what needs to be discussed is whether new actors, new publics, and new modes of participation emerge as new digital platforms are adopted and adapted and whether and how these actors and publics can shift political cultures and entrenched power.[41] This paper argues that the in the case of the Karabakh conflict, the Iranian diplomatic machines as well as the Iranian public turned to cyber-space to signal how vital is the concept of Iranian territorial integrity to the Iranian people both inside the country and in the diaspora. The cyber-space, in this regard, has been utilised as a tool for deterrence against foreign threats by exhibiting national unity over the subject matter.

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[40] Ibid. p.115

[41] Dina Mattar, 15 April 2021, Is Clubhouse the latest new media technology for change in the Middle East? https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/cgmc/2021/04/15/is-clubhouse-the-latest-new-media-technology-for-change-in-the-middle-east/

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