

Analysis of the "Mahan" Psychological Operation Plan During the Late Pahlavi Era and the Impact of Modern Psychological Warfare on Socio-Spiritual Disorders

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Abstract

This article examines the "Mahan" psychological operation plan, implemented by the SAVAK security advisor in the late Pahlavi regime under the military government of General Gholam Reza Azhari. The operation, suggested by Mossad, aimed to ridicule religious beliefs among the Iranian populace with a budget of 20 million Tomans. The plan involved utilizing pseudo-clerics to propagate false religious visions supporting the Shah. This study also draws parallels to contemporary methods used in the Islamic Republic to manipulate public opinion and the resulting socio-political ramifications.

Keywords: Mahan Plan, SAVAK, Mossad, Psychological warfare

Introduction

In the early years of the Iranian Revolution, a video surfaced featuring the security advisor to the head of SAVAK (Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar), discussing a plan called "Mahan." This plan was executed during the final years of the Pahlavi dynasty under General Azhari's military government. According to the SAVAK officer, whose fate remains unknown and whose interview recalls coerced confessions, the operation was initiated at Mossad's suggestion and allocated a budget of 20 million Tomans (BBC News). Similar practices have led to significant socio-psychological disorders within the Iranian community, including disrupted immigration patterns (Davoudpour, A. R., 2024), an increase in psychological disorders (Davoudpour, A. R., 2024), and widespread distrust. Social media and television has become a component of this psychological warfare, and the Iranian government's dangerous practices of violence have both contributed to and exacerbated these social disorders.

The "Mahan" Psychological Operation Plan

Execution of the Plan

The primary objective of the "Mahan" plan was to mock and undermine the religious beliefs of the Iranian public. The budget primarily funded pseudo-clerics who were instructed to claim that they had seen Imam Reza in their dreams. According to these fabricated visions, Imam Reza supposedly advised supporting the Shah to ensure his continued reign in Iran. Another prominent rumor propagated was the sighting of Ayatollah Khomeini on the moon. This operation highlights the intersection of intelligence services and state propaganda aimed at destabilizing revolutionary movements through psychological manipulation (Gasiorowski, 1991).

Goals and Intentions

The central aim of this psychological operation was to weaken the burgeoning revolutionary sentiments by discrediting religious

figures and sowing confusion among the masses. By disseminating these false religious narratives, the regime sought to erode the legitimacy of religious leaders and create distrust among the populace. The use of fabricated religious experiences was designed to disorient the public, making it difficult for them to rally behind legitimate revolutionary leaders (Abrahamian, 1982).

Impact on Society

The implementation of the "Mahan" plan had profound effects on Iranian society. The spread of fabricated religious visions and rumors led to a significant erosion of public trust in clerical authorities. This operation contributed to societal divisions and confusion, impeding the ability of the public to discern truth from propaganda. The resulting atmosphere of suspicion and fear was instrumental in delaying the revolutionary momentum, although it ultimately failed to prevent the revolution (Hafez, 2003).

Contemporary Parallels

Although the "Mahan" plan is no longer in operation, similar tactics persist in the Islamic Republic today. These strategies aim not only at religious beliefs but also at wasting the time and lives of citizens through various means, including misleading projects, pseudo-politicians in the media, and fake online clerics. These operations may even be orchestrated by the Islamic Republic itself to undermine opposition, leading to severe societal polarization and widespread deception, aptly termed the "False Messiah" program. Programs like Hamster and Pi, despite their negligible influence outside Iran, rapidly penetrate Iranian society, causing systemic disarray. Systematic defamation and cultural sabotage, along with aggressive opposition to national interests, exemplify these contemporary strategies. For instance, systematic efforts to undermine regional cooperation by pitting Iran against its neighbors and vice versa prevent the formation of cohesive regional interests (Khosrokhavar, 2009).

Historical Context and Background

The Role of SAVAK

SAVAK, the Iranian secret police, was notorious for its brutal tactics and extensive surveillance network. Established in 1957 under the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, SAVAK's primary objective was to suppress political dissent and maintain the Shah's regime (Gasiorowski, 1991). It was heavily influenced by Western intelligence agencies, particularly the CIA and Mossad, which provided training and support to its operatives (Abrahamian, 1982). The close collaboration with these agencies helped SAVAK develop sophisticated techniques for surveillance, interrogation, and psychological manipulation.

