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## **So Many Similarities: Linking Domestic Dissent to Foreign Threat in Iran**

Warnaar, M.

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MAAIKE WARNAAR



## SO MANY SIMILARITIES LINKING DOMESTIC DISSENT TO FOREIGN THREAT IN IRAN



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## Colophon

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Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR), University of Amsterdam  
Department of Political Science  
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237 | 1012 DL Amsterdam | the Netherlands  
[www.ai SSR.uva.nl](http://www.ai SSR.uva.nl)



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# **So many Similarities**

Linking Domestic Dissent to  
Foreign Threat in Iran



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Outside Threat</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Enemy Inside</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>A 'velvet coup'</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Implications</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>So many Similarities</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>18</b>



## Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of Iran's hardline narrative about the 2009 events in general and the Green Movement in particular. This narrative dismisses domestic challenges to the regime as a product of Western interference. The paper shows that this narrative is a product not of simple paranoia, but an inherently consistent and thought through narrative based in existing understanding of Western meddling. The regime not only tries to defuse opposition by connecting it to a foreign threat, but also aims to justify the violence used against journalists, reformers and Green Movement activists by branding them as 'agents of the West'. Whether the regime succeeds in selling their message to a broader Iranian public remains the question, and may partly rely on the availability of a counter-narrative from the side of the Greens.

Western leaders must have been biting their tongue during the aftermath of Iran's 2009 Presidential elections. Since the Islamic Republic's regime's rise to power in the 1979 Revolution, Western governments have difficult relations with Iran, and the massive demonstrations which took place after the announcements of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory in June 2009 were an unprecedented challenge to the regime. However, instead of expressing outright support for the protestors and their favoured candidate, Western leaders merely expressed their concern about the vote-rigging allegations as well as the regime's violent response to the demonstrations. One reason for this was that overt support for the demonstrators could feed suspicions about Western meddling in Iran's affairs. This would make it even harder for the West to come to a settlement of disputes such as the nuclear issue (Kessler 2009).

Another rationale was that any Western support for the opposition movement would be its *kiss of death*: any association with Western meddling would seriously undermine the credibility of the movement as an indigenous endeavour. While this is true, in light of the West's relations with Iran in the last 30 years - its efforts to support civil society initiatives in Iran, the improvement of Iran-West relations during the Presidency during Khatami and the statements calling for an inquiry into the election results, as well as condemnation of the treatment of activists and protestors<sup>1</sup> - the West's somewhat muted response to Green Movement activism was too little too late. A side effect of the West's confrontational approach towards Iran is that reform efforts in Iran have for long been framed by hardliners as Western interference. The 2009 demonstrations were no exception to this. This paper discusses the anti-reformist narrative during the events before and after the 2009 Presidential elections (hereafter called the 2009 events) and aims to show how hardline conservative discourse<sup>2</sup> discredits reformists by framing them as the enemy inside with connection with Iran's historical

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<sup>1</sup> Stephan de Vries (2010) sums up (proposed) legislation in the US in 'support' of democracy and/or the opposition, including the recent "Resolution H.Res. 888 (2009, 111th Congress) [which] expresses 'the continued support and call for a renewed focus on the 'Green Movement' within Iran, which embraces the yearning of the Iranian people in seeking freedom, human rights, and fundamental elements of democracy'. The 'Stand with the Iranian People Act' of 2009 (H.R. 4303, 111th Congress) calls for 'prohibiting Federal procurement contracts with persons that provide censorship or surveillance technology to the Government of Iran'. And, finally, the 'Iran Democratic Transition Act of 2010' (S. 3008, 111th Congress) calls for the establishment of 'a program to support a transition to a freely elected, open democracy in Iran'."

<sup>2</sup> Hardline accounts of the 2009 events show remarkable similarity and overlap to a great extent. It is this shared understanding of the events which forms the basis of this paper. It makes use of statements by hardliners in Iran's state apparatus, government and leadership, and others hardliners who have expressed themselves on the issues. More than any other source, the author relies on account provided by the hardline Iranian daily *Keyhan* – the main mouthpiece of Iran's hardliners.

outside enemies. This is done through dissemination of an inherently consistent narrative of the 2009 events, which is made plausible by its appeal to existing perceptions of foreign enemies meddling in Iran's internal affairs.

