



The Missing Lever: Information Activities against Iran

By Michael Eisenstadt

Iran's recent decisions on the nuclear front—to reject offers to further process its low-enriched uranium abroad, to rebuff United Nations demands to halt ongoing enrichment activities, and to further enrich its stockpile of low-enriched uranium to 20 percent—make new multilateral sanctions on the Islamic Republic a near certainty. Broad international support is lacking, however, for the type of sanctions that could have a decisive effect on Iranian decisionmaking. Accordingly, the United States must find ways to sharpen the impact of existing and new sanctions while using heretofore unexploited sources of leverage over Tehran.

Perhaps the most promising option is a strategic communication campaign—one that employs every means at the U.S. government's disposal to play into the regime's paranoia, its concerns about the domestic opposition's strength and staying power, and latent and overt fissures both within the regime and between the regime and the people.¹ The goal would be to create a situation in which

Tehran feels compelled to mitigate external pressures generated by new sanctions and a strategic communication campaign while it manages the challenges posed by its domestic opposition.²

U.S. policymakers may doubt the efficacy of a policy that relies on less tangible sources of leverage such as information activities. Yet experience in Iran and elsewhere shows that such approaches can succeed.

1. No generally accepted U.S. government definition for “strategic communication” exists, though the term typically describes the systematic use of words, actions, and images to influence the behavior of a specific target audience or actor. Other informational activities, such as public diplomacy (State Department) and information operations (Defense Department), tend to fall under the rubric of strategic communication. In the past, phrases such as “psychological warfare” and “strategic influence operations” were used to convey (perhaps more precisely) the term's meaning as used in this paper, though both of those formulations have fallen out of favor. See National Security Council Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Policy Coordinating Committee, *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication* (June 2007); Dennis Murphy, *The Trouble with Strategic Communication*, U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, vol. 2-08 (January 2008); Joint Forces Command Joint Warfighting Center, *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication* (September 1, 2008); and Michael G. Mullen, “Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 55 (4th quarter 2009), pp. 2–4.

The Decisive Role of Soft Power

The use of words, actions, and emotive images as part of a sustained campaign to shape the psychological environment in Iran is the greatest untapped source of U.S. leverage over the Islamic Republic. In assessing Iran's ability to harm American interests, U.S. policymakers tend to focus on the regime's hard power: its unconventional warfare and terrorism capabilities, as manifested

2. Ray Takeyh, “On the Streets of Tehran, an Opportunity for Obama,” *Washington Post*, December 31, 2009, A17.

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by the Qods Force and Hizballah; its sea denial capabilities (small boats, mines, and anti-shipping missiles); and its rocket/missile and nuclear weapons programs. They tend to overlook the key role that soft power—especially propaganda and psychological warfare—plays in Iran’s defense and foreign policies. They also tend to overlook Tehran’s significant vulnerabilities in this area; after all, a country whose political culture is characterized by paranoia, rumormongering, and elaborate conspiracy theories should be particularly susceptible to information and psychological operations.

This oversight—stemming from divergent assumptions about the importance of the psychological dimension in statecraft and strategy—is striking given Tehran’s reliance on information activities to intimidate its enemies and enhance its standing among domestic and foreign supporters. Whereas the United States undertakes information and psychological operations to support its military operations, Iran frequently undertakes military activities (i.e., displays of force and surrogate terrorist operations) to support its propaganda and psychological warfare operations.³

Tehran’s fixation on alleged U.S. propaganda and psychological operations, as well as the amount of effort it invests in its own such activities, are proof of the importance it attaches to the informational instrument of national power. This is rooted in the belief (derived at least in part from the Quran) that the moral and psychological dimensions play a decisive role in human competition and conflict.⁴

The two weapons the regime fears most are information that challenges its official propaganda and ideology, and cultural products that threaten to corrupt Iranian society (which it sees as part of a foreign “cultural invasion”). The

reason is not difficult to discern. Iran enjoys significant geographic depth, which is a powerful deterrent against a military invasion; the country’s heavily populated central plateau consists of a series of rugged, easily defended mountain ranges.⁵ By contrast, each and every citizen is potentially exposed to subversive messages that enter the country through the internet, radio, and satellite television.

