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Black Friday revisited: disinformation, misinformation, and the politics of memory at Tehran's Jaleh Square

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ABSTRACT

The events of September 8, 1978, in Iran, commonly known as 'Black Friday', have long been portrayed as a mass killing of peaceful protesters by the Shah's regime, with widely cited death tolls ranging from several hundred to several thousand. However, this article presents a comprehensive reassessment of the incident at Jaleh Square in Tehran, arguing that the dominant narrative is rooted more in disinformation and misinformation than verifiable fact. Drawing on official records from the Imperial Iranian Government, post-revolutionary data compiled by the Islamic Republic's own Martyrs Foundation, the article establishes that approximately 58–64 people were killed in the incident thus contradicting inflated figures disseminated by opposition groups, amplified by Western media, and institutionalized in scholarly literature. The article further examines how disinformation campaigns, journalistic failures, and ideological biases contributed to the construction and persistence of the 'massacre' narrative, which continues to serve the Islamic Republic's political agenda to this day. Through this case study, the article underscores the need for critical scrutiny in reporting and historiography, particularly when unverified claims shape national memory and influence political legitimacy.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary society, the prevalence of disinformation and misinformation is more pronounced than ever. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of scholarly publications on the topic emerged between 2020 and 2022 (Pérez Escolar et al., 2023).

Given the growing academic and political focus on disinformation, it is essential to re-examine the events that occurred at Tehran's Jaleh Square on September 8, 1978, when clashes broke out between the Imperial Iranian Military and opponents of the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This confrontation marked a significant turning point in the Shah's reign and paved the way for the Islamist takeover and the eventual establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran on April 1, 1979. Former Iranian diplomat Darioush Bayandor (2019, p. 210) described the Jaleh Square incident as a 'landmark event', underscoring its importance in the Shah's downfall.

More than four decades later, the Jaleh Square clashes remain a central event in Iranian political memory, shaping contemporary discourse and influencing the ongoing struggle against the Islamic regime. The incident is often invoked by regime elites to reopen historical wounds, sow division among opposition groups, and manipulate current protests for political ends. For example, during the November 2019 uprising[1], Mir-Hossein Mousavi[2]—a former prime minister and current rival to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—issued a statement comparing the deaths[3] during those protests to the events at Jaleh Square in 1978 (Kaleme, 2019). This narrative is increasingly weaponized today, particularly as popular calls to overthrow the Islamic regime grow louder, tensions escalate with Israel, and the pro-democracy

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movement led by Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, son of the late Shah, gains momentum (e.g. BBC, 2025; Darabi, 2025; Ross, 2025).

While numerous studies have explored the broader consequences of disinformation—including its impact on individual behavior, democratic processes, and public trust (e.g. Bastick, 2021; Schaewitz et al., 2020)—few have provided detailed case studies illustrating both its immediate and long-term effects. This article seeks to investigate what actually transpired at Jaleh Square on September 8, 1978, and to uncover the layers of disinformation and misinformation that have surrounded the incident for decades. It further aims to demonstrate how political propaganda, journalistic urgency, and agenda-driven scholarship have contributed to the creation and perpetuation of a myth around the events of that day. As Ecker et al. (2024) note in their study of misinformation and democracy, researchers play a crucial role in combating disinformation and must strive to provide the public with accurate, evidence-based information.

To that end, this article examines the official records of the clashes, various portrayals by the Western media at the time, the findings of the Islamic regime's own post-revolution investigation, and the ways in which the myth surrounding the Jaleh Square events continues to persist in scholarly and popular discourse, ultimately reinforcing the Islamic regime's narrative. This article argues that the dominant narrative of a 'massacre' at Jaleh Square, alleging the deaths of hundreds or even thousands of demonstrators, has no basis in verifiable evidence and originated through a combination of deliberate disinformation by opposition groups, uncritical repetition by foreign media, and post-revolutionary mythmaking by the Islamic Republic. It further demonstrates how this distorted account has been canonized in Western scholarship and journalism, often without reference to more accurate data produced by both the Imperial government and, ironically, by the Islamic Republic's own internal investigations.

While other dramatic events—such as the Cinema Rex fire of August 1978, initially blamed on the Shah and SAVAK but soon attributed to Islamist militants—also played a decisive role in the monarchy's downfall, they did not generate the same enduring mythology as Jaleh Square. For this reason, the present article confines its scope to Jaleh Square as a case study in the persistence of disinformation. It further pursues a dual aim: to analyze how disinformation surrounding Jaleh Square was created and weaponized as a political instrument, and to remind scholars and journalists of the importance of scrutinizing historical claims to avoid reinforcing political mythologies.

The purpose of this article is not to deny that lethal force was used at Jaleh Square—an undeniable tragedy that claimed dozens of lives—but to examine how the *scale* and *framing* of that violence were transformed through disinformation and misinformation into what became known internationally as the 'Black Friday massacre'. By tracing the lifecycle of this disinformation, the article highlights how political mythologies persist, how truth is overwritten by narrative, and how journalists and scholars may unintentionally contribute to the endurance of false historical claims. Unlike previous accounts, which have focused primarily on the political significance or casualty figures of September 8, this article frames Jaleh Square as a case study in the lifecycle of disinformation and misinformation, thereby contributing to broader debates on how historical myths are created, sustained, and mobilized in contemporary politics.

While previous scholarship—most notably the investigation by Emaeddin Baghi—has clarified the factual record of the Jaleh Square casualties, it has not explained why exaggerated figures continued to circulate in media and academic discourse long after reliable data became available. The present study extends this line of inquiry by situating the Jaleh Square case within the broader conceptual framework of disinformation and misinformation studies. By tracing how inaccurate casualty figures were created, transmitted, and later institutionalized, this article provides an explanatory account of the mechanisms that allowed a corrected historical record to remain overshadowed by a politically useful myth.

