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# Iran and the Soft War

## **Disciplines**

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

## Iran and the Soft War

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The events of the Arab Spring instilled in many authorities the considerable fear that they could too easily lose control over the narratives of legitimacy that undergird their power.<sup>1</sup> This threat to national power was already a part of central thinking in Iran. Their reaction to the Arab Spring was especially marked because of a long-held feeling that strategic communicators from outside the state's borders were purposely reinforcing domestic discontent. I characterize strategic communications as, most dramatically, investment by an external source in methods to alter basic elements of a societal consensus. In this essay, I want to examine what this process looks like from what might be called the "inside," the view from the perspective of the target society. A focused effort or a campaign of this kind, moves, one might say, from what has traditionally been called "soft power" to a different level of engagement that might be, and has been, called a "soft war." In recent years, Iran has characterized efforts by the United States, alone or with other states, as engaging in such intensified measures against its existing governing structure. In this essay, I explore whether a line between soft power and soft war can be drawn, and how the Iran experience, crowded as it is between competing measures and countermeasures, might contribute to the theory of strategic communications. How does such a "soft war" become articulated by the target, and how are the contours of "free expression" implicated as the emphasis flows more to "war" than to the "softness" of the equation?

### Differentiating Soft Power from Soft War

Almost to the level of cliché, much has been written about "soft power." Joseph Nye (2004, 2008) has famously described soft power as some combination of national culture, political ideals, and policy that works to "attract" individuals, groups, and governments in other states to the positions and culture of the projecting entity. What constitutes the instruments of soft power—what should be included under this umbrella and what belongs in another conceptual category—is hotly disputed among practitioners and theoreticians. International broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, nation branding—all these and more fall within the broad mantle. Soft power can be very soft or increasingly aggressive. It can be a way, in Nye's central meaning, of achieving the benefits of gaining sympathy with one state's (or alliance's) interest. From the perspective of the society which is the target, these exercises of power can be tolerable and tolerated, sometimes even supportive of the society's own goals. But what marks the shift across a line? When is a strategic intervention describable not merely as "soft power," but much more?

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<sup>1</sup> Writing about Iran is chancy and complicated, at best. This essay relies a great deal on the work of Babak Rahimi and Reza Marashi, among others. I am grateful for the comments of Briar Smith, Mahmood Enayat, and Libby Morgan.

As pressure has increased on the Islamic Republic of Iran to change various policies, including its nuclear enrichment program and regional support for Hezbollah and others, the United States is continuing to mount a concerted campaign to alter Iran's media sphere. When Iran characterized this effort as a soft war, what did it mean, and how did it conceptualize the shift? The Islamic Republic claimed that it was the object of a concentrated, directed, and strategic series of information-related actions (through international radio and other means described below) by the United States and the West. For the Islamic Republic, the soft war was defined as the strategic and focused use of these nonmilitary means to achieve objectives, such as regime change, that might otherwise be obtained through conventional weaponry. The information-related interventions included enough explicit references to regime change that the campaign was more the equivalent of war in its ambition and strategic sweep than something encouraging a gradual and nondestabilizing shift to more democratic practices. A typical and succinct formulation was given in July 2011 by Iranian Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi, "We do not have a physical war with the enemy, but we are engaged in heavy information warfare with the enemy" (*Tehran Times*, 2011).

By studying the Iran case, one might be able to identify the elements that lead to a target state's perception of a persistent and disciplined threat to its governance and stability. Examining Iran's response or counter strategy would allow the description of a bureaucracy of defense: the shaping of cultural redoubts and the equivalent of soft fortresses and propaganda. It would show the relationship between a defensive and offensive posture in a "soft war" context. There are ample precedents, of course, before Iran, for the large-scale use of information techniques as an adjunct to conflict, or even as an alternative to conflict. The history of propaganda is an encyclopedia of such efforts. International broadcasters in the West often point to the collapse of the Soviet bloc as a triumphant example of a persevering investment in international broadcasting and similar mechanisms of altering opinion and softly preparing a target society to become a more intense demander of democratic change. Iran as a case study extends our knowledge of this phenomenon. For the theocracy and ruling class, there was definitely a narrative of legitimacy, and for them, the deeply felt claim that that narrative was under attack. Iran is an exceptional locus to study this evolving discourse. There are few states where there has been more continuing external concern and involvement with the nature of authority and those who are exercising control. It is a site where there has been a frequently implied, often explicit effort to use forms of intervention to shape, reshape, reinforce, or destabilize the political status quo, both from within and from without. These have included an externally driven coup, soft power investment in the sustainability or reputation of the Shah, the bitter period of the hostage crisis, efforts at rapprochement, external support for factions in election campaigns, and more generalized and intense information intervention after the 2009 elections. Certain conflicts (famously the Spanish Civil War) have been test zones for the tools of conventional war, for new technologies in hot wars (new ordnance, new armored vehicles, and new modes for targeting). Similarly, certain conflicts are test zones for modes of strategic communication and the use of new information technologies. Iran has been a test bed, including for the use of circumvention technologies, social media, and satellite-related competition. Rarely since the Cold War, and never in the era of social media, has there been such a full-blown governmental response and reaction as in Iran, a national rallying to a war footing, as if it were a hot war. It is because of this public articulation and reaction that a picture may be emerging of what kind of steps a government might take when it considers itself to be under this kind of attack.

