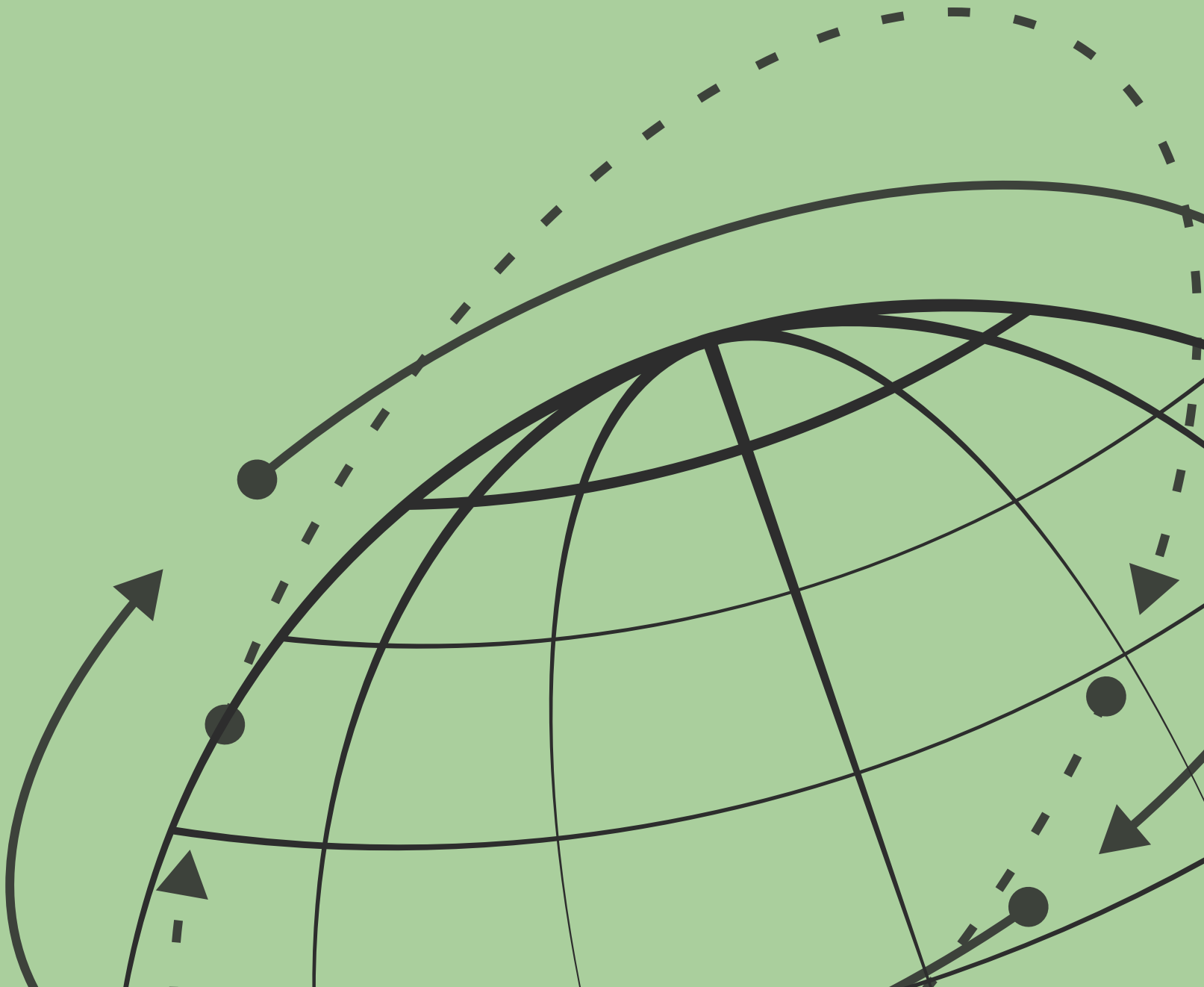
THE GLOBE

The George Washington University

Volume XII, Issue II, August 2025





THE GLOBE

The Globe aims to engage the undergraduate academic community in responsible global citizenship through the promotion of undergraduate international relations scholarship. The articles published in *The Globe* offer rich diversity in thought and conviction, allowing for active and vigorous debate on key policy issues in International Affairs.

The Globe strives for clarity, honesty, and accountability within its issues to further our collective understanding of the discipline and encourage dynamic leadership on a community-wide level.

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Letter from the Editor-In-Chief

Author: Stephanie Van Ausdeln[·]

[·] Stephanie Van Ausdeln is a rising senior majoring in Political Science and Economics with a Double Concentration in Public Policy. Currently, she serves as Vice President of the Japanese Cultural Association and Secretary of her fraternity, Phi Sigma Pi. Professionally, Stephanie has completed several internships of interest, including a journalism internship with SAGE Publications, field organizing with the Maryland Democratic Party, and most recently as an Administrative Specialist with the Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration. Beginning this fall, she will begin coursework for a combined Master's in Public Policy from the Trachtenberg School, after which she aspires to craft a multidisciplinary career in public service spanning policy and legal, private consulting, and government service industries.

Dear Readers,

This is the final time that I address you all as Editor-In-Chief of *The Globe*, the sole student-

run undergraduate research journal in International Affairs at the George Washington University, and by extension, the Elliott School of International Affairs. It is with the utmost pride and confidence for the journal's legacy that I am able to pass the torch on to my successor, Daniel Catapang, for the 2025-2026 publication cycle.

This issue marks the culmination of three months of extensive effort during the Summer 2025 term, a period that has seen us continue to grow and evolve in remarkable ways. We focused on expanding operations, implementing updated policies and guidelines to ensure the integrity of our publication, and expanding our staffing to new numbers. Many of these projects were conducted asynchronously, and spanned borders around the world as many of our staffers continued their dedication to our journal while working, studying abroad, and away from the borders of the District.

I am proud to say that this issue represents another landmark in the history of *The Globe*. It is our first ever issue to include several articles addressing the balance between democracy and autocracy, and is our fifth publication since the journal's revival in 2023. These milestones are not just a testament to the hard work of our team but also to the ambition of our journal as we continue to rebuild our presence as a publication on-campus and beyond.

Over the past three months, we have had a myriad of successes in new initiatives. Our sister publication, *The Compass,* over a full year since its revival, expanded its staff and publication output to provide opportunities for students to share their insights into global affairs. In just a few month's time, we were able to further develop and rebuild our online platform to increase visibility and accessibility for readers. We also expanded our Writing and Editing Cohort to include over 80 staffers from all over the world. Furthermore, we have further expanded our submission policy and have implemented competitive standards for the highest quality articles. This move marks a

significant step in broadening our horizons and enriching our content with diverse perspectives, while holding our journal to the highest level of quality and excellence in academic research.

Of course, one must note that as our team created this issue, the field of International Affairs continued to shift in unprecedented ways. The War in Ukraine has continued despite peacekeeping efforts. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, exasperating ethnocultural differences around the world as Palestinians continue to suffer through increasing famine and war along the Gaza Strip, where several rounds of peacekeeping negotiations have failed to resolve the conflict. Meanwhile, countries across nearly every continent face a continuous threat to their democracy and political institutions. In the United States, domestic politics have entered an unprecedented time of division as Donald Trump shifts federal power structures in the faces of his allies, making executive orders and pushing Congress to force unprecedented policies for the nation. Meanwhile, the end of the Syrian Civil War leaves the newly established Al-Sharaa Government with the monumental task of rebuilding a nation ravaged by a fourteen year conflict, hopefully towards a prosperous future. *The Globe* strives to act as a torch for the field in such unprecedented times.

As I carry out my final duties as Editor-In-Chief, I do so knowing that this journal carries with it an important lesson in the ever-changing world of politics and international affairs. Purpose, drive, and progress is not carried out only by the torches that we pass to our successors, but also by spark and drive we share with others as we face change together. As you read through this issue, I encourage you to engage deeply with the perspectives, lessons, and insights provided, and use the knowledge it provides you to broaden your understanding and initiative in the field of international

affairs.

Signing Off,

Stephanie Van Ausdeln

Editor-In-Chief

Forbidden Connection: Starlink, Censorship, and Survival in Repressive Regimes

Author: Jordan Grossman*

Abstract

Thousands of SpaceX's Starlink satellites have brought internet connectivity to millions of users, requiring only terminals and open patches of sky. As an alternate source of internet, Starlink is a profound prospect to people around the world living under governments that limit internet freedom or completely deny access. As a company rather than a country, SpaceX itself plays a role distinct from conventional state actors and has provided Starlink access to citizens with or without the permission of their governments. SpaceX is not impervious to the affairs of states, however, and has negotiated agreements on Starlink with several countries, yet completely passed over others. This paper will explore Starlink's role in cooperation or opposition to the governments of Iran, Myanmar, China, and Israel and its interactions with each, seeking to identify the factors that allow Starlink a presence in some repressive countries and not in others. The findings suggest that the most important factors in determining the efficacy of Starlink under a given repressive regime are its internal capacity and the international perception of that country. The events these evaluations describe are complex and ongoing, but certainly indicate a dynamic and promising role for Starlink in the coming years.

Keywords: Starlink, Internet, Repression, International Law

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Introduction

The first launches of SpaceX's Starlink satellites in 2019 mark a truly unprecedented era of telecommunications. As of the writing of this paper, over 5,000 Starlink satellites zip through low Earth orbit, providing low-latency internet access to anyone with a terminal, regardless of their coverage by terrestrial cables or distant satellites in geostationary orbit. Starlink has been hailed as revolutionary. Millions of people have purchased terminals, using them to gain access to better bandwidth from remote areas, navigate at sea, and even replace telecommunications destroyed in war. For people living under repressive regimes, which for the purpose of this paper are defined as those that limit freedom of speech and expression through censorship or denial of internet access, Starlink terminals are an opportunity to connect with the outside world despite censors or a lack of conventional internet. Starlink is not a guaranteed path to internet freedom, however. Terminals are not free and can be difficult to obtain, and the reliable electricity and access to ground stations they require cannot be taken for granted. The most significant obstacle of all is international law, which determines that Starlink must gain permission to operate in any country; yet governments and their interactions with SpaceX have shown that international law is difficult to enforce, especially when its subjects are corporations. This paper will investigate whether or not Starlink may prove a realistic outlet for expression for people living under repressive regimes by examining the cases of Iran, Myanmar, China, and Israel in Gaza.

In order to understand the potential impact Starlink can have in repressive regimes, I will first examine how the system works on both the user level and in orbit. Starlink satellites orbit the Earth closely compared to traditional telecommunications satellites—at about 550 kilometers compared with the 35,786 kilometer orbital altitude of internet satellites in geosynchronous orbit,

they can send signals more quickly to the Earth's surface.[1] The downside of such a low orbit is that Starlink satellites individually are not able to cover large areas of the Earth's surface. Despite this, Starlink satellites are so numerous that most of the Earth's surface is covered by satellites, and if one satellite is disabled, another can take its place. Additionally, the cost of launch for a Starlink satellite is very low, allowing SpaceX to expand its constellation with ease. Most Starlink satellites pre-2021 communicate with purchasable terminals via ground stations or local fiber optic networks; to provide service, a Starlink terminal must be within 1,000 kilometers of a ground station.[2] As SpaceX has improved its technology, it has transitioned to launching satellites that communicate with one another via laser crosslinks, reducing their reliance on ground stations.[3] Starlink terminals also require a steady supply of electricity through their power supply units.[4] A standard Starlink terminal currently costs $599, and service plans range from $140 per month to $500 per month.[5] Terminals can be easily delivered to most customers, so long as they live in a country with an import license. As per Starlink's terms of use, users must comply with international trade controls and only use terminals in the location identified in their initial order.[6] Additionally, governments must issue Starlink landing rights, or a license to transmit, for it to legally operate in a country as per the regulations of the

[1] "Starlink | How Starlink Works," Starlink, n.d., https://www.starlink.com/technology.

[2] Berna Ackali Gur and Joanna Kulesza, "Activated! Public Dissent, Internet Access and Satellite Broadband," *Internet Policy Review*, February 23, 2023, 1, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Joanna-Kulesza/publication/368848761_Activated_Public_dissent_internet_access_and_satellite_broadband/links/63fdc310b1704f343f8ac285/Activated-Public-dissent-internet-access-and-satellite-broadband.pdf.

[3] Jason Rainbow, "All Future Starlink Satellites Will Have Laser Crosslinks," SpaceNews, August 26, 2021, https://spacenews.com/all-future-starlink-satellites-will-have-laser-crosslinks/.

[4] "Starlink | Service Plans," Starlink, n.d., https://www.starlink.com/service-plans.

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Starlink," Starlink, n.d., https://www.starlink.com/legal/documents/DOC-1020-91087-64.

International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a body of the United Nations.[7] Starlink's satellite internet is novel in many ways, but it is still governed by rules traditionally levied on service providers.

Most of the above requirements are easily met by customers living in more developed countries and those that have granted Starlink an import license. Using a terminal is far more complicated otherwise. For example, the majority of African countries and much of South and Central Asia are not covered by ground stations, which many Starlink satellites still require to communicate.[8] In war zones and impoverished areas, accessing reliable electricity and affording a terminal can also prove obstacles. Perhaps the most significant impediment for potential users of Starlink terminals are import controls. If a country views Starlink internet as too competitive, dangerous, or otherwise undesirable for its citizens, it can simply refuse to grant Starlink an import license or deny it a license to transmit, forcing customers to turn to the black market to obtain a terminal.[9] There are varying levels of success associated with smuggling products like terminals—it is simpler to smuggle terminals into countries that share borders with countries where terminals are legal. Similarly, if ground stations are not available in one country, terminal users can connect to ground stations in neighboring countries if they are within 1,000 kilometers. The success of using a black market terminal also depends on a government's capacity (or incapacity) to detect and confiscate illegal terminals. Though Starlink is lauded as a step forward

[7] International Telecommunication Union, *Radio Regulations*, (2020): 249, https://search.itu.int/history/HistoryDigitalCollectionDocLibrary/1.44.48.en.101.pdf.

[8] "Starlink Ground Station Locations: An Overview," *Starlink Insider*, n.d., https://starlinkinsider.com/starlink-gateway-locations/.

[9] Ackali Gur and Kulesza, "Activated! Public Dissent," 1.

for internet freedom, several obstacles remain before it can become an accessible outlet for people living under repressive regimes.

Despite laws that supposedly hem in Starlink's capabilities, SpaceX is a powerful corporate entity that does not always answer to national governments. As a company, its goal is to make a profit and to gain a worldwide following, unlike a country that is beholden to trade law and the ITU. Another interesting dynamic of SpaceX is the individual control that CEO Elon Musk has over company policy, often making choices motivated by public behest on the social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter). Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine was the first time Starlink was mobilized for a large-scale and politically consequential humanitarian cause. After a Russian cyberattack compromised the internet in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government asked Musk to make Starlink available.[10] Musk agreed, waiving the subscription fee, and thousands of terminals using ground stations in friendly Poland, Türkiye, and Lithuania have provided internet in Ukraine since then.[11] The Russian government has called for the deactivation of Starlink in Ukraine because it is a foreign-based intervention used by the military and threatens Russian security.[12] Since Ukraine has granted Starlink both licenses to transmit and import, its operation there is legal by international standards. While an argument could be made that in Russian-annexed areas, Starlink is not a legal enterprise as Russia had not granted permission, international consensus, at least in the West, is that those areas are rightfully

[10] Alexandros Kolovos, "Commercial Satellites in Crisis and War: The Case of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict," *Air & Space Management and Control Laboratory, Occasional Paper* no. 3 (2022): 19, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/368806976_Commercial_Satellites_in_Crisis_and_War_The_Case_of_the_Russian-Ukrainian_Conflict.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid, 10-21.

Ukrainian. Therefore, the Ukrainian government is generally perceived to have the authority to allow Starlink's operation in those areas. Since then, Starlink has become a critical piece of Ukraine's telecommunications infrastructure for both civilians and the military.[13] After Ukraine's successful utilization of Starlink, people around the world began to realize its potential in a similar yet distinct struggle: fighting against censorship and internet denial. I will now describe and evaluate some of these cases.

Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran has historically limited internet access to its citizens; it is common for websites to be blocked on the basis of being incompatible with Islam or politically dissident.[14] The government uses varied methods, including the slowing or restricting connectivity, the blocking of websites, and the prohibition of URLs containing certain keywords.[15] Notably, Iran has even broken ITU regulations and jammed satellites belonging to the European Union (EU) that broadcast critical foreign news channels into Iran.[16] Censorship is justified by the government as necessary to protect the development of local content, meet security thresholds, and prevent the proliferation of anti-Iran propaganda from foreign-based

[13] Valentina Chabert, "The Outer-Space Dimension of the Ukraine Conflict: Toward a New Paradigm for Orbits as a War Domain?," Journal of International Affairs 75, no. 2 (2023): 147, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27231743.

[14] Simurgh Aryan, Homa Aryan, and J. Alex Halderman, "Internet Censorship in Iran: A First Look," *3rd USENIX Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet (FOCI 13)*, 2013, 1, https://www.usenix.org/system/files/conference/foci13/foci13-aryan.pdf.

[15] Ibid, 2.

[16] Jason Rainbow, "Eutelsat Says Satellite Jammers Within Iran Are Disrupting Foreign Channels," SpaceNews, October 7, 2022, https://spacenews.com/eutelsat-says-satellite-jammers-within-iran-are-disrupting-foreign-channels/.

Persian language media, the United States (US), and terrorists.[17] Internet access is managed by several bodies, most of which are composed of both elected members and members selected by Iran's highest religious authority, the Supreme Leader.[18] The 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement underscored the need for free internet access. The movement began when a young woman, Mahsa Amini, died in the custody of morality police after she was arrested for wearing her compulsory hijab improperly, and thousands of Iranians took to the streets to demonstrate for women's rights against government repression.[19] The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's regime-aligned military force, locked down internet access across the country and cut off social media in an effort to prevent footage of the protests from spreading.[20] In order to maintain the communication and cohesion of their movement and continue connections with the outside, protestors requested that Elon Musk make Starlink available in Iran.[21] In response to a post by the US Secretary of State on issuing a General License to extend digital communications access to Iranians, X, Musk posted, "Activating Starlink…," indicating that he had made the satellite service available to Iranians to counter the censorship of their government.[22]

Though the Starlink connection presents a compelling opportunity for protestors and other internet users in Iran, the government is predictably opposed to its usage. As Iran never

[17] Alireza Hashemzadegan and Ali Gholami, "Internet Censorship in Iran: An Inside Look." Journal of Cyberspace Studies 6, no. 2 (2022): 183-204, 186-187, https://jcss.ut.ac.ir/article_90348.html.

[18] Ibid, 187-189.

[19] "Iran: Is This the Time When Change Will Come? Or Not?" Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy 50, no. 9 (2022): 20, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2719744869?_oafollow=false&accountid=11243&pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=Trade%20Journals.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ackali Gur and Kulesza, "Activated! Public Dissent," 1.

