Review of International Studies (2023), **49:** 4, 694–720
doi:10.1017/S0260210523000116

RIS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The intimate public as a decolonial lens: "cripping" affect, nationalism and imperial violence

Sara Tafakori

School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, United Kingdom
Email: s.tafakori@leeds.ac.uk

(Received 1 September 2021; revised 16 September 2022; accepted 18 October 2022)

Abstract

This article brings an intimate perspective to bear upon the violence of economic sanctions, shifting attention away from an exclusive focus on state actors, in order to examine how '"wounds" enter politics'.[1] In this research, I 'stretch' Berlant's notion of the intimate public, reconfiguring it as a decolonial analytic lens on subaltern suffering in conditions of endemic imperial violence. I focus on the Facebook page of the Iranian chief negotiator, Javad Zarif, during Iran's talks with the P5+1 powers over its nuclear programme, under the pressure of what the Obama administration itself termed 'crippling' economic sanctions. Examining Zarif's audience's readings of his back injury during the talks as representing the 'crippled' nation, I trace how subaltern injury is intimately narrated through a racialised framework of disablement and 'recovery', where 'recovery' signifies a desanctioned and deracialised national body. I firstly complicate the prevailing conception of the intimate public as oriented around a 'national fantasy', theorising it as an affective structure that simultaneously locates imperial power, as well as the nation-state, as sources of complaint and hope; secondly, I draw on a critical disability ('crip') lens to understand the intimate public as mediating both the debilitation of racialised underdevelopment, and the fantasy of a normative, 'developed' national body in a post-sanctions future. Through examining the intimate politics of economic sanctions, this study contributes to a decolonial perspective on the entanglements of affect, nationalism and imperial violence.

Keywords: affect; race; coloniality; disability and crip; intimate public; sanctions; nationalism

Introduction

> It's 10:45 pm Sunday night, and I have just arrived home. Before posting the report I wrote and prepared for you on the plane, I wish to thank all you friends who came to welcome me at the airport. I feel very humble and I do apologise sincerely for the fact that our security guard friends did not let me leave the car. Nothing was sweeter to me than seeing you there in close proximity, however ….[2]

The above is an extract from a post on the page of Javad Zarif, Iranian Foreign Minister, to his social media followers after hundreds had greeted him at Tehran's Mehrabad airport on 24 November 2013.[3] Zarif had just returned from a successful first round of negotiations with the P5+1 powers

[1] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.33.

[2] Javad Zarif, Facebook post [in Persian] (24 November 2013), available at: {https://www.facebook.com/jzarif/posts/711088668902584}.

[3] See, for example, Farangis Najibullah, 'Iranians welcome Geneva nuclear deal', *Radio Farda/Radio Liberty* (25 November 2013), available at: {https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-welcome-nuclear-deal/25179888.html} accessed 25 June 2021.

over Iran's nuclear programme, negotiations which held out the prospect of a relaxation of the harsh US-led economic sanctions that had caused widespread distress and hardship among the population.[4] Zarif had announced the provisional success of the negotiations in an earlier post that morning from Geneva.[5] His second post that day, to his 'friends', the Iranian public, mediates an intensification of what was by this point an accustomed, emotional proximity that is meant to alleviate the distance – physical and social – attendant upon his status as state representative. Hope and gratitude, combined with a sense of shared and ongoing suffering, were the prevailing emotions among the thousands of replies to both posts emotions evoked in the repeated phrase: 'dear Zarif, thanks'.[6] Suffering and hope had been, and remained the dominant affects on the Zarif page, in the wake of Hassan Rouhani's election as president.

Rouhani had won the presidential elections in June primarily on the basis of his declared willingness to negotiate with the 'Western powers', as Iranians called them, over Iran's nuclear programme,[7] and thus end the 'cruelty and injustice'[8] of the comprehensive US, UN and EU economic sanctions which the population had endured since 2010,[9] under the government of his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.[10] The sanctions imposed in 2010–12 led to steep rises in unemployment, homelessness, shortages of essential medicines and spare parts for aircraft, and concomitant increases in drug abuse, prostitution, and suicide.[11] In 2012, US Vice President Joe Biden, in the face of Republican Party criticism that the multilateral sanctions on Iran were not harsh enough, emphasised that '[t]hese are the most crippling sanctions in the history of sanctions, period. Period.'[12] As I discuss below, the Obama administration deployed this violent vocabulary at regular intervals in 2009–12, something that did not go unnoticed by the Iranian public. Hence, when Rouhani decisively declared, during the election campaign, 'I have come to rescue the economy and develop constructive interaction with the world', in a video entitled 'Spring is Hidden

[4]On the suffering caused by sanctions, see page 11 below. The talks began in June 2013 and came to a successful conclusion in July 2015. Both sides agreed to adopt the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, on 3 April 2015. 'The P5+1' was the term used to refer to the group of six world powers engaged in diplomacy with Iran over its nuclear programme from 2006. They comprised the permanent members of the UN Security Council – the US, UK, France, Russia, and China – plus Germany. Kate Lyons, 'Iran nuclear talks: Timeline', *Guardian* (14 July 2015), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/iran-nuclear-talks-timeline} accessed 20 February 2022.

[5]The 2013 phase of talks culminated in the JPOA, or Joint Plan of Action, an interim deal, signed on 24 November, that led to the partial lifting of sanctions.

[6]See replies to Zarif post beginning 'It's 10.45pm Sunday night', 24 November 2013.

[7]Ali Ansari, 'Iran's Eleventh Presidential Election Revisited', LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series (November 2016). The 'global powers', in Iranian popular parlance, referred to the P5+1 powers (see n.4).

[8]See Hassan Rouhani, 'Spring is Hidden behind the Winter', official presidential election campaign video, produced by Hossein Dehbashi, and broadcast by IRIB TV Channel 1 (Shabake 1: Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting TV) (4 June 2013), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=L9VDMGtUSus} accessed 16 October 2022.

[9]On these sanctions, which took the form of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), signed into law by Obama on 1 July 2010, see C. Joy Gordon, 'Crippling Iran: The UN Security Council and the tactic of deliberate ambiguity', *Georgetown Journal of International Law*, 44:3 (2013), pp. 973–99.

[10]Ahmadinejad's conservative administration was widely blamed for exposing the country to US-led sanctions as a result of dismissing Western demands for limits on Iran's nuclear programme. See Manuchehr Sanadjian, 'Nuclear fetishism, the fear of the "Islamic" bomb and national identity in Iran', *Social Identities*, 14:1 (2008), pp. 77–100. In 2009, Ahmadinejad defeated Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the reformist candidate, in what many saw as fraudulent elections, winning a second term. In the months following, the demonstrations of the Green Movement protesting the result were brutally repressed, and in February 2011, Mousavi was placed under house arrest. See Pouya Alimagham, *Contesting the Iranian revolution: The green uprisings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Rouhani has been defined as a 'moderate', in distinction from conservatives and reformists. Although Rouhani did not identify himself with the reformists, many voted for him as an alternative to the conservatives.

[11]Farhad Rezaei, 'Sanctions and nuclear rollback: The case of Iran', *Middle East Policy*, 24:4 (2017), pp. 74–90.

[12]'Vice Presidential debate transcript', *ABC News* (12 October 2012), available at: {https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/vice-presidential-debate-transcript-danvilel-ky-oct-11/story?id=17457175} accessed 21 February 2022. This declaration was retweeted by Obama without comment.

behind the Winter', which was broadcast on national television,[13] his audience would have understood exactly what he meant. In acknowledging the continuing 'winter', Rouhani presented himself as compassionately recognising people's ongoing pain, and by his references to 'spring' and to 'rescue', he presented himself as a national saviour, ready to secure a lifting of the economic sanctions that had caused so much suffering. Soon after his 2013 presidential victory, Rouhani appointed Javad Zarif as foreign minister, and Zarif became chief negotiator in the talks with the P5+1 powers that began in October that year.[14] Zarif's regular reports on his official Facebook, which provided the public with the latest news on the progress of the nuclear negotiations, drew on the affective discourses of hope and compassion that the Rouhani campaign had initiated, and rapidly earned him a large following among the Iranian public.[15]

I conceive the Zarif page, in my argument, as an intimate public, that is, a mass-mediated scene of mutual recognition between strangers, whose intimacy confirms what they already feel, or feel they know, about their suffering and pain.[16] For its members, the intimate public is a way of accessing a common national core of 'true feeling' that will somehow enable the possibility of a 'good life'[17] for all the nation's citizens. I draw on Lauren Berlant's concept of the intimate public precisely for its focus on 'subaltern pain',[18] its complex mediation of the affects/effects of structural violence, by which I primarily refer, in this study, to US-led economic sanctions, but also to the previous Ahmadinejad administration's refusal to negotiate with the 'global powers', and its widely perceived lack of compassion towards Iran's sanctioned population.[19] The intimate public, in its original conception, is composed of subaltern, 'nondominant' people, whose suffering and disappointment arises from the systematicity of inequality and injustice.[20] Intimate publics thus centre around pain as ongoing, everyday suffering, rather than pain in the form of 'trauma', or extraordinary event.[21] Their suffering, in its ongoingness, is consoled and mitigated through the continual practice of affective reciprocity, through narratives of shared pain that are mediated in the form of texts, images, and sounds. Public intimacies, then, are collective productions, oriented, as I will show, around mediated genres and tropes.

In this article, I expand on the notion of the intimate public, typically located in relation to the 'fantasy' of the nation,[22] to situate it as an affective structure that simultaneously locates global, imperial powers, as well as the nation-state, as sources of complaint and hope. In mapping this entanglement of national and international imaginaries, I frame the concept of the intimate public

[13]Rouhani, 'Spring is Hidden'; also Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Mahmood Monshipuri and Manochehr Dorraj, 'The resilience of populism in Iranian politics: A closer look at the nexus between internal and external factors', *Middle East Journal*, 75:2 (2021), pp. 201–21. In 2017, having presided over the conclusion of the nuclear agreement, the JCPOA, Rouhani successfully ran for election a second time. A series of viral memes that circulated nationwide, both on digital platforms and in the print media, highlighted a wounded, bandaged index finger, marked with ink for voting (pressing the inked index finger onto the ballot paper is the usual form of voting/voter ID in Iran). The viral images, combined with captions and hashtags signifying resilience and remembrance, were immediately understood to mean that Iranians were voting with their wounds, with the bodies that had suffered over the previous eight years.

[14]Kelsey Davenport, 'Iran, P5+1 Hold 'Substantive' Talks', *Arms Control Today*, 43: 9 (2013), p.27.

[15]The Zarif page received 929,000 likes up to December 2015, according to my research notes from the time, with every post receiving around 1,000 to 4,000 replies, although at key points in the talks these numbers could be much higher.

[16]Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. xiiii, x, 22.

[17]Ibid., p. 2.

[18]Ibid., p. 28.

[19]See Sanadjian, 'Nuclear fetishism'; also below, on Ahmadinejad's dismissal of sanctions as 'a piece of torn paper'.

[20]Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. viii, also ch. 1.

[21]Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 9–10, argues against 'the discourse of trauma', for its assumption that catastrophe is something exceptional. They prefer the term 'systemic crisis' or 'crisis ordinariness'.

[22]Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 1.

as a decolonial analytical tool, one that enables the study of 'subaltern pain'[23] as a mediated narration of imperial violence. I utilise a 'crip' lens to deepen this decolonial analysis, examining the intersections of racialisation, debilitation, and disablement as experienced by populations in the Global South.[24] I claim that the expression 'crippling sanctions', constantly repeated and circulated by the Obama administration in 2009–12, became incorporated into Iranians' own idea of themselves as *falaj*, or 'crippled'. Through identifying with Zarif's own – widely publicised – severe back pain, which I discuss in detail below, the public gathered on his Facebook page felt and recognised itself as a 'crippled' national body. The trope of 'crippling' [*falaj-konandeh*], I argue, is thus central to understanding the Zarif page as an intimate public that is narratively organised around an ontological racial divide between 'underdeveloped' and 'civilised' bodies, and hence is marked as an affective structure by coloniality.[25] In this narrative, Iran as a collective body, disabled by economic sanctions, is placed outside the 'community of civilised nations'[26] and blocked from pursuing a normative path towards the status it desires, that of autonomous, fully developed nation.[27] I thus highlight the importance of the 'crippling' trope for centring the intimate public on the Zarif page as a public that narrates its own racialised subalternity, while it hopes for eventual 'recovery' from the injury of sanctions, and its attainment of normative status as a 'developed' national body.

Based on its analysis of Iranian public intimacies, this article proposes a fresh approach to thinking about the relation between affect, nationalism, and imperial violence, and thus contributes to a burgeoning decolonial scholarship in IR. First, I argue for 'stretching' the concept of the intimate public in Global South contexts, using it as a decolonial lens on subaltern affective communities organised around both national and international imaginaries, and mediating combined violences, local and imperial. Secondly, through drawing on critical disability scholarship, I propose a deeper understanding of how a racialised affective collectivity may be constituted around a dual orientation of injury and hope. Thirdly, I argue that the centrality of mediation to intimate publics allows us to refocus on subaltern narratives, via a focus on the content generated by ordinary social media users. This article aims to contribute to broader scholarship in postcolonial and decolonial IR, nationalism and affect studies that centres on non-state actors' perspectives on structural violence.