This conceptualization of attack has its roots in the 1979 Islamic revolution. The revolution positioned itself as a homegrown response to the Shah, defined, in the narrative of the Islamic Republic, as the decadent, Westernized (and therefore un-Islamic) puppet installed by intelligence agencies after orchestrating a coup against Iran's democratically elected Mossadegh. The revolutionary rhetoric, still salient and sustained more than 30 years later, is situated as a bulwark against those seen to be meddling and interfering in Iran's domestic affairs, with the regime imagined as the righteous defender of Islam and caretaker of a moral society. Even those who are not supporters of the regime are familiar with this trope of legitimacy. The idea of "soft war" is prepackaged to fit European and American initiatives into a ready-made metanarrative of maleficent Western intervention. The Islamic revolution's authenticity is derived from the fact that the popular uprising was voluntary, organic, and reflective of the population's desire to purge corruption and immorality from the ranks of society by empowering the clergy. The Islamic revolution's legitimacy is closely tied to maintaining its consensual veneer. Indeed, consistent with this view of its history, Iran voiced support for the Arab Spring in 2011, suggesting that the events across the Arab World were "an Islamic awakening" similar to Iran's 1979 revolution.<sup>2</sup> It could celebrate change in Egypt and Tunisia at the same time that it considered similar efforts at home, such as the Green Movement following the disputed 2009 election and the ongoing opposition movement in ally Syria, as outcroppings of foreign-spawned illegal intervention (Aslan, 2011).

### **The Characterization of Soft War**

There is a conventional language of conventional war—its weapons, its objectives, modes of measuring the effectiveness of battles, and formulae for bringing such a war to conclusion. This language has a long international tradition about the use of force, when it is authorized, and when it is justified. The language of conventional war is preoccupied with distinctions between fighting forces and citizens or civilians. The language of conventional war contains limits, often contained in treaty formulations, like those of the Vienna Conventions. There are few, if any, counterparts for a soft war, no elaborated discourse of acceptable methods and articulated limits. Here, I look to statements by Iranian officials, hyperbolic as they might be, to provide insight into the way these issues are formulated in sectors of Iran. I do not represent the research here as yielding a representative sampling of such statements, but rather, as a window into views not sufficiently taken into account in global analysis of official discourse in Iran. Also, while it would be far better to be exhaustive, the purpose in this limited essay is to isolate and articulate a way of thinking that is influential.

For example, one can look to statements of the Islamic Development Organization of Iran (IDO), an institute with vast media activities and holdings that was created by the Iranian regime after 1979 to promote Islamic revolution values both internally and externally. The IDO defines soft war as:

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<sup>2</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said,

Today's events in the north of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and certain other countries have another sense for the Iranian nation. They have special meaning. This is the same Islamic awakening which resulted in the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation. (*The Guardian* at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/18/iran-arab-spring-syria-uprisings>)

[A]ny kind of psychological warfare action and media propaganda which targets the society and induces the opposite side to accept the failure without making any military conflict. The subversion, internet war, creation of radio-television networks and spreading the rumors are the important forms of Soft War. This war intends to weaken the intellection and thought of the given society and also causes the socio-political order to be annihilated via the media propaganda. (Islamic Development Organization, 2010)

In 2009, Ali Mohammad Na'ini, then deputy head of the Basij militia for cultural and social affairs, adumbrated the concept. He linked soft war to the uses of soft power using the 1979 revolution itself as an example:

The main principle of that revolution was the soft power of the revolution, namely the ability of the leadership to arouse an entire nation. . . . The main aim behind the Soft War is to force the system to disintegrate from within in view of its values, beliefs, its main fundamental characteristics, and its identity. Any system, especially a system that is based on certain beliefs and values, owes its identity and its existence to those beliefs and values. It is based on the models and principles on the basis of which it continues its political, social and economic life. . . . If the identity or the fundamental beliefs and values and the main model of a revolution in different social, political, cultural and economic fields are challenged by non-military means the adherence of the society to that system would be challenged. Quite naturally this would lead to the ineffectiveness and the invalidation of that model, it will weaken the different pillars of the society, and subsequently the system will start to disintegrate from within. Therefore, Soft War aims at confronting the main blueprint and the main ideas of a political system in different fields. By making use of its soft power, namely its culture and values, its cultural and political values and its cultural products the enemy will try to win the trust of the public [in the enemy's values]. In this way, it infiltrates the different intellectual, mental and spiritual layers of the society, and it will undermine the strength and validity of that system and will sap public trust in it. Thus, it will destroy the effectiveness of a system and would give rise to instability, and that instability and lack of trust in turn will result in civil resistance. (*Jahan News*, 2009)

These, then, are the distinctive strategies of a soft war: to "force the system to disintegrate from within." The strategies focus on a society's values and beliefs, and on its identity. The imputed strategy is one of encouraging internal disintegration of support for the government by undermining the value system central to national identity. The external intervenor—in this case, the United States specifically and the West generally—is said to seek the "ineffectiveness and the invalidation" of Iran's organizing model. It is a strategy of jiu-jitsu, establishing doubt so that the "main ideas of a political system" would be rendered susceptible to analysis that would lead to their unraveling. To do this requires a persistent targeting of "the different intellectual, mental and spiritual layers of the society," weakening public trust at each step.

