

## Report

### The Role of Iran's Regional Media in its Soft War Policy

*Massoumeh Torfeh\**

**16 February 2017**





**Members of the Iran's Revolutionary Guard [AP]**

## Abstract

Highly financed and led by Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC), Iran's vast regional media network directly projects Iran's regional politics. It reflects the trajectory of Iran's interactions with major players such as Russia, Syria and Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, as well as the regional Sunni and Shia groups.

By examining the reporting of Iran's regional media on the latest wars in Iraq and Syria this paper looks at how Iran aims to portray its image and for what policy gains. It discusses whether Iran's regional policy is focused on Shia-Sunni divide or on rivalry with the US and to a lesser extent Israel. It poses the question whether Iran's soft war policy has succeeded in its aim of reconciling "a cultural identity" for Muslims and challenging "West's one-sided news imperialism".

## Introduction

Aleppo's fall to Syrian forces in mid-December 2016 was hailed<sup>(1)</sup> by the Iranian leaders as a major victory. "Aleppo was liberated thanks to a coalition between Iran, Syria, Russia and Lebanon's Hezbollah," said Seyed Yahya Rahim-Safavi, Iran's top military advisor to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei whose words were carried by all Iranian regional media including Tasnim<sup>(2)</sup> web page close to Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC). Aleppo advances were "the most important victory during the past five years that Syria has been entangled in the war on terrorism and a prelude to future victories, including the liberation of Mosul," said Ali Akbar Velayati, a top political advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, reported by Fars news agency in Arabic, English, Turkish and Persian.

Highly financed and led by IRGC, Iran's vast regional media network directly projects Iran's regional politics. It reflects the trajectory of Iran's interactions with major players

such as Russia, Syria and Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, as well as the regional Sunni and Shia groups.

The chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Broadcasting (IRIB) is one of the few official posts directly appointed by Khamenei, reflecting its crucial importance. The network is tasked with carrying the combined military and Islamic messages of the hardline Revolutionary Iranian establishment. The remit of the chief is defined by the Supreme Leader.(3)

"Soft power is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals," said Joseph Nye(4) who coined the term soft power. He distinguished in his theorisation between "soft power" and "propaganda". In the case of Iran, it is difficult to distinguish between the two and most of the media communication comes across as propaganda.

Judging by the level of success that Iran has had in the battlefield, however, in both Syria and Iraq it could be argued that it has managed to attract sufficient support to have become an acknowledged player in the international arena over discussions on peace in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. At the same time, however, there appears to be strong reported(5) animosity towards Iran in many Arab states of the region with Iran having constantly to try to persuade them to accept its line.

### **Iran's soft power tools in Syria and Iraq**

IRIB's annual budget was reported in 2009 to be 900 million US dollars, and their personnel is estimated at 46,000.(6) It is highly likely that the budget and staffing for the external services has been drastically increased over the past five years to deal with the wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. There are five external TV channels: Sahar, Al-Kawthar, Al-Alam, Qods TV, and Press TV, forming the soft power toolbox of Islamic Republic, making it one of the largest media organisations in the Middle East.

The most effective of these is Al-Alam TV and its web sites. Backing these are the hardline Iranian web sites such as Fars and Tasnim, close to Iran's powerful IRGC — all going out in Persian, Arabic, English, and Turkish.

Al-Alam relies for its financial and logistic support mainly on IRGC and occupies a central position in reflecting the propaganda style of Iranian media in the region. Moreover, it sets top priorities, portraying possible future scenarios, and more generally influencing the debate on Iran's media policy in the region.

The other external services such as Sahar TV and Al-Kawthar and Qods TV, are mainly religious propaganda media. There are of course the Al-Manar and Al-Nahar TV and web sites which are funded by Iran but owned by Hezbollah.

### **Iran-Saudi Relations**

Iran and Saudi Arabia have historically been rivals for power in the region but always kept a facade of diplomatic relations. Even prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 the two countries argued over influence in Yemen but at that time as Iran's ruler, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was close to the United States owning the fourth most powerful army in the world, the rivalry never surfaced. The level of public diplomacy was also much greater at the time. Thus the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia does not necessarily relate to the Islamic Republic or only to the Shia-Sunni quest for power.

By contrast Iran portrays in all its communication the humanitarian aspects of its own action as the saviour of the people of Yemen, against the Saudi-led military intervention. It does not divide the people by religious lines but by a political divide in their loyalty to what it regards as the "Saudi backed fugitive regime" versus the "popular forces". Iran also always stresses that it would never give up its influence in Yemen and in the Gulf of Aden and neither of these points has any direct connection to the Houthis. They are more about regional dominance and sea navigation and trade.

