

Facts in the Crossfire
Investigating American Rhetorical Strategies After Their
Version of the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike Was Contested

Mathias Olsen Norgren

Thesis, 15/30 ECTS (hp)

Master's Programme in Politics, Security and Crisis

Autumn 2024

Supervisor: Magnus Ekengren

Word count: 19989

Abstract

Are we living in a post-truth world, or do states behave as if facts matter? Some scholars have suggested that our current digital age facilitates the use of evidence to contest states and thereby undermine their credibility. However, others have suggested that we are living in a post-truth world where facts have lost their significance. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate and try to understand how states behave when they are contested in the digital age. I will do this by analysing America's rhetorical strategies following the 2017 Al-Jinah Airstrike in Syria, where their version of the event was contested by the investigative NGO Bellingcat. As such, this paper analyses the 2017 Al-Jinah rhetorical contestation process with contemporary perspectives grounded in the debates on how evidence and truth are valued in the digital age. This was done by applying the method of rhetorical criticism to analyse five different texts from both sides of the contest. Previous literature on strategic narratives and contestation processes has discussed the significance of evidence for the credibility of narratives, however, I argue that they have missed applying such perspectives in a comprehensive manner together with notions of the post-truth, especially on rhetorical contestation processes at the event-level. This paper found that the US acknowledged and modified their behaviour to some extent in the face of evidence provided by Bellingcat. However, the Americans also refuted credible evidence of killing dozens of civilians. As such, the findings supported both the notion that evidence matters for state behaviour in the digital age, while also supporting a more post-truth perspective where states can/are ignoring evidence as they please. Nonetheless, by applying these perspectives, I argue that our understanding of how and why states may behave the way they do when contested in the digital age is enhanced.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	5
1.1 Research Problem & Contribution.....	7
1.2 Thesis Outline	10
2. Previous research	10
2.1 Strategic Narratives.....	11
2.2 Credibility	12
2.3 Post-truth.....	14
2.4 Research Gap	16
3. Theory	17
3.1 Rhetorical Framework	18
3.2 Theoretical Framework.....	22
3.3 Summarising the Theory.....	25
4. Research Design.....	25
4.1 Methodology.....	25
4.2 Method	26
4.3 Selecting the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike and the Material.	28
4.4 Methodological Limitations.....	31
5. Analysis.....	32
5.1 Rhetorical Strategies	32
5.2 Understanding the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike Contestation Process.....	41
6. Discussion	46
6.1 Findings.....	46
6.2 Limitations	47
6.3 Contributions.....	48
6.4 Avenues for Future Research	49
7. Conclusion	50
Reference List	52
Literature.....	52
Empirical Material	54

List of tables

Table 1. Defensive Rhetorical Strategies.....	19
Table 2. Offensive Rhetorical Strategies.....	22
Table 3. Analysed Texts	31

1. Introduction

In recent years, strategic narratives have become popular within international relations. Strategic narratives can be defined as “...a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon et al, 2017:6). As such, narratives guide how actors frame different issues, as well as how they respond to them. At the heart of strategic narratives lie their credibility. If audiences do not find them credible, they won't accept them, and thus their utility is diminished (Miskimmon et al, 2014:12, 72).

However, there are different opinions on what makes narratives credible for audiences. Miskimmon et al (2014:114) argued that “A narrative must appear consistent with events as they are known by the narrative’s audience”. In this sense, “An effective narrative will work not only because it appeals to the values, interests and prejudices of the intended audience but also because it is not going to be exposed by later information and events.” (Freedman, 2006:23). For example, Miskimmon et al (2014) argued that American narratives surrounding the War in Iraq were contested because events and information from the ground contradicted their tales of success and victory. Hence, even though narratives of victory may have appealed to the values of the audiences the facts on the ground made them untenable.

Still, the mere existence of contradicting information cannot be enough to make a narrative uncredible. After all, the information may not be known by the narrative’s audience (Miskimmon et al, 2014:114). In the past, it was easier for states to control the narrative through censorship. For example, during the Second Chechen War, the Russian government instituted heavy media censorship to avoid the say-do discrepancy of the first war. This contributed to a rise in support among Russians for the war against Chechnya (Miskimmon et al, 2017:77-79). In the case of Israel on the other hand, Mor (2006) showed how Tel Aviv faced credibility problems during the Second Intifada when their professed aims and narratives clashed with their sometimes-brutal behaviour on the ground. Unlike Russia, Israel was unable to control the information space which led to photos and videos of their conduct being broadcasted around the world. As such, some have argued that the difficulty of controlling the information sphere has exploded with the emergence of the internet and the digital age, which should arguably aggravate the risk of credibility loss for different state actors and their narratives (Mor, 2006:165).

Thus, some argue that the new media ecology has changed the stage for states and their weaponization of narratives. For example, Khaldarova & Pantti (2016) have argued that the Internet has provided both elites and ordinary citizens an avenue where narratives can be contested. In fact, many new organisations focusing on challenging states through open-source intelligence (OSINT) such as Bellingcat have risen to prominence in recent year years (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:31). As such, Miskimmon et al (2014) argue that the growth of the digital sphere has enabled the proliferation of material that can quickly challenge long-established meanings around events and narratives: for example, photos of the Abu Ghraib prison camp challenges American narratives in Iraq. In this sense, the rise of the internet and the explosion of information suggests that we might see an intensification of the problems of the say-do gap: i.e. the credibility loss states may face when events and behaviour contradict their narratives. As Miskimmon et al (2014) argue, “Events that people experience or know happened can counter the most sophisticated strategic narrative” (Miskimmon et al, 2014:78).

However, in the last decade, scholars, analysts, and journalists alike have suggested that we are increasingly living in a post-truth world (McIntyre, 2018; D’Ancona, 2017). The Oxford definition of post-truth is the following: “relating to a situation in which people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs, rather than one based on facts:” (Oxford, 2023). Therefore, evidence and truthfulness are no longer the key aspects in the contest for credibility: instead, appeals to emotions and other tricks may be more efficient for states to retain credibility among their audiences. This means that a clash between words and actions could be alleviated through hoodwinking and rhetoric.

Regarding strategic narratives and credibility, scholars such as Szostek (2018) have suggested sentiments like those of the post-truthers. She argued that Ukrainian audiences largely assessed the credibility of narratives by whether they conformed to their preexisting beliefs and values rather than their factual basis. The downing of Malaysia Airlines MH17 by Russian forces in 2014 suggests that this may be true. The Russians consistently blamed the Ukrainians for the attack, despite vast amounts of evidence proving that a Russian BUK anti-air system shot down the plane (Bellingcat, 2017). In a 2014 survey, 82% of Russians blamed Ukraine for the attack, which indicates the Russian telling of the event succeeded in convincing their domestic audience of their non-involvement (Luhn, 2014). Hinck et al (2018) have therefore argued that Russia has successfully moved away from traditional principles of strategic communication that stress “...the need for truth, credibility, and

avoidance of contradiction” (Hinck et al, 2018). So, despite the emergence of the Internet, factually based arguments pinning the blame on Russia either did not reach Russian audiences or were not interpreted as credible by them.

1.1 Research Problem & Contribution

As evident, there is a discrepancy present. On one hand, the rise of the internet and social media has been theorised to make it harder to maintain the credibility of narratives that are contradicted by action on the ground. This suggests that faring with lies would be ineffective: after all, the truth will be disseminated through the help of crowdsourced evidence online and the state narratives will weaken. Therefore, it seems more rational to acknowledge evidence but try to frame it in a way that is beneficial for one’s narrative. On the other hand, the theorised rise of the post-truth and events such as the MH17 strike suggests that evidence may not be as damaging to the credibility of narratives as may be thought. Instead, it seems as if states are actively twisting evidence that contradicts them to fit their narratives.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to examine and understand how states behave when they are contested in the digital age. Do they act as if evidence matters, or do they ignore it? I will do this by investigating how the US behaved after their version of the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike was contested by the investigative group Bellingcat. This means that I will take my analysis one step further down from looking at strategic narrative contestation in the general sense. Instead, I will look at the rhetorical contestation process following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike, which I argue constitutes a cog in the larger wheel of American strategic narratives. Therefore, I look at behaviour in the form of rhetorical strategies, like Mor (2012).

The US alleged that the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike killed dozens of terrorists during an Al-Qaeda meeting, whereas Bellingcat among others argued that the US had killed upwards of fifty civilians after striking a mosque-complex (Triebert, 2017a). By looking at how the US rhetorical strategies changed as evidence against them mounted, I argue that we can learn about how the US, and states more generally, value evidence and truth when contested in the digital age. To categorize the rhetorical strategies used by the US, as well as the ones used by Bellingcat to contest the Americans, I have created a rhetorical framework that adapts the work of Benoit (2024) and Mor (2012). To understand why the US have used certain strategies at different points in time, I have created a theoretical framework that draws on the

aforementioned perspectives on the post-truth and the role of evidence, truth and credibility in the digital age.

However, it would be ahistorical to argue that the perspectives used for understanding America's rhetorical strategies and the contestation process are entirely new. After all, undermining the credibility of states through exposing their actions is not something new: as Miskimmon et al (2014) argue, the US lost credibility after lying about Iraq's WMDs in 2003. Similarly, Yuval Harari argues that we have always been living in a post-truth society: the only difference between now and then is that social media have exacerbated its reach (Brahms, 2022:3-4). Nonetheless, I argue that we are living in a qualitatively different era whose intricacies have largely been missed in prior studies on narrative contestation and especially on rhetorical contestation processes. The explosion of the internet has eroded the control that states have over narratives as videos, images, and other sources of information are churned out in massive quantities by a diverse set of actors that include regular civilians with smartphones, NGOs, states, and more. So, while the 2003 Invasion of Iraq produced many different perspectives on the reality of the war and its relation to the truth, the information space of today enables the formation and spread of vastly different and contesting narratives of war on an unprecedented level and speed (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:26-30). Similarly, Saliu (2023) argues that the environment in which we communicate has changed significantly in terms of public diplomacy and narratives. He argues that the power of states has eroded as citizens are contesting them by the billions (Saliu, 2023:218).

What is clear is that a lot has happened in the last decade and that the events researched in earlier studies such as Miskimmon et al (2014) and Mor (2012) are outdated. Both studies acknowledged and discussed the increasingly salient role of digital information spaces in regards to narratives and contestation. However, they could not account for the developments in the last years. Simply put, our current era of information is vastly different than earlier, and we need studies that reflect this (Saliu, 2023:210). To this end, I argue that the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike encapsulates the complexities of the digital age well, which I will describe in detail later. Miskimmon et al (2018) have looked at more recent events, however, they fail to comprehensively include perspectives that look at how states behave when contested in the context of the digital age. Studies such as Szostek (2018), Khaldarova & Pantti (2016), and Saliu (2023) have taken a more digital approach: however, they do not look at specific rhetorical processes of contestation and how states may/may not adapt their strategies as

evidence against them emerges. As such, my work will build on earlier studies such as Mor (2012) and Miskimmon et al (2014) by infixing a more contemporary perspective as inspired by studies and books such as Khaldarova & Pantti (2016), Szostek (2018), Ford & Hoskins (2022), D’Ancona, (2017), and McIntyre (2018).

To this end, the paper contributes to the field of political science with a focus on politics, security and crisis by descriptively looking at a contestation process in the digital age through a rhetorical framework adapted from Mor (2012) and Benoit (2024). This enables us to learn more about how the US behave when they are contested more specifically, but also how states may behave more generally. As written earlier, being exposed for deviating between one’s words and actions can undermine a state’s credibility and ability to pursue its goals: as such, being contested can reasonably constitute a political crisis for a state. Therefore, learning about how states behave during such processes will grant us more knowledge on how states handle crises and security issues. Due to the paper’s design, we will moreover gain insights on how Bellingcat contests the US through tools that have emerged in the digital age, even if the focus is on state behaviour. Secondly, by looking at evidence and post-truth-based theories on how the digital age may influence state behaviour during rhetorical contestation processes, I furthermore seek to nuance the conversation on what role facts and the truth play for states in an era of increasingly polluted information spaces. As such, I do not seek to disprove nor prove the post-truth perspective or the view of those who believe that the new era will bring about increased transparency and restrict states’ ability to twist reality. Instead, I aim to explore and nuance our knowledge of contestation in the digital age by looking at how the US behaved following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike by applying these perspectives.

