Iran: Asymmetric Strategy and Mass Diplomacy

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of Iran's information and mass diplomacy efforts in terms of its use of traditional written and audio-visual media, as well as through internet-based ones. Iran's information efforts are both at the centre of its national strategy in dealing with its adversaries and its domestic policies to maintain and protect the regime. Furthermore, it is also well-aligned with the overall Iranian doctrine to take 360 degree approach to security, while avoiding direct military confrontation. A better understanding of Iran's approach and inherent logic behind its information warfare can help anticipating the country's next move.

Introduction

Iran's Power Seen from Different Lenses

The Trump administration, like previous ones since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, perceives Iran as a threat to the interests of the United States. The *U.S. National Security Strategy* of December 2017 notes that one of its objectives is to "neutralize Iranian malign influence" in the Middle East.[1] Yet, the main tools to reach this objective appear to be hard power ones, especially in the form of economic strangulation, covert operations, and limited military actions. Markedly, in May 2018, the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action meant to prevent Iran to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities, and re-imposed stiff economic sanctions against the country. In January 2020, the United States launched a drone strike in Iraq, killing General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Qud Force.

Although soft power is been used too, such as the promotion of democracy, internet freedom, and public diplomacy towards Iran, they are pale if compared to the hard power side. For instance, Radio *Farda* based in Prague receives $11 million per year, the Persian service of Voice of America about $20 million, and the Near East Regional Democracy programming $15 million in 2019.[2] Such significant imbalance of hard versus soft power is not a new phenomenon in American foreign policy.[3]

In the years that followed the invasion of Iraq, a substantive academic and practitioners' literature emphasized that the United States and its allies were engaged in a "war of ideas," where economic and military means are poor tools to change anti-Western attitudes, ways of thinking, and ultimately policies in foreign lands.[4] It appears that the United States is at risk of falling into same mistake when it comes to Iran, and achieving its objective of neutralizing Iranian malign influence to become even further remote.[5]

This paper seeks to illustrate that the depth and extensive capabilities of the Iranian soft power is likely to prevent United States' goal to undermine Tehran's influence in the region significantly. To do so, first it proposes an overview of the Iranian's soft power approach to show the centrality and qualitative depth of Iran's influence strategy. The second part emphasizes

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the variety of means used by Iran to sustain such influence, especially in the open domain of public diplomacy. The paper concludes with a short reflection on the challenges that such asymmetry of approach might bring to American foreign policy and security.

Iran's approach to soft power in a context of encirclement

"Raise your speech, not your voice. It is the rain that grows flower, not the thunder," wrote the mystical Persian poet of the 13th century, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, thus illustrating the long-lasting and deep-seated place that *soft power* occupies in the Iranian collective psyche. Prone to feelings of geopolitical encirclement, Iranians are convinced that in both domestic and foreign policy, the spirit of conquest is inseparable from the conquest of minds. Throughout its history, Iran was oftentimes threaten by other nations and found itself in situations of military inferiority, requiring to implement indirect approaches that the Ismaili and Parthians of Ancient times already used effectively. Avoiding frontal combat and striking where the adversary expects it the least have been at the core of Iran's way to survival. From the *taqia* to *ketman* and to the *khod'eh* and the *tārof*, Iranians have a wide array of well-defined forms of feints and tricks to draw from, accumulated through centuries in battlefields, palaces' gardens, and bazars' warehouses.[6] In modern times, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the overwhelming U.S. presence in the region have further convinced the Iranian leadership that the Islamic Republic cannot succeed through direct confrontation against its regional adversaries and beyond, and that the country must invest in an indirect approach, giving a significant role to media influence and information weaponization.[7]

As noted by François Thual, Iran always perceived its geopolitical position through an obsidional prism, or siege mentality, apprehensive about the constant threats posed by states and nations surrounding it.[8] Shireen Hunter highlights that Iran, being the only Persian-speaking and Shia country in a neighborhood, made of a majority of Turkish-Arabic Sunnites, cannot count on any natural ethno-cultural solidarity to deal with external threats.[9] To these reasons underlying the Iranian feelings of isolation, one can add that the country is both too big and too small all at once. Major players on the international stage cannot ignore it, and yet, it is too small and weak to deter them.