## Outside Threat

The statements of leaders and spokespeople of the Iranian regime alike, never fail to emphasize Iran's troubled relations with the West. These views also resonate among the Iranian media, and are a recurrent theme in the reports and opinion pieces of the conservative newspapers. Some analysts have suggested that this hostile rhetoric has little importance for Iranian foreign policy, which is guided not by ideological but geostrategic considerations. However, dismissing this rhetoric as 'more bark than bite', does not do justice to its importance at a domestic level, where it serves as a source of domestic legitimacy. Iran's foreign policy discourse is replete with references to Iran's contemporary history. According to the official narrative, Iran's 20<sup>th</sup> century history was shaped by its interactions with colonial powers, particularly Britain and the United States. Most recently during the reign of Iran's last Shah, these countries were allowed a free hand in Iranian affairs to secure their own interests. Epic in this regard was the 1953 coup to restore Britain's oil interests in Iran. When Prime Minister Mosaddeq nationalized Iran's oil, MI6 and CIA together with domestic opposition overthrew Mosaddeq's government and put the Shah back in power. The 1979 revolution was directed towards this increasingly despotic Shah, but was by extension a revolution against foreign interference in Iranian affairs. The Islamic Republic which came into being through this revolution continues to see it as its mission to put up resistance against these foreign powers. Its political discourse is replete with reference to foreign powers intentions to dominate Iran by weakening it, and Iran's continuing opposition to these efforts.

Today, the 1979 revolutionary slogans directed towards an interfering West echo in Iran's foreign policy discourse. An example from a speech by Khamene'i in 2006:

'Our Muslim nations have the experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism in front of them. Now, during the period of postmodern colonialism we should take lessons from those experiences and should not once again allow the enemy to dominate our destiny for a long time' (Khamene'i, January 9, 2006).

While Khamene'i implies particularly the United States and Britain when he speaks about 'the enemy', President Ahmadinejad generally refers to these powers as the 'bullying' or 'arrogant powers' emphasizing that "the great Iranian people, with their trust in God, and with determination and steadfastness and with the support of its friends, will resist the bullying and has defended and will continue to defend its rights" (Ahmadinejad, September 24, 2008).

According to the official discourse, the enemy has many means at its disposal to assert its influence internationally, in the region and in Iran. It emphasizes among other things the military might of the West and its occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as its tight grip on the UN – particularly the Security Council, and its economic power. More than anything, however, the West is using its ideational power: an "...evil chain of propagandas and a myriad of lie-spreading and rumor-mongering media centres," particularly aimed at "provocation of sectarian snobbery, prejudice and enmity among brothers." (Khamene'i, November 26, 2009). The West's use of propaganda to create

doubt and discord among Iranians is a recurrent theme in official foreign policy discourse (see also: Khamene'i, April 6 2007, March 4 2009, October 21, 2005; Ahmadinejad, September 24 2008), and like in history "they usually try to achieve their goals through their agents" (Khamene'i, January 9, 2006).

The 2009 events are framed as a continuation to these Western policies of divide and rule. However, they were not merely directed at sowing discord, but aimed at regime change. To be sure, perspectives on the events of 2009 differ among hardline conservatives. However, there seems to be consensus on the pre-planned nature of those events by a coalition between reformists and outside enemies. Whether the initiative was with the reformists, and outsiders merely took advantage of these events, or whether the events were pre-planned by outsiders, and the reformists only acted as their agents seems to be a matter of perspective. Most sources however, imply the latter scenario, where the West aimed to trigger a 'velvet coup' in Iran. The foreign governments which hardline conservatives identified as the main perpetrators without exception Western, in the first place the United States and United Kingdom. Also Israel is mentioned as one of the designers of the post-election unrest. Other countries are complicit, but play minor roles.

President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i both emphasized Western interference in the weeks following the elections:

'[The West] tried to interfere in our election, made irrelevant plans, acted rudely, insulted the nation and supported sedition and attacks on public property.'  
(Ahmadinejad, July 16, 2009)

'...foreign elements triggered a line of destruction, arson, pillage of public wealth and unrest; they have no link to people or supporters of candidates rather they are related to ill wishers of the Iranian nation and mercenaries of Western and Zionist services'  
(Khamene'i, June 20, 2009).

