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THE ROLE OF IRAN'S REVOLUTIONARY GUARDS IN THE MEDIA SPHERE: PROPAGANDA, STRATEGIES AND NARRATIVE POWER

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Abstract

Traditional and modern media have evolved into powerful tools for shaping public consciousness, with some regimes skillfully exploiting the media to propagate their narratives and suppress dissenting voices. The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) stands as a prime example of an Iranian entity that has effectively harnessed the media, in both its traditional and digital forms, to limit its effectiveness as a forum for transparent social and political interaction. This mastery is achieved not merely through censorship but also through comprehensive manipulation to systematically shape public opinion. The questions that arise include: how has the IRGC managed to dominate the media space? What are the IRGC's strategies and tactics in this sphere, and how has the IRGC successfully distorted reality to secure social control and domination? This study addresses these questions by offering a conceptual framework for understanding the mechanisms employed by the IRGC. It aims to identify the diverse tools and strategies adopted by the IRGC, explore their substance, and examine their tangible outcomes and impact on Iranian society.

Keywords: Iran, IRGC, media strategy, social media, media militarization, perception management

Introduction

Due to its ideological structure, the Iranian political system has always sought to control both the public and private spaces of Iranian society. The internet and the increasing expansion of social interaction in the electronic space have created a new virtual world that lacks physical embodiment —a boundless space that presents genuine challenges to the Iranian system's narrative. Over the past two decades, the researcher has encountered in the discourse of Iranian political and military leaders a new conceptual term known as "soft war." Consequently, the concept of "war" for the Iranian system is no longer limited to the military sphere; it extends now into cultural, social, scientific, and technological spheres. Thus, the new battlefield of the IRGC includes extending its domination over controlled media (traditional media: radio, television, newspapers, magazines and books) through censorship and uncontrolled media (new media: social media platforms) through the deployment of a cyber army to counteract anti-establishment narratives and disseminate propaganda.

This study argues that while media, social networks and cyberspace in general have become an extension of the social space, or in other words, an "extension of inner consciousness" according to McLuhan, the Iranian revolutionary establishment, through the IRGC, has always sought to colonize this social space. Thus, this study analyzes the role of the IRGC in the digital space, its adopted tools and strategies of distorting reality, and its attempts to control narratives, focusing on managing social perceptions and shaping public opinion in line with the ideological goals of the Iranian political system. It aims to provide a basis for a better understanding of how the IRGC operates within the media and virtual spheres and to explain the process of spreading disinformation by highlighting the efficacy of its strategies. In this context, the tools and strategies of the Iranian system in challenging narratives on media and social networks — known as "cognitive warfare" — will be discussed. This will help to understand the nature of the Iranian establishment's tools and strategies in controlling the flow of information, distorting the truth, and the use of media and social networks to strengthen and promote its authoritarian discourse, as well as expose the establishment's methods of persuasion, audience engagement and social control.

Conceptual Approach

The conceptual approach of the study employs a number of concepts that need to be explained before delving into the study. The key concepts include the following:

Soft War/Soft Power

Soft power has attracted significant attention in the field of international relations, often described as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than force or coercion.[1] Unlike hard power, which depends on military and economic strength to assert influence, soft power seeks to foster harmony and coexistence while promoting a nation's values.[2] It works by shaping

the desires and affiliations of others, depending on the ability to attract, captivate, and win over the targeted individual or society.[3]

Hijacking the Truth

This concept describes the current virtual sphere in Iran. It refers to the takeover of mass communication, particularly the media, by ideologically driven and authoritarian regimes. The main objective of hijacking is to control content and shape social beliefs and norms according to a specific ideological perspective.

Militarization of Media

The Iranian establishment represents a form of religious fundamentalism characterized by its ideological-military nature. This political system promotes a religious ideology that claims to encompass all social and cultural domains while being supported by military strength, particularly that of the IRGC. This backing is so pronounced that the concept of "war" extends beyond military confrontations to encompass cultural, social and even scientific and technological spheres. Consequently, the hardline narrative of the "Islamic Republic" prioritizes *axiological*[4] and value-driven concerns over national and regional interests. As a result, the concept of "war" and "war conspiracy" permeate all cultural discussions,[5] labeled in the official narrative as "soft war."[6] This concept possesses a teleological dimension that transcends traditional military definitions, becoming a significant concern for Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei over the past two decades. In a speech from the early 1990s, he elaborated on the nature of this "soft war" as follows:

"Soft warfare is a cultural invasion, a cultural raid and massacre,"[7] and therefore, "controlling the media" that can be managed — such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, and even books —through censorship and removal, as well as "engaging through the cyber army" against uncontrollable media, like social networks (despite being banned), is fundamentally one of the primary pillars of the IRGC's "soft war." The various tools and strategies employed by the "Islamic Republic" in this soft media conflict extend beyond mere information management and control; they also encompass the manipulation and distortion of information, the falsification of facts, and the fabrication of counter-information.