To convert my abstract aim into something researchable, I have therefore composed two overarching research questions that will guide the paper. These are the following:

- a) *What rhetorical strategies did the Americans employ after being contested following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike?*
- b) *How can we understand the 2017 Al-Jinah contestation process?*

As such, there are two components to my paper: the first question is descriptive, while the second aims to explore and understand the use of different rhetorical strategies over time by

infixing my theoretical framework. To further nuance the analysis, question a) will include sub-questions that enable us to look at the contestation process as it played out from both sides. Therefore, I will also look at how the US rhetorical strategies changed as more evidence was laid out against them by Bellingcat. By doing this, I will gain further insight into how the process played out over time, which will aid me in furthering our understanding of the contest at large.

1.2 Thesis Outline

In the next chapters, I will elucidate the theoretical underpinnings of this paper. I will begin by outlining the previous literature on strategic narratives, credibility and the post-truth. Then, I will present my theory which will guide the paper forward. I will begin by presenting the rhetorical framework, which is divided into *offensive rhetorical strategies* and *defensive rhetorical strategies*. After this, the theoretical framework that will be applied to explore and understand America's behaviour and the rhetorical contestation process will be presented. Following this, I will go over the paper's research design. After this, my analysis will commence. Lastly, I will conclude the study with a discussion of the paper's findings, limitations, its contributions to academics and policymakers alike, avenues for future research, as well as a conclusion.

2. Previous research

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper will investigate and try to understand state behaviour during rhetorical contestation processes through a theoretical framework based on theorisation of how truth and evidence are valued in the digital age. This idea sprung up from reading a variety of research and theory on strategic narratives, credibility and the post-truth. Therefore, I will begin by reviewing the key literature on strategic narratives itself. Then, I will narrow it down by examining the literature on the credibility of narratives. After this, I will introduce the concept of post-truth. The literature on credibility and post-truth can be said to constitute the theoretical backbone for how I seek to understand the contestation process and America's behaviour following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. Lastly, I will clarify the gap in the previous literature that led me to my questions.

2.1 Strategic Narratives

The concept of strategic narratives is a relatively new addition to the conceptual toolbox of International Relations. It was introduced by Freedman (2006), who focuses on the role of narratives in military conflicts. Strategic narratives in his view can be defined as intentionally designed storylines meant to “explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn” (Freedman, 2006:22). As such, narratives guide how actors frame different issues both to themselves but also to others, as well as how they respond to them. These narratives are based on various levels of evidence and experience. Thus, there is nothing contradictory in a narrative being based entirely upon fantasies, however, Freedman (2006) argues that such narratives are likely to fail eventually.

Miskimmon et al (2017) further develop the concept beyond the military sphere. They define strategic narratives as “...a means by which political in actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors (Miskimmon et al, 2017:6). They categorise strategic narratives on three levels: the system-level, the policy-level, and the identity-level. These levels are linked together, and contradictions among the different levels can undermine the effectiveness of the narratives as a whole (Miskimmon et al, 2017:8). The first level concerns the narrative(s) of what the international system is. Examples of such narratives would be the Cold War and the War on Terror. The second level concerns narratives designed to make sense of why certain policies are needed and how these policies can be accomplished. For example, the narrative that Iraq has WMDs, and that this issue can be solved through invasion (Miskimmon et al, 2017:7-8). At the third level, states use narratives of identity to shape their projected identity on the international stage (Miskimmon et al, 2017:2). These narratives “set out what the story of a political actor is, what values it has, and what goals it has” (Miskimmon et al, 2017:7-8). For example, American narratives of precision and care for civilians (Garamone, 2016).

Thus, strategic narratives are a form of soft power: they are tools used to induce change by persuasion rather than coercion. However, this is not to say that strategic narratives are separate from tools of hard power. Instead, authors stress the importance of narratives and soft power for military conflicts (Miskimmon et al, 2017; Mor, 2006). Thus, we can see how soft power, perception and narratives are important to influence audiences during conflicts.

But what makes a narrative credible, and why does it matter? I will now go over the literature on credibility and the post-truth to examine the research on the matter.

2.2 Credibility

As mentioned earlier, soft power is about shaping others to desire the same outcomes as you do without coercing them. Nye (2008) argues that a country's soft power is based on three resources. These are a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. Through public diplomacy, countries try to enhance these assets of soft power. For example, culture and values can be exported through movies, while foreign policies may be projected through press conferences and interviews with foreign media (Nye, 2008:96-102). However, Nye (2008) argues that the advent of the digital age has led to a paradox of plenty, which is a situation where the wealth of information has decreased the attention span of the public. Therefore, the public relies on cue-givers and editors to sort out their information. Credibility, in turn, "...is the crucial resource and an important source of soft power" (Nye, 2008:100) for these people. As such, Nye (2008) argues that politics is now a contest between whose story is the most credible, and thus the winner among the public. He argues that credibility is undermined by inconsistencies between the words and the deeds of a nation. For example, the many civilian deaths that followed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 arguably undermined the credibility of America's identity narratives of precision and care for civilians. Therefore, America's ability to co-opt others through soft power, especially in the Muslim world, suffered (Nye, 2008:99-108).

The previous argument is extended by Mor (2012) who similarly argues that the reputation for credibility has become a cornerstone of soft power in the digital age. Compared to Nye (2008), however, Mor (2012) puts a stronger emphasis on how credibility is dependent on the perception of the audience itself. In this sense, he argues that the truth is subordinate to credibility. Therefore, a narrative based on falsehoods may be viewed as credible by the intended audience, while one based on the truth may be seen as uncredible. As such, he argues that actors can use various rhetorical strategies to avoid the discrepancy between an actor's narrative and their actions (Mor, 2012:401-402). For example, by denying an offensive action as having happened at all. Therefore, rhetorical strategies and manipulation can play a key role in maintaining credibility even when facts contradict your words among audiences. However, this is not to say that actors are making statements to support their narratives wily-nilly: on the contrary, Mor (2012) argues that "...actors rarely make

assertions without simultaneously trying to back them up” (Mor, 2012:418). For example, Mor (2012) found that Israel tried to justify an attack on an apartment building during the Second Lebanese War in 2006 by alleging that Hezbollah used human shields. However, Amnesty International disputed this claim and discredited the Israeli narrative by arguing that Israel had provided no concrete evidence to back their claims (Mor, 2012:416). Hence, Mor (2012) observes how the rhetorical strategies used by both sides still incorporate claims and disclaims of evidence, despite the assertion that truth may be subordinate to credibility.

However, multiple authors (for example Mor, 2006, 2012; Miskimmon et al, 2014, 2017, 2018; Saliu, 2023) suggest that the rise of social media, the internet, and the new media ecology in general may increase transparency and democratize the information sphere in the digital age. This has been suggested to pose a risk to the credibility of different strategic narratives promoted by various actors. For example, open-source intelligence and digital archives provide new avenues for disseminating evidence that can undercut state narratives (Miskimmon et al, 2018:7). Therefore, Miskimmon et al (2018) argue that it is essential for states to avoid creating a say-do gap between a state’s words and its actions. Previously, it would have been difficult for organisations such as Amnesty to access information that could undermine state narratives, however, this has arguably become easier with the increased visibility and transparency in the digital age (Mor, 2012:393-394). As such, it should be difficult to, for example, credibly use rhetorical strategies to mask acts that contradict your words in the digital age. Khaldarova & Pantti (2016) similarly argue that the Internet has created new platforms for both civilians and elites alike to contest narratives. As such, they argue that it is progressively harder to enforce dominant narratives in a conflict.

Therefore, new actors may increasingly challenge state-led strategic narratives through new tools that have emerged in the digital age. For example, Miskimmon et al (2014) argued that Israel failed to maintain credibility for its narratives when faced with accusations of war crimes by a variety of non-traditional actors during the Second Lebanese War. After being condemned by European leaders and faced with rising domestic discontent because of these accusations, Israel was forced to sign a ceasefire (Miskimmon et al, 2014:123). Hence, the say-do gap is not just a proposed theoretical construct but is something that has real-world consequences for states. All in all, these pieces of literature suggest that it may be harder to maintain the credibility of narratives when your actions are inconsistent with your words in the digital age. While earlier literature has suggested that certain techniques, such as various

rhetorical strategies, can alleviate concerns regarding the say-do gap, it is unlikely that they could completely turn the reality of an event on its head due to increased transparency and more critical audiences in the digital age (Mor, 2012:401-402).

On the other hand, some studies have suggested that the credibility of narratives is not dependent on their factual bases. For example, in a study on the clash of narratives in Ukraine, Szostek (2018) found that Ukrainian audiences judged the credibility of narratives both by their factual underpinnings, but also by whether they addressed issues that mattered to them. For example, she found that three-quarters of her participants “...expressed scepticism about news content based not on perceived factual inaccuracies, but on the belief that the wrong issues were being addressed” (Szostek, 2018:17). How the participants prioritized what issues mattered were in turn linked to their lived and personal experiences. In this sense, Ukrainians with strong links to Russia would be less likely to find Ukrainian narratives credible as they perceived them to threaten their connection with Russia (Szostek, 2018:21). This turns the argument that increased transparency threatens narrative credibility on its head. If the factual underpinnings are not important for the credibility of the narrative among audiences, then it logically does not matter if facts are increasingly visible in the digital age. As such, it seems as if it would be reasonable for states to use rhetorical strategies to alleviate the say-do gap, even if the claims made through these strategies are easily debunked by evidence. This follows the logic of the so-called post-truth, which I will proceed to now.

2.3 Post-truth

The word post-truth came into prominence in 2016 during Brexit and the US presidential election and has since been discussed among researchers in diverse fields such as public diplomacy, political science, philosophy, and even law (D’Ancona, 2017; Waisbord, 2018; Manor & Bjola, 2021; Pentney, 2022). Post-truth is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford, 2023). In this sense, D’Ancona (2017) argues that the era of post-truth is marked by a collapse in the value of truth itself. This does not mean that truth itself has ceased to exist. Instead, the post-truth suggests that truth has become “...subordinate to our political point of view” (McIntyre, 2018:11). Therefore, it is wrong to say that notions of truth have disappeared: instead, they have lost their value compared to emotions, like how Mor (2012) argued that truth was

subordinate to credibility. Similarly, D’Ancona (2017) and Waisbord (2018) argue that lying, hoodwinking and deception have always existed, even in democracies. However, D’Ancona (2017) argues that the difference between our previous world and the post-truth world is that the public has evolved to stop caring about lies. Instead, they actively collude with them (D’Ancona, 2017:25-27). Therefore, the cost-benefit analysis of using lies versus not has changed. Like Szostek (2018), D’Ancona (2017) therefore argues that the value of truth has not disappeared but may increasingly be losing its status as the main criterion of political contests.

There are different views, however, on whether the post-truth is a new predicament or if it is a return to the state of nature. Yuval Harari argues that the post-truth is not a new phenomenon, but one that has marked humanity forever. He argues that humans have always valued power higher than truth and that the only difference between now and then is how easily exploitable this predicament has become due to the new media ecology (Brahms, 2022:3-4). McIntyre (2018) and D’Ancona (2017), on the other hand, argue that the new media ecology in the digital age is a cause of the post-truth. Hence, their arguments differ slightly: Harari sees the post-truth as the normal state of man, but exacerbated by the new media ecology, while McIntyre (2018) & D’Ancona (2017) argue that the new media ecology is one of the causes of the post-truth which they view as a new development.

Empirical examples and studies relating to the post-truth predicament have mostly focused on Russia, Brexit, and Trumpism (for example, D’Ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016, Pomerantsev, 2017, Hinck et al, 2018). For example, some of these argue that Russia has begun to forego the concepts of credibility and truth completely. Instead, Russia has been argued to pollute the information space with disinformation to the point of paranoia, in other words, a state where no one knows what to believe anymore (Pomerantsev, 2017; Hinck et al, 2018; Manor, 2019). Arguably, this can be seen as the ultimate state of post-truth: there is no truth, no knowledge, and everything can be believed and disbelieved simultaneously (Pomerantsev, 2017:275). On the other hand, some authors suggest that different methods can be used to combat post-truth narratives (McIntyre, 2018; Manor & Bjola, 2021). For example, Manor & Bjola (2021) suggests five different methods that diplomats can use to combat false narratives spread by states such as Russia, China and North Korea. For instance, they argue that diplomats can debunk false information by contesting them with facts in real-time or by using humour to showcase the ridiculousness of the

narratives, thereby undermining them (Manor & Bjola, 2021:117). As such, the post-truth is not a hegemonic reality, but one that can be actively contested for normative and pragmatic reasons (McIntyre, 2018).

