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The Islamic Republic’s Political Elite & Syria: Understanding What They Think Through Iranian Media Narratives

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The Islamic Republic’s Political Elite & Syria: Understanding What They Think Through Iranian Media Narratives

Abstract
The Islamic Republic of Iran has been the central regional backer of the Bashar al-Assad regime since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011. Despite the importance of Iran in the drama unfolding in Syria, including any possible resolution to the conflict, the Iranian political elite’s perceptions of the Syrian civil war are arguably not well understood. This report attempts to uncover these perceptions by analyzing the Iranian print news media and highlighting the dominant narratives. As one of the first systematic studies of Iranian media narratives on the Syrian civil war, this report can be an aid to policymakers, academics, journalists and others in understanding the Iranian political elite’s thinking on this issue.

Disciplines
Communication | International and Area Studies

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[About IranPolitik]

IranPolitik: The Iran Political Analysis Project (www.IranPolitik.com) is an independent website that focuses on delivering high-quality content on Iranian politics today to a broad English-speaking audience including students, academics, analysts, policymakers and the general public. Our team of researchers aims to provide the most objective, accurate and up-to-date information on the changing dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and foreign affairs and their social and economic context, using a wide variety of sources.

[About the Iran Media Program]

The Iran Media Program is a collaborative network designed to enhance the understanding of Iran’s media ecology. Our goal is to strengthen a global network of Iranian media scholars and practitioners and to contribute to Iran’s civil society and the wider policy-making community by providing a more nuanced understanding of the role of media and the flow of information in Iran.

[About the Author]

Farzan Sabet is a doctoral student in International History at the Graduate Institute, Geneva. He is currently the editing manager of IranPolitik. His research includes U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations and economic sanctions, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a political actor in Iran, the Islamic Republic’s discourse and practice of soft war, and Iranian media narratives on the Syrian civil war. His previous professional experience includes work in the Canadian government and oil consulting in Iran.

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This image by Ommat News, entitled "Proxy War in Syria", is a visual timeline of the Syrian conflict from March 2011 to August 2012 and is a good representation of the kind of media narratives coming out of Iran. While the emphasis is on the proxy nature of the conflict, other elements, such as the rise of radical Sunni Islamists, can be detected.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been the central regional backer of the Bashar al-Assad regime since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011. Despite the importance of Iran in the drama unfolding in Syria, including any possible resolution to the conflict, the Iranian political elite’s perceptions of the Syrian civil war are arguably not well understood. This report attempts to uncover these perceptions by analyzing the Iranian print news media and highlighting the dominant narratives. As one of the first systematic studies of Iranian media narratives on the Syrian civil war, this report can be an aid to policymakers, academics, journalists and others in understanding the Iranian political elite’s thinking on this issue.

KEY FINDINGS

• The Iranian political elite, despite public disagreements on a range of domestic and foreign policy issues, does not strongly diverge on support for Syria in public.

• The Syrian civil war is seen by the elite as a “proxy war” between two blocs: The al-Assad regime, Iran, Russia and China on the one hand and the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the United States and the European Union on the other.

• There is anxiety among the elite about the rise of radical Sunni political Islam in Syria and concern that this will have a contagion effect on the rest of the Middle East. This anxiety signals that Iran is increasingly a status quo power in the region and may view the rise of radical Sunni Islam as one area of possible mutual interest between itself, the United States and the European Union.

• There is little indication that the elite are considering withdrawing their support for the al-Assad regime. This appears to be in part because they believe that the rise of radical Sunni political Islam in Syria will lessen U.S. and E.U. enthusiasm for the Syrian opposition.

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian uprising began as a largely peaceful protest movement against the Ba’athist regime of Bashar al-Assad in March 2011. Initially part of the revolutions sweeping across the Middle East during the Arab Spring, it has now devolved into a full-scale civil war. As of May 2013, the death toll was estimated at 80,000 people.\(^1\) March saw heavy fighting between the regime and the opposition, and activists claimed that 6,000 people were killed, the highest monthly death toll since the conflict began.\(^2\) Initiatives by the United Nations and the Arab League to reach a negotiated political settlement have come to naught. In fact, even as the Syrian regime and opposition continue fighting with no clear end in sight, the conflict has taken on regional and international dimensions, with local, regional and international actors arrayed on both sides.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is the central regional actor on the side of the Syrian regime. Iran has a strong interest in keeping the regime in power and has consequently been among its strongest backers, providing it with a range of economic and military support.\(^3\) Despite the Islamic Republic’s key role in supporting the Syrian regime, the Iranian political elite’s perceptions of this momentous event are arguably not well understood. One of our best guides to understanding elite perceptions of the Syrian civil war may be the Iranian print news media. By analyzing the narratives offered of the Syrian civil war by Iranian print media sources with different political affiliations, we may be better able to understand the elite’s perceptions of the conflict. To this end, this report addresses the following two questions. First, what are the dominant narratives emerging from the Iranian print media on the Syrian civil war? Second, what can these narratives tell us about the perceptions of the conflict held by Iran’s political elite?