Of course, the primary aim of this study is not to explore the intricate details of these tools and strategies but rather to investigate how the promotion of state narratives has necessitated their use. The nature of this narrative is crucial in determining the scope and scale of the IRGC's media operations, ultimately providing a clearer understanding of this entity's objectives.

Undoubtedly, the foundation of Iranian ideology is rooted in a comprehensive religious framework that holds the Twelver Shiite doctrine, as articulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini —the founder of the "Islamic Republic"— at its core. This ideology encompasses the engineering of all moral aspects of social life. Here, "ethics" extends beyond professional standards to represent a holistic

system of values, suggesting that "ethics" is synonymous with the entirety of the "human sciences."

Furthermore, the Iranian republic exhibits a tendency to localize natural and mathematical sciences, aligning them with an Islamic heritage. For instance, in fields such as medicine, there is an attempt to position "traditional medicine" as a counterpoint to "modern medicine." This position fosters a pervasive pessimism within the Iranian republic regarding the "human sciences" and the modern world's ethos, along with a relative skepticism toward the natural sciences, arts and technology, particularly concerning the concept of "development." Consequently, any representation or introduction of these subjects — especially through media channels — is perceived as a "threat" that necessitates a response in the form of soft warfare. Thus, all civil protests are framed as a "conspiracy" attributed to external elements. [8]

Scope of Threat

The scope and dimension of the perceived "threats" to the ideology of the Iranian republic extend far beyond those observed in the former Soviet Union that embraced a Marxist-Leninist ideology. In that context, factors such as economics and history could be viewed as threats due to their divergence from the liberal or conservative ideologies of the Western bloc, prompting efforts to eliminate them from citizens' daily lives. In contrast, the Iranian state identifies threats in even the micro aspects of everyday life, encompassing technical issues in fields like law, politics, literature, and philosophy.

Practices ranging from alcohol consumption to clothing choices and various forms of relationships between men and women depicted in global media, alongside philosophical discourses related to alternative ideas and religions —especially secularism — are all deemed as threats. Consequently, the scope of "criminalization" within the Iranian state is extensive. Unable to address this vast scope comprehensively, the Iranian establishment has instead concentrated on monitoring and managing cultural media narratives, implementing selective and demonstrative punishments to assert its power.

Conversely, the media in Iran exhibits a marked "indifference" to internal cultural developments, often neglecting them entirely. Despite many of its models becoming obsolete in everyday life, the media continues to showcase these outdated representations, resulting in a cultural disconnect from daily experiences in official institutions like schools and government offices. This disconnect is exacerbated by the fact that many individuals affiliated with the Iranian republic lead "double lives." When this cultural conflict escalates into a significant confrontation, as seen during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement, the establishment resorts to severe social repression and does not hesitate from harsh crackdowns on its own citizens. The official media has actually alienated its real audience, prompting the general public to seek information through satellite channels or virtual platforms. In response, the establishment has attempted to block these

sources on a large scale. However, while this approach has yielded limited success, it has also resorted to deploying its cyber army within cyberspace to manipulate and obstruct the flow of information. Additionally, the establishment has produced media content aimed at external audiences, hoping to influence global public opinion, even though this content contradicts the messages intended for domestic consumption.

With the onset of the 1979 revolution, Iranian revolutionaries motivated by Shiite ideology ultimately seized power and sought to impose their way of life in a radical manner on all other social classes, sects, and religions. During this time, the media became entirely homogenized, functioning in alignment with their value system. The IRGC effectively served as the internal enforcement tool to suppress dissent and protests, while other entities operated in parallel to it.

Jihad of Clarification

The significance of the threat landscape and soft war prompted Khamenei to formulate his own concepts, notably coining the term *jihad al-tabyeen*, which translates to "the jihad of clarification." In 2021, he officially issued this directive, deeming it an urgent and essential duty[9] in response to what he perceived as the distortion of facts. He asserted, "Today, there is a confirmed media policy hostile to the Islamic Republic and Islam, constantly engaged in distorting facts and disseminating falsehoods, blending news about the Islamic Republic with various types of lies (deliberate fabrications that have been meticulously crafted and relied upon), while simultaneously glorifying the corrupt and oppressive regime and concealing the multitude of crimes and betrayals it has committed."[10] According to Khamenei, this form of jihad encompasses scientific, research and educational efforts within the media landscape aimed at countering the enemy's insinuations and elucidating matters requiring awareness within Iranian society and government.[11]

From the Iranian leader's viewpoint, this jihad also encompasses various critical issues, including enhancing the political system's effectiveness, achieving a resilient economy, countering the threat of external influence, and reinforcing public faith in the ideals of the revolution and the ideology of resistance, as well as promoting the establishment's approved way of life. Thus, this jihad is viewed by the Iranian establishment as a strategic instrument for preserving cultural security, elevating public awareness, and fortifying social and economic structures in the face of soft warfare.

