

Framing Targeted Killings in Newspapers: The Cases of Osama bin Laden and Qassem Soleimani

Enmarcando los asesinatos selectivos en los periódicos:
los casos de Osama bin Laden y Qassem Soleimani

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ABSTRACT

How did major U.S. news outlets frame the targeted killings? This study examines how major U.S. newspapers framed the assassinations of Osama bin Laden and Qassem Soleimani, aiming to identify their stances and highlighted themes. Employing Bloch-Elkon's approach (2007), we analyzed 450 news articles from *The Washington Post* (192), *The New York Times* (171), and *The Wall Street Journal* (87). The findings reveal that the media favored the bin Laden killings more in both analyzed periods and emphasized security-related themes in both cases.

Key words: framing, targeted killing, United States, media.

RESUMEN

¿Cómo enmarcaron los principales medios de comunicación estadounidenses los asesinatos selectivos? Este estudio examina cómo los principales periódicos estadounidenses enmarcaron los asesinatos de Osama bin Laden y Qassem Soleimani, con el objetivo de identificar sus posturas y temas destacados. Utilizando el enfoque de Bloch-Elkon (2007), analizamos cuatrocientos cincuenta artículos de *The Washington Post* (192), *The New York Times* (171) y *The Wall Street Journal* (87). Los hallazgos revelan que los medios favorecieron más el asesinato de bin Laden en ambos periodos analizados y enfatizaron temas relacionados con la seguridad en ambos casos.

Palabras clave: presentación, asesinato selectivo, Estados Unidos, medios de comunicación.

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INTRODUCTION

On May 2, 2011, approximately ten years after the attack on the Twin Towers, the president of the United States at that time, Barack Obama, announced the success of the operation that led to the death of Osama bin Laden. After an extensive intelligence development process, the acknowledged leader of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda was located hiding in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan (Bowden, 2012), where the operation for his capture or death was conducted. The operation, known as “Neptune Spear,” received wide media coverage and generated great public commotion. In this sense, U.S. news outlets played a key role in informing the population about the event’s details and international implications (Onyebadi, 2016).

U.S. newspapers portrayed the killing of bin Laden as the elimination of a dangerous international terrorist, following the speech delivered by Obama. They also drew connections between the killing of bin Laden and the 9/11 attack in their articles, reinforcing the national identity of the United States. The headlines ranged from “Got the Bastard!” to “Bin Laden Dead” (Bowman et al., 2014).

Almost ten years later, on January 3, 2020, the U.S. carried out a targeted strike using MQ-9 Reaper drones and Hellfire missiles, resulting in the death of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and fourteen other people, including the leader of Kata’ib Hezbollah, Abu Hadi al-Muhandis.

Based on his “America First” foreign policy doctrine, then-President Trump sought to disengage from the Middle East and showed restraint in the face of Iranian provocations in the Gulf. However, he refused to tolerate attacks by pro-Iranian militias against a U.S. base and the U.S. embassy in Baghdad (Frisch et al., 2020). This targeted killing operation significantly increased the already existing tensions between the United States and Iran, as well as causing a diplomatic crisis between the U.S. and Iraq, where the operation took place.

In this scenario, news outlets provided extensive coverage of the execution of General Qassem Soleimani, also leader of the Revolutionary Guard and of the Quds Force. The newspapers aimed to report in detail on the operation, emphasizing mainly the possible consequences of the death of the Iranian general. In this way, the media coverage emphasized the conflicts between the nations, the risk of escalation, and possible retaliation (Frisch et al., 2020).

The targeted killings of Osama bin Laden and General Qassem Soleimani occurred during successive presidential administrations in the United States. Both events received extensive media coverage and generated wide repercussions both on the U.S. domestic scene and internationally. These two cases were chosen as the main focus of our exploratory and comparative study.

From this perspective, the main objective of this article is to analyze the framing done by primary U.S. news outlets regarding the targeted killings of Osama bin Laden and Qassem Soleimani. In particular, we attempted to identify: 1) the main position adopted by the analyzed newspapers in relation to the cases, and 2) the main theme emphasized in the news reported on the two killing operations.

To achieve these objectives, the research design follows the approach proposed by Bloch-Elkon (2007) and uses an original database composed of 450 news stories published by *The Washington Post* (192), *The New York Times* (171), and *The Wall Street Journal* (87). These news items were collected in the period between May 2, 2011 and November 2, 2011, as well as between January 3, 2020 and July 3, 2020.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to promote a broad debate about media framing in the targeted killing cases under analysis as well as to theoretically substantiate our study, two strands of literature on foreign policy analysis were addressed: targeted killings and the media in foreign policy.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CURRENT TARGETED KILLING OPERATIONS

Targeted killing can be defined as the intentional selection, targeting, and execution of an individual—not held in physical custody—by a state for military, political, or security purposes. (Melzer, 2008: 3–4). Based on this concept, two main characteristics are identified in targeted killing operations: 1) the execution of the target is the objective, rather than withdrawal, surrender, or incapacitation; 2) they are directed at individuals previously identified by the offender (Walsh, 2018).

While targeted killing has persisted over the millennia in many different forms, its frequency and its moral, legal and functional evaluation have varied significantly (Sen and Troy, 2017: 175). As a result of the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers, targeted killings have undergone a significant transition in the present day (Sen and Troy, 2017; Walsh, 2018; Statman, 2004).