2. A short background

In 1941, during World War II, Allied forces occupied Iran and forced the abdication and exile of Reza Shah Pahlavi[4]. Despite British objections, his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, ascended to the throne in September of that year (Milani, 2012, pp. 84–85). Over the following decades, the new Shah embarked on a comprehensive modernization and development agenda. Among his reforms were the abolition of

feudalism, land redistribution, economic modernization, and the extension of suffrage to women, enabling their participation in national elections (Bill, 1970). These reforms, however, were met with resistance from both conservative religious factions and segments of the left. As Pejman Abdolmohammadi (2024, p. 164) succinctly puts it, the Shah was 'a modernizer challenged by Islamists and Leftists'. By the late 1970s, these challenges had become increasingly severe. Widespread unrest and escalating protests eventually led to the Shah's departure from Iran in January 1979. Shortly thereafter, Ruhollah Khomeini, the architect of the Islamic Revolution, returned from exile in Paris and declared the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The Shah succumbed to a prolonged battle with cancer in Cairo on July 27, 1980, with the specifics of his illness still remaining disputed (Khoshnood & Khoshnood, 2016).

One of the most pivotal events in the Shah's fall was the confrontation at Jaleh Square in Tehran, later referred to by his opponents as 'Black Friday'. On September 8, 1978, in response to growing unrest, Prime Minister Jafar Sharif-Emami's[5] government imposed martial law in Tehran and eleven other cities. Despite this, opposition groups gathered in Jaleh Square to demonstrate. The protest escalated into a violent clash, culminating in gunfire. Opposition sources quickly claimed that a large number of demonstrators had been killed. Ali Davani, a cleric and chronicler of the clerical opposition to the Shah, asserted that over 4,000 people died following the eruption of gunfire (Davani, 1979, p. 45). These numbers, disseminated by various opposition groups and echoed in some Western media, deeply influenced public perception, portraying the Shah as a brutal dictator and significantly undermining his domestic and international standing.

For broader overviews of Iran's modern political history leading up to the revolution, see Afkhami (2009) and Milani (2012).

3. Disinformation and misinformation

Disinformation refers to the intentional spread of false information with the goal of manipulating public perception or influencing political outcomes. In contrast, misinformation involves the dissemination of inaccurate information without the intent to deceive (Rubin, 2022, p. 7). The concept of disinformation has its origins in the Russian term *Dezinformatsia*, and was a central component of Soviet intelligence operations known as *Aktivniye meropriyatiya* (active measures), which included 'political manipulation and propaganda to influence international opinion' (Pringle, 2015, p. 2). Disinformation is ultimately about power: the power to shape thoughts, emotions, and behavior toward a defined goal.

One of the most prominent analysts of Soviet disinformation is Ladislav Bittman, a former Czechoslovak intelligence officer who defected to the United States in 1968. Bittman provided a detailed account of the KGB's global disinformation operations, including those aimed at destabilizing the Shah's regime and fomenting anti-American sentiment in post-revolutionary Iran (Bittman, 1983, pp. 110, 113, 116–118). Among the most notorious of these efforts was Operation Denver, a campaign that falsely attributed the origin of AIDS to U.S. biological weapons research (Selvage, 2019).

Although commonly associated with Soviet and Russian intelligence operations, disinformation campaigns have also been employed by Western intelligence services (West, 2015, pp. 105, 325). For instance, black propaganda—a key form of disinformation—has been described as 'a potent instrument in the CIA's arsenal since its inception' (Turner, 2007, p. 112).

Unlike disinformation, which is deliberate, misinformation refers to the spread of false information without intent to deceive. A striking example is the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, when U.S. and U.K. officials asserted that Saddam Hussein possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction. Subsequent inquiries in both countries concluded that this belief was based on intelligence failures rather than deliberate deception (Butler, 2004; Select Committee on Intelligence, 2004). Nevertheless, the claim was widely amplified by government channels and global media, swaying public opinion in favor of the war (Kull et al., 2003).

These examples illustrate the broader dynamics of how both deliberate disinformation and unintentional misinformation can shape political outcomes. With this conceptual framework in place, the next section turns to the Jaleh Square incident to analyze how these mechanisms operated in the Iranian context.

4. The Jaleh Square event

Before turning to the empirical analysis, it is worth briefly noting the methodological approach. This study relies on triangulating multiple categories of sources—official records, media reports, and later scholarly accounts—evaluated in light of the literature on disinformation and misinformation. This qualitative case-study approach allows us to assess not only the immediate reporting of the Jaleh Square clashes but also the longer afterlife of the 'massacre' narrative in scholarship and public memory.

During the clashes at Jaleh Square on September 8, 1978, numerous protesters as well as several police officers and soldiers were killed. According to the Imperial Iranian Government (IIG), 70 members of the security forces died across Tehran that day, many of them at Jaleh Square. However, these figures were not publicly released at the time (Afkhami, 2009, p. 465). The military governor of Tehran, General Gholam Ali Oveisi[6], officially stated that 86 people were killed and 205 wounded across Tehran (Zabih, 2011, p. 22). Of these, according to the IIG, 58 fatalities occurred at Jaleh Square itself (Zakir, 1988, p. 163). The figure of 86 fatalities throughout Tehran was also affirmed by the Shah in his final memoir, *Answer to History* (Pahlavi, 1980, p. 160).

The reported casualties among soldiers and police officers suggest that the clashes were not entirely one-sided. Gil Guerrero (2016, p. 103) notes that General Oveisi had attempted to convince the government that soldiers were initially fired upon, resulting in military casualties. Gholam Reza Afkhami (2009, p. 465) similarly writes that soldiers deployed to the Jaleh Square when attacked by agitators, 'were ordered to fire in the air. According to military reports, the troops then were fired at. They responded by firing into the crowd'. An Islamist activist close to Ruhollah Khomeini, interviewed by Andrew Scott Cooper (2018, p. 401), likewise acknowledged that several protesters at Jaleh Square were armed and used their weapons against the police and soldiers. The first eyewitness to report on Iranian radio and television claimed that shots were fired at the protesters from a nearby apartment and that gunfire also emanated from within the square (Cooper, 2018, p. 400). While the majority of demonstrators were almost certainly unarmed, these multiple and diverse accounts indicate that at least some participants were armed and engaged security forces. Some of these individuals are believed to have been trained in foreign countries, notably Palestine and Libya (Afkhami, 2009, p. 465).