[22] Elon Musk (@elonmusk), "Activating Starlink…" X, September 23, 2022, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1573379244268437504.

gave Starlink an import license or permission to transmit, it is illegal to send a terminal there under both national and international law. This lack of permission poses several obstacles to realizing full internet access to Iranians via Starlink, making it much more complicated legally than in Ukraine. Without an import license, terminals must be smuggled into Iran, an expensive prospect on top of Starlink's price and service fees. There is a dearth of ground stations required for older Starlink satellites. None of Iran's neighbors are willing to host ground stations, and even if they were, several important epicenters of protest, like Tehran, would be out of their range.[23] Despite these challenges, Starlink-based internet connection is still possible in Iran. Electricity is widely available and terminals are small and relatively easy to transport. Overall, censorship of a Starlink network is unlikely; there are far too many Starlink satellites for Iran to jam them effectively as with the EU satellites, and as an American company, SpaceX is insulated from the direct authority of the Iranian government. Each factor of legality, connectivity, and decentralization influences the role Starlink terminals and the internet have been used in the country since 2022.

Given that information coming out of Iran is still limited by the government and the use of Starlink terminals is illegal there, it is difficult to form a full picture of the proliferation of Starlink and its influence on the protest movement. At least in the short term of the Women, Life, Freedom movement, Starlink's influence seems to have been too small to have created a significant impact. The movement died down and internet restrictions are still rife. While Musk declared that nearly 100 terminals were active in Iran, this was not enough to create a parallel

[23] Ackali Gur and Kulesza, "Activated! Public Dissent," 1.

internet as in Ukraine.[24] Ownership of a terminal in the first place can be grounds for a conviction of spying and smuggling, both highly punishable offenses.[25] Starlink may not have revolutionized the Women, Life, Freedom movement, but it does have a presence that could continue to grow. Mehr News Agency, a state-owned news source in Iran, reported the seizure of Starlink terminals in conjunction with a "spy service… planning to recreate riots in Zahedan."[26] *Time* has reported that networks of international activists have worked with smugglers to distribute boxes of terminals inside the country, often disguised as other products.[27] If such smuggling continues, protesters in Iran may come closer to establishing an internet independent of the state and continue spreading their movement. Yet as Starlink's influence in Iran grows, so have the government's efforts to fight it.

Starlink's presence in Iran is clearly a violation of its national sovereignty, and international support for the protest movement has come into conflict with the laws of the ITU. During the earlier stages of the Women, Life, Freedom movement, the United States Treasury expanded its D-2 General License, which increased the internet and digital services that the US would allow technology firms to make available to Iranian citizens.[28] After this, SpaceX was able to make Starlink available in Iran under US law. The ITU landing rights still have an international legal basis, however. Iran has taken up its opposition to the operation of Starlink

[24] Karl Vick and Andrew D. Johnson, "Inside the Clandestine Efforts to Smuggle Starlink Internet Into Iran," *TIME*, January 25, 2023, https://time.com/6249365/iran-elon-musk-starlink-protests/.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Mehr News Agency, "Telecom Equipment Utilized for Riots Seized in Iran," Mehr News Agency, October 2, 2023, https://en.mehrnews.com/news/206679/Telecom-equipment-utilized-for-riots-seized-in-Iran.

[27] Vick and Johnson, "Inside the Clandestine Efforts."

[28] "Advancing the Free Flow of Information for the Iranian People - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, September 23, 2022, https://2021-2025.state.gov/advancing-the-free-flow-of-information-for-the-iranian-people/.

systems within its territory with the Radio Regulations Board, a body of the ITU that governs radio frequencies. The US indicated that it restricted licensing for Starlink to areas that had granted authorization and that Starlink would not provide services to ground stations in unauthorized regions, but this contradicts the reality on the ground.[29] Although the US claimed that it was impossible for SpaceX to identify every user of Starlink within Iran, this seemed to be refuted by the fact that Starlink terminals screen a warning message to users in Iran.[30] Iran argued that the message, which reads:

> Use caution in regions that may be hostile to Starlink usage. Starlink will not provide information about you or your Starlink usage to law enforcement or governments, however the websites, apps, and services you access and any entities monitoring those services might be able to see you are using Starlink.
>
> Use a VPN service to help hide the fact that you're using Starlink. Ensure the VPN is always active when using sensitive services, including apps and services running in the background of your devices.[31]

This is clear evidence that Starlink is aware of terminals and able to disable them should it wish to, and goes so far as to encourage their further use. The Radio Regulations Board concluded that the US must comply with ITU provisions and immediately take action to disable Starlink

[29] International Telecommunication Union, "Summary of Decisions of the 95th Meeting of the Radio Regulations Board," March 12, 2024, 11, https://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-r/md/24/rrb24.1/c/R24-RRB24.1-C-0014!R1!PDF-E.pdf.
[30] Ibid.

[31] International Telecommunication Union, "Further Submission by the Administration of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Response to the Submissions from the Administrations of Norway and the United States Regarding the Provision of Starlink Satellite Services in the Territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran," February 26, 2024, 6, https://www.itu.int/md/R24-RRB24.1-SP-0002/en.

terminals in Iran.[32] The decision of the board certainly gives Iran more power in terms of international norms, but it has no enforcement mechanism, and the US will likely allow the terminals to continue functioning.

The future of Starlink in Iran is somewhat ambiguous. As more Starlink satellites transition to laser cross links and technology improves, it may become easier for protesters to use Starlink in Iran, and should the Women, Life, Freedom movement or any other mass protest resurge, it could be a desirable tool for communication between and within networks of dissidents. The government's efforts to crack down on Starlink may also increase if the terminals proliferate further. While Iran's claims against Starlink are consistent with international law, it is unlikely that they will result in any action by the US to rescind its General License or restrain SpaceX's activities. As of now, the US has little reason to, except in the case that it decides to seriously negotiate a nuclear deal or other settlement with Iran. Finally, SpaceX has sacrificed little to maintain Starlink in Iran—users there still pay for terminals and subscriptions, and providing internet there, even in a limited capacity, brings prestige to a company increasingly involved with international affairs. In this case, it seems that while Iran's international influence is not sufficient to prevent Starlink from providing service to Iranians, the state's capacity to confiscate terminals and the geographic depth of the country are significant obstacles to its use by citizens.

Myanmar

Myanmar has had a complicated relationship with freedom of speech and expression. For most of its post-independence history, Myanmar was ruled by a military government that

[32] International Telecommunication Union, "Summary of Decisions" 12.

exercised full control over the internet.[33] 2011 brought an end to military rule, and internet censorship dropped dramatically, with significant growth in the variety of internet service providers available in the country.[34] The 2021 military takeover of the government and installation of an authoritarian junta was tremendously destabilizing and reversed the progress of the last decade. Since the coup, civil society, ethnic minority armies, and the national government in exile (called the National Unity Government or NUG) have vociferously resisted the military and have been met with violent and deadly force.[35] The junta has implemented pervasive internet outages and censorship to obtain power and maintain control.[36] Censorship has taken the form of cellular outages, DNS blocking, and Internet Protocol blocking, notably of key communications social media websites like Facebook and X.[37] Restrictions on the internet have taken a heavy toll on the economy—in 2021, internet shutdowns are estimated to have cost Myanmar $2.8 billion in US dollars.[38] Unlike in Iran, censorship in Myanmar is likely decentralized, as different websites are blocked on different networks.[39]

[33] Ramakrishna Padmanabhan, et al., "A Multi-Perspective View of Internet Censorship in Myanmar," Proceedings of the ACM SIGCOMM 2021 Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet, August 23, 2021, 28, https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3473604.3474562.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Paul Vrieze, "Joining the Spring Revolution or Charting Their Own Path?: Ethnic Minority Strategies Following the 2021 Myanmar Coup," *Asian Survey* 63, no. 1 (2023): 90–120, 93-95, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/363904440_Joining_the_Spring_Revolution_or_Charting_Their_Own_Path_Ethnic_Minority_Strategies_following_the_2021_Myanmar_Coup.

[36] Padmanabhan et al., "A Multi-Perspective View," 28.

[37] Ibid, 29-31.

[38] Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Junta to Prosecute Satellite Internet Users," The Irrawaddy, November 24, 2023, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-to-prosecute-satellite-internet-users.html.

[39] Padmanabhan et al., "A Multi-Perspective View," 31.

In addition to the censorship conducted by the military, Myanmar struggles to achieve high connectivity, with its internet marked by low coverage and high latencies.[40] About 60.2% of Myanmar's significant rural population has access to electricity, but this connection is not reliable, and people in urban and rural areas alike have experienced frequent power outages since the turmoil of the coup.[41] As it stands, citizens of Myanmar have a lot to gain from Starlink—internet outside the military's control could solve many of the problems associated with censorship. The ruggedness of the terrain and the remote locations of towns do not inhibit connection with satellites passing over Myanmar in orbit.[42] Access to electricity is a far more significant obstacle, as is the low affordability of terminals in impoverished and repressed communities. Like in Iran, the junta government of Myanmar has not granted Starlink an import license or landing rights, and bringing a terminal there is illegal. While Myanmar's neighbors have shown varied responses to the coup, they have mostly moved towards appeasement, making the possibility of using ground stations there uncertain.[43] The viability of Starlink in Myanmar is certainly hampered by the foregoing limitations, but in the event that they are superseded, Starlink could be an invaluable tool to citizens of Myanmar, especially embattled minorities, in search of information, connection with the outside world, and paths of resistance.

[40] Riccardo Corrado, Maximilien Berthet, and Morokot Sakal, "Starlink for ASEAN: A Changemaker in the Race Toward Sustainable Development?" *Space Policy 65* (August 1, 2023): 3, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spacepol.2023.101554.

[41] Ibid., 7; World Bank, "In the Dark: Power Sector Challenges in Myanmar," Myanmar Monitoring Platform, September 5, 2023, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/myanmar/publication/in-the-dark-power-sector-challenges-in-myanmar.

[42] Corrado, Berthet, and Sakal, "Starlink for ASEAN," 5-6.

[43] Charles Dunst, "The Myanmar Coup as an ASEAN Inflection Point," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 4, no. 6 (2021): 37-45, 38, https://media.defense.gov/2021/Aug/26/2002840264/-1/-1/1/DUNST.PDF.

In late 2023, anti-junta activist group Justice For Myanmar posted on X to Elon Musk, requesting that he make Starlink available in Myanmar in order to counter the censorship of the military.[44] The group never received a reply from Musk or SpaceX, but several groups have been able to make use of Starlink within Myanmar. At a grassroots level, there are posts on Facebook, the top virtual forum in Myanmar, about small-scale enterprises by individuals to provide Starlink internet; for example, an internet cafe in the minority state of Karen was reported to offer wifi for Ks. 1,000/- per hour.[45] International Christian humanitarian aid organization Free Burma Rangers has posted videos on X, thanking Starlink for making the terminals that the organization uses to communicate to the outside world from their aid site for internally displaced people in Karenni State; the group promises to pay whatever it needs to pay, as the services are not being provided for free.[46] The National Unity Government, Myanmar's government in exile promoting a democratic federal system, has made communications and internet access a central goal of their Federal Net Campaign.[47] NUG officials claim to have set up satellite internet in the areas under their control and made Starlink available to administrators of areas secured by the resistance.[48] While it is difficult to know the extent of these small, civilian-run terminals or the

[44] Justice for Myanmar (@JusticeMyanmar) "@elonmusk Stand with the ppl of Myanmar. Activate #Starlink now!," X, September 26, 2022, https://twitter.com/JusticeMyanmar/status/1574291023660040192.

[45] ဖက်ဒရယ် FM, Facebook, November 22, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/federalfmradio/posts/pfbid02nG87UFXH7tZWzyZuShvziNSLCHuZZPUHW1ZEg2KdD8MiHfUHiJ4xuiEpNYY3sf87l.

[46] David Eubank (@DaveEubankFBR) "8 June 2023: Two messages of thanks from the Eubank family, to Elon Musk and Starlink, from a hiding place with IDP children in Karenni State, Burma," X, June 9, 2023, https://twitter.com/DaveEubankFBR/status/1667239805342588939.

[47] Myanmar National Unity Government, "Federal Net Campaign Announcement," November 30, 2023, https://mocit.nugmyanmar.org/federal-net-campaign/.

[48] "Anti-Junta Forces Set Up Satellite-based Internet Service in 60 Areas." *Radio Free Asia*, December 20, 2023, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-satellite-internet-12192023223105.html.

impact of Starlink internet in areas held by resistance forces based on the few reported cases, Starlink is serving both a humanitarian and military role. Regardless of its official position, Starlink is helping Myanmar's citizens communicate with the outside world and obtain aid, and is also playing a role in the armed resistance to the junta government.

The junta government of Myanmar has acted to stop the spread of Starlink and other satellite communications equipment, but it has not taken the issue to the international level or to SpaceX. According to Myanmar news network Irrawaddy, the Communications Ministry declared that anyone found operating unlicensed satellite equipment will be sentenced to a year in jail. The government cited pre-existing regulations surrounding business licenses and permission for using satellite communication equipment, as well as specifying that not only possession but also usage is illegal.[49] As much as the government tries to control the use of Starlink internet, arrests and confiscations can only go so far when the root of the problem is hundreds of miles away in orbit.

Despite the difficulties associated with the wide-scale implementation of Starlink internet in Myanmar and the indifference of SpaceX to the situation there, Starlink seems to have had a significant impact on both grassroots and national levels. In dynamic and harsh conditions where internet access is extremely difficult to obtain, Starlink is a more viable alternative to stringing out fiber optic cables over miles of militarily contested territory or undeveloped mountains. It is a useful resource to civil society and the People's Defense Forces, with few other means. The government's attempts to stop Starlink's spread have not successfully addressed the heart of the issue. Though the government has made the terminals more dangerous to possess, compared with the risks already posed to groups actively fighting or being targeted by the government, the risks

[49] Irrawaddy, "Myanmar Junta to Prosecute."

are not as consequential. The international community has not taken a stance on Starlink's usage in Myanmar. While many countries have either pursued appeasement or made moves to isolate Myanmar, its junta government has little legitimacy in the eyes of the world, and the causes of humanitarianism and resistance would easily outweigh any claims it may make about the illegality of Starlink's presence. Perhaps the more perplexing aspect is SpaceX's non-acknowledgement of its role in Myanmar. This could be attributable to the lack of international focus on events in Myanmar, the low chances of profit in the region, or the unwillingness on the part of SpaceX to become embroiled in what is likely to be a long-lasting and bloody conflict.

China

In a departure from the previous cases, there is no evidence of Starlink's usage in the People's Republic of China. China famously has a thriving internet culture with hundreds of millions of users. China's censorship system is extensive and pervasive, and is regarded as flexible and capable of managing such a large network.[50] Unlike Myanmar or Iran, China has not needed to shut down its internet to maintain its censorship. Several government agencies are responsible for censorship, but the most active is the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, which operates at the provincial, municipal, and local levels.[51] The so-called Great Firewall of China mostly operates through DNS censorship and rerouting IP addresses.[52] In the face of such sophisticated censorship, there have not been large-scale protests or resistance movements

[50] Jun Liu, "Internet Censorship in China: Looking Through the Lens of Categorisation" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs (2024)*: 2, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/18681026231220948.

[51] Taiyi Sun and Quansheng Zhao, "Delegated Censorship: The Dynamic, Layered, and Multistage Information Control Regime in China," *Politics & Society* 50, no. 2 (2022): 191-221, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00323292211013181.

[52] Nguyen Phong Hoang et al., "How Great is the Great Firewall? Measuring China's {DNS} Censorship," 30th USENIX Security Symposium (USENIX Security 21), 2021, 3381-3398, https://www.usenix.org/conference/usenixsecurity21/presentation/hoang.

against the government or calls for Starlink to be made available in China. While access to electricity and the affordability of terminals are not significant obstacles, Starlink has no landing rights or import license in China. China's size makes ground stations in neighboring countries impractical as well. Even if terminals were smuggled into the country, SpaceX has ensured that they will not connect to the satellites orbiting above the Earth.

In an interview with the Financial Times, Elon Musk claimed that after he allowed Starlink to operate in Ukraine, the Chinese government asked him not to sell Starlink in China.[53] Musk's Tesla company is highly active in China—many of its cars have been sold to China and it also runs factories there.[54] Musk is clearly incentivized not to upset the Chinese government, and Starlink has no plans to sell terminals there; on the official website map of where Starlink is available, China is blacked out.[55] The Chinese government prioritizes avoiding the import of a technology that would allow citizens to access the world's internet without limits, even if it could improve connectivity for citizens living in remote rural areas. Should Chinese citizens ever decide to engage in a large protest movement or find an alternative to VPNs, there is a small chance they could turn to Starlink in the future. In the meantime, China is developing its own satellite constellation in its mission to obtain strategic resources in space and has been developing small satellite capabilities and rockets to launch them.[56] Given enough time, a Chinese satellite constellation could have its own effect on the lives of citizens of countries around the world who gain access to terminals.

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[53] Roula Khalaf, "Elon Musk: 'Aren't You Entertained?,'" *Financial Times*, October 7, 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/5ef14997-982e-4f03-8548-b5d67202623a.

[54] Russell Brandom, "China Asked Elon Musk Not to Sell Starlink Within the Country," *The Verge*, October 10, 2022, https://www.theverge.com/2022/10/10/23397301/elon-musk-starlink-china-great-firewall-censorship.
[55] "Starlink | Availability Map," Starlink, n.d., https://www.starlink.com/map.

[56] Andrew Jones, "China to Begin Constructing Its Own Megaconstellation Later This Year," SpaceNews, March 28, 2023, https://spacenews.com/china-to-begin-constructing-its-own-megaconstellation-later-this-year/.

Ultimately, China has far greater capacity and international influence than Myanmar or Iran, as well as a more powerful vantage point in its interactions with Musk and US corporations. Elon Musk and Chinese citizens alike are not in a position to counter the government.

Gaza and Israel

The lines of state sovereignty and capacity are much more blurred in Gaza, where Israel has become the primary determinant of whether access to Starlink can be provided to Gazans. Since Israel is at a state of war with Gaza, its actions regarding Starlink are understood through a lens of security and military considerations rather than as a governing state attempting to repress its own citizens, although it certainly seeks to keep the population of Gaza under control. At the same time, Hamas is not in a condition to negotiate with Starlink, physically or reputationally. Israel's role in Gaza began in 1967, when it directly occupied the then-Egyptian territory during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. After several decades of occupation and limited settlement, in 2005, Israel withdrew from Gaza, removing Jewish settlements and military installations in an attempt to reduce its responsibilities in the region, putting it under full control of the Palestinian National Authority.[57] 2006 brought a turning point in the territory, when the political party and militant group Hamas was democratically elected to the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, entered armed conflict with the former governing party Fatah, and took control of Gaza.[58] Israel deemed Gaza a hostile territory and, along with Egypt, severely restricted travel

[57] Geoffrey Aronson, "The Day After in Gaza Is Today," Middle East Institute, December 1, 2023, https://www.mei.edu/publications/day-after-gaza-today.

[58] Benedetta Berti, "Non-State Actors as Providers of Governance: The Hamas Government in Gaza between Effective Sovereignty, Centralized Authority, and Resistance" *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 1 (2015): 9–31, 12, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1659979426?sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals.

and trade in and out.[59] Today, Israel fully controls entry into Gaza on land, at sea, and in the air, including Gaza's telecommunications networks and a significant portion of its electrical supply which are often routed through Israel.[60] Israel does not practice internet censorship in Gaza despite its control of telecommunications there, but Hamas has ordered internet service providers to block several news and commentary websites in order to control the political narrative within Gaza.[61]

The ongoing Israel-Hamas War has had a significant effect on connectivity in Gaza, as Israeli military campaigns frequently utilize internet and telecommunications blackouts.[62] As infrastructure in Gaza deteriorates under bombings, it becomes more difficult for Gazans to communicate with the outside world and one another, contributing to a humanitarian crisis and preventing political or military cohesion within. Several countries have debated the morality of Israel's strategy as Gazans claim they need connection with the outside world more than ever.[63]

When internet and telecommunications blackouts in Gaza began with Israel's military retaliation for Hamas's October 7th attacks, Palestinian diplomat Husam Zamlot and United States Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez took to X to plead for international

[59] Haggay Etkes and Assaf Zimring, "When Trade Stops: Lessons from the Gaza Blockade 2007–2010," *Journal of International Economics* 95, no. 1 (2015): 16–27, 18, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022199614001172.