Formation of Institutions

The significance of media and cyberspace has prompted the Iranian leadership to establish various institutions, with a budget allocation of 15 trillion tomans for this purpose.[12] The three primary bodies overseeing media and cyberspace in Iran are the Supreme Council of Cyberspace,[13] the IRGC, and the Committee to Determine Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC).[14] These institutions implement a range of policies, including blocking websites, monitoring communications, conducting

cyberattacks, and arresting online activists. The Supreme Council of Cyberspace serves as the decision-making authority for cyberspace policies, responding to the establishment's directives and enforcing measures such as content blocking and monitoring. Meanwhile, the IRGC,[15] as a military entity, is involved in ensuring cyberspace security, actively monitoring communications and safeguarding the establishment's cybersecurity interests.

The CDICC is tasked with establishing and compiling the criteria and definitions for criminal content. It determines which concepts may be deemed contrary to or harmful to the system based on its standards. This institution actively encourages citizens to report criminal websites through its platform, stating that "so far, nearly half a million reports from people have been submitted to this secretariat regarding the display of criminal content and requests for filtering various websites." These reports are then referred to relevant experts for review. [16] In collaboration with these three institutions, the Iranian establishment enacts extensive policies to control and manage cyberspace, which significantly impacts social and cultural development within the country.

The Strategy of Hijacking the Truth

McLuhan, a prominent media theorist, provided a prescient overview of the relationship between technology, ideas, and truth in his book *Understanding Media*. He believes that every new technology or idea is actually an "extension" of the human senses or the body itself. This perspective elucidates the profound impact of technology on our lives and consciousness.[17] Within the structure of the "Islamic Republic, the body and social memory serve as the foundation for cultivating and promoting ideology. In this context, especially within the IRGC, media tools become an arena for implementing strategies for dominating the truth. By controlling the media, the IRGC aims to realize its vision of establishing and reinforcing a state-sponsored narrative which is often at variance with the truth, to the extent that IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, stated "this military force has 2,000 battalions in cyberspace that produce content and conduct operations."[18]

IRGC Media Strategies

The Iranian establishment, to maintain its authority across the media landscape, particularly for domestic aims, applies strict filtering and censorship, alongside the management of formal criticism using various fallacies, such as the fallacy of false analogy. On the other hand, it strives to project an acceptable image in spaces beyond its control as well as in international media. Consequently, there is a significant difference between its messaging in national and international media. The following chart illustrates the cycle of media strategies employed by the Iranian establishment:
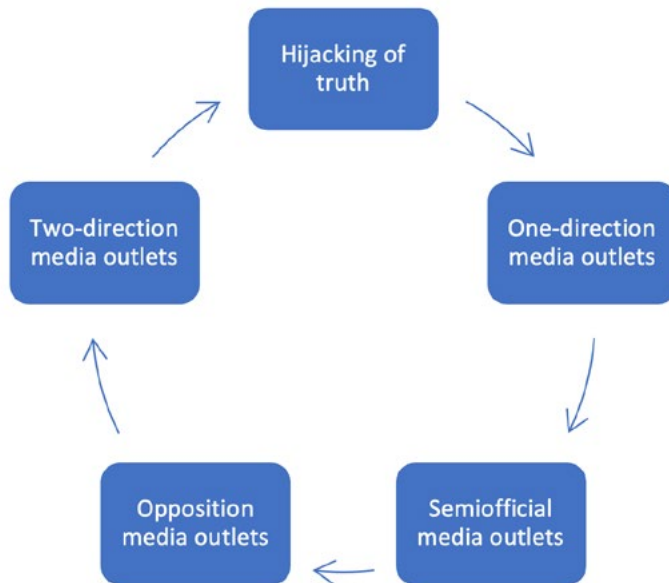
Figure 1: The Iranian Establishment's Cycle of Media Strategies

The following looks at the aforementioned elements of the cycle of media strategies employed for the sake of messaging and manipulating public opinion.

One-direction Media Outlets

Official media (radio, television, and official newspapers): These media forms, whose mission is to directly convey the official narrative, are subject to strict censorship and operate under the direct supervision of the IRGC. There is no leniency, and a very limited number of "critical programs" or "sham debates" are conducted at certain times, for example, during elections, to draw people to the ballot boxes. These criticisms are:

■ directed at individuals or governments and never at the establishment, supreme leader, state institutions, or the IRGC

■ reductive in nature, focusing on lower-level issues that only generate a false sense of hope and momentum, creating the facade of public participation through the promotion of media figures who advocate for citizens on a limited basis, thus propagating the illusion of democracy.

■ temporary, quickly forgotten, and leave no trace.

■ trivialize meaningful criticism and destroy its significance.

■ sometimes presented in a radical form during times of crisis; however, these are put forward by a critic who is allowed to express these radical criticisms through radio and television. This serves two goals: first, to sacrifice a small interest for a greater one during crises and distract the public from more serious matters;

second, create false hope in society so that public opinion is directed toward another secondary issue. Eventually, this critic, after gaining some fame in the virtual space, alters and amends his rhetoric, allowing the establishment to control the wave of criticism and direct it as needed.