Nonetheless, I argue that we witness a discrepancy between the post-truth camp and those who argue that evidence is essential for the credibility of narratives and contests. Post-truthers, such as D'Ancona (2017) and McIntyre (2018) argue that the new media ecology has contributed to the devaluation of truth, as evidenced by studies on how the Russian populace seemingly does not care or is not informed of the objective reality that others experience (Hinck et al, 2018). Hence, facts and truths are not the cornerstone of narratives anymore: in fact, objective reality can be disregarded entirely. If you have committed a massacre, you can simply deny it. In other words, you can use rhetorical strategies to mask the say-do gap (Mor, 2012). On the other hand, authors such as Khaldarova & Pantti (2016), argue that the rise of the internet can create new avenues for actors to contest state narratives by putting forward credible evidence for their cause (Miskimmon et al, 2014, 2017, 2018). As such, states should reasonably keep evidence in mind when formulating their responses to an act of wrongdoing. For example, instead of denying a massacre that was videotaped, it may be wiser to formulate other rhetorical strategies to try and preserve one's credibility. Now, I will elucidate the research gap further before proceeding to the theory.

2.4 Research Gap

With the previous literature in mind, I will explain where the gap that I am trying to fill lies. First, the previous literature on strategic narratives has established a large and well-developed theoretical base. However, I argue that the field has lagged in assessing how states behave when their narratives are challenged, especially when they are challenged by their own actions during specific events in the digital age. Miskimmon et al (2014) have written on how states behave when their narratives are contested, however, their empirical cases are dated and predate the explosion in information that we have seen in the last decade. Thus, their work lacks the critical insights that have developed in the last years, most notably a clear post-truth perspective. Similarly, Mor (2012) investigated the rhetorical contestation between Israel and two human rights groups following the 2006 Qana Massacre. While he suggests that the new media ecology will change the playing field regarding narrative contestation, his case also predates the extreme growth in information during recent years.

These shortcomings have partly been alleviated by other works, such as Szostek (2018) and Khaldarova & Pantti (2016), who have taken a more digital approach to the phenomena of strategic narratives. However, both papers focus more so on how narratives are spread and received, rather than narrative contestation itself, especially in the context of specific events. Similarly, Miskimmon et al (2018) also examine how the digital age may impact how strategic narratives are used; however, they do not delve into how the current age may have impacted how states orient situations where their narratives are contested during specific events. Lastly, Ford & Hoskins (2022) discuss narratives and the power that new actors may wield in contesting state accounts of events in this new era. For example, they highlight how the NGO Airwars have contested US accounts of their air war in Syria through open-source intelligence (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:31-33). Nonetheless, they do not delve into the processes of contestation in detail. Similarly, Manor & Bjola (2021) investigates how diplomats can contest state-led narratives in a post-reality world through five different methods, however, they look more so at how states can contest narratives rather than how they behave when they are contested.

Thus, this paper will try to go deeper into the cogs of narrative contestation by looking at event-level rhetorical contestation processes, as well as thrusting it into the digital age with a focus on state behaviour. As such, it can be said that this paper seeks to combine the rhetorical focus of Mor (2012), with the overarching notions of credibility from the literature on strategic narratives together with the digital and post-truthist insights from Ford & Hoskins (2022), Khaldarova & Pantti (2016), McIntyre (2018), among others. Therefore, my paper can be said to combine different aspects from various papers and fields to provide a contemporary and exploratory analysis of how states behave rhetorically when they are contested in the digital age. Now, I will go over the paper's theory, including both the rhetorical and theoretical frameworks.

3. Theory

In this chapter, I will go over the rhetorical and theoretical frameworks that will guide the paper. This chapter is divided into two parts. First, I will present the rhetorical framework. I constructed this framework by adapting the works of Mor (2012) and Benoit (2024). This framework is divided into two parts: *offensive* and *defensive rhetorical strategies*. In short, the offensive rhetorical strategies are those that are used by the accuser to pin responsibility

or maximise the blame of the accused. The defensive rhetorical strategies on the other hand are used to absolve/reduce blame (Mor, 2012:404). As such, I operationalize behaviour during contestation processes through this framework.

Regarding the theoretical framework, I will first outline the two strands that will guide the analysis. The first is the perspective that evidence matters for the credibility of narratives and rhetoric, especially so in the digital age. Therefore, states should take evidence into account when strategizing their rhetoric. I call this perspective *evidence-matters*. The other perspective comes from the post-truth school of thought and posits that evidence has lost its significance compared to, for example, appeals to emotions or manipulation in the digital age. I call this strand *post-truth*. I do not view these strands as dualistic: they should rather be viewed as two ends of a spectrum. Notably, I am not operationalising the theoretical framework into measurable variables: this paper is about interpreting and understanding, not validating or confirming. Now, I will begin by going over the rhetorical framework.

3.1 Rhetorical Framework

This framework is divided into two sections: *defensive rhetorical strategies* and *offensive rhetorical strategies*. The former will be applied to examine the US's rhetorical strategies when defending themselves against the allegations, while the latter is used to examine how Bellingcat contests the American account of the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. Both the defensive and offensive strategies rely on factual and normative components. These components will also be presented. The defensive rhetorical strategies that I will outline here are a mix of Mor's (2012) typology of blame avoidance strategies and Benoit's (2024) image restoration theory framework, while the offensive rhetorical strategies are adapted from Mor (2012).

3.2.1 Defensive Rhetorical Strategies

Firstly, Benoit (2024) and Mor (2012) build upon the same literature but differ slightly in content. The most notable difference between Benoit (2024) and Mor (2012) is that the latter does not include the strategies of *mortification* and *corrective actions* in his framework. Still, he acknowledges that such strategies are used in situations of image restoration: therefore, I argue that they are important to include in line with Benoit (2024). As such, I have extended Mor's framework with the strategies of mortification and compensation that I have adapted from Benoit (2024). These strategies are defensive, insofar as they serve to remove/lessen the damage from incoming allegations. These strategies are presented in Table 1.

Strategy	Example statements
<i>Denial</i>	It did not happen
<i>Dissociation</i>	It wasn't us
<i>Excuses</i>	They left us no alternative; We were forced to do X; We did not intend X
<i>Defensive Reframing</i>	It was different; It could have been worse
<i>Justification</i>	It was legitimate; we played fair; we meant well
<i>Corrective action</i>	We will fix it; We will learn from this event so we can prevent it in the future
<i>Mortification</i>	We apologize for the strike

Table 1. Defensive Rhetorical Strategies. Adapted from Mor (2012:403) & Benoit (2024:15-16)

I argue that these rhetorical strategies can, and often are, used by states to mend their reputation/and or narrative, as suggested by Mor (2012), Benoit (2024) and Peijuan et al (2009). As such, I argue that they are a good starting point for operationalizing American behaviour following the accusation of killing civilians during the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. Benoit (2024) argues that an actor's reputation/narrative is at risk if key audiences believe that the alleged act is offensive and that the alleged actor is responsible for it. Furthermore, someone must have put this allegation forward: otherwise, there is nothing to respond to. Clearly, allegations of striking a mosque and killing civilians should be deemed offensive by key audiences: as such, it is expected that the US would employ some of these strategies in their restorative work following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. Therefore, it is theoretically in the US's interest to restore their narrative/reputation as best as they can through rhetoric.

Furthermore, Mor (2012) argues that two components can be applied to a claim: a normative and a factual one. The normative component is about establishing a context in which the action is excused by an appeal to social norms. For example, trying to minimize the responsibility for an offence by arguing that it was not intentional. Secondly, facts are important to back up your rhetorical strategy. For example, providing evidence that an allegedly ruined building is still standing would contradict allegations of destroying said building. Similarly, when accusing someone of acting wrongfully, it is important to have evidence backing up your claim (Mor, 2012:406).

The strategies comprising the defensive rhetorical strategies are *denial*, *dissociation*, *excuses*, *reframing*, *justification*, *corrective action*, and *mortification*, whereas the first five are adopted from Mor (2012), and the last two from Benoit (2024). The first strategy, *denial*, is a strategy that denies the event entirely (Mor, 2012:403-404). For example, arguing that an event of mass killing never happened. While normative aspects are possible to apply here, such as arguing that an event never happened because they would never commit such an atrocity, factual ones would be stronger. For example, if someone alleges that a building has been struck and destroyed, a state could back up their strategy of denial by showing evidence that the building is still standing.

The second strategy is *dissociation*. This strategy does not deny the action nor the outcome of the action but challenges the claim of being responsible (Mor, 2012:403). For example, accepting that an explosion happened but alleging that someone else was responsible for it. Again, both factual and normative aspects can be applied to make this strategy stronger. Thirdly, *excuses* are about excusing the attack: for example, arguing that their hands were tied, that they did not intend for the outcome to happen, or that a lack of information made it impossible for them to foresee the consequences of an action. As such, this strategy accepts what happened during an event, however, it tries to lessen the responsibility for it (Mor, 2012:402-404).

The next two strategies are different compared to the former three in the sense that they accept responsibility for the event. *Defensive reframing* is a strategy that aims to present the event in a way that lessens the negative perception of the accused. For example, by arguing that the event happened in a different way than described, that others have done worse, or that the event could have been worse. Thus, responsibility is accepted, however, both the action and outcome itself can be challenged or accepted depending on the exact strategy used. For example, it may be argued that a strike happened but that it targeted terrorists and not civilians. Therefore, audiences should not view the accused in a negative light. Justification, similarly, accepts responsibility but argues that the action was legitimate (Mor, 2012:402-404). For example, by appealing to normative claims such as the legality of the strike according to international law.

The last strategies are *corrective actions* and *mortification*. The first concerns situations in which an actor promises to resolve a problem. For example, by restoring "...the situation to the condition it was in before the offensive act or ... make changes to prevent the recurrence

of the undesirable act” (Benoit, 2024:15). For example, promising new routines for calling airstrikes to ensure minimal civilian damage. The last strategy, *mortification*, is about admitting guilt and asking for forgiveness in the hopes that the audience will forgive you for the act (Benoit, 2024:16).

Lastly, it should be noted that these strategies are not mutually exclusive. Instead, Mor (2012) argues that they are often used in conjunction simultaneously or at different temporal points. Therefore, a state may mix and match these strategies to achieve its aims. Likewise, a state may realize that their initial strategies were fruitless, leading them to switch strategies

3.2.2 Offensive Rhetorical Strategies

From Mor (2012), I have identified three offensive strategies that are used to discredit an opponent’s narrative/version through factual claims. These strategies are henceforth referred to as *insufficient evidence*, *offensive reframing*, and *association*. This framework will be used to look at how Bellingcat contested the Americans by presenting their own version of the event through evidence-based claims. According to Mor, the most prominent offensive strategy is to accuse the opponent of providing insufficient evidence for their claims (Mor, 2012:416). I call this strategy *insufficient evidence*. For example, Human Rights Watch claimed that Israel did not back up their claim of Hezbollah's presence in Qana during the 2006 Lebanon War: as such, the Israeli claim was discredited (Mor, 2012:416). Secondly, Mor (2012) argues that an actor can introduce new information to *offensively reframe* the situation: for example, Israel claimed that Hezbollah shot rockets out of the Qana village and that the civilians killed were used as human shields. By presenting evidence that contradicted these claims, Human Rights Watch reframed the event to one where Israel hit defenceless civilians and not human shields. Thirdly, Mor argues that an actor can present new evidence to “...undermine the sincerity of the opponent’s self-proclaimed motivation” (Mor, 2012:420). For example, if the accused argues that they accidentally hit civilians, the accuser may introduce facts that show that the accused should have been aware of nearby civilians present. This strategy is called *association*. The offensive rhetorical strategies are summarized in Table 2.

Strategy	Example statements
<i>Insufficient evidence</i>	You do not have any evidence for your claims
<i>Offensive reframe</i>	We found that the building did not contain any weapons, so why do you claim that it was a weapons cache?
<i>Association</i>	Your drones circled the area before striking and should therefore have noticed the civilian presence.

