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The New York Times
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Re: Complaint Against Farnaz Fassihi

In light of recent and growing complaints from the Iranian-American community and from Iranian dissidents, we aim to draw your attention to multiple examples of unprofessional conduct and inaccurate reporting by your reporter, Farnaz Fassihi. We are aware that Ms. Fassihi, like many Iranian and female social media users, has been subjected to violent and sexist comments and threats from unnamed Twitter accounts. We condemn these and all other such vile attacks, unconditionally. Our below well-founded and well-documented concerns are not about Ms. Fassihi as an individual, but rather about her reporting and her actions which have caused immense suffering to Iranian-Americans, Iranians, and victims of the crimes committed by the Islamic Republic in Iran.

Our primary concern is Ms. Fassihi's reporting, which could be analyzed at length for its myriad inaccuracies, falsehoods, and denials of basic truths. Here however, we highlight just two specific, recent episodes: the elimination of Qassem Soleimani and the downing of Ukrainian Airlines Flight PS752.

We are not alone in our concerns. Indeed, just yesterday you received a letter from more than two dozen families of those murdered by the Islamic Republic aboard flight PS752, a dozen Iranian journalists, leading dissidents in Iran, and the families of other murdered activists both in Iran and in exile. We raise our concerns to you, with respect, and in solidarity with these victims of the regime. We appreciate, in advance, your concern and prompt response.

Qassem Soleimani:

Following the death of Qassem Soleimani, in a [piece](#) titled "*Iranians Close Ranks Behind Leaders After U.S. Kills Popular General*", Ms. Fassihi asserted that "at least for now, Iran is united — in anger at the United States" and that "the nation rallied behind its leaders." She goes on to say that Soleimani "had near cult figure status" and was "almost universally admired" by "Young and old, rich and poor, hard-liner and reformer." Ms. Fassihi seems to cherry-pick quotes from seven individuals who reinforce this characterization of Soleimani by saying, "Every major political actor within Iran...saying this is a great loss", and "Many Iranians, whether they like the regime or not, did consider Soleimani as a sort of national symbol." Her commentary was so positive that the Islamic Republic's state propaganda services [repeatedly cited](#) Ms. Fassihi's writings as global recognition of Mr. Soleimani's popularity. The selection of these particular quotes, which all endorse a single viewpoint, ignore any and all opponents of Mr. Soleimani and those who supported his elimination.

Ms. Fassihi has yet to provide any evidence to back her claim that the majority of the Iranian people consider Soleimani a "national hero." It is common knowledge that in brutal totalitarian regimes such as the clerical regime in Iran, street protests against establishment leaders like Soleimani result in arrest, torture, and death; this is especially pertinent considering that three months prior to the assassination, the regime massacred 1,500+ people and unjustly imprisoned thousands more following an anti-regime uprising.



Despite the obvious safety concerns, local [media](#) reported that the regime had [arrested](#) dozens of people who had criticized Soleimani on social media or torn his posters in the street. Others [danced](#) to joyful music to celebrate his demise. These individuals who did not consider Mr. Soleimani a “national hero”, who did not “rally around the leaders” of the Islamic Republic and risked their lives to show their dissent were ignored in Ms. Fassihi’s reporting.

The piece includes no quotes from anti-government dissidents, Iranian opposition activists inside the country or in exile, nor Iranians inside the country who favored the strike. Indeed, her claims of Mr. Soleimani’s status as a national symbol or cult-like figure are totally unsupported by data from reputable sources. [Statistics available](#) from non-governmental sources indicate Mr. Soleimani was indeed among the *least popular* political figures in the country. Ms. Fassihi (and co-authors) [made](#) the same, unfounded claim about Mohsen Fakhrazadeh, the assassinated nuclear scientist, referring to him as the “man considered a national hero.” No references or sources were cited to back up the claim leading one to ask who, indeed, believes the man who played an important role in the Islamic Republic’s pursuit of chemical and nuclear weapons to be a “hero.”

