Too Soft on "Soft War"

Commentary on Monroe Price's "Iran and the Soft War"

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It has been asserted that the Islamic Republic's notion of "soft war" is in essence a paranoid argument. But, as the saying goes, there are often good reasons for paranoia. In Iran's case, these reasons include the real, decades-long attempts by U.S. administrations and others to subvert the Islamic Republic by using extensive funds and new communications technologies. Tactics have included assassinations, cyber attacks, increasingly severe economic sanctions, and more. Recently, President Obama has tried to limit Tehran's influence in Latin America, leaving it up to the U.S. State Department to formulate a policy to counter Iranian presence in the region. And it is indeed the case that the Islamic Republic is modeling its internal and external strategies around the concept of "soft war". But these facts do not in themselves elevate political rhetoric to theory.

It is important to investigate the rhetoric and policies of the Islamic Republic—so I welcome Monroe Price's essay "Iran and the Soft War" about the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic—but the analysis has to be done carefully and with analytic rigor to try to distinguish claims from fact and rhetoric from reality. There is much to say about the essay, but I will confine myself to *three* main issues: the nature of soft war as a concept, the dearth of empirical context and history, and the piece's confusingly unapologetic relativism.

I.   Is "Soft War" an Analytic Concept?

It seems that Monroe [Price] himself cannot decide if soft war *is* a real theoretical concept or if it is a clever neologism coined by ideologues of the Islamic Republic and thus designated "soft war," with quotation marks. The title of the piece suggests the former and even goes further, suggesting that there is something called (by whom?) "the soft war" (a construction that also implies that there are no others and this is *the* one). The mixed usage suggests indecision.

So is soft war a serious analytical concept? Monroe goes to great pains to set out the Islamic Republic's argument about "soft war", supported by lengthy quotations—but never questions it. What is included under the rubric of "soft war" that couldn't be included in the concept of "soft power"—itself a much-contested construct that has given way to a notion of "smart power"? Is anything distinguishable by function between "soft power" and "soft war"? Whose concept is it? More significantly, are any of the reasons given for the notion valid?

Monroe talks about "Iran," rarely the Islamic Republic. But who comprises this Iran and how does it speak? Such usage conjures up a synecdochic whole or a homogeneous society, which the tumultuous events surrounding the Presidential election of 2009 showed to be a fantasy. Instead, it would be preferable to recognize this rhetoric as the ideological emanation of the Islamic Republic, more specifically coming from the parastatal IRGC—the Revolutionary Guards known inside Iran as Sepah Pasdaran—whose leaders have been key in the formulation of the concept and strategy of their "soft war."

And to whom is the idea of soft war addressed? Mainly, it appears that the concept is used as an internal weapon to justify further repression and surveillance, with the "external" threat cleverly transmuted into the internal threat and domestic critics redefined as enemy agents. The piece is silent about the severe internal politico-legal consequences of "soft war."

That the idea of "soft war" has had real political and foreign policy consequences is not in doubt. The question is whether political rhetoric, from any polity, should be taken as social theory without significant examination.

II.   A Lack of Context and History

In many ways, the notion of "soft war" is merely another clever play on Western words by the Islamic Republic's ideologues. Monroe seems unaware that there have been many such linguistic reconstructions. For example, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" became Khatami's "dialogue of civilizations"; Bush's "axis of evil" became the Islamic republic's "axis of resistance." So why shouldn't "soft power" become "soft war"? A response made to the demonstrations after the contested presidential election of 2009 was "velvet revolution." Absent an acknowledgment of this ongoing subversion of Western political language by successive politicians of the Islamic Republic, this might appear to be an isolated episode—which it is not. The ongoing play with language suggests that the ideologues of the Islamic Republic pay considerable attention to Western foreign policy discourses and are adept at clever reformulations.