It is well-documented that various opposition groups, including both leftist and Islamist factions, received military training abroad during the Shah's reign (Alpher, 1980; Bayandor, 2019, pp. 122–123; Cooley, 1979). As early as 1964, members of the Liberation Movement[7] underwent training in Egypt, organized under the auspices of the newly formed Special Organization for Unity and Action[8]. The group was led by Ebrahim Yazdi[9] (later Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic), Mostafa Chamran[10] (later Minister of National Defense and Deputy Prime Minister of Iran for Revolutionary Affairs), and Sadegh Ghotbzadeh[11], (later Foreign Minister and head of the National Radio and Television). Chamran, who had military training experience in Cuba during the 1960s, was tasked with overseeing militant instructions against the Shah (Chehabi, 2006, pp. 182–184; Zabih, 1982).

During the 1970s, the scale of militant training expanded significantly, with operations in Syria, Lebanon, Libya, and Jordan. Iranian Marxist organizations, such as the Organization of Iranian People's Fadayi Guerrillas[12], and the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran[13]—described by scholars as a Marxist-Islamist group (Kazemzadeh, 2013)—began receiving military training in these camps (Chehabi, 2006, pp. 185–189). For instance, the leadership of the Fadayi Guerrillas received military training from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)[14] and subsequently returned to Iran to initiate guerrilla warfare and robbing banks (Rahnema, 2021). The PLO and the Lebanese Amal[15] movement played a key role not only in training the Shah's opponents, but also in building smuggling networks to move militants and weapons in and out of Iran (Milani, 2012, p. 327; Zabih, 1982).

Despite these well-documented foreign links, rumors quickly spread following the Jaleh Square incident that Israeli commandos disguised as Iranian soldiers were behind the killings (Takeyh, 2021, p. 222). These claims gained traction among segments of the Iranian population, with some eyewitnesses alleging that soldiers had 'blond hair and blue eyes' (Davani, 1979, pp. 49, 63, 66).

5. Official figures by the Islamic Republic

Following the revolution, the newly established Islamic regime sought to discredit the Shah's legacy and justify the execution of former officials and loyalists. Accordingly, the regime tasked the newly created Foundation of Martyrs[16] with investigating the number of individuals killed under the Shah. This institution, which remains highly influential today, operates under the control of the regime's supreme leader and maintains close cooperations with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps[17] (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2020; Wehrey et al., 2008, p. 57).

Journalist and researcher Emaeddin Baghi, working with the Foundation's Scientific Department and editing its magazine *Yad-e Yaran*[18], was assigned to compile the data. According to Baghi (2004, pp. 429–430), the findings were scheduled for publication in 1996/1997 but were suppressed because they contradicted long-standing claims by Khomeini and other revolutionary leaders. While Khomeini and others had asserted that over 60,000 people were killed by the Shah's regime between 1961 and 1979, Baghi's official figures based on the Foundation's internal records, listed just 3,164[19] fatalities (Baghi, 2004, p. 430).

Baghi's findings were first published in full in the 2003 edition of his book *Review of the Iranian Revolution*[20] (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2019). With regard to the Jaleh Square clashes, Baghi's investigation confirmed more or less the official IIG figure: 64 people were killed in the incident (Baghi, 2004, p. 431). According to Baghi (2003, p. 134; 2004, p. 431), the victims included one woman and one girl. He further estimated that the total death toll across Tehran on that day was 88, virtually identical to the figure presented by the Shah's government (Baghi, 2004, pp. 254, 431).

In contrast to Baghi's findings, Ali Davani's interviews with eyewitnesses claimed that women were at the forefront of the protests and that many, including pregnant women and mothers with children, were killed by Shah-loyalist forces (Davani, 1979, pp. 60, 66). Baghi's research strongly contradicts these accounts and suggests that such stories were part of a broader disinformation campaign against the Shah and the IIG.

Further corroboration of these inflated figures being consciously manipulated can be found in a 2017 article by Abdollah Nouri, a senior cleric and former Minister of the Interior under President Mohammad Khatami[21]. Writing in *Shargh Daily*, Nouri recalled that the Combatant Clergy Association[22] had reported a lower death toll in their condemnation of the killings. When Nouri asked Ayatollah Beheshti about why they had not exaggerated the number tenfold, Beheshti replied that the figure they had already released was itself a deliberate exaggeration (Nouri, 2017).

6. Media coverage by Western countries

The following section examines how various Western media outlets reported on the Jaleh Square incident. Due to the vast number of publications covering the 1979 revolution, a comprehensive survey is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we focus on a selected group of prominent newspapers and magazines known for their influence and reach. This approach is not exhaustive but aims to provide a representative cross-section of how Western media contributed largely through misinformation born of haste, reliance on opposition claims, or lack of verification, to the narratives that surrounded the events at Jaleh Square.

Western media is far from homogenous, and this is reflected in the diverse and often conflicting accounts published in the wake of the clashes. While some outlets adopted a critical stance toward the Shah, others offered more neutral reporting, sometimes even presenting the official figures released by the IIG. For instance, several newspapers and magazines relied on reports from the late Parviz Raein, the *Associated Press* bureau chief in Tehran at the time. Raein frequently cited official numbers provided by the IIG and offered a more balanced perspective than many of his contemporaries. He also noted that demonstrators hurled stones and bricks at soldiers and described the unrest as being led by 'hardcore Muslim religious leaders' and 'religious extremists' (Raein, 1978a, 1978b).

6.1. Sweden

By contrast, some Western outlets were far less measured in their reporting. Two notable examples come from Sweden: *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*, both established in the late 19th century and

among Sweden's most widely read newspapers. *Svenska Dagbladet* (Blodbad i Teheran – 100 sköts ihjäl, 1978) ran the story on its front page under the dramatic headline: 'Bloodbath in Tehran – 100 Shot Dead'.[23] While the article did mention that the Iranian government had announced 58 fatalities and included unofficial figures suggesting up to 100 deaths, it also quoted the Iranian Student Union's claim that nearly 15,000 people had been killed at Jaleh Square. This large number, left unchallenged in the article, constitutes one of the most sensationalized reports from any Western outlet during that period.

