أبحاث محكمة باللغة الإنجليزية

A Cross-Cultural Study of Visual Framing in News Photos Surrounding General Soleimani's Assassination

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Abstract

This study investigates the visual framing of the 2020 assassination of Iranian General Soleimani, a defining moment in U.S.-Iran relations. Analyzing coverage from seven newspapers in conflict-involved, allied, and adversarial regions, we explore how visual framing operates at various levels during short-term conflict, such as in unexpected and brief news events. Soleimani, as the Quds Force commander, held significant influence, and his assassination prompted diverse global reactions. Our study contributes to conflict coverage and visual framing literature by exploring coverage of short-term conflict from a range of regional alignments.

التأطير البصري في الصور الإخبارية المتعلقة باغتيال الجنرال سليماني.. دراسة عبر الثقافات

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ملخص:

اهتمت هذه الدراسة بمعرفة الاختلافات في الأطر البصرية التي استخدمتها الصحف الدولية في تغطية مقتل اللواء الإيراني قائد فيلق القدس قاسم سليماني 2020 في غارة جوية أثناء تواجده في العراق بموافقة الرئيس الأمريكي ترامب. كانت هذه لحظة فارقة في تاريخ العلاقات الأمريكية الإيرانية وأثارت مخاوف حول اندلاع حرب عالمية ثالثة واختلفت ردود فعل الدول حول هذا الحدث بين مؤيد ومعارض. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة على تحليل الأطر البصرية لحدث قصير المدى ومفاجئ بعكس أغلب الدراسات السابقة وحللت الدراسة سبع صحف من سبع دول هم إيران وأمريكا والعراق وهم الدول المتصارعة، وروسيا والصين كحلفاء لإيران وإسرائيل ومصر كحلفاء لأمريكا. تم التحليل لأربعة مستويات للأطر البصرية وفقا لمنهجية Rodriguez & Dimitrova, (2011) وأشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى التزام الصحف في أغلب الوقت بالنشر في إطار السلام بصرف النظر عن توجه الصحيفة تجاه الحدث.

Introduction

More than four decades have passed since the Iranian Revolution, and relations between the US and Iran remain tense. The tensions escalated starting when Trump became president and reached its peak when he ordered the assassination of Iranian general Soleimani on January 3, 2020. (Fawcett & Payne, 2023) (محمد واخرون، 2023)

Soleimani served as the commander of the Quds Force from 1998, which is primarily responsible for secret operations beyond regional borders. He was also the right-hand man of Iran's Supreme Leader, Khamenei, making him the second-most powerful person in Iran (Binkaya, 2020). This incident has become a defining moment in recent world history, attracting significant attention from media all over the world with far-reaching international implications.

The debate and consequences of this incident were extensively covered in the media, whether locally in conflict-involved regions or abroad in allied and adversarial regions. This resulted in coverage that included expert analysis and interpretations ranging from exaggerated expectations of Iran seeking high-revenge actions that could lead to World war (Staff, 2020) to downplaying the likelihood of direct confrontation between Iran and the US (Akbarzadeh, 2020).

Media coverage of a conflict, especially through still images, can directly and indirectly contribute to its escalation or de-escalation through stylistic, denotative, and connotative systems, and as ideological representations (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017). While visual framing analysis helps in identifying these aspects, its focus is often on ongoing coverage or anticipated issues. In protracted conflicts, visual framing can wield significant

power due to the media's ability to access diverse sources beyond official channels. However, in shorter conflicts where live coverage is limited, governments may exert greater influence over news frames. Consequently, exploring the visual framing of sudden, brief, and unexpected news events presents an opportunity to discern governments' intentions regarding future relations with the conflicting parties..

This study compares visual news coverage of Soleimani’s assassination in seven newspapers from conflict-involved, allied and adversarial regions using the four levels of visual framing to better understand the coverage and to explore how visual framing of conflict can occur in unexpected, brief events.

Literature Review

Conflict coverage

The assassination of General Soleimani, a central figure in the influence of the Islamic Republic in the Middle East, through an American strike in Baghdad on 3 January 2020, triggered numerous reactions worldwide. While most countries called for calm to prevent escalation, some viewed the operation as justified self-defense by the US (Nichols, 2020), while others condemned it as a brutal attack (*Tasnim News Agency*, 2020). Reactions within the crisis-affected countries were diverse.

In the US, opinions were divided, with some supporting and welcoming the assassination, and others considering it a reckless step that would lead to losses for everyone involved (*Deutsche Welle, 2020*). However, the US media primarily portrayed Soleimani as a killer regardless of whether they agreed or disagreed with his assassination. Atalla, Moftah, and Marzouk (2021) found that the New York Post depicted

Soleimani as a person responsible for the deaths of many American soldiers in Iraq and assisting in the killing of civilians and children in Syria.

In Iran, masses took to the streets in demonstrations against America, demanding revenge for the martyr and bidding farewell to him in a solemn funeral. This demonstrated the extent of his popularity in his home country, where he was regarded as a national hero. Iranians considered him as martyr, which is the highest status accorded to an assassinated person in the Islamic faith. Few others celebrated his death as a statue of terrorism (*Al Jazeera*, 2020a).

Reactions in Iraq were also mixed. A study by Fadel and Jelewi (2020) examined the interaction of Iraqi students with Trump's posts on Twitter and found high engagement with his tweet mentioning the assassination. The study revealed that while many Iraqis denounced the assassination, others expressed concerns about Iraq being transformed into a war zone without its involvement. Some Iraqis even expressed happiness over Soleimani's killing due to his interference in Iraqi politics and his role in destabilizing the country (فاضل و جليوى، 2020). Similar results were found in media reports (Pollock, 2020).