[60] Maram Humaid, "The Seven Border Crossings of Gaza," The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, August, 2022, 35, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2689723758?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=11243&_oafollow=false&sourcetype=Magazines.

[61] Jonathan Zittrain et al., "The Shifting Landscape of Global Internet Censorship," Berkman Klein Center Research Publication 2017-4 (2017): 17-38, 13, https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/06/GlobalInternetCensorship.

[62] Joanna Kulesza and Berna Akcali Gur, "Resilient Connectivity: SpaceX's Stellar Solution for Gaza's Internet Amid Conflict," Research Bites, February 2, 2024, 1–7, 2, https://directionsblog.eu/resilient-connectivity-spacexs-stellar-solution-for-gazas-internet-amid-conflict/.

[63] Priyanka Shankar, "Can Elon Musk's Starlink Provide Internet Service to Gaza?," *Al Jazeera*, December 3, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/29/can-elon-musks-starlink-provide-internet-service-to-gaza.

intervention and criticize Israel's actions. In response, Elon Musk posted a pledge to "support connectivity to internationally recognized aid organizations in Gaza."[64] Just the day before, the Israeli Communications Ministry had issued a press release declaring its intention to bring Starlink technology to Israel to support communications for Israel Defense Forces Security Coordinators and towns near the line of hostilities after Hamas terrorists specifically targeted communications towers close to the border before invading to disrupt military communications.[65] Despite the commitment, for the Israeli government, the risk of connectivity falling into the wrong hands outweighed the benefits of Israeli access to Starlink. Israel's Minister of Communications, Shlomo Karhi, replied that his office would cut its ties with Starlink should it be made available in Gaza, as "HAMAS will use it for terrorist activities. There is no doubt about it, we know it, and Musk knows it."[66] Musk then posted that no terminals had been activated in Gaza, and that Starlink would conduct checks with the United States and Israeli governments to ensure any terminal would be used strictly for humanitarian purposes.[67] The interaction highlights the tension associated with Starlink as a dual-use technology. In Myanmar, for example, Starlink has been used by both humanitarian organizations and by resistance groups. It is difficult to assure the Israeli government that Starlink will be used solely for humanitarian purposes, and a similar argument could be made for

[64] Elon Musk (@elonmusk), "Starlink will support connectivity to internationally recognized aid organizations in Gaza," X, October 18, 2023, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1718224153474388433.

[65] Ministry of Communications, "Summary of the Activities of the Ministry of Communications – Ten Days into the War," October 17, 2023, https://www.gov.il/en/pages/17102023.; Aric Toler, "How Hamas Attacked Israel's Communications Towers," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/10/world/middleeast/hamas-israel-attack-gaza.html.

[66] Shlomo Karhi (@shlomo_karhi), "Israel will use all means at its disposal to fight this," X, October 28, 2024, https://twitter.com/shlomo_karhi/status/1718309963666211328.

[67] Elon Musk (@elonmusk), "We are not so naive," X, October 28, 2024, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1718376814769258956.

the civilian or military purpose of hypothetical emergency use of Starlink by IDF Security Coordinators.

In November of 2023, Musk visited Israel as part of an effort to calm backlash against his support of antisemitic content on X and show his support for the Jewish community.[68] He visited sites where Hamas had committed atrocities, spoke with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and agreed that it was important to stop the propaganda that contributed to such violence.[69] Minister Karhi welcomed Musk to Israel and announced on X that the Communications Ministry had reached an agreement with him that satellite units could only be operated in Israel or Gaza with permission from the ministry.[70] By February of 2024, the impasse between Israel and Starlink had calmed enough for the two parties to reach an agreement on how Starlink could best be used for humanitarian and civilian causes in both Israel and Gaza. The Communications Ministry announced that they had signed a license to use Starlink in Israel, which would be used to improve the redundancy of communications infrastructure for both peacetime and emergencies.[71] The ministry also agreed to provide humanitarian units for Gaza on a case-by-case basis, starting with a United Arab Emirates field hospital in Rafah.[72] UAE Director of Strategic Communications Afra al Hameli posted on X that the hospital would be collaborating with an

[68] Matthew Mpoke Bigg and Ryan Mac, "Elon Musk Visits Israel Amid Backlash Against His Endorsement of Antisemitic Post," The New York Times, November 27, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/27/world/middleeast/elon-musk-israel-visit.html.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Shlomo Karhi (@shlomo_karhi), "Elon Musk, I congratulate you for reaching a principle understanding…" X, November 27, 2023, https://twitter.com/shlomo_karhi/status/1729028213991514477.

[71] Israel Ministry of Communications, "Starlink in Israel for the First Time: The Minister of Communications, Dr. Shlomo Karai, Approved the Satellite Giant Owned by Elon Musk to Operate in the Country," February 15, 2024, https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/15022024.

[72] Ibid.

international network of hospitals for real-time video call medical consultations.[73] Musk thanked Israel for its approval and expressed his hope that Starlink could help both Gazans and Israelis, writing, "In such a terrible situation, we should strive for conspicuous acts of kindness whenever possible."[74] In retrospect, it seems that Israel received the better end of the deal—Starlink is at the disposal of Israeli citizens, and as of the writing of this paper, the UAE field hospital in Rafah is the only authorized user of Starlink in Gaza. In the future, this may change if more humanitarian organizations are approved to use terminals.

Should more Starlink terminals be approved in Gaza, it is questionable whether they would be effective. Gaza is afflicted with many of the problems plaguing efforts to create a parallel internet in Myanmar. As most of Gaza's electric grid has been bombed, powering a terminal is a major challenge. The fuel that Gazans are able to obtain might be better used for cooking or heating. The cost of terminals is also an obstacle, though humanitarian organizations may be able to cover the fees. On the other hand, access to ground stations is less of a problem in Gaza—countries like Egypt or Jordan may allow them to be built as a low-risk way to bolster their support of Gaza. The major limitation on the use of Starlink terminals in Gaza remains the rate of Israel's approval of humanitarian organizations, which has been notoriously slow throughout the conflict in areas like medical and food.[75] Smuggling terminals into Gaza against the will of Israel would be almost impossible. In mid April of 2024, roughly 300 trucks were

[73] Afra Al Hameli (@Afra Al Hameli) "#UAE Collaborating on Initiative to Provide #Starlink Internet Service at #UAE field hospital in the #Gaza Strip," X, February 14, 2023, https://twitter.com/AfraMalHameli/status/1757801958495109176?s=20.

[74] Elon Musk (@elonmusk) "It is our hope to help both the people of Israel…," X, February 14, 2024, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1757813478172340451?s=20.

[75] Lee Keath, "Cumbersome Process and 'Arbitrary' Israeli Inspections Slow Aid Delivery Into Gaza, US Senators Say | AP News," AP News, January 6, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/israel-gaza-rafah-aid-us-senators-2bc2a3c5e5f8af8e2d3f0b7242c1a885.

entering Gaza per day, and each one was vetted closely by Israel to ensure only humanitarian items were being allowed in.[76] As it is, the amount of food and medical supplies that are transported into the strip is insufficient for the struggling population. Even if a terminal was smuggled into the country, Starlink agreed not to connect with unauthorized terminals in the region. Gaza is small enough that the argument Starlink made against Iran that it would be impossible to identify all the terminals is even weaker.

Israel possesses greater international clout than Gaza. With allies in the West, status as a democracy, and diplomatic and economic ties with the high-tech industry, Israel has an advantage over isolated countries like Iran in arguing for its right to control the landing rights, not just in its own territory, but also in Gaza. Hamas's brutality on October 7th gives Israeli concerns an urgency in the international community that Iran's struggles to censor its own citizens do not have. Perhaps most importantly, SpaceX is a US company and feels pressure to conform to US foreign policy.[77] US foreign policy has been to stand with Israel, condemn Hamas, and provide Israel with the materiel it needs for self-defense. Therefore, SpaceX ultimately gave Israel final say over terminals in Gaza and sold it the terminals it requested for its own defense. As an individual, Elon Musk also benefits from portraying himself as a broker of peace and a conspicuous humanitarian; it increases the appeal of his companies and may simply seem like the moral path to take. One could also argue that Israel's status as a Jewish state also helped it in its negotiations with Musk and Starlink, offering Musk an opportunity to rehabilitate his image against allegations of antisemitism in exchange for power to authorize terminals in Gaza. Gazan voices were conspicuously absent from this exchange beyond the

[76] James Hider, "How Much Aid's Waiting to Enter Gaza? Depends Who You Ask," NPR, April 10, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/04/10/1243697016/israel-hamas-war-gaza-aid-waiting-borders.

[77] Kulesza and Akcali Gur, "Resilient Connectivity," 3-4.

initial call for an end to the internet blackouts. Hamas understandably made no attempt to request Starlink access for Gazans, and its lack of capacity, along with its poor international image, would have made any attempt impossible. While innocent civilians in Gaza receive a much more sympathetic international reception, their influence cannot outweigh that of the Israeli government.

Conclusion

If one conclusion is clear from the cases of Iran, Myanmar, China, Gaza, and Israel, it is that the factors surrounding the successful implementation of Starlink internet in a country are numerous and multifaceted. Technical factors of access to electricity and ground stations, legal factors of landing rights and import licenses, ideological factors of democracy or alignment with the West, corporate factors of business ties and production considerations, individual factors of morality and public appearance, economic factors of affordability and transportation, and political factors of censorship and punishment all play a significant role in the viability of Starlink under repressive regimes. Due to the multicausality of each factor and the wide range of circumstances leading to each country's interaction with Starlink, it is difficult to determine which factors specifically are responsible for each traction or failure.

Based on the outcomes of each case, however, I argue that the most important element in the viability of Starlink under a repressive regime is a government's international influence in terms of allies, economic power, integration, and state capacity in terms of law enforcement and access to electricity. China, as the most powerful country out of the selection of cases, had the capability to use its geopolitical and economic clout to simply ask that Starlink not be made available in Chinese territory. Similarly, Israel's relationship with the US and status as a Western-style democracy allowed it to negotiate terms with Starlink in which it controlled all

Starlink access in Gaza. Myanmar's junta government, isolated and held in low regard by most of the world, cannot make the same sorts of requests or negotiations as Israel or China, leaving it to repress Starlink on its own, a messy and difficult task which has mostly failed due to its low capacity. Finally, Iran's arguments through the International Telecommunications Union and favorable ruling, while legitimate, have little effect on the actions of SpaceX. Iran is diplomatically isolated, and global sympathies rest with protest movements instead of with the government. Yet, Iran has greater state capacity than Myanmar and has been more successful in confiscating terminals, complicating its effectiveness. There is a degree of endogeneity to this evaluation. Countries with especially repressive regimes that motivate citizens to turn to Starlink also strain their international relations due to the poor treatment of their citizens. Similarly, states with already high capacity tend to be more developed, giving them more economic influence in the financial considerations of companies like Starlink. Further research, possibly with a more quantitative quality, should be conducted into the direct effects of each factor in the effectiveness and proliferation of Starlink in a wider set of countries to produce stronger results. There is plenty to study. As Starlink's constellation expands and more citizens of the world purchase terminals, the number of cases will only continue to grow.

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When Post-Soviet Democrats Turn To Authoritarian Practices: The Paradox of Boris Yeltsin's Conduct in the 'October Days' of 1993

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex and often-neglected legacy of Boris Yeltsin and the 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis. While Russians often recall the Yeltsin era with disdain, surveys reveal a lack of specific knowledge about his policies. The 1993 crisis exemplifies this dynamic: though condemned by citizens, it is largely forgotten as a defining event. The study aims to reassess Yeltsin's conduct through a primarily historical lens. By synthesizing secondary literature and consulting primary sources, the investigation evaluates whether Yeltsin's actions during and after the crisis aligned with democratic principles or revealed his authoritarian tendencies. The paper contends that, despite his democratic legitimacy, Yeltsin's behavior in 1993 increasingly subverted democratic norms to consolidate personal power. This investigation not only challenges simplistic views of Yeltsin as a "post-Soviet democrat" but also addresses a broader scholarly gap, as the crisis itself remains underexplored in academic discourse on post-Soviet Russia. Ultimately, the research seeks to promote a more nuanced yet critical understanding of Yeltsin's presidency and the formative moments of Russia's post-Soviet political system.

Keywords: Democracy, October Days, Boris Yeltsin, Constitutional Crisis, Post-Soviet Russia

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Introduction

Despite being a constant of early post-Soviet politics, Russia's first democratically elected leader – Boris Yeltsin – is simultaneously reviled and ignored by his compatriots, now facing their 25th year under the rule of Vladimir Putin. Setting aside methodological concerns over researching public opinion in closed authoritarian settings, a January 2023 poll by the Levada Center shows that 67 percent of Russians held a negative opinion of the first president, and when asked to name a good thing that Yeltsin's tenure brought, a 40 percent plurality either could not determine a response or simply stated "nothing."[1] Yet, when asked about "what bad things [the Yeltsin Era brought,]" the two highest categories, brought up by 43 and 27 percent respectively of those surveyed, were chaos and poverty.[2] On the surface, this result is unsurprising, as Russian society often remembers the collective trauma of the pre-Putin years through pejorative terms like 'wild', banditskie, or lihie, referring to the era's organized crime and economic instability.[3] However, the fact that a majority of respondents chose to list a broad problem, rather than a particular policy decision of the president and his administration, may well point to an overall ignorance of Yeltsin's tenure, whether due to popular indifference, temporal distance, or more significant post-2000 socio-political traumas.

Regardless of the exact hypothesized cause, the same mix of societal disdain and disregard of Yeltsin's legacy can be identified at the micro level when examining one of the most controversial episodes of his first term: the 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis, fought between

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[1] "Attitude to Boris Yeltsin, to His Era, to the Yeltsin Center," *Levada Center*, February 16, 2023. https://www.levada.ru/en/2023/02/16/attitude-to-boris-yeltsin-to-his-era-to-the-yeltsin-center/.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Vsevolod Sokolov, "From Guns to Briefcases: The Evolution of Russian Organized Crime," *World Policy Journal* 21, no. 1 (2004): 68–74, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209904.

Yeltsin and the Soviet-era parliament on the streets of Moscow and ultimately decided by the intervention of the Russian Army. Although the presidential administration ardently defended its actions in September-October 1993 as necessary for stability, democracy, and reform, Russian citizens of various ideological leanings have continually doubted the veracity of the governmental narrative. In 2003, 80 percent of Russians disagreed with Yeltsin's use of tanks against parliament.[4] A more detailed 2016 survey by the Levada Center reveals the endurance of this scepticism, indicating that by that point, only 6 percent of those sampled felt that Yeltsin supporters had been right, while 54 percent considered the application of military force during the crisis by Yeltsin to be unjustified.[5] Still, despite this popular condemnation of Yeltsin's decisions and the extraordinary violence of the crisis, immortalized via photographs of 'Black October'[6] and archived footage from Western news agencies,[7] Russians have seemingly chosen to ignore the crisis as a focal point in the 9-year leadership of President Yeltsin. After all, in the aforementioned 2023 Levada survey, neither the crisis nor its aftermath ranks even in the top twelve "negative

[4] Steven Rosenberg, "Remembering Russia's Civil Siege", *BBC News*, October 3, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3161002.stm.

[5] "The October 1993 Constitutional Crisis," *Levada Center*, November 9, 2016. https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/11/09/the-october-1993-constitutional-crisis/.

[6] "1993 год: Политики, звезды и простые люди – 30 фото, которые вошли в историю," РОСФОТО, February 24, 2023, https://st1.rosphoto.com/history/1993_god_politiki_zvezdy_i_prostye_lyudi_30_foto_kotorye_voshli_v_istoriyu-9172. ("1993 god: Politiki, zvezdy i prostye lyudi – 30 foto, kotorye voshli v istoriyu," ROSPHOTO, accessed February 24, 2023, https://st1.rosphoto.com/history/1993_god_politiki_zvezdy_i_prostye_lyudi_30_foto_kotorye_voshli_v_istoriyu-9172.)

[7] “CNN Coverage of Crisis in Moscow (1993).” YouTube video, 1:17:46. July 2, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veuAEUwqNg8.

results" of the first president's leadership.[8] Put simply, much in the same way they evaluate Yeltsin as a politician, the Russian body politic of the 21st century seems to process the Russian Constitutional Crisis by judging and forgetting at the same time.

While such complex memorialization alone makes a deep analysis of the 'October Days' and Yeltsin's conduct already compelling, an additional necessity for such an investigation comes from an analytical neglect of the crisis in question. Although a significant body of literature exists on Yeltsin and Russia's fraught post-Soviet transition, academic researchers and policy experts on Russia have failed to comprehensively study the constitutional crisis, let alone develop a consensus on whether the president acted in a 'democratic' or 'liberal' fashion. Of course, that is not to say no research has been conducted; on the contrary, experts—especially in the West—have exploited the 20 and 30-year anniversaries of the event to write articles[9] and organize limited conferences,[10]

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[8] To the lay observer, one could very well dispute the 'forgetting' claim by hypothesizing a link between the Constitutional Crisis as a destabilizing event and the "chaos" survey response. While this investigation does not dispute that some of the respondents may have associated their responses in relation to September-October 1993, the *Levada Center*'s untranslated survey results largely portray a different picture. In the Russian version, "chaos" is determined via the following responses: *razruha* (devastation, primarily in an economic sense), *bardak* (disorder or messiness, primarily in a structural or organizational sense), *razval strany (*breakdown/break-up of the country, in a general sense), *razval armii* (breakdown/break-up of the army), *razval predpriyatii* (breakdown/break-up of economic enterprises), *besporyadok* (disorder or messiness, especially of an organizational variety), *razorenie strany* (ruin of the country, especially in an economic sense), *krizis* (crisis, unclear if referring to 1993 Constitutional, the 1994-96 Chechen Crisis/War, 1998 financial crisis, or the 1999 Second Chechen Crisis/War), and *defizit* (deficit). In sum, most responses relate to the Russian state's power following the collapse of the CPSU party-state apparatus, whether economically, militarily, or geographically. Only a slim minority of response types could be convincingly considered as relating directly to the partisan confrontation of 1993, thus reinforcing – if not fully proving – the forgetting hypothesis.

[9] For example: Andrei Kolesnikov, "Why The Constitution Is Not to Blame For Today's Regime: A Hard Look at the 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis," *Russia.Post*, October 4, 2023. https://russiapost.info/politics/crisis_1993. See also a converse opinion from Russian journalists and analysts exiled in the West: «Как начиналась автократия в России. Зачем президент Ельцин начал войну с Верховным советом? Видео к годовщине конституционного кризиса 1993 года.» Новая газета Европа, сентябрь 21, 2023. Accessed July 21, 2025. https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/09/21/kak-nachinalas-avtokratiia-v-rossii ("How Autocracy Began in Russia. Why Did President Yeltsin Start a War with the Supreme Soviet? A Video for the Anniversary of the 1993 Constitutional Crisis." Novaya Gazeta Europe, September 21, 2023. accessed July 21, 2025.)