Dagens Nyheter (Hernbäck, 1978) also led with a provocative front-page headline: 'Submachine Gun Burst Straight into the Crowd',[24] claiming that 500 people had been killed. While *Dagens Nyheter*, like *Svenska Dagbladet*, failed to critically assess the exaggerated death toll, it did not mention the vastly lower figures provided by the IIG, which *Svenska Dagbladet* at least included.

6.2. United States of America

The Washington Post stood out for its relatively neutral reporting. Its article on the Jaleh Square incident noted: 'Tehran's military governor said 58 persons were killed and 205 injured in the main clash near the Iranian parliament. Opposition leaders claimed, however, that the death toll reached at least 70' (Branigin, 1978). The paper also refuted popular rumors that Israeli soldiers had been flown in to kill Iranian demonstrators, stating that no evidence supported such claims.

Time magazine, by contrast, contributed to the spread of inaccuracies. In its post-event coverage, *Time* wrote: 'At nightfall, after the bodies of the victims had been loaded into army trucks and carried away, the government announced that 86 people, mostly women and children, had died, and 205 others were wounded' (Iran: The Shah's divided land, 1978). While *Time* did not explicitly state that all 86 deaths occurred at Jaleh Square, the placement of this figure immediately after its description of the clashes there creates the misleading impression that the fatalities were confined to that location. In reality, the 86 deaths referred to all of Tehran on that day (Pahlavi, 1980, p. 160; Zabih, 2011, p. 22). Moreover, the claim that most of the victims were women and children is unsupported by any credible evidence or official investigation.

Due to a prolonged strike, *The New York Times* did not report on the incident until November 6, 1978. In a retrospective article, the paper stated: 'When the demonstrators pushed on, the soldiers fired directly into them, killing several hundred, although the official death toll was put at 97' (Suddenly, Iran no longer stable, 1978). This too is inaccurate. The official number of deaths was never 97, as the official IIG figure was 86 deaths citywide and 58 at Jaleh Square.

6.3. France

Le Monde, one of France's most respected newspapers, adopted a more balanced tone. It reported that 'the clashes resulted in several dozen deaths',[25] while predominantly emphasizing the Iranian government's assertion that the riots were financed by foreign powers so to mock the Shah (Gueyras, 1978). Today, however, there is evidence of foreign involvement in the Islamic Revolution, most notably from the administration of Jimmy Carter, in support of the Islamists (e.g. Khoshnood & Khoshnood, 2018).

6.4. Germany

The German magazine *Der Spiegel* published a lengthy and profoundly critical report on the Shah on September 17, 1978. Regarding the Jaleh Square incident, the magazine stated that 'the Shah's soldiers ruthlessly opened fire on the crowd. The massacre claimed over 250 lives—though the government only admitted to 97—many of them women and children'[26] (Aufstand gegen den Schah Resa Pahlewi, 1978). Similar to *Time*, *Der Spiegel* also disseminated false information. The IIG never claimed that 97 people were killed, and Baghi's research clearly demonstrated that 250 people did not perish at Jaleh Square, and that only one woman and one girl were killed.

Interestingly, Erich Wiedemann, an editor of *Der Spiegel* at the time with a focus on the Middle East, wrote a separate article on the same issue, where he predominantly tried to ridicule the Shah. Wiedemann (1978) attempted to belittle the Shah with statements such as, 'In the bazaar, young boys had

spray-painted the word 'Shahanshah' on one shaved side of a donkey, inserted peppercorns into its anus, and driven the tormented animal through the streets while jeering'.[27] Most notably, with reference to the Jaleh Square incident, Wiedemann compared it to the Vietnamese My Lai massacre[28] of 1968, despite the absence of any supporting evidence for such a scale of brutality. Wiedemann stated: 'The imperial soldiers are causing a bloodbath among the civilian population of the capital on a scale many times that of My Lai, but His Majesty is upset because the people no longer wish to love their ruler'.[29]

6.5. United Kingdom

The *Financial Times* (Shah's troops open fire on demonstrators, 1979) featured a front-page report on the Jaleh Square incident, stating that 'Witnesses said that up to 100 people were killed and scores more wounded […]'. There was no mention of the official figures presented by the IIG. In comparison to many other media outlets, the report was highly neutral also writing that 'Despite the tough Army response to unauthorized demonstrations early in the day, diplomats were surprised that the military did not crack down harder'.

The Guardian provided one of the most balanced and accurate accounts of the incident. The reporter noted that the widely circulating figure of 250 fatalities 'could not be confirmed'. Additionally, the reporter provided the official statistics released by the IIG. In conclusion, the report mentioned that 'letters are openly circulating with a report that three military transport aircraft arrived in Tehran this week with 300 Israeli soldiers', but emphasized that these claims could not be substantiated (Thurgood, 1978).

An editorial published by *The Economist* (The army or the void, 1978) two months after the Jaleh Square incident primarily focused on political matters but briefly and inaccurately addressed the incident, stating, 'There have been no reports of massacres comparable with the shooting down of hundreds of unarmed demonstrators in Tehran on September 8th'.

The *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC) provided extensive coverage of the 1978–1979 events in Iran. However, inaccuracies also appeared in their reporting. In the 1990s documentary The Last Shah of Iran, *BBC* correspondent Andrew Whitley, who had covered Iran during the revolution, commented: 'Nobody will ever know how many died that day, but it was an extraordinarily bloody scene. The authorities reported fatalities in the low twenties or thirties, but in reality, I believe the number was likely closer to a few hundred' (Kirby, 1998). Not only is Whitley's belief not substantiated by reliable evidence, but his claim that the authorities reported 'twenties or thirties' is factually incorrect—the official IIG figure was 86 fatalities across Tehran, with 58 at Jaleh Square.

6.6. Italy

The Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera* also reported critically on the Shah, echoing the exaggerated death tolls found in some other European media. The article noted that the Iranian government claimed 58 fatalities but added, 'according to other sources, the death toll could exceed 200, perhaps 250'[30] (Sommossa a Teheran dopo la legge marziale Oltre duecento i morti, 1978).