In this same speech, Ayatollah Khamene'i also emphasized that "the British government proved more wicked than others in this regard," and media reports also emphasize the exceptional role of the BBC<sup>3</sup> and the British embassy during the unrest. (*Keyhan*, June 17, 2009) That hardliners identify the British as the main culprit (and not the Americans – in foreign policy discourse Iran's most prominent enemy), is probably because the United States broke off diplomatic ties with Iran after the hostage crisis of 1979-80. Since then, hardliners argue, the U.S. relied on the British to take on the unfinished mission of the Americans. The United States had tried to open an interest section in Tehran for the purpose of coordinating the post-election unrest, but had been unsuccessful (Shari'atmadari, June 30, 2009).

The main goal of the West, it is argued, was a coup d'état much in line with other colour revolutions supported by these countries. Through such a scenario, they could install a government friendly to their interests, and at the same time give in to Zionist pressure to rid the world of the anti-Zionist president Ahmadinejad (Safari, July 15, 2009). The idea that the West had planned a velvet coup for Iran is made plausible in three ways. First, the 2009 events were framed as a continuation of the West's historical policies with regard to Iran. The "British government's dualistic approach is known

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<sup>3</sup> The British media, "executive tools of the British government's interventionist policies" (*Keyhan*, June 17 2009) – had a major role to play according to the hardliners (*Keyhan*, December 28, 2009 and July 17, 2010).

from the past. It interferes in all countries' affairs by the slogan of "divide and conquer"," one source recounts. As an example it mentions the U.K.'s efforts during the constitutional movement by sowing discord among clerical leaders (*Keyhan*, July 21, 2009) *Keyhan* also makes mention of the British and Americans hiring agents in Iran to conduct the 1953 coup, and BBC's special role in that coup. "It seems they are looking for another Sha'ban Bimokh,"<sup>4</sup> it writes (June 25, 2009)

Secondly, hardliners add credibility to the notion of foreign interference by emphasizing that the West is known for its strategy of velvet coup d'états and colour revolutions (Omid, August 26, 2009) In providing its own definition of colour revolutions, *Keyhan* makes a clear statement about the nature of these coups. A velvet revolution, *Keyhan* argues, is the

'overthrowing of a system or a government in a non-military way, by provoking the people to riot and by using psychological, destructive propaganda and deceptive methods using the media and information and communication tools. A velvet revolution takes place by coordinating domestic and foreign assistance.' (Mowlana, August 10 2009).

*Keyhan* refers to the coup d'états in the Ukraine, Kirgizstan, Georgia and Serbia (Shari'atmadari, August 17, 2009 and June 13, 2009; Mohammadi, June 30, 2009), and emphasized the similarities with the 2009 events (Mohammadi, June 30 2009). The fact that the reformists a colour (green)<sup>5</sup> for their movement is seen as another sign that the 2009 events were another Western attempt at a colour revolution. Confessions by reformist in August confirmed this suspicion (*Keyhan*, August 2, 2009)

Third, hardliners argue that the attempted coup of 2009 is much in line with the West's Iran policy since the 1979 revolution, and are merely a continuation of their well-known policy:

'Since the first day of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Western powers, led by America, launched a project to abolish the revolution, or at least suppress it' (Borumand, February 7 2009).

This may sound unreasonable to readers in the West, but the fears of foreign meddling in Iran cannot be equated to mere paranoia. One should not forget that until the 1979 Revolution Iran was governed by a Shah who owed his power to the United Kingdom and the United States. More than the US, the UK is notorious for its long history of meddling in Iranian (political) affairs, and of exploiting its oil reserves for its own gain. The 1953 Coup against Mosaddeq is a textbook example of this. Since the 1979 Revolution, particularly the United States has made no secret of its wish for regime change in Iran, and has in this way also contributed to the credibility of the neoconservatives' accusations. Not only has the U.S. supported initiatives for democracy promotion in Iran, hardliners claim there is evidence that the U.S. supports the terrorist Jundallah, which fights for Sunni rights in Iran. Moreover, the U.S. is at least sympathetic to the Mojahedin-e Khalq which has been fighting the Iranian regime from abroad. Keeping this in mind, the notion of a United States initiation coup after the 2009 elections seems a possible or even, as hardliners argue, a predictable strategy (Imani, August 29 2009; Shari'atmadari June 28, 2009, August 17, 2009, August 6, 2009). In this regard,

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<sup>4</sup> Shaban "Bimokh" (Brainless) Jafari led the counter-uprising in Tehran to reinstate the Shah.