Semi-official Media Outlets

These include "reformist" print media, magazines, movie channels, television series, and similar outlets. Although they hold no place in the official media landscape, they are permitted to broadcast their messages to a certain extent, albeit subject to occasional reprimands. The establishment has deliberately allowed them some room for maneuver, enabling them to ensure that the most powerful critics are preoccupied with issues that remain manageable. Those who run these media outlets are not directly funded by the establishment; instead, a framework of maneuverability has been granted to them to operate within. Ultimately, their objective is to allow a limited degree of public participation while creating a false sense of freedom. While these media outlets observe strict red lines, they occasionally cross these to instill a sense of freedom among the general public.

It is important to note that these media outlets commit minor infractions in order to attract international media and influence foreign audiences. For instance, the attire of presenters on international channels tends to be more open, elegant and modern, yet they still adhere to wearing the hijab. In reality, the "reformist" movement within the Iranian republic has not constituted a genuine reform initiative capable of gradually amending and correcting systemic issues; rather, it has served as a safety valve to release public frustration. However, when this "reformist" movement showed little desire for substantive change, its legitimacy precipitously eroded resulting in the marginalization of this movement and harsh denunciations over its inability to enact meaningful change. Consequently, the safety valve which the "reformist" movement provided was dismantled, leading the public to redirect their protest slogans from secondary issues to the foundational elements of the political system and its key players. This shift provoked a severe reaction from the establishment, resulting in intense repression and widespread violence against dissenters.

Opposition Media Outlets

The IRGC has employed various strategies to promote the establishment's narrative in response to dissenting and anti-establishment media. For instance, it has employed "experts" to reinforce its messages through media outlets. Dissenting voices on state authorized media platforms have provided opportunities for the Iranian republic to steer public attention toward marginal issues. Overall, the establishment navigates and benefits from the media that shares similar, or even slightly conflicting, narratives in a controlled manner. For example, it selectively amplifies leftist criticisms as long as they serve to distort the narrative surrounding the Western bloc and the European world.

Two-direction Media Outlets

With the emergence of the internet, media has transitioned from one-way communication to two-way communication. Initially, the establishment attempted to eliminate the most popular social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp and even Instagram, through widespread blocking. However, the necessity of these platforms in daily life has led individuals to extensively use VPN applications to bypass restrictions. Consequently, the establishment has continually tested various tools and strategies to control the flow of information including:

■ Direct expert engagement: The establishment summons its committed ideological cadres to directly defend the "Islamic Republic" in virtual spaces.

■ Indirect expert and activist involvement: It employs subordinate forces, even regular citizens who may critique some issues, to propagate the establishment's core ideas.

■ Idea dissemination and conflict stimulation: The establishment seeks to produce and promote ideas and discourses that distract public opinion from criticizing it, including the promotion of fanaticism and ethnic conflicts.

■ Crisis news waves: A significant strategy is to generate misleading information on an excessive scale during real crises to divert attention. An example includes the extensive coverage of events like the shooting down of the Ukrainian plane after the killing of Qassem Soleimani, which could have led to a legitimacy crisis.

■ Comment waves: Mobilizing Basij and IRGC cyber brigades to comment extensively on important posts to distort narratives or divert attention.

■ Social media discourse: Creating or hacking chat rooms to identify, control, distort facts, and inject ideas.

■ Mobilizing weak opposition figures: Spotlighting ineffectual opposition figures and caricaturizing them.

■ Media distortion and character assassination: Employing various signatures, memes, and large-scale representations of public figures.

■ Psychological warfare: Engaging in psychological distortion against writers and prominent figures.

■ Distorting journalism: Creating an environment where political news is obscured amidst distracting misinformation.

■ Creating a climate of terror: Arrests and severe media sanctions to instill fear.

■ Creating a culture of silence: Drawing people into the bystander role while deflecting their attention toward secondary-level discussions and shifting the onus on others, i.e., asking others to take action.

■ Fake and controlled myths: Fabricating myths in the virtual space to mislead and control narratives.

■ Distortion of criticism and humor: Reducing critical humor to buffoonery, particularly on significant issues, such as in the television show by Mehran Modiri which confines its criticism to trivial matters; for example, highlighting issues

which are not of fundamental national importance such as scrutinizing work-place conduct.