In this formulation of a soft war strategy, one could also identify a specific and revealing "branding" shortcut, a way that Iranian officials could capsule and frame the energies that would go into a soft war. In a somewhat creative phrase, officials connected the idea of a military alliance to the use of

rhetorical tools to achieve regime-changing objectives. The Western offensive was characterized as the product of a "cultural NATO," (as quoted from the IDO, 2010), a phrase that implies both a quasi-military approach from the West and a coordinated activity among an alliance of external states. To suggest how such a phrase works to create and add to an internal Iranian discourse of soft war, I edit and consolidate elements of its depiction or projection of this construct. Cultural NATO, whose range is the "thought, idea, and culture of nations," is superior to efforts dependent on force: Its functions are "long-term, convenient, and inexpensive," while military alternatives are "short-term, troublesome, and more expensive" (ibid.). Cultural NATO (as implied in the earlier discussion) makes an effort to capture the target nation's beliefs and trust for the purposes of exploiting them. Capping the list of devious objectives attributed to cultural NATO, one of its purposes "is to put the national-religious culture of the societies on the margin so that it holds in hand the control of the world's affairs via the domination of its desires" (ibid.).

The plan of "Cultural NATO" which has been underlined and noted by the Supreme Leader, consists of the offensive line of the enemy and their effort in order to enter into the cultural, artistic and media arenas so that they deal a black picture against Iran. The main purpose of cultural NATO is to destroy the unity and inseparable connection of the nation which has resisted and tolerated during the three decades with all pressures, shortcoming and imperfections. (ibid.)

Iranian analysts thus frame the soft war compatibly with the idea of a cultural NATO: as containing a coordinated set of efforts that, together, seek to enlarge discontent in the society. In this framing, economic sanctions reinforce a range of information-related measures, and vice versa. The deployment of the media is accompanied by engagement with nongovernmental organizations. Iran sees this being accomplished by a set of psychological operations, subtle in some cases, quite bold in others, but all adjusting to shifts in attitudes in Iran. Iranian discourse includes a listing of imputed approaches: exploiting tribal and national differences in Iran, promoting "decadent" Western culture, or fostering civil disobedience in student gatherings, often through Persian-speaking radio-television channels developed abroad that reach into Iran by satellite.

In this reigning theology of the soft war, Iran considered that there was a litany of substantive elements that make up the Western talking points. These included a) inculcating the idea that Iran's nuclear technology is not solely for peaceful purposes; b) generating a media atmosphere that reinforces the idea that Iran supports terrorism and, with that in mind, interferes in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere; c) presenting a "biased analysis" of the internal situation of Iran in terms of economics and politics; d) representing and promoting discontent concerning such subjects as human rights, women's rights, and "aggravation of trade and social exactions by some press and internal parties of Iran"; e) downgrading government implementation of policies, indicating, for example, that "performance of some plans . . . limits women's freedom and rights"; and f) emphasizing confrontation among the heads of the Islamic system of governance and repeating and inculcating ideas that Iran's governance is best represented by conflicts over power in the Islamic Republic and which group will be victorious or defeated. Iranian discourse not only distinguishes soft war from soft power, it further distinguishes the concept from its hard counterpart. The differences that are reiterated include that the range of "cultural NATO" is the thought, idea, and culture of nations, while the range of military NATO is the geographic borders of specific

countries. The policy of cultural NATO is to “obtain the nation’s beliefs and trusts, but the purpose of military attack is to occupy the land and obtain the main economic resources and centers.” In a military conflict, the damages and losses are tangible and observable, but in the cultural NATO, “damages and destructions are not tangible and they are not reconstructed easily.” In a conventional war, “the human losses especially in the front of holy defense under the title of martyrdom are valuable and permanent,” while in a soft war, it is minds and sentiments that are damaged (ibid.).

### **Techniques of Attack in a Soft War**

The Iranian conception of a soft war thus calls for complex machinery of attack—presumably, the functioning of members of cultural NATO, but falling to its primary members. Only with such a machinery could the methods be undertaken, machinery for identifying the signal values of a society, creating a strategy for undermining them and having that strategy penetrate various levels of Iranian society, and doing so in such a way as to subvert public trust and create instability. The construction of the soft war imputes to the United States and the West a sophisticated and effective arsenal. Officials have recounted what weapons it considers Washington and others to have been deploying: foreign manipulation of civil society through a variety of subsidies and inducements, “cultural invasion,” use of psychological operations, deployment of international broadcasting, and intervention in regulation of content on the Internet (circumvention). For example, a major preoccupation of Iran, as it describes the soft war, is support by the U.S. government and European counterparts of civil society in Iran. Since 1979, the Islamic Republic characterized many internal dissenters as “proxies of the United States and its allies, working to weaken the political system” (Adelkhah, 2010). This preoccupation, the Iranian government has claimed, has escalated in recent years, leading to systematic charges of links between U.S. civil society groups, primarily NGOs, and individuals and counterparts in Iran. Iran authorities arrested Western-based scholars, like Ramin Jahanbaglou and Haleh Esfandiari, when visiting Iran, on suspicion of their assistance of Washington-based think tanks and human rights groups (ibid.).