These double feelings of weakness and strategic isolation have led Iranians to develop historically two strategic imperatives: First, protect "fortress Iran" by preserving its economic autonomy and its territorial integrity while, second, actively projecting its influence throughout the region to create a protective buffer. Although they may appear contradictory on the surface, these two strategic "reflexes" are in fact complementary and mutually reinforcing, and are transcending internal ideological differences and implementable through both an offensive approach [tahājomi], such the one practiced by Ahmadinejad, or through a Rohāni-style *détente* strategy.[10]

Propaganda, ideological persuasion, and public diplomacy are central to the Islamic regime's survival and promotion of its interests.[11] At the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the first Gulf War, it became clear to the regime that it found itself in a weakened position, however, it is only at the beginning of the 2000s that the Iranian strategy grows to maturity and becomes truly institutionalized. This period also coincides with the increasing importance and role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC – in Persian: Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enghelāb-e Eslāmi or *Pasdaran* for short). On the domestic front, the IRGC's main informational objective is to protect the regime from what the leadership calls "color revolutions" and "soft *coup d'état*" attempts, which according to them are plotted by its regional and extra-regional adversaries.[12] It is under this light that the Iranian government regularly accuses Web giants, such as Facebook or Twitter, to support "anti-regime propaganda."[13] The *Pasdarans* are responsible for counter-subversion activities through modern communication systems to extinguish "sedition" and to rally public opinion around the regime.[14]

Initially limited to rudimentary and outdated propaganda tools, this effort to shepherd doctrinally Iran's population is now an impressive and modern array of psychological warfare resources, with the Supreme Guide's Office as one of its leading parts. Originally created as an *ad hoc* function, the Office became rapidly the nerve centre of the Iranian informational effort. It has its own publication, the monthly *Sobhe-e Sadegh*, as well as a network of cultural institutes, and think thanks co-managed with the Ministry of Culture, the Organization for the Propagation of Islam, and the Islamic Republic information agency known as IRIB. In the same vein, the *Pasdarans* have a more or less direct control

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over many opinion media, such as the influential *Keyhān* newspaper and the IRIB itself that are normally led by individuals drawn from among the Guards. These tools, combined with the exploitation of social media, support the internal propaganda to maintain a favorable public opinion towards the Islamic Republic.[15]

On the external front, strategic communications comprehensively integrate the approach of seeking to extend Iran's influence and fight regional and extra-regional influence.[16] Early on, the Guards have invested in subversive activities abroad, allegedly to protect people "oppressed" by imperialism.[17] During the last decade, the IRGC has integrated into their standard procedures the use of social media and communication networks to achieve the following political objective: Deter its adversaries in creating confusion and by spreading disinformation about their capabilities and real intentions, while aiming at their own public opinion as an indirect mean to influence their own government's actions.[18] As Arsali noted, the Guards' strategic messages seek to challenge adversaries, mislead their enemies' armed forces about Iran's military capabilities, deter them from military interventions, and convince them of the regime's robustness.[19]

This influence system extends at the regional level through the Quds Force (formerly led by General Soleimani) whose function is to cultivate linkages with Shiites and pro-Iranian organizations such as the Lebanese Hezbollah. In the Lebanese context, this includes spreading pro-regime messages through a network of mosques and *husseiniyyas* [religious meeting locales], as well as through medias linked to the IRIB.[20] Over time, Iran and its regional allies were able to grow a significant place for themselves on the regional scene, as the leaders of the anti-Israeli, anti-Saudi, and so-called anti-Western "Resistance Front."[21]

A sophisticated and multi-layer public diplomacy

At first centralized, Iran's public diplomacy mutated into a bureaucratic-entrepreneur model aimed at minimizing the state's direct involvement and to use as much as possible private or foreign partners.[22] The goal is to legitimise the Islamic regimes' international policy and to present Iran under a more positive light. Consequently, the slogan [*shoar*] is to show the world that Iran is both open and tolerant or, alternately, to fight what the regime calls Iranophobia [in Persian *Iran Harāssi*] allegedly

emanating from its adversaries' propaganda.[23] Furthermore, it is about implementing one of the pillars of the Islamic Republic's diplomatic doctrine: Developing fruitful political, economic, and military relationships in the four corners of the globe while imposing itself as an actor that matters on the international stage.

The IRIB as the "conductor"

While bolstering the *Pasdaran*'s political influence, the IRIB is the principal agency in charge of coordinating the various organizations involved in Iran's audio-visual diplomacy. With an annual budget of over a billion dollars, branches in 20 countries in various regions of the world, particularly in Germany, Brazil, Malaysia, and the United States, the IRIB is the "conductor" of the Iranian influence strategy.[24] In this regard, such services broadcast the regime's values and defend "the Islamic Republic government's official position on major international issues."[25]

Another series of official institutions complement the Iranian audio-visual diplomatic system. For cultural content, the IRIB is working with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation, and especially with the Islamic Relations and Culture Organization (IRCO), which is *de facto* the agency in charge IRIB's cultural diplomacy initiatives. The mandate of IRCO is to promote cultural linkages with other nations and communities; consolidate the Islamic Republic's cultural linkages with other states; offer a proper presentation of Iran's culture and civilization; prepare the foundation for unity among Muslims; rebirth and promotion of Islamic culture and teaching around the world; and broadcasting information about the Islamic Revolution's principles and reality.[26]