This vulnerability is compounded by the fact that many Iranians view themselves as part of the West and are attracted to aspects of Western popular culture that the regime both disdains and fears. As Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said in a 2003 address on state television, “Iran’s enemies” do not need “artillery, guns, and so forth” as much as they need “to spread cultural values that lead to moral corruption.” He continued:

They have said this many times. I recently read in the news that a senior official in an important American political center said: ‘Instead of bombs, send them mini-skirts.’ He is right. If they arouse sexual desires in any given country, if they spread unrestrained mixing of men and women, if they lead youth to behavior to which they are naturally inclined by instincts, there will no longer be any need for artillery and guns against that nation.⁶

Tehran’s belief in the decisive nature of the psychological dimension is central to its doctrine of “resistance,” which likewise underpins Hamas and Hizballah’s concept of armed struggle with Israel. This doctrine rests on the assumption that one achieves victory by demoralizing one’s enemies—not by seizing enemy terrain or winning military victories (as traditionally understood), but by terrorizing enemy civilians, bleeding enemy armies, and denying the enemy battlefield victories.⁷

This belief also informs the regime’s approach to the domestic opposition. *Newsweek* correspondent Maziar Bahari, in discussing how he was detained and tortured by Iranian authorities after the June 2009 presidential election, offered a unique insight into this mindset:

3. In this regard, Tehran’s approach is similar to that of jihadist groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. See Thomas Elkjer Nissen, *The Taliban’s Information Warfare: A Comparative Analysis of NATO Information Operations (Info Ops) and Taliban Information Activities*, Royal Danish Defence College Brief (January 2008), p. 7.

4. For example, Surat al-Anfal, verse 65, says: “O Prophet! Rouse the believers, to the fight. If there are twenty amongst you, patient and persevering, they will vanquish two hundred; if a hundred, they will vanquish a thousand of the unbelievers: for these are a people without understanding.” Cited in Fariborz Haghshenass, *Iran’s Asymmetric Naval Warfare*, Policy Focus no. 87 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008), pp. 10–11, <http://washingtongroup.org/templateC04.php?CID=298>.

5. Patrick Clawson and Michael Rubin, *Eternal Iran: Continuity and Chaos* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 6–7, 9.

6. Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008), p. 17.

7. Ehud Yaari, “The Muqawama Doctrine,” *Jerusalem Report*, November 13, 2006.

I once interviewed a former Islamic guerrilla who had become a government minister. The problem with the shah's secret police, he said, was that they thought they could break a prisoner's will through physical pressure, but that often just hardened the victim's resolve. 'What our brothers after the revolution have masterminded is how to break a man's soul without using much violence against his body.'⁸

All of these factors help explain Tehran's relentless efforts to "spin" events, to humiliate enemies through jibes and taunts, and to undermine U.S. influence through public diplomacy and media operations. They also underlie the constant ideological and religious indoctrination of Iran's security organs, universities, and general population, which the regime views as necessary in order to immunize them against corrosive foreign cultural influences, subversive political messages, and purported U.S. psychological warfare activities.⁹

Many Washington-based decisionmakers do not sufficiently appreciate the importance of such factors, though senior U.S. military officers in Iraq and Afghanistan have learned, through hard experience, that information operations are crucial in the Middle Eastern milieu. They consider these operations to be one of their most potent counterinsurgency tools, and the most effective means of countering Iranian influence in Iraq and elsewhere.¹⁰

Can Information Activities Make Revolutions or Win Wars?

Drawing on its own historical record, the Iranian regime believes that propaganda and psychological operations are key to revolutionary movements and wars. In the shah's Iran, clandestinely distributed tape recordings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's sermons contributed to the success of the Islamic Revolution and the rise of Khomeini as its leader, while skillful propaganda spurred mass defections from the shah's

armed forces and discouraged many still loyal to the old order.

Similarly, during Hizballah's protracted guerrilla war against Israel in southern Lebanon (1982–2000), the Iranian client and surrogate carried out psychological operations that played a central role in undermining Israeli domestic support for the occupation, contributing to the May 2000 Israeli withdrawal.¹¹ Such operations also helped Hizballah convince many Lebanese and other Arabs that its summer 2006 war with Israel—a debacle that inflicted great hardships on many of the group's supporters—was in fact a "divine victory" (even though Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah once conceded that the war was a mistake).