In 2010, authorities in Iran labeled 60 international groups and media organizations as “Soft War agents” and forbade Iranians from working with or receiving aid from the proscribed organizations. These included think tanks, universities, and broadcasting organizations identified as being part of a concerted effort to bring down the state’s Islamic system. The contact ban was articulated as a response to what was described as the systematic undermining of the Islamic system. As Iran’s government saw it, Western-sponsored individuals and groups were reaching out to influential “special groups,” including experts, artists, and academics, under the cover of cultural and scientific exchanges. The BBC quoted one official as saying that “Our revolution has become a target to be overthrown by the intelligence services of some countries, particularly America and Britain, and they have established soft invasion and overthrow strategies against the Islamic republic of Iran,” he said. “They have allocated extraordinary formal budgets to fulfill this aim” (Tait, 2010a).

A now rather old, but lingering focal point for Iranian attacks on U.S. support for Iranian civil society (and a mode of locating U.S. articulation of its purposes) was the controversial Iran Democracy Fund (IDF; see De Vries, 2011). The IDF was established in 2006 during the George W. Bush administration as part of an approach to regime change in Iran. The IDF funded a variety of organizations



that could have been seen as either strongly aggressive in promoting human rights or, as Iran saw it, under the cover of mild civil society support, providing guidance and training to support an impetus for regime change. Congress approved \$66 million of a \$75 million administration request in 2006. The majority of IDF funding went toward Radio Farda and Voice of America Persian. The National Iranian American Council (NIAC), in evaluating the funding patterns, wrote that "the controversial part was the \$20 million provided to MEPI [Middle East Partnership Initiative] for 'democracy programs in Iran'" (Blout, 2008). In 2008, Congress stated a basis for justifying the expenditure, focusing not on Iran and its internal politics, but rather, on Iran's role in the region. The Congressional statement recommended that the State Department "use an unspecified amount 'to support groups, organizations, and individuals in the Middle East who adhere to democratic principles and who may counter in a non-violent manner the meddling of Iran in the domestic political affairs of neighboring countries'" (ibid.).

The incoming Obama administration changed emphasis, though not necessarily in ways that would detract, materially, from Iran's perception of there being a "soft war" agenda. In 2008, the Bush administration had requested \$65 million for the IDF for the 2009 fiscal year. The Obama administration, however, directed only \$25 million and changed the nature of the recipient. A Near East Regional Democracy Fund (NERD) was created. This new entity was initially criticized by proponents of regime change as insufficiently directed to achieve the desired level of engagement with Iran's civil society.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, NERD was awarded \$40 million, \$10 million of which was earmarked for "internet access and freedom" (De Vries, 2011).

The change in name—from IDF to NERD—resulted in part from the concerns articulated by prominent Iranian-American groups that the U.S. approach was too explicit and counterproductive. After 2008, the arguments for terminating the IDF had intensified (Kalbasi, 2009). Indeed, in 2008, a letter had been sent to the administration by distinguished Iranian diaspora representatives seeking that the fund be closed down. According to one blogger,

The Iranian democracy fund was initiated by the Bush administration in an effort to topple the clerical regime in Tehran by financing Iranian NGOs. But the fund only hindered the actions of Iranian NGOs as they were now accused of working to overthrow the government with the help of the United States. (Zubairy, 2009)

Trita Parsi, founder and president of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC) said, "the money has made all Iranian NGOs targets and put them at great risk. While the Iranian government has not needed a pretext to harass its own population, it would behoove Congress not to provide it with one" (quoted in De Vries, 2011).

Opponents of the IDF pointed to one of its beneficiaries, the Iranian Human Rights Documentation Center (IHRDC), a nonprofit which received the majority of its funding between its

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<sup>3</sup> Writing in *Middle East Forum*, Ilan Berman suggests that NERD "lacks a clear direction or mandate" (<http://www.meforum.org/2685/struggle-for-iran-soul>). See also <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3114> and <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704224004574489772874564430.html>

founding in 2004 and 2009, \$3 million, from the State Department. In 2005, according to these critics of the IDF, the IHRDC organized a seminar in Dubai. Though it was advertised as a human rights seminar, it was believed by Iran that the aim was to train Iran-based human rights defenders on how to overthrow the Iranian regime through nonviolent means. One participant later told *The New York Times*, "We were certain that we would have trouble once we went back to Tehran. This was like a James Bond camp for revolutionaries" (Azimi, 2007). In a taste of what was to come, several of the participants were subsequently arrested in Iran. The BBC reported that they "bitterly complain[ed] that the Human Rights Documentation Center knowingly put them under immense risk by luring them to Dubai—a hub for Iranian intelligence services—under false pretenses" (Kalbasi, 2009).

In terms of the tools of soft war, another listed by Iranian officials was the augmented use of those international broadcasters sponsored primarily by the United States and the United Kingdom, and what Iran saw as a beefing up of their hours and efforts with the specific aim of sharpening their effectiveness. From Iran's perspective, these broadcasts were yet another mode of reinforcing the narratives I have already described; narratives that, for the Iranian authorities, seemed designed to undermine legitimacy and foster a narrative of dissent. Among the many foreign government-sponsored broadcasters, Radio Farda, Voice of America Persian, and BBC Persian were the most important.<sup>4</sup> In Iran's analysis, the intensification of international broadcasting directed at its population was somewhat more comprehensive, and therefore more sinister, than what usually occurs as the ordinary extension of "soft power."