Table 2. *Offensive Rhetorical Strategies. Adapted from Mor (2012:420)*

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Now, the theoretical framework will be presented. While the rhetorical framework will be applied to categorize and operationalize America's behaviour and Bellingcat's accusations during the contestation process, the theoretical framework will be applied to help us interpret and understand their behaviour as well as the contestation process at large.

3.2.1 Evidence Matters

I have named the first strand *evidence matters*. Early writers on strategic narratives and soft power highlighted the importance of having a credible narrative backed up by material reality. That is, the credibility of your narrative largely depends upon the consistency between the words in your narrative and the actions people know you commit (Nye, 2008; Miskimmon et al, 2014). This means that states should strive to avoid the say-do gap, meaning, that states must try to avoid contradicting their narratives with their actions or try to avoid these actions being seen. In the context of this paper, the alleged act has already happened. As such, the possibility of avoiding an action has already passed (Mor, 2006:165-166). In previous years, it would have been relatively straightforward for states to manipulate events through rhetoric as the outlets for spreading information were smaller, and the chances of evidence reaching audiences was lower (Saliu, 2023:218).

However, in recent years, the explosion of information has created new possibilities for a variety of actors to present evidence that may contrast with the words of a state's narrative or rhetoric. Through open-source intelligence, social media and other forums, actors both large and small have almost infinite ways of contesting states (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:31; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016:891-894). Hence, it is now very difficult to stop the dissemination of information that contradicts your larger strategic narrative or your version of an event.

If we moreover assume that audiences care about evidence, then lying about what happened during an event while being contested would be counterproductive. The lie will be exposed, and the opponents' telling of the event will gain credibility while yours will plummet. As such, lying about the sequence or factual basis of an event would be irrational from this perspective (Mor, 2006:165-166). Therefore, states in the digital age should be incentivized to keep close to the truth if the argument that modern politics is a contest of being the most credible is correct (Nye, 2008). Of course, this does not mean that a state would be disincentivized to reframe or slightly spin a situation; rather, I argue that it is an outright denial of facts or large deviations in words versus reality that would be dangerous for a state. After all, spinning the intents or specific details of an event is not as uncredible as a statement that fully denies reality (Pentney, 2022:21).

In terms of rhetorical behaviour, this perspective suggests that if the evidence is overwhelming, it is unwise for a state to use a rhetorical strategy that strays too far away from the truth, such as outright denial, as that would risk widening the say-do gap to the point where the credibility of a narrative is severely diminished. For example, denying an attack against civilians is arguably worse than acknowledging but trying to justify it: the former strategy does nothing to absolve blame if the audiences have consumed the contradictory evidence while the latter strategy can serve to minimize the say-do gap by rhetorically fitting the event into one's narrative (Mor, 2012). As such, using rhetorical strategies backed up by normative claims, rather than trying to ignore/fabricate factual claims is arguably more rational from this point of view. For example, by justifying a strike you could agree that it happened but still retain your credibility by arguing that it was legitimate and therefore not an action that would constitute a gap between your narrative and actions or between reality and story.

Mortification and corrective actions are also reasonable paths for a state to take in a world where evidence matters. By apologizing, a state may signal that this specific event was a one-off mistake: therefore, not one that indicates any discrepancy between the words and actions of a state (Benoit, 2024:17-18). For example, even if a state accidentally kills civilians during a war, it does not necessarily mean that its identity-narrative of conducting precise warfare is untrue. After all, mistakes happen. Likewise, promising corrective actions would work in the same way. By promising to do better in the future, the narrative can arguably be restored in that the failures of a specific event do not reflect any larger gap between narrative and action. Foregoing narratives completely, the same logic applies if we are only talking about the

damage to a state's reputation after committing an act of wrong-doing. For example, according to this strand, it would be more rational to appeal to normative claims to restore one's reputation rather than contest credible evidence.

So, at the core of this strand, the US would be expected to use rhetorical strategies that acknowledge undeniable facts put against them if evidence matters in the digital age. Instead of denying these, I would expect the US to use strategies that seek to reduce the blame and responsibility for the wrongdoing through normative claims. However, this is not to say that the US would be expected to accept every accusation laid out against them: if evidence matters, and the US believes the accusatory evidence to be false, then it would be expected that they respond to allegations with facts that back up their claims.

3.2.2 Post-truth: Evidence Does Not Matter

On the other hand, the post-truth strand would posit that in contemporary political discourse, the boundaries between fact and fiction have become blurred, and the persuasive power of rhetoric and emotional appeals often outweighs the influence of objective evidence. As such, this perspective posits that audiences have moved away from viewing the factual basis of arguments as key (D'Ancona, 2017). Therefore, modern politics is not a credibility contest: or if it is, credibility is not dependent upon material truth (Nye, 2008). Instead, emotional appeals and arguments have overtaken the importance of truth. Therefore, states and other actors do not have to rely on evidence to win over people to their narratives or telling of events anymore. Instead, anything goes and accusations of wrongdoing can either be denied entirely or manipulated to fit one's narrative (McIntyre, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2017).

Thus, this perspective challenges the notion that evidence matters when narratives or versions of events are contested. If states behave as if this is true, then they should logically be more flexible in choosing their rhetorical strategies no matter if they face credible evidence.

Therefore, while new actors have emerged with new tools to contest states, these do not matter in practice (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:31-33). For example, if a massacre has occurred, the option that fits one's narrative best may be to deny the massacre entirely even if other actors have presented strong evidence for the existence of a massacre. However, this is not to say that denial is always the most effective strategy for a state even if it behaves as if we live in a post-truth world (Benoit, 2024:19-20). Still, the perspective does suggest that states would not be constrained by evidence when strategizing their rhetorical response. Likewise, they would not depend on using factual claims to back up their rhetoric.

Nonetheless, as I said earlier, these strands should be viewed as ends of the same spectrum. As such, it is not contradictory that the US would lie in some respects while acknowledging facts in others. Therefore, the theoretical discussion here serves as a base for my future analysis and is not the elucidation of two perspectives that will be tested against each other.

3.3 Summarising the Theory

So, the theory of this paper is two-fold: first, we have the theoretical framework including the two strands that pose the theoretical backbone of the paper. Secondly, we have the rhetorical framework which is composed of the offensive and defensive rhetorical strategies. Each strategy is described and presented along with example statements. Going off these descriptions, I will identify rhetorical strategies in the analysed texts. The theoretical framework on the other hand is a bit more ambiguous. I do not argue that the use of, for example, denial somehow proves a post-truth culture while the use of justification does not. Instead, this framework will be applied fluidly and will inform rather than dictate the analysis.

4. Research Design

In this chapter, I will critically discuss and outline the research design of this paper. First, I will begin by discussing the methodology that this paper rests on. Then, I will discuss the method used in this paper, which is a form of textual analysis called rhetorical criticism. After this, I will explain why I chose to study the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike as well as how I gathered the material for the analysis. Lastly, I will discuss some of the limitations that have arisen due to my research design.

4.1 Methodology

I emanate from a critical realist perspective, which can be said to be a bridge between realism and relativism. Like realism and unlike relativists, critical realists posit that an independent reality exists outside of language. As such, a critical realist perspective takes the stance that one and not multiple realities exist. However, our perceptions and understandings of reality are mediated by social phenomena such as language and culture (Braun & Clarke 2022:169-170). Therefore, our reality can be said to rest upon the material world, which invariably constrains and informs our views on reality, but also on social phenomena such as language

and culture. Therefore, it is not out of realm that the American perspective of reality differs from that of, say, Bellingcat (Braun & Clarke 2022:169-170). However, the material facts remain true nonetheless: in the context of this paper, I therefore, argue that it is possible to acknowledge that some facts around the event analysed, such as the specific munitions used, are materially true. Similarly, a critical realist approach allows us to make judgments on issues that are more contentious: such as whether causalities were civilian or military. Without making assertions about the material world, I argue that it is difficult to understand issues such as contestation and the value of truth in the digital age. That is, if we cannot establish a truth, then we cannot establish if others lie or if it is their subjective reality that is different.

However, it is also key to acknowledge that the rhetorical strategies used may be influenced by the understanding of reality as mediated by, for example, a post-truth culture. So, despite the evidence being objectively there, it's still projected and interpreted by other actors creating, for example, contextual truths for different individuals (Braun & Clarke 2022:170). As such, the US may know that what they are saying is false: but, living in a post-truth culture, the material reality does not matter for the contextual truth they may try to impose upon the audiences. Therefore, this approach was chosen for its bridging abilities: like its proponents, I believe that material reality exists independently of our minds, but that our perceptions of it are mediated and influenced by social phenomena (Braun & Clarke 2022:169-170).

4.2 Method

Choosing the right method according to your methodological approach is important for research to be persuasive (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:19). As such, the method I use must be consistent with my critical realist approach. In my view, rhetorical criticism does not intrinsically clash with the approach of critical realism: that is, the methods way of generating and analysing information are not contradictory to a view that establishes a material reality beyond language. Rhetorical criticism may be incompatible with a positivist ontology; however, critical realism acknowledges the subjective views that make up our perceptions of reality (Braun & Clarke 2022:169-170). As such, I argue that rhetorical criticism is an apt method to investigate and understand the rhetorical contestation process and America's behaviour following Bellingcat's accusations regarding the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike.

4.2.1 Rhetorical Criticism.

To assess and understand the rhetorical strategies of the US through my frameworks, I will apply a method called textual analysis, and more specially the approach of rhetorical criticism. This method is often used in disciplines such as communication and media studies (Peijuan et al, 2009:2). Furthermore, this method is common in studies on image restoration theory (Zhang & Benoit, 2004; Peijuan et al, 2009). As such, there is an established basis for using the method when assessing rhetorical strategies. Compared to most traditional research on image restoration theory however, I seek to include a critical perspective to understand why specific rhetorical strategies were used at different points during the contestation process. In other words, I aim to not only elucidate the rhetorical strategies used, but I also seek to understand these through my theoretical framework.

Frey et al define rhetorical criticism as "...a systematic method for describing, analysing, interpreting, and evaluating the persuasive force of messages embedded within texts." (Frey et al, 2005:229). They argue that the method can shed light on several different functions: two of which are relevant for this paper. Firstly, the method can illustrate the purposes of a message, such as restoring a narrative or lessening blame. Secondly, the method can help us "...understand historical, social, and cultural contexts and, thereby, explain how contexts affect and are affected by persuasive messages." (Frey et al, 2005:230). The latter function is of key importance for this text: the post-truth/evidence-matters strands are not only philosophical constructs but as far as they reach into the real world should also be viewed as cultural contexts that may affect what strategies a state uses when contested. For example, by analysing what different strategies the US uses in relation to the facts presented by Bellingcat, we may be able to better understand the cultural and social contexts that influence America's behaviour and thus the contestation process at large.

To use the method, we must choose a set of artefacts to study based on our object of analysis (Foss, 2018:9-11). As I will evaluate America's behaviour and the contestation process surrounding Al-Jinah, the object of analysis is the rhetorical strategies used by the US and Bellingcat. As such, texts from US governmental officials and news reports which contain statements by officials will be analysed together with the reports released by Bellingcat to identify the use of rhetorical strategies. To guide the analysis, I have formulated three different questions to ask the texts. According to Foss (2018), there are four types of components that a rhetorical critic can base their questions on: in this case, I base my questions on exploring the components of the message and the rhetor. The message

component is about “...the specific features of the artifact that enable it to function in particular ways” (Foss, 2018:12). In the context of this paper, this entails examining the texts and classifying the American defensive rhetorical strategies as well as Bellingcat’s offensive rhetorical strategies according to my rhetorical framework. The second component is about exploring questions such as how motives or worldviews impact a rhetors use of rhetoric. For example, how we understand the American's rhetorical strategies and by extension the contestation process by applying my theoretical framework? The first two questions are the following:

What defensive rhetorical strategies can be identified in the American texts?

What offensive rhetorical strategies does Bellingcat use to contest America’s claims?

These questions serve to help me answer research question a)

What rhetorical strategies did the Americans employ after being contested following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike?

The rhetorical strategies that I will look for are the ones I presented in the rhetorical framework. The third question is about understanding America's behaviour and the contestation process through my theoretical framework (Foss, 2018:11-12). This question is the same as research question b) and does not include any sub-questions. The question is the following:

How can we understand the 2017 Al-Jinah contestation process?