While Ms. Fassihi was quick to call designated-terrorists like Mr. Soleimani a “national hero” without any evidence, she was much more critical of regime opponents-- even those who were murdered by the regime. When exiled journalist Ruhollah Zam was lured to Iraq from France and kidnapped by the Islamic Republic, she said he was “arrested” and [criticized](#) his news outlet as having “often posted false information, lies, slander & instructions on how to make explosives.” He was later executed by the regime. Iranians were shocked by her callous assessment for a kidnapped fellow journalist.

Flight PS752:

Following the shooting down of Ukrainian Airlines Flight PS752 by the Islamic Republic, Ms. Fassihi [wrote](#) a report claiming a watchtower officer fired two missiles, less than 30 seconds apart, after being unable to communicate with his commanders, [suggesting](#) that the attack was not deliberate and simply a mistake made by low-level officials who thought they were defending against an incoming American attack. She also [alleged](#) that President Hassan Rouhani was unaware of the regime’s involvement in the attack, and only his threat of resignation prompted the IRGC to admit to shooting down the plane.

Ms. Fassihi’s account effectively exonerates Rouhani and the IRGC and blames the incident instead, on a low-level watchtower officer who only fired the missiles after he “couldn’t get through” to his commanders. This narrative is similar to the [official position](#) of the regime. This description of events however, was later [rejected](#) by the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, saying that the statements given by Iranian officials raised serious concerns as they did not [explain](#) “how the miscalibration occurred and why it was not detected.” The UN rapporteur’s report [says](#) Iran’s explanation does not “make clear that this aircraft was not a missile,” nor explain “why the second missile was launched.”

The UN rapporteur, Agnès Callamard, also says that civil officials at the Civil Aviation Organization, under the direct control of former President Rouhani, knew the truth from the beginning. Even an air traffic controlman at the nearby Mehrabad Airport [reported](#) that he had seen missiles fired. When the civil aviation authority and other airport officials knew about the missile attack, it is exceedingly unlikely that Mr. Rouhani was not apprised of this reality. More importantly, it raises the question of how Ms. Fassihi could have claimed Rouhani’s ignorance with such certitude despite a lack of any real evidence. This allegation is particularly curious



in light of comments from the US government, the Canadian prime minister, and international media [indicating](#) that a missile hit the plane.

The UN's rapporteur also [quotes](#) an Iranian defense expert as saying: "Iran's advanced defence system could never mistake a passenger airliner for a missile or military plane." In addition to that, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [reported](#) that the Canadian government had obtained a recording attributed to Mohammad Javad Zarif, in which the Foreign Minister said: "The truth about the downing of the Ukrainian plane will never be revealed and the authorities will not do the slightest thing to tell the truth, because it will open some doors into the defence systems of the country that will not be in the interest of the nation to publicly say," indicating that the IRGC intentionally shot down the plane.

Ms. Fassihi's account of the regime's massacre of the 176 passengers and crew aboard PS752 is shockingly out of touch with the reality reported by independent experts and the United Nations. This is likely because her account is based [solely on](#) senior, unnamed sources within the regime's security apparatus and government officials. As the families of the PS752 massacre [indicated](#) in their letter to you yesterday, you have long expressed a "distaste" for such anonymous sources. Yet in this critical "investigation" into one of the most brazen aviation massacres in recent memory, your reporter based her "reporting" solely on such anonymous sources. Indeed elsewhere, where anonymous sources have been used against the regime, Ms. Fassihi [criticized](#) fellow journalists' use of such sources.

Once again, Ms. Fassihi's report quotes no opposing experts to refute the claims made by the regime. Her reporting on this massacre by the Islamic Republic has been the subject of routine and ongoing criticism by the victims' families. [Yesterday's letter](#), signed by more than two dozen of the victims' family members, being only the most recent example. They were forced to take their concerns directly to you because when they raised them with Ms. Fassihi herself, she often resorted to [blocking](#) them on Twitter.

To this day, Ms. Fassihi has not corrected her false reporting in a piece which became the official record of the incident for millions of readers.

In addition to consistently citing unnamed regime sources as the basis for her inaccurate and false reporting, Ms. Fassihi is often quite [gushing](#) in her [comments](#) about the leaders of the regime in Iran who are responsible for unspeakable and ongoing crimes against humanity. Such strange comments have, understandably, caused immense ire in our community, especially amongst the victims of the regime for whose affiliates Ms. Fassihi has such kind words.