According to Sen and Troy (2017), the current transformative process of targeted killing features three dimensions. The first dimension refers to the expansion in the number of nations employing this form of action, as well as the growth of military targeted killing operations since the early 2000s (especially by the United States).

Before the attack on the Twin Towers, Israel was the only country that openly used the strategy of targeted killings in the fight against terrorist groups, facing international criticism, including from the United States. However, after 9/11, the U.S. also adopted this approach in its war against Al Qaeda (Statman, 2004).

As a consequence of this cathartic attack, the United States began to prioritize combating terrorism as a central issue of their foreign policy (Gaynor, 2014). During the first decade of the 21st century, a number of targeted killing operations took place, including the one of Osama bin Laden, as well as drone and conventional force operations in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Somalia and Pakistan (Walsh, 2018).

This is related to the second dimension of the recent process of transformation of targeted killing operations, involving technological progress and the widespread use of information technologies and drones. The use of drones is currently considered extremely relevant in the context of targeted killing operations (Walsh, 2018; Saylor, 2015; Grayson, 2012).

Drones allow the U.S. to carry out targeted killings without putting their soldiers in danger (Walsh, 2018: 145-46). The MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper drone systems—along with the employment of weapons such as Hellfire missiles—are widely used by countries, with the United States, Israel, and the United Kingdom standing out in the current scenario (Walsh, 2018; Grayson, 2012).

Policies of secrecy and denial related to targeted killings have gradually been abandoned by states. A growing use of these operations within public discourses is observed, constituting the third and final dimension of this transitional process (Sen and Troy, 2017).

In November 2002, an American Predator UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) attacked and killed an Al Qaeda activist in Yemen by using a technique that was similar to the one used by the Israeli army against Hamas or Islamic Jihad activists (Statman, 2004: 180). This was the first drone strike undertaken by the United States out of a military conflict context, marking a turning point. From this event onwards, the U.S. government took responsibility for several other targeted killing operations.

THE MEDIA AND FOREIGN POLICY

Opposing the traditional conception of political science, which considers the media as passive and only broadcasting information from political elites to the public, there is an alternative field of study that argues that media outlets play an influential role in

public opinion and consequently influence policymakers (Druckman, 2001; Iyengar, 2017; Schnell and Callaghan, 2001; Naveh, 2002; Entman, 2010).

Within this field of studies, the media would be a key player in the broadcasting of “images and frames” that may reflect national, subnational, or tribal beliefs, playing a crucial role in defining the standards and criteria for political action of nations (Neack, 2019). Ample evidence suggests the power of the media to influence public opinion and related political perceptions (Schnell and Callaghan, 2001: 188).

In this regard, a field of research on political behavior states that the media can play an important role in setting the political agenda of countries through the selection of events to be covered and broadcast as news. The argument that the media cannot directly influence public opinion but can direct the public to pay attention to specific issues or events has become known as media agenda setting (Iyengar, 2017: 3).

In addition, the scheduling effects of news coverage can be as relevant to political elites as they are to public opinion. When a particular topic becomes prominent in public opinion, elected authorities may recognize the importance of devoting attention to that issue (Iyengar, 2017).

Besides the agenda-setting phenomenon, another relevant theoretical perspective is the concept of framing developed by Robert Entman, which is the focus of this article. According to this approach, when an event or problem occurs in the international arena, the political elites need to provide explanations and interpretations of the event to the general population.

These explanations are essential for influencing public perception and shaping collective understanding of the event in question (Neack 2019). Frames define the problem, diagnose its cause, offer and justify treatments for it, and predict its likely effects (Entman, 1993: 52).

The process of framing involves selecting and promoting certain aspects of an event, and connecting them to offer a specific interpretation. Both the media and the political elites can use framing to influence public opinion by altering the understanding of an issue and promoting their own political interests (Entman, 2010; Neack 2019; Druckman, 2001; Iyengar, 2017).

Considering this potential influence of the media on public opinion, media outlets become relevant players in the eyes of decision-makers. Thus, Neack (2019) explains that, from this perspective of the media as a relevant political player, four configurations of relations between the media and foreign policymakers can be identified. The first configuration consists of the media acting independently in conducting policies, which is related to the phenomenon known as the “CNN effect” (Gilboa, 2005; Baum and Potter, 2008; Naveh, 2002; Robinson, 2000).

The CNN effect refers to the influence of impactful images presented by the media, which can lead policymakers to intervene in situations that would not normally be considered in the national interest. Intense media coverage can generate an emotional response from the public, leading them to demand action from policymakers (Feist, 2001; Baum and Potter, 2008). However, the CNN effect is not consensual and has been the subject of several studies that question its incidence and true impact (Robinson, 2000; Moeller, 1999).

The second configuration of the relationship between the media and foreign policy involves the collaboration between the media and policymakers in the news selection and composition process, where journalists contact government advisors to determine what will be considered newsworthy. Based on this, journalists exercise their judgment to decide what news will be covered (Mermin, 1997; Neack, 2019).

In the third type of relationship between the media and foreign policy, policymakers exercise control over the news reported by the media, which acts primarily as a broadcasting vehicle. This may involve the states' direct or indirect control over media outlets (Gehlbach and Sonin, 2014; Dragomir, 2018).