Significantly, during the Jaleh Square clashes, the renowned French scholar and journalist Michel Foucault was on assignment in Iran for *Corriere Della Sera*. Though he arrived after the event, Foucault reported that 4,000 people had been killed in the protest (Corriere della Sera, November 5, 1978, reprinted in Afary & Anderson, 2005, p. 211).

7. The Jaleh Square myth in recent publications

Despite the passage of time and the emergence of credible evidence confirming the true death toll at Jaleh Square, the myth large-scale killing involving hundreds or even thousands of protesters persists in both popular and scholarly literature.

Several authoritative historians of modern Iran, such as Ervand Abrahamian, have produced influential analyses of the 1978–1979 upheaval. While these works are often regarded as balanced within the broader historiography, early editions nevertheless contributed to the diffusion of exaggerated figures. In *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Abrahamian (1982, p. 516) cited both the IIG 's official figures and the

opposition 's claims that 'more than 4,000' people were killed and that 'as many as 500' died at Jaleh Square. By juxtaposing these numbers without further evaluation or comment on their credibility, the text effectively placed official and opposition claims on the same evidentiary footing, allowing the inflated figures to gain scholarly visibility. As noted by Sepehr Zabih (1984) in his review of Abrahamian's book, the work was shaped by a strong neo-Marxist orientation that constrained its treatment of empirical evidence and contributed to interpretive imbalance. Although Abrahamian (2018, p. 163) later adopted accurate estimates in subsequent writings, this early presentation helped lend academic legitimacy to the inflated casualty narrative. The aim of this section is therefore not to reassess the specialist historiography but to examine how such early academic references, together with journalistic and popular accounts, reinforced and disseminated the myth of large-scale killing far beyond Iran's academic community.

Many other authors continue to propagate dramatically inflated figures. In her book on Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi[31], Hubbard-Brown (2007, p. 26) claims that 600 protesters were killed at Jaleh Square—despite publishing several years after Baghi's findings were made public. Similarly, historian Frye Gaillard (2007, p. 41), in his biography of U.S. President Jimmy Carter, suggests that up to 1,000 demonstrators were killed during the event.

Mark Thiessen (2009, p. 47), a graduate of Utrecht University, published a book in 2009 estimating that between 500 and 900 people died in the clashes. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2013, p. 193), a professor of political science, presents a similar range, writing that between 400 and 900 protesters were killed. Turkish scholars Bozkurt and Koc (2018, p. 129) also refer to 'hundreds' of deaths.

Even former intelligence officials have contributed to this misinformation. Steven Ward (2009, p. 214), a former CIA officer, states that 200 people were killed at Jaleh Square, along with an additional 100 throughout Tehran. Kenneth Pollack (2004, p. 130), another former CIA analyst, provides an even more exaggerated account: 'A crowd of 5,000 people, many of them students, gathered together at Jaleh Square, and the Army decided to make its point: around two hundred people were killed at Jaleh Square and several hundred more in military crackdowns across the city'. These statements are not supported by any credible source and directly contradict the official and post-revolution figures.

In Sweden, Rickard Lagervall, an Islamologist at Lund University, made a particularly striking claim in a 2010 *Sydsvenskan* article about Michel Foucault. He wrote: 'He [Foucault] arrived in Iran for the first time just over a week after Black Friday, on September 8, 1978, when the Shah's soldiers massacred between 2,000 and 4,000 people in an afternoon'[32] (Lagervall, 2010). To his credit, Lagervall later corrected this figure in a follow-up blog post and a printed note in *Sydsvenskan*, acknowledging that the actual number was 64.

Other scholars present misleading impressions without citing specific numbers. Professor Minoo Moallem, in her 2005 book, does not specify a death toll but claims that 'the Shah's troops fired at a crowd in Zhaleh [=Jaleh] Square in Tehran and killed a spectacular number of women' (Moallem, 2005, p. 109). Given that Baghi reported only two female fatalities—one woman and one girl—this statement appears to be a significant exaggeration. Considering Professor Moallem's background as a native Persian speaker educated at Tehran University, such a departure from verified figures is both surprising and concerning.

More recently, Malcolm Byrne and Kian Byrne (2021, pp. 2, 13) write that 'nearly 100 protestors were killed at Jaleh Square in Tehran'. Later in the same book, they describe the event as a 'massacre' and claim that 'security forces opened fire on protesters, killing more than 100'.

This internal inconsistency illustrates how vague or inflated estimates can undermine scholarly credibility, especially when more accurate figures are readily available. Similarly, journalist Edward Luce, in his biography of Zbigniew Brzezinski, states that on September 8, 'Iranian troops fired on a large demonstration in Tehran's Jaleh Square, killing at least a hundred protesters and probably far more' (Luce, 2025, p. 268). In a similar vein, former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (2020) recounts that a French journalist first reported 3,000, then 4,000 deaths, while BBC correspondent Andrew Whitley estimated 'a couple of hundred'. These retrospective accounts—especially when presented without source criticism—reflect how narrative momentum often overrode empirical caution. While less extreme than earlier post-revolutionary claims, such formulations continue the trend of presenting inflated or inconsistent casualty figures without referencing more reliable post-revolutionary data, such as those published by the Islamic Republic's

own Martyrs Foundation. Together, these vague or imprecise estimates contribute to the persistence of the 'massacre' narrative and dilute the credibility of academic and journalistic discourse surrounding the event.

Alarmingly, the myth continues to appear even among student-focused platforms. For instance, *The Security Distillery*, an educational platform supported by students of security and intelligence studies from universities in Scotland, Ireland, Italy, and the Czech Republic, published an article in 2024 asserting that 'The protests of the Iranian Revolution were brutally suppressed by the SAVAK, leading to tragic events like Black Friday, which left over 3,000 deaths' (Muniz, 2024). This figure is not only inaccurate but more than 45 times higher than the numbers reported by the Islamic regime in Iran.