A useful example of Iranian media analysis of BBC Persian from a strategic perspective was a panel discussion among three Iranian media experts held in Tehran in August 2009.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Hesamoddin Ashena, a professor at Imam Sadeq University, provided a context for Iranian analysis. According to Professor Ashena:

[W]hat happened with the launching of the BBC [Persian] was that it provided a type of television that did not exist in Iran. We had not seen it with that quality before. It had been precisely planned to fill the vacuums in our media. In the areas where we had some limitations, they tried to fill those vacuums. Finally, we get to the election time. Here, I am only referring to the white propaganda. If we compare the performance of the television of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the performance of the BBC's Persian Television on the eve of the election we can learn many valuable lessons. . . . The first point to bear in mind is that in practice the BBC Persian did not tell its audiences anything special on the election day. In other words, up to five o'clock in the afternoon it did not say anything to its viewers about the vast number of people who took part in the voting. . . . [F]rom five o'clock in the afternoon for 30 hours [as published] it had a live programme, and hour by hour, minute by minute and moment by moment it tried to maintain its contacts with Iranian viewers inside and outside the country. It provided graphics about people's votes on television and it tried to tell the people and its viewers

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, Al Jazeera is seen as part of a foreign conspiracy, as are private external satellite services that are beamed into Iran.

that the situation was not normal. They used the very simple but very effective technique of showing figures by means of graphics. When you were looking at the clock you could see that from one hour to the next the number of votes increased, but there was no change in the method of the votes [as published]. It was made clear that this was unnatural. (BBC, 2009a)

Ashena's analysis was in terms of three forms of propaganda—black, grey, and white—and this first stage was white:

They say that white propaganda is a form of propaganda when both the source of the message and the message itself are quite clear. In the case of the grey propaganda they say that the source of the message is clear but there is some ambiguity about the message. In the case of the black propaganda they say that this form of propaganda has neither a clear source nor a clear and definite message. (ibid.)

A shift to grey occurred, Ashena contended, when BBC Persia, compensating for not having reporters in Iran, represented that it was calling and directly using voices from Iran:

The second thing it did was to contact the people inside the country, or showing [pretending] that it was contacting the people inside the country. We can never prove whether those contacts were real or unreal. . . . [T]hey have filled the vacuum of not having reporters in Iran. They decided to go towards the direction of having a large number of reporters who were completely our citizens [by means of telephone contacts]. Indeed, they wish to say that they have even eliminated the small degree of bias that their reporters could have had if they were reporting directly from Iran. Whatever you hear now is the voice of the Iranian people themselves. This is the height of the BBC's professional work and the height of its mischief [sheytanat]. (ibid.)

Black propaganda occurred mostly, according to Ashena, through the use of the Internet. These were e-mails that purported to be educational:

[S]ay about how you should safeguard your security, and how you should violate other people's security. The latest announcements and messages about something that is now known outside Iran as the Green Movement, and something that in the name of the Green Movement has really entered the phase of a color [coded] revolution. (ibid.)

These are black propaganda because "nobody knows where they come from. Nobody knows where and by whom they are being organized." But "if you are within that circle whatever you hear you will regard it as divine revolution. It is in this circle that they will teach everybody who is that circle how to say their Friday prayers" (ibid.).

Iran's perspective on the international broadcasters was also set forth (discussion of international broadcasting is ubiquitous) in a 2009 book published by the Bureau of Media Studies and Planning at Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. It claimed, referring to Radio Farda, that, "The most significant task of the media hostile to the Islamic republic is creating a rift between the [Iranian] regime and its government" (Tait, 2010b). Masoud Mohammadi, the book's author, considered that the international broadcasters had consciously prefabricated hostile and critical post-2009 election coverage.

Radio Farda and other Persian-language media based outside Iran, in his view, preplanned their coverage and coordinated with the mass demonstrations that greeted President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory; they knew beforehand, Mohammadi argued, that he would be accused of fraud. "Months before Iran's 10th presidential elections in June 2009, the directors of such networks had planned to use this opportunity to promote the project of creating instability in the country" (ibid.). Surveying output, Mohammadi sought to demonstrate that the bias of the report was to over-report those most noted for dramatic change and the encouragement of popular dissent. Radio Farda interviewed the Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi 118 times over an unspecified two-year period. Journalists Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and Issa Saharkhiz were interviewed 149 times and 106 times, respectively, over the same period. The point here is not the accuracy of the claim, but the nature of the Iranian perception.