For information content, the IRIB is using mostly the IRNA press agency, itself funded and controlled by the government and under the authority of the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which beyond its 60 offices in Iran, oversees 30 more branches in various countries across of the world. The aim is to maximize Iranian soft power by multiplying the channels and languages used to circulate the regime's message throughout the planet.[27] It is noteworthy that the official press agency, already subordinated to the executive power, had its subordination to the regime even further reinforced since the early 2000s.[28] Lastly, the Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications, the Islamic Republic's

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main agency in charge of managing information and communication systems, provides technical support to the audio-visual diplomacy. Beyond the audio-visual diplomacy influence apparatus, the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security VEVAK (acronym for *Vezārat-e Ettelā'at va Amniat-e Keshvar*) has a discrete but crucial role in assisting the IRIB in terms of propaganda and disinformation through the production of documentaries praising the regime and its allies, or denouncing its regional and extra-regional adversaries.[29]

Central audio-visual Medias and their target audience

Along with twelve national television networks and thirty provincial ones, the IRIB manages four international television information networks, six satellite-based TV networks for its international audience and thirty radio stations. Broadcasts are achieved through shortwave radio and satellite, in over 30 languages including Albanese, German, English, Arabic, Azeri, Bosnian, Kurdish, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Italian and Russian – a wide linguistic array attesting of Iran's global ambitions and its foreign policy target audiences.[30] In addition to information programmes, the IRIB produces every year 5,000 hours of television content, 300 films, and 20,000 minutes of animated film.[31] The flagships of this audio-visual diplomatic system are *Press-TV*, *al-Alam*, *Jamejam*, *Al-Kawthar TV*, *Voice of the Islamic Republic*, *Sahar Network*, and *Hispan-TV*. The following three illustrations show how much each of these are aiming at a specific audience.

Launched during the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the satellite-based network *Al-Alam* [the Arab World] seeks essentially to address an Iraqi, Shiite, and Arabic speaking audience. With offices in Teheran, Bagdad and Beyrouth, and accessible on the entire Iraqi territory with a satellite dish, this information network offers business, sport and cultural programmes. It prides itself to offer an alternative to other satellite networks run by the Gulf monarchies while conveying to an Arab population images favorable to the Islamic Republic. Its coverage of the 33 Days War in the summer of 2006, for instance, emphasized the Iranian humanitarian aid geared towards the reconstruction of Lebanon in view to enhance sympathy towards the Islamic regime. As Saeid Golkar noted, these images were well-received by many Muslim Arabs who had to suffer from feelings of humiliation under colonial rule.[32] This type of media operation allowed the

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Iranian network, according to some reports, to increase the legitimacy of the Iranian regime in Iraq and in other countries in the region.[33]

The other Iranian satellite network, *Press-TV,* was launched in 2007 with the hope of competing with other 24/7 information networks such as BBC World News, RT, DD India, CNN, France 24, and Deutsche Welle. From the onset, the Iranian authorities made its goal clear: The government hopes to use *Press-TV* to counter what it considers as a flow of constant Western propaganda against Iran, as well as to offer an alternate vision of world news.[34] With a budget of 25 million dollars, this 24/7 information network targets Western audiences and broadcasts both in English and French.[35] Although it is also aimed at propping-up Iran's international reputation, *Press-TV* shows that these various networks are not subject to a cookie cutter approach, but rather each of them is carefully designed and operated according to the audience it seeks to reach. If the female news presenters wear the hijab [*tchador*] on Al-Alam, *on Press-TV* they have a more liberal outlook to include make-up and more colorful clothing, which the Iranian national television networks prohibit. However, these public relation efforts did not save *Press-TV* from criticism, as it faced regular accusations of being a propaganda outlet for the Islamic regime and even losing its licence in several European and Asian countries during the 2010s.[36]

Furthermore, in order to cultivate Iran's image as a champion of Islamic resistance against Western countries, Tehran's audio-visual diplomacy enhances its reputation as an anti-imperialist force in non-Muslim countries, known in the past as the non-aligned, such as in Latin America and sub-Sahara Africa.[37] It is in this vein that in December 2013 was launched *Hispan-TV*, IRIB's Spanish language satellite-based networks.[38] Supported by the "Middle East" desk of the English language news network *Press-TV*, *Hispan-TV* also benefits since its launch from a strategic partnership with the neo-Bolivarian television network *Telesur*. In line with Iran's forward defence strategy, this media breakthrough in Latin America aims to communicate directly with South American people and to create a permanent footprint in America's courtyard.[39]

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New Medias and Private Networks

