University of Tehran
Office of the President

November 17, 2026

The Editor
The New York Times
620 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY 10018, USA

Subject: A Response to "War May Answer Long time Riddle of Iranian Dams Built for No Clear Reason": Using 'Journalism' to 'Legitimize' Attacks on Critical Civilian Infrastructure

Dear Editor,
Your newspaper's article published on November 16, 2026, entitled "War May Answer Long time Riddle of Iranian Dams Built for No Clear Reason," raises deeply concerning questions about its analytical foundations, the selection and presentation of evidence, and the professional responsibility of journalism when reporting on matters with potentially devastating humanitarian consequences.

By comparing the geographical locations of Iran's dams and water-transfer projects with areas targeted in airstrikes, the article advances the strange hypothesis that some of the country's water infrastructure may have been developed to support military facilities. Although the article repeatedly acknowledges that this alleged connection remains speculative and unproven, its framing and selection of evidence creates a misleading impression of the nature and purpose of Iran's critical infrastructure.

I believe the following issues warrant serious consideration and a response.

1. Building dams in Iran is not a mystery that requires a military explanation
Iran is predominantly an arid and semi-arid country. Its average annual precipitation is approximately 240 millimeters, less than one-third of the global average. Limited water resources, uneven rainfall distribution, recurring droughts, and the consequences of climate change are fundamental geographical and environmental realities.

In such circumstances, the construction of dams and the development of water infrastructure for water storage and regulation, drinking-water supply, agricultural needs, and hydropower generation constitute conventional responses to legitimate developmental and climatic challenges. In terms of actual water use, more than 95 percent of the water supplied from Iran's dams is used for agricultural and urban purposes, while only less than 5 percent is allocated to industrial uses.

Each project must remain subject to rigorous scrutiny regarding its economic feasibility, environmental impacts, and long-term sustainability. However, questioning the effectiveness or necessity of particular projects is fundamentally different from suggesting, without any meaningful evidence, that their underlying purpose was military.

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2. Geographical correlation does not establish causation

The central argument of the article rests on the geographical proximity of dams to certain military facilities. Yet such data, on their own, cannot establish either the direction of the relationship or its underlying cause.

Without considering competing hypotheses and presenting independent evidence, on what basis can conclusions be drawn about the alleged hidden purposes of decades of investment in a country's water infrastructure?

3. Cautious language does not eliminate the potential consequences of publishing an unsubstantiated narrative

The article repeatedly employs terms such as "speculative," "possible," and "unproven." However, even an unverified hypothesis, when presented as a coherent journalistic narrative, can influence public perception and shape how military operations are interpreted—particularly when the subject concerns critical infrastructure during an armed conflict.

The issue is not merely whether a hypothesis is ultimately correct or incorrect. It is also the manner in which geographical coincidence or correlation is transformed into a narrative about the alleged military purpose of civilian infrastructure.

In wartime, such narratives can blur the distinction between civilian infrastructure and military objectives in public perception, potentially contributing to the acceptance of further attacks against essential civilian facilities.

4. Critical water infrastructure is protected under important principles of international humanitarian law

Article 54 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions and Rule 54 of customary international humanitarian law address the protection of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, including drinking-water installations and irrigation systems.

Article 56 of Additional Protocol I also provides special protection for dams and dykes against attacks that may cause the release of dangerous forces and consequently result in severe civilian casualties.

The legal assessment of any particular attack must, of course, take into account its specific circumstances, the nature of the target, its foreseeable effects, and compliance with the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution. Nevertheless, the essential civilian nature of dams and water infrastructure, and their vital importance to the survival and well-being of the population, must be fully respected. Nevertheless, dams and water infrastructure serving civilian populations are civilian infrastructure and must not be subjected to military attacks. Any deliberate attack against such essential civilian infrastructure constitutes a grave violation of international

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humanitarian law and may constitute a war crime. No speculative allegation or unsubstantiated claim can justify such attacks or absolve those responsible of their legal accountability.

A newspaper with the international standing and influence of *The New York Times* should make this fundamental distinction clear to its readers when publishing allegations of this nature.

5. The selective use of the 2018 arrests of environmental activists does not substantiate the proposed hypothesis

The article refers to the detention of several environmental activists in 2018 and the espionage allegations made against them, linking these events to the hypothesis that military facilities may have existed in protected areas.

However, the article itself acknowledges that no definitive and independently established explanation has been provided for the alleged connection. It also refers to alternative political interpretations of the motivations behind those arrests.

Consequently, using this case as supporting evidence for a military hypothesis, without presenting independent and verifiable evidence, raises serious methodological and journalistic concerns.

6. The absence of a response from Iranian authorities is not evidence supporting the allegations

The article notes that Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Energy, and other relevant institutions did not respond to requests for comment. However, the absence of a response from one party cannot, in any way, be treated as evidence supporting the allegations made by another. Nor should readers be led to interpret silence as implicit confirmation.

7. Journalism bears an ethical and professional responsibility for the humanitarian consequences of its reporting

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the responsibility of journalism in times of war.

Water and energy infrastructure are not merely engineering structures or technical facilities. They are essential foundations of everyday life, public health, food security, economic activity, and the continuity of vital public services.

In a country such as Iran, where water scarcity and climatic challenges are already severe, the destruction of dams, water-transfer networks, treatment facilities, and electricity infrastructure could have far-reaching and potentially irreversible consequences for millions of people.

Media organizations have both the right and the responsibility to investigate and publish information. However, they also have an ethical and professional obligation to exercise particular care when presenting unsubstantiated allegations concerning civilian infrastructure during an armed conflict.

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When a media narrative, without sufficient evidence and by selectively presenting information, excluding plausible alternative explanations, and disregarding relevant humanitarian and legal considerations, contributes to normalizing or legitimizing attacks against essential civilian infrastructure, the media organization cannot simply evade its professional responsibility for the potential consequences of that narrative.

In light of these concerns, I urge *The New York Times* to:

1. Publish the independent and verifiable evidence, if any, supporting the alleged connection between the construction of Iran's dams and water-transfer projects and military objectives.
2. Seriously examine alternative explanations, particularly the possibility that military facilities were established near pre-existing development infrastructure.
3. Clearly acknowledge, in the article and any subsequent coverage, the fundamental limitations of the proposed hypothesis and its unproven nature where credible evidence is unavailable.
4. Recognize the right of the Iranian civilian population to safe water, electricity, and other essential services, and the importance of protecting essential civilian infrastructure against attacks that violate international humanitarian law and constitute crimes against humanity.

The New York Times must take these concerns seriously and reconsider the framing of this issue. Responsible journalism must not contribute to a narrative that undermining the civilian status of essential infrastructure or normalizing attacks against facilities on which the lives and well-being of millions of people depend.

Sincerely,



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