This report identifies three dominant narratives. The first narrative is that there is an emerging proxy war between regional and international blocs consisting of the Syrian regime, Iran, Russia and China on one side and the Syrian opposition, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the United States and the European Union on the other. The second narrative raises the specter of the spread of radical Sunni political Islam in the MENA region, asserting that the support of regional and international states for the Syrian opposition is fueling this trend. The third narrative alleges a Western propaganda campaign against the al-Assad regime. While other narratives exist in the print media, no others appear as consistently over time. The persistence of these three


narratives across time and sources could potentially tell us a number of things about perceptions of the Syrian civil war among the elite. First, the predominance of these three narratives could be interpreted as a sign that the elite are united in their perceptions of the Syrian civil war. At the same time, however, it could be a symptom of the limited freedom of the press and the state-centric nature of print media in Iran, which severely constrains the expression of differences among the elite and, indeed, in society more broadly. This limitation could create the illusion that the elite are united in their perceptions of the Syrian civil war when in fact they are not. Second, the Islamic Republic’s concerns over the rise of radical Sunni political Islam may be a sign that Iran is increasingly transitioning from an anti-status quo power to a status quo power in the region and may have a shared interest with the United States and the European Union in stemming the tide of extremism. Iran’s concerns could have important long-term implications if radical Sunnis become ascendant in the region. However, it appears unlikely to translate into a serious willingness to pursue a political compromise with the West over Syria in the short term.

This report is divided into five parts. Part One explains the basic framework of the report, including the methodology, classification of the Iranian political elite and sources used. Part Two gives a brief historical background on the Iranian print media since 1979. Part Three draws a brief outline of Iran-Syria relations since 1979. Part Four lays out the three main narratives observed in the Iranian media since the start of the Syrian conflict in March 2011. The conclusion discusses what these narratives can tell us about the elite’s perceptions of the Syrian conflict.

PART ONE: FRAMEWORK

Methodology

This report seeks to understand the Iranian political elite’s perceptions of the Syrian civil war through the Iranian print news media. To this end, six Iranian print media sources representing each major political current in the Islamic Republic were analyzed. The hypothesis was that Iranian print media provide a narrow but reliable lens to the Iranian political elite’s perception of the Syrian civil war. This segment of the Iranian media was chosen for a number of reasons. First, television and radio inside Iran have a greater degree of central government control than print outlets and they may thus be less representative of the range of views within the elite. Furthermore, only some television and radio programs are consistently archived online, making them difficult to use for systematic multi-source research. This report has thus focused on print media, including news websites, which can be readily accessed online and are thus more amenable to analysis over time.

The main criteria for selecting sources were that (1) they represent the views of one of the political currents outlined below; (2) they publish high quality content that could be accessed online; and (3) they publish content frequently. The sources used in this study were considered to best meet these three criteria. International broadcasters, including those funded and operated by the United States (VOA Persian, RL/RFE, Radio Farda), Great Britain (BBC Persian) and Germany (Deutsche Welle Persian) were excluded because they are not seen as reflecting the views of the elite. In addition, social media sources were excluded because of low quality, infrequency of publication and difficulties in tracking narratives over time. Finally, when sources appeared in multiple languages (including English), only Farsi articles from the sources were used to maintain consistency.

After identifying the sources to be studied, the search function was used on the websites of each source to look for articles, the main keyword being “Syria.” Articles across all of the sources’ web archives were analyzed for narratives by looking at the headlines and content of articles. News articles, editorials and op-eds were included in the analysis. A narrative can be expressed without explicit editorializing: The choice of a quote, especially from an Iranian or non-Iranian figure or major Western media source, can be a way of stating the narrative. Narratives repeated more than once by at least five out of the six selected sources were then selected for further analysis as dominant narratives that may represent the elite’s perceptions on the Syrian conflict. Three such narratives emerged. These are presented in Part Four of this report.4

Classification of the Iranian Political Elite & Print Media Sources

The following classification of the Iranian political elite into “political currents” is derived from IranPolitik: The Iranian Political Analysis Project’s classification system developed for the 2013 Iranian presidential election.5 Groupings in the Islamic Republic’s political system are notoriously difficult to ascertain and categorize because of the system’s opacity, lack of a strong party system, focus on powerful personalities, and shifting nature

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4 Appendix A lists a sample of more than 40 citations of articles from the selected sources that illustrate the dominant narratives.

of allegiances. There is limited consensus on Iranian currents’ key characteristics and even their names. As such, some level of interpretation is required. The only deviation here from standard classification frameworks of Iranian political currents is that the Principalists, Iran’s ruling conservatives, are divided into three distinct currents based on divisions that have emerged since 2009.