More recently, dramatic cell phone videos of Iranian security forces rampaging against opposition protestors following the June 2009 election have badly tarnished the regime's image. Footage of the shooting death of Neda Agha Soltan during a June 20 protest and of the funeral of Sohrab Arabi, another young person killed by security personnel around the same time (the precise date of his death is unknown), have had a particularly powerful impact.

These lessons regarding the critical importance of psychological factors do not apply solely to Iran. A number of major events in U.S. military history can be attributed to dramatic shifts in the domestic and international psychological environment as well.

For example, while U.S. and Vietnamese forces repulsed the communist Tet Offensive of early 1968 and inflicted massive losses on Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops, televised images of combat in Saigon destroyed what remained of American domestic support for the war, marking a turning point in the conflict. Likewise, the April 2004 revelations of U.S. military abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison constituted a strategic setback from which the United States is still recovering.

Conversely, the success of "the surge" in Iraq was due in large part to the psychological impact of establishing a constant coalition presence throughout much of Baghdad and its environs. This presence helped lift the pall of fear that deterred the population from cooperating with U.S. and Iraqi security forces against al-Qaeda in Iraq; it

8. Maziar Bahari, "118 Days, 12 Hours, 54 Minutes," *Newsweek*, November 30, 2009.

9. See, for instance, Ali Alfoneh, *Indoctrination of the Revolutionary Guards*, Middle Eastern Outlook no. 2 (American Enterprise Institute, February 2009), p. 5.

10. Author interview with senior officers, Multi-National Corps–Iraq, Baghdad, October 2009. See also Ralph O. Baker, "The Decisive Weapon: A Brigade Combat Team Commander's Perspective on Information Operations," *Military Review* (May–June 2006), pp. 114–133.

11. Frederic W. Wehrey, "A Clash of Wills: Hizballah's Psychological Campaign against Israel in South Lebanon," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 53–74.

also contributed to the perception that momentum was shifting against the terrorists and insurgents.

Thus, it is a major error to dismiss the Iranian regime's spin, hyperbole, and propaganda as mere "bluster" (which it indeed sometimes is). The United States needs to take these efforts seriously, counter them, and exploit both the regime's major vulnerabilities and America's significant advantages in this area.

Obstacles to an Effective Information Campaign

In the past, Washington has used the informational instrument of national power in a sophisticated manner, but this capability has long since atrophied through disuse.¹² Despite progress on this front since the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government still faces significant bureaucratic, cultural, and political obstacles. In particular, its information activities have long been hindered by skepticism regarding their efficacy, differences over how they should be employed, concerns that covert or clandestine efforts could undermine the credibility of U.S. public diplomacy, and a cumbersome interagency process that often lacks coherence, flexibility, and responsiveness—three prerequisites to success in this domain.¹³

The U.S. government is also constrained in its ability to communicate with the Iranian people and ensure their access to accurate, timely news due to the uneven professional standards of Radio Farda and Voice of America (VOA) Persian television, including their reliance on outdated techniques and their often sluggish response to breaking news stories.¹⁴ Washington could mitigate

this problem by having officials give frequent interviews not only to Farda and VOA, but also to BBC Persian and various Persian-language blogs popular with the Iranian public, as well as to regionally popular Arabic-language stations that serve audiences targeted by Iranian propaganda.

Another problem is that U.S. government approaches to Iran tend to be more firmly grounded in American perceptions and political imperatives than in Iranian political and cultural realities, and thus fail to adequately account for Iranian perceptions. Tehran views America's media outlets, nongovernmental organizations, universities, cultural elites, and entertainment industry as part of a seamless web coordinated by the U.S. government. As a result, Washington is often held responsible for and credited with activities over which it has no control. U.S. information campaigns have rarely taken account of this fact or effectively grappled with its implications.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the Obama administration needs to become comfortable with the idea that exploiting Iran's internal fissures and other vulnerabilities is not only compatible with efforts to engage Tehran regarding its nuclear program but also perhaps essential to the success of such efforts.

Fears that a more aggressive informational policy would undermine diplomacy are misplaced. Tehran already believes that the United States is waging psychological warfare against it, so Washington has little to lose and much to gain by actually doing so.