4.3 Selecting the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike and the Material.

As written earlier, I will focus on the rhetorical contestation process regarding a single event, and not a larger contestation process surrounding a strategic narrative itself. Therefore, I will apply my rhetorical framework to several texts on the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike, whose results are thereafter analysed through my theoretical framework.

I choose the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike for a few reasons. First of all, the US has been an oft-cited example in the literature on the post-truth and is both democratic as well as anglophone (McIntyre, 2018; D’Ancona, 2017). As they are democratic, it should arguably be more dangerous for their leaders to lie, as being exposed might mean that they lose credibility among their constituents. As such, the stakes are higher, and I therefore find them more interesting to study in this regard. Secondly, the US being anglophone means that I will not

have to translate their statements. As such, I do not have to worry about losing rhetorical strategies in translation.

This eventually led me to the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. I argue that this strike encapsulates the digital age well. The strike happened in a rural area and would most likely have been overlooked if not for the internet and the new media ecology. Due to local reporters and civilians on the ground, information about the strike was quickly disseminated through social media and was later picked up by OSINT groups such as Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017a). As the strike was conducted as part of Operation Inherent Resolve, I would similarly argue that such information also contests the larger strategic narrative of both the operation and the US being precise and that they are extraordinarily careful around protecting civilians (Airwars, 2024; Garamone, 2016).

The ambiguity around the strike led to multiple reports criticising the Americans, as well as the Americans responding themselves. This was another reason why I chose this specific event to study: namely, I could access texts from both sides. Therefore, my selection of event was inextricably linked to the access to available material for study (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:69-71). When looking at the potential material for each potential event, I had two general criteria. First, there had to be multiple and substantial texts from both sides of the contest. That is, multiple texts which contained enough relevant information for me to conduct a rhetorical criticism. Secondly, there had to be multiple texts released at different points in time with new material. Again, a contestation which consisted of one accusatory text and one retaliatory one would not be substantial enough for me to conduct an analysis where factors such as, for example, the emergence of new evidence over time could be considered. Therefore, the availability of material around Al-Jinah ensures that I can take an intertextual approach. I believe it is important to compare and look at the texts together to gain a fuller view of the context in which they lie, but also to fully understand the meanings found in each one individually (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:86). Therefore, it was important to find an event with multiple texts available for analysis.

I have indicated the substantial material analysed in Table 3. I have included the date of publication as well as whose words it is that are analysed in the text. Notably, Bellingcat was not the only organisation that contested the US. However, due to the scope of this paper, I have limited myself to their reports for the rhetorical criticism. This was deemed appropriate as they collaborated closely with other investigative organizations such as Forensic

Architecture (FA) and Human Rights Watch (HRW). Therefore, I argue that it is sufficient to analyse Bellingcat’s texts to gain an understanding of the contestation process from the opposition's point of view. To investigate the American rhetorical strategies, I had to use two sources which were not published by the government, but nonetheless recite what American officials have said. The first one is an article published by NBC. The second one is a transcript of an American press briefing released unedited by the organisation Airwars. Still, these recount American statements, and I have therefore marked the US as the actor. Lastly, other material has also been used to illustrate the event and to provide more nuance. However, I have not analysed them rhetorically. As such, they are not included in Table 3.

Name of text	Actor	Date of release
U.S. Denies Striking Syrian Mosque After Dozens Reported Killed (Johnson & Kube, 2017)	US (published by NBC)	March 17 th , 2017
CONFIRMED: US Responsible for 'Aleppo Mosque Bombing' (Triebert, 2017a)	Bellingcat	March 16 th , 2017 – March 18 th , 2017 (text was updated multiple times)
Pentagon Spokesman: Dozens of Terrorists Believed Killed in U.S. Strike in Syria (Ferdinando, 2017)	US (published by the Pentagon)	March 17 th , 2017
The Al-Jinah Mosque Complex Bombing — New Information and Timeline (Triebert, 2017b)	Bellingcat	April 18 th , 2017

Transcript of Pentagon's Al Jinah Investigation media briefing (Airwars, 2017)	US (published by Airwars)	June 27 th , 2017
--	---------------------------	------------------------------

Table 3. Analysed Texts

4.4 Methodological Limitations

There are several limitations to my approach. Firstly, limiting myself to analysing one event involving the US means that my findings will not say much about contestation processes in general. Nonetheless, I do not seek to find any general relationship in this paper. Rather, as said earlier, this paper is exploratory and seeks to apply new perspectives to further our understanding of contestation processes in the digital age. Similarly, there are no clear-cut indicators of whether certain rhetorical strategies determine a post-truth versus evidence-matters context. Again, this is beyond the scope of this paper: I do not aim to create a typology or guide for how to identify post-truth or evidence-matters sentiments. Instead, the theoretical framework is applied to further our understanding, rather than finding any robust causal relationships.

Secondly, it is difficult to establish the truth and the credibility of evidence. First and foremost, local actors that disseminate information picked up by Bellingcat may have an incentive to lie and/or hide certain information. Similarly, states may be incentivized to sabotage information available on the web (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:32). Furthermore, the US has not made their investigation into the Al-Jinah strike public. Instead, the only evidence of an investigation happening at all is the press briefing that was transcribed by the organisation Airwars (2017). Therefore, it may be so that the US is telling the truth when they refer to their own intelligence reports in the briefing. This is alleviated by taking an intertextual approach, but is still a problem

Similarly, there is a distinction between intentionally spinning the truth and unintentionally speaking inaccurately due to bad information. As such, just because the US says something wrong does not mean that they are lying. Indeed, the distinction between lies and inaccuracy is something that must be inferred through factors such as temporality, circumstances, and by examining the texts against each other. In other words, an intertextual approach must be taken, and it is necessary to move back and forth between the texts to establish a coherent understanding of them (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:86).

5. Analysis

The analysis is organised into two sections. In the first section, I will analyse the texts and the rhetorical strategies used by Bellingcat and the US through my rhetorical framework. Here, I will also situate the rhetorical contest by presenting a brief background on the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. In the second section, I will analyse these findings through the theoretical framework presented earlier.

5.1 Rhetorical Strategies

Depending on the actor, the questions I ask the texts to uncover their strategies differ slightly. This is because I am examining Bellingcat's offensive rhetorical strategies, while I am looking at the defensive rhetorical strategies for the US. The questions are the following:

What defensive rhetorical strategies can be identified in the American texts? (US texts)

What offensive rhetorical strategies does Bellingcat use to contest America's claims? (Bellingcat's texts)

Thus, each text will be asked either question depending on the actor analysed. By asking these questions, I seek to answer research question a):

What rhetorical strategies did the Americans employ after being contested following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike?

I have analysed and categorized the texts in chronological order. Notably, the first Bellingcat report was written and updated over the course of two days. I decided to categorize it according to its earliest date, however, I have kept this in mind when doing the analysis. Now, I will present a brief background on the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike before continuing with the analysis.

5.1.1 2017 Al-Jinah Strike

Since 2014, the US have fought the Islamic State and other Islamist groups in Syria as part of a global coalition under the name Operation Inherent Resolve. Much of the kinetic campaign has been conducted from the air (Airwars, 2024). According to the coalition, this operation has been the most precise ever, with the US estimating that 1437 civilians have died, while the investigative organisation Airwars (2024) have confirmed or strongly believes that between 8,220–13,299 civilians have been killed.

The 2017 Al-Jinah strike was part of Operation Inherent Resolve and was launched by an American special operations task force from an undisclosed base in the region (Airwars, 2017). The attack took place at 18:55 Syrian time on the 16th of March 2017 and struck the northern part of a mosque-complex in the Syrian city of Al-Jinah in the Aleppo governorate. After striking the complex with F15 Strike Eagle aircraft, MQ9 drones proceeded to launch missiles at targets outside of the mosque (Airwars, 2017). Minutes after the attacks, reports and images of the strike began to surface on Twitter. Hours after the attack, various actors established that multiple bombs had hit a mosque in the town of Al-Jinah. The Syrian White Helmets reported that dozens of civilians had died and that many others were being rescued from the ensuing rubble (Treibert, 2017a).

Simultaneously, US CENTCOM released a statement saying that they had "...conducted an airstrike on an Al Qaeda in Syria meeting location March 16th in Idlib, Syria, killing several terrorists" (Treibert, 2017a), and that Idlib moreover had "... been a significant haven for Al Qaeda in recent years" (Treibert, 2017a). Thus, confirming that an American strike had happened in the region. While the initial American statement wrongly listed the location as Idlib, CENTCOM later clarified that the statement was indeed referring to the Al-Jinah strike in the nearby Aleppo province (Treibert, 2017a)

So, there is an initial discrepancy between the American statement and the allegations put forward by Bellingcat and others. These actors alleged that the US had struck a mosque filled with worshipers, which the US quickly denied (Johnson & Kube, 2017). As such, this allegation is the starting point to where I argue that the American defensive rhetorical efforts begin. This allegation fits both components that Benoit (2024) argues are necessary to trigger a rhetorical response. Firstly, attacking a mosque filled with civilians is an offensive act. Secondly, the US was alleged to be responsible. As would be predicted by Benoit (2024), the US quickly launched their restoration efforts. Simultaneously, organisations such as Bellingcat mobilized to contest the American version of the event.

Moreover, I argue that we should put the contestation process of Al-Jinah in a larger context. Arguably, contesting the American claims of a clean operation killing terrorists also contests the larger identity-narrative of the US and Operation Inherent Resolve being the "most precise in history" (Garamone, 2016). As said earlier, I am narrowing down my study to a single event, but the contestation process is nonetheless embedded in a larger battle

for/against the credibility of strategic narratives. Now, I will begin by analysing the first text of this paper.

5.1.2 16th March: U.S. Denies Striking Syrian Mosque After Dozens Reported Killed (US)

In this brief article, military officials in contact with NBC denied the allegations of targeting a mosque and killing at least 42 persons. Instead, they argued that they had hit an Al-Qaeda meeting where they killed multiple suspected terrorists in a building close to a mosque (Johnson & Kube, 2017). As such, I argue that the US used the strategy of *defensive reframing* (Mor, 2012:403). They denied the allegation that they targeted a mosque but acknowledged that they had struck an al-Qaeda meeting near a mosque. Hence, they accepted responsibility for the strike but challenged the alleged nature of the action and the outcome. No concrete evidence was provided by the US at this stage.

5.1.3 16-18th March: CONFIRMED: US Responsible for 'Aleppo Mosque Bombing' (Bellingcat)

This report was initially posted on the eve of the attack but was subsequently updated multiple times (Triebert, 2017a). As such, it is unclear at times what parts were written when. However, I argue that it is still fruitful to examine it, as it includes a lot of information that the Americans refuted on the 17th of March.

In this text, Bellingcat examines open-source information to lay out what happened on the eve of the 16th of March. They established that the targeted mosque was a newly and partially constructed complex in Al-Jinah, Aleppo Governorate contrary to initial American reports that the strikes had happened in the Idlib Governorate. By cross-referencing satellite imagery with videos and pictures from the aftermath of the strike, they prove that a mosque-complex was struck and damaged. As such, they *offensively reframe* the situation from the initial American claims with evidence (Mor, 2012:403; Triebert, 2017a). Similarly, they include American imagery of the strike's aftermath to prove that they had struck a mosque. Bellingcat does note that it is likely that the US were unaware of the building's religious nature. Hence, they do not go as far as saying that the Americans deliberately attacked a place of worship.

Moreover, Bellingcat list the civilian deaths as at least 29, citing the White Helmets and the Syrian Network for Human Rights. They also include a video taken from Twitter which shows a kid being pulled out of rubble (Triebert, 2017a). As such, they contest vital parts of the US version of the event by arguing that the building had a religious purpose and that the

strike had killed dozens of civilians. They back up their claims with evidence collected from actors on the ground and through open-source channels.

