

The Iranian Zeitgeist: Success in Arab Media

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Brief Analysis

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Iran resorts to multiple and contradictory narratives in its international outreach. Tehran is offered to the West as a natural ally against (Sunnī) terrorism, while for the rest of the world it is a role model of self-sufficiency, if not autarky, in the face of the arrogant West. Iran is not unique in honing the art of branding and messaging to multiple audiences, even at the risk of incoherence. Still, the divergence in the content of the messages presented to Arab audiences by the web of networks and media outlets funded and managed by Iran and its proxies rises well beyond the gray shades in truth-telling often observed in political discourse, amounting to outright premeditated disinformation. Yet, in the absence of a consistent, sustained, alternative, the Iranian info-op has proven successful in achieving its goals. It is not a quantitative success. The Iranian meme flood in Arab media has not swayed the Arab public at large towards more support for Iran or its proxies. In fact, as detailed in successive polls released here on Fikra Forum, positive assessments of Iran across Arab audiences continue to shrink. Where Iranian proxies have the upper hand, intimidation compensates for such erosion in image. The success of the meme flood is instead in the domination of the public narratives, towards diluting the animosity to Iran, and delaying the emergence of a coherent alternative.

“It is now possible to ride a bicycle from Mashhad, in Eastern Iran, all the way to Southern Lebanon.” The Iranian-led “Resistance Axis”, according to a pro-Iranian Lebanese polemicist, has thus scored consecutive victories in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, yielding a contiguous dominion. In substance, this claim does not differ from the boast made by Iranian officials— in Persian to internal audiences—about the presumed occupation of four Arab capitals (with the addition of Yemen’s Sana to the Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut string), or about the emergence of a “Third Persian Empire” extending to the Mediterranean. However, addressed to an Arab context, the boast has to be phrased with consideration for the sensitivities of multiple audiences, with diverging and even conflicting fears and aspirations.

Iran, through its apologists, has settled on a productive and versatile formula applicable across the range of audiences. The basic premise is to deflect from any portrayal of the two camps of the conflict as one of Iran and its proxies against states and societies that object to Iranian hegemony, and to posit it as a confrontation between two projects: a project of aggression, external to the region, led by the United States as the global imperial power, seeking to divide the region, appropriate its wealth, and subjugate its citizens; while the second is a project of defense, native to the region, uniting Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and (occasionally) a Palestinian state, committed to the self-

determination of its peoples and to resistance against external aggression. This serves as a broad framework that is refined and enhanced by elements suitable for each intended audience. The audiences fall into three broad groups—Shia, Sunnis, and “minorities”—and the purpose of the outreach is different for each (recruitment, de-mobilization, and vassalization), thus requiring different messaging for optimal effect.

The Shia communities top the list. They are sought for mobilization and recruitment and serve as “boots on the ground” for Iranian expansion. These communities do exhibit some pull factors complementing the Iranian push effort. A full century after their emergence as modern political entities, the states of the region have failed to achieve the transition from sclerotic communitarian divisions to dynamic national politics. In some cases, the “national” discourse was a thin cover for minority community rule; in others, it served to legitimize the dominance of the communitarian majority on the minority communities. In its heyday, pan-Arab nationalism seemed to provide many Shia in the region with a credible path away from marginalization. Nationalism, however, failed, and was overtaken by authoritarianism, reversing national integration gains and reinvigorating factionalism. A deficit in inclusive narratives provided revolutionary Iran—openly seeking the exportation of its revolution—with a suitable opportunity. Whether in Iraq or in Lebanon, this Iranian outreach was explicitly sectarian, targeting the respective Shia communities. While benefitting from the retreat of nationalism, Hezbollah was not the product of the failure of propositions that transcend community identities. It was instead, since its inception, conceived as segregation and mobilization of Lebanon’s Shia community. Hezbollah was implemented by its Islamist Iranian creators as a comprehensive totalitarian project, the like of which proving unsuccessful in Iran itself, due to the resilience and resistance of Iranian society.