President Obama can overcome these obstacles to an effective information campaign by sustained action on three fronts:

1. Removing bureaucratic obstacles to effective interagency cooperation;
2. Mobilizing all departments and agencies as well as all means at the government's disposal—overt, covert, and clandestine—on behalf of this effort;
3. Implementing quiet government action to ensure that the Iranian people can communicate with one another, keep abreast of developments inside their own country, and make their voices heard abroad.

In the long run, this last step may be the most important, given that the words and actions of Iranians will ultimately determine the prospects for the domestic opposition and

12. See Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006). See also Carl Bernstein, "The Holy Alliance," *Time*, February 24, 1992. Bernstein's article describes U.S. informational activities and its partnership with the Vatican in support of Poland's Solidarity labor movement in the 1980s.

13. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication* (Washington, DC: September 2004); Marshall V. Ecklund, "Strategic Communications: How to Make It Work?" *IO Sphere* (Fall 2005); Dennis M. Murphy and James F. White, "Propaganda: Can a Word Decide a War?" *Parameters* (Autumn 2007), pp. 15–27; Dennis M. Murphy, *The Trouble with Strategic Communications*, Issue Paper vol. 2-08 (U.S. Army Center for Strategic Leadership, January 2008); William M. Darley, *Distilling Strategic Communications*, Landpower Essay no. 08-3 (Association of the U.S. Army, Institute of Land Warfare, October 2008).

14. Mehdi Khalaji, *Through the Veil: The Role of Broadcasting in U.S. Public Diplomacy toward Iranians*, Policy Focus no. 68 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 2007), <http://washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=271>.

the future of Iran. Much of what the United States does as part of such a campaign should therefore be aimed at facilitating the opposition's informational activities.

Policy Recommendations: Enhancing U.S. Leverage

As mentioned previously, the Islamic Republic is unlikely to change its current policies unless it believes that meeting foreign nuclear demands is essential if it is to fend off external and domestic pressures that could threaten its survival. Accordingly, the goal of a strategic communication campaign should be to exploit the regime's paranoia, its concerns about the opposition's strength and durability, and its internal divisions to convince senior Iranian officials that their domestic and foreign policies have produced a backlash that imperils the regime's survival. Such a campaign should be guided by the following principles:

Keep engagement on the table while keeping the flame of resistance alive. The Obama administration's engagement policy has thrown Tehran off balance. It has denied the regime an external enemy that can be *credibly* blamed for the country's woes or depicted as a hostile threat requiring repressive internal security measures. For this reason, it is important that Washington keep engagement on the table while doing all it can to ensure that the opposition has breathing room—that is, the political space needed to demonstrate and organize, keep the regime off balance, and preserve the possibility of internal change that could dramatically and positively transform Middle Eastern politics and power relationships.

Toward this end, the United States should continue to support the people's right to demonstrate peacefully, and it should speak out against Tehran's human rights violations, while avoiding language that could raise unrealistic expectations or discredit the opposition in the eyes of still-uncommitted Iranians. Washington should also subtly link the protest movement with the Shiite moral imperative to fight tyranny and injustice, using the regime's language against it by defending the people's right to resist oppression and arrogance.

Further constrict the regime's freedom of action. Tehran has thus far avoided using all means at its disposal in dealing with the opposition, eschewing a Tiananmen

Square-like response in favor of a prolonged campaign of intimidation and demoralization. It apparently fears that the security forces might crack if ordered to use massive force. Moreover, in a society where martyrdom has a special religious resonance, large-scale bloodletting might spur mass displays of grief that could lead to even greater violence. The United States can take the following steps to further limit the regime's freedom of action:

- Feed the regime's anxieties about the security forces' reliability by, for example, publicizing reports of disquiet in the ranks over their repressive role.
- Condemn the show-trials of reformists.
- Publicize the cases of prominent regime victims.
- Quietly assist Iranian expatriate groups that disseminate internet videos depicting violence by the security forces.