5.1.4 17th March: Pentagon Spokesman: Dozens of Terrorists Believed Killed in U.S. Strike in Syria (US)

This is the first official statement released by US government sources following the initial report of the attack published by CENTCOM. In this statement, the Pentagon spokesman Captain Jeff Davies refutes the allegations that the US has targeted a mosque filled with civilians. He says that:

I wanted to draw your attention to it, because I think there are a lot of reports suggesting that we had targeted a mosque," he said. "We did not. Of course, you know we never would. (Ferdinando, 2017)

As such, he denies the allegations that the US had hit a mosque filled with civilians. Instead, he maintained that they hit a meeting of Al-Qaeda officials where they killed a dozen terrorists (Ferdinando, 2017). Thus, he *defensively reframes* the event (Mor, 2012:403). To support his position, he includes an image of the site post-strike. He argues that the image shows that the US has not struck a mosque. Clearly, they saw it as important to back up their claims and rhetoric with facts (Mor, 2012:418). Nonetheless, he goes on to say that:

The area has been a significant safe haven for al-Qaida since it re-established a Shura Council in Syria last year, Davis said, adding that extensive surveillance took place before the strike. (Ferdinando, 2017)

So, together with *reframing* the attack, he also *justifies* it. In other words, he argues that the US strikes in the area were justified as they were provoked by al-Qaeda's presence in the area. He does not provide any concrete evidence of this. However, this information should be easily verifiable by outside sources, and I see it as unlikely that the US would lie about this. This strategy also has a normative component, as it posits the context of the strike as justified as it is an Al-Qaeda haven (Ferdinando, 2017). Lastly, he ends his statement by saying that:

We do not currently assess there were any civilian casualties," he said. "As always, you know we take extraordinary measures to mitigate the loss of civilian life in our operations. (Ferdinando, 2017)

Here, he opens for possible civilian casualties, even if he argues that they do not assess there to be any as of now. Still, he arguably pre-emptively *justifies* the strike in the case of civilian

causalities. Even if civilians have perished in this attack, he argues that the US takes extraordinary measures to protect civilians. As such, it would be a one-off mistake and not something that would indicate any larger pattern. Therefore, the blame would be lessened as they meant well (Mor, 2012:403).

5.1.5 18th April: The Al-Jinah Mosque Complex Bombing — New Information and Timeline (Bellingcat)

Three investigative reports on the Al-Jinah strike were released simultaneously: these came from Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017b), HRW (2017), and FA (2017). While the reports were conducted independently, they extensively shared information. As said earlier, I have decided to only analyse the Bellingcat report, which I argue contains the most important information laid out in the two other reports.

In this report, Bellingcat challenges the American version of the event and pin blame on them using all three offensive rhetorical strategies laid out in the framework: *insufficient evidence*, *offensive reframing*, and *association* (Triebert, 2017b; Mor, 2012:420). As such, they critique the lack of concrete evidence supporting US claims, while simultaneously presenting new evidence to substantiate their claims. They mostly relied on open-source intelligence, which has become a prevalent method for actors to use when contesting states in the digital age (Ford & Hoskins, 2022:31-33).

Immediately, they argue that “...a United States (US) airstrike targeted the Sayidina Omar ibn al-Khattab mosque, where reportedly almost 300 people had gathered for the Isha’a night prayers and a religious lecture” (Triebert, 2017b) and that the “...airstrike completely destroyed the northern side of the mosque-complex near al-Jinah in Syria’s Aleppo governorate” (Triebert, 2017b). Therefore, they *offensively reframe* the situation: the US did not target a meeting in a community hall, but a fully functioning mosque-complex. They back up their claim by referring to evidence dug out by FA and HRW, as well evidence that they gathered on their own. For example, they write that:

Locals told Human Rights Watch that construction at the mosque started in 2013. Historical imagery from Google Earth, Microsoft Bing, and TerraServer corroborates this account. The construction remained unfinished due to lack of funds, the interviewees said. (Triebert, 2017b).

Similarly, they include still frames from videos taken of the building’s exterior that prove it was a mosque. For example, referring to a still frame they posted, they write that:

The first video shows that the athan speaker, used for the call for prayer, is visible on the roof of the mosque. A sign next to the entrance reads “Sayidina Omar Ibn al-Khattab mosque”. It is worth noting that this sign is in the very same position as seen in post-strike photos and videos. (Triebert, 2017b)

By backing up their claims with evidence, they attempt to *reframe* the American claim of hitting a community hall. Instead, they argue that the US hit the northern part of a functioning, albeit unfinished, mosque-complex. This part comprised the Imam’s flat, a ritual washroom, a kitchen, and a winter prayer hall. With this said, Bellingcat does not cast any judgment on whether the US deliberately struck the mosque: instead, they argue that it might have been a case of misidentification (Triebert, 2017b).

Bellingcat also disputes the American claim of striking an Al-Qaeda meeting. Firstly, they argue that it would be very unlikely for Al-Qaeda to convene for a secret meeting in a prayer hall filled with 300 worshippers (Triebert, 2017b). Secondly, they argue that “...the US authorities have so far not released any information to support their claims” (Triebert, 2017b). They further write that they have examined photos and videos from the strike where they have been unable to identify the presence of any military equipment or Al-Qaeda members. Instead, they refer to HRW, who have cross-checked the victims of the strike with their Facebook profiles without being able to find any links to terror organisations (Triebert, 2017b). Moreover, Bellingcat attaches videos and photos taken from Twitter and other sites showing casualties and people being dragged out of the rubble. Among those, a 14-year-old boy identified as Mohammad Orabi, who later died from his injuries according to Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017b). As such, we can observe the use of *insufficient evidence* as well as *offensive reframing*.

Lastly, we also observe the use of *association* in the text. Contrary to American claims of taking “extraordinary measures to mitigate the loss of civilian life” (Ferdinando, 2017), Bellingcat argues that the Americans should have been aware of the civilian presence in the area considering that they struck the site 15 minutes before night prayer. They back up their claim by arguing that prayer times are easily findable online and that the likelihood of US authorities being oblivious to them is very slim (Triebert, 2017b). Therefore, even if the Americans struck a building which they only believed was close to a mosque, the risk of civilian casualties should have been considered high due to the timing of the strike. As such,

Bellingcat undermines the American's sincerity of their self-proclaimed motivations (Mor, 2012:420).

All in all, Bellingcat has introduced evidence to contest America's version of the event and, by extension, arguably their larger strategic narrative in which the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike is embedded. Moreover, they have also critiqued the US's lack of evidence backing up their claims. In the end, they do not go as far as claiming that the US deliberately struck civilians, but they do argue that the American description of the event does not match reality (Triebert, 2017b).

5.1.6 June 7th Transcript of Pentagon's Al-Jinah Investigation media briefing (US)

This text consists of a briefing by Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis and General Paul Bontrager after concluding the US investigation into the strike. This briefing was held after investigations by HRW (2017), FA (2017) and Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017b) had all concluded that the US had struck a mosque-complex and killed civilians. The transcript of the June 7th briefing was not released officially, however, the investigative organisation Airwars (2017) received permission from the Pentagon to post a transcript of the meeting.

In this text, multiple defensive rhetorical strategies are used (Mor, 2012:403; Benoit, 2024:19). The key takeaway from the text is that the US strike was justified, but that there were some shortcomings in the operational process that will be addressed in the future. General Paul Bontrager maintains that the US struck their intended targets and that the struck section was not used by worshipers, even if the larger complex was of religious significance. They back up their claims with reference to internal intelligence reports, however, they do not present this evidence to the audience. The closest they come is referencing the earlier image released by the Pentagon the day after the strike (Airwars, 2017). For example, Bontrager says that they:

...reviewed all available video and images, operational reports, and intelligence reports associated with the strike, while researching all regulations, standing operating procedures, commander's guidance and other pertinent information. (Airwars, 2017)

Arguably, the investigation and briefing came because of the reports alleging the US of misconduct. For example, they explicitly acknowledge the report by HRW, saying that they used it "...to further assess if we could learn from their conclusions and their research." (Airwars, 2017). As such, it can be said that Bontrager *defensively reframed* the situation from the claims put forward by Bellingcat, FA, and HRW. Nonetheless, it should be noted

that he largely maintained the original US position on the strike: as such, the view of him using *defensive reframing* is dependent on the view that the investigation and briefing came as a response to refute the new reports. Furthermore, while *reframing* the situation, he also *justifies* the strike as legal and strategically sound. Still, he acknowledges some problems with the operation that have been raised against them by various actors. He argues that the US will learn from these mistakes, and in this, he uses the defensive rhetorical strategy of *corrective actions*. As he does this, he also *excuses* how the strike was handled by the Target Engagement Authority (TEA) responsible for approving the strike. I will illustrate the use of these strategies now. As they mix and match these strategies, I will go over them together rather than picking them out one by one (Mor, 2012; Airwars, 2017).

First, Bontrager argues that they received information that an Al-Qaeda meeting was imminent and would take place in the building that they later struck. Furthermore, he notes that the general area where the meeting took place is ungoverned and a hotspot for Al-Qaeda, as Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis did in the previous report (Ferdinando, 2017; Airwars, 2017). This and further information were provided to the TEA, who approved the strike as the building was deemed to be a valid military target (Airwars, 2017). Bontrager argues they successfully struck an Al-Qaeda meeting and that a dozen militants were killed. Moreover, he argues that the strike "...complied with operational and legal requirements" (Airwars, 2017). Here, we see both *reframing* and *justification* in Bontrager's rhetoric. First, the strike is *reframed* as a successful hit on an Al-Qaeda meeting, compared to the accusations by Bellingcat that the Americans struck a mosque and killed civilians. As such, the Americans argued that they acted on credible information and that the strike was not a mistake as suggested by Bellingcat (Trieber, 2017b).

Moreover, by claiming that the area is ungoverned and a hotspot for Al-Qaeda, I argue that Bontrager *justifies* the strike by alleging that the area is under control by terrorists, and thus a fair area to strike. Moreover, Bontrager *justifies* the strike as adhering to both operational and legal requirements (Airwars, 2017). Therefore, even if they would mistakenly kill civilians, it was still legal and American responsibility for any failure should be lessened. Thus, Bontrager attempts to back up his claims with both factual and normative components: there was a meeting of Al-Qaeda members according to US intelligence, and the strike was normatively justified as legal and proportionate (Airwars, 2017; Mor, 2012).

Moreover, responding directly to the accusations of causing civilian casualties, Bontrager argues that the Americans successfully targeted Al-Qaeda members and not civilian worshippers. For example, Bontrager says that:

We are not aware of large number of civilians being treated in hospitals after the strike. We are confident this was a meeting of Al Qaida members and leaders. This was not a meeting of civilians. (Airwars, 2017)

However, he does argue that one of the casualties may have been a civilian due to his short stature, and he expresses sadness at this possibility, although he falls short of apologizing for it. Instead, he argues that the potential civilian was known before approving the strike but that it was deemed as a proportionate amount of collateral damage (Airwars, 2017). Thus, he *justifies* the attack as proportional. As such, Bontrager both *reframes* and *justifies* the situation concerning the alleged civilian casualties. Interestingly, he does not provide any names or concrete evidence that the deceased were part of Al-Qaeda. Instead, he backs up his claim by arguing that their intelligence had provided them with this information (Airwars, 2017).

Lastly, Bontrager accepts some of the accusations laid out against the Americans: namely, that they struck a building that was used for religious purposes. About the building's purpose, we can identify four different defensive rhetorical strategies used by Bontrager: *defensive reframing*, *justification*, *excuses*, and lastly *corrective actions*. Firstly, he points to imagery released by the Pentagon in an earlier statement to argue that the strike was precise.

Bontrager says that:

And I will avoid classified details, but the effects visible in the photograph are evidence the bombs were appropriately fused to limit collateral damage. You can see that vehicles parked outside the building are still intact and right side up. You can see that the mosque was slightly damaged but left standing. You can see that the adjacent larger building was left mostly untouched as well. The target, a meeting of Al Qaida, that we aimed for was the only structure that was hit. (Airwars, 2017)

Again, *justifying* the strike as precise and successful. However, soon after he notes that the Americans were not aware that the struck part of the building was part of a larger religious complex under construction when they approved the strike. He says that “these two buildings, the one we struck and the larger building that we did not strike, were both under construction and actually had a religious purpose.” (Airwars, 2017). Contrary to Bellingcat, however,

Bontrager argues that the struck part was intended to become a school in the future. Therefore, he refutes that it was an actively used part of the mosque (Airwars, 2017).