The consistent inaccuracies in her reporting and her behavior have caused victims of the Islamic Republic to publicly criticize her false statements with the viral hashtag "[#NYTimesPropaganda](#)" which was used by prominent activists inside Iran, Iranian journalists, and thousands of Iranians and Iranian-Americans. Ms. Fassihi responded to the dissent by calling it [harassment](#) and the work of [bots](#). Any and all harassment, as we have already noted, towards Ms. Fassihi or anyone else should be roundly condemned. Ms. Fassihi insults victims of harassment and assault, like those of the Islamic Republic, by claiming that every critique of her work is harassment. Pointing out Ms. Fassihi's inaccuracies is not harassment, yet she levels that allegation against such critiques with frequency, often looking to link the attacks (from unnamed accounts possibly linked to the regime itself with the aim of sowing discord) to the Islamic Republic's secular, democratic opposition. In one particularly absurd case she [referred](#) to an unnamed Twitter account with Jack

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Sparrow from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series as a profile photo as “[the Iranian opposition](#).” Such disingenuous and laughable claims, meant to discredit legitimate criticism of her work in the eyes of the average observer, are common from Ms. Fassihi.

It is not always that what Ms. Fassihi writes or says is untrue, but rather that she *ignores* the truth. While Iran has undergone multiple rounds of nationwide, anti-government uprisings which led to arrests, killings, torture, and other human rights violations on a mass scale, her reporting often ignores this issue entirely. Out of more than 100 articles she has contributed to since 2019, [only 4](#) of them mention the human rights situation in Iran. This represents a mere 3.7% of her pieces. To cover Iran and to ignore the country’s abysmal human rights situation 96% of the time is a shocking dereliction of duty. Often, when she does speak of human rights it is downplaying the severity of their abuse by the current regime. In a recent piece about the regime’s newly-selected president, Ebrahim Raisi, Ms. Fassihi [refers](#) to his “long history of involvement in human rights abuses.” For the average reader this may seem to refer to common human rights abuses still, unfortunately, too common across the world. What the reader is not told is that this seemingly innocuous “involvement” Ms. Fassihi refers to is Mr. Raisi’s direct order for the mass-murder of more than 5,000 political prisoners.

We are hopeful that you can see that beyond the shameful threats that Ms. Fassihi has received from unnamed Twitter trolls, there is a long history of dishonesty, false reporting, and behavior unbecoming a journalist serving America’s paper of record in Ms. Fassihi’s work. These are not the crazed claims of trolls, nor is it harassment. What we have provided you, and what the regime’s victims and their allies provided you yesterday are evidence of a shocking track record of inaccurate reporting conducted in the name of the New York Times.

We therefore, in addition to reinforcing the demands of the letter by Iranian activists and families of the victims of flight PS752 sent yesterday, call on you to conduct a special editorial investigation into Ms. Fassihi’s reporting on these two issues. As yesterday’s letter asked, if you find the Times’ policies and journalistic ethics to have been violated, we request all false claims to be immediately and publicly corrected. We also, specifically, ask you the following:

1. Does the New York Times support Ms. Fassihi’s editorializing and unfounded allegations that Messrs. Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh are “national heroes” in Iran? If so, based on what evidence does the New York Times support such a claim?
2. Despite evidence to the contrary, does the New York Times stand by the claim that the Islamic Republic, specifically President Hassan Rouhani, did not know about the downing of flight PS752?
3. Does the New York Times support Ms. Fassihi’s decision to block bereaved families of flight PS752?
4. Does the New York Times agree with Ms. Fassihi’s blanket statement that the Iranian opposition, many of whom are threatened daily with arrest and execution in Iran, are “thugs”?

Our concerns extend far beyond those listed above, including but not limited to the unacceptably limited coverage the New York Times has given to human rights abuses and crimes against humanity in Iran. However, we hope that this will be the beginning of a serious dialogue between you and the Iranian-American and broader Iranian community.

Thank you,

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