<sup>5</sup> The colour of islam, now adopted by people who "had nothing in the slightest to do with holiness – most of whom in fact did not even observe the most basic Islamic codes of conduct" (Shari'atmadari, June 13, 2009)

emphasis is also put on the similarities and links between the 2009 and 1999 street riots. (Imani, August 29, 2009; Omid August 26, 2009; *Keyhan*, June 28, 2010).

## The Enemy Inside

The reformist movement became part of the Iranian political mainstream with the victory of Mohammad Khatami in 1997. Since, Iranian hardliners' efforts gradually excluded this movement from politics. Central to their aims was an ideological campaign to label reformists as lackeys to outside enemies. During Khatami's term (1997-2005), hardliners viewed the reformist foreign policy of détente at best as "an acceptance of weakness and surrender to the enemy" (Norooz, February 17, 2002). At worst, reformists were considered the enemy's "fifth column inside the country" (Shari'atmadari, May 19, 2002). This view of reformists as representatives of outside enemies was maintained and even reinforced throughout Ahmadinejad's presidency. Towards the end of Ahmadinejad's first term, the two reformist candidates running for president (Mirhuseyn Musavi and Mehdi Karubi) were targets of similar accusations of cooperation with the enemy.<sup>6</sup> These allegations intensified after Ahmadinejad's 2009 victory and subsequent opposition. Since then, reformism is effectively targeted as a subversive activity directly linked to Western meddling in Iran's domestic affairs. Reformists have now been effectively marginalized from Iranian politics.

That according to hardliners the West initiated the 2009 events (just as it did in 1953 and 1999) does not mean that it operated without the help of Iranians. In all its planned scenarios to undermine the Iranian regime, the West depends on "aligned or hired individuals or groups within Iran". (Shari'atmadari, June 30, 2009) In the 2009 scenario, the West found lackeys among Iran's reformist elite. Confessions made by detained reformists uncovered for example the systematic relations between reformists and the CIA (*Keyhan*, August 2, 2009) including guidance and training of reformist leaders by this organization. (Omid, June 24, 2009) Also, purportedly the U.S. administration in 2007 allocated large sums of money toward the goal of destabilizing Iran after the 2009 elections, and there was evidence of direct financial assistance from American sources toward Musavi's supporters. (*Keyhan*, September 9, 2009)

While some hardline sources refer to these reformist elites as deceived people "who were under an illusion – and still continue to suffer from the same illusion" (Borumand, February 28, 2010; also: Omid August 26, 2009), it is also suggested that the reformists deliberately sought to cooperate with the foreign enemy. "The unorganized situation of the candidates ... forced them to do so," one news report argues. (*Keyhan*, June 21 2009b) Other sources concur that reformists knew they would not stand a chance against Ahmadinejad in the elections, as they were lacking domestic support (Mahjub, September 23, 2009), and therefore has to resort to the drastic measure of cooperating with the West. (Shari'atmadari, June 13, 2009) Furthermore, shared ideas between the reformists and the West made this coalition possible: *Keyhan* repeatedly emphasizes the Western leaning of reformists (Mohammadi, Februari 18 2010), as well as the convergence in interests and goals between reformists and the West. (Mahjub, September 23, 2009; *Keyhan*, November 1 2009; Shari'atmadari, May 24, 2009 and August 17, 2009) This is further supported by claims that reformists had taken

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<sup>6</sup> "One can ask why reformists share the same views with America, Israel, super capitalists and the economically corrupt," Shari'atmadari wrote (May 24, 2009).

advice from the American neoconservative specialist Michael Ledeen and philosopher Richard Rorty (*Keyhan*, 21 July, 2009; Shari'atmadari, August 17, 2009). The support expressed by Western leaders toward the reformists before and after the elections is taken as another indication of their good relations (*Keyhan*, February 10, 2010).