The article is organised as follows: I first argue the importance of intimate publics for developing a conception of affective communities that centres on 'subaltern pain', before moving to establish a connection between subaltern affects and the affective structure of coloniality, through a focus on emotions around economic sanctions. I discuss how using a 'crip' lens to focus on the mediation of sanctions as colonial violence strengthens the efficacy of the concept of intimate publics as a tool for decolonial analysis. I then set out my analytical approach, based on identifying four distinct affective-discursive strands within the affective repertoire of the 'crippled' nation. I move on to illustrate how these four affective strands are deployed: I map and explain two contrasting reactions – empathy, among Zarif's supporters, and shame, among his conservative opponents – to

[23]Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. 28.

[24]On racialisation and disablement, see Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); on debilitation, see Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

[25]Anibal Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1:3 (2000), pp. 533–80; Walter Mignolo, 'Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality', *Cultural Studies*, 21:2 (2007), pp. 449–514. On coloniality and sanctions, see Mariam Georgis and Riva Gewarges, 'Violence on Iraqi bodies: Decolonising economic sanctions in security studies', *Third World Quarterly*, 40:2 (2019), pp. 317–36.

[26]See Sara Tafakori, 'Digital feminism beyond nativism and empire: Competing claims to suffering in Iranian women's online campaigns', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 47:1 (2021), pp. 47–80 (p. 51). See also Ty Solomon, 'Status, emotions, and US-Iran nuclear politics', in Simon Koschut (ed.), *The Power of Emotions in World Politics* (Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), pp. 130–48.

[27]On disability, racialisation, and development discourses, see Katerina Kolarova and M. Katharina Wiedlack, 'Introduction: Crip notes on the idea of development', *Somatechnics*, 6:2 (2016), pp. 125–41; Margit Shildrick, 'Neoliberalism and embodied precarity: Some crip responses', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 118:3 (2019), pp. 595–613; also Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 3, on 'underdeveloped' and 'undevelopable' bodies.

the trope of Zarif's announcement of his back pain and his public appearance in a wheelchair at the talks. A third strand manifests in the reactions of Western (US) observers: I ask why their reading of Zarif's injury was far more favourable than US readings of Iranian Prime Minister Mosaddegh's incapacity at an earlier moment of Iranian confrontation with imperial power. The fourth, dissenting, strand is exemplified in a post by a commentator who refused to invest in either the Zarif intimate public's or conservative narratives of the injured nation. I conclude by reflecting on what material these different strands offer for a decolonial approach to the emotional mediation of suffering, injury, and violence, at the intersection of national and international political orders.

Intimacy, social media, and subaltern suffering

In this section, I argue for the concept of intimate publics as a decolonial analytic tool. I first highlight the connection between the study of intimacy and the affective impacts of racialised violence, before emphasising the importance of user-generated data to the fine-grained analysis of emotions, and especially of public intimacies. I frame the intimate public as a form of mediatised affective community, formed around injury, before moving to explore the centrality of subaltern suffering to the concept – particularly, in the present context, racialised subalternity. I then discuss how the affective structure of the Global South intimate public that is the focus of this article mediates colonial relations of power and violence, oriented, as it is, in a phantasmatic relation to the international – in the form, especially, of the US imperium – as well as to the local nation-state.

International Relations scholarship, particularly feminist IR, has engaged with the study of affect and emotion over the past two decades as part of a turn to investigating 'the unspoken but experiential constitution of … larger categories of nation, state, economy, security'[28] at the micropolitical levels of everyday experience. In this work of mapping emotional levels, interconnections, and worlds, the intimate has been a somewhat taken-for-granted presence. Until recently, IR scholars have infrequently theorised the intimate as a realm of power relations which connects the everyday worlds of ordinary people to the level of nation-states and the international.[29] Meanwhile, political and cultural geographers have intensively engaged with the pioneering work of queer, feminist, and postcolonial anthropologists and historians on the regulation of intimacies by empires and nation-states.[30] A key point of convergence between these scholarships is the lens that intimacy affords on the racialising effects of power. Intimacy offers a way of thinking about how imperial and colonial violence shapes subjectivities and forms of belonging, the ways in which it '[forms] the boundaries of our bodies and political communities'.[31] Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli thus observe that while the threat of physical harm is 'almost always at the core' of violence, 'all forms of violent oppression work through intimate emotional and psychological registers'.[32] Yet as Pain and Staeheli acknowledge, people also resist, negotiate, and navigate violence through adhering to intimate and affective collectivities.

[28]Ty Solomon and Brent J. Steele, 'Micro-moves in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2017), pp. 267–91 (p. 270); Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing emotions in world politics', *International Theory*, 6:3 (2014), pp. 491–514; Amanda Russell Beattie, Clara Eroukhmanoff, and Naomi Head, 'Introduction: Interrogating the "everyday" politics of emotions in international relations', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 15:2 (2019), pp. 136–47.

[29]On IR's tardy engagement with the intimate, see V. Spike Peterson, 'Family matters in racial logics: Tracing intimacies, inequalities, and ideologies', *Review of International Studies*, 46:2 (2020), pp. 177–96. Among recent approaches, however, see Joanna Tidy and Joe Turner, 'The intimate international relations of museums: A method', *Millennium*, 48:2 (2020), pp. 117–42; Joe Turner, *Bordering Intimacy* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020).

[30]See Elena Barabantseva, Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, and V. Spike Peterson, 'Introduction: Engaging geopolitics through the lens of the intimate', *Geopolitics* (2019); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[31]Lauren Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 3.

[32]Rachel Pain and Lynn Staeheli, 'Introduction: Intimacy-geopolitics and violence', *Area*, 46:4 (2014), pp. 344–60 (p. 344).

I examine, then, how an Iranian digital community is intimately constituted, and constitutes itself, in and through the racialised violence of economic sanctions.[33] In so doing, I centre the significance of user-generated data for the study of public intimacies, including affects of suffering, loss, and hope. Within IR, Amanda Beattie, Clara Eroukhmanoff, and Naomi Head have argued for focusing on popular cultural material, which necessarily includes the digital, in order to map the workings of affect and emotion at the level of the everyday.[34] IR and geopolitics research that examines the affective aftermath of terror attacks has also drawn on social media posts and replies in its analysis.[35] More broadly, there has been an increased focus in IR on the emotional responses of populations of nation-states to international crises and disasters, which has entailed drawing on user-generated data.[36] As Constance Duncombe rightly observes, 'social media … has the capacity to challenge the conventional acceptance of what politics is – in formal state-centric terms – and who can participate.'[37] Studies of public diplomacy, as she points out, have had increasing recourse to the analysis of user-generated content, frequently utilising an affect and emotion lens.[38]

Two recent studies of the Iran-P5+1 talks of 2013–15 are cases in point. Both studies analyse the emotional content of social media exchanges between Iranian and US representatives during the talks. The main focus of their enquiries, however, is the role of emotions in shaping the identity performances and narratives of state actors. The absence, from these studies, of the user-generated content produced by domestic publics on social media platforms, means that the violent impact of sanctions is acknowledged in passing, while the role of this violence in shaping subjectivities and forms of belonging remains unexplored.[39] In Constance Duncombe's account of the nuclear talks,[40] Iran's representatives positively choose to rise above what they termed US 'bullying', in the form of sanctions;[41] instead, they represent their nation, via diplomatic tweets, as strong, yet law-abiding, worthy of recognition on an 'equal footing'[42] with Western states. Iran's discursive strategy thus challenges US patterns of (mis)recognition and helps to build the 'mutual trust' and 'respect' that leads to the successful conclusion of the talks. In this perspective, a Global South state's ability to decisively shape the narrative and hence the outcome of international talks appears as significantly uninflected by 'hard power', or imperial violence. The second study, by Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, gives rather more weight to the role of power inequalities between Iran and the West and less weight to the achievement of 'mutual respect'.[43] The authors' focus is on how the

[33] I draw here in part on Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence*, p. 6.

[34] Beattie et al., 'Introduction'.

[35] Clara Eroukhmanoff, 'Responding to terrorism with peace, love and solidarity: "Je Suis Charlie", "Peace" and "I Heart MCR"', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 15:2 (2019), pp. 167–87; Samuel Merrill, Shanti Sumartojo, Angharad Closs Stephens, and Martin Coward, 'Togetherness after terror: The more or less digital commemorative public atmospheres of the Manchester Arena bombing's first anniversary', *Environment and Planning D, Society & Space*, 38:3 (2020), pp. 546–66; Angharad Closs Stephens, Martin Coward, Samuel Merrill, and Shanti Sumartojo, 'Affect and the response to terror: Commemoration and communities of sense', *International Political Sociology*, 15:1 (2021), pp. 22–40.

[36] See, for example, Chenchen Zhang, 'Contested disaster nationalism in the digital age: Emotional registers and geopolitical imaginaries in COVID-19 narratives on Chinese social media', *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 219–42; Sarah Kreps, *Social Media and International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[37] Constance Duncombe, 'The politics of Twitter: Emotions and the power of social media', *International Political Sociology*, 13 (2019), pp. 409–29 (p. 410).

[38] Constance Duncombe, 'Digital diplomacy: Emotion and identity in the public realm', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 14:1–2 (2019), pp. 102–16; Tobias Lemke and Michael Habegger, 'Diplomat or troll? The vase against digital diplomacy', in Corneliu Bjola and Ruben Zaiotti (eds), *Digital Diplomacy and International Organisations* (Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), pp. 229–66.

[39] See, on the 'generative' role of violence in shaping subjects, Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence*.

[40] Constance Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy: Social media and Iran–US relations', *International Affairs*, 93:3 (2017), pp. 545–62; and *Representation, Recognition and Respect in World Politics: The Case of Iran-US Relations* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2019).

[41] Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy', p. 559.

[42] President Hassan Rouhani, quoted in Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy', p. 557.

[43] Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'The visual politics of the 2015 Iran deal: Narrative, image and verification', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33:5 (2020), pp. 778–98; Solomon, 'Status, emotions'.

superior 'hard power' of the US, which here largely takes the form of sanctions, is discursively staged during the nuclear talks. As they argue, 'a superpower' requires its power to be 'witnessed' and 'recognised',[44] hence the onus is upon Iran, as an 'untrustworthy' state, to become 'a trustworthy object'; Iran has to 'put its interiority on display'[45] and allow its nuclear programme to be wholly open to inspection by the 'superpower'. In this account, the respective affective performances of US and Iranian representatives, in their public diplomacy on social media, correspond revealingly to each side's position in the hierarchy of the state system; trust-building is framed as a notably asymmetric affair. Both these studies, then, yield a range of insights into the affective negotation of power dynamics during the talks. Nonetheless, their omission of the responses of Iranian domestic publics to the negotiations means that the broader affective reverberations of 'hard power', the ways in which violence is mediated and narrated to redefine political collectivities,[46] are left out of consideration.

In addressing the affective impacts of violence, this research aligns itself with Emma Hutchison's contention, in her book *Affective Communities in World Politics*, that emotions 'lie at the core of how communities, including nation-states, are organised and function'.[47] While affective communities have been defined in various ways,[48] Hutchison's work on these communities engages with three issues that are important for my argument: the role of emotions as shaping, and being shaped by, narratives of collective suffering and injury after catastrophe; the ways in which emotional narratives cement attachments to the nation; and the role of media representations in constituting these narratives. As Angharad Closs Stephens has observed, 'collectivities do not *precede* but are produced through the circulation of emotions';[49] thus the role of media, not only in circulating emotions, but in reshaping the national imaginary through this circulation, is a key concern of the present study. Hutchinson's discussion focuses largely on national communities formed around narratives of trauma. She describes how extreme events or periods of suffering 'shatter identities and debase a wider sense of shared meaning or cohesion', but are also followed by attempts to 'restore or reconfigure' the nation as 'the "imagined" community of feeling'.[50] Hutchison traces how collective emotions are narratively organised in response to catastrophe so as to reconstitute the political and affective coherence of the national community. She centres her empirical analysis on representations of catastrophe in national legacy media coverage, arguing that it is through such representational practices that powerful political interests operate to shape the emotions of national communities.[51] Her approach thus avoids situating official and popular versions of the national imaginary as polar opposites. In a more recent study, Chenchen Zhang draws in part on Hutchison's work to analyze emotional representations of the Covid-19 pandemic in Chinese media.[52] Her research, which covers both official legacy media and social media, similarly avoids casting official and popular narratives of the nation as perpetually in conflict, but also provides a rich picture of the ways in which social media commentators at times contest official versions of the national imaginary.

[44] Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 'Visual politics', p. 783.

[45] Ibid., p. 782.

[46] Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence*, p. 3.

[47] Emma Hutchinson, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 5.