Government-sponsored or -funded services from the West were not the only presumed participants in the soft war. There were the many private channels targeting Iran from the Iranian diaspora and those channels organized by relatives of the Shah, as well as channels deemed to be financed not only by private funds, but by agencies of the U.S. government. And there is Farsi1, a satellite entertainment channel broadcasting from Dubai that became immensely popular, and, because of its popularity and emphasis on appealing programming, is said to be changing attitudes among the public (Autella, 2010). Farsi1 is jointly owned by the MOBY Group<sup>6</sup> and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. From the battlefield of the soft war, it matters less what Farsi1 conceives of its own political motives, and more what Iran imputes them to be. The popularity of Farsi1, tied up with anxiety over satellite television in general, was the subject of much excoriation among Iranian authorities, with Mohammad Taghi Rahbar, head of the clerical faction in the Iranian parliament, accusing Farsi1 of airing content that "seeks to destroy the chastity and morals of families and encourage young Iranians to have sex and drink alcohol" (Namazikhah, 2010). Magazines have devoted entire issues to disparaging Farsi1's purported ulterior motives (Erdbrink, 2010), while others have blamed the channel for 15% of the divorces across Iran (*Jahan News*, 2011). In late November, 2010, the Farsi1 website itself was hacked by Iran's Cyber Army, who posted a warning to the "allies of Zionism" that "dreams of destroying the foundation of the family will lead straight to the graveyard," and earlier in the year, authorities attempted to jam the satellite used by the channel (Filkins, 2010). In May 2010, the strategic studies center of the extraordinarily named Expediency Discernment Council convened a meeting to look into the "covert aims" of Persian-language satellite TV directed from abroad, and Farsi1 in particular. Speakers at the meeting noted the "extraordinary welcome" these TV stations had received from viewers in Iran. Many media experts became highly critical of the state-run national station, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), for making programs so unappealing to Iranian audiences that it drove them into the arms of Farsi1 (*Aftab News*, 2011).

### **The Islamic Republic's Response to Soft War**

I have sought to provide some insight into how a Western communications strategy is perceived in a target society. I have also tried to show how the adoption of the term "soft war" can be seen as a

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<sup>6</sup> Privately-owned MOBY Group was founded by the Mohseni family in 2003. It is partly owned by News Corporation.

justification for Iran considering itself on an information-related battle footing. A next step is to understand how a society that deems itself subject to an aggressive soft war fashions a responsive strategy or counter-strategy. Iran can provide a case study of this, as well. The concept of a "soft war" in which Iran is the target is so central to Iran's current identity, and has become such an integral part of Iran's strategic defense planning, that it has given rise to an elaborate governmental response, with sizeable funding and the creation of a soft war cabinet (Adelkhah, 2010). Considering itself at war means the allocation of a large budget; the formation of a strategy; and a bureaucracy of conflict, innovation, and experimentation.

### **Bureaucracy of Response**

Having conceptualized a large-scale ongoing "soft war" attack, including the concept of a cultural NATO, it is predictable that the Islamic Republic would take on its own "war footing" and organize for a projected counter-strategy (beyond the much-recognized processes of censorship and control of the press and broadcasting). The shift from a reaction to "soft power" to reacting to a perceived "soft war" should be, and was, reflected in the bureaucracy or operational aspects of response at an institutional level by the Islamic Republic. In its own articulation of this response, the Iranian discourse provides that:

[I]n order to confront the Soft War, having strategy is more important than having the power. . . . [I]t is necessary that the role of each governmental institution is determined and explicated and capability of the security organizations is reinforced in both internal and international arenas. (IDO, 2010)

One central example is Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, which has established a special military force, a "Unit of the Soft War" (Setad-e Jang-e Narm). This unit, largely made up of members of the Basij-e Mostaz'afin (or Basij, the state militia which is subordinate to the Revolutionary Guards), would, on behalf of the military, be responsible for soft operations, including some cultural activities and "psychological operations" (Adelkhah, 2010). The unit has the ostensible objective of confusing and subsequently disrupting foreign-organized soft attacks, perhaps by jamming and other similar techniques. According to Adelkhah's May 2010 report for the Jamestown Foundation, the Iranian Majlis (parliament) ratified a bill designating the use of IRR1,212,280,000,000 (US\$100 million) for "soft" programs, some of which has been set aside for the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council to produce pro-government art and film. Accordingly, provincial councils around the country were allocated a "cultural budget" for setting up "Soft War camps." To foster understanding and improve strategy, conferences and instructional programs were set up to produce analysis and intelligence on how the regime could effectively advance its Internet and similar activities in the cultural and educational domains.

It is also significant to focus on the reorganization or innovation in the broadcast media sphere. The objective here was not merely to advance the state ideology, but to expand various media outlets that could rival and "neutralize the effect of anti-Islamic Republic media" (Press TV, 2009). The 2007 launching of Press TV, an English-language 24-hour news channel, set the stage for the rise of a new type of state media competing on a global scale with Sunni-Arab channels like Al-Arabiya, and Western channels like CNN and BBC. In November 2009, the IRGC announced its latest plan to begin a new press agency called

Atlas, modeled on international news agencies like Al-Jazeera. Shortly afterward, Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi announced the inauguration of a new Iranian-designed satellite called Toloo, which will expand Iran's global media capacities along with its military defense capabilities. As Former IGRC Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi put it using a military metaphor, "We can block the enemy's cultural onslaught by using our own culture" (Press TV, 2010). Nima Adelhah has written that:

Since one of the main Soft War battlefields is in the educational domain, an attempt is being made to reacquaint the young with the ideals of the revolution. . . . The institutionalization of various Basij centers in elementary schools is reminiscent of the early revolutionary years of the 1980s, when the newly established Islamic Republic sought to instill the new ideology among the younger population. . . . In many ways, the thrust of the new ideological campaign can be described as a form of "cultural revolution" that includes the involvement of artists, intellectuals and poets as agents of "truth" who can "distribute" (or propagate) such ideals through cultural means. (Adelhah, 2010)

### **Creating a Halal Internet**

Reza Marashi (2011), among others, has written about the Islamic Republic's plans to create a "halal Internet." He recognizes the government's long-term vision as reinforcing and invigorating a peculiarly Iranian Islamic culture that is pervasive, and as ensuring that the Internet affirmatively contributes to (and does not detract from) that idea of the role of media:

Iranian decision-makers seek to increasingly quarantine their population by dividing this international system into a fragmented national network. And while foreign-inspired virus attacks command the attention of policymakers and pundits in the West, the Islamic Republic's long-term strategy is slowly succeeding. (ibid.)