In other areas of the world, Russia, a longstanding arch-enemy of the US, warned that the assassination would escalate tensions in the Middle East. Russia’s Foreign Ministry extended sincere condolences to Iranians and criticized the attack, which it viewed as hasty and motivated by hidden agendas (*Al Jazeera*, 2020b).

Israel, on the other hand, strongly welcomed the assassination, albeit considering it long overdue. Israeli

media had a similar narrative to American media. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the US had the right to defend itself by killing Soleimani and attributed responsibility to Soleimani for the deaths of American citizens and numerous innocent people, claiming that Soleimani had planned more such attacks (Perrigo, 2020). In their study, Farokhi and Semnon (2022) found that the main and prominent Zionist media (*Haaretz*, *The Jerusalem Post* and *Israel-Hume*) portrayed Soleimani's personality and performance in the world in negative way and found his assassination is a consequence of Iran's interfere in the region.

Egypt gave real attention to this incident. Mohammed et al. (2023) found that Egyptian media paid more attention to the Soleimani assassination compared to American and Iraqi media (محمد، نوناى، راجح، حجاج، و توفيق، 2023). Regarding Egypt's official statements, the country attempted to maintain neutrality, but media reports revealed its true position. Soleimani had represented a real threat to Egypt since 2013 when he entered the country with a forged passport and met with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time. His aim was to propose a plan for creating a Revolutionary Guard unit similar to the one in Iran, which would confront the regular police in Egypt. Egyptian authorities discovered this plot (عبد الحميد، 2020). Additionally, Egypt, with the largest Sunni institution in the world (Al-Azhar), holds differences with Iran, the largest Shiite country. Moreover, Egypt has been a strong ally of the US since the 1970s.

A review of Chinese media and academic articles discussed how the assassination of Soleimani raised significant concerns in China (Grazia-Giuffrida, 2020). China called on all parties involved, particularly the US, to exercise

restraint. Its statement primarily blamed the US for worsening the situation, the statement highlighted that the US should refrain from "misusing force" and emphasized that the dangerous military operation violated fundamental norms of international relations, contributing to regional tensions and instability. However, they ultimately praised Iran for showing restraint (*Al Jazeera* , 2020b).

Visual framing

News images remain an important aspect of how viewers understand conflict coverage, especially in how they provide immediate conscious and sub-conscious emotional response to the reader, and in how this message often supersedes messaging in the words of the story (Coleman, 2010; Gibson & Zillmann, 2000; أنور، 2024). Visual elements such as camera shots, frames, and photographs depicting dead bodies, burned places, physical harm, and shooting can evoke different emotional responses from the public compared to diplomatic talks, politicians shaking hands, and negotiators (Fahmy & Neumann, 2012; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017). This is exactly what visual framing explores. It refers to the way the subject is presented in the image, including the selection of what to include or exclude, the use of particular camera angles and perspectives, and the manipulation of image elements (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Visual framing analysis can be applied at four levels, which start at a surface-level understanding of the image and gradually moves into deeper aspects of meaning-making (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

The first level, denotative, evokes how Roland Barthes (1977) described the literal objects in the image, and can often be simplified to a question of “who or what is being

depicted here? (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011 p. 53). For example, in conflict coverage of the European refugee crisis, Zhang & Hellmueller (2017) identified the various news actors involved (such as political figures, celebrities, members of the public) to count and compare their presence in news images.

The stylistic level begins to add to what we can say about the literal objects in the news images by looking at how they are presented (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). The photographer doesn't just choose what will be in their image, but also makes decisions about the composition. In particular, the use of angle and distance can send emotional cues to the viewer. Much like how we naturally look at things above and below us, the use of a high camera angle looking down on an object or actor can visually diminish them in the eyes of the views and the use of a low camera angle to look up on an object or actor can do the reverse by elevating them to an important status (Coleman, 2010). Similarly, the closer the actor or object is in the photo (whether due to the photographer's physical proximity, use of a zoom lens or in cropping during post-processing), the stronger emotional connection we might feel to it/them (Berger, 1981; Coleman, 2010).

The connotative level starts exploring the meanings of what we see in the image beyond simple presence. At the image level, they can carry overall positive, negative, or neutral emotional tones, which can vary based on subject matter (Amores, Calderón, & Stanek, 2019). But even at the individual level, simple indicators such as eye contact or physical touch can convey meaning. An individual making eye contact in a photograph, whether at the camera or at someone else, is generally seen as a positive connotation of

honesty (Coleman, 2010). Physical touch can be positive (a hug), negative (gripping an arm during an arrest) or neutral and adds more meaning to the presence of the individual (Lough & McIntyre, 2019).

The ideological level zooms out to look at broader meanings and connections from the photograph (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011), such as war and peace frames. For example, Fahmy& Neumann (2012) coded individuals in coverage of the Gaza War as victim, belligerent, negotiator, or demonstrator, and showed how the first two pertained to a war frame and the latter two to a peace frame. Here, we can take the sum of the photo to see the greater message being conveyed, especially as it pertains to the coverage topic.

Visual portrayal of conflict

International media often portrays conflicts from their perspective, influenced by their countries' relationships with the parties involved and their interests. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how conflicts are covered by the media of the parties involved, as well as their supporters and adversaries. Several studies have investigated how the media utilize the power of words and visual imagery to depict protracted and anticipated conflicts.