Mossad's Involvement

Mossad's involvement in the "Mahan" plan underscores the close ties between Israeli and Iranian intelligence services during the Shah's regime. The collaboration aimed to stabilize the Shah's rule by countering revolutionary ideologies and preventing the rise of pro-Soviet or anti-Western factions (Sela, 2004). This relationship was marked by a shared interest in curbing revolutionary movements that could destabilize the region. The exchange of intelligence and techniques between Mossad and SAVAK was instrumental in crafting sophisticated disinformation campaigns and psychological operations.

The Political Climate of the Late Pahlavi Era

During the late 1970s, Iran was on the brink of revolution. The Shah's regime faced mounting opposition from various groups, including Islamists, leftists, and nationalists. The economic crisis, coupled with widespread corruption and human rights abuses, eroded the regime's legitimacy. The "Mahan" plan was one of many covert operations aimed at preserving the Shah's power by discrediting and demoralizing the opposition (Ansari, 2003). The increasing public discontent and the growing influence of

revolutionary ideologies made the regime's survival increasingly precarious.

Detailed Analysis of the "Mahan" Plan

Psychological Warfare Tactics

The "Mahan" plan employed several psychological warfare tactics designed to manipulate public perception and sow discord. These included:

- **Disinformation Campaigns:** Spreading false information through media outlets and clergy loyal to the regime to create confusion and mistrust among the public (Hafez, 2003). This tactic aimed to discredit legitimate religious and political leaders by associating them with absurd or discredited claims.
- **Cultural Sabotage:** Promoting cultural and religious narratives that undermined traditional values and weakened the social fabric (Bayat, 1997). This included the dissemination of stories and rumors that alienated the public from their cultural and religious heritage.
- **Psychological Manipulation:** Utilizing fear, uncertainty, and misinformation to disrupt the revolutionary momentum and maintain control over the population (Zarehi, 2009). The regime sought to create a sense of hopelessness and disorientation among the populace, thereby reducing their willingness to engage in revolutionary activities.

Role of Pseudo-Clerics

Pseudo-clerics played a crucial role in the "Mahan" plan. These individuals, posing as religious leaders, were tasked with spreading fabricated stories of supernatural visions and endorsements from revered figures like Imam Reza. This strategy aimed to delegitimize genuine religious leaders and create a rift between the clergy and the masses. The use of such figures was instrumental in blurring the lines between faith and manipulation, thus eroding the moral authority of the religious opposition (Keddie, 2003). The pseudo-clerics were often recruited from among the disillusioned or opportunistic elements within the clergy, who were willing to collaborate with the regime for personal gain.

Budget Allocation and Expenditure

The allocation of 20 million Tomans for the "Mahan" plan reflects the significant resources devoted to psychological operations. This budget was used to finance various aspects of the plan, including:

- **Salaries and Incentives:** Paying pseudo-clerics and other operatives to disseminate false messages. The regime's financial support ensured the loyalty and compliance of these individuals, who were often compensated handsomely for their participation.
- **Media Campaigns:** Funding newspapers, radio stations, and pamphlets to spread disinformation (Nafisi, 2003). These media outlets were strategically positioned to reach a wide audience and amplify the regime's messages.
- **Operational Costs:** Covering the expenses of surveillance, intelligence gathering, and counter-intelligence activities aimed at monitoring and suppressing dissent (Yadollahi, 2008). The regime invested heavily in maintaining a network of informants and operatives who could swiftly identify and neutralize threats to its authority.

Broader Implications and Societal Impact

Erosion of Trust

The "Mahan" plan significantly eroded public trust in religious and political institutions. The spread of false information created a climate of suspicion and fear, making it difficult for people to distinguish between truth and falsehood. This erosion of trust undermined the social cohesion necessary for collective action against the regime, thereby weakening the revolutionary movement (Karim, 2007). The psychological manipulation employed by the regime was effective in creating a fragmented and disoriented society, where individuals were more likely to be influenced by propaganda and less inclined to engage in organized resistance.