The archetypal Hezbollah individual is born in Hezbollah hospitals, educated in Hezbollah schools, trained in Hezbollah camps, serves in the Hezbollah military, works for Hezbollah enterprises, dies in Hezbollah battles, and, after his death, expects his family to be attended to by Hezbollah welfare institutions. It is Hezbollah from cradle to grave, and beyond. In addition to framing their subjects, Hezbollah’s operators have also sought to strengthen its discourse at two levels. At the public level, the Hezbollah discourse is moderate and inclusive, albeit ambiguous in its terminology. It thus refers to Hezbollah’s defense of the “nation,” but omits any clear indication to whether the intended nation is Lebanese, Arab, Shia, or Islamic. At the private level, a dissimulated discourse is charged with explicit and implicit factionalism, hostile to other communities (the Sunnis in particular), and espousing of religious sectarian assertions with both polemical and millenarian content.

With Hezbollah dispatched by its Iranian overlords to the rescue of the regime in Syria, some of the private discourse had to be circulated in the public sphere to reinforce Shia mobilization and recruitment, even if a side effect of such an action was to weaken the messaging aimed at the second audience, namely the Sunni communities in the Levant and the rest of the Arab world.

The interest of the Iranian-led “Resistance Axis” in the Sunni setting is not mobilization, but the opposite: to ensure that Sunni audiences are not attracted to any opposing recruitment hostile to Iranian pursuits. Towards such purpose, the Iranian-led effort proclaims an embrace of issues believed to be central to Sunni political consciousness, where such a consciousness exists—supporting the Palestinian cause and declaring enmity to Israel, resisting neo-colonialism and external interventions, endorsing the quest for just governance—or merely seeking to satisfy the demand for a local Islamic identity, where no active Sunni political consciousness is noted.

The Iranian interest in the Sunni setting is result focused, to ensure that image of the “Resistance Axis” is viable, irrespective of subject matter. The approach of the media effort is to saturate the public sphere with propositions that would serve the intended result, even while being inconsistent with one another. In many such representations, the United States is a malevolent force and the source of all the harm that afflicts the region; even more, it is the United States, in its quest to subdue and control the region, that has created and manipulated the terrorist

organizations; the only impediment to American nefarious design is the Resistance Axis. In other representations, the United States is a sober superpower that has finally come to the realization that eradicating terrorism necessitates an alliance with and a reliance on the Resistance Axis, and is thus desperately seeking its approval. In yet other representations, radical Sunni militancy is no longer inherently evil terrorism, but merely deceived and manipulated by the United States which seeks to leverage it against Iran and its allies; Hezbollah, in this case, presents itself as the caring voice of reason inviting fellow Islamists to avoid the trap—that is, when it is not presenting itself as a defense shield for Sunni Muslims in particular, as well as others, targeted by these same Islamists. The enmity for Israel is also subject to gradation: it may be presented as a principled position based on human rights and on the rejection of injustice, occupation, and mass expulsion; or it may be imbued with nationalist content, as a rejection of a colonial-settler Zionism that must be expunged from the region; or it can display a blunt hatred of the collective “Jews,” the killers of the Prophets and the enemies of Truth until the end times. May the targeted Sunni circles, or any segments or individuals within, take what they desire from this range of offerings; the result may hopefully be some support for the Resistance Axis, or at least some dilution in their enmity towards it. Some, in these circles, may even be susceptible for recruitment into non-Shia formations at the service and pay of Iran.

Accommodation of and pandering to perceived Sunni concerns, however, expose the messaging intended for the third audience, the region’s “minorities,” to some attrition. The media operation of Iran’s “Resistance Axis” aimed at the religious, linguistic, and ethnic groups in the Middle East seeks to assure these communities of the presumed protection accorded to them by Iran and its proxies. The danger against which this protection is needed is neither Israel nor the United States—which are otherwise the primary substance of the Resistance Axis rhetorical wrath—but the Sunni Arab milieu itself, as the incubator of “Wahhabism,” radicalism, and terrorism, and its natural and historical proclivity to extremism and oppression. The sole guarantee for survival and safety—for Christians, Druze, Yazidis, Kurds, and other ethnic groups—is through an alliance with Iran’s Resistance Axis.