[10] “The tomb of the Soviet Union, or the Womb of Putinism? The 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis, 30 Years After,” H-Soz-Kult, September 21, 2023, accessed July 21, 2025.

though this activity has generally concentrated on more structural questions, including whether the crisis' outcome laid the foundations for the current Putin regime to rise, survive, and entrench itself into the state and society.

Accordingly, this investigation serves to promote a new vector in this neglected niche, utilizing the crisis as a historical case study to gain a deeper, more nuanced look at President Yeltsin's status as a so-called 'post-Soviet democrat'. Predominantly, this work will rely on synthesizing the historical and social scientific literature to judge whether Yeltsin truly acted in the name of Russia's democratic transition. However, the paper aims to enrich this analysis through frequent consultation of primary sources, which may help identify heretofore neglected factors that could tip our judgment of Yeltsin's conduct in a more democratic or authoritarian direction. Simultaneously, this analysis aims to conceptualize a chronological model[11] of Yeltsin's behavior in relation to his opponent during the crisis:

[11] Visual models and tools have become an increasingly common approach to understanding intrastate dynamics and regime evolution, including in the post-Soviet space. See, for example: Grigorii V. Golosov, "The Place of Russia's Political Regime (2003–2023) on a Conceptual Map of the World's Autocracies," *Social Science Information* 62, no. 3 (2023): 390–408, https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184231207597.

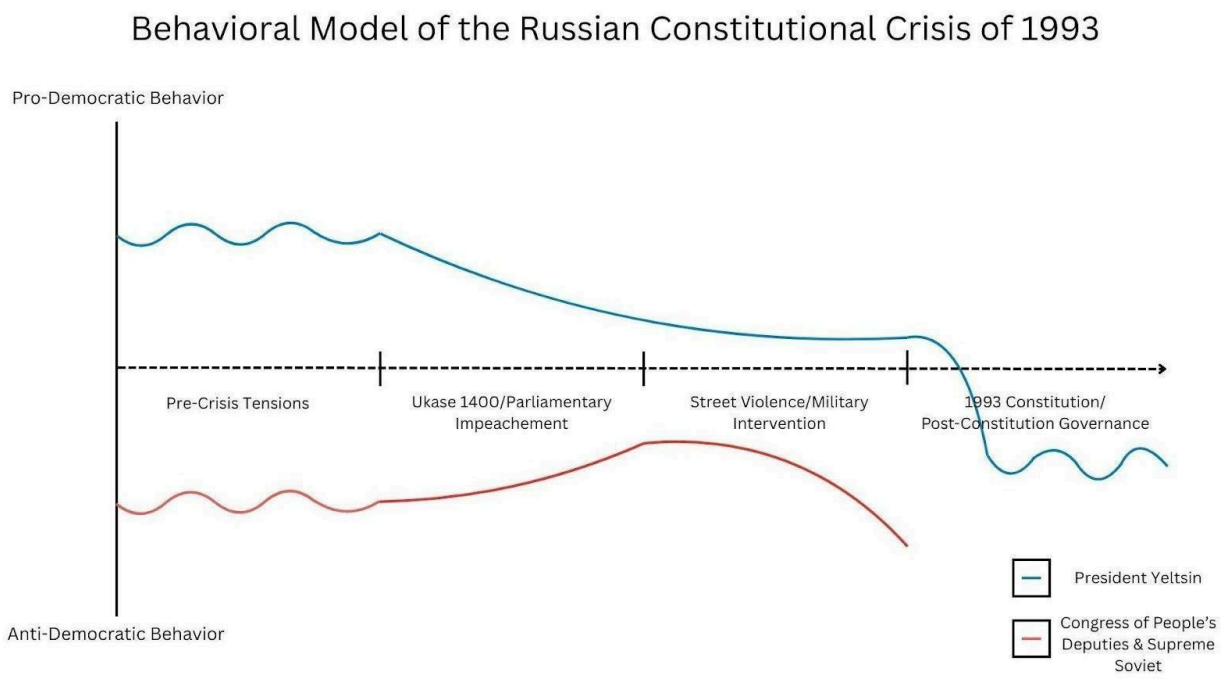


Figure 1: One-axis classification of actor behavior during the 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis. "Pro-Democratic Behavior" denotes actions that serve to institute, protect, maintain, or work within a democratic system, in accordance with the principles of free and fair elections, popular sovereignty, separation of powers, and the rule of law. "Anti- Democratic Behavior" denotes actions that oppose, prevent, or subvert democratic governance and democratic principles, whether by intent or by consequence. Precision of line positions is not guaranteed, for instrumental purposes only.

To accomplish this evaluation and justify the above model, the study will be split into two parts: (1) a historical overview, providing essential context on the course of this post-Soviet conflict, and (2) a chronological analysis, in which explicitly pro- and anti-Yeltsin perspectives will be pitted head-to-head through each major stage of the crisis, allowing for more nuanced and dispassionate critique of each side's intentions and behavior. In adopting such an approach, this study aims to demonstrate that although President Yeltsin by 1993 was a legitimate democratic leader, held a strongly liberal reputation, and was battling an authoritarian institution, his actions during and especially after the crisis subverted democratic norms for the sake of increasing his

personal power, an outcome that on the whole reveals the more autocratic – if not totalitarian – tendencies of the Yeltsin regime.

Historical Background

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the newly independent Russian state entered an uncertain era of transition away from 69 years of dictatorship and planned economy.[12] At the helm of this transformation was President Boris Yeltsin, elected in June 1991, who promoted radical reform for prosperity and stability. With the collapse of the Soviet party- state apparatus and all central planning mechanisms, his administration quickly took charge, focusing in 1992 and 1993 on "shock therapy" economic reforms that were spearheaded by Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar.[13] While these reforms increased privatization and foreign investment, Yeltsin's promises that the adverse effects of economic change would be short-term were inaccurate. Instead of prospering, ordinary Russians continued to struggle in the face of steep inflation, the disintegration of key state industries, and sharp rises in unemployment and homelessness.[14] Combined with many Russians' anger over the fall of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union itself, widespread economic woes fueled the growth of a movement that stood against the Yeltsin Administration's policies, inflaming political tensions in Moscow.

One anti-Yeltsin force, supported by a "red-brown coalition" of communist and ultranationalist groupings, was found within Russia's legislative apparatus left over from

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[12] Martin McCauley, "From Perestroika toward a New Order, 1985-1995," in *Russia: A History*, ed. Gregory L. Freeze (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 383-422.

[13] Michael McFaul, "The Russian Federation," *The Cambridge History of Russia, Volume III: The Twentieth Century*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 352-380.

[14] Nicholas Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 646.

Communist Party rule: the Supreme Soviet and the Congress of People's Deputies.[15] Dissatisfied with the country's worsening circumstances, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Ruslan Khasbulatov, various deputies, and their ally Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi became increasingly opposed to Yeltsin's rule. By late 1992, animosity escalated into a power struggle over a new constitution, which would dictate the nature of the post-Soviet order. Despite mutual attempts to compromise, Khasbulatov resolved to increase parliamentary resistance through legal means: at his direction, Russian parliamentarians approved swaths of initiatives, from limiting the president's decree powers and trying an abortive impeachment to proclaiming that only the legislature could oversee the constitution's elaboration. In response, President Yeltsin defiantly passed reformist presidential decrees (ukase), openly drafted his own constitution with a strong presidency, and held a referendum to display national confidence in his leadership.[16]

In September 1993, after months of political and legal infighting between the legislature and executive, an embattled Yeltsin triggered the Constitutional Crisis by issuing Ukase No. 1400, a decree on constitutional reform that ordered the parliament to dissolve and mandated early parliamentary elections.[17] Undeterred by such a drastic step, the legislature impeached Yeltsin and proclaimed Rutskoi to be the legitimate president, in effect creating a situation of *dvoyevlastiye*, or dual power. For thirteen days, Moscow became embroiled in a stand-off as Khasbulatov, Rutskoi, people's deputies, and groups of supporters occupied the White House – the official seat

[15] Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey from Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016), 104.

[16] Riasanovsky and Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 649.

[17] «Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.09.1993 г. № 1400», Администрация Президента России, 21 сентября, 1993, http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/4364. ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation from

21.09.1993 No. 1400", Administration of the President of Russia, September 21, 1993, http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/4364).

of the Supreme Soviet – for an armed resistance against Yeltsin, who had deployed personnel from the Ministry of Interior to the scene.[18] Simultaneously, Yeltsin and the legislature competed for the loyalty of the military, various ministries, and regional leaders. On October 2, the stand-off turned into civil war in Moscow as pro-parliament forces, mostly made up of far-right paramilitary organizations like Aleksandr Barkashov's Russian National Unity, clashed with police and attacked strategic locations across the city.[19] Witnessing the unraveling situation, Yeltsin decreed a state of emergency, and on October 4, having gained the support of the Russian military, brutally ended the crisis: tank units fired ten blanks and two incendiary shells at the White House, setting the building ablaze, while special forces unit "Alfa" stormed it, destroying all resistance.[20]

Victory for Yeltsin in the Constitutional Crisis came at a heavy cost: at least 187 people[21] died in street fighting unseen in Moscow since the days of the Russian Revolution.[22] Still, having come out on top and more or less unscathed, the head of state pressed on with forming a new regime. By mid-December 1993, a referendum established a constitution, in which executive authority was greatly increased and a new legislature – the State Duma and Federation Council – was created to replace the old opposition-dominated parliament.[23]

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[18] Riasanovsky and Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 650.

[19] Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality* (n.p.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), 84.

[20] Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia*, 85.

[21] Non-governmental sources list the death toll much higher, at times claiming that as many as 2,000 Muscovites were killed in the violent stand-off. If true, the crisis' death count would surpass that of the 1989 Romanian Revolution and would be closer to the higher death estimates for the Tiananmen Square Massacre in Beijing.

[22] Tim Weiner, *The Folly and the Glory: America, Russia, and Political Warfare 1945*–2020 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020), 169.

[23] Martin McCauley, “From Perestroika toward a New Order, 1985-1995,” 417; Timothy Colton, Yeltsin: A Life (New York, Basic Books, 2008), 202.

Stage Zero: The Presidential Administration and Parliament as of September 1993

First, the investigation will cover the immediate backdrop to the Constitutional Crisis' ignition by comparing the political status of president and parliament as of September 20, 1993, the day before the issuing of Ukase No. 1400. In doing so, the study aims to establish a stable 'reference point' for Boris Yeltsin and the legislature's actions and counteractions in subsequent stages, allowing for a more reliable analysis of the 'October Days' as a historical process while underpinning it within greater historical processes.

In the greater academic literature covering the Yeltsin regime, one can identify a significant circle of 'pessimist critiques' toward all post-Soviet political-governmental actors, including Yeltsin and his 1992-93 legislative opponents. The observers behind such interpretations are diverse, including but not limited to analysts trying to understand Russian politics through simplistic "FSB State" or "Mafia State" models,[24] as well as disillusioned experts,[25] who seek to overturn the 'rose-colored' interpretations of Western observers of the time and demonstrate how the consistent illiberalism of Yeltsin's two terms fueled the revanchism of the Putin Era. Regardless of their exact motivations, such scholars implicitly (and perhaps unintentionally) rely on a political realist framework for their analysis, at least within the context of Russia or of the former Soviet Union. Although this framework, especially in its structural or neorealist form, is typically applied to matters of war and foreign policy, it also has some application at the intrastate

[24] This line of thinking became more prominent around the 2000s, as the scholarly world reckoned with the passing of the fraught Yeltsin years and the beginning of the 'stable' Putin years. It has become especially prominent to understanding both the Russian 1990s and contemporary affairs following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conflict between Wagner Group's Evgeny Prigozhin and the Ministry of Defence. See: "Prigozhin's Death Shows That Russia Is a Mafia State," The Economist, August 24, 2023, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/08/24/prigozhins-death-shows-that-russia-is-a-mafia-state.

[25] Stephen Kotkin and Lilia Shevtsova are especially prominent voices in this area.

level, including civil war-style conflicts and the behavior of rivaling leaders or state institutions, such as the case study analyzed in this paper. As Niccolo Machiavelli – a foundational philosopher of classical realism – wrote in his 1532 The Prince:

> A ruler, especially a ruler new to power, can't always behave in ways that would make people think a man good, because to stay in power he's frequently obliged to act against loyalty, against charity, against humanity and against religion.[26]

Though the critics in question may disagree that a head of state 'ought to' act in such ways, their implicit assertion of such analysis' relevance carries with it significant assumptions about the very nature of Russian statecraft, including the concept that "the final arbiter of all things politics is power," that the foundation of politics is the 'conflict group' varying in size and sophistication depending on the state of development, and that politics is inherently controlled by humanity's desire for power and security.[27] In turn, in the political battlefield that is post-Soviet Russia, higher ideals, whether ideology, public policy, or morality, become secondary and even irrelevant to one's ultimate authority. Accordingly, to such scholars, Yeltsin and the Russian Parliament cannot be described as democratic actors, as they are inherently self-interested and seek to wrest power from the other merely for the sake of obtaining or maintaining it.

To an extent, such an interpretation holds up to the historical test, as ultimately, Yeltsin and parliament fought over 1992-93 primarily for constitutional power. The Russian Constitution, as the name of the crisis suggests, was the legal catalyst for the events of

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[26] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. W. K. Marriott (Milan: IULM University, 2020), 70, https://apeiron.iulm.it/retrieve/handle/10808/4129/46589/Machiavelli%2C%20The%20Prince.pdf.

[27] Robert G. Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (1984): 287–304. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706441, 290.

September-October 1993.[28] While the destruction of the Soviet system impacted virtually every aspect of Russian life, it did not have a significant effect on the country's legal apparatus; rather, Russia continued to operate under an outdated Soviet Constitution instituted in 1978 and amended hundreds of times since, though these changes largely created more structural problems. For instance, a 1991 amendment established the office of president for Boris Yeltsin, but it neglected to clarify the scope of the head of state's powers and labeled him the "highest official", despite Article 104 stating that the supreme body of state power was the parliament.[29] Such a contradiction inevitably led to conflict: Chairman Khasbulatov and the parliament sought to defend the extant constitution in order to preserve and ultimately reassert their legal supremacy, while Yeltsin attacked it in order to prevent parliament's dominance and expand his own power.[30] This deadlock over the constitution consequently spurred tensions, resulting in a mutual intent to repeatedly escalate the conflict and try to tilt the balance until victory was total. In this way, the Constitutional Crisis was a conflict driven by pragmatic self-interest and ambition for authority, making both sides' uncompromising conduct ambiguous to most and authoritarian to some.

While it is possible – and at times analytically expedient – to see conflict through this cold lens of power, the above interpretation's pessimism ultimately presents a slippery slope for making conclusions on actors, their behavior, and their true intentions. By branding every actor, whether state, party, class, executive figure, or governmental institution, as simply a power-

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[28] Stephen Kotkin*, Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 150.

[29] Thomas Graham, "The Fate of the Russian State", *Demokratizatsiya (2000*), 354–75.

[30] Michael McFaul, "The Russian Federation," 362.

seeking agent, it becomes far too easy to brand any individual or group as inherently autocratic, no matter the conflictual, temporal, national, or exact ideological context. Furthermore, contrary to what many lay observers and contemporary theorists may think, not even the most pessimistic of classical realists would dispute the necessity or relevance of morality and ideals to the conduct of politics; rather, they frequently acknowledge the low state of human nature while encouraging the consideration of higher political thinking, whether in diplomacy, war, the treatment of citizens and subjects, or the creation of domestic legal orders.[31] Accordingly, any analysis of the Yeltsin Administration's actions is substantially weaker (and likely inconclusive) without due consideration of the ideological-reputational 'state of play' between the President and the Russian Parliament prior to the issuing of Ukase No. 1400. Following this line of thinking, a surface-level analysis of each side is ever more inadequate when considering the fact that in both the prelude and aftermath of Black October, Yeltsin, former parliamentary deputies, and their respective supporters all made contradictory claims that their side stood for democracy from the very beginning, while the enemy was brazenly dictatorial. Still, a close examination shows that Yeltsin, despite having exaggerated his accusation of the legislative branch to be outright "fascist-communist" rebels, was correct in branding himself a democrat and the legislature as aligned with authoritarianism.[32]

By September 1993, Yeltsin clearly had consolidated a reputation as the harbinger of a democratic order at the domestic and international level, gaining strong legitimacy through his

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[31] Erica Benner, "Political Realism and Human Nature: Classical and Modern Arguments," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Political Realism*, ed. Alasdair Blair and Mark Laffey, 1st ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2f4vqhm.5.

[32] "Russian Presidential Address." C-SPAN Video, 21:24. October 6, 1993. https://www.c-span.org/video/?51206-1/russian-presidential-address.

political decisions, electability, and concurrent support from democrats inside and abroad.[33] Domestically, although encumbered by a decades-long legacy as a CPSU *apparatchik*, Yeltsin managed to exploit *perestroika* to rebuild his political image into one as an anti-establishment figure: he frequently called for faster democratization, exited the Politburo in 1987, and left the party altogether in 1990.[34] Furthermore, with the creation of the Russian Republic Presidency, Yeltsin was nominated by the movement *Demokraticheskaya Rossiya*, although he remained somewhat controversial among Russian liberals due to his maintaining of formal dialogue with Soviet head of state Mikhail Gorbachev.[35] His quick campaign, defined by its pro-democracy and pro-reform agenda, proved successful in gaining Yeltsin both a sovereign position and more legitimacy as a national leader: he won 57.3 percent of the vote, while the CPSU's preferred candidate, Nikolai Ryzhkov, won only 16.85 percent.[36]

Most significantly at the domestic level, when the so-called 'State Committee on the State of Emergency' (*GKChP*) tried to overthrow Gorbachev in the 1991 August Coup and bring back a hardline communist order, President Yeltsin proved his commitment to both Russian

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[33] Евгений Анисимов, *История России от Рюрика до Путина. Люди. События. Даты*. (Санкт-Петербург: Издательский дом «Питер», 2010), 521 (Evgeniy Anisimov*, History of Russia from Rurik to Putin. People. Events. Dates.* (Saint Petersburg: Publishing House "Piter", 2010), 521)

[34] John Wallach, "Is Boris Yeltsin a Democrat?" *The Brown Journal of Foreign Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1993): 155-56. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24589644.

[35] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, No. 82, 29 April 1991, RFE/RL Daily Report*, accessed July 21, 2025, archived September 17, 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20180917105402/http://friends-partners.org/friends/news/omri/1991/04/910429.html.

[36] Beyond beating the Russian Communist Party, one must note that Yeltsin's democratic campaign symbolically trounced all other visions for the Russian Soviet Federative Republic for the electorate at the time, with reform communist Vadim Bakatin winning 3.42%, ultranationalist populist Vladimir Zhirinovsky winning 7.81%, nationalist-communist Albert Makashov's winning 3.74%, and Kemerovo-linked left-wing populist Amangedly Teleyev winning 6.81% of the vote. See: ЦИК России, «Выборы Президента РСФСР 12 июня 1991 года,» Архив Центральной избирательной комиссии России, архивировано 25 февраля 2001 года, доступ 21 июля 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20010225132057/http://www.fci.ru/archive/vyb91.htm/. (Central Election

Commission of Russia, “Presidential Election of the RSFSR, June 12, 1991,” Archive of the Central Election Commission of Russia, archived February 25, 2001.)