8. Discussion

This analysis moves beyond previous works that primarily focused on establishing the factual casualty figures. By integrating contemporary theories of disinformation and misinformation, the study explains how narrative persistence can occur even after factual correction, thereby extending Baghi's empirical findings into a broader interpretive and conceptual framework.

Recent research on disinformation and misinformation offers valuable explanations for the persistence of false or exaggerated narratives even after factual corrections have been issued. Studies by Ecker et al. (2024) and Bastick (2021) describe how emotionally charged or identity-reinforcing claims tend to resist correction, a phenomenon known as the 'continued influence effect'. This mechanism helps explain why the inflated Jaleh Square death toll endured despite the availability of reliable post-revolution figures. Once a narrative of large-scale atrocity became symbolically tied to revolutionary legitimacy, subsequent factual revisions could not easily dislodge it. The Jaleh Square case thus exemplifies how misinformation can evolve into a durable political myth, maintained through emotional resonance and strategic repetition rather than empirical accuracy.

The events at Jaleh Square on September 8, 1978, stand as one of the most consequential moments in modern Iranian history; not merely for their immediate political repercussions, but also for the manner in which they were reported, interpreted, and mythologized. This paper has shown that the dominant narrative of a 'massacre' involving hundreds or even thousands of peaceful demonstrators lacks empirical support and is primarily the product of disinformation, misinformation, and uncritical journalistic and academic reproduction.

A clear pattern emerges when assessing how many Western media outlets responded to the event: a systemic failure of source criticism. Reporters relied heavily on unverifiable eyewitness accounts, opposition press releases, or sensationalist claims by politically motivated actors—often without attempting to cross-check these against official data or alternative sources. For instance, when the Swedish journalist Eva Hernbäck (1978) of *Dagens Nyheter* was asked in 2012 how she arrived at the figure of 500 dead, she stated that she and other journalists had agreed on that number based solely on what they believed they saw from a nearby rooftop. Her further claim—that three soldiers committed suicide to avoid shooting protesters—was based entirely on hearsay from 'ordinary citizens'. Such admissions are not simply anecdotal; they reflect a journalistic culture that, at that moment, prioritized immediacy and emotional resonance over verification and accuracy.

The result of this recklessness was not just a misinformed public at the time but a distortion of historical memory that continues to this day. Inflated casualty figures originating from uncorroborated reports were uncritically repeated by major outlets like *Svenska Dagbladet*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, and others. Many did not reference official figures from the Imperial Iranian Government, nor did they engage in basic source evaluation. Some even presented astonishingly large figures such as 15,000 deaths at Jaleh Square without so much as questioning their plausibility (Blodbad i Teheran – 100 sköts ihjäl, 1978). Much of the Western media's role in spreading exaggerated casualty figures falls most likely into the category of misinformation—errors born of haste, emotion, and insufficient verification (Maier, 2005; Tuchman, 1972). In contrast, the Islamic Republic's post-revolutionary narrative appears to be a deliberate campaign of disinformation, designed to mythologize the revolution and justify the regime's foundational legitimacy.

The long-term consequences of this journalistic failure are significant. Modern academic and political discourse on Iran continues to rely on figures and interpretations that originated in this initial moment of disinformation. As demonstrated, numerous scholars ranging from Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2013, p. 193) and Kenneth Pollack (2004, p. 130) to Steven Ward (2009, p. 214) and Minoo Moallem (2005, p. 109) have reproduced exaggerated claims without acknowledging the existence of rigorous post-revolution investigations, including those by the Islamic Republic's own Martyrs Foundation. These distortions not only shape academic literature but also reinforce political myths that serve the ideological goals of the current regime.

It must be acknowledged that establishing the precise number of casualties in a mass demonstration is inherently difficult, as casualty figures are often contested and shaped by political interests. Nevertheless, the convergence between the Imperial Iranian Government's official figures and the subsequent findings of Emaeddin Baghi—conducted under the auspices of the Islamic Republic's Martyrs Foundation—carries particular evidentiary weight. As an opponent of the Pahlavi state, Baghi had no incentive to minimize the Shah's abuses; if anything, the Islamic Republic had every reason to maximize reported deaths in order to further discredit the monarchy. This 'adverse witness' quality strengthens the credibility of Baghi's account, which largely corroborates the Shah's figures and stands in sharp contrast to the exaggerated numbers circulated by opposition groups and repeated in Western media.[33]

Indeed, the Islamic Republic itself has weaponized the myth of Black Friday for political ends. In a 2019 statement, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (2019) repeated the claim that 4,000 people were killed by the Shah's forces at Jaleh Square. Similarly, the *Left Voice*, a revolutionary socialist outlet, recently claimed that the Shah 'massacred up to 3,000 protesters', repeating the highest and least credible figures with no reference to official or revised accounts (Montag, 2021).

Even celebrated intellectuals contributed to the mythologization of the Jaleh Square incident. The French scholar Michel Foucault, widely regarded as one of the foremost critical thinkers of the 20th century, was among those who idealized the Islamic Revolution and helped romanticize its violence and martyrdom. In Paris, Foucault expressed strong support for Ruhollah Khomeini's movement and was part of a circle of intellectuals whose enthusiasm helped inspire public support committees for the Ayatollah (Afary, 2003; Nahavandi, 2005, p. 241). His sympathies with the revolutionaries, some of whom would later become architects of the current Islamic regime, evidently shaped his perception of events in Iran. Reporting for *Corriere della Sera* more than a month after the events at Jaleh Square, Foucault repeated unverified claims that three to four thousand protesters had been killed, despite arriving in Iran only after the event (Corriere della Sera, November 5, 1978, reprinted in Afary & Anderson, 2005, p. 211). That such a dramatic figure was propagated by a thinker known for his critical research on power and discourse reflects a profound intellectual contradiction. Foucault was not an ordinary foreign correspondent but a celebrated intellectual whose words carried significant academic and political authority. His uncritical repetition of such an inflated figure therefore illustrates how ideological proximity, even among leading scholars, can override the standards of evidence and rigor that both scholarship and responsible journalism demand.