The table below illustrates each source analyzed in this report alongside their relevant political current. Given the dominance of the Neo-Principalists over every facet of Iran’s political system today, it is represented by two sources to account for its importance among the elite. The Green Movement has been excluded because it is no longer part of the regime elite.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Current</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Print Media Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Principalist</td>
<td>The most powerful current in the Islamic Republic is that of the hardliners, referred to here as the Neo-Principalists. One of the central principles of this current is <em>velayat madari</em>, or obedience to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Alongside the Supreme Leader, the main backer of this group is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the most powerful social, political, economic and security complex in Iran. The Neo-Principalists are opposed to every other current in Iran’s political establishment to varying degrees. This current originally backed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for president in 2005 until his re-election in 2009. They were central to his first term as president in terms of both policy and the provision of key cabinet members, but broke with the president after 2009 for reasons explored below. The key personalities include ex-parliamentary Speaker Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel (who is also well regarded by Traditional Principalists); Supreme National Security Council Secretary and Chief Nuclear Negotiator Saeed Jalili; former Interior Minister Sadegh Mahsouli; Persevering Front of the Islamic Revolution (PFIR) parliamentary faction Secretary Morteza Agha-Tehrani; and parliamentary representative Ruhollah Hosseinian. The main spiritual leader of this current is the controversial cleric Ayatollah Mohammad-Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi. In the Iranian parliament this current is represented by the PFIR.</td>
<td>Kayhan Daily Newspaper: <em>Kayhan</em> is a daily morning and evening newspaper that is part of the government-owned <em>Kayhan</em> Foundation and <em>Kayhan</em> media complex. <em>Kayhan</em>’s editor-in-chief Hossein Shariatmadari was directly appointed by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, leading many to believe that <em>Kayhan</em> directly represents the Supreme Leader’s point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmadinejad-Mashaei Current</td>
<td>Once virtually indistinguishable from the Neo-Principalists to outside observers, this current came to light after the 2009 presidential election with the rise of its most notable figure (aside from president Ahmadinejad), Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. Mashaei has been labeled “the octopus” because of his appointment to multiple senior posts by the president, including as presidential chief of staff. This current has dominated Ahmadinejad’s second term (2009-2013). Its unorthodox points of view on domestic and foreign policy have led Neo-Principalists and others to label them the “deviant current.” Ahmadinejad has angered some hardliners by questioning the need for the police to crack down on young people for the way they dress, saying that the country has larger problems. Mashaei has said that the age of political Islam as it exists today is over, and that the time is ripe for an “Iranian school of Islam.” The pair has also highlighted Iran’s pre-Islamic history and attempted to reconcile Iranian nationalism with Shiite political Islam. Their rhetoric on the return of the Mahdi and the end times has also raised suspicions among hardliners who see this as undermining the Islamic Republic’s main political theory, the <em>velayat-e faghih</em>. Finally, although Ahmadinejad is known outside Iran as anti-Israel and anti-American, Mashaei has said that Iranians have no problem with the people of Israel and Ahmadinejad himself has often taken a reconciliatory tone toward the United States post-2009. Aside from Ahmadinejad and Mashaei, presidential adviser Hamid Baghaei is another key individual in this current.</td>
<td>Islamic Republic News Agency: <em>IRNA</em> is an online-only print media source directly controlled by the presidential administration in power. Today it represents the views of the Ahmadinejad-Mashaei Current.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| **Traditional Principalists** | A current rooted in the Islamist right during the first decade after the revolution, this group as it exists today emerged as a reaction to the victory of Mohammad Khatami and the Reformists in the 1997 presidential election. Traditional Principalists have stronger ties with the Centrist current than the Neo-Principalists and the Ahmadinejad-Mashaei current, and also have deep ties to the bazaar, a historically important social and economic force in Iran. Although conservative, they are more moderate than the Neo-Principalists, and since 2009 the Traditional Principalists have often found themselves at odds with Neo-Principalists hardliners. This current contains a number of senior political figures, including parliamentary speaker Ali Lanjani and Tehran mayor Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, as well as more independent figures such as parliamentarians Mohammd-Reza Bahonar and Ahmad Tavakoli. | Mehr News Agency: MNA is an online-only mass media outlet that can be said to represent the views of all Principalists, although Traditional Principalists have a particularly strong presence. |

| **Centrists** | Another current rooted in the Islamic right during the first decade of the revolution, the Centrists emerged under the leadership of one of the regime’s most powerful and enduring politicians, former president Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and were in power between 1989 and 1997. The current retains some support in the Iranian parliament today. Its past platform emphasized economic reform (tending toward free markets) and led the charge during the Reconstruction Era to recover the economy after the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). This current has received strong support from technocrats and entrepreneurs in the past. Alongside Hashemi-Rafsanjani, former chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rowhani is a well-known Centrist figure. | Iranian Labour News Agency: ILNA is an online-only print media source run by the House of Labour, the regime’s official labour union. It is associated with moderates in the Centrist and Reformist political currents. |