In most media analysis Iran sees Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States attempting to isolate Iran and divide the Middle East amongst themselves. So it is not seen as a Shia-Sunni divide. And Iran is keen to keep a reasonable diplomatic relationship with Saudi Arabia.

"We have no problem in our mutual relations with Saudi Arabia," said the Supreme Leader's top advisor on international relations, Ali Akbar Velayati.<sup>(7)</sup> "The only irrational thing they request from us is that we should forego our presence and influence in the Arab world. The question is which Arab nation has given Saudis the right to make such an assumption," Velayati said.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **On Syria and Iraq**

Syria and Iraq are covered in the Iranian media as a given sphere of Iranian influence and a success story showcasing Iran's diplomatic and military power in the Middle East. "We have had great successes in our strategic cooperation with Russia over Syria, and the military situation has changed very much in favour of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah camp," said Velayati. "We have announced this as our redline to our Russian friends too," he said.<sup>(9)</sup>

In Syria most military operations are reported(10) to be carried out by the Syrian army against "terrorist" of Jeish Al-Fatah, ISIL and Al-Qaida. Sometimes the "Lebanese combatant Hizbollah" is added(11) to the list of "pro-government forces". They could be referred to as "popular forces" too. Yet in the list Iran was never included.

The key spin jargon here is that any outside intervention has been at the request of the Iraqi or Syrian government and therefore in line with Iran's regional and international commitments. And when Iran Russia and Turkey met on 20 December to discuss the strategy for Syria, this was reported(12) as meeting to "underline respect for Syria's territorial integrity".

Yet, on the same day the defence ministers of Iran and Russia met in Moscow(13) together with their high level commanders to "boost defence cooperation" on Aleppo. The same teams had met in Tehran on 12 June at the invitation of Iran's defence minister, General Hossein Dehqan, the Defence Ministers of Iran, officially to discuss their battle against ISIL.

### **Iraq: a centerpiece of Iran's regional policy**

It was in fact the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war that triggered the vast media operations we observe today. The first foreign radio broadcast in Arabic from the Islamic Republic was propaganda to topple the then Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein. Also Al-Alam TV was set up originally in response to the US-UK invasion of Iraq.

Moreover, the proximity of Iraq to Iran makes it a priority security issue with the additional importance of the holy Shia site of Karbela, where the shrines of Imam Hussein the successor to Prophet Mohammad and his brother Abbas are located.

"The Iranian advisors, headed by dear brother Qassem Soleimani, have been beside us since the start of war and his presence has happened upon the demand of the Iraqi government and agreement of the Armed Forces' top commander," said Commander Abu Mehdi al-Mohandes of Hashd al-Shaabi (volunteer forces).(14)

The Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari also said that that IRGC Qods Force Commander, General Qassem Soleimani went to Iraq to help the country in campaign against terrorism "after receiving Baghdad's rigid request".(15)

"If the Islamic Republic of Iran and its leader didn't help us, I say very explicitly that no Iraq would exist today," said another representative of Hashd al-Shaabi was quoted by Fars.(16)



## Iran's portrayal of the regional terror groups

When it comes to trying to discredit regional power networks such as ISIL, ISIS, Al-Qaida, Al-Nusra Front Iran resorts to religious terminology. They are Takfiris (heretics) and Saudi-backed Wahhabis. Rather than advocating a military campaign Iranian media prefer to portray the inhuman, non-Islamic aspects of their action.

For example, ISIS used chemical weapons three times, says Al-Alam(17) or it is making money selling regional valuable antiques.(18) They show or upload on their web pages horrifying images(19) of beheadings and executions or ISIL burning fighters alive for retreating.(20) Al-Qaida and Al Nusra are discredited and belittled in the same way with one report describing an Al-Nusra Front commander eating livers of the dead Syrian soldiers.(21)

## Soft power, war propaganda or public diplomacy?

"Propaganda is source-based, cause-oriented, emotion-laden content that utilises mass persuasion media to cultivate the mass mind in service to the source's goals," argues Nancy Snow in a paper on the differences between propaganda and public diplomacy.(22) In Western democracies propaganda is expected to be utilised mostly during the war or at times of serious national crisis. At other times the term used is public diplomacy.

Iran uses the propaganda method both at home and in the region. The propaganda is always anti-West (mainly US) and anti-Israel. However, when it comes to conflict in the Middle East it is difficult to distinguish between propaganda, public diplomacy and soft power used either by Iran or other actors in the region, whether it be the US, Russia or Saudi Arabia.