For instance, during the 2003 Iraq War, the American media predominantly showcased images of destroyed facilities, armored vehicles, and infrastructure resulting from the war, while minimizing the depiction of human losses on both sides of the conflict (Mercier, 2005). This absence of coverage on "killed and wounded people" was also observed in studies analyzing media aligned with the US. Kristensen& Ørsten (2007) conducted a content analysis of 2,045 news items produced by Danish media before and during the initial

weeks of the Iraq war, revealing that the coverage omitted the war's casualties suffered by either side, instead focusing on military battles and strategies. They said that their findings align with other studies which found that newspapers' visual reporting on the war emphasized military battles and strategies, neglecting to convey the stories of human casualties in text and visuals. Fahmy& Kim (2008) obtained similar results in their analysis of how *The New York Times* and The Guardian visually framed the war, revealing that only a small portion of the photographic coverage in US and British newspapers depicted actual combat activity.

Conversely, Maeshima's (2007) study analyzing coverage of the 2003 Iraq War in *The New York Times* and Asahi, a Japanese newspaper, presented contrasting narratives of the war and the reasons behind it. *The New York Times* portrayed the oppressive Saddam Hussein regime and terrorists as the wrongdoers, while Asahi depicted the US as the primary wrongdoer.

More recently, in the Russian-Ukrainian war, which is a long-term and expected conflict, media coverage varied depending on the countries' relationships with the conflicting parties during the crisis. Before the war, Ukraine and Belarus shared a strong relationship, with Belarus declaring full support for Ukraine in any potential crisis. However, when the Russian invasion began, the language used by Belarusian newspapers shifted, defending the Russian position and even highlighting the humanity of the Russian army by facilitating safe corridors for Ukrainian civilians to exit. Belarus asserted its right to engage in the war to protect its territory from its archenemy, NATO (Mudrov, 2022). On the other hand, Italian newspapers covered the event differently, focusing on showcasing the resilience of Ukrainians and the collaborative

efforts of civilians and the military in confronting the Russians. They also criticized the Russian government and highlighted the negative impact of the war on Europe as a whole (Lami & Sahota, 2022).

This demonstrates that the coverage frameworks of countries involved in the conflict differ based on their relationships with the countries involved. In terms of the conflicting parties, Veileder (2022) found that Russian media primarily presents the war as an act of self-defense by Russia, emphasizing the violations committed by the Ukrainian army, which resulted in the deaths of numerous Russian soldiers (Veileder,2022). This framing portrays Russia as the aggrieved party and victim. Close results were presented by Roman, Young, & Perkins, (2020) Study regarding the Russian media, while it showed that the Ukrainian media focused on the crime scene by denouncing what Russia is doing against Ukraine, which prompted Ukrainian citizens to flee. These and other studies underscore the disparity in coverage frameworks between countries directly involved in long-term and anticipated conflicts, as well as countries supporting one of the conflicting parties. This study aims to examine the visual frameworks employed in sudden and short-term conflict, which differ from prior research.

In a study by Ahmed, Cho, and Jaidka (2018), the framing of a sudden incident in Singapore was examined. The incident involved a fatal car accident at a crowded dining spot, which led to aggressive behavior from onlookers, mainly migrant workers, towards the police and emergency personnel. The researchers analyzed media coverage and Twitter discussions surrounding the incident across ten countries over one week from 9-15 December 2013.

The study found that Singaporean newspapers blamed the rioters rather than the authorities, while newspapers from other countries heavily criticized the Singaporean authorities for their handling of the incident. These findings suggest that in short-lived incidents, news media tend to align with their respective governments, possibly due to considerations of national security or limited access to alternative sources for different narratives.

The short-term, immediate coverage of the Soleimani assassination provides a unique opportunity to explore visual framing and conflict coverage across not only the conflict-involved region, but also from allied and adversarial nations. Therefore, guided by the four levels of visual framing, we ask:

Research Questions:

RQ1: What were the dominant denotative pattern in news coverage of the Soleimani assassination?

RQ1a: How did this differ between newspapers in allied and adversarial countries?

RQ2: What were the dominant stylistic pattern in news coverage of the Soleimani assassination?

RQ2a: How did this differ between newspapers in allied and adversarial countries?

RQ3: What were the dominant connotative patterns in news coverage of the Soleimani assassination?

RQ3a: How did these differ between newspapers in allied and adversarial countries?

RQ4: How were war and peace frames used at ideological levels in news coverage of the Soleimani assassination?

RQ4a: How did these differ between newspapers in allied and adversarial countries?

Methods

We used a quantitative visual content analysis to examine the contents and dominant frames of 280 news photos (our unit of analysis) from seven online newspapers that covered the Soleimani assassination operation.

Sample of countries

We identified seven countries for media analysis: USA, Iran, Iraq (conflict parties), China (Iran's Ally) , Israel (USA ally), Russia (USA adversary), and Egypt (Iran adversary). The authors collected data starting from the assassination day January 3, 2020, until January 10th a day after the Iranian military responded in "Operation Martyr Soleimani" and then-President Trump tweeted "All is well".

Newspaper sample

The photos came from seven online newspapers, three from conflict-involved regions, two from allied regions and two from adversarial regions (Table 1).

To identify which online newspapers qualify to be studied, the researchers were guided by three criteria. First, it should be in Arabic or English as the authors don't know any other languages. Second, it should be one of the most prominent daily newspapers in its region: Third, it needs to have a free archive on its website or a website that one of the authors has access to. Furthermore, to select our sample of newspapers, we also considered previous studies and selected *The New York Times* for the USA and *The Jerusalem Post* for Israel (Vu et al., 2018), *Tehran Times* for Iran (Ahmadian & Farahani, 2014), *Al-Ahram* for Egypt

(Mohammed & McCombs, 2021), *Azzaman* for Iraq (الهنداوي، 2019) (الرفاعى، 2018) , *China Daily* for China (Wang, 2013), and *Izvestia* for Russia (via reports from Statista).