[48] See, for example, Veronika Zink, 'Affective communities', in Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (eds), *Affective Societies* (Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), pp. 289–99, who distinguishes this type of community from 'emotional communities' as more transient and less institutionalised; see also Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, fin-de-siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), which focuses on friendship as a resource for anticolonial solidarity.

[49] Angharad Closs Stephens, 'The affective atmospheres of nationalism', *Cultural Geographies*, 23:2 (2016), pp. 181–98.

[50] Hutchison, *Affective Communities*, p. 3.

[51] See Emma Hutchison, 'Emotions, bodies, and the un/making of international relations', *Millennium*, 47:2 (2019), pp. 284–298 (p.295).

[52] Zhang, 'Contested disaster nationalism'.

In the current research, I draw on Hutchison's concept of affective communities for its centring of the role of emotional narratives in lending an imagined coherence to the injured national subject, and for its refusal of official-versus-popular dualisms. At the same time, I have found it helpful to bring the concept of affective communities into conversation with Berlant's concept of intimate publics. As I explain further below, while intimacy is a well-established lens through which to study online affective collectivities, especially on social media, what the concept of the intimate public illuminates are the distinct and complex ways in which subaltern populations construct emotional narratives around structural violence. These narratives may include modes of complaint and critique, as well as empathy and gratitude, but for the most part, as I show, they mediate hopeful investment in the existing order. I thus frame the intimate public as a distinct mode of affective community, which narrates the experience of suffering and injury as ongoing, everyday and structural, rather than as extraordinary event, or trauma; it is through the narration of everyday violence that this form of affective community seeks to restore coherence to the national imaginary.

While there is a slowly growing scholarship on intimacy in International Relations, as I noted above, the concept of the intimate public has been little employed in IR. Intimate publics have, however, been frequently studied by media scholars, employing a range of feminist, queer, and critical race perspectives.[53] Seen through a media lens, intimacy circulates in genres of texts and images in the mediated public sphere, rather than being cast as an attribute of individuals, or the 'private' realm; 'intimacy travels from "public" institutions, ideologies and regulations to "private" fantasies, desires and life goals, and vice versa.'[54] As the editors of the volume *Mediated Intimacies* point out, 'the characteristics associated with intimacy seem inherent in the structure of social media: both intimacy and social media allow people to express and share what matters to them, and both encourage personalised connection and interactivity.'[55] Digital intimate publics thus draw on the affordances of social and mobile media, which already disrupt the boundaries between private and public, and between the personal and the political.

The intimate public, then, offers disprivileged, 'nondominant people' a mass-mediated space of mutual recognition and reciprocity to voice their sufferings, in the expectation that these sufferings will be empathised with and consoled.[56] An intimate public, Berlant explains, is first of all structured around complaint and disappointment. The experience of consolation and empathy, in turn, generates optimistic reattachment to social normativity. Both elements of the intimate public's affective structure are typically oriented towards the nation: '[n]ations provoke fantasy',[57] as Berlant puts it. This is apparent, I suggest, in Zarif's exhortation to his Facebook followers on the night of his return to Mehrabad airport; his post concludes: 'the nation's compassion and unity is a must more than ever.'[58] Borrowing from Benedict Anderson, I frame the Zarif Facebook public as affectively structured around the imagined 'horizontal comradeship' of the nation suffering under economic sanctions.[59] Mutual compassion – for shared suffering – brings national unity around a

[53] Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards, and Nicholas Carah (eds), *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Rikke Andreassen, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, and Tobias Raun (eds), *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2018); Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect and Queer Sociality* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2013). On Global South national contexts of public intimacy, see Marwan M. Kraidy and Sara Mourad, 'Crossing the Red Line: Public intimacy and national reputation in Saudi Arabia', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31:5 (2014), pp. 380–94; Susana Galán, 'Today I have seen angels in shape of humans': An emotional history of the Egyptian revolution through the narratives of female personal bloggers', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13:5 (2012), pp. 17–30.

[54] Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, Tobias Raun, and Rikke Andreassen, 'Introduction: Mediated intimacies', in Andreassen et al. (eds), *Mediated Intimacies*, pp. 1–16 (p. 4).

[55] Neberling Petersen et al., 'Introduction', in Andreassen et al. (eds), *Mediated* Intimacies, p. 4.

[56] Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. viii, also ch. 1.

[57] Berlant, *Queen of America*, p. 1.

[58] Javad Zarif Facebook post, beginning 'It's 10.45pm Sunday night' (24 November 2013).

[59] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (rev. edn, New York, NY and London, UK: Verso, 2006), p. 7. Berlant writes of her debt to Anderson's work on the nation-state as 'the utopian form of political life' (*Queen of America*, p. 266).

political project, or to put it differently, trusting in Zarif offers hope for the ending of sanctions. The intimate public is based, in this sense, on an 'affective contract',[60] one that centres on a promise, however fragile or illusory, of reciprocity, even equality; the prospect that this relationship will at some point be beneficial to their members' flourishing.

I wish to highlight, at this point, the centrality of subalternity to the affective practices of an intimate public, and to its analytical potential as a decolonial concept. For Berlant, the intimate public articulates the 'subaltern pain'[61] that arises as particular responses to the violence of injustice and marginalisation. As 'nondominant people', in her account, subalterns are exposed to the multiple structural inequalities that are embedded in the workings of heteropatriarchal, racial capitalism.[62] Under this definition, Berlant includes publics that are 'historically subordinated' as a result of their gender, sexuality, race, class, or disability.[63] As I explain in the next section, economic sanctions can be seen as predicated upon coloniality, in that they operationalise a racialised distinction between sanctionable and non-sanctionable life. On the basis that the Iranian population, apart perhaps from the most privileged, experience their situation as inhabitants of a sanctioned nation as racialisation, I expand the definition of 'subaltern' to include the sizeable middle class, below the elite, whose living standards and health are rendered precarious by sanctions, and whose narratives of pain and loss often feature prominently in the comments on the Zarif page.[64] The Islamic Republic, Shabnam Holliday argues, has long sought to project itself in 'national-popular' terms as protector of the subaltern against Western imperialism.[65] What Berlant calls 'sentimental politics' carefully plays upon subaltern narratives of suffering, with the nation as a source of redemptive hope. Sentimental politicians, in this account, 'save the 'political from politics'; they position themselves as renewing, through affect, the political bonds of trust between citizens and their representatives.[66] It is this role, I argue, that Zarif plays in relation to the digital intimate public on his Facebook during the nuclear talks: through appearing to offer compassion and hope, he presents himself as drawing on the nation's resources of 'true feeling' for all its citizens.[67] Armed with this emotional knowledge, he appears to his followers as ready to tackle the structural injustices of both national and international political orders.[68]

[60]Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 66.

[61]Lauren Berlant, 'The subject of true feeling: Pain, privacy, and politics', in Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (eds), *Feminist Consequences* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 126–60.

[62]Berlant, *Female Complaint*, pp. 20–3.

[63]Ibid., p. 291, n. 8. Berlant does not restrict her definition of subaltern to groups such as *dalits*, the poor, the peasantry, or the indigenous, as do scholars in the Indian subaltern studies tradition; see for, example, Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313. For Berlant, Nancy Fraser's 'counterpublics', which are also made up of subalterns, are more politically coherent than intimate publics. See Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), pp. 56–80, and Berlant, *Female Complaint*, pp. 8–9.

[64]As a political sociologist of the Middle East, Asef Bayat has conceived the subaltern in terms that are similar to those of Berlant in a US context, that is, 'the urban and rural poor, marginalized youth, women, and other … groups' including ethnic minorities. See Asef Bayat, 'The Arab Spring and revolutionary theory: An intervention in a debate', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 34:2 (2021), pp. 393–400 (p. 399). However, Bayat regards the middle class as having some kind of voice within the system, and hence not as completely 'outside' political power. On this question, my argument aligns more closely with the approach of Peter D. Thomas, who has argued that 'subalternity… is an experience of marginality, in terms of the subalterns' relations to the centers of political power, but it is not a marginal experience'. See Peter D. Thomas, 'Refiguring the subaltern', *Political Theory*, 46:6 (December 2018), pp. 861–84 (p. 878). Relatedly, Shabnam Holliday, writing on the Iranian revolution of 1979, understands the subaltern 'as those who saw themselves as marginalised by and subjected to the hegemony of the Pahlavi regime. This is not necessarily linked to class'. See her article 'The legacy of subalternity and Gramsci's national–popular: populist discourse in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Third World Quarterly*, 37:5 (2016), pp. 917–33 (p.922).

[65]Holliday, 'The legacy of subalternity'.

[66]Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. 145. The phrase is from Mona Mannevuo, 'Anxious politicians: Productivity imperatives in the Finnish Parliament', *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 7:4 (2020), pp. 409–30 (p. 409).

[67]Berlant *Female Complaint*, for example, pp. 12, 34–5.

[68]As seen in the discourse that emerged on Zarif's Facebook in the wake of the JPOA agreement, hailing him as a national hero (see replies to Zarif post beginning 'Here it is 4am Sunday in Geneva', 24 November 2013).

My argument conceives the intimate public on the Zarif page as invested in both national and global, or imperial, political orders, in a phantasmatic structure that is marked by coloniality. Berlant initially framed the intimate public's affective promise in terms of a distinctly American national fantasy: 'if you invest your energies in work and family-making, the nation will secure the broader social and economic conditions in which your labor can gain value and your life can be lived with dignity.'[69] In similar fashion, the Zarif page, as I mentioned in the introduction, encourages its followers to reattach to the nation through the promise of the post-sanctions 'good life' that the Rouhani administration offers; nonetheless, this better life is ultimately dependent on the policies pursued by the US and other Western powers. It is in this context that Rouhani's rhetoric of 'prudence and hope',[70] has to be located. Instead of defiantly dismissing sanctions as 'a piece of torn paper', as the previous administration of Ahmadinejad had done,[71] Rouhani proposed a policy of 'moderation' towards Western powers, in the form of talks over Iran's nuclear programme. Successful negotiations, Rouhani declared, would bring 'hope' for Iran's population, especially unemployed young people, as Iran moved out of isolation and reintegrated into the global economy. His rhetoric echoed the optimistic language in President Obama's annual broadcasts at Iranian New Year (Nowruz), which, beginning in 2009, had repeatedly promised Iranians an end to sanctions, and access to global economic opportunities, if their leaders would enter into talks.[72] Obama's 2010 broadcast envisaged a post-sanctions 'future where Iranians can exercise their rights, to participate fully in the global economy, and enrich the world through educational and cultural exchanges'.[73] Likewise, in the wake of Rouhani's presidential victory in 2013, and the initiation of talks, Obama's Nowruz message of 2014 promised that if Iran 'meets its international obligations … [it would mean] more economic growth and jobs for Iranians, especially young Iranians who dream of making their mark in the world'.[74] Rouhani's language in his first election campaign video closely paralleled Obama's promises, stating that he wanted to 'reconcile with the world … [to] develop constructive interaction with the world'. As he put it, 'people are asking – why should they travel all the way to Europe to seek an ordinary [decent, dignified] life?'[75] As well as echoing Obama's language of the global 'good life', Rouhani was alluding to a trope of middle-class youth unemployment and emigration, which had been inscribed into the national memory since the 1980s, the decade of the devastating Iran-Iraq war and accompanying economic depression.[76] It is this intertwinement and overlapping of emotional investments, oriented both to the local state and to the US imperium,[77] that is echoed, I argue, in the Zarif Facebook, locating its intimate affective

[69]Berlant, *Queen of America*, p. 4.

[70]Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit, *Iran in the World: President Rouhani's Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1, 42; Ansari, 'Eleventh Presidential Election', p. 23.

[71]'Ahmadinejad says U.N. resolution a "piece of torn paper"', Reuters (21 January 2007), available at: {https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-ahmadinejad/ahmadinejad-says-u-n-resolution-a-piece-of-torn-paper-idUKHAF43083220061224} accessed 6 January 2020; the anger and distress this statement generated among the public is noted by Sasan Fayazmanesh, *The United States and Iran: Sanctions, Wars and the Policy of Dual Containment* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), p. 214.

[72]See, for example, White House, 'Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz' (20 March 2012), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/20/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz} accessed 21 February 2022. The echoes of Obama's aspirational rhetoric in Rouhani's speeches were widely noted by analysts at the time. See, for example, Hanna Kozlowska, 'Rouhani rips off Obama "Yes We Can" video in latest PR stunt', *Foreign Policy* (27 November 2013), available at: {https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/11/27/rouhani-rips-off-obama-yes-we-can-video-in-latest-pr-stunt/}.

[73]White House, 'Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz' (20 March 2010), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz} accessed 21 February 2022.

[74]White House, 'President Obama's 2014 Nowruz Message' (20 March 2014), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/03/20/statement-president-obama-nowruz} accessed 21 February 2022.

[75]Rouhani, 'Spring is Hidden'.

[76]This trope was reactivated following the repression of the Green Movement in 2009, and the mass migration of educated young people that followed.