The Establishment's Media Strategies in Terms of Content

The Iranian establishment's media strategies in terms of content generation are enumerated and analyzed below.
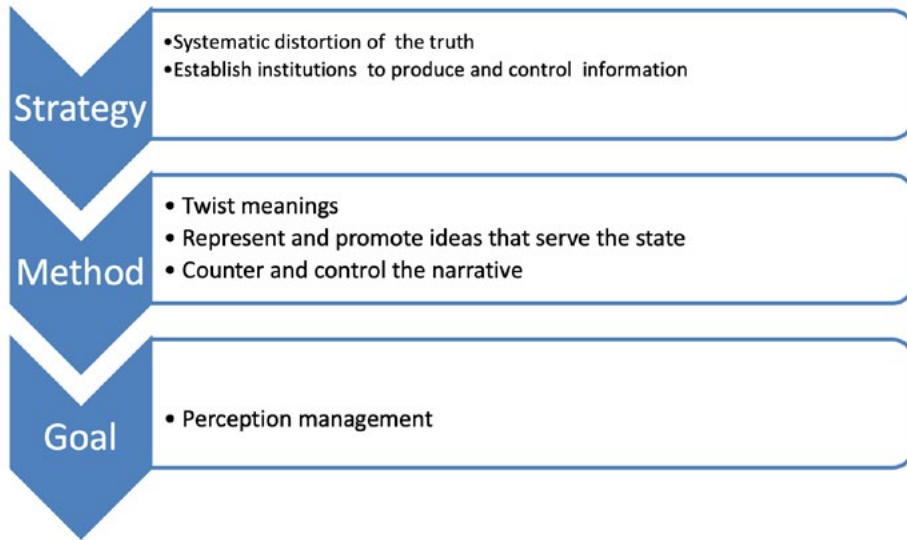

Strategy
- Systematic distortion of the truth
- Establish institutions to produce and control information

Method
- Twist meanings
- Represent and promote ideas that serve the state
- Counter and control the narrative

Goal
- Perception management

Figure 2: The Iranian Establishment's Media Strategies
in Terms of Content Generation

Representation

Representation is the production of meaning through conceptual and discursive frameworks that form the infrastructure of social concepts. This means that meaning is generated through signs, especially language. Language is the window through which we communicate with the world and is the medium of meaning for material phenomena and social methods. It is not just a neutral medium for formulating meanings and knowledge about the world. Rather, social, religious, political and other phenomena always enter the interpretation stage to make these phenomena meaningful through the language network. Therefore, the so-called truth is not outside the process of representation.[19] Controlling the field of representation through monitoring and controlling the generation of content and news is a prime aim of the IRGC to manipulate the truth because the world is created and reconstructed through representation.[20]

As we know, the truth does not exist in a meaningful way, and representation is one of the effective methods of ascribing meaning because meaning is not clear or transparent in itself, nor does it remain constant over time through

representation; instead, meaning can be subject to distortion.[21] The main conflict of the IRGC in Iran is actually over meaning, as meanings must accord with the ruling elite's interests.

The IRGC employs several specific strategies in its representation policy. Below, we address various questions that arise from these strategies.

■ Whose representations dominate the public sphere?

■ Who has the power to represent reality, or who wields authority over social concepts in some way?

■ Who must be lured into silence so that this representation can take over?

■ Whose voices must be suppressed so that this representation can dominate the public sphere?

The IRGC has censored, eliminated, deported and imprisoned opponents of the Iranian establishment over the past decades in the context of its strategies to dominate the media and representation.[22] In its strategy of distorting the truth, the IRGC has always attempted to present an alternate reality according to its conceptual and ideological orientations by altering facts. In fact, the image that must be conveyed to society is one that reflects the aims of the political system through dedicated media channels. This goal is achieved through the systematic dissemination of propaganda and disinformation.

Representation and Truth Distortion

Since the media is the most effective institution for generating and disseminating information and shaping perceptions in the modern world, the substance of media content is of immense social value. Media representation is important because it shapes knowledge and public perceptions. Therefore, media representation is not a neutral process, as any representation is heavily influenced by the discourse and ideology of the prevailing power. For example, it lends credence to Iran's Shiite discourse, which aligns with aspects of Iranian nationalism, and then replicates and sustains the dynamics that align with the establishment's ideological discourse. In other words, semantics produce a kind of knowledge that facilitates the control and perpetuation of power within the security framework of the IRGC and the organizations under its control. This means that every expression employed by Iran's state-run media stems from power dynamics and simultaneously serves to expand and control these dynamics.

Most media theorists, by adopting a formative view of representation and meaning, believe that phenomena in themselves are not capable of meaning, but that meaning must be represented through culture. The role of the IRGC and its affiliated cyber apparatus is to mediate between the meanings and connotations conveyed to society. In other words, they reconfigure events through processes of description, concept creation, and substitution. There is no doubt that the world exists independently of the representations about it, but for it to carry meaning, it must be represented. Therefore, representation serves as a means to create meaning for reality. If we accept that meaning does not have a fixed, guaranteed

nature, but arises from specific cultural representations, we can conclude that the meaning of anything cannot be fixed. In fact, meaning always emerges from context, is subject to other factors, and follows shifting power equations. For example, former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Khamenei in their speeches in the early 21st century dismissed pride in the Achaemenid Empire as an illusion, and this message was widely propagated throughout the country through media. Yet, only a few years later, they praised Iran's identity and ancient history in their speeches. [23] Thus, cultural and media representation and manipulation of meanings are not neutral or static; rather, they are intertwined with power dynamics to produce and spread referential meanings in society.