| **Reformists** | This current emerged from the Islamic left during the first decade after the revolution. In its second incarnation, after a sweeping victory in the 1997 presidential election, it emphasized social and political reforms and attempted to liberalize Iranian society and the political system. Although this current had significant political clout between 1997 and 2005, and was seen as having governed well during its tenure, it ultimately failed to make reforms a lasting reality and has been systematically swept from power since. Members of this current particularly failed in supporting social forces, such as students and women, who made their electoral victories possible. It is now becoming a marginal player within the Islamic Republic’s political establishment. Key Reformist figures include former President Khatami, Ayatollah Mohammad Mousavi-Khoeiniha and former Interior minister Abdullah Nouri, among others. | Shargh Newspaper: Shargh is a daily newspaper associated with the Reformist current. |

| **Green Movement** | The Green Movement, originally a political movement that emerged and was active between April 2009 and February 2011 and had the support of the majority of Reformists, is no longer active. The Green Movement in Iran today consists of more radical Reformists, led by the imprisoned Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, many of whom are in exile. While there is likely much sympathy in Iranian society toward this current, there appears to be no organized political support for it inside Iran, as much of its organized social base was crushed in the aftermath of the controversial 2009 election. The Green Movement is well outside the Iranian political elite, and print media associated with it are not examined in this report. | |
PART TWO: BRIEF HISTORY OF IRANIAN MEDIA SINCE 1979

To uncover the Iranian political elite’s perceptions on the Syrian civil war from March 2011 to March 2013 through dominant narratives, it helps to understand the historical context, legacies and contemporary characteristics of Iranian print news media. The triumph of the Islamic Revolution marked the beginning of one of the most repressive periods in Iranian media history, persisting to the current day. Although the media opened up significantly immediately following the Pahlavi regime thanks to revolutionary chaos, as the Islamist forces under the direction of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini consolidated power, the opening rapidly disappeared and media diversity was reduced to the range of views that existed among the Islamists themselves. For example, the popular daily Ayandegan was famously closed for good after surviving a number of attacks by the ancien regime when Khomeini declared: “I do not read Ayandegan.”

As part of the mass nationalization of the economy in the early years of the revolution, nearly all media came into the direct hands of the state. Ettela’at and Kayhan, bastions of the private media during the Pahlavi dynasty, became two of the most powerful state media complexes, directly airing the views of Iran’s powerful Supreme Leaders and their associates. It is even rumored that some Ettela’at editorials have been penned by current Supreme Leader Khamenei himself. In this sense, much of Iran’s print media is an extension of the regime and elite. Media diversity, insofar as it exists, is confined to the political currents within the regime. The system of censorship set up by the Pahlavi dynasty has been reproduced in the Islamic Republic. The most well-known contemporary example of this includes the 18 Tir student uprising of 1999. This uprising had its roots a decade earlier, when a number of paradigmatic changes began the process of fundamental transformations. The end of the revolutionary crisis, the bloody Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and the death of the charismatic Khomeini created the circumstances for great social, economic and political change in Iran. After ten years of revolutionary terror and war, civil society started becoming active once again. In 1997 Mohammad Khatami, a mid-level cleric who had represented Khomeini at Kayhan soon after the revolution and held a number of other senior appointments, was elected as president in a landslide victory. Under the Khatami administration, Iran witnessed the “Press Spring,” in which print media flourished, as well as a larger opening that touched every field of intellectual life. Halfway in Khatami’s first term, Iran’s conservative dominated Fifth Parliament (1996-2000) sought to make Iran’s Press Law, which placed limitations on freedom of the press, even more restrictive as an attack on Khatami’s reforms.

In the ensuing political battle over the Press Law, the pro-Reformist Salam daily newspaper published a top-secret internal memo from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (abbreviated as VEVAK in Farsi) that set off a chain of events leading to a political crisis. The VEVAK memo, originally sent by Deputy Intelligence Minister Saeed Emami (who would later be disgraced over his involvement in the Chain Murders and “commit suicide”) to then Intelligence Minister Ghorban-Ali Dorri-Najafabadi on 8 October 1998, outlined Emami’s support for a more restrictive Press Law. By linking conservatives seeking a more restrictive Press Law to a despised figure like Emami, Salam had hoped to smear them. For the crime of publishing a VEVAK top-secret internal memo, Salam was shut down. This pushed Khatami supporters, particularly university students, to rise up in what became known as the 18 Tir uprising in 1999. The mass repression that followed helped close the political opening Khatami had helped