The Shah's critics often characterized the Jaleh Square confrontation as a massacre of peaceful protesters. While some demonstrators may have been unarmed, the evidence shows that several of them were indeed armed (Afkhami, 2009, p. 465; Cooper, 2018, pp. 400–401; Gil Guerrero, 2016, p. 103). Iranian opposition groups—including both Islamists and Marxists—had received foreign military training, particularly in Libya, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. There is credible documentation of armed elements among the crowd, including testimony from both regime insiders and revolutionary activists.

Moreover, foreign powers also supported the revolution against the Shah, meaning that their institutions were used to conduct influence campaigns targeting the Shah and his government. As previously noted, the Carter administration played a role in this process, but the Soviet Union, particulary the KGB, was also highly involved, both directly and through proxies, in efforts to undermine the Shah. Andrew and Mitrokhin (2005, p. 173) note that 'greater preparations for sabotage were made in Iran than in any other non-Western country', underscoring the extent to which Iran had become a high-priority target for destabilization efforts during the Cold War. Yet, this crucial detail was, and continues to be, frequently omitted from accounts of the event, reinforcing a binary narrative of evil regime versus innocent masses. Numerous scholars contributed to this portrayal in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, whose

early analyses helped entrench the 'massacre' framing in both public memory and academic literature (Abrahamian, 1984; Halliday, 1979; Pliskin, 1980; Ramazani, 1982).

It is essential to emphasize that none of this diminishes the real human cost of the Jaleh Square tragedy. Even if only 58 or 64 individuals were killed—as the best available data suggests—each life lost represents a profound tragedy. But to inflate the death toll and omitting the proper context of the events, is not merely careless, but also dangerous. It distorts public understanding, legitimizes authoritarian myth-making, and compromises the credibility of journalism and scholarship alike. While some scholars, following definitions such as those outlined by Semelin (2003), might apply the term 'massacre' to the killing of unarmed demonstrators even at the lower casualty figures, this article emphasizes that it is precisely the inflated and mythologized narrative of thousands killed that constitutes the central disinformation surrounding Jaleh Square.

Therefore, scholars and journalists must take seriously the ethical obligation to verify sources, scrutinize claims, and resist ideological convenience. Media inaccuracy—especially when amplified over decades—erodes public trust and perpetuates false historical narratives. As Maier (2005) notes, even small inaccuracies can have far-reaching effects on public perceptions and attitudes. When those inaccuracies become central to national myths or regime propaganda, the consequences are even more severe.

Finally, this case study of Jaleh Square offers broader lessons that extend beyond the Iranian context. It reveals that disinformation is not confined to authoritarian states or intelligence agencies but can also be effectively employed by political adversaries. Moreover, it illustrates how disinformation may be unintentionally propagated by democratic institutions, journalists, scholars, and well-meaning activists. The true danger lies not only in deliberate falsehoods but in the uncritical acceptance of information. It is the responsibility of every serious and conscientious citizen, especially journalists and scholars, to question 'common knowledge' and scrutinize claims that lack evidence, regardless of where they originate.

9. Conclusion

The events at Jaleh Square involved real and tragic loss of life; this study does not dispute that reality. Rather, it challenges the later inflation of the death toll and the subsequent mythologization of the episode as a mass killing of hundreds or thousands. The myth of a 'massacre' at Jaleh Square on September 8, 1978, endures not because of the strength of evidence, but due to a confluence of disinformation, misinformation, and the failure of key institutions—media, academia, and political movements—to critically evaluate sources. Despite post-revolutionary data from the Islamic Republic itself confirming fewer than 70 deaths at Jaleh Square, figures in the hundreds or thousands continue to be cited by scholars, journalists, and public figures, distorting historical memory and legitimizing political narratives.

This article has demonstrated how opposition groups intentionally exaggerated casualty figures for strategic purposes, how foreign media repeated these claims with minimal verification, and how even respected intellectuals like Michel Foucault were swayed by ideological commitments and discourses rather than empirical scrutiny. These distortions not only obscured the complex reality of the event—where some protesters were armed and clashes were bidirectional—but also laid the foundation for a historical myth that has been exploited by the Islamic Republic to justify repression and consolidate its authority to this day.

The Jaleh Square case underscores a broader lesson: disinformation thrives not only in authoritarian regimes but also in democratic societies when journalistic urgency, ideological bias, or intellectual romanticism replace evidentiary rigor. Upholding historical truth is not merely a scholarly exercise—it is a civic responsibility. To protect public trust and democratic discourse, journalists and academics must confront politically expedient myths and commit to source criticism, even—and especially—when the facts challenge prevailing narratives.

Notes

1. The November 2019 protests began in response to a sudden increase in fuel prices but quickly escalated into widespread anti-regime demonstrations.