Republican autonomy and democratic reformist principles, as he denounced the coup and personally rallied democrats and fellow citizens for a resistance at the Moscow White House. The president's choice to struggle and his swift victory against the hardliners simultaneously paved the way for Yeltsin to wrest full independence and to gain an unprecedented amount of popular support, especially among urban reformists. This outcome can be best seen in the diverse independent media of the era. For example, during the crisis, the St. Petersburg-based newspaper *Nevskoe Vremia* put Yeltsin's announcement resisting the *GKChP* at the top of its front page as the "Decree of the President," right alongside a *GKChP* decree, which seems to have been quietly delegitimized as merely an 'announcement' by Gennady Yanayev, Valentin Pavlov, and Oleg Baklanov, without mention of their coup committee positions.[37] Meanwhile, after the crisis, the newspaper *Kuranty* displayed on its front page large photos of a triumphant Yeltsin and accompanying crowds of Muscovites with fists in their air, headlines like "Democracy Has Endured," and articles covering the continued operation of the city council and the liberal editors' gratitude to Muscovites for their bravery against the coup.[38] This was later followed by major Russian cultural figures symbolically banding around the Republic President, whether by praising the electorate in radio interviews for their choice of a powerful, proven democratic

[37] *Nevskoe vremia*, *Center for Research Libraries Global Resources Network*, August 20, 1991, https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/ppn/?a=d&d=nvva19910820-01&e=-------en-25--1--img-txIN --.

[38] *Kuranty, Center for Research Libraries Global Resources Network,* August 23, 1991, https://gpa.eastview.com/crl/ppn/?a=d&d=krty19910823-01&e=-------en-25--1--img-txIN --.

figure[39] or by reporting that they had personally stood against the *GKChP* at the barricades around the White House.[40]

As Russia's republican sovereignty gradually gave way to full-scale independence, President Yeltsin used his increasingly democratic credentials to solidify himself as a liberal international figure of the early 1990s. This can be best seen in Yeltsin's push, at least between 1991 and 1993, for a friendly and cooperative partnership between the Russian Republic and the United States, by that point the clear winner of the Cold War, a global superpower, and the legitimate leader of the 'Free World'. Just over a week after the first-ever Russian Presidential Election, Boris Yeltsin took the opportunity for an official visit to the White House, where President George H.W. Bush officially congratulated Yeltsin on his "landslide" and lauded the new Republican President as someone committed "to democratic values and free-market principles."[41] Though this was not the actual beginning of the two presidents' personal relationship, which started in 1989, it constituted a significant breakthrough in the US' legitimization of a democratic Russia under Yeltsin's helm; however, Washington still tried to toe a rhetorical line that would not impede on Gorbachev's authority as the head of the USSR.

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[39] ЭХО «Разные судьбы в гостях Вячеслав Тихонов – Вячеслав Тихонов – Интервью – 1991-09-09,» *Эхо Москвы*, September 9, 1991, https://echofm.online/archive/beseda/106688. ("Different Fates: Guest Vyacheslav Tikhonov – Vyacheslav Tikhonov – Interview – 1991-09-09," *Echo of Moscow*,September 9, 1991.)

[40] ЭХО «Мстислав Ростропович – Интервью – 1991-08-23,» Эхо Москвы, August 23, 1991, https://echofm.online/archive/beseda/106687. ("Mstislav Rostropovich – Interview – 1991-08-23," Echo of Moscow, August 23, 1991, https://echofm.online/archive/beseda/106687.)

[41] "Remarks and Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation," transcript, The American Presidency Project, June 20, 1991, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-and-exchange-with-reporters-prior-discussions-with-president-boris-yeltsin-the.

This line would quickly be erased after August 1991 as the Soviet state withered away in favor of a commonwealth of independent republics and as Yeltsin deepened his relationship with the American White House: he assured Bush over a phone call of his intention to let Ukraine and others gain independence while Russia became "the engine which will pull other republics along the democratic path,"[42] wrote to Bush of his commitment to "supremacy of law, the principle of free elections and political pluralism… [and his wish for Russia] to integrate into the international community of democratic law-governed states,"[43] and even phoned Bush mere minutes after the signing of the Belavezha Accords, notifying him personally of the dissolution of the Soviet Union even before Gorbachev could know about it.[44] Although the months after the dissolution carried inevitable disappointments for Yeltsin, who frequently encountered reluctance from both the Bush and Clinton Administrations to radically escalate the US-Russia friendship,[45] the US White House of the era continually gave Yeltsin public legitimacy and support, including going so far as to "wish [Yeltsin] well" as tensions with the Congress of Peoples' Deputies escalated in late 1992.[46] Thus, as of September 20, 1993, though his approval among the electorate had ebbed and flowed, Yeltsin still held firmly onto a reputation of a fairly

[42] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation with President Boris Yeltsin, November 30, 1991, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum., https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-11-30--Yeltsin.pdf.

[43] Boris Yeltsin, letter to President George H.W. Bush, November 1991, National Security Archive, George Washington University,, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB447/1991-11-00%20Letter%20from%20President%20Yeltsin%20to%20President%20Bush.PDF.

[44] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation with President Boris Yeltsin, December 8, 1991, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum,, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1991-12-08--Yeltsin.pdf.

[45] Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Meeting with Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia, National Security Archive, George Washington University,, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29670-document-8-memorandum-conversation-subject-meeting-boris-yeltsin-president-russia.

[46] "Bush Tells Yeltsin: 'We Stand Behind You,'" UPI Archives, November 30, 1992,, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1992/11/30/Bush-tells-Yeltsin-We-stand-behind-you/4605723099600/.

elected president, committed to democratic principles, with trust from the Russian people and support from liberal politicians at home and abroad.

In contrast, despite the fact that the legislature's own building was the site of democratic resistance to the *GKChP* coup, the parliament's two chambers were largely undemocratic in their legitimacy and behavior patterns. Institutionally, the legislature's deputies had been selected under a Soviet electoral system in the midst of reform, which gave democratic candidates the opportunity to win a break-out of 20% of the seats; however, the reforms' incompletion made the event only partially free,[47] making the nascent legislative body lose significant legitimacy. This loss is especially the case when comparing to the subsequent June 1991 presidential election, where Yeltsin was given a decisive mandate, and what unfair meddling by the CPSU existed was ultimately unsuccessful.[48] Accordingly, by September 1993, while Russian politics, business, and civil society became remarkably active and diverse (often to a dangerously chaotic extent), the parliament remained an institution dominated not by a single ideology but by various factions representing a broadly anti-reform and anti-Yeltsin old guard, including "Soviet factory bosses, who had been pushed out of the way during the privatization… representatives of the military and the powerful agricultural lobby."[49] This anti-democratic tendency would be repeatedly affirmed over 1992-93 as deputies anticipatedly stockpiled weaponry, all while striking down democratic reform bills and economic reform initiatives (which would weaken the center's supremacy and theoretically prevent a return to an undemocratic *status quo*); these included

[47] Richard Sakwa, *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), https://research-solution.com/uplode/books/book-53526.pdf.

[48] Will Englund, "A Defining Moment in the Soviet Breakup," *The Washington Post*, June 11, 2011, , https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/1991-the-soviet-unions-end/2011/06/08/AGnsDdOH_story.html.

[49] Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia*, 104.

roadblocking Yeltsin's 1993 attempts to push through a more stable, defined constitution and legislation from Yegor Gaidar "to control the legislative spending and end the automatic response by the Central Bank to cover the deficits."[50] Further evidence of the legislature's pro-autocratic bent can be seen in socio-political factors, namely the fact that the parliament was primarily supported across Russian society by groups of communists, nationalists, monarchists, and fascists, who had as early as 1992 advocated for a coup d'état against the Yeltsin Administration and threatened to 'punish' ethnic minorities, so-called "Zionists and 'agents of American influence'" for their acts against the unity of the Soviet state apparatus.[51]

Therefore, we can conclude that before the outbreak of the Constitutional Crisis, while tensions between the legislative and executive branch were driven partly by constitutional contradictions on power, the struggle for authority was also partially a struggle for the future vision of the country – Yeltsin's democratic platform or the parliament's attempt to prevent reform and preserve the remnants of the old Soviet system. Accordingly, Yeltsin's status as a leader remains ostensibly democratic, though the element of power adds a significant ambiguity that makes it necessary to analyze the subsequent stages of the conflict.

Stage One: Ukase No. 1400

As the immediate trigger of the crisis, Boris Yeltsin's issuing of Ukase No. 1400, which on paper dissolved the parliament and called for new legislative elections, forms a key stage for analysis of his actions. In examining the issuing of the decree as a potential assertion of

[50] Dick Wilson, "On Yego Gaidar." no. 16 (2009): 189, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/wp-content/files_mf/1389825198d16Wilson.pdf

[51] Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia*, 109.

authoritarian control, the investigation will analyze the decree's legality, Yeltsin's motivations for issuing it, and the ukase's systemic effect on Russia's political system.

The Case for Boris Yeltsin

President Yeltsin ardently defended issuing the decree by claiming that doing so was the only way to guarantee national stability and democratic reform. In his personal journal, published in 1994 but written during the crisis' unfolding, Yeltsin wrote that by September 1993, he felt that inter-branch tensions had reached a boiling point: his administration had tried to peacefully compromise with parliament several times, from forming "a reconciliation commission to bring parliament and government back together" to replacing Acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, much despised by parliament, with the more moderate Viktor Chernomyrdin.[52] However, the parliament under Chairman Khasbulatov only continued to hinder the president's authority, reforms, and constitutional plans, which amounted to an egregious abuse of the powers provided to it.

For Yeltsin, as a self-proclaimed "guarantor of Russia's progress away from communism", such severe obstructionism made the parliament a "destructive force, a threat to Russia's security," which not only meant the stagnation of reform but also, given increasing opposition to Yeltsin's government by nationalist and communist groups, a possibility for the emergence of "a new Russian Stalin" that would crush democracy outright.[53] In September, while announcing on state

[52] Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, trans. Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, (New York: Penguin Random House, 1994), 247.

[53] Riasanovsky and Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 649; Yeltsin, The Struggle for Russia, 244, 248.

television the issuing of Ukase No. 1400, Yeltsin echoed these anxieties by stressing the need to establish order, even if his methods contradicted legal "contradictory norms created by a legislative power which had utterly discredited itself."[54] In this way, considering Yeltsin's established democratic reputation and taking this rationale at face value, it can be argued that the president had acted to protect and advance democratic change, not gain authoritarian control.

Yeltsin as a Roadblock to Building Democracy

However, the pro-Yeltsin argument is flawed, regardless of whether one believes the stated intentions of the president in issuing the *ukase*. As stated previously, Yeltsin was mostly correct in denouncing the legislature's authoritarian alignment, and this validity extends to accusations of destabilizing the national order. After all, the parliament had acted in ways that can be considered reckless power-grabbing: it had tried to strip Yeltsin of his ability to issue decrees, passed hundreds of constitutional amendments favoring itself, canceled the president's policies, dismissed Yeltsin's cabinet ministers without warning, and even tried to kindle revanchist ambitions, for example, by issuing a decree claiming Ukrainian Sevastopol as a Russian federal city.[55] However, this did not give Yeltsin any legal justification to issue a decree dismantling the legislature, as under the 1978 Russian Constitution, the entirety of parliament's conduct, including its impeachment and dismissal of Yeltsin, was legal and within the confines of a mostly democratic system. In contrast, despite the 1991 presidential amendment establishing a vague separation of powers between the executive and legislature, Yeltsin's dissolution of parliament and implementation of presidential

[54] Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia and the Russians: A History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 592.

[55] Serge Schmemann, "Russian Parliament Votes a Claim to Ukrainian Port of Sevastopol," *New York Times*, July 10,

1993, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/07/10/world/russian-parliament-votes-a-claim-to-ukrainian-port-of-sevastopol.html.

rule were completely unlawful acts.[56] Academics like Martin McCauley and Tim Weiner do not concentrate on this aspect of the crisis, but the significance of such an overstepping of power is not to be overlooked due to the importance of the rule of law at this stage of Russia's history.

The rule of law had been a key goal for making democracy in Russia a reality since the beginning of systematic transformation under the last Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev.[57] Even Boris Yeltsin, despite his fierce conflicts with Gorbachev, echoed in his private and public rhetoric Gorbachev's goal of establishing *pravovoye gosudarstvo* – a "law-based state."[58] However, by illegally and unconstitutionally issuing Ukase No. 1400, Yeltsin clearly subverted the rule of law in order to push through his reform agenda. Thus, paradoxically, while the intentions may have been democratic, in execution, Ukase No. 1400 was authoritarian, breaking a pillar of democracy just as it was being erected.

Stage Two: Blood on the Streets of Moscow

The thirteen days of armed stand-off in Moscow in September-October 1993 form the second stage in judging Yeltsin's actions during the Constitutional Crisis. In doing so, the investigation will specifically look at President Yeltsin's decisions and reactions to parliament's conduct. However, it will not touch upon established conclusions regarding Ukase No. 1400, as while the argument that Yeltsin's continued rule as president was illegal is formally correct, the crisis had by then de facto transformed into armed conflict between rival regimes.

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[56] McCauley, *Russia: A History*, 416.

[57] Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 147.

[58] Президентский центр Бориса Ельцина (Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center), «Октябрь 1993. Обращение Бориса Ельцина к гражданам 21-го сентября 1993 г.,» ("October 1993. Boris Yeltsin's Address to Citizens on September 21, 1993"), video, 16:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9juTns736s.

Use of Force: An Aggressive Consolidation of Power or a Necessary Protective Measure?

Overwhelmingly, Russia scholars assert that Yeltsin's dealings with the opposition in late September and early October were an anti-democratic consolidation of power because Yeltsin used force to end the conflict.[59] To an extent, this perspective is understandable, as the conflict carried a large death toll, alienated many democratic politicians from the Yeltsin regime, and – in an almost Shakespearean reversal – led to the destruction of the very place that Yeltsin had carried out a democratic resistance two years prior.[60] Beyond this symbolic shock, the destruction of a rival parliament via military intervention clearly showcased Yeltsin's less democratic instincts and caused a significant reversal in progress toward building a true democratic state. Put simply, troop intervention in Moscow erased the taboo on the use of violence at this scale in civil politics and ended much of Russia's hopes that the transition to democracy could be peaceful.[61]

Of course, this disheartened reaction was not universal at the time, as 42 literary figures signed and released a letter on October 5, 1993 commending the president, army, and law enforcement for the put-down of the authoritarian-minded parliament.[62] Although the letter included prominent cultural names, including the illustrious folk bard Bulat Okudzhava, the letter's reception was extremely controversial, reflecting the deep divide and consternation among Russian society regarding Yeltsin's actions. Still, such figures' – as well as a minority of contemporary scholars' – approval of presidential force remains worth investigating. After all,

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[59] Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia*, 87; Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia*, 115; Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 151.

[60] Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 594.

[61] Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 650.

[62] «Письмо сорока двух,» *Известия*, October 5, 1993, archived at Vivovoco, https://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/HONOUR/LETT42.HTM. ("Letter of Forty-Two," *Izvestiya*, October 5, 1993. Archived at Vivovoco.)

though Yeltsin and his advisors considered a potential "lightning-quick shock-troop assault" in the first days of the post-Ukase No. 1400 stand-off, they chose to hold back, caught off-guard by the military's public neutrality and extent of opposition rallying around Khasbulatov and Rutskoi.[63] Instead, the Presidential Administration chose not to put up "any heavy army or police cordons around the parliament building" and began to peacefully negotiate with parliament under the Russian Orthodox Church's mediation.[64] However, these negotiations eventually collapsed due to the beginning of armed attacks across Moscow by pro-parliament forces, namely paramilitary groups led by far-right figures like Albert Makashov.[65] By the morning of 4 October, these offensive actions, in particular the successful occupation of the mayor's office and the failed seizure of the Ostankino Television Center, had resulted in dozens of civilian deaths, which could be interpreted as ample justification for the Yeltsin administration to permit military intervention in order to protect Muscovite lives. Thus, it can be concluded that in the moment, Yeltsin's actions were justified and democratic, as they were done in response to an authoritarian threat to public safety. However, on a larger scale, the president's decision to apply force was highly damaging to Russia's democratic transition, escalating the institutional damage wrought by Ukase No. 1400.

[63] Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, 256.

[64] Ibid, 257.

[65] Although the investigation primarily focuses on President Yeltsin, per Figure A, I also take this development to be an autocratic one for the parliamentary authorities. It is unclear to what extent Khasbulatov or Rutskoi had any authority in the decision to attack, meaning that by that point, either the parliament had broken the taboo on violence by ordering around disorganized far-right militias to attack and seize civilian and governmental facilities, or it had become a completely inert institution, with Khasbulatov and Rutskoi merely going along with an already enraged crowd of rebels as violence escalated and parliamentary authority became moot to that of the Kalashnikov rifle.

Regardless, the result is the same: severe damage to democratic principles, including popular sovereignty, rule of law, compromise, and non-violence. For more, see: Hosking, *Russia and the Russians*, 593.

Stage Three: The Yeltsin Constitution

The December 1993 ratification by popular referendum of Yeltsin's preferred constitution, which made significant changes to the governmental order and the powers of the president, serves as the conclusion of the crisis and the ultimate achievement of the president's victory. Unsurprisingly, the result brought about significant political division across the Russian Federation. On a theoretical level, the Yeltsin Constitution was arguably a way to reestablish stability in the wake of the crisis, continue the process of creating democratic institutions, and build a reliable representative government. According to political scientist Timothy Colton, besides putting human and civil liberties into Russian law, the Yeltsin Constitution managed "to tie the state together and encode the norms of representative government, separation of powers, primacy of the president, and federalism," all formally non-authoritarian achievements.[66] However, critics in 1993 and the 21st century have pointed out severe flaws in the constitution's wording. For example, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev criticized the experts who drew up the basic law for including "a disproportionate expansion of the powers of the president, together with substantial cutting back of the powers of parliament."[67] Later on, political experts like Lilia Shevtsova echoed these sentiments, pointing out a balance of power so one-sided that it created a "super-presidential" order where Yeltsin, nearly impossible to impeach, was not the head of the executive branch but above all branches of government, thereby subverting the basic principles of democratic representative governance and rendering him an autocratic ruler.[68] In

[66] Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life*, 202.

[67] Mikhail Gorbachev, *The New Russia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 70.

[68] Lilia Shevtsova*, Russia, Lost in Transition: The Yeltsin and Putin Legacies* (Washington, D. C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), 17.

order to judge whether either of these sides is correct, however, it is necessary to look beyond the text and examine the political realities that arose with this constitution's implementation.

A Powerless Parliament and Unchecked President

On the one hand, criticism of Yeltsin's new constitutional order as autocratic has firm grounds in evidence. Firstly, with the aforementioned destruction of the parliament and the imposition of presidential rule, the entire drafting process was done largely by the Yeltsin administration with little to no input from other groups.[69] Secondly, the lack of clarity in detailing the role of the legislative branch by the writers of the constitution meant that mere months after the December 1993 elections, many legislators began to chafe under their lack of responsibilities and power within what increasingly seemed like a decorative Federation Council and Duma; even Yegor Gaidar, an ardently pro-Yeltsin politician, admitted after becoming a senator that "the role of the legislative organs… is extremely limited, even for a presidential republic."[70] With the president having so much oversight and the legislature having so few responsibilities, it can thus be argued that Yeltsin had created an authoritarian system where, as Gorbachev warned in his commentary, there would be no "strong democratic institutions to safeguard his policies against miscalculation."[71]

Such a miscalculation unfortunately emerged in reality through the First Chechen War of 1994-1996. While the Russian federal structure at the time was chaotic and peculiar, Chechnya, a small Russian Republic in the North Caucasus, was even more of an anomaly with its leader

[69] Michael McFaul, "The Russian Federation," 363.