[77]Cecilia S. Uy-Tioco and Jason Vincent A Cabañes, 'Glocal intimacies and the contradictions of mobile media access in the Philippines', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture & Policy*, 179:1 (2021), pp. 9–22. The authors develop the

structure as rooted in coloniality. The page's optimistic orientation is thus doubly cruel, ensuring that the subaltern remains 'attached to the world that generates the very injustices that marginalize them'.[78]

A 'crip' lens: Sanctioned bodies and the coloniality of affect

In this section, I pursue further the notion of intimacy as a colonial affective structure, introducing a 'crip' or critical disability lens to examine the ways in which the violence of sanctions shapes emotional understandings of the national and the imperial, situating sanctioned Iranian bodies at the intersection of intimate discourses and practices of racialisation, disablement, and debilitation. Beginning from an understanding of sanctions as colonial violence, I argue that this violence impels the redefinition of Iranian bodies and subjectivities[79] around the racialised and ableist frame of *development* as the index of the normative body and subject.

Recent scholarship has begun to question the dominant IR perspective on sanctions as a 'normal', peaceful, rational mechanism of pressure in the state system, and instead examines economic sanctions as forms of systematic violence, 'punish[ing] entire populations of nation states'.[80] The indiscriminate nature of sanctions as instruments of violence has been long regarded by sanctions specialists as essential to their effectivity. While Iran has been periodically subject to US-led economic sanctions since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the sanctions imposed by the Obama administration from 2010, in collaboration with the UN and EU, were particularly harsh and comprehensive.[81] There is a plethora of evidence for the violent impact of US, UN, and EU sanctions upon the Iranian population, especially the most vulnerable.[82] Farhad Rezaei identifies rising unemployment, drug addiction, crime, suicide, and prostitution as evidence of social demoralisation and anomie reaching levels high enough to threaten the Iranian government's ability to control the country, thus driving it to the negotiating table.[83] Richard Nephew, the former deputy coordinator for sanctions policy at the State Department under the Obama administration, clearly explains that 'sanctions are a form of violence', emphasising that 'the power [of sanctions] to hurt' the target state must be 'measured in the suffering it can cause' among a population.[84] As Stuart Davis and Immanuel Ness observe, Nephew 'develops "pain" as an analytic category, arguing for the strategic application of harm' through a range of carefully calibrated restrictions on trade that were designed to shrink the economy, increase unemployment and raise food prices - measures which disproportionately affected the majority of Iranians, far more than the wealthy elite.[85] The main point of sanctions on Iran, as Nephew explains it, was to inflict 'pain' in the broadest sense – not only economic, but psychological and emotional – with the aim of 'prying apart the regime and the population' and thus weakening the government's 'resolve'.[86]

term 'glocal intimacies', drawing on Roland Robertson's glocalisation thesis to emphasise the interpenetration of global and local in the shaping of mediated intimacies on the Philippines' mobile network. Significantly, they stress that 'what we define as local emerges from the region's negotiations with global forces, both from its colonial past and neo/postcolonial present' (p. 10). I thus identify at an affective level what Uy-Tioco and Cabañes have identified at an infrastructural level.

[78]Akane Kanai, 'Girlfriendship and sameness: Affective belonging in a digital intimate public', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26:3 (2017), pp. 293–306 (p. 297).

[79]Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence*, p. 3.

[80]Stuart Davis and Immanuel Ness, 'Introduction: Why are economic sanctions a form of war?', in Stuart Davis and Immanuel Ness (eds), *Sanctions as War* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 2–24 (p. 2).

[81]On these sanctions, see Gordon, 'Crippling Iran', and n. 9 above.

[82]On the 'crippling' and indiscriminate (untargeted) nature of Iran sanctions during the Obama administration, see Gordon, 'Crippling Iran'. Among numerous medical studies of the devastating effects of the Obama-era sanctions on Iranian health and medical care, see Shohreh Shahabi, Hooman Fazlalizadeh, Jennifer Stedman, Linus Chuang, Ahmad Shariftabrizi, and Regina Ram, 'The impact of international economic sanctions on Iranian cancer healthcare', *Health Policy*, 119:10 (2015), pp. 1309–18.

[83]Farhad Rezaei, 'Sanctions and nuclear rollback: The case of Iran', *Middle East Policy*, 24:4 (2017), pp. 74–90.

[84]Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 10.

[85]Davis and Ness, 'Introduction', *Sanctions as War*, p. 7.

[86]Davis and Ness, 'Introduction', p.7; Nephew, *Art of Sanctions*, pp. 53–62, pp. 111–12. Nephew, *Art of Sanctions*, pp. 13, 111.

Western strategists have long understood, then, that sanctions are an 'economic weapon' that are often 'more tremendous than war' for their effect on civilian populations.[87] From a Marxist perspective, Davis and Ness argue that sanctions are a neocolonial instrument that is typically employed by Western imperialist states against less powerful states in the Global South.[88] Mariam Georgis and Riva Gewarges go further, however, framing Western sanctions on Iraq not only as a form of imperial violence, but as a form of violent coloniality. They draw on the work of Anibal Quijano, Walter Mignolo, and others to define coloniality as the organisation of power relations around an ontological divide between the human and the less than human.[89] Viewed through the lens of coloniality, the international system is a hierarchy that continues to be shaped by the circumstances of its foundation in colonial empire, one in which violent domination, with its racialising and dehumanising dimensions, is a structural rather than accidental feature.[90] In Georgis and Gewarges's argument, sanctions' violence is tied to coloniality in the sense that it is predicated upon 'the dehumanisation of certain populations at the bottom of the racial hierarchy'.[91] In focusing on the security of states, they contend, mainstream IR has erased the insecurity and suffering of racialised populations from its purview.[92] I draw parallels here between their argument and Jasbir Puar's account of debilitation as neoliberal capitalism's systematic exposure of racialised populations to impairment, disablement, and premature death.[93] This is not to argue that disablement is merely a metaphor for racialisation: it is a means also by which racialisation is enacted; disability, as Shaun Grech contends, was and is 'constructed, imagined and lived in the colonial'.[94]

In this vein, I argue that it is through discourses of disablement that the affective structure of the Zarif Facebook's intimate public is most clearly actualised. In 2009–12, as I described above, the Obama administration repeatedly deployed the phrase 'crippling sanctions' to mediate Iran's immobility and powerlessness under US-led sanctions, its inability to access the resources and markets it needed for economic development.[95] Two events impelled Iranian social media commentators' appropriation and recontextualisation of this trope. On 8 October 2013, the Zarif team posted images of the foreign minister lying in bed, working on his laptop, on the plane to the talks in Geneva. In a post that day, Zarif described himself as suffering from an episode of severe back pain.[96] On 16 October, he appeared at the talks in a wheelchair.[97] On his Facebook, and across social and legacy media platforms, comparisons abounded between Zarif's injured body and the

[87]Woodrow Wilson, *Case for the League of Nations* (1923), quoted in Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2022), p. 1.

[88]See Davis and Ness (eds), *Sanctions as War*; also Mulder, *The Economic Weapon*, p. 17, on the nineteenth-century roots of sanctions as imperial instrument, viz. the use of 'pacific blockade' against non-European populations.

[89]Georgis and Gewarges, 'Violence on Iraqi bodies'; Mignolo, 'Delinking'; Quijano, 'Coloniality of power'.

[90]Randolph Persaud, 'Security studies, postcolonialism and the Third World', in Randolph B. Persaud and Alina Sajed (eds), *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations: Postcolonial Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 155–79; Randolph B. Persaud and Narendran Kumarakulasingam, 'Violence and ordering of the Third World: An introduction', *Third World Quarterly*, 40:2 (2019), pp. 199–206.

[91]Georgis and Gewarges, 'Violence on Iraqi bodies', p. 327.

[92]Ibid., p. 319. See also, for example, Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence*, p. 2.

[93]Puar, *Right to Maim*, p. xvi. Puar argues that debilitation forecloses 'the translation to disability', the latter being a status which confers rights (p. xiv). See the useful discussion in Sabiha Allouche, 'A review of Jasbir Puar's *Right to Maim* (and added interjections)', *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 4:2 (2018). Sima Shakhsari, *The Politics of Rightful Killing: Civil Society, Gender, and Sexuality in Weblogistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 22, draws on Puar to frame Iran sanctions as a mode of debilitation.

[94]Shaun Grech, 'Decolonising Eurocentric disability studies: Why colonialism matters in the disability and Global South debate', *Social Identities*, 21:1 (2015), pp. 6–21 (p. 8).

[95]On the promise of global economic opportunities in a future without sanctions, see Obama's Nowruz (Iranian New Year) messages to Iranians, 2009–16, for example White House, 'Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz' (20 March 2010), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz}.

[96]Javad Zarif Facebook post (8 October 2013) beginning: 'It's 9.30 at night and I just got back from the hospital', available at: {https://www.facebook.com/jzarif/posts/680806045264180}.

[97]Golnaz Esfandiari, 'Back pain breaks ice during Iran nuclear talks', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (17 October 2013), available at: {https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-nuclear-zarif-back/25139716.html} accessed 3 June 2020.

body of the nation 'crippled' by sanctions. In this emergent narrative of the 'crippled nation', I argue, the suffering caused by sanctions is situated within the frame of economic underdevelopment as a racialised condition. Social media commentators' redeployment of the imagery of 'crippling', as I show in the data analysis section, in the first place acknowledged the dual violence visited upon the Iranian population: the violence of the US and other Western powers in continuing to impose sanctions, but also the perceived callousness of the previous Ahmadinejad administration which had defied sanctions and left the people to suffer. This narrative centred around the spectacle of the racialised, underdeveloped, disabled national body. The imagery of national disablement, however, as Eunjung Kim has argued in relation to Korea, contains within it a narrative of 'recovery',[98] whereby the national body is envisioned as once again – in the imagery that is also recurringly employed by Zarif's Facebook audience – 'standing on its feet'. The trope of the potentially 'recovering' national body may thus be understood as a focus for optimistic attachment to the Rouhani government as providing a route out of economic 'backwardness', and towards the position of 'normal' nation in the (US and Western-led) global order. As Kolarova and Wiedlack observe, '[t]he development fantasy continues to colonise the lives of disabled and racialised communities.'[99] Development discourses, they argue, in well-nigh Berlantian terms, are 'an affective politics of promise',[100] through which people maintain an 'affective investment' in 'imaginings of the future, a "good life", and humanity'.[101] Iranians' fantasy of proximity to deracialised, normative status accords with Berlant's definition of 'cruel optimism', in that it entails an attachment to the very political order, both national and international, which is the source of the injury in the first place.[102]

I thus frame the intimate public on the Zarif page as structured, through coloniality, around a dual desire, firstly, to mourn the underdevelopment, 'backwardness' and immobility imposed by sanctions, and secondly, to acquire developed and deracialised status. There is a convergence, here, between my account of the dual affective structure of this intimate public, and Sima Shakhsari's analysis of the ambivalent status of Iranian life in Western narratives of Iran. On the one hand, Shakhsari contends, Iranians are racialised as rightless, dangerous, sanctionable life, while on the other, they are offered the prospect of deracialisation, as they aspire towards ideal neoliberal rightfulness.[103] If, as I argue, the state of rightlessness underpins the narrative of the injured and suffering nation – the racialised subaltern's complaint – the promise of rightfulness equates to the 'good life' after sanctions. In this phantasmatic aspiration, proximity to rightfulness is also proximity to civilised status, to whiteness.[104] I underline, here, a point that I made earlier: the complexity of this intimate public's affective structure is connected to the way in which it intertwines a degree of recognition of an unequal international order as a source of injury with a *mis*recognition of the routes to recovery from this injury.[105]

[98]Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2017).

[99]Kolarova and Wiedlack, 'Introduction: Crip notes on the idea of development', p. 125.

[100]Ibid., p. 135.

[101]Ibid., p. 125.

[102]Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 1–3. See also Shildrick, 'Neoliberal precarity', p. 600, on the cruel optimism of development fantasies for racialised, debilitated populations.

[103]Shakhsari, *Politics of Rightful Killing*.

[104]On Iranianness as an aspiration to whiteness, see Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[105]My use of the term 'misrecognition' echoes its use in Bourdieusian sociology to refer to the ways in which a process or situation in which social distinctions are perpetuated is 'not recognised for what it is because it was not previously "cognised" as such within the range of the dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it'. See David James, "How Bourdieu bites back: recognising misrecognition in education and educational research", *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 45:1, pp.97–112 (p.100).

