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Iran's Military Propaganda: Failures and Successes

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Brief Analysis

While propaganda plays a major role in forming local and international public opinion, it may also be deployed as a tool of “soft deterrence,” designed to tilt the calculations and military strategies of other countries in another country’s favor. Iran’s financial investment in its media presence, with dozens of satellite channels broadcasting in a number of languages, demonstrates the seriousness with which the state takes this form of propaganda. [Facebook’s recent removal](#) of hundreds of Facebook pages, accounts, and Instagram profiles linked with Iranian networks demonstrates the country’s sustained investment in disinformation tactics proven effective in shaping a variety of elements of public opinions.

Iran controls these efforts through a dedicated ‘disinformation’ division in the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, designed to build structures of psychological warfare, media disinformation, and propaganda against the enemies of the “Islamic” republic. The ministry is in charge of both aspects of propaganda focused on political interests and the manipulation of foreign media and intelligence services attempting to obtain information about Iran’s intelligence services and military capabilities.

It is certain that this division disseminates and oversees most of the news published in Iranian newspapers and on official websites, making reliable military figures more difficult to come by. This style of propaganda allows for Iran to fashion itself as militarily equipped to fight its enemies, which in reality can have vastly superior military technology and resources at their disposal. In particular, despite the United States’ frequent technological developments in military and defense industries, the narrative of Iranian media portrays the Iranian military’s development of new technologies as even more rapid.

In order to do so, Iran inflates and exaggerates its military achievements. For example, Iran announced the production of the Qaher-313 military aircraft in 2013, a project that five years later has still yet to see the light of day. The Iranian military has also relied on [digital editing](#) to obfuscate the power of ballistic missile launch pads during missile tests, such as that applied in the Shahab-3 missile test in July 2008 in a picture that initially fooled foreign media but was quickly debunked and retracted afterwards.

This propaganda represents a longstanding trend that continues to prove popular despite repeated refutations in foreign press. Iran has issued reports of the Koker-1 drone in November 2012; advertised an operation to send a monkey to space in 2013; and celebrated the launch of a naval submarine in the Strait of Hormuz in August 2006—later revealed by American newspapers to be Chinese naval tests. Most recently, Iranian propaganda ‘re-labeled’ an aircraft in order to mask existing planes as new models, as was the case with Iran’s unveiling of an F-5 on August 19, later found to be an American plane dating back to the era of the Shah.

As these examples make clear, Iran expends a good deal of time and energy exaggerating its military strength in order to deter its adversaries and instill in them the credibility of Iranian deterrence. One of the remarkable aspects of this propaganda machine is its dogged continuation despite its continuous failure to shape foreign understanding of its military capabilities. However, the state bases its strategies on the premise that psychological warfare may reduce the likelihood of actual war. Thus, it often resorts to bolstering the prestige of its military leaders fighting in Middle Eastern arenas in its media coverage. Moreover, a wider examination of the effects of Iranian military propaganda shows that where propaganda does often succeed is in its ability to boost the morale of Teheran’s allies.

One of Iran’s most common uses of military propaganda is the highlighting of its military leadership. This is clear from the media ‘halo’ that surrounds General Soleimani with every movement. Iran’s fallen fighters in Iraq and Syria are also depicted in a way that bestows a religious and historical dimension upon Iran’s policy in the region, a narrative initially developed during the Iran-Iraq war as a way of justifying the massive loss of life that has created a longstanding intertwining of military and religious imagery. The use of concepts such as “defense of holy sites, the liberation of Jerusalem, combatting arrogance, and the salvation of the weak” has given the Iranian military the justification to trample on the sovereignty and borders of other nations.

Iran’s video clips of missile tests and military maneuvers and its emphasis on recent developments in Iranian defense industries also create a narrative of defensive strength in the face of escalating American sanctions, which are taking a clear toll on the country’s economy. In addition, Iran has produced numerous animated films intended for its regional proxies that depict its army as undefeatable.

These propaganda tools rest on the key concepts of “personalization of the enemy,” “inflation of threats,” and “conspiracy.” Such concepts allow the Iranian state to sustain the momentum of its populist, religious, and revolutionary discourse and to exploit social incubators close to them by putting them in a perpetual state of readiness to confront the enemy. In turn, these beliefs allow Iran to justify the existence of its nuclear and ballistic missile programs; legitimize its intervention in Iraq, Syria and Yemen; and, most of all, suppress internal opposition critical of its foreign policies.

Iran, through its military propaganda, aims to send a clear message to the international community that it is a country capable of weathering the international pressures imposed on it by continuing to modernize its military. However, the message is ultimately one that hits closer to home: by demonstrating the state’s continued ability to develop its weaponry, especially ballistic missiles, unmanned aircraft, and light weapons, Iran also wants to prove to Iranians—through a model of economic resistance—that the Islamic Republic of Iran is not subject to American dictates.

Given the limited efficacy of Iranian propaganda outside of Iran, it is nevertheless important to understand its domestic function—both for Iranians and its foreign allies. Iranian military propaganda greatly influenced the revolutionary discourse of Imam Khomeini and continues to influence that of Khamenei. The wedding of revolutionary and militant ideals is a key feature of Iran’s successful messaging to proxy fighters, and remains influential and inspirational among the pro-Iranian political milieu—already predisposed to accept the message of Iranian disinformation.

On the whole, propaganda will continue to be shaped by media policies ordered by the highest political authority in Iran. In the meantime, outside observers, noting the easily disprovable nature of Iranian media's claims regarding its military, should not make the mistake of believing that these messages lack impact. When Iran's allies believe in the strength of Iran, they will fight harder against its enemies. ❖



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