Finally, in the fourth configuration, referred to as the competitive frame, policymakers compete with other elites, including the media, to present their news and gain control over the public debate (Entman, 1993; Neack, 2019).

EXAMINING MEDIA LITERATURE: FRAMING IN BIN LADEN AND SOLEIMANI CASES

The analysis of media literature on selective assassination cases involving bin Laden and Soleimani reveals a notable scarcity of comprehensive studies, with a more common thematic focus on the moral aspects of these operations (Sen and Troy, 2017). Furthermore, the few identified articles predominantly concentrate on immediate media reactions, emphasizing themes and neglecting empirical depth (Bowman et al., 2014; Frisch et al., 2020; Onyebadi, 2016).

In the realm of research on media framing in foreign policy, the majority directs its attention to conflicts and interventions (Auerbach and Bloch-Elkon, 2005; Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2008; Andresen et al., 2020). However, given the increasing frequency of targeted assassinations in state security policies, our study aims to transcend this limitation.

Distinguishing itself from existing studies, our research goes beyond the analysis of initial media reactions, addressing not only immediate moments but also subsequent periods, thereby expanding the scope of the investigation. As stated in the

introduction, we have adopted the Bloch-Elkon (2007) methodology to explore media framing in cases of targeted assassination, highlighting a comprehensive methodological model.

METHODOLOGY

In order to promote transparency and replicability, a detailed description of the steps carried out in this paper is provided. This chart summarizes the main features of our research design.

Chart 1 RESEARCH DESIGN	
Research question	How did major U.S. news outlets frame the targeted killings of Osama bin Laden and Qassem Soleimani?
Space Unit	Journalistic articles
Time delimitation	First six months of each case
Techniques	Content analysis and categorization
Sources	<i>The New York Times</i> , <i>The Washington Post</i> and <i>The Wall Street Journal</i>
Source: Elaborated by the authors.	

The research question aims to understand how major news outlets in the United States framed two targeted killing cases: Osama bin Laden and Qassem Soleimani. Therefore, the aim of the study is to analyze how these two cases were presented by the most widely circulated newspapers in the United States.

In order to achieve this objective, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal* were established as the source of analysis. The selection of those newspapers was based on three main criteria: circulation of the newspapers, availability of relevant news to analyze the cases, and accessibility of the news on websites.

After a preliminary analysis of the circulation of U.S. newspapers, we observed that the three newspapers with the largest circulation in the U.S. were *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today*; however, we opted to choose *The Washington Post* instead of *USA Today* as the source of analysis. This decision was made because both newspapers had a similar daily circulation and—after an exploratory

analysis—we found that *The Washington Post* presents a greater availability and accessibility of news about the two cases under analysis, especially that of the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden.

Following the definition of the newspapers, we then collected editorials, op-eds, and news articles related to the two targeted killing cases. The cases were examined and their main events were identified and divided into two stages: stage 1, which corresponds to the execution of the targeted killing (first five days of the case); and stage 2, which covers the period after the killing (following six months). This time delimitation made it possible to analyze the initial journalistic coverage of the cases and to investigate the evolution of the narrative over time. Chart 2 encapsulates the delineation of temporal periods and analysis stages for the two examined cases.

Chart 2 DIVISION OF CASES INTO ANALYSIS STAGES			
Case	Time Frame	Stage 1	Stage 2
Assassination of Osama bin Laden	May 2nd, 2011, to November 2nd, 2011	May 2nd, 2011, to May 6th, 2011	May 7th, 2011, to November 2nd, 2011
Assassination of Qassem Soleimani	January 3rd, 2020, to July 3rd, 2020	January 3rd, 2020, to January 7th, 2020	January 8th, 2020, to July 3rd, 2020
Source: Elaborated by the authors.			

This collection resulted in an unprecedented database with a total of 450 articles from the selected newspapers. In the case of Osama bin Laden’s killing, 142 articles were collected, with 65 from *The Washington Post*, 53 from *The New York Times*, and 24 from *The Wall Street Journal*. In the case of General Qassem Soleimani’s killing, 308 articles were collected: 127 from *The Washington Post*, 118 from *The New York Times*, and 63 from *The Wall Street Journal*. The difference in the number of articles can be attributed to the fact that the bin Laden case occurred more than a decade ago, which may have affected the availability of news on the subject.

To analyze the collected data, the mixed content analysis approach proposed by Bloch-Elkon (2007) was adopted. However, specific adaptations were made: 1) adjustment of the categorization tables to the context of targeted killings; 2) exclusion of public opinion analysis; and 3) inclusion of news articles in the analysis, in addition to op-eds and editorials.

Thus, after consolidating the database, qualitative and quantitative content analysis techniques were used—along with categorization—to examine the data collected. In this context, the primary objective of this procedure was to examine the positioning of journalistic articles and identify their most prominent themes. To do so, a thorough reading of the articles was conducted, registering the facts and direct quotes related to the cases under analysis.

The positioning analysis was based on pre-defined categories derived from the basic methodology, which include “for,” “for with reservations,” “neutral,” “against with reservations,” and “against.” It is important to mention that some articles, especially op-eds, explicitly presented their position on the topic. However, when the position was not clear, the identification was determined based on the proportion between positive and negative aspects of the case presented by the article.