16 The Chain Murders are alleged to have been a VEVAK operation to assassinate Iranian political activists and intellectuals between November and December 1998. This was seen as being part of a larger operation going back a decade which targeted political activists at home and abroad. Although VEVAK denied responsibility by claiming that Emami had gone rogue, suspicions regarding its culpability remain.
create. The repression included a mass order, the first of its kind, by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to close a number of Reformist-oriented newspapers.\textsuperscript{17}

Iranian print media today has a number of characteristics. First, much of print media content now appears both on newsstands and online. In fact, some of the most prominent print media do not even publish physical newspapers, but only appear online. Second, cyber spaces in general and social media specifically have changed the print media by allowing non-state media to expand content and readership to new heights. Still, with few exceptions the quality of this media leaves much to be desired. The most high quality non-regime media are by foreign governments, the best example being BBC Persian.\textsuperscript{18} The implementation of a plan, begun in September 2012, to create a “national intranet” that could in the long term cut the average Iranian off from cyberspace could potentially cut Iranians off from most if not all non-regime media.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, despite the severe limitations on Iran’s media, within the ruling Principalists (from which nearly all major power-holders in the Islamic Republic today hail) there is a surprisingly diverse and dynamic media. These media outlets are often linked to key state institutions, political currents or figures but still manage to produce interesting, informative and diverse content. Understanding the limited freedom of the press and the regime-centric nature of print media in Iran allows us to expect with some confidence that our analysis of the sources is a good guide to the understanding the Iranian political elite’s perceptions of the Syrian civil war.

PART THREE: IRAN-SYRIA RELATIONS SINCE 1979

An understanding of Iran-Syria relations since 1979 is important for properly contextualizing Iranian print media narratives on the Syrian civil war. According to Jubin Goodarzi, a foremost scholar on Iran-Syria relations: “[T]he Syrian-Iranian axis is one of the most intriguing developments in modern Middle East politics...Pointing to many differences in their respective ideologies, as well as their social and political foundations, most analysts expressed surprise at how a revolutionary, pan-Islamic theocracy like Iran could form an alliance with a secular, pan-Arab socialist republic like Syria.”\textsuperscript{20}

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Goodarzi argues that it is precisely this lack of overlap in ideological claims as well as strategic priorities (the Levant for Syria and the Persian Gulf for Iran) that has made the three decade long Iran-Syria alliance one of the most enduring in the modern Middle East. He identifies this alliance to be primarily defensive with limited offensive capability, focused on opponents such as Israel in the Levant, Iraq under Saddam Hussein and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the Persian Gulf, and the United States in the wider region (one may want to now add Turkey to this list).\textsuperscript{21}

Following the events of 11 September 2001 and the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the Iran-Syria alliance has formed the core of what the Islamic Republic calls the “axis of resistance,” a loose partnership that also includes Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Given Iran’s lack of land routes to the latter two allies and its limited naval capabilities, Syria is essential to Iran’s power projection in the Levant. This, alongside the fact that Syria is one of the few countries in the region not strategically aligned with the United States, has meant that the Islamic Republic does not see what is happening in Syria as part of the Arab Spring (which the regime views as an Iranian-inspired “Islamic Awakening”) but instead as a Western-backed attempt to unravel the axis of resistance.\textsuperscript{22} The Iran-Syria alliance can lead us to expect that the Iranian print media’s narratives will generally be positive toward Syria, especially given the regime’s close ties with media. This alliance also leads us to expect that dominant narratives will likely revolve around strategic regional and international issues.

PART FOUR: DOMINANT MEDIA NARRATIVES

The dominant narratives examined here mainly began appearing around March 2012, a full year after the start of the Syrian conflict. This is not to say that no narratives existed prior to this, but that consistent narratives on the Syrian conflict expressed over a long period in the Iranian print media are a more recent phenomenon. A similar pattern can be seen with other major domestic and foreign policy issues. For example, for months after the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan uprisings beginning in late 2010 and early 2011, the Iranian print media covered much of what was happening but did not necessarily have a coherent narrative. Eventually, the idea that these uprisings were an Iranian-inspired

\textsuperscript{17} Samii, “Sisyphus’ Newsstand”.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 10.

The reality of Syria’s issues is: A proxy war with the Syrian government on the part of some governments and with the leadership of America to meet interests of the Zionist regime and strike a blow against the [axis of] resistance in the region. In the middle, the Syrian people have been ignored and have been sacrificed, and this situation must stop as soon as possible.24

This narrative has also been advanced in a number of editorials by Hossein Shariatmadari, the Khamenei appointed editor-in-chief ofKayhan Newspaper, including the following passage:

Remembered witnesses, and many other witnesses, do not leave any doubt that Turkey, on behalf of America and Israel, and with the dollars of al-Saud and Qatar, has been drawn into a proxy war. A war whose end can be predicted now [and shall end with] a heavy price and downfall for the Erdogan government...25

