



AMERICAN FOREIGN
POLICY COUNCIL



Iran Democracy Monitor No. 233

April 3, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Islamic Extremism; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Terrorism; Warfare; Caucasus; Gaza; Iran; Israel

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC AND INFORMATION WARFARE

When it comes to disinformation, propaganda and information manipulation, world attention has generally focused on Russia – and more recently on China, in the context of social media apps such as TikTok. But the Iranian regime is heavily invested in winning "hearts and minds" as well – and, against the backdrop of spreading disorder in the Middle East, officials in Tehran are stressing the importance of information to achieving their strategic objectives. "The media is more effective than missiles, planes and drones in forcing the enemy to retreat and to influence hearts and minds," Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, told artists and writers in recent comments carried by IRNA. "All war is a media war. Whichever actor has greater media influence will achieve their goals." (*Asharq al-Awsat*, March 27, 2024)

HAMAS TAKES A VICTORY LAP IN TEHRAN...

Ever since October 7th, speculation has swirled about Iran's role in the bloody terror campaign against Israel carried out by Hamas. While there does not appear to be evidence the Islamic Republic directly ordered Hamas to carry out its attacks, Iran's prior role in training, equipping and empowering the Palestinian rejectionist group is by now well known. And nearly six months into the resulting Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip, those connections remain as strong as ever. Late last month, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh visited Iran to celebrate his group's political successes – and the Iranian regime's role in them. Israel is now experiencing "unprecedented political isolation" as world criticism of its military campaign mounts, Haniyeh told interlocutors in Tehran. Israel is "losing power and protection even in the [UN] Security Council," he noted – an apparent reference to the Biden administration's abstention from a recent UNSC resolution that delinked calls for a ceasefire from calls for a return of the more than 130 Israeli hostages still being held by Hamas.

Haniyeh and his delegation reportedly met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during their visit to the Islamic Republic, the group's second since October 7th. For his part, Khamenei praised the "unique resistance of the Palestinian forces" and pledged to continue his government's support for Palestinian rejectionism. "The Islamic Republic of Iran will not hesitate to support the cause of Palestine and the oppressed people of Gaza," Khamenei is reported to have said. (*Al-Arabiya*, March 26, 2024)

...AS THE IRANIAN REGIME PONDERES PRESSING ITS ADVANTAGE

The Iranian regime sees the Gaza war as a gateway to a "new world order" in which Western influence in the greater Middle East is profoundly diminished, a new analysis has assessed. Citing recent statements by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Seth Frantzman notes in the *Jerusalem Post* that the Iranian regime clearly believes "that the war in Gaza will accelerate various processes in the global order" and has the power to pave the way for a reconfiguration in the regional – indeed world – balance of power. "Iran's president's statement matters," Frantzman argues. "It shows how Iran is thinking about October 7 and the long term plans that Iran has. Iran sees the fighting in Gaza as a benefit. It also sees the suffering of Gazans as a benefit. What that means [is] that Iran believes it can use suffering in Gaza to take advantage of the war, and exploit it for its own interests."

Iran, Frantzman concludes, "has long-term plans." It "cares more about the grand strategy" than the tactical state of play in the Gaza Strip, and "is happy to see the war go on and on." (*Jerusalem Post*, March 26, 2024)

A TUG OF WAR IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

The growing regional status and pro-Western orientation of the Republic of Azerbaijan is posing new strategic challenges to the Iranian regime, and confronting officials in Tehran with the possibility of a significant loss of influence in the South Caucasus. "An emboldened Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey, has changed the balance of power in the South Caucasus in recent years," reports *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. This includes, most prominently, recently reclaiming full control over the contested enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh, and doing so at the expense of Iran's traditional regional ally, Armenia. These strategic shifts "have raised concerns in Iran, which neighbors Armenia and Azerbaijan." Tehran now "fears it could lose its clout" in the region, where another key player, Russia, is also receding. "The changing dynamics in the region and the decline of Russia's relative influence pose potential challenges to Iran's long-term geopolitical and security goals in the region," says Hamidreza Azizi of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

For Iran, the problems don't stop there. "Iran is also wary that Baku's growing influence in the region could fuel 'irredentist tendencies' among Iran's large ethnic Azeri population, separated from Azerbaijan by the Aras River and located primarily in Iran's East and West Azerbaijan provinces," RFE/RL reports, citing Brussels-based expert Eldor Mamedov.

Iranian officials have responded by seeking to strengthen regional security structures – and to bully local states into submission. On March 6th, Iranian