Data collection

We accessed the newspapers online archives and searched for Soleimani or سليماني as a keyword. Only stories that had Soleimani's assassination as the main theme were added to the sample. Photos and captions from the stories were identified for analysis, resulting in 280 images (Table 1).

Table (1): The number of images analyzed from each newspaper.

	Izvestia	*Azzaman*	*China Daily*	*The New York Times*	*Al-Ahram*	*Tehran Times*	*The Jerusalem Post*	Total
Region	USA Adversary	Conflict	USA Adversary	Conflict	USA Allied	Conflict	USA Allied	
Language	English	Arabic	English	English	Arabic	English	English	
Count	23	24	24	13	92	86	18	280
%	8.2%	8.6%	8.6%	4.6%	32.9%	30.7%	6.4%	100.0%

Al-Ahram, the Egyptian newspaper, demonstrated the highest level of attention towards the assassination among all the *newspapers* studied, accounting for approximately 32.9% of the total analyzed images. Despite not being directly involved in the conflict, Egypt held concerns about the potential consequences of the incident due to its alliance with the USA and its adversarial relationship with Iran. Additionally, being an Arabic country, Egypt was apprehensive about the potential risk of Iraq becoming a proxy battleground between Iran and the USA. *Tehran Times*

closely followed, representing approximately 30.7% of the analyzed images.

Among the remaining newspapers, *China Daily* and *Izvestia* each had a sample size of (8.6%) while *Azzaman*, the Iraqi newspaper, had a slightly smaller sample of (8.2%). *The Jerusalem Post* accounted for approximately 6.4% of the analyzed images. *The New York Times* has the smallest contribution representing only (4.6%) of the total. Unlike *Tehran Times*, *Azzaman* and *The New York Times* focused more on domestic issues following the incident rather than solely on Soleimani and his assassination and this study analyzed only stories that has Soleimani's assassination as a main theme.

Variables

Following similar studies, as well as updating for this particular *news* topic, we coded the content of the image as the variable for the denotative level, which included: American figures, Iranian figures, Iraqi figures, other figures, Soleimani, the Soleimani funeral, demonstrations and others (Nurmis, 2017; Parveen & Showkat, 2020; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017). Two variables, camera distance (close, medium or far) and camera angle (above, straight-on, below), were used for the stylistic level (Coleman, 2010; Fahmy, 2004; Zhang & Helmueller, 2017; AlSaba, 2023). At the connotative level, we coded three variables. Emotion was measured as positive, negative or neutral (Amores, Calderón, & Stanek, 2019). Physical touch was measured as positive, negative or not present (Lough & McIntyre, 2019). Eye contact was measured as direct, indirect or unsure (Coleman, 2010). For the ideological level, we coded two variables following Fahmy

and Neumann (2012). First, the role of the news actor as victim, belligerent, negotiator or demonstrator, and second, any physical harm evident in the image (Fahmy & Neumann, 2012).

After we developed the codebook, two coders received training and were given the same 42 news photos (15%) to code to check intercoder reliability. All variables scored above the desired 0.75 using Cohen's Kappa reliability formula, ranging from 0.79 to 0.9.

Chi-square analyses were used for each variable to compare them across the seven newspapers, and contingency coefficients were calculated to measure the strength of any differences.

Results

Denotative level

Results of RQ1, which addressed the denotative level of content/news actors, (Nurmis, 2017; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011; Parveen & Showkat, 2020; Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017), show that Iranian figures or leaders appeared to be the most prominent actors with (21%) of newspapers' coverage, followed closely by the category of American figures with (18.6%) of their coverage (Table2).

Table (2): Content/actors in the news images.

		Izvestia	*Azzaman*	Chaina Daily	*The New York Times*	*Al–Ahram*	*Tehran Times*	*The Jerusalem Post*	Total
American figure	Count	4	2	4	4	29	7	2	52
	%	17.4%	8.3%	16.7%	30.8%	31.5%	8.1%	11.1%	18.6%
Iranian figure	Count	3	4	1	0	10	38	3	59
	%	13.0%	16.7%	4.2%	0.0%	10.9%	44.2%	16.7%	21.1%
Iraqi Figure	Count	0	4	0	0	4	1	1	10
	%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%	4.3%	1.2%	5.6%	3.6%
Other figures	Count	10	1	2	0	19	9	0	41
	%	43.5%	4.2%	8.3%	0.0%	20.7%	10.5%	0.0%	14.6%
Soleimani	Count	0	1	0	3	12	9	3	28
	%	0.0%	4.2%	0.0%	23.1%	13.0%	10.5%	16.7%	10.0%
Soleimani Funeral	Count	0	2	4	2	7	13	7	35
	%	0.0%	8.3%	16.7%	15.4%	7.6%	15.1%	38.9%	12.5%
Demonstrations against	Count	2	4	9	4	1	3	1	24
	%	8.7%	16.7%	37.5%	30.8%	1.1%	3.5%	5.6%	8.6%
Others	Count	4	6	4	0	10	6	1	31
	%	17.4%	25.0%	16.7%	0.0%	10.9%	7.0%	5.6%	11.1%
Total	Count	23	24	24	13	92	86	18	280
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Regarding the differences between newspapers, the analysis revealed a significant difference among newspapers in terms of utilizing different content/news actors X^2 (42) = 164.33, p < .000. The Contingency Coefficient (0.608) suggests that these differences are moderate.