Representation of Concepts and Negative Characterization

The representation is produced and disseminated in the context of meanings such as common sense, but this is subject to the management and control of a system that prioritizes some meanings over others. As a result, certain ideas and meanings prevail, while others are excluded. The IRGC's control over the media, along with the launching of thousands of media and virtual activists, results in the proliferation of ideas, values and viewpoints associated with the Iranian Shiite ideological understanding of governance, whether in domestic or foreign policy, being presented as common sense or instinctual. In other words, what is being presented is not the truth but rather a subjective representation of events that aligns with the IRGC's media discourse.

The world portrayed by the media, like the world we live in and sense, is a culturally organized set of categories or general concepts. We manage the world by creating concepts or classifying them, [24] and this way of creating meaning is rooted in an ideological process. In other words, when we classify phenomena, it is not our direct experience or understanding that matters most but rather the stereotypes dictated by society. Stigmas such as enemy resistance, prostitution, homosexuality and others provide the framework and reflect the media's stance on how the world is organized according to certain views and values. [25] For example, the image projected by the propaganda apparatus regarding social freedom in the West is conveyed to society as one of immorality and moral decay, and any desire for social freedom is stigmatized. Similarly, when it comes to the concept of development and the transformations in the Arab Gulf states over the last two decades, the Iranian media conveys development and rule of law in these countries by representation and attaching negative implications to them.

To the extent that in representing the concept of development, it is described as a colonial project imposed by Western countries. For example, in a 2017 speech, Khamenei described the construction of towers and airports in the UAE as a form of regression and backwardness. [26] This strategy of framing concepts negatively ultimately leads to a kind of resistance in the social subconscious to accepting modern ideas, so much so that any negative confrontation or decision made by the ruling elite in Iran regarding society appears to be normal.

Representation and Narrative

The term "war is a war of narratives" has been widely discussed in the context of the media war and propaganda apparatus in Iran, to the point that Khamenei emphasized its importance by stating, "You must narrate the truths of your society, your country and your revolution. If you do not narrate, the enemy narrates; if you do not narrate the revolution, the enemy will narrate."[27] This term refers to an approach that emphasizes the importance of precise control and information gathering in the media space. In other words, war is not only waged on the military battlefield, but also extends to the information and media space. In this context, the Iranian establishment aims to shape and document narratives consistent with its theories and goals. By adopting this approach, efforts aim at preserving and strengthening the positive image of Iran's revolutionary discourse and goals in the public consciousness. The aforesaid not only represents a principle in the media war but also symbolizes the overall strategy of Iran's propaganda apparatus, which seeks to maintain public support for the establishment's goals under all circumstances. This goal led the head of public relations in the IRGC to announce in 2011 the organization of 21,000 honorary correspondents within the Basij, stating that these "journalists" would collaborate with the IRGC and Basij in cultural spheres. [28]

Culture functions as a system of stories or narratives that are continuously generated, mediating between existence and awareness of existence, and thereby shaping both. The media, as the most effective storyteller, plays a critical role in instilling popular ideologies, values, and beliefs. In fact, the intersubjective social space is consistently targeted by the IRGC for the dissemination and propagation of its narrative. Narratives serve as cognitive cultural models, simplifying and framing intersubjective experiences of the world. These models include the collective knowledge of a culture, enabling the coordination, interpretation, and direction of actions, beliefs, values, and norms.

Narratives, as cognitive frameworks, shape how individuals perceive and explain reality. In its bid to influence public perceptions, the IRGC's narrative advances the interests of the Iranian revolution, and in its strategy to alter the truth, linguistic statements and templates are chosen to reflect the vision enforced by the IRGC's discourse. The decisions people make in their social lives depend on public consciousness, which is heavily influenced by the media and the IRGC's control over the narrative.

Perception Management

IRGC commanders have frequently addressed[29] the concept of a large-scale "war of consciousness," often referred to in the Iranian republic's discourse as a "cognitive war." This war is orchestrated by the establishment on the domestic front by intervening in and reconstructing reality. This theme is reflected in Figure 2, underscoring how various methods are employed to interpret social phenomena for a better understanding of their surroundings.[30] These

interpretations, whether in political or social contexts, are shaped by individual perceptions and beliefs. People's behavior, both politically and socially, is largely influenced by how they comprehend and perceive facts.

The primary factors that shape individual behavior include the nature of perceptions, ideas, and beliefs entrenched in the public consciousness. These beliefs and perceptions are intricately linked to the subjects or goals individuals recognize. The context in which perceptions are shaped also significantly influences the formation of these beliefs. Consequently, controlling this context — such as social networks, media, and content — becomes essential for the IRGC in managing perceptions effectively.

In managing perceptions, the IRGC employs a range of tools, including misrepresenting events, simulating scenarios, manipulating meanings, and negatively framing concepts. These strategies are implemented within domestic politics to control public opinion and garner popular support. Consequently, individuals' comprehensive understanding of their environment and their subsequent behavior rely not only on personal perceptions but also on how institutions and agencies deploy these perception management tools.