Impact on Revolutionary Dynamics

The psychological operations of the "Mahan" plan had a profound impact on the dynamics of the Iranian Revolution. By sowing discord and confusion, the regime was able to delay and dilute the

revolutionary fervor. However, these tactics ultimately failed to prevent the revolution, as the sheer scale of popular discontent and the resolve of the revolutionary forces overcame the regime's psychological defenses (Mojab, 2003). The persistence of revolutionary ideals and the unyielding resolve of the Iranian people ultimately led to the downfall of the Shah's regime, despite the extensive psychological warfare employed against them.

Contemporary Strategies and Their Evolution

Modern Psychological Warfare

The strategies employed in the "Mahan" plan have evolved but remain relevant in contemporary Iranian politics. Modern psychological warfare tactics include:

- **Cyber Operations:** Using the internet and social media to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion (Zarghami, 2016). These operations leverage digital platforms to reach a global audience, bypassing traditional media controls.
- **Propaganda and Media Manipulation:** Leveraging state-controlled media and online platforms to disseminate propaganda and suppress dissent (Rahimi, 2015). The regime's control over major media outlets and its ability to censor online content allow it to shape public discourse to its advantage.
- **Covert Operations:** Conducting covert operations to disrupt opposition activities and maintain control over political and social movements (Khosrokhavar, 2009). These operations include infiltration, surveillance, and targeted suppression of dissident groups, using both human and technological resources.

The Role of Social Media

In the digital age, social media has become a powerful tool for both state and non-state actors to influence public opinion. The Islamic Republic has utilized social media to disseminate propaganda, monitor dissent, and shape public discourse. These platforms have enabled the state to bypass traditional media channels and reach a broader audience, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of its psychological operations (Ahmadi, 2017). The use of social media algorithms and targeted advertisements has further amplified the

regime's messaging, creating echo chambers that reinforce its narratives and marginalize opposing views.

The "False Messiah" Program

The concept of the "False Messiah" program continues to be relevant in contemporary Iranian politics. This program involves creating and promoting false narratives and figures that appear to offer solutions or leadership, thereby distracting and manipulating the public. This tactic aims to weaken genuine political and religious leaders and maintain the regime's dominance (Fathi, 2014). The promotion of false messiahs serves to divert public attention from real issues and undermine the credibility of legitimate opposition movements, thereby consolidating the regime's power.

Case Studies and Comparative Analysis

The Role of Disinformation in Other Regimes

Similar disinformation campaigns have been employed by other regimes worldwide to suppress opposition and maintain control. For example, the Soviet Union's use of disinformation during the Cold War and the use of propaganda by the Nazi regime in Germany provide relevant case studies. These examples highlight the enduring nature of psychological warfare and its effectiveness in shaping public perception and behavior (Propaganda Analysis, 1943). The strategies employed by these regimes share common elements, such as the use of media manipulation, psychological manipulation, and disinformation campaigns, to maintain control and suppress dissent.

Lessons from History

The "Mahan" plan offers valuable lessons for contemporary political strategy. Key lessons include:

- **The Importance of Information Control:** Controlling the flow of information and shaping public discourse are crucial for maintaining

power (Orwell, 1949). Regimes that control information can effectively manipulate public perception and suppress dissent.

- **The Role of Psychological Warfare:** Psychological operations are effective tools for undermining opposition and maintaining social control (Lasswell, 1927). These operations exploit psychological vulnerabilities and use various tactics to create confusion, fear, and mistrust among the populace.
- **The Need for Resilience:** Societies must develop resilience against psychological manipulation to protect democratic values and maintain social cohesion (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Building institutions that promote transparency, accountability, and civic engagement is essential for countering psychological warfare and preserving democratic integrity.

Conclusion

The "Mahan" psychological operation plan, executed during the late Pahlavi era, stands as a historical example of state-sponsored efforts to manipulate public perception and discredit religious authorities. Its impact on Iranian society was profound, fostering distrust and division among the populace. Today, similar tactics are still employed by the Islamic Republic and other external governments, aiming to manipulate public opinion and undermine opposition, thereby exacerbating societal divisions. Understanding these operations is essential for recognizing and countering contemporary psychological manipulation tactics. The consequences of such psychological warfare are particularly alarming, as they contribute to the emergence of psychological problems, feelings of insecurity, distrust, and can escalate to violence, ultimately deteriorating public mental health and exacerbating socio-spiritual disorders (Davoudpour, A. R., 2024).

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