More recently, Khamenei’s representative in Syria, Mojtaba Hosseini, has repeated this line of thinking, saying: “The battles and insecurity by militant and terrorist groups in Syria in reality is a proxy war by America and the regime occupying Jerusalem [Israel] and some seditious Arab countries for revenge for Syria’s resistance [to Israel].”26

Senior government officials have not been the only ones to advance this narrative. According to Hossein Zahmatkesh, a professor of international relations at the University of Tehran:

In fact the situation in Syria is the best example of a phenomenon which is known as proxy war in international relations: A war whose outcome can lead to the reshaping of the situation of many of the regional and international players


Narrative Two: The Spread of Radical Sunni Political Islam in the MENA Region

The second dominant narrative warns of the spread of radical Sunni political Islam in the Middle East (the terms “Wahabism” and “Salafism” are often used in this regard). Although the Islamic Republic practices a form of political Islam, it has historically been hostile to some Sunni versions of political Islam. In fact, despite espousing a form of Islamic universalism, the Islamic Republic has cynically ignored Islamic causes when it is convenient. For example, despite anti-Iranian Chinese and Russian policies that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of Muslims in those countries, Iran has nonetheless retained close ties with these governments while simultaneously condemning American policies in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Syria itself, the Iranian government largely ignored the Hafez al-Assad regime’s slaughter of thousands of Syrian Muslim Brothers during the 1980s because the Syrian government provided Iran with crucial military and diplomatic aid during the Iran-Iraq War.

This dominant narrative has at least two characteristics. First, it views the spread of groups espousing radical Sunni Islamism as a cancer in the region and a disaster for the Islamic ummah (community). Second, the narrative attacks the United States and its allies for supporting radical Sunni Muslims that Iran believes will, once in power, quickly turn against their backers. This narrative recalls memories of the Western and Saudi-backed anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. The most interesting example of this narrative in the sources examined in this study was the coverage of Syrian Prime Minister Wader Nader al-Halghi’s speech at the Non-Aligned Movement summit on 30 August 2012, which briefly addressed the threat. Al-Halghi stated, “It has become clear that foreign-backed terrorist groups have abused this crisis and are killing innocent people. Between [these groups] there are Salafi and Takfiri al-Qaeda individuals.”

Despite being a small point in al-Halghi’s speech, it was highlighted by Iran’s print media.

As reports of radical Sunni Islamist groups gaining strength in Syria proliferate, this narrative has gathered momentum. Avaz Heydarpour, member of the Iranian parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy commission, stated in an interview with Mehr News Agency that:

“The efforts of the West and countries allied to the West in the region is to start a fight between Shi’as and Sunnis, which of course they have not been successful in doing, and for this reason they try to activate groups like the Taliban….”

A more recent article by Fars News Agency took on this subject by referencing an attack on Syrians in Iraq by what it claimed was the al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorist group. According to the article, this signifies that radical Sunni groups in different countries, who want to found states based on their own interpretation of Shari’a law, are on the rise in the region, leaving footprints everywhere including Iraq, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, Lebanon and Libya. Citing the killing of the U.S. ambassador in Libya, the article maintains that these groups have aspirations beyond any one state and will eventually target Western interests and the West itself:

The extremist Salafist-Jihadist current which is gaining force in the region and under the name of the Free Syrian Army, the Free Iraqi Army, Jebhet al-Nusrat, Ahrar al-Sham etc., by securing its position in Syria will not remain idle and will challenge the entire region and will suck the rulers of the countries who support them into a tornado as well... America which has nurtured this [radical Sunni] current, during the Benghazi conflicts in which America’s ambassador in Libya was killed, was not able to remain safe from the venomous sting of the serpent that it nurtured in its own midst. And French officials also did not imagine that someday they would have to take action against those they themselves raised.

Narrative Three: Western Propaganda against the Regime of Bashar al-Assad

The third and final dominant narrative accuses the Western media of carrying out a propaganda campaign against the al-Assad regime, and by extension Iran. It also claims that the Syrian regime continues to be legitimate and popular among the Syrian people. For example, the Iranian media take opportunities to highlight pro-regime demonstrations as evidence of Western deception, as in the case of an interview with a member of the Iranian parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy commission:

[D]espite the poisonous propaganda of the West and the distortion of the truth everyone has seen that 15 million out of Syria’s 25 million people come out to demonstrate in favor of their legal government and have shown the falseness of Western-backed media outlets.31

Iran’s ambassador to Syria, Mohammad-Reza Raouf-Sheibani, is another figure cited by the Iranian print media to express this narrative. In an article by IRNA he is quoted as dividing the international media into two camps, one that he claims reflects reality and another that is biased and works for “American-Zionist” interests. Speaking about the latter, he stated that:

Biased media have an important role in the [Syrian] events and instead of directing public opinion in a correct direction, by provoking it they direct the region toward disagreement and conflict, and this [biased] media’s share in the tragedies in the region cannot be denied.32