To process the results obtained in the positioning evaluation, Table 1 was used to record the positioning of all the journalistic articles present in the consolidated database of the analyzed newspapers. The table was structured in a way that accounted for the positioning of the articles in relation to the two stages of each of the cases under analysis.

Table 1 POSITIONING OF THE NEWSPAPERS				
	Stages of the case			
	Stage 1		Stage 2	
Positioning	n	%	n	%
Newspaper X				
For	x	x	x	x
For with reservations	x	x	x	x
Neutral	x	x	x	x
Against with reservations	x	x	x	x
Against	x	x	x	x
Total	x	x	x	x
Source: Elaborated by the authors.				

In addition, content analysis was conducted to identify the thematic framing of the journalistic articles, which were categorized according to the following categories:

National/International Security, Humanitarian, Economy, Victory/Progress, Risk of Conflict/Reprisal, and Combination. Categories from the original methodology were combined with new categories adapted to the particularities of the targeted killing cases.

The identification of the thematic framing of the journalistic articles was carried out by enumerating the facts presented in each news item. This process enabled the identification of the main theme or themes addressed in each of the articles.

The analysis of the thematic framing of the journalistic articles was conducted by using Table 2, which records the main themes presented in the selected newspapers over the two stages into which the cases were divided.

Table 2 THEMATIC FRAMING OF THE NEWSPAPERS				
	Stages of the case			
	Stage 1		Stage 2	
	n	%	n	%
Framing				
Newspaper X				
National/International Security	x	x	x	x
Humanitarian	x	x	x	x
Victory/Progress	x	x	x	x
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	x	x	x	x
Economy	x	x	x	x
Combination	x	x	x	x
Total	x	x	x	x
Source: Elaborated by the authors.				

Content analysis played a crucial role in this study, allowing for a comprehensive and deep understanding of the collected data. The categorization technique used was meticulously developed and adapted to the specificities of the analyzed cases, ensuring an accurate and meaningful analysis. This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the data and played a key role in formulating the conclusions and final considerations of this paper.

ANALYSIS OF THE POSITIONING OF THE CASES

Table 3
NEWSPAPER POSITIONING ON THE OSAMA BIN LADEN CASE

Positioning	Stages of the case		Stage 2	
	Stage 1			
	n	%	n	%
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>				
For	7	46.6	6	66.6
For with reservations	3	20	0	0
Neutral	5	33.3	2	22.2
Against with reservations	0	0	1	11.1
Against	0	0	0	0
Total	15	100	9	100
<i>The New York Times</i>				
For	10	43.4	9	30
For with reservations	5	21.7	5	16.6
Neutral	8	34.8	15	50
Against with reservations	0	0	0	0
Against	0	0	1	3.3
Total	23	100	30	100
<i>The Washington Post</i>				
For	13	44.8	12	33.3
For with reservations	5	17.2	4	11.1
Neutral	11	37.9	18	50
Against with reservations	0	0	2	5.5
Against	0	0	0	0
Total	29	100	36	100
Combination				
For	30	44.7	27	36
For with reservations	13	19.4	9	12
Neutral	24	35.8	35	46.6
Against with reservations	0	0	3	4
Against	0	0	1	1.3
Total	67	100	75	100
Source: Elaborated by the authors.				

At the initial stage of the analysis, the positioning category with the greatest expressiveness was “for.” Thus, the majority of the news was favorable to the U.S. military action against Osama bin Laden, with *The Wall Street Journal* presenting the highest percentage of favorable articles (46.6 percent), followed by *The Washington Post* (44.8 percent) and *The New York Times* (43.4 percent). The favorable articles focused on the details of the operation and the intelligence process that led to the discovery of bin Laden’s whereabouts.

However, it is important to note that in all newspapers there was a significant portion of articles that—despite the positive framing—presented reservations regarding the action (“for with reservations”), with *The New York Times* presenting the highest percentage (21.7 percent) in this category. The journalistic articles with this positioning had questions regarding the effectiveness of the operation in combating the terrorist group in their text, as well as a debate about the role of torture in the intelligence process.

In addition, there was a considerable percentage of articles with a neutral positioning in all three newspapers, with *The Washington Post* showing the highest percentage (37.9 percent). The newspapers adopted a neutral tone when reporting on the tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan after the operation. Regarding the categories “against” and “against with reservations,” none of the newspapers presented articles opposing the U.S. military action in this first stage.

In the second stage, there was a change in the trend of articles published by the three newspapers. There was a significant decrease in the percentage of favorable articles in *The New York Times* (from 43.4 percent to 30 percent) and *The Washington Post* (from 44.8 percent to 33.3 percent), whereas *The Wall Street Journal* showed an increase (from 46.6 percent to 66.6 percent).

Following this trend, the most prevalent positioning category in newspapers at this stage was the neutral one, with the exception of *The Wall Street Journal*. This shift was reflected in a broadened news coverage of international tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan after the operation, making it the main topic covered in articles in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

In the second stage, there was also a reduction in the percentage of articles that presented a positioning that was “for with reservations,” the most evident being in *The Wall Street Journal*, which had no articles in this category. In addition, there was a low percentage of journalistic articles presenting a positioning that was “against” or “against with reservations” (which was not observed in the first stage).