Tehran Times exhibited the highest interest (44.2%) in publishing images featuring Iranian figures in contrast to *The New York Times* which didn't publish any images containing Iranian figures. Unlike expected, *Al-Ahram* was the most interested newspaper in publishing photos about the American figures category with (31.5%) of its coverage, followed by *The New York Times* (30.8%) while the Iranian

newspaper was the least in publishing photos for American figures and leaders (8.1%). The newspapers showed minimal interest in publishing Iraqi figures photos. Only one picture of an Iraqi figure appeared in *The Jerusalem Post* and *Tehran Times*. *Al-Ahram* and *Azzaman* published four pictures each and the rest of the newspapers didn't prioritize publishing any Iraqi figures.

Stylistic level

Our analysis for RQ2, following (Zhang & Hellmueller, 2017), shows that a straight angle is the dominant camera angle in the newspapers' coverage. Most of the newspapers used straight angles (82.1%), fewer used high angles (17.9%) and none used low angles. There is a significant difference among newspapers from allied, adversarial and conflict countries in terms of using different types of camera angles X^2 (6) = 23.712, $p < .001$. The Contingency Coefficient (0.279) show that these differences are weak. *Al-Ahram* used straight angle technique more than the other newspapers 84 with (91.3%) of its coverage used straight angle. *The New York Times* used high angle in (38.46%) of its coverage which is the highest among the other newspapers.

Medium camera distance emerged as the dominant pattern with (71.8%) of all the coverage followed by long shots (18.2%) and closeups (10%). There is a significant difference among newspapers in terms of utilizing various types of camera shot distance X^2 (12) = 136.965, $p < .000$. The Contingency Coefficient (0.573) show that these differences are moderate.

Newspapers relied more on medium shots. *Al-Ahram* used it in (89.13%) of its coverage and *China Daily* use it the

least (33.33%). Long shots were used 51 times, with *China Daily* having the highest usage of it (66.7%) and *The Jerusalem Post* didn't use it at ll. Only three newspapers used close-up shots, *The Jerusalem Post* used closeup shots in (38.89%) followed by *Tehran Times* (15.12%), and *Al-Ahram* (8.7%). The other four newspapers didn't use close-up shots.

Table (3) Camera angle and distance in the news images.

			Newspapers							Total
			Izvestia	*Azzaman*	*China Daily*	*The New York Times*	*Al-Ahram*	Tehran Times	The Jerusalem Post	
Camera angle	Straight	Count	20	18	16	8	84	74	10	230
		%	86.96%	75.00%	66.67%	61.54%	91.30%	86.05 %	55.56 %	82.14%
	High angle	Count	3	6	8	5	8	12	8	50
		%	13.04%	25.00%	33.33%	38.46%	8.70%	13.95 %	44.44 %	17.86%
	Total	Count	23	24	24	13	92	86	18	280
		%	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.0 0%	100.00 %	100.00%
			Newspapers							Total
			Izvestia	*Azzaman*	*China Daily*	*The New York Times*	*Al-Ahram*	Tehran *Times*	The Jerusalem Post	
Camera distance	Long shot	Count	12	12	16	7	2	2	0	51
		%	52.17%	50.00%	66.67%	53.85%	2.17%	2.33 %	0.00%	18.21%
	Medium shot	Count	11	12	8	6	82	71	11	201
		%	47.83%	50.00%	33.33%	46.15%	89.13%	82.56 %	61.11 %	71.79%
	Closeup shot	Count	0	0	0	0	8	13	7	28
		%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	8.70%	15.12 %	38.89 %	10.00%
	Total	Count	23	24	24	13	92	86	18	280
		%	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.0 0%	100.00 %	100.00%

Connotative level

We employed negative and positive frames as categories to analyze the connotative aspects of visual framing to answer RQ3 (Amores et al., 2020; Nurmis, 2017). We focused on sub-frames related to emotions depicted in the photo, physical touch between *individuals* in the photo, and eye contact with the camera.

A neutral tone emerged as the dominant emotion (Table 4), accounting for (37.5%) of the coverage, followed by negative emotions at (35.7%). Positive emotions were the least utilized in this coverage. We found a significant difference among newspapers in terms of representing different emotions X^2 (18) = 51.8, p < .000. The Contingency Coefficient (0.395) indicates that these differences are moderate.

Table (4): Emotions in the news images.

Emotions		Izvestia	Azzaman	*China Daily*	*The New York Times*	*Al-Ahram*	*Tehran Times*	The Jerusalem Post	Total
Negative	Count	2	12	18	3	37	25	3	100
	%	8.70%	50.00%	75.00%	23.08%	40.22%	29.07%	16.67%	35.71%
neutral	Count	15	7	5	5	37	32	4	105
	%	65.22%	29.17%	20.83%	38.46%	40.22%	37.21%	22.22%	37.50%
Positive	Count	3	0	1	1	8	6	3	22
	%	13.04%	0.00%	4.17%	7.69%	8.70%	6.98%	16.67%	7.86%
Not Identified	Count	3	5	0	4	10	23	8	53
	%	13.04%	20.83%	0.00%	30.77%	10.87%	26.74%	44.44%	18.93%
Total	Count	23	24	24	13	92	86	18	280
	%	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %	100.00 %

Izvestia exhibited the highest interest in publishing topics with a *neutral* tone, with 65.22% of its coverage falling into this category. Conversely, *China Daily* showed the least inclination towards utilizing a neutral emotions (20.8%).