Manipulating the truth and controlling the narrative are vital in shaping public attitudes. This process significantly influences individuals' understanding and perception of various issues by altering and revising information and events. Tactics such as highlighting specific facts while omitting others, or rearranging the chronological order of events can reshape the overall narrative, guiding people toward a particular understanding.

By controlling the narrative, institutions and agencies can effectively present their concepts and viewpoints to society, impacting public consciousness and shaping opinions on social and political matters. This control also involves prioritizing specific issues and directing thought patterns.

Concepts like "truth filter" and "influential media" underscore the role of institutions in shaping public consciousness. Ultimately, the interplay of manipulating the truth and controlling the narrative constitutes a complex and influential process in managing collective consciousness and shaping public opinion.

Conclusion

The Iranian republic views the media landscape as a battlefield to promote the values and ideals of the revolution by creating concepts and establishing institutions within this sphere. Any discourse that falls beyond the pale of revolutionary values is viewed as the discourse of the enemy, leading the establishment to adopt an offensive stance. The strategy of hijacking the truth has been selected for this soft war.

In accordance with this strategy, the governing structures of the political system, led by the IRGC, utilize mass communication tools to bolster and maintain their authority. These tools include television, newspapers, radio, and internet.

By employing these platforms, information, opinions, and cultural content are organized to present prevailing beliefs and ideologies as the reality of society.

This control gradually shifts social understanding, steering individuals toward new beliefs and values. Dominating the public narrative, as a tool of power, undoubtedly significantly shapes the ideological and social landscape, profoundly impacting the collective worldview.

The IRGC utilizes the Shiite-Iranian ideological discourse as the center and focal point in its media strategy and representation. Within this framework, the media strives to present images and news consistent with the principles and values that define this discourse. This effort involves adapting religious concepts and forging a close connection between the disseminated information and sectarian-national values, thereby controlling public perceptions and reinforcing the exclusively Shiite-Iranian identity of society.

In this context, the media serves as a tool for shaping and defining cultural and social norms, promoting religious and national values and obligations. Analyzing the propaganda tactics employed by the Iranian political system, particularly through the IRGC propaganda apparatus, reveals an attempt to create a unique ideological atmosphere and cultivate a concept of "resistance" against the influence of modern ideas, mirroring real-world dynamics.

By forming Shiite groups, the establishment aims to create an idealized image of struggle and resistance, manipulating meanings and concepts in the process. In its media strategy, the establishment employs tactics such as selectively presenting information, prioritizing certain narratives, and making broad generalizations to influence and control the mindset of Iranian society.

Consequently, this propaganda approach seeks to maintain and strengthen its ideological discourse by establishing a robust ideological cover while amplifying the volume of misinformation. This process not only solidifies the ideological system of the Iranian ruling elite but also diminishes the populace's engagement with modern ideas and Western concepts, fostering a form of resistance against these influences.

Endnotes

(1) Vuving, Alexander, "The Logic of Attraction: Outline of a Theory of Soft Power," a paper presented at the American Political Science Association meeting in Toronto, September 3, 2009, accessed October 8, 2024, https://2h.ae/SOnG.

(2) William A. Callahan, "Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of The China Dream, Politics," *Sage Journals,* Volume 35, no 3-4 (March 2015), https://2h.ae/oUyU.

(3) For more information, see Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

(4) Axiology refers to the philosophical study of value and the determination of value, derived from the Greek word "axio" which means worthy. It is also called the Theory of Value; the philosophical study of goodness, or value, in the widest sense of these terms.

(5) "I once said that they are attacking us culturally. And this is true. God knows it is true. Some do not understand this. It means they do not see the scene. Those who look at the scene know what the enemy is doing. They know it is an attack, and what an attack it is!" (Khamenei's speech during his meeting with members of the Cultural Revolution Council - 1991).

(6) The ultimate goal in soft warfare is the same as in hard warfare, which is control and the collapse of a political system, but the tools for achieving this are different. While the overthrow of a political system can be accomplished in hard warfare through the occupation of territory, leading to the collapse of a country's defensive and security systems, efforts in soft warfare aim to influence the beliefs and values of a population, challenging the ideology and governance that grant the political system its identity. If the enemy succeeds in this overthrow, they will effectively achieve success by stripping the political system of its legitimacy and trust.

(7) Zahra Qasemi, "Clarifying the Concept of Soft War in the Thoughts of the Leader of the Islamic Republic," *Habl al-Matin Quarterly* 2, no. 3-4 (Summer and Autumn 2013), accessed October 7, 2024, https://2h.ae/Wkzs. [Persian].

(8) For example, in his speech on October 12, 2023, during a meeting with the new members of the Expediency Discernment Council, Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei described the ongoing events in the country as "sporadic disturbances" and characterized them as "a clumsy and negative planning by the enemy in response to the significant and innovative developments of the Iranian people." He emphasized that these issues "are not a matter of internal spontaneity. Of course, they may have utilized some areas, but the enemy's actions, such as propaganda, attempts to influence thought, inciting enthusiasm and encouragement, and even teaching methods for making incendiary materials, have now become completely clear."