Table 4
NEWSPAPER POSITIONING ON THE QASSEM SOLEIMANI CASE

Positioning	Stage 1		Stage 2	
	n	%	n	%
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>				
For	4	13.3	1	3
For with reservations	2	6.6	2	6
Neutral	5	16.6	15	45.4
Against with reservations	3	10	1	3
Against	16	53.3	14	42.4
Total	30	100	33	100
<i>The New York Times</i>				
For	4	7.3	2	3.2
For with reservations	4	7.3	0	0
Neutral	7	12.7	16	25.4
Against with reservations	4	7.3	6	9.5
Against	36	65.4	39	61.9
Total	55	100	63	100
<i>The Washington Post</i>				
For	6	11.3	5	6.7
For with reservations	4	7.5	3	4
Neutral	13	24.5	21	28.4
Against with reservations	6	11.3	3	4
Against	24	45.3	42	56.7
Total	53	100	74	100
Combination				
For	14	10.1	8	4.7
For with reservations	10	7.2	5	2.9
Neutral	25	18.1	52	30.6
Against with reservations	13	9.4	10	5.9
Against	76	55	95	55.9
Total	138	100	170	100
Source: Elaborated by the authors.				

In the first stage of the analysis of the news on the case of the targeted killing of General Qassem Soleimani, it was found that the positioning category with the highest percentage in the three newspapers analyzed was “against.” *The New York Times* had the highest percentage of opposing articles (65.4 percent), followed by *The Wall Street Journal* (53.3 percent) and *The Washington Post* (45.3 percent).

Within this opposing positioning, the newspapers emphasized themes such as the constant retaliation threats coming from the Iranian government, the international tensions between the United States and Iraq, and the Iranian people’s emotional reaction to the death of an important leadership figure.

In contrast, the percentage of favorable articles was low in all three newspapers, with *The Wall Street Journal* having the highest percentage (13.3 percent). This emphasizes the significant contrast in the early stages of the two targeted killing cases under analysis. In the bin Laden case, the positioning “for” prevailed, with a null proportion of opposing articles. In contrast, in the Qassem Soleimani case, the positioning category with the highest percentage was “against,” while the positioning “for” was barely significant.

In addition, it is important to note that in the first stage of analysis of the Qassem Soleimani case, the “neutral” category had a significant presence in journalistic articles, although to a lesser extent than in the Osama bin Laden case. The “neutral” category was found mainly in articles that dealt with the details of the operation, the motivations behind it, and the initial reaction of the U.S. Congress.

On the other hand, the category “against with reservations” had a low percentage in the three newspapers in the first stage, with *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* standing out, with 10 percent and 11.3 percent, respectively. Considering these results, Graph 1 represents the relationship between the categories in the early stages of the analyzed targeted killing cases, based on the combination of the newspapers under examination.

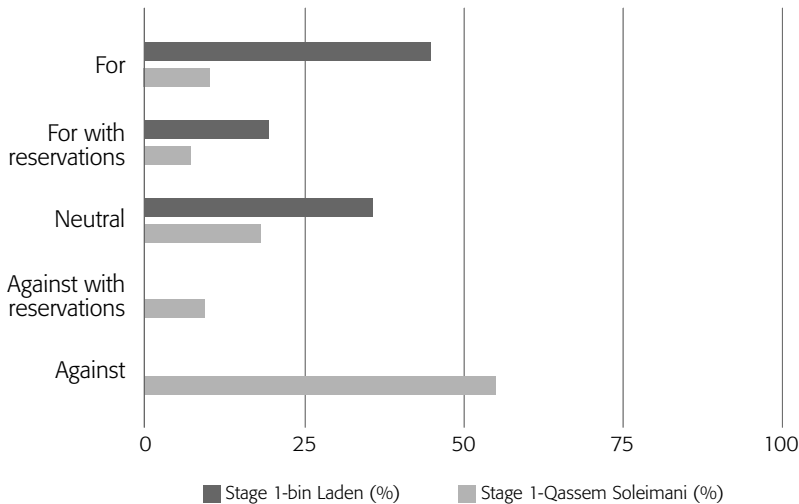
In the second stage of the analysis of the Qassem Soleimani case, a reduction in the proportion of articles in the positioning category “against” was observed in two of the analyzed newspapers, being the most predominant in the first stage, and remaining the most expressive one.

The Wall Street Journal saw a significant drop in the category “against” (53.3 percent to 42.4 percent), while *The New York Times* showed a smaller decrease (65.4 percent to 61.9 percent). On the other hand, *The Washington Post* registered an increase in this category (45.3 percent to 56.7 percent).

In the second stage, the change of focus in the analyzed newspapers resulted in a reduction of the category “against” in *The Wall Street Journal* and in *The New York Times*. This reduction is associated with the coverage of the downing of the Ukrainian

plane, shot down by Iranian missiles, which was predominantly treated in a neutral manner by these newspapers. On the other hand, *The Washington Post* focused on the Iranian retaliation against U.S. troops and questioned the government's justifications, which explains the increase in the opposing positioning in this media outlet.