Surprisingly, *China Daily* was the newspaper most interested in publishing images with a negative tone (75%), while *Izvestia* had the least representation of negative emotions (8.7%). *The Jerusalem Post* displayed a higher utilization of positive emotions in its photos compared to other *newspapers*, whereas *Azzaman didn't* employ positive tones at all.

The dominant pattern observed in the news images regarding physical touch is characterized by "no physical touch." Approximately 97.86% of the newspaper coverage didn't show any physical touch between people in the photo. There was no negative touch present, and not significant *differences* between newspapers in the amount of physical touch present X2 (6) = 6.108, p =0.411.

Negative eye contact was the dominant pattern (Table 5) with (43.9%) of the coverage. Positive eye contact follows closely behind, representing 32.8% of the coverage. There was a significant difference among newspapers in the utilization of different eye contact patterns in the published news images X^2 (12) = 58.87, p < .000. The Contingency Coefficient (0.417) show that these differences are moderate.

Al-Ahram displayed the highest use of photos with negative eye contact (58.7%), closely followed by *Azzaman* (58.3%). *Izvestia* exhibited the least inclination towards publishing photos with negative eye contact (8.7%). Conversely, *Izvestia* had the highest representation of positive eye contact (69.57%), while *The New York Times* didn't utilize positive eye contact at all. While the dominant emotion in this coverage was neutral, the dominant pattern was no physical touch, the negative pattern in eye contacts was the dominant one.

Table (5): Eye contact in the news images.

Eye contact		*Izvestia*	*Azzaman*	*China Daily*	*The New York Times*	*Al-Ahram*	*Tehran Times*	*The Jerusalem Post*	*Total*
indirect [negative]	Count	*2*	*14*	*8*	*4*	*54*	*32*	*9*	*123*
	%	*8.70%*	*58.33%*	*33.33%*	*30.77%*	*58.70%*	*37.21%*	*50.00%*	*43.93 %*
direct [positive]	Count	*16*	*7*	*7*	*0*	*18*	*41*	*3*	*92*
	%	*69.57%*	*29.17%*	*29.17%*	*0.00%*	*19.57%*	*47.67%*	*16.67%*	*32.86 %*
Unsure	Count	*5*	*3*	*9*	*9*	*20*	*13*	*6*	*65*
	%	*21.74%*	*12.50%*	*37.50%*	*69.23%*	*21.74%*	*15.12%*	*33.33%*	*23.21 %*
Total	Count	*23*	*24*	*24*	*13*	*92*	*86*	*18*	*280*
	%	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*100.00 %*

Ideological level

Drawing on Fahmy and Neumann's (2012) categories for determining war and peace frames, we identified two main categories to address RQ4. The first category focused on the role of the news actor in the image and the second focused whether any physical harm was evident. In their study, they combined victims and belligerents to create war frames, and negotiators and demonstrators to create peace frames. Although most demonstrations in our study were peaceful, they expressed a desire for revenge, which could contribute more to the war frame than the peace frame.

In this study, only the negotiators frame represented the peace frame, while the other three categories represented the war frame. The results indicate that the peace frame is the dominant frame, accounting for 51.8% of the images (Table 6). Within the war frame, the belligerent subcategory is the most dominant, comprising 23.2% of the images.

Table (6): The role actors play in the photo

Role		Izvestia	Azzaman	China Daily	The New York Times	Al-Ahram	Tehran Times	The Jerusalem Post	Total
Victims	Count	4	3	1	1	2	0	0	11
	%	17.4%	12.5%	4.2%	7.7%	2.2%	0.0%	0.0%	3.9%
Belligerent	Count	1	11	3	2	21	21	6	65
	%	4.3%	45.8%	12.5%	15.4%	22.8%	24.4%	33.3%	23.2%
Negotiator	Count	16	4	7	4	61	49	4	145
	%	69.6%	16.7%	29.2%	30.8%	66.3%	57.0%	22.2%	51.8%
Demonstrator	Count	2	6	13	6	8	16	8	59
	%	8.7%	25.0%	54.2%	46.2%	8.7%	18.6%	44.4%	21.1%
Total	Count	23	24	24	13	92	86	18	280
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Analyzing the differences between newspapers in allied, adversarial, and conflict countries, we found a significant difference among them ($\chi 2$ (18) = 79.2, $p < .000$). The Contingency Coefficient (0.470) suggests that these differences are moderate.

Izvestia showed the highest interest in publishing images with a peace frame (69.6%), closely followed by Al-Ahram (66.3%). Azzaman contributed the least to the peace frame with only 16.7%. To assess which parties were more interested in contributing to peace frames, we combined the frequencies of Izvestia and China Daily for the allied countries to Iran, and Al-Ahram with The Jerusalem Post for the allied countries to the USA. We then presented the conflicting parties separately. The allied countries to the USA contributed approximately 59% to the peace frame, while the allied countries to Iran contributed 48.9%. Tehran Times contributed 57% to the peace frame, whereas The New York Times contributed 30.8%, and Azzaman had the lowest contribution in this category at 16.7%.

Table 7 shows that no physical harm is the dominant pattern (95.7%). There is a significant difference among newspapers in the presenting physical harm in the published news images X^2 (12) = 37.36, p < .000. The Contingency Coefficient (0.343) shows that these differences are moderate.

China Daily and *The Jerusalem Post* published all their photos with no physical harm shown (100%), closely followed by *Tehran Times* (98.8%) and *Al-Ahram* (97.8%). *Azzaman* exhibited the least inclination towards publishing photos with no physical harm (75%). This contributes more to the peace frame as all the newspapers publish photos that contain physical harm in less than 5% of its coverage.