"Resistance is the Only Solution to Hostilities; Minor Events Should Not Distract Officials from Reconstruction," *The Office of the Supreme Leader*, October 12, 2022, accessed October 7, 2024, https://2h.ae/GhzU. [Arabic].

(9) "The Jihad of Manifestation in the Statements of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution," *International Quran News Agency (IQNA)*, July 9, 2022, accessed October 8, 2024, https://iqna.ir/fa/about. [Persian].

(10) "Statements During the Meeting with the Poets of Ahl al-Bayt (Peace Be Upon Them)," *Khamenei.ir*, February 22, 2022, accessed October 7, 2024, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=49448. [Persian].

(11) "Jihad of Clarification in the Statements of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution."

(12) "Government Proposal for the 1402 Budget of the Ministry of Communications: 15.6 trillion Tomans," *Digiato*, accessed October 6, 2024, https://2h.ae/HcSk. [Persian].

(13) The Supreme Council of Cyberspace was established on March 7, 2012, by order of Ali Khamenei.

(14) A working group to identify criminal content was formed in 2008 under Article 22 of the Cyber Crimes Law, which was enacted in the same year and is headed by the Attorney General of Iran.

(15) This military institution was officially established in May 1979 by the order of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, to suppress the counter-revolution and protect the gains of the revolution. Over time, this organization has gradually transformed into a large and multifaceted coalition present in all areas of Iran. Its special status has made the IRGC the most involved institution in internet censorship and the repression of bloggers.

(16) "Borderless Expensive Capable: Enemies of the Internet - Iran: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,

Supreme Council of Cyberspace, Working Group for Identifying Criminal Content," *Reporters Without Borders,* March 12, 2014, accessed October 7, 2024, https://2h.ae/cIIt. [Persian].

(17) Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), accessed October 7, 2024, https://2h.ae/RDrh.

(18) Currently, the IRGC is responsible for the largest content production and psychological operations in cyberspace, with one of its key institutions being "Siraj." Since 2008, the leaders of this military institution have repeatedly announced the organization of virtual brigades in cyberspace aimed at combating "soft war." Billions of tomans are spent annually on these virtual brigades, which are often centered in Basij headquarters and mosques, with members conducting their activities from home. See: Independent Persian, "Commander of the Guard: We Have Organized Two Thousand Cyber Brigades," *Independent*, September 6, 2022, accessed October 5, 2024, https://2h.ae/rWVM. [Persian].

(19) Chris Barker and Emma Jane, *Cultural Studies Theory and Practice* (Loss Angeles: Sage, 2004).

(20) Ben Calvert, et al., Television *Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge: 2002), 200

(21) Stuart Hall, Christophe Jaquet and Kolja Lindner, "Signification, Représentation, Idéologie Althusser et les débats poststructuralistes (Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates)," *Raison Polititique* no. 48 (November 2012)) : 131-161, https://2h.ae/voyR.

(22) In March 2013, Reporters Without Borders published a report on World Day Against Cyber Censorship, labeling Iran, China, Syria, Bahrain, and Vietnam as the five countries hostile to the internet. The organization placed Iran's National Cyber Space Center on its list of institutions that suppress cyberspace worldwide, describing its activities as "a clear threat to the freedom of opinion and expression enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Additionally, Freedom House included the Iranian political system on its 2022 list of the worst countries regarding internet access. In 2022, the Iranian government also imposed the strictest censorship on the internet in Iran.

(23) Ansar Clip 17, "Leader of the Revolution: Pride in the Achaemenids is an Illusion," YouTube video, 1:02, November 23, 2021, accessed October 8, 2024, https://2h.ae/sWxq. [Persian].

(24) Eoin Devereux, *Understanding the Media 3rd ed.* (Loss Angeles: Sage, 2003), accessed October 7, 2024, https://2h.ae/rkCw

(25) "Shocking Statistics on the Assault of Girls and Women in America," *Tasnim News Agency*, January 17, 2023, accessed October 8, 2024, https://2h.ae/vThs.

(26) "Leader of the Revolution: Today, the Tallest Tower in the Region is in the Most Inept Country!" *Khabar Online*, video, February 21, 2018, accessed October 7, 2024, https://2h.ae/bBpU. [Persian].

(27) "Leader Receives Nurses, Families of Health Martyrs," *Iran Press*, December 12, 2021, accessed October 23, 2024, https://iranpress.com/leader-receives-nurses-families-of-health-martyrs.

(28) "An Official of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: 21,000 Volunteer Journalists Will Be Employed in the Basij," *Radio Farda*, October 9, 2011, accessed October 8, 2024, https://2h.ae/vgsT. [Persian].

(29) "We Have Entered a Cognitive and Perceptual War with the Enemy," *ISNA*, October 2, 2022, accessed October 8, 2024, https://2h.ae/DIqt. [Persian].

(30) Robert Feldman and Robert Baron, *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1974).