Exacerbate tensions within the regime to hinder effective action. To increase tensions within the regime and the security forces, the United States should selectively declassify reports that describe how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is using its connections to gain control over the economy. These and similar steps could help intensify resentment among "have-nots" within the military and security forces regarding the IRGC's growing wealth and influence. Moreover, in the event of new sanctions on Iran's importation of refined petroleum products, Washington should launch an information campaign underscoring that the regime, not the United States or the international community, is responsible for the resultant hardships.

Any such strategic communication campaign must be carefully calibrated. The United States will need to strike a balance between several apparently contradictory desiderata by taking a more committed stance without confirming the regime's narrative of foreign intervention, by indirectly assisting the opposition without inadvertently encouraging its members to overplay their hand, and by carefully ratcheting up pressure on the regime without causing it to lash out domestically or abroad.

Publicly exert presidential leadership. President Obama has a crucial role to play in any information campaign. Just as past presidents used oratory to great

effect during the Cold War (e.g., John F. Kennedy’s “I am a Berliner” speech and Ronald Reagan’s impassioned challenge to “tear down this wall”), President Obama may have the power, through words and deeds, to alter the course of events in Iran.

Tailor messages to audiences and circumstances.

Several principles and tactics should inform the messages that President Obama, other U.S. officials, and government organizations deliver to the Iranian people:

- Differentiate between the regime and the people, and define the conflict over Iran’s policies as one between Tehran and the international community rather than Iran and “the West”—a formulation that feeds the regime’s “clash of civilizations” narrative.
- Meet taunts and jibes by President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad and Ayatollah Khamenei with expressions of ridicule and contempt that deflate the regime’s image and undermine the facade of self-confidence that it tries to project.
- Turn the regime’s rhetoric against it. When Khamenei brags about smashing America’s teeth, slapping its face, or giving it a black eye, President Obama should point out that the people of Iran are the only ones who have had their teeth smashed, faces slapped, or eyes blackened by the regime.
- Make unfavorable comparisons between the shah’s efforts to suppress the opposition in 1978–1979 and the Islamic Republic’s current efforts to do so, contributing to a perception of revolutionary inevitability.
- Emphasize how the regime’s words and actions sully Iran’s reputation in the eyes of the international community and are therefore an affront to the Iranian nation.
- Highlight the regime’s corruption and lack of accountability, which has resulted in the disappearance of tens of billions of dollars from government coffers and that, before the June 2009 elections, was one of the major grievances of Iranians against their government.
- Underscore how—at a time when most Iranians struggle to make a living—the regime is squandering

the people’s money on distant causes and organizations like Hizballah and Hamas that have only served to bring additional hardship and suffering to the peoples of the region. Further emphasize that these associations have transformed Iran into a pariah state and could someday drag it into a catastrophic war.

- Exploit Ahmadinezhad’s close identification with the regime’s nuclear program in order to delegitimize its efforts to create a nuclear weapons option. Portray it as an intrinsic part of Tehran’s efforts to block popular demands for change and maintain its grip on power by force, based on the reasoning that a nuclear Iran would be less vulnerable to international pressure regarding human rights.
- Address concerns that the United States would sell out the domestic opposition in return for a nuclear deal with the regime. Explain that a resolution to the nuclear standoff would be in the interests of the Iranian people because it would allow their country to become more fully integrated into the international community, while Washington would use regular contacts with Tehran to relentlessly press the regime on human rights.
- Highlight to audiences in Iraq, the wider Persian Gulf, the Levant, and Afghanistan that the Iranian people reject the regime’s version of Islam and model of governance. Moreover, popular Iraqi anger at Iran’s recent occupation of the Fakka oil field just over the border provides fertile ground for anti-Tehran messages in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.
- Raise constant questions about the regime’s stability, long-term viability, and reliability as a patron and partner, planting doubts among rejectionist groups and regimes throughout the region and beyond.

Not a day should go by that U.S. officials fail to hammer home these themes—using one medium or another—to target audiences in Iran and elsewhere.

Discredit Tehran’s narrative. Tehran has consistently attempted to portray the Islamic Republic as a rising power. Meanwhile, it depicts the United States as a spent force fighting a losing battle to keep Iran and the Islamic *umma* (community) weak by denying them

nuclear and other advanced technology. The United States should counter this narrative by highlighting the regime's fundamental weaknesses: namely, its lack of legitimacy and popular support, its failure to effectively develop the country's oil and gas sector (including that sector's rather poor prospects without massive foreign investment in the coming years), and its failure to diversify the economy or create meaningful employment opportunities for the more than 800,000 Iranians who graduate from college each year. Washington should also underscore, loudly and often, its willingness to help meet Iran's legitimate civilian technology needs if the regime addresses the international community's nuclear concerns.