[70] *Izvestiya*, January 20, 1994.

[71] Gorbachev, *The New Russia*, 70.

Dzhokar Dudayev having expelled Russian forces in 1991 and demanding full independence ever since.[72] In 1994, with parliamentary resistance suppressed, Yeltsin's administration finally decided to reassert control over Chechnya, but the president immediately chose to abandon negotiations and initiated an unsuccessful covert military operation in the breakaway republic. Afterwards, convinced by generals that an invasion would be short and by Defense Minister Pavel Grachev that "Grozny could be seized in two hours,"[73] Yeltsin utilized his now-institutionalized decree power to authorize "the army and the MVD to 'restore constitutional order'."[74] However, what was thought to be an easy victory turned into a protracted, brutal conflict, in which by April 1995, 25,000 civilians and 1,500 Russian soldiers had been killed.[75] The toll of war was so unpopular that at one point, 54 percent of Russians supported a military withdrawal, while only 27 percent supported the war effort.[76] Despite this popular wish for peace, Yeltsin pressed on until a ceasefire in late 1996, by which time he had won no victory and Chechnya remained out of federal control. In this way, the tragic example of the First Chechen War highlights how the Yeltsin Constitution amounted to an authoritarian consolidation of power, as the resulting lack of authority in

[72] Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia*, 110.

[73] Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Chechnya: Ten Years After -- The Logic Behind The First Chechen War," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 10, 2004, https://www.rferl.org/a/1056335.html.

[74] Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life*, 210.

[75] Ibid, 212.

[76] Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia*, 117.

parliament[77] and the executive's unchecked powers allowed him to wage war recklessly, independently of public opinion, and with no one powerful enough to stop the bloodshed.

Democracy at Work?

Despite the aforementioned case of Chechnya, one can still argue that civil democratic governance continued. While critics at the time were suspicious that the constitution would build Yeltsin a "throne of bayonets", Russian opposition in the legislature continued to play a major role in the country's development.[78] In essence, though not as confrontational or legally powerful as the Congress of People's Deputies and Supreme Soviet, the Duma and Federation Council still acted largely independently of the president. For example, in terms of ideological make-up, in the post-crisis parliamentary elections of December 1993, Russia's Choice, the democratic pro-Yeltsin party, obtained only 15 percent of the vote, while the anti-Yeltsin chauvinistic Liberal Democratic Party came in at first place with 23 percent, indicating that Yeltsin was not dictating the legislature's composition.[79] In turn, the Duma became dominated by senators, who "did not feel particularly indebted to the president when it came time to vote", deferring consideration of Yeltsin's chosen candidates for many positions and granting amnesty to Aleksandr Rutskoi and Ruslan Khasbulatov in 1994.[80]

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[77] Counterfactuals regarding what a more constitutionally powerful parliament might have done to stop Yeltsin's actions in 1994-96 are difficult to establish. Some options include: a vote of no confidence regarding Yeltsin's appointed Government, impeachment proceedings against Yeltsin himself (which were historically attempted but unsuccessful), and the passing of federal laws by the State Duma and Federation Council to end offensive operations in the Republic and initiate ceasefire or peace negotiations with Dudayev-aligned forces. Further consideration on the power that legislative bodies under different constitutional orders could have in ending armed conflict is ultimately out of the scope of this study.

[78] Colton, *Yeltsin: A Life*, 205.

[79] McCauley, "From Perestroika toward a New Order," 417.

[80] Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia*, 104.

Later on, during Yeltsin's second term, the post-1993 legislature was even able to force his hand on certain issues through its meager legislative powers. Most significantly, during the 1998 Russian Financial Crisis, the Duma used its power, which requires the approval of Yeltsin's appointments of Prime Ministers, by refusing to confirm the presidentially-preferred Viktor Chernomyrdin as the new head of government, instead strong-arming Yeltsin into nominating "Evgenii Primakov, the Foreign Minister, who was… politically neutral and a pragmatist but who also had an important past in the Communist Party."[81] Such moves by the parliament plainly illustrate that the president's constitution did not allow him to act with unchecked authority in all areas of governance. Consequently, a largely mixed picture is created, as while Yeltsin's constitution did allow him to secure authoritarian control in some respects, he was certainly unsuccessful in taking control of many other fields, leading to the continuation of a partially democratic legislative order at least up until Boris Yeltsin's resignation on December 31, 1999 in favor of Acting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

Conclusion

> "The tree of power in Russia has two roots: the roots of authoritarianism and of democracy, and this is very much in tune with Yeltsin himself."[82] - Gennady Burbulis, 1996

When Gennady Burbulis, a Yeltsin ally, said the above words to US journalist David Remnick in a 1996 interview, he was referring to Yeltsin's overall presidency up to that point, but this assertion is especially topical for the Constitutional Crisis of 1993, as Yeltsin's conduct in it was a perfect encapsulation of his contradictory rulership. From a general perspective, one can assume that

[81] Riasanovsky*, A History of Russia*, 656.

[82] David Remnick, *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 88.

Yeltsin, based on his Soviet political history and international standing, was pro-democracy. With the above stage-by-stage examination, that is partly valid, as his actions in the crisis, whether by intent or accident, did not lead to the creation of a totalitarian system. The trappings of democracy, however fragile and flawed after the old parliament's defeat, continued their formal functions. However, one cannot label Yeltsin a true democrat either, as his executive actions in the immediate crisis by and large consolidated presidential power and undermined key pillars of civil democratic rule. In retrospect, Yeltsin overstepped his authority, subverted the rule of law to destroy a governmental branch, used military force to sweep away opposition, and enforced a constitution that greatly expanded his own powers at the expense of stability and balance. Thus, analyzing the 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis, Yeltsin acted to some extent democratically, but he also acted to a larger extent to consolidate authoritarian power, even though his methods never gave him full control over Russia in the aftermath of the crisis.

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Words of War: Bush's Six Rhetorical Strategies to Regain Trust and Build Support for the Surge in Iraq

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Abstract

On January 10, 2007, President George W. Bush delivered a speech from the White House announcing the new surge strategy in Iraq. This strategy required additional troops to be deployed to the country, the beginning of various reconstruction efforts, and the adoption of counterinsurgency tactics. Since the War in Iraq was wildly unpopular among Americans at the time, Bush was faced with the task of convincing the American people this plan would work. In this paper, I analyze Bush's speech announcing the surge, focusing on six key rhetorical strategies and how Bush used them. In his speech, Bush emphasized the thoughtful nature of the decision to use force, created the enemy, brought the threat home, encouraged unity, tempered people's expectations, and took responsibility. These six strategies can be used to analyze wartime communication from presidents and to further understand how language can influence public opinion and trust.

Keywords: War in Iraq, George W Bush, Presidential Speech, Rhetoric

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All eyes are on the president during a time of war, magnifying the importance of their every word. A miscommunication could lead to widespread dissent and resistance to the war itself. Looking at the War in Iraq that followed the 2003 invasion and toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, President George W. Bush continuously made attempts to sway public opinion through his rhetoric. In the period immediately following 9/11, Bush was effective in using rhetoric to rally the nation and inspire Americans to persevere after the horrific attacks.[1] In the early stages of the Iraq War (2003 to 2006), Bush convinced the public that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), citing it as one of the main reasons to invade Iraq. It was later revealed that Bush had misrepresented information around the topic of WMD.[2]

By 2007, American support for the War in Iraq was dwindling. Significant failures in Iraq were public knowledge in the United States, including the torture scandal in Abu Ghraib and the failed elections that led to the civil war. These events were accompanied by an increasing death toll for both American soldiers and Iraqis. Before the announcement of the surge strategy, there were more Americans who believed the United States had made the wrong decision to invade Iraq than there were those who believed the war was justified.[3] Bush was met with low approval ratings, with only 37 percent approving of his job as president while his disapproval rating was 59 percent.[4]

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[1] Joshua Muravchik, "Two Cheers: Second Thoughts on the Bush Doctrine," *World Affairs* 171, no. 2 (2008): 58.

[2] Joshua Hill, Willard M. Oliver, and Nancy E. Marion, "'Shaping history' or 'Riding the wave'?: President Bush's influence on the public opinion of terrorism, homeland security, & crime," Journal of Criminal Justice 38, no. 5 (2010): 897, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2010.06.005.

[3] Carroll Doherty and Jocelyn Kiley, "A Look Back at How Fear and False Beliefs Bolstered U.S. Public Support for War in Iraq," Pew Research Center, March 14, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/03/14/a-look-back-at-how-fear-and-false-beliefs-bolstered-u-s-public-support-for-war-in-iraq/.

[4] "Presidential Approval Ratings -- George W. Bush," Gallup, https://news.gallup.com/poll/116500/presidential-approval-ratings-george-bush.aspx.

Despite the unpopular nature of the war and his low approval ratings, Bush opted to introduce the surge strategy in Iraq.

The surge strategy was adopted in Iraq beginning in 2007. It was a tremendous shift from the previous plan to achieve American goals in Iraq. The surge required a massive deployment of American troops, accompanied by various reconstruction efforts to improve Iraqi life, and, most critically, the uniform adoption of counterinsurgency operations focused on protecting the Iraqi population and legitimating its new government.[5] Counterinsurgency strategies were a complete reversal from existing tactics in Iraq at the time. Some of the major tactical shifts included living among and building relationships with Iraqis, working to secure areas of importance, and promoting reconciliation in the Iraqi population. In General David Petraeus's guidance on counterinsurgency strategy, he emphasized that the strategy employed would look drastically different, since the fight in Iraq was not one the military was equipped to deal with.[6]

Bush faced an uphill battle in convincing the American people of his choice to "double down" in Iraq rather than drawing back as planned. By the end of 2006, almost two thirds of Americans believed the War in Iraq was not going well.[7] Democrats gained 21 seats in the House during the 2006 midterm elections, reflecting that the people lost confidence in Bush's

[5] National Security Council, Highlights of the Iraq strategy review [PowerPoint slides], 2007 https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/78696.pdf.

[6] David Patraeus, "Multi-National Force-Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance," June 21, 2008, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/MR-Coin-Reader2/COIN2-Petraeus/

[7] Tom Rosentiel, "Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003-2008," Pew Research Center, March 19, 2008, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/.

administration.[8] In the midst of low approval ratings for his presidency and the War, on January 10, 2007, at 9PM, Bush delivered a 20-minute speech announcing and outlining the surge plan to the nation. In this nationally televised address, Bush stood in the White House library, next to a fireplace and many dimly lit bookshelves. He was calm and controlled as he explained his intended plan and reasoning for Iraq.[9] Naturally, this speech was Bush's opportunity to rally support for this plan. What rhetorical strategies did Bush employ in his speech announcing the troop surge in Iraq and what was the intended effect of those strategies?[10]

In Bush's 2007 speech announcing the surge in Iraq, he emphasized the thoughtful nature of the decision to use force, created the enemy, brought the threat home, encouraged unity, tempered the nation's expectations, and took responsibility for past miscalculations. Bush used these six rhetorical strategies to regain the people's trust and convince them of the eventual success of the surge strategy. These strategies work together and often overlap to support each other. By utilizing presidential wartime rhetoric in an intentional way, Bush was able to convey messages of hope provided by thoughtful solutions. He also acknowledged the past failings in Iraq in an effort to show people he understood their concerns. This paper will look into these six rhetorical strategies, providing historical examples of each. Next, I will apply these tactics to Bush's speech and discuss how he used them and why. The rhetorical framework used in this paper presents a tool to analyze wartime rhetoric for any president.

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[8] Carl Hulse, "On Wave of Voter Unrest, Democrats Take Control of House," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 8, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/08/us/politics/08house.html,

[9] George W. Bush, "President's Address to the Nation on the Surge" (speech, January 10, 2007).

[10] It can be difficult to determine the actual effect of a rhetorical act, so I have limited this paper to the intended impact of each rhetorical strategy. This serves as another way of looking at why Bush may have employed certain devices in this speech.

Emphasize Thoughtful Consideration

In wartime, presidents must communicate that their actions are the result of thoughtful deliberation. Military intervention has costly consequences, requiring presidents to carefully justify their decision to use force when it is necessary. If their decision appears to be the result of anger or rash thinking, they risk severe backlash and the loss of support from the American people. Additionally, presidents must emphasize that the use of force is a last resort and emphasize that they have exhausted all other means.[11] This communication strategy is often utilized throughout wartime speeches to assure the people that the country is fighting for the right reasons and that fighting is not the initial attempt to solve conflict.

When President Woodrow Wilson declared war on Germany in 1917, he stressed that this decision was made on rational grounds. "The choice we make for ourselves must be made with a moderation of council and a temperateness of judgment befitting our character and our motives as a nation. We must put excited feelings away."[12] Wilson posited that the war's rationality was reason enough to invest in it. On top of emphasizing thoughtful decision making, Wilson also reminded people to temper their feelings. Sending Americans into the life and death situation of war is not a matter of emotions—this rhetorical strategy addresses that framework.

In Bush's speech announcing the surge, he dedicated time early on to convey the pragmatic nature of the plan. Two minutes into his speech, he outlined all the parties involved in a "comprehensive review" of the new plan in Iraq, establishing credibility and painting the picture of the thoughtful, rational process used to craft the surge strategy. Bush mentioned his national

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[11] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," *in Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago, IL: *University of Chicago Press*, 2008), 222.

[12] Campbell and Jamieson, “Presidential War Rhetoric,” 222.

security team, military commanders, and diplomats as the principal agents conducting this review. Collectively, they consulted members of Congress from both parties, international allies, and outside experts, as well as the Iraq Study Group.[13] Bush conjured an image of dozens of people qualified in various areas that impacted the war reviewing and contributing to this plan. Bush ensured he had all his bases covered. The broad input gave the plan its credibility. By citing others, this credibility was derived from other entities outside the presidency.

Later in his speech, Bush again recognized military leaders for their consultation on the new surge strategy, stating, "Our military commanders … report that this plan can work."[14] By emphasizing the amount of time and review put towards the surge strategy, as well as the many sets of eyes that looked over the plan, Bush made it clear to the people that this was a well-thought- out decision. The amount of time translated to the implied rationality of the plan, since any irrational aspects of it would likely have been discussed by one of the many people contributing to the plan. Bush also avoided emotional language in these two parts of his speech to prevent the conclusion that he was sending troops into Iraq as an emotional response.

With a low approval rating of only 37 percent and a disapproval rating of 59 percent, Bush needed to work harder to gain the trust of the American people.[15] Bush made an effort to credit people outside of himself in hopes that the American people trusted those sources more, or at least trusted them corroborating with each other. For example, 73 percent of Americans were confident

[13] Bush, "President's Address."

[14] Ibid.

[15] “Presidential Approval,” Gallup.

in the military in 2006.[16] Therefore, a plan approved by military commanders was thought to garner more support from the people than a plan put forward by just Bush. By presenting the new surge strategy as consensus among many high level officials and experts, Bush distanced the strategy from his low approval ratings and presented it as the product of thoughtful deliberation. This deliberation was conducted by many and over a long enough period of time that the people could trust the plan, even if they did not trust Bush.

Another element of emphasizing the rationality of the decision to go to war is by clarifying that the use of force is a last resort. In 1812, Madison spoke of his work "to make every experiment short of the last resort."[17] When President George H. W. Bush announced the military action in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1991, he made it clear that the United States "exhausted every means at our disposal to bring this crisis to a peaceful end."[18] Framing war as a last resort can provide a sense of inevitability to the decision to send in troops. Once war is viewed as unavoidable, the only rational choice the United States can make is to fight. Madison and H. W. Bush made it clear that there was not another option forward at the time.

In the context of Bush's speech on the surge, there was already a war occurring in Iraq. He was uniquely advocating for an increase in force, rather than the declaration of a new war. However, Bush still employed the same rhetorical tactic of proving. Bush emphasized that the reason the United States had failed in Iraq so far was that there were not enough troops and that

[16] Mohamed Younis, "Confidence in U.S. Military Lowest in over Two Decades," Gallup, July 31, 2023, https://news.gallup.com/poll/509189/confidence-military-lowest-two-decades.aspx.

[17] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 224.

[18] Ibid.

there were too many restrictions on the troops they did have.[19] By highlighting the lack of troops as the principal cause of failure thus far in Iraq, Bush made the case that increasing force is the only way to succeed in Iraq and thus the most rational decision to make.

Sending more troops to fight in an unpopular and failing war was not an ideal situation. In this speech, it was incredibly important for Bush to justify that decision, and assure the people that this increase in force will be necessary for success. Part of that justification required proving to Americans that this plan was rational and worthy of their trust, which Bush did by citing outside sources and demonstrating that increasing force was a last resort.

Create the Enemy

A rhetorical strategy Bush heavily employs in this speech is creating the enemy.[20] This enemy must be thwarted at all costs.[21] Typically, this enemy is labelled as "evil," allowing the president to depict the United States as "good" by opposition. A simplification of the world into "good versus evil" is a necessary step in the use of this rhetorical strategy. By identifying this enemy, a president can easily demonstrate why war is necessary to eradicate them.[22]

Robert Ivie and Oscar Giner's idea of the "rhetoric of evil" describes how presidents characterize the enemy. The pair describe the rhetoric of evil as a motive for protecting democracy by creating an external enemy and projecting evilness onto that enemy. Then the United States is

[19] Bush, "President's Address."

[20] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 224.

[21] Ibid, 226-228.

[22] Robert L. Ivie and Oscar Giner, “Hunting the Devil: Democracy’s Rhetorical Impulse to War,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007), https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552279.

able to position itself as a savior or avenger ready to defeat all evil.[23] Oftentimes, this projection of evil strips the enemy of any personhood and justifies any necessary action against them. In a speech at a 2002 fundraiser, Bush discussed the enemy in Iraq as "an enemy who sends young men to die on suicide missions and they, themselves, try to hide in caves."[24] Bush used this strong characterization of the enemy to demonstrate how evil they were. Evil cannot be fully defined objectively, a complication articulated by philosopher Susan Neiman.[25] Since evil exists more as an idea, characterizing the enemy as evil makes that enemy an idea as well. Once the enemy is an idea, unpersonified, it becomes easier for many to justify any means to crush that evil.

When constructing this evil, presidents are subscribing to a black and white world view. This enemy must embody a clear-cut and absolute evil.[26] This intentionally strips nuance from the discussion to make sure force can be justified.

Public opinion is a malleable resource—one the president exerts great control over.[27] Ivie states that Bush's profile of terrorism was the most influential factor in conveying the danger in Iraq, regardless of its accuracy.[28] By employing this faceless evil tactic, Bush created a caricature

[23] Ivie and Giner, "Hunting the Devil."

[24] Ibid.

[25] Caryn D. Riswold, "The Rhetoric of Evil and Eradicating Terrorism," in *Religion, Terror and Violence: Religious Studies Perspectives,* ed. Philip L. Tite and Bryan S. Rennie (New York: *Routledge*, 2008), 73.

[26] Riswold, "The Rhetoric," 67.

[27] Hill, Oliver, and Marion, "'Shaping history,'" 896.

[28] Robert L. Ivie, “Fighting Terror,” in Democracy and America's War on Terror (Tuscaloosa, AL*: University of Alabama Press*, 2005), 127.

of the terrorists as the personification of evil.[29] He was able to use this caricature throughout the War in Iraq, as it became familiar to the American people.