Table (7): Physical harm depicted in the images

Physical harm		*Izvestia*	*Azzaman*	*China Daily*	*The New York Times*	*Al-Ahram*	*Tehran Times*	*The Jerusalem Post*	*Total*
No physical harm	*Count*	*21*	*18*	*24*	*12*	*90*	*85*	*18*	*268*
	%	*91.30 %*	*75.00 %*	*100.00 %*	*92.31%*	*97.83%*	*98.84%*	*100.00%*	*95.71%*
Severe	*Count*	*0*	*2*	*0*	*1*	*1*	*0*	*0*	*4*
	%	*0.00%*	*8.33%*	*0.00%*	*7.69%*	*1.09%*	*0.00%*	*0.00%*	*1.43%*
Most Severe	*Count*	*2*	*4*	*0*	*0*	*1*	*1*	*0*	*8*
	%	*8.70%*	*16.67 %*	*0.00%*	*0.00%*	*1.09%*	*1.16%*	*0.00%*	*2.86%*
Total	*Count*	*23*	*24*	*24*	*13*	*92*	*86*	*18*	*280*
	%	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*	*100%*

Discussion

During periods of conflict, the media often perpetuate a dichotomy by not only reflecting the prevailing political reality but also by playing a role in shaping it. However, it is worth considering whether the media can also operate oppositely

by contributing to peacebuilding efforts through nuanced and multi-faceted coverage. Indeed, we found evidence of a focus on peace framing through our analysis of the dominant stylistic, denotative, connotative, and ideological patterns in news coverage of the Soleimani assassination. Our results explore how these patterns differ between photos published in newspapers in conflict, allied, and adversarial countries. Our findings align with previous studies and support how politics plays a vital role in visually reporting news events (Huang & Fahmy, 2011).

Denotatively: Supporters in times of conflict

The *Tehran Times* didn't publish a lot of photos of American figures and published just one photo of an Iraqi politician, while *The New York Times* didn't publish any photos of Iranian or Iraqi figures at all. These findings align with Fahmy's (2020) research, which found that the ISIS magazine, Dabiq, also gave minimal attention to their enemies and focused heavily on their supporters. This is unlike what Ottosen (1995) concluded in how media give attention to photos of enemies, and the frame of them could change through times of peace or conflict (Lowenstein-Barkai, 2018). The difference could be attributed to the nature of the conflict itself. Most of the conflicts studied were about long-term conflicts, and this study is about short-term conflict.

Regarding newspapers allied and adversarial to the parties involved, with the exception of *Al-Ahram*, all newspapers published more photos of the adversarial party. For instance, *Izvestia* and *China Daily*, despite being allied to Iran, published more photos of American figures. Similarly, *The Jerusalem Post*, despite being allied to America,

published more photos of Iranian figures. This could be because they are interested in following their reactions and for their concern in commenting on the adversarial party. Conversely, *Al-Ahram*, which is allied to America, published more photos of American figures. This can be attributed to the influence of American media and news agencies, particularly *The New York Times*, on Egyptian journalism. Abo Yousof (2002) revealed that *Al-Ahram* was more influenced by the coverage of *The New York Times* compared to the Iraqi newspaper, despite the latter being in the same language as *Al-Ahram*. (أبو يوسف، 2002)

Tehran Times showed the highest interest in publishing photos of Soleimani's funeral. Notably, both *Al-Ahram* and *The Jerusalem Post* gave attention to this category despite their alliance with America, in contrast to countries allied with Iran. *Izvestia* and *China Daily* didn’t publish any pictures of Soleimani. The results indicated the interest of the remaining newspapers, except for the Iranian newspaper *Tehran Times*, in featuring pictures of Soleimani in military attire. This is noteworthy because his assassination took place while he was wearing civilian clothes. Al-Dagher, 2020 suggests that these newspapers aimed to convey to the global public that the US targeted a high-ranking military commander rather than a civilian. Moreover, Soleimani's facial expressions portrayed a strong, defiant, and determined demeanor, indicating his resolve to seek revenge against adversaries.) (الداغر،2020)

Regarding the *Tehran Times*, it published various pictures of Soleimani. These included images of him alongside the Iranian Revolutionary Leader, as well as photos capturing him smiling, dressed in civilian clothing, or exhibiting a sharp, piercing gaze while wearing a military

uniform. These images aimed to showcase his strength and presence.

Stylistically: Keeping a neutral distance

Most news images were taken at a medium length and straight-on, reflecting a basic informational-level style of photography. This indicates the photographers were likely mostly in neutral positions– Not close to the subject matter but also not so far away that they must rely on zoom lenses and broad compositions. The straight-on angle also reflects this, both in the underlying emotion of neutrality and in how it is the simplest photo to take (the photographer doesn't need to raise or lower the camera and/or their body to make the composition).

Many of the photos analyzed in this study included presidents. Mullen (1997) found presidential portrayals followed a consistent pattern over thirty-year periods, with profiles, eye-level shots, and medium/medium-long shots being the most common depictions. Greenwood (2005) revealed a prevalence of eye-level camera angles in photographs of presidents, with fewer instances of high or low camera angles. This dominance of eye-level photography suggests that photographers typically frame the president as an equal to the rest of society. Mansour (2021) explains this finding by noting that photographs of the president rarely adopt a low angle, which would imply power over the viewer, or a high angle, which would give the viewer power over the president. In this study, we can apply the same explanation provided by Mansour to all the photographs featuring political figures.