Iran may consider Lebanon a highly successful pilot project. Its investment in Hezbollah in Lebanon has yielded an effective proxy military force, tested and proven in operations inside as well as outside Lebanon. It has further created a political order with the façade of a “normal” state, behind which resides an Iranian occupation cemented through the coercion, intimidation, and entrapment honed by Hezbollah. Confidence in a high level of success allows Hezbollah, through its proponents, to be open about the terms of coexistence with it. It is thus acceptable for other Lebanese political groups to contend on issues of electricity provision, garbage collection, and civil service appointments; Hezbollah’s regional role and its defense policy, on the other hand, are issues towards which Lebanese politicians have no standing. It is modern-age vassal status imposed on the Lebanese polity and society.

Syria also provides Iran with a claim of victory. Indeed, the state of the revolution in Syria is dire. The usurpation of the Syrian uprising by Islamists of all stripes, the myopic rivalries and lack of consistency of external actors nominally supportive of the revolution, and the determination shared by Iran and Russia to rescue and restore the Damascus regime irrespective of (Syrian) human and material costs, has effectively deflated all prospects of regime change. The next phase in Syria is one of soft-landing and terminating the revolution, spearheaded by Russia and Iran, with the remedial participation of Turkey, the United States, the Gulf states, and other international parties. The situation is suitable for a recasting by the Resistance Axis. Where in fact there is a tragedy of death and destruction inflicted by the regime and its allies on the Syrian population, the pro-Iran media boasts of strategic victory. In Lebanon, Iran is a force of occupation; in Syria, it is a partner in crimes against humanity.

The Iranian experience in Iraq has elements of similarity with that of Lebanon. Iran has been instrumental to the resistance to the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon— an episode that concluded close to two decades ago — to create building blocks for its own takeover and occupation of all of Lebanon. In Iraq, Iran has taken advantage of the

fight against the so-called “Islamic State” to wedge into the Iraqi polity, instituting elements that can later serve to consolidate an already palpable domination and control. The Popular Mobilization Units, which have indeed contributed substantively to the defeat of ISIS, may have been incorporated into the Iraqi state defense framework, but are at best ambiguous in their national allegiance, with many of PMU factions recognizing the Iranian Supreme Guide as their leader and commander. The PMU structure is informed and inspired by that of Iran’s Basij, the Mobilization Resistance Force, a primary source of recruitment for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—the backbone of the parallel structure to the conventional state in Iran. Dichotomy is a primary aspect of Iran, which is both a revolution, reified by the IRGC and its aggressive expansionism, and a weakened “normal” state — which also seeks to maximize influence but more in line with international norms. The duplication of the Iranian model, in progress in Iraq, would only create further tensions to the detriment of Iraqi stability. The trajectory towards emulating the Iranian model in Iraq, however, cannot achieve a mere duplication, in which the two parallel structures, even if unequal in power, are expressions of internal agency. The emerging parallel structure in Iraq is built from scratch as an Iranian satrapy.

When the pro-Iranian media flood refers to the Resistance Axis as a regional independence project with Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as its elements, it is in reality conflating each of these states with a malignant component within it: not Iran, but the clergy-IRGC tyranny that controls it; not Iraq, but the emergent part of a dichotomized Iraq under Iranian control; not Syria, but its decaying murderous regime; not Lebanon, but Hezbollah, its captive population, and the state structures subverted by Hezbollah infiltration; and not a Palestinian state, but whatever group willing to engage in terrorism in line with the Iranian vision. Freedom is not promoted as an individual right, but as the “freedom” of collectives to mobilize for death, to accept disinformation as truth, and to submit to a vassal status.

The discourse of the Resistance Axis is not strong due to the soundness of its propositions, which are riddled with multiple defects. Its strength stems from the saturation approach adopted in promoting its multiple elements across all types of media. More importantly, its strength is also the result of the absence of a credible alternative. The parties with the resources to provide such alternative have been pre-occupied by other endeavors and pursuits, abandoning the task of countering the Iranian media operation to terrorist organizations and radical ideologues — an opposition almost custom-made to the order and pleasure of Iran.

Verbal attacks on Iran, its tools, and proxies are not needed. What is imperative is the deconstruction of the Resistance Axis narratives to unravel the claim that they speak for states and societies, uncover the purpose of the pro-Iranian info-op, and reveal its mobilization, diffusion, and aims at subjugation. ❖

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