Monroe Price makes mention of BBC Persian's role, but again, without background. BBC Persian Radio was founded in 1940, BBC Persian Online has had a Web presence for many years and BBC Persian Television started broadcasting in January 2009. There is little doubt that the BBC Persian services have played a role in mediating British-Iranian foreign policy for the past 70 years, especially during times of crisis that include the 1979 revolution, when the institution was widely regarded as supporting the popular mobilization. There is no doubt that BBC Persian Television became, quite unplanned, embroiled in the 2009 post-election politics. But it was the internal dynamics of widespread revulsion at the charade of the presidential election that precipitated the "green politics," not the external broadcasts of BBC Persian Television.

And Iran has also been in the business of international radio broadcasting since the 1950s under the Pahlavis. The Islamic Republic has invested heavily in developing new international broadcasting channels in different languages, including Arabic and English, with Press TV—its international English-

language channel—established in early 2007. These channels are the ideological vehicles of the Islamic Republic.

Having set out the arguments made by the IRGC about soft war, one waited for some kind of analysis and rebuttal, a careful examination of the facts. These might have included the following:

- Noting the difference between public service and state broadcasting. The BBC World Service is funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but maintains considerable editorial independence from its current paymaster. This arrangement will change in 2014, when it will be funded through a license fee. Iranian foreign broadcasting is the mouthpiece of the regime and kept on an extremely tight ideological rein by the state.

- Noting that the BBC has wanted to establish a Persian television channel since 2007, meaning that its initial broadcast in January 2009—the year of a presidential election— was fortuitous, not deliberate.

- Noting the Islamic Republic's more than 30-year history of international broadcasting.

- Noting the long history of broadcasting to Iran by the BBC World Service and other channels.

III.   *Uncritical Relativism*

As media analysts unpack the self-serving propagandistic elements of Western political discourse, David Cameron's "big society" notion comes to mind, so must we critically examine Iranian rhetoric. Analysis needs to be able to separate fact from fiction, loose verbiage from grounded theory. Monroe does not do that.

When Naini, quoted at length by Monroe, talks about the "soft power" of the Iranian revolution, he is not using the term in the conventional manner to talk about foreign influence but rather in reference to the revolutionary solidarity of the 1979 movement; so the concept loses its international dimensions When Naini talks about "soft war," he assumes that the enemy will win over the trust of the people, an unsubstantiated model of a "hypodermic needle" notion of media effects. One might ask, if the ideas of the revolution are strong and pervasive, why should the "enemy" win and why does Naini believe that it will? Or is this simply a self-serving justification for repression? Naini's notion that the Internet could be "flooded" with Iranian content reveals an interesting naivete about the web.

Why isn't Ashena's attempt to distinguish the three kinds of propaganda strategies of the BBC, again quoted at length, punctured as blather? Mainly, Ashena is concerned about the use of what one might call "citizen journalist" content emanating from inside Iran as scores of people sent text and images out during the post-election demonstrations. International channels, including the BBC, worked very hard to sort out and verify this material. Even a cursory discussion with such channels would reveal the

obfuscation of Ashena's analysis. Ashena's concern about "black propaganda" focuses on the reverse flow of messages from a wide range of sources that instructed Iranians about TOR and other tools to protect their privacy and security. This is fascinating rhetoric that tells us a great deal about the thinking of regime ideologues, including their particular understanding of the global digital environment—but requires careful exposition for any non-Iranian readership.

"Soft war" is a clever neologism developed first in Persian, a potentially interesting idea that could be developed into a serious analytic concept. However, many of the claims by the Islamic Republic about "soft war" *are* propaganda. They are as amenable to factual clarification as the claims of some U.S. fascists, recently relayed by Press TV that the massacre of children at Sandy Hook was a Zionist plot hatched in anger at the UN's recognition of Palestinian statehood. If this language and these claims are not questioned by critical media theorists, then we truly lose all ability to discriminate between valid argument and political bluster.

And by the way, former Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, to this day a hero to many Iranians, was not assassinated, but instead died at home under house arrest many years after the 1953 U.S./UK-engineered coup.

All academic examination of Iran currently has to negotiate the Scylla of hostile Western interventionism and the Charybdis of the repressive Islamic Republic. Careful analysis of Iran, particularly at this tense and dangerous time, is to be welcomed, including that of nonspecialists, but a quick vault into the fray without 3-D spectacles is not.

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