This lack of close-up imagery may contribute to a lack of personal connection with the viewer and contribute to a

portrayal of the subjects as strangers (Fahmy, 2004; Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). The same goes for how no low-angle images were looking up at the subject matter, but in an opposite direction– images at eye level or above avoid presenting the viewer as lesser (Fahmy, 2004).

It is important to note that many of the long shots taken with high angles were for covering demonstrations and Soleimani's funeral, which could reflect the need for the photographer to be at a physical distance and/or to find a unique vantage point to make the photograph. Unlike other studies (e.g., Fahmy, 2004), this position highlights the large numbers of people in demonstrators opposing Soleimani's assassination and emphasizes their strength.

Connotatively: Neutral emotions

According to Nabi (2003), emotions can serve as frames, influencing how information is processed and impacting the availability, accessibility, and subsequent judgments of beliefs. In other words, emotions can act as a lens through which individuals perceive and interpret an issue, effectively framing it and shaping their subsequent opinions.

Our sub-frames related to emotions depicted in the photo largely reflected an overall neutral approach concerning overall emotion and physical touch between individuals. Negative emotion was still present, and we saw very little positive emotion depicted.

Neutral emotions were evident in news images portraying people walking in the streets, presidents from the US and Iran, as well as the UN representative. However, there were still several instances of overall negative emotions captured, such as angry individuals participating in

demonstrations, photographs of a displeased President Trump, and Iranian figures appearing sad. Given the short duration of the conflict and the relatively low number of casualties (three victims), it is understandable that neutral emotions predominated.

Physical touch was neutral, and there was no difference according to newspapers' political direction. The dominant pattern was "no physical touch" and none of the newspapers showed any negative touch between the actors in their published photos. Fahmy & Neumann, (2012) have found that negative emotions were the dominant emotions in covering the conflict in Gaza 2008-2009 and there were not any neutral emotions appeared in the coverage. Again, this could be attributed to the long period of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which differs from American Iranian one in the case of the study.

Negative eye contact, however, emerged as a dominant pattern. Most of these photos were for Soleimani representing his power, the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution representing his sadness, and other Iranian people who are walking in the street and thinking of their future if there is a war.

Ideologically: Peace and negotiation

Our findings indicate a notable emphasis on peace framing in this short-term conflict, which contrasts with the war-focused framing typically observed in longer-term conflict coverage (Fahmy & Neumann, 2012; عبد الرازق، 2023). Several factors could explain this finding.

Firstly, the assassination was an unexpected event, resulting in a lack of photos depicting the victims. Instead, the media published photos of them while they were still alive,

which differs from the coverage of long-term conflicts. In long-term conflicts, the media tends to focus on the conflict zone and publish a wide range of images, as seen in conflicts like the Ukraine-Russian conflict or the Palestinian-Israeli war. In these cases, the media often includes photos of the victims, which can evoke strong emotions and contribute to the war frame, a focus that was not present in our study. Additionally, the short-term nature of the assassination and the subsequent reactions led to a shift in visual coverage from active conflict and war to a focus on the negotiation efforts that followed the event and publishing photos for negotiations. Both countries have good relations with dominant countries which worked as mediators for negotiations and de-escalations. in contrast to the Palestinian - Israeli war in which only Israel has good relations with dominant countries.

Secondly, this distinction in peace framing can’t solely be attributed to the conflict's duration. It is also influenced by its nature and the power dynamics between the conflicting parties. In conflicts like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where the struggle revolves around land and survival and there is an imbalance of power, the focus tends to be on war. However, in the case of the USA-Iran conflict, both countries are competing for authority and dominance in the MENA region, and they possess significant power.

Thirdly, this conflict was targeted at one individual, even though three people were killed in the strike. This distinction sets it apart from other conflicts in terms of the target and the number of victims. Fourthly, the US announced after the strike that it didnt want to escalate the conflict and accepted the Iranian strike on its military base in Iraq as a means of de-escalating tensions. In contrast, in

other conflicts, each party typically strives to emerge as the victor. This reflects the governmental preferences and priorities in each of the analyzed newspapers.

This expands our understanding of peace framing in conflicts by highlighting how different types of international conflicts may be approached in terms of war versus peace framing. In this particular case, media outlets favored peace frames in their coverage of the conflict.

The limited depiction of physical harm aligns with the nature of the conflict and the types of images that were published, further reinforcing the peace-oriented approach. For instance, the few instances of physical harm captured included a burned car, which was the specific target of the US in this operation. This choice of imagery, avoiding depictions of burned bodies or blood, can have a lesser impact on viewers' emotions.

Conclusion

Our overall findings from the four levels indicate that newspapers approached their coverage of Soleimani's assassination largely in a peace frame, whether through showing supporters, keeping a distance, depicting neutral emotion or focusing on negotiators over victims, belligerents and demonstrators. They consciously avoided adopting a war frame in order to prevent further escalation of emotions. This aligns with the desires of the conflicting parties involved, as they also sought to avoid exacerbating tensions in politics and political discourse.

Our study is limited in that we aren’t able to apply these findings to all types of formats like video or audio, however it was our intention to focus on the news photograph that freezes a moment in time. Future studies can incorporate

other formats and platforms to see if the peace frame appears similarly. Our sample could also be expanded to additional countries and news outlets. While all coded variables passed intercoder reliability standards, some could have been higher.

News photographs of conflicts across the world provide important information to viewers about the politics, event, population and more. Our study provides a useful addition to what we know about this visual framing of conflict by highlighting short-term conflict and examining this across media in conflict-involved, allied, and adversarial regions.

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