Graph 1
ANALYSIS OF POSITIONING IN THE FIRST STAGE OF CASES

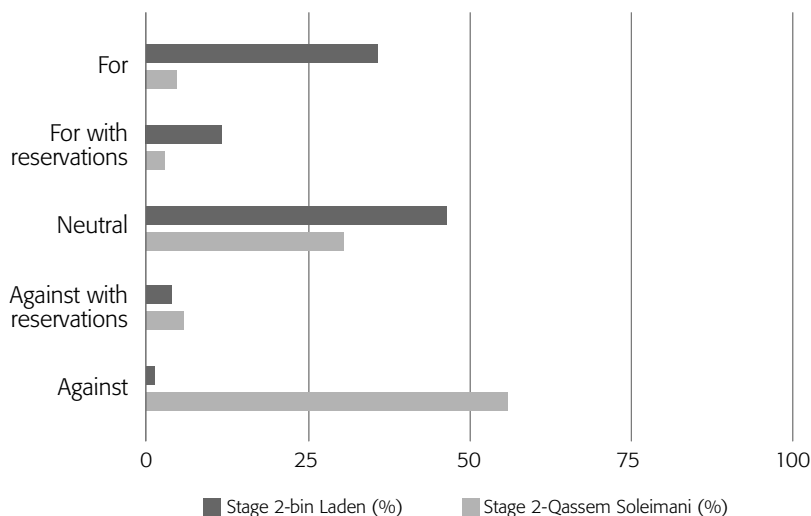


Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the second stage, there was also an increase in the “neutral” category in the three analyzed newspapers: *The Wall Street Journal* (from 16.6 percent to 45.4 percent), *The New York Times* (from 12.7 percent to 25.4 percent), and *The Washington Post* (from 24.5 percent to 28.4 percent). This increase is related to the decrease in tensions between the United States and Iran over the analyzed period, as well as the significant coverage of the Ukrainian plane crash by the newspapers.

Regarding the positioning categories “for,” “for with reservations,” and “against with reservations,” there was a decrease in their percentages when considering the combination of the analyzed newspapers. Graph 2 illustrates the comparison between the positioning percentages in the second stage in both cases, considering the combination of newspapers in each one of them.

Graph 2
POSITIONING ANALYSIS IN THE SECOND STAGE OF THE CASES



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the first stage, the newspapers emphasized the “National/International Security” thematic category (prevailing category), with *The Wall Street Journal* presenting the highest frequency of articles falling into this category (66.6 percent), followed by *The Washington Post* (58.6 percent), and *The New York Times* (43.5 percent). This relevance attributed to the category is related to the wide broadcast of news in the first moment about the details of the military operation and the intelligence employed to locate bin Laden, as well as to national security issues and initial tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan.

The “Victory/Progress” category was the second most frequent theme in the first stage, representing 26.6 percent of the articles in *The Wall Street Journal*, 20.7 percent in *The Washington Post*, and 30.4 percent in *The New York Times*. This category was present in articles that addressed the popular reaction to the success of the military operation and the details of the operation itself, highlighting the success achieved in the process.

In contrast, the “Risk of Conflict/Reprisal” thematic category had little representation in the newspapers analyzed, especially in *The Wall Street Journal*, which did not present any article in this category. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, on the other hand, had more significant rates, with 8.7 percent and 3.4 percent of the articles falling into this thematic category, respectively.

Table 5
NEWSPAPER THEMATIC FRAMING OF THE OSAMA BIN LADEN CASE

	Stages of the case			
	Stage 1		Stage 2	
	n	%	n	%
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>				
National/International Security	10	66.6	7	77.7
Humanitarian	0	0	0	0
Victory/Progress	4	26.6	1	11.1
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	0	0	1	11.1
Economy	0	0	0	0
Combination	1	6.6	0	0
Total	15	100	9	100
<i>The New York Times</i>				
National/International Security	10	43.5	20	66.6
Humanitarian	1	4.3	4	13.3
Victory/Progress	7	30.4	3	10
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	2	8.7	1	3.3
Economy	0	0	1	3.3
Combination	3	13	1	3.3
Total	23	100	30	100
<i>The Washington Post</i>				
National/International Security	17	58.6	27	75
Humanitarian	0	0	2	5.5
Victory/Progress	6	20.7	4	11.1
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	1	3.4	0	0
Economy	1	3.4	0	0
Combination	4	13.8	3	8.3
Total	29	100	36	100
Combining the newspapers				
National/International Security	37	55.2	54	72
Humanitarian	1	1.5	6	8
Victory/Progress	17	25.3	8	10.6
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	3	4.5	2	2.6
Economy	1	1.5	1	1.3
Combination	8	12	4	5.3
Total	67	100	75	100
Source: Elaborated by the authors.				

The “Combination” category also appeared less frequently in all newspapers in the first stage, ranging from 6.6 percent in *The Wall Street Journal* to 13.8 percent in *The Washington Post*. Finally, the “Humanitarian” and “Economy” categories were not represented in some of the newspapers, such as *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Washington Post*.

In the second stage of the analysis, there was a significant increase in the “National/ International Security” thematic category in all analyzed newspapers. *The New York Times* stood out in this regard, showing an increase of more than 20 percent (from 43.5 percent to 66.6 percent) in the proportion of articles falling into this category.

This growth is related to the emergence of news stories that reported intelligence findings at the Abbottabad compound and the increase in articles that addressed tensions between the United States and Pakistan. This theme became the main content of journalistic articles in this stage.