Marashi outlines the strategy as follows: First, the Islamic Republic controls network infrastructure in Iran—"literally the 'plumbing' that facilitates the existence of internet, mobile, and landline communication networks" (ibid.). Second, the government controls network carriers—mobile phone operators, Internet service providers, global telecom carriers, and Iranian telecom companies that hook all the "plumbing" together to physically connect communication networks. The aspiration is to use control of these two elements (infrastructure and network carriers) for enhanced filtering and surveillance. Increasing technological capacity is one of the Islamic Republic's "defense" requirements for a sustained conflict. Because of sanctions, Iran has invested in indigenous filtering technology, *Separ*, that it has continuously refined, while frequently changing its strategy for blocking Internet access.

In addition to technological strategies, the government has dedicated manpower and resources toward developing a sophisticated organization to implement its larger designs to control the flow of information both entering and exiting Iran. Well-funded and with access to a huge manpower pool, the Iranian Cyber Army (ICA) has used standard and innovative hacking techniques to disrupt the political opposition. This was demonstrated when the ICA conducted social engineering attacks against prominent

reformist websites (BBC, 2009b). According to Marashi (2011), through such sophisticated means as manipulating network service companies to perform actions or divulge information (e.g., obtaining passwords via forged identities), the ICA has been able to redirect Web traffic to mirror sites that are often identical in appearance, and subsequently collect personal information (logins, passwords, etc.) entered into these mirror sites in order to hack into additional sites (e-mail, IM, data storage, etc.). An example is the ICA's hacking of Azerbaijan's state TV website. Iranian-Azerbaijani relations have been deteriorating over the years, exacerbated by the recent Iranian accusations of Azerbaijani collusion with Israel in their alleged connection to the assassinations of Iranian scientists and border disputes over oil fields.

Multiple reports indicate that, since 2009, Iran has been working to upgrade its existing cyber war capabilities. Marashi contends that its latest technology seeks to check each information packet that is sent and received via the Internet (ibid.). If successful, this would enable the government to block traditional circumvention mechanisms (such as VPNs) created to bypass filtering. The government is also reportedly increasing "requests" that Iranian companies relocate websites to domestic data centers, and has already created the first version of its national e-mail service. Although not enjoying widespread use among Iranians now, producing indigenous search engines and e-mail accounts—tools that allow the Internet to function—would also help the government to control the physical infrastructure of the Internet itself. By building filtration mechanisms into the infrastructure, the government will not only increase its control over the flow of information within Iran, but also information coming in and out.

### **Self-Presentation at Home in the Soft War**

The Islamic Republic, in terms of an affirmative information approach, expands state influence over cyberspace and other media outlets to spread pro-government propaganda (Farivar, 2011; Flock, 2011; Fowler, 2009). In its review of modes of shoring up internal defense by bolstering public satisfaction, these are some of the techniques cited in Iranian discourse: 1) improve the performance of the deprived and frontier territories' development in various dimensions, such as poverty, insecurity, inflation, unemployment, or traffic; 2) expand civil freedoms in the framework of the Constitution, along with the necessary awareness in order to prevent the possible threats; 3) reinforce cultural and educational substructures; 4) exercise control and supervision of nongovernmental organizations; 5) increase security organizations' capacities in the country to deal with the nature of soft threats; 6) make the administrative system of the country more effective; and 7) employ the elites in governmental and political institutions with the purpose of preventing their attraction by antagonists of the system (IDO, 2010).

The Supreme Leader has taken an explicit, high-profile interest in institutional responses to the "Soft War." He is depicted as exhorting "the students, professors of universities and artists . . . to foil the threats of the enemy," an enemy in this Soft War using a particular method—"Showing the future dark"—as a way of inculcating fear, disturbing the populace, and exhausting the "main forces" through the creation of doubt and hesitation in their principles and accomplishments. In these reports, the Supreme Leader is quoted as addressing the faculty at universities, for example: "You should give the student hope so that they do not see the great accomplishments of the country as worthless and valueless." The

Supreme Leader has emphasized the student's duty as "the young officers" and "the insider commanders of [the] soft front," (ibid.).

### **Soft War Tactics: Offensive Measures**

A related tactical feature of Iran's soft war deals with offensive, as opposed to defensive, measures. Cyber warfare is key to undermining the flow of information in favor of the United States. Tehran views social sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, as elements of a threat to the Islamic Republic, particularly in the way rumors are spread online to "stir up" discord within Iran (Adelkhah, 2010). Along with reactive measures, such as filtering and blocking access to various sites, Iran's response is also one of proactive management of the flow of information. This includes establishing a "national data center," supervising the activities of dissidents supported by the United States, and perhaps used to spread rumors in favor of the regime.