The intimate public and the nation: Wounded attachments, imperialism, and histories of injury

In this final section of the theoretical discussion, I engage with the aspect of the intimate public's affective structure, which, I argue, has somewhat more to do with recognition than with misrecognition of the sources of suffering. Here, I propose a partial rethinking of the place of nationalism within the intimate public. Berlant's critique of public intimacy centres around a scepticism towards the nation, and 'national sentimentality' as a 'universal' frame for subaltern suffering. While this scepticism is salutary and necessary, the Berlantian framing of nationalism requires qualification, in a Global South context, if it is not to obscure histories and legacies of (neo)colonialism and imperialism that continue to shape national experiences. In the first place, if a nation's entire population is living under sanctions, as in the case of Iran, there is an important sense in which national pain maps closely onto subaltern pain – if one excludes the elite.[106] While this experience will by no means be 'universal', there will be an element of common, indeed *national* experience. A decolonial 'crip' lens thus directs attention to the material debilitation and disablement of racialised populations, rather than limiting itself to questioning the uses of disablement as a metaphor for racialisation.[107] My second point concerns the construction of national history and memory around a narrative of suffering. Wendy Brown has argued that a subordinated group's continual narration of injury as the basis of its identity results in a politically unproductive attachment to the 'wound'; the group becomes imprisoned, in its self-imagining, by the history that produced the injury, rather than being actuated by a desire for a futurity in which the conditions which gave rise to the injury would no longer exist.[108] From a different perspective, Emma Hutchison draws on Vamik Volkan's concept of 'chosen trauma' to refer to affective national communities which refuse the choice of 'working through' their trauma, continue to define their identity as a wounded identity, and thus become 'unable to heal and move on in a forward-looking manner'.[109] While these approaches cast valuable light on the 'ways in which "'wounds" enter politics', nonetheless, Sara Ahmed suggests, 'the critique of injury needs to recognise the different rhetorical forms of injury as signs of an uneven and antagonistic history'.[110] For example, the recuperative model of 'working through' trauma would need to be set alongside a subaltern perspective on imperial violence as constitutive of and endemic to the present international order.[111] From such a perspective, as Ahmed argues, boundaries between past trauma and present injury are necessarily blurred; by implication, then, narratives of the colonial present (in Derek Gregory's phrase)[112] as an arena of recovery also become open to question. The wounds of the subaltern, Ahmed contends, 'remain open in the present'; 'the past is living rather than dead'. Hence the main problem with fetishising the wound as the basis of identity is precisely that it 'cuts the wound off from a history of "getting hurt" or injured'. While identitarian attachment to the wound is unproductive, to forget 'the past as the scene of wounding', she points out, 'would be a repetition of the violence or injury'.[113] I extend this observation to the national experience of racialised subalternity, as a partial corrective to a Berlantian scepticism concerning 'national sentimentality' and its associated intimacies.

It is thus important to note that aspects of the 'crippled nation' discourse engage with a history and memory of national injury that long predate the period of data collection. Images of Zarif

[106] See, for example, Shirzad Azad, *East Asia and Iran Sanctions* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

[107] Shildrick, 'Neoliberal precarity'; Puar, *Right to Maim*.

[108] Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), chapter 3.

[109] Hutchison, *Affective Communities*, p. 237.

[110] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p.33.

[111] See Anna Agathangelou, 'A conversation with Emma Hutchison and Frantz Fanon on questions of reading and global raciality', *Millennium*, 47:2 (2019), pp. 249–62. As I mentioned above, Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (pp. 9–10) also argues against 'the discourse of trauma', for its sense that catastrophe is something exceptional, shifting the focus away from suffering's systematicity.

[112] Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

[113] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 32–3.

suffering from back pain prompted many among his Facebook audience to recall Prime Minister Mossadegh's struggles with poor health.[114] Mosaddegh is the central historical figure of Iranian anti-colonial nationalism, invoked by many supporters of the Islamic Republic, as well as by most secularists.[115] Mosaddegh was elected as prime minister in 1951, and attempted unsuccessfully to nationalise Iran's oil in the teeth of opposition from Britain, which had a decisive stake in Iran's oil industry through the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. In 1953, he was overthrown in a coup backed by both the UK and the US.[116] The story, well known to most Iranians, of Mosaddegh's valiant, though ultimately doomed, struggle against old and new imperial powers, functioned, for many social media commentators – and for journalists and politicians – as a frame through which to interpret the travails of Zarif. The juxtaposition of Mosaddegh and Zarif, as I show below, entailed making clear parallels – usually, though not always, positive ones – between a prime minister who sought to combat Western economic (neo)colonialism in an attempt to achieve national self-sufficiency in oil, and Iran's current Foreign Minister, who was seen both as defending the country from damaging economic war in the form of sanctions, and as asserting Iran's right to achieve self-sufficiency in energy through its nuclear programme.[117] While there were divergent political interpretations of these parallels, in debates that raged across legacy as well as social media, I do not treat national memory, here, as simply a mythic construction that had little empirical purchase on reality.[118] The historical continuities that commentators perceived between Zarif's diplomacy around the nuclear negotiations and Mosaddegh's frantic diplomacy of 1951–2 were not, to them, merely 'grievances from the past', in President Obama's phrase;[119] they were pointing, instead, to unresolved and ongoing imperial violences, from military intervention to economic sanctions, that continued to impact Iranian lives and Iran's trajectory as a nation.[120] While the use of the 'crippling' trope is deeply problematic, not least for its ableist association of disability with a depotentiated national body, Iranian social media commentators' comparison of Javad Zarif's injury with the health problems of Mosaddegh nonetheless pointed to a continuous history – a *national* history – of '"getting hurt" or injured'.[121] The problem here, perhaps, does not lie in the subaltern's attachment to woundedness *per se*, but to the specific ways in which the wound is collectively imagined, narrated, and felt, including, here, its association with the current state, via the body of Zarif. As I have suggested, the complexity of this intimate public's affective structure is that it intertwines a partial recognition of the sources of injury in the racialised hierarchy of the international, with a *mis*recognition of the means of recovery, a misrecognition that involves a cruelly optimistic reattachment to both national and international political orders.

[114]See, for instance, the ISNA news agency image showing Javad Zarif in a wheelchair at the JPOA negotiations, Geneva, 16 October 2013. Photograph: Mona Hoobehfekr. Published on the Iranian government site (18 October 2013), available at: {irdiplomacy.ir}.

[115]See Shabnam Holliday, *Defining Iran: politics of resistance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), especially chapter 2.

[116]See Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, the CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S.-Iranian Relations* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013).

[117]For example of this parallel in Iranian legacy media, see the front cover of *Asman magazine*, which features a double portrait of Zarif and Mosaddegh; the text on the image reads: 'Moving from Zarif to Mosaddegh: Similarities and convergences between Mosaddegh and the Rouhani administration' (30 November 2013), available at: {https://noandish.com/fa/news/}.

[118]See, for example, the discussion of national 'memory and forgetting' in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 199–205.

[119]White House, 'Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz' (20 March 2010), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz}.

[120]Zarif was also frequently compared to another national hero, the minister Amir Kabir (1807–52), who was assassinated for his efforts to modernise the Persian state in the face of threats from foreign powers, and is viewed by Iranians as 'a patriot who chose to put country before self'. See Arian M. Tabatabai, *No Conquest, No Defeat: Iran's National Security Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp.33–4. In a photograph taken during the celebrations in Tehran at the successful conclusion of the nuclear talks in 2015, a woman can be seen holding up a newspaper that carries a montage of Zarif wearing the distinctive headgear of Amir Kabir (ISNA state news agency, 15 July 2015).

[121]Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 32.

Methodology

We are now in a position to more fully understand why the mediation of Zarif's severe back pain in October 2013 carried such affective resonance both within and beyond the circle of his social media followers. As a combined trope, these news events enabled the dual affective structure of the intimate public – consolation for suffering and hope for recuperation – to be read onto Zarif's injured body. In what follows, I set out the methodology for identifying and analysing these readings, or narrative strands, before moving onto the empirical section.

In selecting my data, I draw mainly upon my archive of interactions between Zarif and his following on his Facebook during October and November 2013. It is necessary to point out, first of all, that Zarif's popular Facebook page was in continual interaction with the wider Iranian public sphere. As Kermani and Adham point out, in authoritarian contexts, such as that of Iran, social media 'create opportunities to discuss sensitive topics and present opposing views'.[122] In 2013, Internet penetration in Iran reached the then relatively high proportion of 49.13 per cent of the population.[123] Zarif's Facebook was accessed by a wide audience inside the country, yet when faced with the constant evidence of Zarif's public diplomacy conducted via Facebook, in Farsi as well as English, the response of much Western media at the time was dismissive. A *Huffington Post* article observed of Zarif's Facebook that: '[t]he people of Iran never legally see these postings – they are blocked. The postings are for your eyes and my eyes and for the rest of the Western world.'[124] It is widely known that the Iranian state conducts filtering and blocking of social media content and platforms, and Facebook is officially banned in the country. However, in casting Iran as mired in isolationist, nativist backwardness behind an 'electronic curtain' – a phrase President Obama used in relation to Iran in 2012[125] – several Western media outlets in this period simply ignored the possibility that the audience for Zarif's Facebook posts might be largely domestic, even though his posts were (and are) for the most part written in Farsi. This narrative aligns with a broader orientalist narrative on Iran, which frames the country through the twin tropes of untrustworthiness and despotism.[126]

There is a good deal of evidence that contradicts the *Huffington Post* article's assertions. it is well established that the majority of Internet users in Iran are accustomed to using web proxies, VPNs, or other tools to bypass filtering, and most users of Facebook or other SNSs are not deterred from discussing political matters.[127] A survey conducted after the 2009 elections found that 78 per cent of respondents used VPNs to access at least one digital platform: all digital platforms accessible inside Iran, it should be noted, are based abroad. In this survey, 31 per cent of respondents used Facebook and 37 per cent believed Facebook was the most consulted source for coverage of the

[122]Hossein Kermani and Marzieh Adham, 'Mapping Persian Twitter: Networks and mechanism of political communication in Iranian 2017 presidential election', *Big Data & Society*, 8:1(2021), pp. 1–16 (p. 2).

[123]Ali Honari, 'Online social media research in Iran: A need to offer a bigger picture', *CyberOrient*, 9:2 (2015), pp. 6–32. See also عضویت نیمی از ایرانی‌ها در شبکه‌های اجتماعی/ بیش از *20* میلیون نفر در تلگرام [Half of Iranians are members of social networks: More than 20 million on Telegram]', *Iranian Student News Agency* (*ISNA*) (31 December 2015), available at: {https://www.isna.ir/news/94101005345/} accessed 12 May 2022. Reporting on a nationwide poll by the official Iranian Student Polling Agency, the piece claimed that more than 53 per cent of the nation's inhabitants were members of at least one digital platform, that 38 per cent of participants used digital platforms to follow politics, and that 10.6 per cent used Facebook – more users favoured Telegram, by the time of this survey.

[124]Micah Halpern, 'Iran steps up war on social media', *Huffington Post* (28 July 2014), available at: {https://www.huffpost.com/entry/iran-steps-up-war-on-soci_b_5381844} accessed 14 July 2021.

[125]White House, 'Remarks of President Obama Marking Nowruz' (20 March 2012), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/20/remarks-president-obama-marking-nowruz} accessed 5 April 2021.

[126]See, for example, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 'The visual politics of the 2015 Iran deal'; Solomon, 'Status, emotions'.

[127]An Iranian MP recently observed that more than 80 per cent of Iranians use VPNs or other filter-bypass devices to access banned platforms (such as Instagram, Telegram, and Facebook). 'تا کی می خواهیم با تکنولوژی بجنگیم؟ مایندە مجلس: ۸۰ درصد ایرانی‌ها/ عَفیلترشکن" و عَوی پی ان" نصب کرده‌اند [MP: 80% of Iranians have installed "filter breakers" and "VPNs": How long do we want to fight with technology?]', *KhabarOnline* (6 July 2022), available at: {https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1648414/} accessed 12 May 2022.

contested presidential 2009 election. Indications are that Facebook subsequently grew in popularity.[128] In one survey, Facebook was the most popular SNS among users inside Iran in 2012.[129] Conservative activists, as well as moderates and reformists, have employed Facebook for political purposes. Moreover, Zarif was by no means the only Iranian politician to open an official Facebook account in 2012–13, despite the state ban on Facebook.[130] For example, Facebook was used for campaigning during the 2013 elections by supporters of the hardline presidential candidate, Saeid Jalaili,[131] while Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, opened a Facebook account in December 2012.[132] Nonetheless, it was Javad Zarif, as Iran's chief negotiator in the nuclear talks, who became celebrated as, in effect, Iran's 'digital minister'.[133] His posts in Farsi performed the conscientious public servant through their often mundane information function. This level of openness from a minister, combined with the humble, warm, and intimate tone of his posts, invariably beginning 'Hello friends', was in marked contrast not only with the previous government's rejection of negotiations, but their tight-lipped refusal to acknowledge the violent impact of economic sanctions on the Iranian population.[134] By the time of Zarif's post about his back pain, on 8 October 2013, his Facebook following was reported as numbering some 450,000.[135] The marked overlap between Zarif's Facebook page and the wider Iranian public realm was vividly exemplified by the remarkable exchange that I discuss in the final section: the exchange between Zarif and a commentator identifying as a young woman suffering from severe pain and back problems, who questioned the sincerity of Zarif's professed empathy with Iranians' suffering under sanctions. Their dialogue became a nationwide news story, running across several legacy media outlets inside Iran.[136]

My analysis centres on the twin news events of Zarif's post concerning his back pain on 8 October 2013 and subsequent appearance at the talks in a wheelchair on 16 October, followed by his post on 18 October. The mediation of these events on his Facebook, and beyond, were crucial in establishing an affective repertoire of national suffering that helped to shape Iranian imaginings of national and international politics. I devote limited space to two other news events, insofar as they clarify my account of the repertoire of suffering and its implications – Zarif's much-reported exchange with the abovementioned young woman on his Facebook on 15 October, and his arrival at Mehrabad airport on 24 November. Adopting a discourse-analytical method, I conceptualise affect as always entangled in semiosis or meaning-making.[137] No hard and fast distinction is made between affect and emotion. I focus on the textual and visual material produced in and

[128]Hamid Ziyaee-Parvar and Seyyed Vahid Aghili, 'Investigating the penetration of virtual social networks among Iranian users', *Resaneh*, 4:80 (2009), pp. 23–42 (published by the Iranian Ministry of Education), available at: {(مقاله علمی وزارت علوم) بررسی نفوذ شبکه های اجتماعی مجازی در میان کاربران ایرانی} accessed 18 May 2022.