Consequently, the increased coverage of tensions between the United States and Pakistan resulted in a reduction in the percentage of articles categorized as “Victory/Progress” across all newspapers, most notably *The New York Times*, which saw a significant reduction from 30.4 percent to 10 percent of its articles in this category in the second stage.

In the transition from the first to the second stage, the “Risk of Conflict/Reprisal” category also showed a decrease in frequency, with the exception of *The Wall Street Journal*, which had an increase from 0 percent to 11.1 percent of articles falling into this category. The other two newspapers had a decrease in their frequency, with *The Washington Post* not publishing any articles in this category.

In addition, the “Combination” category also had a decrease in its frequency in all newspapers in the second stage. The “Economy” category appeared in only one newspaper in the second stage, corresponding to 3.3 percent of the articles in *The New York Times*. On the other hand, the “Humanitarian” category presented a significant increase in all newspapers, except *The Wall Street Journal*.

In the first stage of the Qassem Soleimani case, as in the Osama bin Laden case, the “National/International Security” category was the most prevalent in the analyzed newspapers, especially *The Washington Post*, which had the highest percentage of articles in this category (62.2 percent). This was followed by *The New York Times* with 47.3 percent, and *The Wall Street Journal* with 40 percent.

This emphasis on international security issues is related to the tensions between the United States and Iraq, to claims of national sovereignty, and to the protests of the Iranian people, which were widely discussed in the analyzed newspapers. In addition, U.S. domestic security aspects were addressed, such as the reaction of Congress and the government’s allegations to carry out the operation.

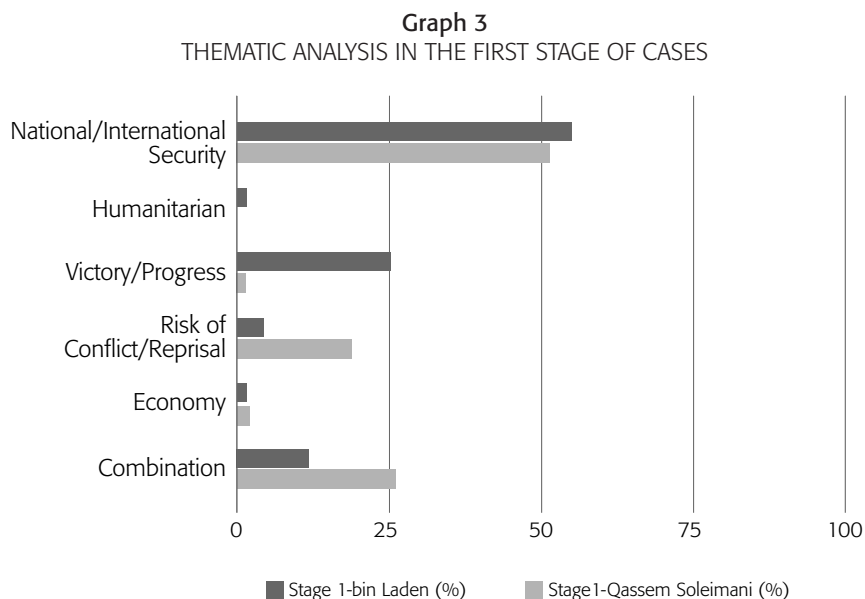
Table 6
NEWSPAPER THEMATIC FRAMING OF THE SOLEIMANI CASE

	Stages of the case			
	Stage 1		Stage 2	
	n	%	n	%
<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>				
National/International Security	12	40	28	84.8
Humanitarian	0	0	0	0
Victory/Progress	1	3.3	0	0
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	4	13.3	5	15.1
Economy	2	6.6	0	0
Combination	11	36.6	0	0
Total	30	100	33	100
<i>The New York Times</i>				
National/International Security	26	47.3	45	71.4
Humanitarian	0	0	0	0
Victory/Progress	1	1.8	1	1.6
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	13	23.6	9	14.3
Economy	1	1.8	0	0
Combination	14	25.4	8	12.7
Total	55	100	63	100
<i>The Washington Post</i>				
National/International Security	33	62.2	54	73
Humanitarian	0	0	0	0
Victory/Progress	0	0	0	0
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	9	17	12	16.2
Economy	0	0	0	0
Combination	11	20.7	8	10.8
Total	53	100	74	100
Combining the newspapers				
National/International Security	71	51.4	127	74.7
Humanitarian	0	0	0	0
Victory/Progress	2	1.4	1	0.6
Risk of Conflict/Reprisal	26	18.8	26	15.3
Economy	3	2.2	0	0
Combination	36	26	16	9.4
Total	138	100	170	100
Source: Elaborated by the authors.				

The “Combination” category also had a considerable presence in the analyzed newspapers, with *The Wall Street Journal* (36.6 percent), *The New York Times* (25.4 percent), and *The Washington Post* (20.7 percent) featuring significant proportions of articles that addressed a variety of distinct topics, with no overlap between them.

In addition, unlike the Osama bin Laden case, the Qassem Soleimani case presented a significant frequency of the “Risk of Conflict/Reprisal” category in the analyzed newspapers, being the third most recurrent among them, especially *The New York Times*, with 23.6 percent of the articles falling into this category. This category was mainly addressed in the coverage of the constant threats of Iranian retaliation after the death of the general.