2. Mir-Hossein Mousavi, born in 1942, served as Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs for approximately five months before being appointed Prime Minister, a position he held from 1981 to 1989. He was Prime Minister during the notorious 1988 prison massacres and is widely believed to have been fully aware of the mass executions (Sinaiee, 2020).
3. It is estimated that approximately 1,500 people were killed during the 2019 protests (Reuters, 2019).
4. Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944) ascended to the throne of Iran in 1925, following a bloodless coup that ousted Ahmad Shah Qajar. This transition marked the end of the Qajar dynasty and the beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty.
5. Jafar Sharif-Emami (1912–1998) served as Prime Minister of Iran for just over two months in 1978 before resigning. He had also briefly held the same position during the 1960s.
6. Gholam Ali Oveisi (1918–1984) served as Commander of the Imperial Iranian Ground Forces. In November 1978, he briefly held the post of Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in the military cabinet of General Gholam Reza Azhari. Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Oveisi fled to Paris, where he continued to oppose the Islamic Republic. In February 1984, he and his brother were assassinated by Lebanese operatives acting on behalf of the Iranian regime (Milestones, 1984).
7. The Liberation Movement, known as *Nehzat-e Azadi* in Farsi, was established in 1961 as an Islamic political organization. Its members played a key role in the overthrow of the Shah and later held prominent positions in post-revolutionary Iran. For instance, the majority of the Interim Government of the Islamic Republic—including Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan—were affiliated with the Liberation Movement.
8. The Special Organization for Unity and Action is known in Farsi as *Sazman-e Makhsoos-e Ettehad va Amal*.
9. Ebrahim Yazdi (1931–2017) was a leading figure in the Islamic Revolution and a close confidant of Ruhollah Khomeini. He lived and studied in the United States for several years, eventually becoming a U.S. citizen.
10. Mostafa Chamran (1932–1981) was educated in the United States. During the Iran–Iraq War, he led Iran's guerrilla warfare efforts and was ultimately killed in action.
11. Sadegh Ghotbzadeh (1936–1982) was educated in the United States and Canada. A close associate of Ruhollah Khomeini, he accompanied him on the Air France flight that returned Khomeini to Iran following the Islamic Revolution. In a meeting with Hamilton Jordan, the White House Chief of Staff under President Carter, Ghotbzadeh allegedly asked whether the CIA could assassinate the exiled Shah (Smith, 1982). In a historical irony, Ghotbzadeh was arrested in late 1980 for conspiring against Khomeini. He was tried and executed in September 1982.
12. The organization, known in Farsi as *Sazeman-e Cherikhay-e Fadayi-e Khalgh-e Iran*, was established in 1963. It was a Marxist guerrilla group that conducted numerous armed operations in Iran until the overthrow of the Shah in 1979.
13. The organization, known in Farsi as *Sazeman-e Mojahedin-e Khalgh-e Iran*, was established in 1965. In the early 1970s, internal strife between its Islamic and Marxist factions led to a major purge. The group carried out numerous armed attacks in Iran and initially supported Ruhollah Khomeini, contributing significantly to the success of the Islamic Revolution. However, it soon came into conflict with Khomeini, resulting in violent confrontations. Its members later fled to Iraq, where they supported Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq War. Today, the group is widely regarded as a cult rather than a conventional political organization (Rubin, 2023). While its leader, Maryam Rajavi, resides in France, most of its members are based at Camp Ashraf 3 in Tirana, Albania.
14. The *Palestine Liberation Organization* (PLO) was established in 1964 as an umbrella organization for various Palestinian factions, with the objective of creating a Palestinian state. Prior to the Oslo Accords of 1993, the PLO engaged in armed struggle.
15. Formally known as the *Amal Movement*, the organization was founded in 1974 as a Shiʿa Islamic group, co-founded in part by Mostafa Chamran. Its military wing, the *Lebanese Resistance Detachments*, played a significant role in the Lebanese Civil War. Today, Amal operates as a political party in Lebanon without a military arm.
16. The foundation was later renamed the *Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs*, known in Farsi as *Bonyād-e Shahīd va Omūr-e Isārgārān*.
17. The *Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps* (IRGC), known in Farsi as *Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmī*, was established in 1979 to safeguard the Islamic Revolution and its achievements. Today, it is considered the most powerful institution within the Islamic Republic, with influence extending across all sectors of government and society (Khoshnood, 2020).
18. Can be translated to *"Remembering Friends."*.
19. While these figures cannot be independently verified—and while the broader context, including acts of terrorism and armed struggle by many of the Shah's opponents, lies beyond the scope of this paper—what is noteworthy is that Baghi's figure differs significantly from the numbers initially promoted by the Islamists who took power in 1979.
20. Our own translation from the Farsi edition: *Barresi-ye Enghelab-e Iran* (بررسی انقلاب ایران).
21. Mohammad Khatami (1943–) served as the fifth President of Iran from 1997 to 2005.
22. Known in Farsi *as Jame'e-ye Ruhaniyat-e Mobarez*, was established in 1977 by senior Shi'a clerics. Though not a formal political party, it became one of the most influential conservative organizations in the Islamic Republic, helping to shape post-revolutionary ideology, law, and governance.

23. Our own translation from the Swedish edition: *Blodbad i Teheran – 100 sköts ihjäl*.
24. Our own translation from the Swedish edition: *Kpistsalvor rakt in i folkmassan*.
25. Our own translation from the Frensch edition: *Les affrontements ont fait plusieurs dizaines demorts*.
26. Our own translation from the German edition: *[…] schossen die Soldaten des Schah rücksichtslos in die Menge. Das Massaker kostete über 250 Tote – die Regierung wollte nur 97 zugeben-, viele von ihnen Frauen und Kinder.*
27. Our own translation from the German edition: *Im Basar hatten junge Burschen einem Esel mit einer Farbsprühdose das Wort »Schahinschah« auf eine kahlgeschorene Seite gespritzt, ihm Pfefferkörner in den After gesteckt und das gepeinigte Grautier gröhlend durch die Straßen getrieben.*
28. On March 16, 1968, U.S. Army soldiers attacked the hamlet of My Lai 4 in South Vietnam, intending to engage the 48th Vietcong Battalion. However, no Vietcong fighters were present. According to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the soldiers encountered only "women, children, and old men." He further reports that "during the next few hours, the civilians were ruthlessly murdered. Many were rounded up in small groups and shot; others were flung into a drainage ditch at one edge of the hamlet and shot; and many more were shot at random in and around their homes." A total of 347 civilians were killed by U.S. forces (Hersh, 1972).
29. Our own translation from the German edition: *Da richten kaiserliche Soldaten unter der Zivilbevölkerung der Hauptstadt ein Blutbad vom vielfachen My-Lai-Format an, aber Majestät sind sauer, weil das Volk den Herrscher nicht mehr lieben will.*
30. Our own translation from the Italian edition: *[…] ma secondo altre fonti i morti sarebbero più di 200, forse anche 250.*
31. Shirin Ebadi, born in 1947, was among the first female judges in Iran during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. She was dismissed from her position following the Islamic Revolution. In 2003, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway.
32. Our own translation from the Swedish edition: *Han anlände första gången till Iran drygt en vecka efter den Svarta fredagen den 8 september 1978, då shahens soldater massakrerat mellan 2000 och 4000 människor på en eftermiddag.*
33. This reasoning follows the logic of what legal scholars call a "statement against interest" or what historians sometimes describe as an "adverse witness," where testimony gains credibility precisely because it runs counter to the declarant's own political commitments.

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Author contributions

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, AMK, upon reasonable request.

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