Bontrager goes on to say that buildings used for religious purposes go through different authorization procedures before being struck. He says that:

This failure to identify the religious purpose of these buildings led the target engagement authority to make the final determination to strike without knowing all he should have known. And that is something that we need to make sure does not happen in the future. (Airwars, 2017)

Here, Bontrager *excuses* the fact that the strike did not go through the proper procedures due to a lack of information given to the TEA. As such, he promises *corrective actions* to make sure that future attacks are authorized according to the right procedure. Nonetheless, he goes on to argue that the strike was still justified as the building was used to congregate Al-Qaeda members at the time of the strike. Therefore, he argues that while the target process was faulty and due to be improved, the strike was *justified*. He encapsulates this view when concluding his speech, where he says that:

Though our investigation identified some critical information gaps that contributed to a misinformation and an overall lack of understanding of the situation, we ultimately struck a blow against Al-Qaida. But that does not excuse us from taking a hard look at what we could do better, particular in terms of process and procedures. (Airwars, 2017)

In the end, we observe multiple rhetorical strategies used by the US. They admit some faults, but largely maintain the position that they killed terrorists, and that the strike was justified despite the structure's religious nature. As such, they use both *defensive reframing* and *justification* in the briefing. Moreover, they acknowledge the faulty procedure and *excuse* themselves. To alleviate the wrongful procedure, Bontrager promises *corrective actions* to ensure that responsible authorities have accurate and up-to-date information before approving strikes in the future (Airwars, 2017).

5.2 Understanding the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike Contestation Process

In this section, I seek to answer research question b) *How can we understand the 2017 Al-Jinah contestation process?* by applying the theoretical framework to analyse and understand

the findings of the last section. To do this, I argue that we must make some assertions of what happened to discuss this at all. As suggested by opponents of the post-truth predicament, we must be able to ascertain that a certain something happened, or otherwise anything goes (McIntyre, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2017). For example, if I cannot say that the US killed civilians, then it is impossible to understand their behaviour from a framework that explores post-truth and the value of evidence in the digital age.

As such, I will begin by establishing what happened. Firstly, the US struck a target in the village of Al-Jinah at 18:55, 15 minutes before the night prayer (Triebert, 2017a). The targeted structure was the northern side of an unfinished mosque-complex, as initially found by Bellingcat, and later acknowledged by the US (Triebert, 2017a; Airwars, 2017). Despite later US claims that this part was likely to be a future school, Bellingcat proved that it was an active part of the mosque-complex composed of a kitchen, toilets, a ritual washroom, and a winter prayer hall as well as the flat of the imam (Triebert, 2017b). The attack was carried out by F15 fighters that dropped 10 bombs on the building, as well as an MG9 drone that fired two missiles on targets that emerged out of the building (Airwars, 2017).

The most significant contention between the Americans and Bellingcat regarded the causalities identities. All actors involved in the contestation agree that at least a dozen humans were killed and wounded. After reviewing all the available texts, the evidence points towards the causalities being civilians in contrast to American claims. This was alleged from the very start by local reporters and Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017a). Later, HRW (2017), Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017b), and FA (2017) emerged with more credible evidence supporting this assertion. The US, on the other hand, has failed to name any killed Al-Qaeda operative. In fact, they have failed to provide any tangible evidence at all supporting their claim (Airwars, 2017). As such, I argue that we can reasonably establish that the causalities of the attack were civilian.

With this in mind, I argue that a look at the post-truth vs evidence-matters strands can help us understand the contestation between the US and Bellingcat as it developed, as well as the specific rhetorical strategies used. As seen in the former section, the Americans denied targeting civilian worshippers in a mosque since the very beginning. I argue that the initial American reaction makes sense: seemingly, the information space was scattered, and the Americans themselves do not seem to have realised that they struck a building with religious

significance (Triebert, 2017b). Nonetheless, it is impossible to ascertain whether they were lying or not at this point.

Still, information quickly emerged from outside actors that contradicted the American claims (Triebert, 2017a). We see a mix of American strategies at the beginning of the contestation process: first, they quickly correct their initial reporting on the strike's location. This is a minor move, but one that at least showcases willingness to acknowledge facts (Triebert, 2017a). However, regarding what building was struck, the US remained confident that it was in fact not a mosque. The first substantial American report on the situation even utilized drone imagery to back up their wrongful claim (Ferdinando, 2017). At this point, and with the latter texts in mind, I believe that the US most likely thought that they had not struck a mosque, in line with Bellingcat (Triebert, 2017a). Otherwise, it seems odd to provide imagery that directly contradicts your statement. As such, it would be dishonest to argue that their efforts to *reframe* and *justify* the situation would be indicative of a post-truth culture permeating the rhetor's behaviour (Foss, 2018:12).

In fact, later American rhetoric regarding the building's nature suggest that the emergence of contradictory evidence did influence America's rhetorical strategies. Following the investigations by Bellingcat, FA and HRW, the Americans renounced their initial claim that the targeted section of the building lacked any religious nature. Instead, the Americans acknowledged that the struck building was a partly constructed religious complex (Airwars, 2017). Arguably, striking a religious complex is a more offensive infraction than bombing a community centre. However, instead of *denying*, *dissociating* or *reframing* the situation in this regard, as I would expect a state that doesn't believe in the value of truth would do, they focused on *justifying* the strike. Justification as a rhetorical strategy was in this case based on normative appeals, i.e. that the US would be in the right to strike the building whether or not it was a mosque due to its military significance. As such, I argue that one can infer some credence to the notion that evidence matters and is a useful tool for contesting states in the digital age, as it otherwise seems puzzling for the US to admit to an infraction worse than the one initially claimed (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016:891-894). Similarly, Bontrager promises *corrective actions*. He admits that the Americans should have been aware of the building's religious nature before authorizing the strike, even if the strike would be justified. As such, he promises that the American military will improve upon its intelligence gathering in the future to avoid situations where the information given to the target authority is incomplete (Airwars,

2017). Again, a move that would be expected by a state that values, or believes that the audience values, truth in the form of material evidence.

Therefore, these American rhetorical strategies indicate that they still value, or at least believe that the audience values, truth and evidence. Nonetheless, as indicated earlier, the Americans still reframed the situation in a way that was not entirely correspondent to reality. For example, while they acknowledge that the struck part of the building was a part of the religious complex, they say that its purpose was to be a future school, seemingly disregarding the fact that it was actively used by worshippers and personnel at the time of the attack (Triebert, 2017b; Airwars, 2017). As such, they reframed the situation in a way that deviated slightly from what happened, but not to an extent that would be ridiculous (Pentney, 2022:21).

So, how can we understand the spectacle around the building's nature through my theoretical framework? I argue that this situation indicates that the emergence of contradictory evidence does play a role in how the US behaves. If various actors had not contested the American account with hard evidence for their case, it seems highly unlikely that the US would admit that they had accidentally struck a religious building. As such, the reports by Bellingcat lend credence to the notion that the new media ecology provides new and effective ways to contest states (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016:891-894). However, the role of evidence is not as salient as one would wish considering that the US still warped the purpose of the struck target. Arguably, the US's rhetorical strategies reflected both truthful and deceptive behaviour, and it would be unempirical to reduce this situation to either reflect a post-truth or evidence-matters worldview among the Americans (Foss, 2018:12).

However, the Americans *defensive reframing* regarding the victims of the attacks suggests a stronger case for the influence of post-truthism on America's behaviour. Again, the Americans continuously claimed that they had successfully struck members of Al-Qaeda, albeit with no concrete evidence to back up their claim. At the same time, Bellingcat provided credible evidence that the victims were civilians (Triebert, 2017b). This suggests that the post-truthers may be right in their assertion that facts have lost their value in favour of other appeals (D'Ancona, 2017; McIntyre, 2018).

However, the Americans did eventually bulge and admitted that a civilian child might have been injured or killed (Airwars, 2017). In the last briefing, Bontrager argued that the presence of a small-statured individual had been known to the TEA at the time of the strike and that

they had deemed it to be proportional collateral: as such, Jeff Davies either lied or was misinformed when he said that no civilian casualties were assessed to have happened in the first report (Ferdinando, 2017). Arguably, Bontrager's backtracking in this regard may have stemmed from the videos shared by Bellingcat which showed a 14-year-old boy being pulled out of rubble (Triebert, 2017a). After all, it is difficult to convince an audience that a child pulled out of the rubble was a terrorist, while bodies of civilian males can arguably be more readily reframed into terrorists. Therefore, while the larger characterization of the casualties as terrorists suggests that the US dismisses evidence, the acknowledgement of the civilian child still points towards evidence playing some role in shaping America's rhetorical strategies. However, this does not indicate that US cares about the truth for normative reasons: rather, they only acknowledged the truth when it was exposed by Bellingcat.

Therefore, I argue that the US has shown behavioural signs that align with notions of a world in which evidence matters, as well as one in which the post-truth predicament reigns supreme. As such, the role of evidence and new actors' role in contesting narratives in the digital age should not be understated: as evident, Bellingcat was able to induce the US to acknowledge factual inconsistencies which otherwise would probably have remained in the dark (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Ford & Hoskins, 2022). On the other hand, ignoring credible evidence of civilian deaths is both deeply problematic and indicative of an age that has not been able to evolve past earlier decades where the truth could be hidden and or/ignored by states through censorship (Miskimmon et al, 2017-77-79). Similarly, even when the US acknowledged the evidence against them, they spun it to better fit their narrative. In the end, this paper has shown that we cannot look at the American's behaviour from an exclusively post-truth nor evidence-matters perspective: we have neither reached a point where the evidence is completely moot nor have we reached a state of transparency where states are unable to lie due to the repercussion they would face in terms of credibility loss. Nonetheless, by applying these perspectives on the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike contestation, I argue that our understanding of how and why the US behaved the way they did when contested by Bellingcat is enhanced. Similarly, I argue that our understanding of how truth and evidence may impact state behaviour during contestation processes in general is enhanced, even if the focus of this paper was on the US.

6. Discussion

In this chapter, I will begin by briefly discussing the findings in relation to each research question. Then, I will go over the limitations of the paper. After this, I will discuss the contributions of the paper and avenues for future research.

6.1 Findings

a) What rhetorical strategies did the Americans employ after being contested following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike?

After being faced with contradicting evidence from Bellingcat, the US used a multitude of strategies: *justification*, *excuses*, *defensive reframing*, and *corrective actions*. In the initial stages of the contestation, they used *justification* and *defensive reframing*. For example, they *justified* the strike by arguing that Al-Jinah was an Al-Qaeda hotspot. Moreover, they *defensively reframed* the situation by showing photographs of the post-strike aftermath to argue that they had not struck a mosque. As time went on and evidence against the US version mounted, they retracted some claims. For example, the US admitted that the struck building was part of a mosque-complex and that a civilian was among the casualties. As such, they did *excuse* that their target strike process was based upon faulty information regarding the building's nature. Moreover, they promised *corrective actions* to alleviate these issues in the future. Nonetheless, they continued to *justify* the strike by arguing that the civilian causality was proportional to the terrorists killed and that the mosque would have been struck nonetheless due to its military significance. Except for the one civilian child, the US continuously maintained that they had killed terrorists even when credible evidence pointed against it. All in all, the Americans' choice of rhetorical strategies differed slightly as evidence mounted against them: however, they still used strategies that legitimized the strike as successful, legal, and entirely within the bounds of their operation through both normative and some factual claims.

b) How can we understand the 2017 Al-Jinah Contestation Process?

By applying theories on how the truth is valued in the digital age, I argue that we can gain some understanding of why the US behaved the way it did in the context of the digital age. I argue that both the post-truth and evidence-matters strands provide insights into their rhetorical strategies and how they changed over time. For example, it is clear that the US took the evidence put against them into consideration: the US acknowledged the struck building's

religious nature when Bellingcat and others proved it to have been part of a mosque-complex. Similarly, acknowledging the one civilian death arguably came as a reaction to the evidence shared by Bellingcat considering that Jeff Davis did not mention the causality in the initial statement despite Bontrager later arguing that the child's presence was known at the time of authorizing the strike. Bellingcat found this information by relying on open-source information, which points to the notion of the internet's democratising and increasingly transparent nature being of significance for contesting states (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016:891-894; Mor, 2012). Had this event happened twenty years ago, it could very well be that there wouldn't be enough material to gather for Bellingcat to contest the Americans at all, especially considering the rural location of Al-Jinah.