The main link between the reformists in Iran and the West, hardline sources show, is through reformists' affiliation with Iranian dissident groups and individuals living abroad. The supposition of reformist ties with the West through exiled dissidents provides a strong back-up to the perception of the reform movement as being mere lackeys of outside forces. Moreover, it reinforces the connection which can be made between the current 'seditionists' and those of the early days of the Islamic Republic – a powerful ideological tool. *Keyhan* for example emphasizes similarities between the Green Movement and the political left, the Freedom movement and the *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MKO) who were critical of the regime in the early 1980s (Zare'i, December 21, 2009) Other *Keyhan* articles make the comparison of the Green Movement with *Baha'i*, monarchists, the *Fedayin-e Khalq* and the National Front as comparable anti-revolutionary groups (*Keyhan*, December 10, 2009a; Fars News Agency, December 10, 2009; Shari'atmadari, August 17, 2009; *Keyhan*, November 1, 2009)

But the Green Movement is not only framed as yet another foreign-inspired counterrevolutionary movement comparable to the early enemies of the Islamic Republic. According to hardline sources, the Green Movement is also directly *cooperating* with the aforementioned groups. Some sources claim that the 2009 events were a pre-planned scenario by a coalition between the Reformist and the Freedom Movement (*Keyhan*, June 21, 2009b), while others emphasize a coalition between reformists and anti-revolutionary organizations including the 'imperialist powers' (*Keyhan*, February 10, 2010; July 17, 2010). In that last scenario, it is emphasized that dissidents are used by the enemy, (Shari'atmadari, March 13, 2010) and that they may not like to cooperate with the enemy but do not have a choice (*Keyhan*, December 10, 2009a). It is emphasized that most dissidents associated with the aforementioned political groups, including many reformists or their families (*Keyhan*, June 28, 2010; July 15, 2009; July 22, 2010; March 6, 2010), live in the West, and find support among Western organizations such as Human Rights Watch, (*Keyhan*, March 6, 2010) and the intelligence agencies (*Kayhan*, July 15, 2009). Here also the historical link is important: cooperation with for example the Freedom Movement, means cooperation with traitors, whose ties with the United States were revealed in documents found in the US Embassy during what is called the epic occupation of 'the den of spies' (the hostage crisis). This connection is also an illustration of the claim that the reform movement is disregarding (not to say insulting) Iran's historical struggles against the enemy (see also *Keyhan*, July 27, 2010). Particularly as one of the Green Movement's spokespeople, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, in a letter to Obama apologized for the occupation of the US Embassy (*Keyhan*, November 1, 2009).

The following quote is an illustration of the ease with which Iran's Green Movement, Iranian dissident groups, Western intelligence agencies and the Pahlavi<sup>7</sup> regime are connected in the hardline discourse:

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<sup>7</sup> In one article the Green Movement is explicitly referred to as the *Mofsed-e Fel'arz*, a term translated by BBC Monitoring as applying in the first place to the Shah's corrupt politicians (Shari'atmadari, August 9, 2009).

‘It should be noted that ... persons of this type, who are the key members of such grouplets such as Fedayin-e Khalq, Tudeh Party and... [ellipses as published] other groups, have been working for the British and American intelligence agencies for a long time now and serving media organizations such as VOA, Radio Farda, BBC and... [ellipses as published] CIA and MI6 even encouraged the Sawak Pahlavi to hire the services of Marxists and leftists during the Pahlavi regime in order to sabotage the revolution of our people’ (*Keyhan*, December 10, 2009a).

The “foreign based anti-revolutionary media” (often mentioned are *Radio Farda*, *Radio Zamaneh*, VOA and *Gooya News*) are particularly relevant here. They are said to cooperate with each other and with regional and domestic media in one media front, spreading false or manipulated information and deceiving people. According to hardliners, it was this media front which was pulling the cart of the velvet coup.

### A ‘velvet coup’

The enemy’s choice for a velvet revolution, according to one prominent hardliner, was simple: “Hopelessness due to lack of people’s support and realization of their absolute defeat in elections. If this was not the case, there would have not been any need to resort to the above-mentioned deceitful project” (Shari’atmadari, June 13, 2009). Realizing that a reformist candidate would not stand a chance in the elections (Shari’atmadari, June 28, 2009), there was a need for an alternative project. This project, according to the hardliners, was based on an extensive propaganda campaign which started months before the elections. This propaganda campaign is also referred to as a media war, or even a psychological coup.