On the other hand, the “Economy,” “Humanitarian,” and “Victory/Progress” categories had a low occurrence in the news stories about the Qassem Soleimani case in the analyzed newspapers. *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* had few articles in those categories, while *The Washington Post* had no articles related to them. In view of this, Graph 3 shows a comparative representation of the percentages of the most recurrent themes in the journalistic articles in the two cases analyzed, considering the combination of the newspapers.



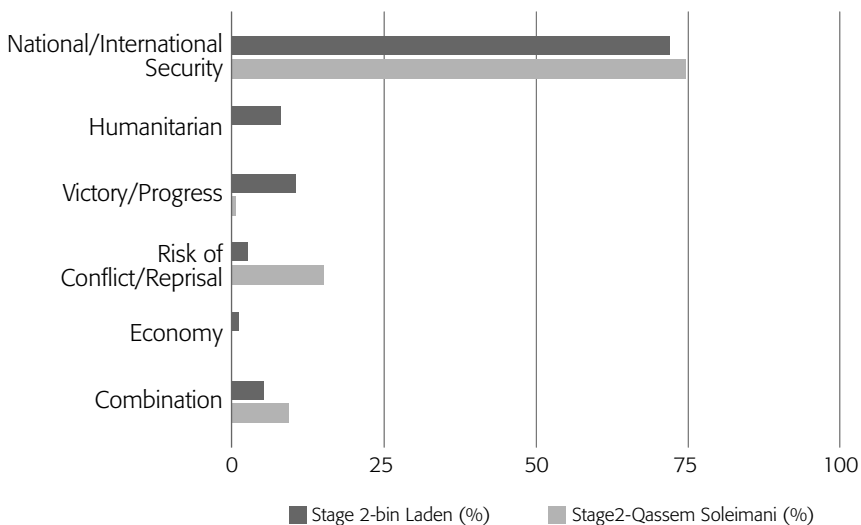
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the second stage of the analysis of the Qassem Soleimani case, “National/International Security” remained the prevailing thematic category, showing a significant increase in all newspapers, as in the bin Laden case. There was a greater thematic focus on security aspects in the newspapers during this phase: *The Wall Street Journal* had an increase from 40 percent to 84.8 percent, *The New York Times* from 47.3 percent to 71.4 percent, and *The Washington Post* from 62.2 percent to 73 percent.

The increased incidence of this thematic category in the second stage reflects the greater focus given by the newspapers on events such as the Ukrainian plane crash, the Iranian reprisal operation and its aftermath, as well as the subsequent reduction in international tensions. There was also greater attention to U.S. domestic security issues, as evidenced by news about the vote to reduce former President Trump’s war powers against Iran.

Regarding the “Combination” category, there was also a significant drop in all the newspapers in the second stage, following the pattern observed in the bin Laden case. In *The Wall Street Journal*, the percentage of articles in this category dropped from 36.6 percent to 0 percent, in *The New York Times* from 25.4 percent to 12.7 percent, and in *The Washington Post* from 20.7 percent to 10.8 percent. This reduction can also be attributed to a more objective framing in the articles, with an emphasis on U.S. national and international security issues.

Graph 4
THEMATIC ANALYSIS IN THE SECOND STAGE OF CASES



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The “Risk of Conflict/Reprisal” category also registered a 2.5 percentage-point increase in the three analyzed newspapers in relation to the first stage. The highlight goes to *The New York Times*, which showed the largest percentage drop, from 23.6 percent to 14.3 percent. This decrease may be related to the reduction in tensions between the United States and Iran over the period analyzed, despite some peaks over the months.

As for the “Victory/Progress,” “Humanitarian” and “Economy” categories, there was a percentage reduction in the analyzed newspapers in the second stage, remaining of little relevance, as in the first stage. In summary, Graph 4 shows the relationship between the thematic categories in the second stage of analysis of the two cases of targeted killings analyzed.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article adopted the methodological model of content analysis proposed by Bloch-Elkon (2007) to examine the framing of the targeted killings of Osama bin Laden and General Qassem Soleimani by the leading news outlets in the United States. The objective was to understand the behavior of the media, their reaction, and the way they framed these security operations in two distinct stages over a six-month period, considering their implications for national and international politics.

As for the conclusions of this article, firstly regarding the positioning adopted by the newspapers analyzed (*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*), it was found that in the first stage of the Osama bin Laden targeted killing case, the predominant positioning category in the newspapers was “for.” In the second stage, most newspapers adopted a neutral stance.

On the other hand, in the case of the targeted killing of General Qassem Soleimani, it was observed that in both stages of the analysis the most frequent positioning category was “against.” This indicates that the U.S. media tended to position themselves more favorably towards the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden than towards that of Qassem Soleimani.

In addition, when conducting a thematic analysis of the articles in both cases, the predominant thematic category in both stages was “National/International Security,” with an average 20 percentage-point increase to the second stage in both cases. This demonstrates a thematic consistency in the framing of U.S. newspapers when addressing targeted killing operations.

Therefore, with regard to the contributions of this article, it is important to highlight that this paper expands the literature on targeted killings by addressing the aspect

of media framing of such events. Moreover, a methodological advance is made by adapting a content analysis method for these particular cases and by developing an original database for the analysis. These contributions broaden our understanding of the role of the media in shaping the narrative and public opinion regarding targeted killings.

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