During his speech announcing the surge, Bush was careful to characterize the enemy. Since the surge plan involved working with Iraqis, Bush used precise language to separate Iraqis from the insurgents. Bush still employed the rhetoric of evil to describe the enemy, referring to them as "radical Islamic extremists," "killers," "murderers," "terrorists," and "without conscience."[30] These characterizations painted the enemy as an absolute evil. Describing the enemy as "without conscience" implied that they would do all within their ability to achieve their goals, regardless of the damage they might inflict. The enemy were "extremists" and would resort to drastic measures to advance their beliefs. The enemy had already proven they were killers and have no regard for life, making it easier to justify action to wipe them out. All these terms painted a portrait of the enemy in Iraq as purely evil.

At the same time, he emphasized that "most of Iraq's Sunni and Shia want to live together in peace."[31] While using the strategy of creating the enemy, Bush was careful to make sure the enemy was not perceived to be Iraqis as a whole. Bush also promised that in a matter of time, this plan would lead to the American people seeing "Iraqi troops chasing down murderers."[32] This final quote separated Iraqis from the terrorists, while also showing that Iraqis would be the ones to help the United States achieve its goals. Here, Bush was still characterizing the enemy by their disregard

[29] Ibid, 129

[30] Bush, "President's Address."

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

for life—an obviously evil trait. By using this specific language for the enemy, Bush was able to construct the narrative that they were ruthless, heartless, and without any remorse.

In his speech, Bush creates a clear enemy, characterizes that enemy as evil, and distinguishes them from the Iraqis the US would ally with. This characterization of the enemy served to justify the increase in forces to Americans.

Bring the Threat Home

Another important rhetorical strategy used by Bush was bringing the threat abroad home. It is important for presidents to convey the enemy as a threat to the nation directly. This allows the people to see why that enemy must be defeated.[33] Preceding the War of 1812, Madison called Great Britain's actions "hostile to the United States as an independent and neutral nation."[34] Madison articulated how the enemy threatened the United States directly. Americans would not want the nation to sit idly by while another country threatens their existence. Bringing the threat home highlights the stakes for everyday Americans.

This threat can be both physical, as in direct attacks on US soil, and ideological. Since the United States was founded on ideals of freedom and liberty, when an outside force threatens those values, they are also framed as posing a threat to the nation. At the beginning of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln said, "this issue embraces more than the fate of these United States."[35] Lincoln was emphasizing that the Civil War implicated the fate of the country, but also extended

[33] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 224

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid, 225.

beyond that. Since the ideal of freedom was threatened in this conflict, failure would not only result in dire consequences for the US, but also the morals and values of its people.

When discussing a war across the globe, this strategy helped Bush convey the stakes of the War in Iraq to the people. Throughout his speech, Bush sold the story that United States security was tied to success in Iraq. Part of this story was achieved through the characterization of the enemy as a complete evil, as discussed in depth earlier. While the faceless, yet ruthlessly evil, enemy raised the stakes, Bush continued to introduce risk by citing times when enemies abroad have brought conflict to the United States. Of course, Bush discussed 9/11 as a clear example of how those across the world can harm Americans: "We saw what a refuge for extremists on the other side of the world could bring to the streets of our own cities".[36] Americans still deeply felt the emotional pain and trauma of 9/11. There was immense power in making this reference given the timing of the conflict. The thought of another 9/11, especially less than a decade after the attack, was terrifying to many. By implying that failure in Iraq could leave the United States vulnerable to more terror attacks, Bush was able to better support his decision to continue the fight in Iraq.

Bush repeatedly mentioned that failure in Iraq poses a threat to the "security" and "safety" of those in the United States.[37] No American would want to risk their security. By underscoring that success in Iraq was essential to achieving safety, Bush was able to align success in Iraq with the goals of Americans at home. With those goals aligned, it became more likely that the people would support this new strategy in Iraq.

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[36] Bush, "President's Address."

[37] Ibid.

In addition to posing extremists in Iraq as a threat to the United States, Bush also rhetorically framed this war as "the decisive ideological struggle of our time."[38] The enemy Bush had created was a threat to the United States, as well as to the future of freedom and democracy. The threat in Iraq was faced on an ideological front. Bush made it clear that Americans were fighting for their safety as well as their ideals.

By bringing the threat home, Bush made the stakes of this war clear to the American people. He made sure to illustrate that there was a direct threat to the United States in the form of possible future attacks. Additionally, there was an ideological threat, since the enemy was fighting against freedom and democracy. This strategy was intended to garner support for the war by relating it to the lives and values of everyday Americans.

Encourage Unity

Another important feature of wartime rhetoric is encouraging unity. War is far more easily pursued when it is met with public endorsement. After creating the enemy as pure evil, the president can unite the people against that enemy. From a rhetorical perspective, this is done by creating and positioning the audience. Presidents make it clear that they are speaking to an audience of united citizens who are all fighting to protect themselves and their values.[39]

In 1966 during the Vietnam War, President Lyndon Johnson urged people to "put away all the childish divisive things" and reminded the country that "the men fighting in Vietnam are simply Americans."[40] The United States has always been divided along political lines, dating as far back

[38] Ibid.

[39] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 231.

[40] Ibid, 232.

as its founding. A strong two-party system characterizes our politics and there is abundant conflict between these parties both in and out of government. In wartime, it is incredibly important to bypass these divisions and get the people to work collectively towards the war effort. Uniting the country under the banner of Americanism and American values is powerful in war, since the conflict is often against those who oppose those values. Regardless of party affiliation, presidents can unite Americans using the values of freedom and liberty.

"Let us be united for peace," said President Richard Nixon in 1969, referring to the Vietnam War. "Let us be united against defeat."[41] The unity required for this rhetorical strategy can also be derived from sources outside of the American identity, including the desire for peace and the desire for the conflict to come to a successful conclusion.[42] Uniting people for peace can be effective since almost anyone can get behind ending the fighting.

This strategy of encouraging unity often uses the enemy created in the strategy discussed above as a source of that unity. By positioning the enemy as evil personified, the United States is able to view itself as a "chosen people" capable of defeating said evil.[43] Since wartime rhetoric operates in a binary world view, Americans will elect to be part of the good side, at least from their perspective of the conflict. If a president is unable to unite the people for something, like the values discussed earlier, they can attempt to unite against the enemy. Unity can be achieved by emphasizing the "us versus them" mentality derived from the "good versus evil" that presidents create when constructing the enemy.

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 232.

[43] Ivie and Giner, "Hunting the Devil."

Bush crafted his audience as "fellow citizens" and the "American people." Here he was uniting them under a common identity. Bush built his audience as the people—the same people who voted him into office years earlier. The rhetorical act of making the audience "the people" revealed some of Bush's goals in this speech. He was not just communicating this plan, but trying to win back the trust and support of the public. He repeatedly used "our" and "we," uniting the audience under these pronouns. Bush used "we" a total of 46 times in this speech and "our" 45 times.[44] These first person plural pronouns served to reinforce the shared identity Bush explicitly named. Additionally, Bush was able to easily distinguish between his audience and the enemy they face using this language.

He particularly gravitated towards these first person plural pronouns when discussing the military. By referring to them as "our troops" he was reminding the audience that they had a stake in military involvement in Iraq. He also used these pronouns to refer to the safety of the American people and objectives of the plan.[45] By using these first person plural pronouns, Bush was fostering a sense of trust and solidarity. He grouped himself in with the audience, making it clear that he was working towards the same goals the people wanted. He frequently used the phrase "we will" to assertively outline the plan, conveying his confidence in the eventual success of this strategy.[46]

Linguistically unifying the audience equipped Bush with the tools to create an "us versus them" dynamic in his speech, which reinforced the "good versus evil" dichotomy he had established when creating the enemy. "On one side are those who believe in freedom and

[44] Bush, "President's Address."

[45] Bush, "President's Address."

[46] Ibid.

moderation," declared Bush. "On the other side are extremists who kill the innocent, and have declared their intention to destroy our way of life."[47] These two sentences serve as an example of these rhetorical strategies working together to achieve Bush's goals. Bush explicitly articulated what the United States was fighting against in this war and made an attempt to unify against the enemy. He continued his characterization of the enemy as evil and positioned the United States as the side supporting freedom.

By harkening to the core values of the nation, Bush was able to unite the audience under the tenets they all subscribe to. Again, Bush brought the threat of the enemy home by reminding the audience that these people were trying to "destroy our way of life."[48] The first person plural pronoun does some of the work of unifying the audience in this sentence. Positioning the destruction of the American way of life as an objective for the enemy also works to unify the audience. The audience was presented with two options: continue to fight or lose the life they have. Bush was encouraging his audience to understand the impacts of failure and unite behind a shared love of freedom and the lifestyle it provides. At the same time, he was uniting them against this enemy that would stop at nothing to destroy them. Mentioning that the enemy "kill[s] the innocent" here furthered the narrative that Bush built in this speech.[49] Creating this juxtaposition between freedom and murder as the two sides of this war made it easier for Americans to support the effort.

As part of the development of the surge strategy, Bush discussed a "bipartisan working group" in Congress that would bring the country "together across party lines to win the war on

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

terror."[50] This group was tasked with ensuring the United States was set up to succeed in the war. Not only was Bush unifying the people through his language, he was explicitly unifying the government they are under. This new working group set an example for the people. Those who may not have rallied behind Bush for political reasons could now look to leaders in their own party and see that unity was the way forward. Creating this bipartisan group under his plan reflects unity across areas of American life in a way that is essential for successful wartime rhetoric. Bush was conveying that the objectives in Iraq were so essential to the United States that they demand bipartisan support.

Encouraging unity is essential in wartime rhetoric. Without the support of the nation, presidents face severe consequences for going to war. Bush attempted to inspire unity in his speech by uniting the people under Americanism, for American values, and against the evil enemy. The intended effect of this is to create a populus that supports the war effort.

Temper Expectations

While Bush mostly followed conventions with presidential rhetoric in his speech, he avoided using Campbell and Jameison's strategy of "strategic misrepresentation."[51] Bush instead spent his time tempering people's expectations and taking a very honest approach with the American people. The uniqueness of the War in Iraq allowed Bush to vary his rhetorical strategy from those used by other presidents.

Presidents have unique access to military and intelligence sources, allowing them to selectively reveal information to the public. They then have the ability to use these

[50] Ibid.

[51] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 246.

misrepresentations in a way that serves their objectives. Campbell and Jamieson acknowledge that no rhetorical act can be entirely truthful. There is always some perspective involved or some information left out.[52] Since unity is so important in times of war, presidents may omit certain information that could lead people to break into factions or oppose the war. Presidents have an incentive to represent the situation in the best possible way to channel support. There is also historically an inherent level of trust between the American people and the president. Presidents can take advantage of this trust in wartime by stretching the truth and saying what they want the people to believe. By assertively stating misrepresentations, presidents can use their position and tone to sell these statements as the truth.[53] In his speech announcing the surge, Bush pulled away from this strategy, despite using it in the earlier stages of the War in Iraq.

Before invading, Bush convinced many people that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD.[54] While evidence began to surface that the claim was untrue, most of this evidence remained private until later on in the war. The secret nature of this information gave Bush the ability to double down on his statements and continue to insist that Hussein was developing WMD.[55] Bush's misrepresentation surrounding WMD was so effective that 69 percent of Americans believed Hussain had WMD in June of 2003.[56] By 2005, that number only dropped to 40 percent, meaning

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[52] Ibid, 242.

[53] Campbell and Jamieson, "Presidential War Rhetoric," 241-242.

[54] Hill, Oliver, and Marion, "'Shaping history,'" 897; John Anthony Maltese, "Communications Strategies in the Bush White House," in *Assessing the George W. Bush Presidency: A Tale of Two Terms*, ed. Andrew Wroe and Jon Herbert (*Edinburgh University Press*, 2009), 230, https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748627400.003.0014.

[55] Hill, Oliver, and Marion, "'Shaping history,'" 897.

[56] Dina Smeltz, "With 20-Year Hindsight, Public Opinion and the Iraq War," *The Chicago Council on Global*

Affairs, March 24, 2023, https://globalaffairs.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/20-year-hindsight-public-opinion-and-iraq-war.

more than half of those who accepted Bush's rhetoric before the War in Iraq still believed him.[57] This clearly illustrates that the American people have a base level of trust in the president and what they say.

Despite the strategy of misrepresentation in Bush's past rhetoric around Iraq, he was shockingly candid in his speech announcing the surge. Bush made a point throughout the speech to remind the American people that this surge plan would not be an instant solution. He was clear that there was no magic formula for Iraq.[58] He corroborated this statement by saying that his advisors all agreed. The comprehensive review conducted on the Iraq strategy—meaning those outside of just Bush—had also reached the conclusion that there was not an easy solution in this war. By tempering expectations of America's future involvement in Iraq, and emphasizing that many experts had reached the same conclusion, Bush was taking an incredibly honest approach with the people. He was not hiding the fact that this would not instantly be successful. Instead, he stated it upfront in an attempt to gain the trust of his audience.

He took time to acknowledge that the surge would not "yield and immediate end to suicide bombings, assassinations, or IED attacks."[59] Bush delivered the bad news of this plan right from the start. As the president, Bush is the first person people would blame if this plan went wrong; making an attempt to align their expectations with the reality of Iraq.

Finally, Bush made an effort to temper expectations on what success would look like. "Victory will not look like the ones our fathers and grandfathers achieved." said Bush, "There will

[57] Maltese, "Communication Strategies," 230.

[58] Bush, "President's Address."

[59] Bush, “President’s Address.”

be no surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship."[60] Bush was honest about every phase of this new plan. He avoided misrepresenting how this war would pan out.

While this tactic is atypical of presidential wartime rhetoric, Bush's situation called for this honesty with the people. By the time he was announcing the surge, the public was aware that he had lied about WMD in Iraq to justify the invasion, and many journalists had criticized him for it.[61] Additionally, the Senate launched a probe into those false claims.[62] The consequences of failed misrepresentation were clear to Bush—he had already faced that intense backlash. Another consequence of his previous lies was a loss of trust. By October 2006, the percentage of Americans who trusted the government fell to only 29 percent.[63] Bush would likely not have been able to pull off a lie since the people no longer trusted him. With low approval ratings, a lack of trust from the people, and an approaching end of his second term, Bush essentially had nothing to lose by being honest and much to gain by managing expectations. By presenting the bad news up front, he could potentially regain American's trust, or at least avoid it eroding further.

Bush also made an effort to point out when the enemy might try to use misrepresentations, tempering their expectations further. He warned Americans not to believe what they see on TV as the surge strategy begins. "Our enemies in Iraq will make every effort to ensure that our television

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Susan Webb, "In Slap at Bush, Senate to Probe WMD Lies," *People's Weekly World*, February 27, 2004, ProQuest Ebook Central; Clarence Page, "No outright lies, just half-truths: Cleaning up Bush's uranium fumble," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL), July 16, 2003, https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/in-slap-at-bush-senate-to-probe-wmd-lies/.

[62] Webb, “In Slap at Bush.”

[63] “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024,” Pew Research Center, June 24, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/.

screens are filled with images of death and suffering," he cautioned.[64] Bush had an understanding of the power of misrepresentation. By warning the people of potential misinformation coming from Iraq, he was attempting to undermine those efforts from the enemy. This also appears as an effort for Bush to earn more credibility with the people.

Bush's situation as an unpopular president led to him deviating from the tactic of misrepresenting information to his benefit. Given his low support and the lack of trust the American people held in government, Bush was likely to benefit from just being honest. By tempering expectations at the initial stage of the strategy, Bush put himself in a better position in the future. The intent of this strategy was to prove to the American people that they could trust Bush.

Take Responsibility

Inevitably, presidents will fail or make the wrong choices during their administration. Typically, presidents avoid admitting mistakes, viewing that as a sign of weakness.[65] However, there are some blunders so massive that they require a well crafted apology from the president. There are many examples outside of wartime communication of presidents taking responsibility for failings during their administration. For the people to accept a president's apology, it must be viewed as genuine and the president should show remorse. Their words must be credible and believable, and often they need to show a clear path forward that is marked by a change in

[64] Bush, "President's Address."

[65] Steve Holland, "Obama Admission of Mistake Rare for Presidents," Reuters, February 4, 2009, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/obama-admission-of-mistake-rare-for-presidents-idUSTRE51371Q/.

behavior.[66] If a president is able to deliver a successful apology, they can regain the support of the people. An unsuccessful apology can plague a president and end their political career.

Nixon failed to take responsibility during the Watergate scandal. After firing three of his top aides, Nixon declared a fresh start and vowed to find all those responsible for Watergate. This ended up being a lie, undermining his credibility and therefore his attempt at accountability.[67] Nixon's apology failed because he did not come forward with the full truth, instead choosing to employ a new lie to cover his tracks.

President Bill Clinton, on the other hand, delivered a successful apology to the American people for misrepresenting his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. Following the speech in 1998 where Clinton admitted his relationship with the intern, there was a loss in public support for the impeachment proceedings against him. Most viewed Clinton's remorse as quite genuine and overall, the Clinton administration remained popular.[68] Since Clinton's apology was truthful, honest, and authentic, people decided to accept it.

Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba in 1961, President John F. Kennedy successfully took accountability for the defeat. In a press conference, he said "I am the responsible officer of the government," explicitly taking responsibility for the failings that occurred in the Bay

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[66] David Greenberg, "The Goal: Admitting Failure, Without Being a Failure," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/weekinreview/14green.html.

[67] Greenberg, "The Goal."

[68] Greenberg, “The Goal.”

of Pigs invasion. As a result, Kennedy's popularity remained high.[69] By placing the blame on himself, he was able to portray his apology as the product of self-awareness and reflection.

In his speech announcing the surge, Bush took the time to apologize to the American people for the failures in Iraq. He said:

> The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people—and it is unacceptable to me. Our troops in Iraq have fought bravely. They have done everything we have asked them to do. Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me.[70]

There were a few ways Bush took responsibility in this statement. First, he aligned his perspective with the American people. First person plural pronouns assist Bush in this task, similar to the way they function when he created unity, as discussed earlier. He acknowledged that they find the situation in Iraq to be unacceptable, then he added that he too finds this to be the case. This alignment of perspective works to build trust and credibility for Bush—an essential component for a successful presidential apology.

In addition to working to build his own credibility, Bush praised the soldiers in Iraq. He made it clear that he did not take their service for granted. He explicitly states that these soldiers were not the ones to blame for failures in Iraq. Bush confirmed the military was not the enemy in this instance. He absolved members of the military stationed in Iraq of responsibility for the state of the war. Bush understood his role as commander in chief, acknowledged that people were acting under his orders, and accepted that the blame is on him.

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Bush, "President's Address."

In this statement, Bush explicitly took responsibility for mistakes in Iraq. Bush avoided placing fault on the military or his advisors, which he could have easily done as a means to avoid his own culpability. When looking at this apology in the context of Bush's low approval ratings, it can be interpreted as an effort to gain back support. By taking full responsibility and not placing blame on anyone else, Bush's apology appeared more genuine. To earn back the American people's trust after the failures in Iraq, Bush needed this apology to be successful and therefore he needed to take responsibility.