Beyond these major communications platforms, the Iranian audio-visual diplomacy is at the leading edge in the region by its use of about one hundred semi-official and non-official media's providing the capacity to privatize Iran's influence activities and adapt its discourse to specific audiences.[40] For instance, in Bahrein, Tehran has been targeting the Shiite population through the radio station *Voice of the Republic* and the satellite TV network *al-Sahar*. The television and radio network *Ahlulbayt*, supported by Iran, covers southern Iraq with religious programmes. The television network *Tamadon* [Civilisation] broadcasts from Kabul and can reach the Afghan elite through an extensive system of relays in which Iran has heavily invested.[41] Using a bureaucratic entrepreneur model, the Iranian strategists also use regularly non-Iranian media's. Iran employed an "influence laundering" strategy in Afghanistan through a variety of initiatives, such as the creation of a "union of local journalists," with an annual budget of 100 million dollars.[42]

Additionally, the Islamic Republic quickly grasped the influence stakes involved with the Internet. Deploying its own story on the World Wide Web, Iran has actively been exploiting social networks such as Twitter and Facebook to conquer minds through an unprecedented access to vast audiences.[43] One of the pioneers in this field, the *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA), was one of the first to develop Iran's e-diplomacy. Conservative newspapers, such as *Kayhān* and *Iran* rapidly followed.[44] *Al-Alam* was launched in 2007 as an English-language website, and then in Arabic and Persian, in order to increase its readership and foster its reputation of being an impartial media. Similarly, *Fars News*, with websites in Persian, English, Arabic, and Turkish, is a governmental press agency linked to the Revolutionary Guards, and acts as one of the main platforms for the regimes internet-based propaganda.

With more than 700,000 blogs in Persian, one of the top ten most used languages for this type of media; the blogosphere has also been one of the main frontlines for Iran's public diplomacy campaigns. The Iranian Supreme Guide, Ayatollah Khamenei, the present president Hassan Rohāni as well as his predecessors, Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejād, have used their own blogs to propagate both official policies of the state and the ideology of the Islamic Republic. These blogs also aim

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at Persian-speaking people outside Iran, such as in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Bahrein, Oman, UAE, and even California, plus those written in Kurdish, Tajik, and Dari, targeting other critical audiences for Tehran's audio-visual and internet diplomacy.

As for the more traditional media outlets, the Iranian regime favors an approach combining bureaucratic supervision and entrepreneurial delegation through non-official, private, or foreign intermediaries.[45] This mixed approach extends much beyond the Arabic/Muslim world. By the end of 2018, informed observers accused Iran of using thousands of fake private accounts on social media platforms such as Facebook to run a vast worldwide disinformation campaign.[46] Experts consider that the Revolutionary Guards' cyber branch to rank fourth in the world, and they regularly suspect them to recruit foreign cyber-mercenaries to conduct hacking operations but also for influence and political interference purposes.[47] This potpourri of genres involves also collaboration with other states. In particular, the United States recently observed with concerns the Iranian coordination of influence activities with China and Russia aiming at disrupting internal American politics, as well as countering its interests in its traditional spheres of influence.[48]

Through different channels and various initiatives, the Iranian regime tries to damage its adversaries' reputation while presenting an alternative image of Iran, one of an independent Islamic and democratic nation opposed to the United States and its allies in the Middle East.[49] In spite of fluctuations in shape and style, their message is constant and coherent, which prompted Michael Rubin to note that the Iranian audio-visual diplomacy "suffers from no editorial confusion," and shows a remarkable alignment with the rest of Tehran's strategy.[50]

Conclusion

In this present context of increased tensions between Iran and the United States, it would be unwise to gauge power relationships solely in hard power metrics. The leadership of the Islamic Republic is fully aware that they cannot promote Iran's interest through direct confrontation against its regional and extra-regional adversaries. Much like in China and Russia, they still hope being able to compensate their relative weakness in the traditional forms of power through an alternative approach emphasizing

indirect means such as information, disinformation, subversion and mass diplomacy.

Even if it is notoriously difficult to measure political power and influence, Iran's approach to influence through soft forms of power is not only intrinsic to its national security culture but the country has given itself a vast of array of tools that clearly outpace what the United States and its allies are willing to put forward in the region.[51] In this 21st century hypermedia environment, where fights in the realm of public opinions are increasingly central to any conflict, Iran has a clear advantage in the region. Their strategy, partially delegated and decentralized, is likely to increase the longevity of the regime, and allows it to continue pursuing its forward defense approach while remaining below the threshold of direct confrontation.

If indeed the United States is seeking to neutralize Iran's subversive influence in the Middle East as a key foreign policy goal, then it appears that the most needed tools to meet this challenge are rather scarce, and even worse, the mindset necessary to implement a viable strategy to counter Iran's influence is also missing. The previous American doctrine of "strategic patience" might have been a better one, but policy-makers should have used that time for actively re-tooling.

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