[129]Honari, 'Online social media research in Iran'.

[130]Radio Farda, 'Iranian Ministers Join Facebook En Masse, Sparking Debate About Online Censorship'. (11 September 2013), available at: {https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-zarif-facebook-page-debate-censorship/25102427.html} accessed 2 February 2017.

[131]Saeid Golkar, 'Student activism, social media and authoritarian rule in Iran', in I. Epstein (ed.), *The Whole World is Texting: Youth Protest in the Information Age* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015), pp. 60–80.

[132]Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Like? Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "joins Facebook"', *Guardian* (18 December 2017), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/18/iran-ayatollah-khamenei-joins-facebook} accessed 2 March 2017.

[133]Here I draw on the words of an Iranian diplomat; see Mojtaba Barhghandan, 'Iran's new social media-friendly approach', *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 14:1 (2015), pp. 137–45.

[134]A popular comment on a fairly banal Zarif post, beginning 'Hello friends, my meeting with Mrs Ashton was positive' (23 September 2013) expressed gratitude that a politician could behave with such openness. The comment received over 3,000 likes.

[135]Esfandiari, 'Back pain breaks ice'. As I noted above (n.15), Zarif's Facebook had received 929,000 likes by December 2015.

[136]For example, عکامنت تکان‌دهنده یک دختر در صفحه فیس بوک ظریف [A girl's spectacular comment on Dr Zarif's Facebook page]', *Asriran News* (22 October 2013), available at: {https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/337691/تکان-کامنت%E2%80%8C-دهندهیک-ظریف-بوک-فیس-صفحه-در-دختر}; also 'م'ه تکان‌دهنده یک دختر به ظریف + پاسخ ظریف [The shocking letter of a girl to Zarif, and Zarif's response]', *Student News Network* (22 October 2013), available at: {https://snn.ir/fa/news/269408/تکان-نامه%E2%80%8C-دهنده-یک-دختر-به-ظریف-پاسخ-ظریف}.

[137]See Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (London, UK: Sage, 2012).

around these events, both on Zarif's Facebook page and other media sites, as archival traces of what Margaret Wetherell has termed affective-discursive practices,[138] that is, as records of communicative acts that signify emotion as part of social meaning-making. Wetherell's approach has also been identified as well suited to the analysis of affective nationalism as discursive practice.[139] Intimacy, on the Zarif page, is treated here as a mediated online practice that works, like other affective-discursive practices, to 'construct relations of proximity and distance, affiliation and detachment, and inclusion and exclusion'.[140] Affective-discursive practices in turn draw on interpretative repertoires. An interpretative repertoire 'is a form of discursive practice or a recurring way of talking about a topic, characterizing and evaluating events and actions',[141] that draws on available cultural resources, including 'broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images'.[142] Accordingly, this study focuses on metaphors and images of 'crippling' incapacitation, injury, and bodily pain to describe Iran, its people and its political representatives, all placed in narrative relation to Zarif's back injury.

Data Analysis: mediating the 'crippled nation'

The data analysis identifies four different 'threads'[143] or narrative strands within this repertoire of incapacitating injury – I call them 'strands' to avoid confusion with 'thread' as a term commonly used in other (social) media contexts. The first strand, that of empathy for suffering and hope for recovery, is identified as the basis of the Zarif intimate public. The second, that of shame and anger at Iran's 'weakness', is identified with Zarif's conservative opponents in the state. The third strand draws on readings of Zarif's back injury by Western media, specifically English-language news reports that refer to Western diplomats' sympathy for Zarif's injury at the talks. The fourth, dissenting, strand, usually latent in the comment threads on the Zarif page, but surfacing occasionally, is exemplified here through the analysis of a viral exchange between Zarif and the commentator identifying as a young woman with severe health problems, who dissociated herself from the mainstream political factions. Through exploring the narratives of these threads, and the relations between them, I endeavour to draw out their significance for thinking about the emotional mediations of nationalism and imperial violence in IR.[144]

Affective strand #1: The suffering nation

On 8 October 2013, the Zarif team released several photographs showing Zarif in a plane on his way to the Geneva talks. They showed him working lying down, under a blanket, with his laptop in his chest. In a Facebook post, Zarif ascribed this to a sudden episode of back pain. 'This morning, after seeing the headline of one newspaper, I got severe back and leg pain', he wrote, 'I couldn't even walk or sit.' He noted that this had forced him to go to hospital for a scan.[145] In analysing the

[138]Margaret Wetherell and T. McCreanor, A. McConville, H. M. Barnes, J. le Grice, 'Settling space and covering the nation: Some conceptual considerations in analysing affect and discourse', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16 (2015), pp. 56–64. Studies of political communication have also increasingly focused on the visual and affective in recent years. See Giorgia Aiello and Katy Parry, *Visual communication: understanding images in media culture* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2020) pp.149–151.

[139]Marco Antonsich and Michael Skey, 'Affective nationalism: Issues of power, agency and method', *Progress in Human Geography*, 41:6 (2017), pp. 843–45.

[140]Wetherell, 'Settling space', p 58.

[141]Ibid., p. 61.

[142]Margaret Wetherell and John Potter, *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation* (London, UK: Harvester, 1992), p. 91.

[143]Wetherell, 'Settling space', p. 61.

[144]Replies to Zarif's posts have for the most part been anonymised, and their content paraphrased, in accordance with standard ethical guidelines for internet research. See aline shakti franzke, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers, *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0.* (2020), available at: {https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf}.

[145]Javad Zarif Facebook post (8 October 2013).

affective narratives around Zarif's back pain, I begin with the reaction strand that seems most characteristic of the Zarif Facebook page as an intimate public. Zarif's 8 October post announcing his treatment for back pain attracted huge sympathy among his already substantial Facebook following.[146] Especially for Iranians inside the country, his back pain seemed to symbolise and embody the notion of sanctions as a crushing and incapacitating burden on the nation. What attracted global as well as national attention, however, was Zarif's subsequent appearance at the final press conference to mark the end of the first round of negotiations on 16 October: he appeared in public in a wheelchair. His injury generated sympathy both inside and outside Iran – it supposedly even 'broke the ice' among diplomats during the nuclear talks.[147] Zarif's first Facebook post in Persian after this appearance, on 18 October, began, as usual, with the warm and familiar greeting, 'hello, friends'. The post mainly focused on reporting details of the negotiations – in Zarif's rather typical mode of the humble public servant doing his duty – and only devoted a few sentences at the end to his medical condition. Much more expansive were the comments on his post. An early comment that attracted thousands of likes pointed out that Zarif's body in the wheelchair also represented the body of Iran, a body that was wracked by pain, restricted in its movements, and barely able to participate in the talks.[148]

Whatever the origin of Zarif's back pain, these images and texts mediated and staged a claim to suffering that had larger ramifications than his immediate personal experience. In mediating the onset of his back pain, I argue, Zarif was reappropriating an ableist trope of US diplomatic discourse, in order to resituate it within the affective repertoire of national injury, centring on the trope of the nation as disabled body. A typical reply among the many that praised the comparison expressed the hope that the nation of Iran could one day overcome its pain and frailty and stand upright. A few months later, in April 2014, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei was to draw on similar imagery, though rather less empathetically:

> The unreasonable behavior of global bullies towards the Islamic Republic correlates with our weakness and our power. Whenever we manage to stand on our own feet and become strong, they will have to behave in a polite and reasonable way. Paying attention to this truth is the key to solving all the problems of the country.[149]

In this passage from a widely disseminated speech, the metaphor of a strong, fully capacitated body evokes the independent and freely developing nation, free from imperial interference.[150] Conversely, the image of the injured or disabled body represents the nation suffering the burden of foreign intervention, in the form of sanctions. Khamenei swiftly repudiates this picture of national 'weakness', while the commenters on the Zarif page embrace it, but all mediate an understanding of the imagery's significance for the national narrative. As Eunjung Kim explains, in another postcolonial context, that of Korea, '[d]isability as nationalized identity produces the mythical experience of shared oppression by the "imagined community" of a modern nation-state that shall be sovereign and autonomous – a community horizontally imagined in the form of an independent, nondisabled body.'[151] The use of disability as metaphor for racial and colonial subalternity can be read in number of ways in the context of Iran sanctions: firstly, the metaphor suggests, highly misleadingly, that no matter how privileged one is, as a member of the Iranian national community, one

[146] Golnaz Esfandiari, 'Back pain breaks ice'.

[147] 'Iran nuclear talks: How negotiators broke the ice', *BBC News* (16 October 2013), available at: {https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24560357}; Esfandiari, 'Back pain breaks ice'.

[148] See Zarif post beginning 'Hello friends. It's 10:30 on a Friday morning. The Geneva talks were useful and constructive …' (18 October 2013), available at: {https://www.facebook.com/jzarif/posts/687446941266757}.

[149] Quoted in Solomon, 'Status, emotions', p. 142; see 'Leader Meets with Laborers of MAPNA Group', Office of the Supreme Leader (30 April 2014), available at: {https://english.khamenei.ir/news/1898/Leader-Meets-with-Laborers-of-MAPNA-Group}.

[150] Kim, *Curative Violence*.

[151] Ibid., p. 20.

suffers the same injury; secondly, the metaphor inferiorises the status of disabled people within the nation through the trope of 'recovery' from an undesired condition, while simultaneously erasing disability as an oppression suffered by a particular group within the population; lastly, the imagery acknowledges, albeit in distorted fashion, something of the debilitation visited upon the wider population by imperial violence.[152]

The trope of disablement, I argue, specifically mediates sanctions as imperial violence through invoking the discourse of 'crippling' (*falaj*, in Persian). In March 2012, President Obama emphasised the growing international impetus towards multilateral sanctions on Iran, in the wake of the comprehensive US sanctions of 2010:[153] 'our friends in Europe and Asia and elsewhere are joining us … the Iranian government faces the prospect of even more crippling sanctions'.[154] In August 2013, prominent Iranian political prisoners wrote to Obama asking him to lift what they also referred to as 'crippling' sanctions.[155] Zarif himself used the same vocabulary, speaking of sanctions as 'crippling' and 'deadly' in an English-language video released during the tense final phase of the first round of negotiations.[156] Using a 'crip' decolonial lens, recent scholarship has highlighted the intertwinement of racialised and ableist features in the discourse of development as a linear trajectory of neoliberal progress; in this view, both the racialised body and disabled or 'crippled' body operate as blockages to normative, forward-facing temporality.[157] While the discourse of 'crippling' sanctions was taken by Iranians to imply their permanent disablement/incapacitation, President Obama simultaneously held out the promise, in his Iranian New year (Nowruz) broadcasts from March 2009 to March 2016, that Iranians would enjoy access to global economic opportunities, once sanctions were lifted; Rouhani, in his 2013 election campaign, had promised much the same thing. The dual affective structure of the intimate public on the Zarif page was thus characterised, on the one hand, by consolation and empathy for past and present injury, and on the other, optimistic, future-oriented attachment to the political order that was the source of that very injury. Or to put it differently: the complaint of racially otherised, sanctioned, non-normative bodies co-existed with a desperate desire for rightful, deracialised, normativity.

Affective strand #2: Vulnerability as weakness

In the second, conservative strand of the affective repertoire of national suffering, Zarif's appearance in a wheelchair also invited identification with the body of the nation. The emotional responses of conservatives differed noticeably, however, from those of Zarif's followers.

[152]See Puar, *Right to Maim*, for a discussion of debilitation as a colonial and imperial exercise of power.

[153]On these sanctions, which took the form of the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), signed into law by Obama on 1 July 2010, see Gordon 'Crippling Iran'.