Leverage private-sector activities. Private U.S. organizations and entities will have vastly more reach with certain Iranians than does the U.S. government. In many cases, these organizations already have missions that would serve U.S. purposes as well: news outlets want to get information out; universities want to encourage contact, scholarly exchanges, and debate; entertainment companies want to provide types of music and images that the people want but the regime despises. Washington could do a great deal to encourage and enhance such activities, such as facilitating travel by Iranian entertainers, students, and professors. It should also consult with private organizations to identify barriers and formulate practical solutions, including ways to tweak U.S. sanctions in order to facilitate people-to-people contacts.

Create synergy among diplomatic, military, and economic measures. It has been said that strategic communication is 80 percent actions and 20 percent words, and although actions may speak louder than words, words can amplify and sharpen the impact of actions. Thus, the United States should seek to create synergy between its words and actions toward Iran. For instance, there is potential synergy between the Department of the Treasury's activities (e.g., efforts to highlight the reputational risk that foreign companies incur by doing business with Tehran¹⁵) and a wider strategic communication campaign—one that emphasizes Tehran's human

rights violations and publicizes the role of various Iranian businesses as fronts for the IRGC's terrorism- and proliferation-related activities.

Deny Iran leverage. Finally, a U.S. information campaign should ensure that Iran does not derive leverage from its slowly advancing nuclear program, its growing missile and rocket forces, or its conventional military. This line of reasoning should be guided by several principles:

- *Don't score propaganda points for Tehran by hyping the threat.* U.S. officials should not exaggerate Iran's military capabilities and technological achievements in the nuclear arena—this only makes Tehran's threats more credible. Rather, it should dismiss or belittle Iranian capabilities when doing so does not undermine U.S. efforts to focus international attention on the threat. The challenge is to highlight the threat without hyping it.
- *Debunk false claims.* Washington should expose exaggerated Iranian claims of technological prowess. For example, U.S. officials could publicly unmask digitally altered photos and bogus military-maneuver videos disseminated by the regime, undermining the credibility of Iranian government spokesmen and deflating Tehran's "great power" pretensions.
- *Highlight the price paid by the Iranian people.* Typically, U.S. officials react to Iranian missile tests, military exercises, and acts of defiance with statements of concern. Instead, they should point out how such actions further isolate Iran and provide further proof to the Iranian people that the regime is squandering the nation's resources on programs intended to threaten its neighbors and keep it in power.
- *Reassure and deter.* As part of U.S. efforts to convince Iran that nuclear weapons will undermine rather than enhance its security, Washington must become more effective at integrating public affairs, information operations, and public diplomacy specialists into its regional activities. For instance, such specialists, at present, rarely if ever interact with missile defense experts (e.g., to debunk propaganda that magnifies Iranian military capabilities or to inform the citizens of allied states in the region of measures to counter Iranian missile and rocket capabilities).

15. Robin Wright, "Stuart Levey's War," *New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 2008.

This must change, particularly in cases in which the United States hopes to reassure allies and deter Tehran through its forward presence, military assistance, arms transfers, and efforts to create a regional missile defense architecture. Every action in the security arena should be evaluated in terms of its psychological impact in Tehran, as well as in the streets and capitals of other regional states.

Conclusion

The absence of a robust and sophisticated strategic communication campaign that can provide added leverage remains the principal shortcoming of U.S. policy toward Iran. There is no guarantee that such a

campaign—in tandem with various diplomatic, economic, and military measures—would cause Tehran to halt its nuclear enrichment program or abandon other problematic policies. But any U.S. strategy that lacks a strong informational component will almost certainly fail—whether it seeks to dissuade Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, deter the regime from cracking down on the domestic opposition, facilitate the opposition’s activities, or deter and contain a nuclear Iran. For this reason, the United States must strengthen its capabilities in the informational domain—the most undervalued component of America’s efforts to engage Iran, support the opposition, and counter the regime’s power and influence.

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