The Iranian print media particularly love to highlight Western social, political, economic and media figures who repeat their narrative. This was demonstrated by the wide coverage given to criticisms by Amber Lyon, a disenchanted former CNN reporter, whose documentary on the Bahraini government’s crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators was canned by CNN. According to a Lyon quote carried in Mehr News Agency, “American networks are constantly showing evil and negative images from Iran and Syria.”33 What is particularly interesting about Mehr News Agency’s coverage of Lyon’s criticisms is that although images of women, especially without the hijab, are often excluded from domestic Iranian media, in this case Lyon’s picture, with full-length flowing blond hair, slender upper body and the outline of her breasts, was shown in their original article (see image below).

Divergent Narratives

Although the dominant narratives discussed here were the most consistent in the sources analyzed, they are by no means the only narratives that appear in Iran’s print media. Looking beyond the six examined sources but still within the Iranian print media, one can find some diverging narratives. For instance, Ahmad Avaei, another member of the National Security and Foreign Policy commission, stated in an interview with Khabar Online shortly after the initial outbreak of demonstrations in Syria that there were similarities between Syria and other Arab Spring countries: “Freedom and real elections do not exist in this country and the minority rules over the majority.”34 Furthermore, he asserted, “The reality is that our absolute support of Syria was not correct, as the people in this country who demonstrated against that regime were religious people and the protest movement was spontaneous…”


However, Avaei was quick to soften his criticism of the Syrian regime by saying that unlike the regimes of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali or Hosni Mubarak, which were dependent on the West, the al-Assad regime is independent, supports Hezbollah and is against Israel. He maintained that “…America and the West incited the demonstrators and by transferring weapons gave these events their desired orientation.”

More typically, however, divergent narratives can be found in Iranian print media sources with political affiliations outside of the Iranian political elite (e.g. the Green Movement) or specialized publications (e.g. those focusing on foreign policy). A good example of the former is Jaras, a Green Movement-linked source, which interviewed dissident senior Reformist and former Deputy Interior Minister for Political Affairs Mostafa Tajzadeh. In the interview Tajzadeh discusses the Syrian conflict, saying that in the context of the Arab Spring the Islamic Republic has become a model for dictatorships. He continued:

The largest mistake of the [Iranian] regime in the last two years has been [its] absolute support of Bashar al-Assad and his criminal actions...What is currently happening in Syria, and it could have turned out differently with our prudence and insight, it’s not only a proxy war in which the West (Europe and the United States) is arrayed against Russia and China. Rather it must be said with deep remorse that it has also become a battle between the Shi’a and Sunni.36

According to Tajzadeh, this battle can have negative consequences for Muslims, including an increase in instability in neighboring states like Iraq and Lebanon and the creation of a violent image of Islam and Muslims. From Tajzadeh’s point of view, a tarnished image of Islam and Muslims also works in favor of Israel because it allows Israel to appear as an island of stability in an unstable and uncivilized region.

Iran Diplomacy provides an example of a divergent narrative from a specialized publication. Iran Diplomacy is a moderate website, associated with former senior diplomat Mohammad-Sadegh Kharrazi, in which domestically based political scientists and former diplomats write on foreign policy issues. In an article written shortly after the outbreak of events in Syria, Iran’s former cultural attaché in Syria, Mohammad Shariati-Dahaghan, wrote an article in which he said that Iran should not stand against the Syrian people. He stated his belief that through reforms the al-Assad regime could have controlled the situation:

[H]owever we are unfortunately witnessing that all of Syria is the scene of the people’s opposition and protest, and the (Syrian regime’s) accusation of armed rebellion against the people has resulted in greater pessimism on the part of the people...In terms of our [foreign] policy orientation we certainly support Syria’s rulers, but let us allow the Syrian people themselves make decisions about the [political] structure of Syria. Thus, Iran should not act in a way in regards to the [Syria’s] political structure that it stands against the [Syrian] people.36