[154]White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 'Fact Sheet: Sanctions Related to Iran' (31 July 2012), available at: {https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/31/fact-sheet-sanctions-related-iran}. The term 'crippling sanctions', in relation to Iran, seems to have first been used in 2009 by Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton to signal the administration's intention to bring a halt to the Iranian nuclear programme. See David E. Sanger, 'US weighs Iran sanctions if talks are rejected', *New York Times* (2 August 2009), available at: {https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/03/world/middleeast/03nuke.html} accessed 27 December 2020. In the run-up to the administration's CISADA sanctions of 2010, State Department spokesperson, P. J. Crowley had stated: '[i]t is not our intent to have crippling sanctions that have … a significant impact on the Iranian people, … Our actual intent is to find ways to pressure the government while protecting the people.' See 'US says does not seek crippling sanctions on Iran', *Reuters* (25 February 2010), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-nuclear-clinton-idUKTRE61O55220100225}. This nuance seems to have been employed less and less frequently by members of the Obama administration.

[155]'Iranian political prisoners' plea to Barack Obama: The full letter', *Guardian* (8 August 2013), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/aug/08/iran-political-prisoners-letter-to-obama}.

[156]The video was released on Javad Zarif's YouTube channel and Twitter account. See Javad Zarif, 'Iran's Message: There is a Way Forward' (19 November 2013), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao2WH6GDWz4}.

[157]Kolarova and Wiedlack, 'Introduction: Crip Notes on the Idea of Development'; Shildrick, 'Neoliberal precarity'.

Conservative political opponents of the moderate Rouhani administration, of which Zarif was a member, remained suspicious, if not outright hostile, towards the government's negotiations with the 'global powers', despite the public backing of Supreme Leader Khamenei for the talks.[158] The two previous conservative administrations, under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had adopted a stance of defiance towards Western pressure over Iran's nuclear programme. Ahmadinejad had dismissed economic sanctions, famously, as a 'torn piece of paper'.[159] During and after Rouhani's election campaign, intransigent conservatives who had refused negotiations were repeatedly figured to Iranian audiences as callously complicit in the violence of sanctions. Zarif made a sharp intervention into this debate, in his 8 October post, with his claim that his back spasm had been brought on by nervous stress after reading a newspaper headline related (as it quickly emerged) to an article in an Iranian conservative newspaper, *Kayhan*, that criticised his negotiating performance.[160] Zarif describes his painful condition in some detail for his audience. He ends, as he often does, by quoting the popular Persian poet Rumi to affectively underline his message, that his enemies have no need to threaten him – he is already enduring 'death in life', and thus sacrificing himself for the good of the nation. Many of the overwhelmingly sympathetic comments under Zarif's post refer to *Kayhan* specifically, identifying the conservatives as the agents of both Zarif's and the nation's suffering. *Kayhan*'s politics are presented in several comments as a direct cause of national disablement, through reference to the massive numbers of casualties suffered during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s. By contrast, conservative media outlets strongly criticised Zarif's public wheelchair use, and its function as a metaphor for the condition of the nation. One conservative MP, Karimi-Ghodoussi, commented: 'Zarif's presence in the negotiations, translated into diplomatic language … means Iran's crippling … By sitting in a wheelchair during the Geneva talks, [he] gave a message to the Western powers that the Iranian foreign minister, as a symbol of Iranian diplomacy, has become crippled, which means the crippling of Iran.'[161] Zarif tersely alludes to these conservative critics at the end of his posted update on the negotations a few days later: 'I apologize if my physical condition offended some of you.'[162] The conservative response, then, to Zarif's staging of his condition was not empathy, but shame and anger at Zarif's weakness and Iran's humiliation.

The uses of the anti-imperialist past

Images of Zarif working from his bed immediately recalled, for many social media commentator and journalists, another frail body, that of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. When a comparison between Zarif and Mosaddegh is made, it usually speaks to the particular version of the affective repertoire of national suffering that the commentator wishes to mediate. Mosaddegh, as mentioned above, had attempted to nationalise Iran's oil industry against Britain's opposition, and was overthrown in a US-UK-backed coup in 1953.[163] As an unofficial national hero, Mosaddegh symbolises Iran's repeated subjection to imperial intervention, but also its history of anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance.[164] Given his secular politics, however, Mosaddegh has never been

[158] See Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy'.

[159] Reuters, 'Ahmadinejad says U.N. resolution a "piece of torn paper"'.

[160] Javad Zarif Facebook post, beginning 'It's 9.30 at night and I just got back from the hospital' (8 October 2013). See Majid KhosraviNik, 'Macro and micro legitimation in discourse on Iran's nuclear programme: The case of Iranian national newspaper Kayhan', *Discourse & Society*, 26:1 (2015), pp. 52–73.

[161] Quoted in Dana Iran News, 'Karimi-Ghodoussi: Zarif's appearance in a wheelchair during the talks intended to mediate the crippling of Iran' (3 November 2013), available at: {https://dana.ir/news/23695.html}. Javad Karimi-Ghodoussi was one of the 'Delvapasan' ('worried') parliamentary group of MPs, which aligned itself with the previous administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and was hostile to the Rouhani administration.

[162] Zarif Facebook post, 18 October 2013.

[163] See Abrahamian, *The Coup*.

[164] See Holliday, *Defining Iran*; Abrahamian, *The Coup*.

adopted into the Islamic Republic's official canon of national heroes. Responding in part to Zarif's initial 8 October post mentioning the *Kayhan* headline, an article on another conservative website, Bultan News, featured montages of Zarif and Mosaddegh, both recuperating in bed; the article compared the vigilance of the soldiers who had defended the country during the Iran-Iraq war with the 'insult' of Zarif's bedridden incapacity, concluding that 'the Iranian people now want strong negotiators who do not stint on physical training.'[165] Mosaddegh is also implicitly derogated in this comparison, his supposed weakness in the face of imperialism contrasting with the strength of the Islamic Republic. The article aligns with the narrative of Iranian conservative parliamentarians who, as we saw, were vehement in rejecting the weak image of Iran that they understood Zarif to be projecting.[166]

In contrast, for many of Zarif's followers, the parallel with Mosaddegh was not only obvious, but favourable to both men. Replying to the comment on Zarif's 18 October post which compared Zarif's bodily condition and the nation's, one commentator extracted an optimistic message from the parallel between images of Zarif in bed and in the wheelchair, and pictures of Mosaddegh in bed. Mosaddegh, they observed, continued to give his all for the nation, despite his ill health, which had actually been brought on by his efforts to secure nationalization of Iran's oil industry. Taking a rosy view of Mosaddegh's diplomacy of 1951-2 prior to his overthrow, the commentator concluded by wishing Zarif similar success in the nuclear talks.[167] Rather than failure in the face of the West, for this commentator Mosaddegh represents triumph. In this individual's memory, rather than malingering in bed, Mossadegh has been admitted to hospital. He is also represented here as reading reports, just like Zarif in the images posted on 8 October. The Zarif team's media output periodically included photographs and posts concerning his incapacitation that mediated resilience and dedication, self-sacrifice for the country, a work ethic maintained despite pain and immobility.[168] For affective strand #1, associated with support for Zarif and Rouhani, the comparison with Mosaddegh clarifies the affective structure of the intimate public on Zarif's Facebook, in which empathy for his bodily condition is accompanied by admiration for Zarif's dedication to the national interest, in the face of Western hard power and its 'crippling' effects. In the wake of the 2013 JPOA deal, this supportive reading also dominated the media coverage; the front cover of *Asman* magazine, for example, depicted the bodies of Zarif and Mosaddegh as partially merging[169] Nonetheless, these different political readings share a common affective repertoire of suffering: whether through a moderate or a conservative political lens, the parallel with Mossadegh, expressed through the figure of bodily injury, mediates Iran's past and present condition as a victim of neocolonial intervention.[170]

[165] عاقای ظریف ادای مصدق را درنیاورید ، رزمندگان *72* ساعت پشت بی سیم بیدار می ماندند [Mr. Zarif, do not pay tribute to Mosaddegh, the fighters stayed awake for 72 hours]', *Bultan News* (16 November 2013), available at: {https://www.bultannews.com/fa/news/176594/بیدار-می-ماندندآقای-ظریف-ادای-مصدق-را-درنیاورید-رزمندگان-72-ساعت-پشت-بی-سیم-}.

[166] See Dana Iran News article above, quoting Javad Karimi-Ghodoussi.

[167] Comment on Zarif Facebook post, 18 October 2013.

[168] That said, Iranian media coverage of Zarif beyond the conservative outlets could sometimes be ambivalent about his resemblance to Mosaddegh in 'going under the blanket', even when otherwise sympathetic. See Mohammad Quchani, 'What are the similarities between Dr. Zarif and Dr. Mosaddeq?', *Parsine.com* (1 December 2013), available at: {https://www.parsine.com/fa/news/170085/شباهت-یادداشتی‌که‌محمد-قوچانی-درباره-مصدق-و-ظریف-نوشت}.

[169] The text over the lower part of the image reads: 'Moving from Zarif to Mosaddegh: Similarities and convergences between Mosaddegh and the Rouhani administration' (30 November 2013), available at: {https://noandish.com/fa/news/}.

[170] More recently, in 2019, Zarif's speech of 30 June to the UN Security Council, which protested US conduct in unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA, quoted from Mossadegh's own statement to the UNSC in 1951 protesting British imperialism's arrogance. See عدو نقل قول ظریف از دکتر مصدق در نشست شورای امنیت

[Two elegant quotes from Dr Mossadegh at the Security Council meeting]', *Ensaf News*

(10 July 2019), available at: {http://www.ensafnews.com/241291/دونقل‌قول‌ظریف‌ازدکترمصدق‌درنشست‌شور/}.

Affective strand #3: Vulnerability as civilisational proximity

The third affective strand concerns Western attitudes to Zarif's condition and the comparison with Mosaddegh. While some observers were sceptical about Zarif's use of a wheelchair,[171] the majority of Western diplomats and policy advisers reacted to Zarif's public staging of his back injury at the talks with sympathy. As the journalist Ben Offiler noted, Zarif's appearance in a wheelchair was far more positively received by the Western side than the performances staged by Prime Minister Mosaddegh on his visit to the US in 1951, which ultimately failed to attract US sympathy for Iranian efforts to contest British control of Iran's oil industry. Offiler wondered how Zarif could mediate 'weakness' to his and Iran's advantage, whereas Mosaddegh's emotional performances of Iran's weakness and distress in the face of British imperialism had been received with ambivalence and contempt by US and Western media and politicians: Mosaddegh, as Offiler recalls, was derogated for his unmanly proneness to 'tears and fainting spells', and his propensity for receiving guests in pyjamas while lying in bed.[172] Western readings of Mosaddegh's public persona in 1951–3 thus drew on an orientalist repertoire of effeminate excess and 'passivity', characteristics that marked out an Eastern nation, Iran, as ripe for domination.[173] In 2013, however, as Offiler pointed out, Zarif's physical incapacity had done him and the Iranian side no harm at all diplomatically – Western diplomats instead offered empathy, sharing stories of their own back pain and suggesting treatments.[174] One answer, I suggest, lies in the respective stereotypes of Iranian masculinity that were prevalent in 2013 and 1951 respectively. From 2005, until the election of Hassan Rouhani as president, the conservative presidential administrations of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had drawn on the repertoire of tough and unyielding Islamic revolutionary masculinity,[175] performatively communicating defiance and stoicism in the face of economic sanctions.[176] In the orientalist repertoire, these performances would read as hypermasculine aggression, to be framed, in this repertoire's racialising terms, as backward and uncivilised.[177] By contrast, Zarif's vulnerability would have conceivably appeared to Western observers as a mark of 'humanity', that is, of cultural and racial proximity to the West, in the following terms: an absence of signifiers of threat; the civilised hierarchy of mind over the physical body; modern masculinity's rejection of 'tough' exteriority. Indeed, as Constance Duncombe's analysis of diplomatic tweets shows, Zarif's English-language tweets tended to attribute aggressive hypermasculinity to the West rather than the East, thus implicitly claiming civilisational equality, if not superiority. Going beyond the usual vocabulary of 'bullying', often used by Iran's representatives to describe Western threats of continued sanctions, Zarif referred to these threats, on more than one occasion, as 'macho'.[178] There is considerable evidence that Zarif's following understood and appreciated his performance of intelligent, civilised masculinity as (out)matching the West on its own terms. One of the comments celebrating Zarif's triumphant return to Mehrabad airport after concluding the JPOA interim deal seems

[171] Suzanne Maloney, Iran expert at the Brookings Institute, was reported as saying that Zarif's ascription of his injury to reading a newspaper headline was a 'political flourish that may play well in Iran but generates rolled eyes elsewhere' (Esfandiari, 'Back pain breaks ice').

[172] Ben Offiler, 'Iran analysis: How Foreign Minister Zarif's back pain may have changed diplomacy … & "being a man"', *EA Worldview* (21 October 2013), quoting *Time* magazine on Mossadegh, 1952. See also Mary Ann Heiss, 'Real men don't wear pajamas: Anglo-American cultural perceptions of Mohammed Mossadeq and the Iranian oil nationalization dispute', in Peter L. Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss (eds), *Empire and Revolution: The United States and the World since 1945* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2000), pp. 178–94.