Conclusion

The surge is a fascinating moment in American history. The United States was involved in an incredibly unpopular war, and had thus far been quite unsuccessful achieving most of its goals in Iraq. Death tolls were rising, a bloody civil war and powerful insurgency were raging in Iraq, and anti-American influences were meddling in the nation. Most seriously Al Qaeda, which had been present only in a very limited way in the country prior to 2003, was the most powerful American opponent in Iraq. American lives were at stake, Iraq's future was at stake, and Bush's legacy was at stake. Adopting a new strategy that involved sending more troops to Iraq to conduct a counterinsurgency, a set of tasks and approaches to conflict that was foreign to both the American people and the US military, was a massive risk. Examining Bush's speech announcing this new strategy can provide insight into how he attempted to sell the surge to the people. Through the careful use of six key rhetorical strategies—emphasizing thoughtful consideration, creating the enemy, bringing the threat home, encouraging unity, tempering expectations, and taking responsibility—Bush attempted to rebuild trust with the American people and gain support for this new strategy in Iraq.

These six strategies present a framework through which we can analyze wartime communication and understand how presidents adapt based on the public perception of their administration and their unique political situation. Bush's speech announcing the surge is a great example of an unprecedented time in American history and how a president can craft their language to communicate with the people.

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Keeping Her Voice Alive: A Feminist Perspective on the Taliban's Treatment of Afghan Women

By: Lauren Kral[·]

Abstract

This paper explores the Taliban's treatment of women in Afghanistan, focusing on the relevant factors that led to their current conditions. Using a feminist perspective to analyze the situation, this paper explains the rise of the Taliban from the Afghan Civil War to the current day, covering the current state of women's rights. Next, the paper explores elements—including cultural and governmental—that led to the deterioration of women's rights and lack of action by specifically looking at the influence of Pashtunwali law and cultural norms from the Taliban's ideology. Using Cynthia Enloe's four questions to highlight the experiences of women, this paper explains the various ideologies and how they affect women and are perpetuated by interested groups. Finally, this paper concludes by explaining the different aspects of the situation that need to be considered to create an effective solution towards ending women's oppression in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Taliban, Feminist IR Theory, Pashtunwali, Women's Rights

Lauren Kral is a junior at the George Washington University majoring in Political Science and Peace Studies. She is the president of Kappa Alpha Theta and a member of the International Affairs Society. She has interests in comparative politics and is currently writing a paper on the threat of foreign nationals to Syrian security and stability. She currently works as a Legislative Intern for the U.S. House of Representatives and previously served as a Political Affairs Intern for The Borgen Project and as an Education and Engagement Intern for Citizens' Climate Lobby. She aspires to work on creating domestic policy and legislation for Congress on international issues, hoping to bring a wider understanding of different ideologies into policy discussions.

After the United States pulled out of Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban quickly took over and imposed an authoritarian state. They imposed extreme restrictions on women, limiting their rights and freedoms to unprecedented lengths. International outcry has called for foreign powers or international organizations to step in and stop these human rights violations, but nothing has been able to stop the Taliban from continuing to oppress women. For progress to be made in restoring the freedoms of Afghan women, feminist international relations (IR) theory must be used to analyze the current conflict and all possible solutions to ensure women are at the forefront of any solution.

Understanding Taliban Ideology and Women

Islam has long been the dominant religion in Afghanistan, with 99% of today's Afghan population identifying as Muslim.[1] Throughout modern history, local and religious affiliations have consistently been a stronger authority over the Afghan people than central and state authority. In 1992, with the collapse of the Soviet Union-backed government, the country was plunged into civil war. The Afghan Civil War is often considered the bloodiest and most destructive period in Afghan history, despite only lasting 4 years.[2] The limited state authority infrastructure that was already in place was largely destroyed, and violence became rampant. Due to the vacuum in political power, the Taliban movement rose and became a powerful force in the civil war.

The Taliban movement was born in Islamic schools and among Afghan refugees within refugee camps in Pakistan. The Taliban's specific branch of extremist Islam, known as Salafi

[1] Seran de Leede, "Afghan Women and the Taliban: An Exploratory Assessment," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, (2014): 2.

[2] Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims, “Unfulfilled Promises: Women and Peace in Post-Taliban Afghanistan.” *International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 62, no. 3 (2007): 644.

Jihadism, holds that "true" Muslims have a religious duty to kill or physically harm all non-properly practicing Muslims and non-Muslims.[3] With Salafi Jihadism, the Taliban also incorporates Pashtunwali tribal principles, which enforce a strict honor code for women. Pashtunwali principles are widely practiced in Afghanistan, with 40 to 60 percent of the population identifying as Pashtun.[4] Their culture greatly influences Afghan law and revolves around conforming to societal norms and preventing a loss of honor.[5] This selective interpretation of Islam and the principles of culture became the basis of Taliban ideology, making it unique from other Islamic terrorist organizations, like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State.[6] The Taliban slowly built a popular base by fighting local criminals, who harassed women and were able to establish a base in the south of Afghanistan.[7] Gradually, the Taliban increased their control over Afghanistan until they took over Kabul in 1996, where they enforced a strict interpretation of Sharia law, which closed schools for girls, banned women from working outside the home, and forced them to cover their faces and bodies in public at all times.[8] Eventually, the Taliban had almost complete control in the south of the country, while in other regions, they were unable to establish complete control due to ideological differences.

After the events of September 11, 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom began reclaiming territory in Afghanistan towards the north of Kabul. The Taliban quickly fell, and a new president

[3] Katherine Zimmerman, "Understanding the Salafi-Jihadi Movement, in America's Real Enemy: The Salafi-Jihadi Movement," American Enterprise Institute, (2017): 7.

[4] Hamid M. Khan, "Islamic Law, Customary Law, and Afghan Informal Justice," United States Institute of Peace, (2015): 2.

[5] Khan, "Islamic Law, Customary Law" 3.

[6] Assaf Moghadam, "The Salafi-Jihad as a Religious Ideology," Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, (2008).

[7] de Leede, "Afghan Women and the Taliban," 4.

[8] Ibid.

was put in place and later elected. The Taliban defeat in 2001 gave women new opportunities and brought a greater focus from human rights organizations toward the mistreatment that they had faced. Women gained more political representation and were able to rejoin the workforce.[9] Despite rollbacks on restrictions against them, women still faced pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. Women who spoke out against oppression were often met with violence and the target of threats and attacks, much of which came from the belief that they were supporting Western interests, something many people in the region found concerning due to the country's long history of colonization.[10]

Since 2005 the Taliban have continued to rise in strength again, largely due to a lack of international attention and insecurity in Afghanistan, particularly in the south, which has led to instability and civilians facing violence. The Taliban's resurgence has continued to affect women and harm their position in society. After fighting the Taliban for over 2 decades, the US finally decided to withdraw troops from the region in 2020, signing the Doha agreement (formally the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan) with the Taliban regarding the specifics and safe removal of US troops, as well as various assurances of security for both groups.[11] Since the final withdrawal of American forces in 2021, the Taliban have taken control of Kabul and installed an extremist, authoritarian government in Afghanistan. This has led to a wide variety of restrictions being reimposed on women. These restrictions include modesty standards, bans on secondary or higher education, bans on women in a variety of workplaces, and more.[12] All of these bans are

[9] de Leede, “Afghan Women and the Taliban,” 5.

[10] Farhoumand-Sims, “Unfulfilled Promises”, 647.

[11] U.S. Department of State, “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” (2020).

[12] United States Institute of Peace (USIP), “Tracking the Taliban’s (Mis)Treatment of Women,” (2024).

enforced by the government's morality police, which are known to use "threats, arbitrary arrests, and detentions".[13] Through their restrictions, the Taliban's treatment has not only attacked women physically but also left them without access to education, independence, money, and freedom. Additionally, the Taliban's treatment of women is well known to the international community in different forms, such as through the human rights reporting of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.[14] Overall, the Taliban's human rights abuses towards women have been documented over decades, with clear evidence showing what restrictions could be put into place in the event of a Taliban-controlled state.

Explaining the Deterioration of Women's Rights

In the current state of Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, women are being left with no assistance from the international community or from any other group that could offer them support. The lack of support, despite significant media coverage of the situation, begs the question: Why is no one in the international community doing anything to address the situation? Time and time again, the international community has been unable to protect women's rights in Afghanistan because they do not understand the necessary factors at play when proposing solutions. Feminist IR theory explains how actors rarely consider the specific security issues that affect women when addressing solutions. It explains how IR solutions will usually look exclusively at physical and military security, neglecting the cultural, health, and community security of women.[15] This leads to

[13] The Associated Press, "The Taliban's Morality Police Are Contributing to a Climate of Fear Among Afghans, UN Says," (2024).

[14] United Nations, "United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan," United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, (2024).

[15] J.A. Tickner and Laura Sjoberg, “Feminism,” in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 5th ed., ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 188.

solutions that don't have a lasting impact or that end up backfiring and making conditions worse for women. Feminism-first suggests looking at international conflicts with a stronger emphasis on the issues of women, so that one can begin to understand how a situation can affect women vastly differently than men. When looking at Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, one must look into the current position of women, what got them there, and the different power structures that keep the system in place. Using feminist IR theory, specifically Cynthia Enloe's guiding questions, can help highlight the circumstances that women face that are unique and often ignored. As a foundational piece of feminist IR theory, Cynthia Enloe's questions can be used to assess the position of women within the ongoing conflict, which can help provide additional context when it comes to finding a solution.

Where are the women?

In Taliban ideology, women are below men in society. A variety of political structures help enforce these ideas. Women are less likely to be in the workforce than men, with Afghanistan having one of the world's lowest percentages of women in the workforce at 22 percent in 2019.[16] This number has significantly dropped since then due to the barring of women in many workplaces by the Taliban, and even those who are still allowed to work are not able to make more than 5,000 AFN (about 73 USD) a month, a fraction of the cost of living in Afghanistan.[17] By barring women from working and lowering their salaries, the Taliban removes women's ability to gain economic freedom for themselves and their families. It traps them in situations where they are reliant on male relatives and husbands, giving them no ability to leave abusive marriages, achieve upward

[16] Clara Albrecht, Britta Rude, and Tanja Stitteneder, "Women in Afghanistan: Developments over the Last 20 Years and the Return of the Taliban," CESifo Forum, (2022): 58.

[17] United States Institute of Peace, “Tracking the Taliban’s (Mis)Treatment of Women,” (2024).

economic mobility, or have any sense of personal freedom. Outside of economic prosperity, women are barred from educational forums due to the Taliban's ban on secondary and higher education for women.[18] This ban stops girls from attending school after the sixth grade and blocks them from entering more exclusive fields. Additionally, women have recently been barred from receiving healthcare from male doctors and from going to medical school, which has left women without access to medical care, contributing to soaring female mortality rates among infants and women giving birth.[19] While there has been limited permission for women to learn to be nurses and midwives, this allowance has not solved the doctor shortage in Afghanistan, nor has it helped contribute to better standing for women in health care.[20] Overall, women have been placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Afghanistan, with a variety of laws and mandates enforcing that place in society.

How did they get there?

Aside from the laws and mandates that put women at the bottom of society, there are also significant Pashtunwali social norms that enforce women's position through longstanding societal beliefs. Even before Taliban rule, the Pashtun people have been an influential ethnic group in the Pakistan and Afghanistan region.[21] As a group, they trace their roots back to the first and second millennia, long before the spread of Islam. Within their community, there is a large emphasis on conforming to the norms and acting with honor, especially as observed by other Pashtuns. When

[18] USIP, "Tracking."

[19] Mustafa Basij-Rasikh and Alyssa Sharkey, "Outlasting the Taliban's Ban on Women's Medical Education," Think Global Health, (2024).

[20] USIP, "Tracking."

[21] de Leede, “Afghan Women and the Taliban,” 2.

one is observing Pashtunwali, or "the way of the Pashtuns," they are considered to be building up their honor.[22] Therefore, Pashtun society's motivations are aimed at how one can accrue honor and avoid negating or losing honor. However, it is widely accepted in standard Pashtunwali that while men can accrue and negate honor, women can only negate it, and their sense of honor is interdependent with the males caring for them.[23] As a result, when a woman does something that negates her honor, it also negates the honor of her husband, brother, father, and other male figures in her household, so many of the norms imposed on women aim to prevent a loss of honor. Combined with the principles of Islam, this concept forms the basis for many of the principles of Pashtun-Afghan society, where the Pashtun people have taken Islam as their code of honor and then applied Pashtunwali to measure adherence to said code of honor.

This creates the basis for many of the restrictions that the Taliban have put in place. A strict interpretation of the Quran, combined with Pashtunwali's belief that if a woman does not conform she diminishes the honor of her household, leads them to believe that imposing these restrictions keeps everyone from having their honor diminished. This encourages the Taliban to place modesty standards and restrictions on women's ability to work and receive education, all so that they do not risk harming their honor. This also explains why the Taliban seems to violate certain parts of the Quran with their restrictions, seeing it as a trade-off.[24] By not following a smaller, less important principle, they can ensure that larger, more important principles are upheld and limit the amount of honor diminished. This sets up a perfect system that allows the Taliban to justify their restrictions on women by choosing portions of the Quran to support their rule and using the existing

[22] Khan, "Islamic Law, Customary Law," 3.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

beliefs of the people to explain why this must be upheld. While the laws and restrictions the Taliban have put into place have contributed to the oppression of women, it is equally important to look at the cultural norms that are used to justify and reinforce those laws.

Who benefits from them being there?

It is hard to understand how a person, group, or country could truly benefit from the extreme oppression of women. According to many metrics, the Taliban's harsh policies have hurt their country. By keeping women out of the workforce, Afghanistan's productivity and workforce have shrunk, decreasing their GDP.[25] The Taliban authorities have faced sanctions from much of the international community, further decreasing their GDP and ability to trade with other countries.[26] This has caused inflation to rise, contributing to economic hardship for many citizens, particularly people in rural areas.[27] Despite the economic hardship that has resulted from their policies, the Taliban and Afghan-Pashtun men see benefits in their oppression in a few different forms. First, they can remain in power. By isolating half the population and preventing them from gaining access to educational and financial resources, they largely remove the chance that they will rebel in large numbers against their rule. When girls are only taught religious material that reinforces the rule of men and are only able to interact with men, they are likely to believe and conform to the ideals they are taught.

[25] Albrecht et al., "Women in Afghanistan," 58.

[26] Global Sanctions, "Afghanistan," (2021).

[27] Albrecht et al., "Women in Afghanistan," 58.

Another way that this oppression benefits men is that it helps ensure their honor. Under Pashtunwali law, men can increase and decrease honor while women can only decrease honor.[28] Therefore, when a man can keep the women in his household from decreasing his honor, he is benefiting by maintaining and increasing his honor. This is a huge benefit to the men of the country because of the emphasis in Pashtun society on their honor being seen by the community. When a man can show his peers that he can uphold his household's honor, he benefits from his societal standing and is given more respect by his peers. Consequently, these men benefit from the oppression of women almost directly, gaining honor and social standing for themselves at the detriment of their wives, daughters, and sisters. Overall, it is hard for those outside of the Afghan belief system to understand what there is to gain from the oppression of women; however, cultural understanding helps to explain why Afghan-Pashtun men see great benefit in their oppression of women.

What do they themselves think of their being there?

While many women in Afghanistan feel unsafe and have protested their place in society, there is also a portion of female Afghans who support, or at least tolerate, Taliban rule. It is unknown exactly what percentage of women support the Taliban regime, but many women see the Taliban's policies as a way to ensure their safety and security if they conform to them. Women in Afghanistan have long faced struggles for economic independence, often facing staggering unemployment rates and discrimination in the workplace.[29] This has led to marriage being seen as the only option for ensuring financial security. Additionally, in rural areas, where Taliban control

[28] Khan, "Islamic Law, Customary Law," 3.

[29] Ahmed Ezzeldin, “Why Do Some Women Support The Taliban?” Fair Observer, (2021).

and restrictions are less enforced, many women have no other options.[30] Conservative Pashtunwali social norms are pushed much harder, so there is little change in the lives of rural women who are already being married off at young ages and not attending school, despite no direct enforcement under Taliban rule.[31]

To many rural women, there is no other way of life; however, for women living in heavily Taliban-controlled areas, it is a different story. Especially in urban areas, the women of Afghanistan enjoyed a much wider range of freedoms and rights during the 20 years the Taliban were not in power—rights they are now losing. However, these women are still finding ways to persevere and resist the oppression they exist under. Whether it is by teaching workshops on language and mathematics skills, or by speaking out in any way they can when given the chance, these Afghan women are refusing to go down without a fight.[32] While it is essential to highlight and uplift the voices of women speaking out against their oppression, it is just as important to highlight the voices of women who support or have to exist within Taliban rule because they have no better option or don't know any differently. Accordingly, this necessitates exploring all of the different perspectives of women gives a better understanding of how women are affected by the conflict.

By answering these questions, there is a better understanding of the laws and societal norms that help contribute to women's oppression, as well as a more complete picture of why they are being oppressed and who benefits from their oppression. With that understanding, solutions can

[30] Ezzeldin, "Why Do Some Women Support The Taliban?"

[31] Ibid.

[32] Sahar Halaimzai, Metra Mehran, and Marika Theros, “Inside Afghanistan’s Gender Apartheid,” Atlantic Council, (2024).

be tailored to women, by going beyond just physical security and looking into how to ensure their cultural security and give women the means to uplift themselves economically and socially, while still respecting their religious and cultural beliefs.

Understanding Possible Solutions

Solutions to help the women of Afghanistan must be culturally conscious and realistic. While Afghanistan was never a formally colonized state, it has faced large amounts of colonial influence over hundreds of years, and its rulers have used extensive post-colonial rhetoric to maintain and exert influence over the population.[33] This has made the people of Afghanistan very wary of international, particularly Western, intervention in their country. Because of this, future solutions to help women in Afghanistan cannot be based on Western or UN intervention and instead must be rooted within the cultural context of Afghanistan. This means respecting Islamic and Pashtunwali law and incorporating the principles of both into a solution. This is not a conflict that can be easily solved with military action, but is instead one that requires working within thousands of years of religious and cultural heritage to change the minds of millions of people. In the past, military tactics to solve this problem have done more harm than good for the women of Afghanistan, often leading to tighter restrictions and further harm against them. Enlone's feminist theory reinforces these ideas, explaining that the ideas that drive the narrative that women are less than men need to be dismantled, otherwise the cycle will just repeat because people's mindsets will not have changed.

Additionally, feminism would argue that solutions need to have nuance that reflects the differences in views of women from different ideological backgrounds in Afghanistan, such as

[33] Elisabeth Leake, "States, Nations, and Self-Determination: Afghanistan and Decolonization at the United Nations," *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (2022): 272-91.

conservative rural women. Similar to how men and women are affected differently by solutions and actions implemented in Afghanistan, rural women and urban women will be affected differently by solutions put in place, even those that keep women in mind. Without solutions that incorporate nuance and understanding of the religious, cultural, and historical background of women in Afghanistan, the Taliban will continue to oppress women without intervention until the women of Afghanistan are not heard or seen in any capacity. In order to ensure this does not happen, feminist IR theory must be used to analyze the impacts of any proposed solution to ensure it has the best interests of women at heart and will help ensure that they can live long and prosperous lives.

Conclusion

Whether freedom comes for Afghan women through a change in ideology or an overthrow of Taliban leadership, women must be at the forefront of change. Incorporating the voices of women in the situation and the planning process is vital to ensuring that the women of Afghanistan do not remain in a cycle of oppression and harm. By incorporating feminist thinking through Cynthia Enloe's questions and the recognition that women have specific needs, there can be a true understanding of the human security issues that women face. It is up to all of us to ensure that Afghan women's rights are protected, and the beginning of the movement starts with understanding the genesis of these conflicts and what can be done to solve these problems.

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