Was the War on Terror a propaganda war, soft war, or a public diplomacy campaign? How about the war "to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL"? When Iran's Supreme leader describes Hezbollah as "shining like the sun"(23) or Fars News Agency boasts about how dozens of Saudi-led soldiers were killed in Qaher 1 (Syrian-made) missile attack then is this war-time propaganda?(24)

In this regard we could also juxtapose the use by the former US president, George W. Bush of the term "axis of evil" with Ayatollah Khamenei's use of the term "Great Satan" to describe the United States of America. It is the media in both Iran and the US that play a major role in putting across these characterisations and radical moral judgements.

"Evil" is perceived, according to Silverstone, as the manifestation of absence of God, referring to actions beyond justification and beyond reach.(25)

Robert Entman(26) illustrates how on the days that followed the attack of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush framed his public broadcasts to “unite the country behind the Bush Administration’s interpretation and response to the attack”. He argues that by conveying an “unambiguous and emotionally compelling frame” Bush managed to get public approval for calling it the “War on Terror”.

Iran is also framing most of the news about the Middle East in terms of the ongoing wars. The three web sites under review write extensively(27) on Iran's air defence might, stressing self-sufficiency in production.(28) Also often revealing propaganda-like manoeuvres and war games.(29) IRGC boasts its economic power and its plans for oil and gas projects.(30) Moreover, Iran is keen to portray itself as a self-sufficient military power in the region capable of repelling attacks by the West or Israel.

"You are the officers of the soft war," said Ayatollah Khamenei in an address to Islamic Students Association on 20 April.(31) He calls on the young Muslims in the region to rise against the enemy:

There is a war going on. You can liken this soft war to a hard war and a front line of a war, just like the condition that exists in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and other countries in the present time. You can liken it to these wars or to the war during the eight-year Sacred Defence Era in Iran.(32)

This juxtaposition of soft and hard war stands to reason. Ayatollah Khamenei knows well that while the hard war might have been won in Syria, and possibly in Iraq the soft war or what President Bush called “the operation to win hearts and minds” has been much more difficult to win in the region. With the humanitarian disasters in Syria Iraq and Yemen, with hundreds and thousands of civilians killed and millions more made into refugees it is doubtful if the propaganda machination of any of the players whether it be Iran, Russia, Syria, Saudi Arabia or the US could claim any victory in soft power in the region.

“The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources,” said Joseph Nye: “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)”.(33)

---

Copyright © 2017 Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.

\***Massoumeh Torfeh** is a research associate at the London School of Economics and Political Science and at the School of Oriental and African Studies specialising in the politics of Iran and Afghanistan.

## References

- (1) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/iran-aleppo-syria-shia-militia> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (2) <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/12/14/1267690/general-highlights-iran-s-role-in-aleppo-liberation> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (3) <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3676/Hezbollah-is-shining-like-a-sun> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (4) <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (5) Dr Lina Khatib, Suffering May Not Be Over for Iraqis "Liberated" From ISIS , Chatham House, May 31, 2016
- (6) <http://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/iran-tv.pdf> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (7) <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13950217000044> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (8) Ibid
- (9) <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13950217000044> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (10) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950917000072> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (11) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950922000650> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (12) <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/12/20/1273442/iran-russia-turkey-underline-respect-for-syria-s-territorial-integrity> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (13) <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/12/20/1273300/iranian-russian-defense-ministers-discuss-syria-crisis> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (14) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950323000380> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (15) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950323000380> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (16) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950323000380> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (17) <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1805909> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (18) <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1805937> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (19) <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1805577> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (20) <http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/01/12/968974/isil-burns-fighters-alive-for-letting-ramadi-fall> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (21) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950118000579> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (22) <http://www.e-ir.info/2012/12/04/public-diplomacy-and-propaganda-rethinking-diplomacy-in-the-age-of-persuasion/> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (23) <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3676/Hezbollah-is-shining-like-a-sun> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (24) <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940930001336> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (25) Roger Silverstone,(2007). Media and Morality, on the rise of the mediapolis, London: Polity



- (26) Robert Entman, (2004) *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US foreign Policy*, Chicago & London
- (27) <http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/04/06/1041354/iran-starts-producing-octogen-modern-explosives> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (28) <http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/04/05/1040782/iran-s-air-defense-forces-equipped-with-homegrown-electro-optic-systems-commander> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (29) <http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/04/11/1045421/iranian-army-ground-force-to-hold-war-games-unveil-new-military-gear> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (30) <http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/04/10/1044271/10-mega-projects-by-irgc-construction-base-in-final-phases-commander> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (31) <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3676/Hezbollah-is-shining-like-a-sun> (accessed 5 January 2017)
- (32) The reference is to Iran-Iraq War 1980-88, referred to as "Sacred War" in the Islamic Republic's narrative. <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/3676/Hezbollah-is-shining-like-a-sun>
- (33) Joseph Nye (2013). What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power, Foreign Policy web page.