[173] Heiss, 'Real men'.

[174] See, for example, Esfandiari, 'Back pain breaks ice'; *BBC News*, 'Iran nuclear talks'.

[175] See Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

[176] Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change* (London, UK Gingko Library 2019), p. 143.

[177] 'Defiance' seems to be the single most favoured trope from the affective repertoire deployed by the Western media to represent Ahmadinejad's stance in the face of sanctions, along with 'hostility'. See, on masculinising stereotypes of Iran, Tafakori, 'Digital feminism beyond nativism and Empire'.

[178] Duncombe, 'Twitter and transformative diplomacy', pp. 557, 559.

precisely to address the conservative criticism that Zarif's performance was failing to mediate a 'strong' Iran to the West:

> Don't look at his fragility, he's crushing six countries![179]

The comment, which received 14,000 likes, protests that Zarif's opponents inside Iran should not focus on his vulnerability, but should instead see him as overcoming and humiliating the P5+1 powers. It utilises wordplay, rhyming two words with almost opposite meanings – *zarif*, 'delicate' or 'fragile', and *harif*, 'conquering' or 'crushing', in a powerful rejoinder to those conservative champions of a superseded set of emotional norms who would argue that one cannot simultaneously be *zarif* (delicate) and *harif* – a competitor or winner on the world stage.

Despite accusations of weakness from conservatives, then, Zarif seems to have managed to both navigate and shape a range of domestic and external readings of the nation and its place in the hierarchical international order. He steered a course between the twin orientalist tropes of effeminacy and hypermasculinity, in Western readings, while to domestic audiences, he was able to reframe the terms of Iranian masculinity in a way that expressed the advantages of the moderates' approach over that of the conservatives in terms of dealing with Western powers. It is plausible that the domestic support for Zarif's identity performances at the talks, via his Facebook page, made his task of continuing to project these narratives to both domestic and foreign audiences much easier. In mobilising and soothing Iranian anxieties concerning the country's insufficient level of modernity and civilisation, Zarif arguably encouraged hopes among his followers for a normative, deracialised proximity to the violent imperial order that had itself been the source of injury to Iranian bodies and lives.

Affective thread #4: contesting national sentimentality

Many posts on the Zarif page mediate a sense that Zarif is not like other politicians, that even despite his privilege, he is able to recognise and empathise with ordinary people's suffering. Following Zarif's first post concerning his back pain, one commentator addressed Zarif directly, observing that he had shown understanding of people's ongoing pain and misery, but at least Zarif could receive medical treatment, whereas most people were unable to afford it. Such comments imply, nonetheless, that while Zarif's suffering may not be as severe or as longstanding as that of ordinary people, his sharing of his pain on social media has allowed him to be included in the ranks of sufferers.[180] The basis of the 'affective contract' of this intimate public,[181] is Zarif's ability to empathise and to receive empathy in return.

Desperate appeals to Zarif, in the form of lengthy, personal letters, surface at intervals in the comments on his page during the protracted negotiations. The letters implore him to help bring about a speedy end to sanctions, and they often mediate a degree of doubt as to whether Zarif can empathise with the writer's pain. The more elaborate responses had in themselves become a topic in Iranian news sites, with much discussion of their highly emotional and intimate content. One urgent appeal went viral. Posted as a comment on Zarif's 18 October update on the Geneva talks, the appeal was widely reported in domestic news outlets as 'shocking' and 'spectacular'.[182] Zarif's reply to this comment on his Facebook page was also widely covered.[183] Identifying herself as a 26-year-old woman, the anonymous commentator describes her despair at being unable to afford her Master's studies, and at the inability of her husband, a doctoral student, to find a job. She continues:

[179]Comment on Zarif Facebook post, 24 November 2013.

[180]Comments on Zarif post, 8 October 2013.

[181]Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, p. 66.

[182]For example, '[A girl's spectacular comment on Dr Zarif's Facebook page]', *Asriran News*. I have not anonymised or paraphrased the comment, given the extensive coverage it received in Iranian national media outlets.

[183]Including on BBC Persian and Radio Farda. Examples of Iranian domestic reportage include: '[The shocking letter of a girl to Zarif, and Zarif's response]', *Student News Network*.

> I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. I just want my rights. In what language do I need to say to you that I do not want nuclear energy, at the expense of my youth and my life? I would sell my right [to nuclear energy], instead I want a job, a house, and money for my dowry. I don't know what the problem is with your back, Mr Zarif, but I understand your pain very well. … Pain starts in my back and goes down to my ankles, I can't stand up, can't sit, or sleep. It feels as though there are hot wires in my legs … . I will die of this pain but I have no money to go to a doctor … . Lucky you who has a doctor for his pain … This is the difference between you and me … . My life is hanging from a thread, but you, the government, live peacefully and beautifully with no stress. This is why you with comfort and calm tell us about the next round of negotiations, but the same thing causes tears in my eyes … . I am telling you all of this for you to know that there are people who are alive but have many, many times wished for death. Do something to finish the sanctions.[184]

The young woman's post openly contests two claims that underpin Zarif's Facebook messaging. Zarif's first, openly stated, claim is that defending Iran's nuclear programme is compatible with a concern for citizens living under sanctions: the phrase 'I would sell my right', echoes the language of the diplomatic negotiations, during which Zarif asserted the country's 'right' to nuclear energy, while also adopting a stance of empathy towards the population's suffering.[185] The second claim is that Zarif's empathy and sense of public duty is all the more authentic for being based in a suffering that is shared. This claim, though not openly stated, is powerfully signified through the trope of back pain. The commentator flatly rebuts this implied claim by pointing to an inequality between her suffering and Zarif's ('lucky you, who has a doctor for his pain'). Taken in isolation, this would not be an unusual comment, but the force of the remark is compounded by what the commentator perceives as Zarif's failure to project empathetic recognition of this inequality ('you with comfort and calm …'). Her comment even draws on the language of the post in which Zarif had shared news of his sudden incapacitation, in order to subvert its implicit claim to a commonality of suffering.[186] As Eunjung Kim has pointed out in reference to the history of Korea, the image of the nation collectively disabled by foreign powers homogenises a variety of positionalities within the borders of the nation, and erases 'the diversity of [its inhabitants'] experiences, capabilities and perspectives'.[187] In pointing to a similar erasure, the commentator reframes the Zarif page as no longer a space of hope for the normative life that she eloquently evokes. The intimate public's sentimental promise that it was a space of 'true feeling',[188] a metonym for the larger nurturing space of the nation, has dissolved. Berlant has described texts such as the young woman's post as '"countersentimental"', a 'resistant strain within the sentimental domain' that 'withdraws from the contract that presumes consent' to the 'sentimental alliance'.[189] Here the commentator devastatingly picks apart the ways in which national sentimentality purports to include and yet invisibilises her experience of incapacitation and disablement.

Zarif's reply, posted directly underneath the woman's comment, was also much reported in Iranian media. Beginning 'Hello, my dear girl', his response does not depart from the familiar and empathetic register of his Facebook page; it speaks of the obligation upon the government

[184]Comment on Zarif post, 18 October 2013.

[185]Notably on Zarif's Facebook post on 24 November 2013, the night of his welcome at Mehrabad airport, but also in his video broadcast of 3 July 2014 ('Iran's Message'). It should be noted that consistent majorities of Iranians during these talks supported Iran's pursuit of its nuclear programme, and specifically its right to enrich uranium, according to University of Maryland polls. See Nancy Gallagher, Clay Ramsay, and Ebrahim Mohseni, 'Iranian Attitudes on Nuclear Negotiations', Centre for International Security Studies at Maryland (September 17, 2014), available at: https://cissm.umd.edu/research-impact/publications/iranian-attitudes-nuclear-negotiations

[186]Javad Zarif Facebook post (in Persian), beginning 'It's 9.30 at night' (8 October 2013). The commentator echoes, for example, the sentence: 'I could not even walk or sit.'

[187]Kim, *Curative Violence*, p. 23.

[188]Berlant, *Female Complaint*, p. 56.

[189]Ibid., pp. 55–6.

to resolve the crisis and implores her (and the wider audience) to believe that he was grateful 'to you all individually' during the negotiations. This could be taken as addressing the commentator's point that her specific, individual suffering was erased in the trope of the injured nation; but it also again perpetuates the idea that genuine person-to-person feeling could resolve inequalities that are structural, a stance that Berlant identifies as characteristic of intimate publics.[190] Once more stressing Iran's 'legitimate rights' to nuclear energy, Zarif ends his reply with an optimistic quotation from a popular modern Iranian poet: 'Be patient a little longer: the dawn is nearing.' This part of his reply became a newspaper headline.[191] Iranian and Persian poetry, which is part of everyday popular culture, is repeatedly drawn upon by Zarif as a resource for establishing intimacy, to confirm him as an 'insider', close to the people. In this context, the commentator's subversion of the emotional repertoire of the Zarif Facebook all the more strongly signals her affective disinvestment from the 'cruel optimism', in Berlant's terms, that is offered by the Iranian state.

Conclusion

Given the absence of ordinary social media narratives from the study of Iran's relations with the West, this article has outlined a decolonial affective approach that engages with racialising and ableist mediations of imperial power, focusing in this case on the affective trope of the nation as disabled by economic sanctions, and hence as blocked from pursuing a 'normative' developmental path to the 'good life' and deracialised status. It thus attends to the ways in which emotional narratives of the nation interweave with mediations of the international. The focus on the contractual aspect of these affective investments, drawing on the concept of the intimate public, has allowed attention to how attachment to a political order operates through an expectation of reciprocity, and when and how this reciprocity may be called into question.

As the last example illustrates, the desire for intimacy, for recognition, and for normativity, may exceed that which the state can provide: postcolonial scholars, drawing on Berlant, have argued that intimacy, in this sense, is 'more than that which takes place within the purview of institutions, the state, and an ideal of publicness',[192] but 'neither is it a romanticized ideal that exists outside of the normalizing power of institutions'.[193] I have suggested that the concept of intimate publics enables a combined attention to mass 'subaltern pain' and to its instrumentalisation, where neither element disappears from view; it thus complements and enriches the concept of affective communities built around narratives of injury and trauma. Recognising the ongoingness of violence as a structural part of the international order – of which economic sanctions is a manifestation, I would suggest this throws into doubt any hard and fast distinction between authentic trauma, from which national communities may recover, and the elements of 'chosen trauma' in states' victimisation narratives.[194] Here, I propose, the concept of the intimate public can open up a decolonial perspective on affective communities in the Global South, allowing us to map the complex relation between the narrativisation of the imagined nation and the materiality of colonial injury. An intimate public's structures of consolation and empathy may simultaneously be shaped by the regulatory practices of sentimental politics and reverberate with the painful histories of imperial violence that connect past and present. Likewise, the affective structure of hope, as a form of attachment that is so central

[190] See, for example, Berlant's remarks on Obama and 'true feeling' in Lauren Berlant and Jordan Greenwald, 'Affect in the End Times: A conversation with Lauren Berlant', *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 20:2 (spring/summer 2012), pp. 71–89 (p. 80).

[191] عظریف: اندکی صبر، سحر نزدیک است [Zarif: "Be patient a little longer: the dawn is nearing"]', *Eghtesad Online* (23 October 2013), available at: {https://www.eghtesadonline.com/خبر-بخش-18/29582-ظریف-اندکی-صبر-سحر-نزدیک-است}. The quotation is from a poem by Sohrab Sepehri.

[192] Lauren Berlant, 'Introduction', in Lauren Berlant (ed.), *Intimacy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 3–8 (p. 4).

[193] Phanuel Antwi, Sarah Brophy, Helene Strauss, and Y-Dang Troeung, 'Postcolonial intimacies: Gatherings, disruption, departures', *Interventions*, 15:1 (2013), pp. 1–9 (p. 4).

[194] Hutchison, *Affective Communities*, pp. 220–1.

to the intimate public, needs to be rethought as not only national in its orientation, but as invested, through tropes of recovery from injury, in the cruel promise of the international order.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Lilie Chouliaraki for her careful reading of earlier drafts of this article, and her unwavering support. Warm appreciation goes to Sabiha Allouche for her motivating and helpful feedback during the tortuous process of writing. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful and formative suggestions, and the journal editors for their guidance and care, especially during the article's later iterations. I wrote the first version of this article during my postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. I thank IASH for their support and interest in the research.

Dr Sara Tafakori is Assistant Professor in media and communication at University of Leeds. Her research intersects feminist theory, media and affect, critical race, and postcolonial studies. She is interested in digital affective practices in (post)colonial contact zones and their role in creating new political spaces of appearance. Her work particularly explores the problematics of constructing feminist solidarity, with a focus on hybrid activist networks in Iran. She has published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, The European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Feminist Media Studies*, among other journals. She can be found on Twitter at @TafakoriSara

Cite this article: Tafakori, S. 2023. The intimate public as a decolonial lens: "cripping" affect, nationalism and imperial violence. *Review of International Studies* **49,** 694–720. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000116