In the arts, there is also a coordination effort: Iran has ambitious goals in the cultural area. Under one development plan, "all state-run cultural organizations and media particularly Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting (IRIB)" and Islamic Propagation Organizations are urged "to produce works in cyberspace, organize and strengthen such . . . space" (*Khabar Online*, 2011). Claiming that the soft war cannot be fought through a "political approach," alone, Ayatollah Khamenei called on Iranian artists to present "the truth" through a "full-fledged and influential artistic manner" (*Payvand Iran News*, 2009), with truth resting in the revolution's narrative of legitimacy.

Iran's offense is not only internal—toward the population within its own borders. It obviously seeks to influence global public opinion, and to control the narrative in Europe, the region, and critical areas where general attitudes can affect international policy making (such as at the UN). Among the instruments for this are large-scale events, such as the 2012 meeting of Non-Aligned Movement, where Iran has sought opportunities to rebrand itself as friendly mentor to developing nations and a high-profile platform from which to scoff at the supposed effects of economic sanctions. In terms of affecting satellite content, there is Iran's building up of Press TV and its global broadcasts (Press TV, 2012; Press TV n.d.). Iran intimidates and harasses Persian-language reporters working for international media organizations by hacking their e-mail accounts, trumping up accusations of serious crimes at home, and detaining family members still in Iran, in an effort to force resignations (BBC, 2012). It affects Iranian nationals' contributions to international conferences through control of visas, and, from time to time, though denouncing the motives of conveners (Iran Media Program, 2012).

### **Strategic Censorship and Affirmative Production**

The Iran experience of, and response to, its perception of a soft war leads to another point of analysis: a shift in strategic understanding of government steps grouped under the heading of censorship. Censorship is usually cast in terms of a series of actions, often arbitrary, to deny basic rights to express oneself, rights promised under international norms. Censorship is infrequently analyzed as a strategic response or reaction to what are deemed aggressive interventions that affect information flows. Censorship in this theater of conflict—in the mindset of the leadership of the Islamic Republic—becomes a



component of a wholesale therapeutic effort to reorient the mix of images and correct against unjustifiable intrusions. Censorship is one arm of a large-scale reinforcing of a specific narrative. Censorship constitutes the negative, information-canceling side. But an affirmative aspect would be spreading the state ideology in various cultural and public institutions. In what might be called a "total soft war," all aspects of the system of understanding and indoctrination are in play (the arts, the media, and the educational system all can be deemed a part of the battlefield) with an effort to "reacquaint the young with the ideals of the revolution" (Adelkhah, 2010).

The strategy of information management includes far more than control, and must extend to production. As the Basji official Naini put it:

In order to confront the Soft War, the main strategy is to increase the soft power of the system. In other words, this battlefield requires its own tools and weapons. Its model of operation is also different. We must increase our capabilities in the field of Soft War. . . . We should also have a clear strategy and programme for confronting it. In order to fight against a Soft War we need special methods and models and we must accept the special requirements of this battle too. . . . We must increase our media, cultural and propaganda power, and our ability to persuade others, to engage in producing movements and strengthening our defensive psychological operations. We must define the field of play in the Soft War, and we must get out of our present defensive mood. We must make good use of media capabilities and cyber opportunities. We must become productive and must produce new ideas. We must influence public opinion and different groups, and must shape movements. (ibid.)

### **Conclusions**

Does soft war warrant a special category of analysis, differentiated from soft power on the one hand, and hard war on the other? A belief in the idea of soft war affects conceptions of information space in a target society. Its invocation shapes governmental mobilization, bureaucratic responses, and defensive and offensive measures. Being subject to a soft war—or arguing that one's society is such a target—becomes a justification, warranted or not, for controls over patterns of production, reception, and diffusion of speech in society. Article 19 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights assures the individual's right to receive and impart information regardless of frontiers. But Article 19 contains a complex world of exceptions, and regulation of a soft war could emerge as a category for reverse intervention. The closer one gets to the practice of actual conflict—the conduct of war—the less the parties involved consider international norms that govern persuasive efforts, limited though those may be. Cyberwar becomes a concurrent or next stage. Media systems are disrupted. Technical devices—circumvention tools and others—are introduced to alter, purposely, the capacity of the state to manage information flows internally. Soft war is not primarily ameliorative. It could be categorized as a potential threat to national integrity, a ground for exception in the European Convention, or to national security.

In this essay, I have sought, as mentioned, to see "strategic communications" not from the perspective of the progenitor, but from the perspective of the receiver. This is not because one

perspective is more accurate than the other, but because it is the dynamic of concurrent perceptions that govern actions. The Iranian example provides an example of the complex operation of the model of the market for loyalties. Iran seeks, through the use of law, force, technology, and subsidy, to maintain a cartel of acceptable purveyors in its markets for allegiances. Elements of the government, through a variety of techniques, limit the capacity of competitors to enter. Foreign governments, sometimes working with nongovernmental organizations and others, similarly use law, technology, and subsidy to seek to break the cartel—to find space for their own favored entities to be able to reach Iranian audiences. Nor is this done wholly through broadcast media and other elements of the press. The existence of the cartel and efforts to break it take the shape, as we have seen, of competing efforts to create or limit a civil society and censor or produce (but always affect) artistic product that helps to shape public attitudes, and of efforts to alter the educational system or the mix and strength of religious figures. The soft war in Iran is more than a perception of actions and a discourse of counter-moves. It is also a study in governmental organization—both on the Iranian side and, potentially, on the side of its counterpart in the sending state or states.

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