Nonetheless, the US continued to *reframe* the status of the victims, even as Bellingcat and other organisations provided strong evidence that the victims were civilians. Hitting civilians is a bad look for the US, both among domestic and international audiences: as such, they seemingly decided to ignore facts in favour of appealing to emotions among audiences. This points towards somewhat of a post-truth sentiment among the Americans. Perhaps, the confusing and complex information space of today enables the US to maintain this lie: after all, it is hard to know who and what to believe when confronted by an almost endless stream of narratives and information (Ford & Hoskins, 2022). Moreover, when the US acknowledges the truth, I argue that they do so for pragmatic rather than normative reasons: meaning, it is unlikely that they would have acknowledged the truth regarding the building's nature and the civilian causality had they not been contested. As such, the information space of today can play a significant role in forcing states to take accountability for acts of wrongdoing. In the end, the theoretical framework enables us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the contestation process at large, and US's behaviour in particular.

6.2 Limitations

First, this paper has only looked at one way of understanding behaviour: that is, through a truth/evidence-based framework applied to America's rhetorical strategies. Moreover, I have only looked at one event. For example, considering that the strike took place in Syria, a post-colonial framework could also help us understand the American behaviour following the strike, albeit from a different perspective. As such, this paper does not comprehensively cover the Al-Jinah contestation process, or US behaviour during contestation processes in general.

Moreover, the lack of a comparison, especially temporally, is also troubling. As I have not analysed a similar event that happened, say, 20 years ago, it is difficult if not impossible to gauge if we are living in a new age. For example, the US may have behaved similarly during prior bouts with other actors. If so, the rationale that it is important to study contestation processes with more recent cases due to us living in a different time is undermined. Similarly, my theoretical framework is based on the notion that the explosion of information has changed how evidence and truth are valued. If the US has behaved in similar ways before the information explosion, my theoretical framework loses theoretical strength. Moreover, the American behaviour after Al-Jinah might have been an outlier. For example, it could be that the US usually acknowledges and apologizes for wrongly striking civilians, which would lend more credence to the perspective that the information explosion has had an important effect in restraining states from straying too far from the truth. Similarly, the US may be an outlier among states: as such, our understanding of state behaviour in general during contestation processes is limited.

Furthermore, it is also difficult to delimit the age that we are in. As said before, I believe that we must look at more recent cases and apply new theoretical tools to understand contestation processes in the digital age. However, it is difficult to establish when this new age began. By comparing 2017 and 2007 we can see a big change in how information is spread across the world: however, looking at changes year after year it becomes a bit murkier. Does the digital age begin with the popularisation of social media or the launch of the iPhone? Perhaps, the popularisation of OSINT organisations during the War in Ukraine could be viewed as a starting point for a new era marked by an explosion in information and narratives. As such, one could argue that the case studies of previous research are not outdated and that my justification is arbitrary. Nonetheless, I have applied a framework that seeks to reflect on proposed changes and theorisation on truth and evidence in the digital age. As such, I still develop previous studies with insights that have been proposed in recent literature.

6.3 Contributions

I have contributed to the field of political science with a focus on politics, security and crisis by analysing the contestation process following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike with a framework that focuses on how truth and evidence are oriented and valued by states in our current digital age. By building on previous literature, I have therefore expanded our understanding of why states may behave the way they do after being challenged. In the process, I argue that I have

contributed with empirical evidence of how OSINT organisations may contest states, as well as how the US has behaved as more and more evidence mounted against them. This helps illustrate how narratives and states are contested in the digital age. The theoretical framework that I have applied also deepens our understanding of how rhetorical strategies and behaviour can be influenced by perceptions of how much truth and evidence matter in an age characterized by a strong bottom-up ability to present and spread information.

Besides the academic contributions, I argue that there are several insights from the paper that practitioners can draw upon. Firstly, the paper has shown that OSINT is a viable way to contest states in the digital age. As such, practitioners should not be discouraged by arguments that the truth and evidence have lost significance. Similarly, the study has illustrated what strategies the US following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. By learning from this, I argue that practitioners may better envision and predict what strategies they will face, and therefore they can gain an edge in countering such strategies even before they have been applied.

Lastly, there is also a normative aspect to the contributions of this paper. I argue that it is important for all of us to combat the post-truth. To combat the post-truth, McIntyre (2018) suggests that we must point out lies and inaccuracies as we see them: as such, pointing out the American falsehoods regarding the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike is also a normative pursuit of a world where the truth matters.

6.4 Avenues for Future Research

I advise future researchers to study and compare more events of contestation, both temporally and cross-sectionally. By doing this, we can gain further insights on questions such as whether there has been any change in how evidence and truth are valued over the last decades. Moreover, by looking at more events and states, it is possible to identify patterns: for example, does geographical location play any role in what strategies states use when contested? Does the US usually acknowledge evidence, or do other events suggest that they are devaluing claims of truth and evidence in favour of falsehoods that fit better with their narratives? How do democracies versus autocracies act when contested? This will further help us understand contestation both today, but also in the past. Likewise, through identifying other factors that may influence how a state behaves, our understanding of how and to what extent states value truth and evidence is increased. Moreover, I suggest future researchers

work on improving and developing theoretical frameworks on how evidence and truth are valued.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate and try to understand how states behave during contestation processes in the digital age. To achieve this purpose, I analysed America's behaviour after being contested by Bellingcat following the 2017 Al-Jinah Strike. I operationalized their behaviour in the form of rhetorical strategies, which I analysed through a rhetorical framework adapted from Mor (2012) and Benoit (2024). Similarly, I also looked at how Bellingcat presented evidence to contest the Americans through various offensive rhetorical strategies to put the American rhetoric in context. To identify the strategies used, I analysed five different texts through the method of rhetorical criticism. To understand why the Americans behaved the way they did, I applied a theoretical framework to analyse the texts and the findings. This framework drew on previous studies that discussed how truth and evidence are valued in the digital age. In the end, I found that the Americans used a variety of rhetorical strategies that differed as evidence against them mounted. I argue that our understanding of the rhetorical strategies used by the Americans was enhanced through the application of my theoretical framework. Here, I found that the American behaviour indicated that they valued the truth and evidence to some extent, most likely for pragmatic rather than normative reasons. Still, they disregarded the truth in the case of the victims' identities as well as the intended purpose of the struck building. As such, the findings supported both the notion that evidence matters for states in the digital age, while also supporting a more post-truth perspective where states can/are ignoring evidence as they please. Nonetheless, the framework helped in understanding why the Americans, and by extension states, behaved and behave the way they do during contestation processes in the digital age.

Reference List

Literature

- Bellingcat (2017) MH17 - The Open Source Investigation, Three Years Later, *Bellingcat*, [online], July 17, Available at <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/07/17/mh17-open-source-investigation-three-years-later/>> [Accessed at 12/28/2024].
- Benoit, W.L. (2024) *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory Extended*, 3 ed., Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Brahms, Y. (2022) *Philosophy of Post-Truth*, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*, London: SAGE.
- D’Ancona, M. (2017) *Post truth: the new war on truth and how to fight back*, London: Ebury Press.
- Ford, M.C. and Hoskins, A. (2022) *Radical war: data, attention and control in the twenty-first century*, London: Hurst & Company.
- Foss, S.K. (2018) *Rhetorical criticism: exploration and practice*, 5 ed., Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc.
- Freedman, L. (2006) Networks, culture and narratives, *The Adelphi Papers*, 45(379), 11–26.
- Frey, L.R., Botan, C.H. and Kreps, G.L. (2005) *Investigating communication: an introduction to research methods*, 2 ed., Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Garamone, J. (2016) Centcom Official Calls Aerial Assault on ISIL the Most Precise in History, *DOD News*, [online], January 22, Available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/644139/centcom-official-calls-aerial-assault-on-isil-the-most-precise-in-history/>> [Accessed at 01/04/2025].
- Hinck, R.S., Kluver, R. and Cooley, S. (2018) Russia re-envisioning the world: strategic narratives in Russian broadcast and news media during 2015, *Russian Journal of Communication*, 10(1), 21–37.
- Khaldarova, I. and Pantti, M. (2016) Fake News: The narrative battle over the Ukrainian conflict, *Journalism Practice*, 10(7), 891–901.

- Luhn, A. (2014) MH17: vast majority of Russians believe Ukraine downed plane, poll finds, *The Guardian*, [online], July 30, Available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/30/mh17-vast-majority-russians-believe-ukraine-downed-plane-poll>> [Accessed at 12/28/2024].
- Manor, I. (2019) *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Manor, I. and Bjola, C. (2021) Public Diplomacy in the Age of “Post-reality”, in P. Surowiec and I. Manor (eds) *Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 111–143.
- McIntyre, L. (2018) *Post-Truth*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B. and Roselle, L. (2014) *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Routledge.
- Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B. and Roselle, L. (2017) *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B and Roselle, L. (2018) Strategic Narrative: 21st Century Diplomatic Statecraft, *Revista Mexicana De Política Exterior*, 113, 1-19.
- Mor, B.D. (2006) Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2(2), 157–176.
- Mor, B.D. (2012) Credibility talk in public diplomacy, *Review of International Studies*, 38(2), 393–422.
- Nye, J.S. (2008) Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 94–109.
- Oxford (2023), Oxford English Dictionary., *Oxford: Oxford University Press*, [online], July, Available at: <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/post-truth_adj?tl=true> [Accessed 12/28/2024].
- Peijuan, C., Ting, L.P. and Pang, A. (2009) Managing a nation’s image during crisis: A study of the Chinese government’s image repair efforts in the “Made in China” controversy, *Public Relations Review*, 35(3), 213–218.
- Pentney, K. (2022) Tinker, Tailor, Twitter, Lie: Government Disinformation and Freedom of Expression in a Post-Truth Era, *Human Rights Law Review*, 22(2), 1-29.

Pomerantsev, P. (2017) *Nothing is true and everything is possible: adventures in modern Russia*, London: Faber & Faber.

Saliu, H. (2023) Narratives of Public Diplomacy in the post-Truth Era: The decline of Soft Power, *Communication & Society*, 209–224.

Schwartz-Shea, P. and Yanow, D. (2012) *Interpretive research design: concepts and processes*, New York: Routledge.

Szostek, J. (2018) Nothing Is True? The Credibility of News and Conflicting Narratives during “Information War” in Ukraine, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(1), 116–135.

Waisbord, S. (2018) The elective affinity between post-truth communication and populist politics, *Communication Research and Practice*, 4(1), 17–34.

Zhang, J. and Benoit, W.L. (2004) Message strategies of Saudi Arabia’s image restoration campaign after 9/11, *Public Relations Review*, 30(2), 161–167.

Empirical Material

Airwars (2017) Transcript of Pentagon’s Al Jinah Investigation media briefing, *Airwars*, [online], June 27, Available at <<https://airwars.org/news/transcript-of-al-jinah-investigation-briefing/>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]

Airwars (2024) US-led Coalition in Iraq & Syria, *Airwars*, [online], Available at <<https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria/>> [Accessed at 12/28/2024]

Ferdinando, L. (2017) Pentagon Spokesman: Dozens of Terrorists Believed Killed in U.S. Strike in Syria, *DOD News*, [online], March 17, Available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1122791/pentagon-spokesman-dozens-of-terrorists-believed-killed-in-us-strike-in-syria/>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]

FA (2017) Airstrikes on the Al-Jinah Mosque, *Forensic Architecture*, [online], April 17, Available at <<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/airstrikes-on-the-al-jinah-mosque>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]

HRW (2017) Attack on the Omar Ibn al-Khatib Mosque, *Human Rights Watch*, [online], April 18, Available at <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/04/18/attack-omar-ibn-al-khatib-mosque/us-authorities-failure-take-adequate-precautions>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]

Johnson, A. and Kube, C. (2017) U.S. Denies Striking Syrian Mosque After Dozens Reported Killed, *NBC News*, [online], March 17, Available at <<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-denies-striking-syrian-mosque-after-dozens-reported-killed-n734696>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]

Triebert, C. (2017a) CONFIRMED: US Responsible for 'Aleppo Mosque Bombing, *Bellingcat*, [online], March 18, Available at <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/03/16/us-missile-remains-reportedly-recovered-from-site-of-aleppo-mosque-bombing/>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]

Triebert, C. (2017b) The Al-Jinah Mosque Complex Bombing — New Information and Timeline, *Bellingcat*, [online], April 18, Available at <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2017/04/18/al-jinah-new-info-and-timeline/>> [Accessed at 12/27/2024]