CONCLUSION

What can the three dominant narratives found in the course of this investigation tell us about the Iranian political elite’s perceptions on the Syrian civil war? If we take the six selected sources as unreservedly expressing the views of their respective political affiliations, then we could interpret the dominant narratives as showing a high degree of perceptual unity among the Iranian political elite on the issue of the Syrian civil war. However, given what we know about Iranian domestic politics, the Iranian print media, and Iran-Syria relations, it is also possible to view the narratives as more strongly representing the perceptions of the Principalist political grouping, especially Neo-Principalists, while marginalizing the perceptions of Reformists and Centrists. Regardless of which interpretation is true, the elite are publically showing a united front on the Syrian conflict, as they often do with other foreign policy issues. Even if some currents within the elite view what is happening in Syria differently than the above narratives, they have kept their views private and have not very openly diverged. As Centrists and Reformists are marginalized and placed outside of the elite in the course of this investigation tell us about the Iranian political elite’s perceptions on the Syrian civil war? If we take the six selected sources as unreservedly expressing the views of their respective political affiliations, then we could interpret the dominant narratives as showing a high degree of perceptual unity among the Iranian political elite on the issue of the Syrian civil war. However, given what we know about Iranian domestic politics, the Iranian print media, and Iran-Syria relations, it is also possible to view the narratives as more strongly representing the perceptions of the Principalist political grouping, especially Neo-Principalists, while marginalizing the perceptions of Reformists and Centrists. Regardless of which interpretation is true, the elite are publically showing a united front on the Syrian conflict, as they often do with other foreign policy issues. Even if some currents within the elite view what is happening in Syria differently than the above narratives, they have kept their views private and have not very openly diverged. As Centrists and Reformists are marginalized and placed outside of the elite in the course of the 2013 Iranian presidential election, they may more openly diverge from the regime’s dominant narratives (much as the Green Movement does).

With regards to the narratives themselves, the third narrative, which alleges a Western propaganda campaign against the al-Assad regime, appears to be


primarily a case of counter-propaganda. The first two narratives, however, may be able to tell us something more significant. The first narrative, which states that there is an emerging proxy war between two regional and international blocs, may indicate that the Iranian political elite views regional rivals’ and Western actions in Syrian as a kind of red line that has forced a response by Iran, China and Russia. From this point of view, Iranian political elites may see a new global order emerging whereby Western economic and military power is increasingly challenged by a rival bloc at the regional and international levels. The notion of a proxy war may also reveal the Iranian political elite’s concern that the Syrian conflict will lead to political instability elsewhere in the Middle East and even to interstate conflagrations.

This concern is related to the second narrative, which raises the specter of radical Sunni political Islam in the Middle East. By repeatedly emphasizing this narrative, the print media may be showing the Iranian political elite’s anxiety regarding the rise of Sunni Islamist regimes. Until very recently, Iran’s position as the main proponent of anti-Western political Islam was more or less unchallenged. Iran walked a fine sectarian line, trying to appeal to both Sunni and Shi’a political Islamists. Consequently, both Sunni and Shi’a political Islamist groups often looked to Iran for support, reinforcing the country’s position and power. The rise of radical Arab-Sunni political Islamist groups or states that are anti-Iranian, anti-Shi’a and anti-Western could seriously undermine Iran’s claim to leadership in the Islamic world and change the balance of power in the region.

At the same time, Iranian political elites may see an opportunity within the threat. In 1979, revolutionary Iran was a revisionist power, and regional and international states banded together to neutralize any potential Iranian threat. In the post-Arab Spring era, Iran may slowly be transforming into a status quo power. The second dominant narrative argues that the rise of radical Arab-Sunni political Islamist groups or states in the region presents a threat not only to Iran, but also to the West and Western allies in the Middle East. Through this narrative, Iranian political elites may be sending subtle signals to the West that there are indeed mutual interests between Iran and the West. While this is unlikely to translate into any immediate political compromises between the two sides, it could be a subtle sign that Iran is pondering the changes in the regional order and considering areas in which mutual interest could lead to greater cooperation with the West.

APPENDIX A: DOMINANT NARRATIVE SOURCES

The following sources for the narratives have been organized according to their corresponding narrative and chronologically.

Note that at the time of publication (during the 2013 Iranian presidential election), IRNA has been taken offline, possibly as a political attack on the Ahmadinejad-Mashaei Current, and many of the sources used here can no longer be retrieved. Dead URLs are a common problem when studying Iran using online sources based inside the Islamic Republic. As a countermeasure, the author has archived articles used in this report that were still working at the time of publication. The articles cited from IRNA and one article from Khabar Online, however, were inaccessible, and URLs are not provided below. All other sources are archived with the author in .pdf format should they become inaccessible in the future.

Appendix A(1): International and Regional Proxy War in Syria


5. “Head of IRGC Intelligence: We Should Not Allow the Resistance Front in Syria to Be Broken (Raies-e Sazman-e Ettela’at-e Sepah: Nagozarim Khat-e Moghavemat Dar Surieh Shekasteh Sha-


Appendix A(2): The Spread of Radical Sunni Political Islam in the Middle East


7. “Foreign Policy reports: The neo-conservative roots of the coalition favouring attack on Syria/Plan for a new American century (Foreign Policy Barresi Kard: Risheh-haye Neo-Mohafezehkaran-ye


Appendix A(3): Western Propaganda against the Regime of Bashar al-Assad


BIBLIOGRAPHY


34. “Supreme leader of the revolution meets the head of the United Nations: Arming the Zionist regime with nuclear weapons is a major danger for the region. (Rahbar-e Moazzam- Enghelab dar Didar-e