The soft overthrow which the enemy had planned for the 2009 elections, hardliners argue, had several stages (Mowlana, July 2, 2009; Shari’atmadari June 13, 2009). The first stage took place in the months before the elections, when the foreign based media in cooperation with domestic reformist media tried to discourage Iranians from voting for Ahmadinejad<sup>8</sup> (Safari, July 15, 2009), for example by discrediting him and his administration (*Kayhan*, June 29, 2009), as well as discouraging Iranians from participating in the elections all together (Safari, July 15, 2009; *Kayhan* June 17, 2009; Shari’atmadari, August 6, 2009). At the same time, propaganda efforts were geared towards creating an atmosphere of doubt about the elections:

‘Announcements that the election has been rigged are made very early and this allegation is continuously repeated by domestic movements and is followed up by the foreign media who support these movements inside the country<sup>9</sup> and especially by the US’ (Shari’atmadari, June 13, 2009).<sup>10</sup>

For this purpose, hardliners argue, the BBC sent 55 journalists to Iran to cover the elections (*Keyhan*, June 17, 2009) and started a Persian service three months before the elections, and the CIA set up media centers in Dubai (Omidi, June 24, 2009). Also, false opinion polls were released by various media “in order to make the claims of vote rigging seem natural (!) and acceptable (!)” (Shari’atmadari, August 17, 2009), and claims were made that Musavi was on the winning side

<sup>8</sup> The West started a “No Ahmadinejad campaign” because of his demanding position around the negotiating table (Shariatmadari, June 30, 2009) and because of his anti-Israel stance (Safari, July 15, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> This repetition by the domestic media is emphasized as evidence of the cooperation between the reformist and foreign media (*Keyhan*, June 21, 2009b).

<sup>10</sup> Also: Omidi, August 26, 2009.

(Safari, July 15, 2009). Efforts were made to convince even Musavi himself of his imminent victory (Mohammadi, July 12, 2009), and in a coordinated effort, reformists started a 'committee to safeguard the votes' two months before the elections, also suggesting that the elections would be unhealthy (*Keyhan*, June 21, 2009b). To make sure people would take part in the anti-government protests after the elections, arrangements were made during the months before the elections to mobilize people (Borumand, February 28, 2010; *Keyhan*, June 21, 2009b).

On June 12 2009 the propaganda campaign entered its second stage, which was to spread false information about the result of the elections, *Keyhan* argues. It is considered a well-known strategy for velvet coups: "They make claims about their victory, hours before the end of the voting to prepare the grounds for alleging that the election is rigged after the election outcome is officially announced!" (Shari'atmadari, June 13, 2009). In one report, the English and Persian-languages services of the BBC are accused of taking charge of spreading the false news of unsound elections, which they had prepared in the months before (*Keyhan*, June 17, 2009). The BBC's "55-strong media group", it is said, facilitated the flow of information and provided the Green Movement with means of communication (Ibid). Another source points at "America and its allies" who "used all their political and media capabilities and their financial resources to get this false message [of fraud] across" (Shari'atmadari, August 6, 2009).

The third and possibly most important stage of the propaganda campaign was the velvet coup itself, which supposedly was planned to take place after the elections through street demonstrations. That the demonstrations were not spontaneous, but a pre-planned attempt at a soft coup by reformists and outsiders is supported by the presence of reformists figures<sup>11</sup> who were said to direct these events, as well as US financial and political support (*Keyhan*, June 21, 2009b; Shari'atmadari, August 6, 2009). Another source reports the extensive role played by the British Embassy (particularly its Iranian staff) in fomenting riots "even to the extent of being present in the riots and provoking others" (*Keyhan*, February 10, 2010). Two weeks after the 2009 elections, *Keyhan* wrote: "[...] almost all Western embassies in Tehran have during the past few weeks turned into headquarters for plotting against the Islamic Republic system" (June 29, 2009).

When it comes to the velvet coup, major roles are attributed again to the BBC and the foreign counterrevolutionary media. Aside for the already mentioned Western media and foreign-based anti-revolutionary media, at this stage in the velvet coup websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are mentioned as particularly relevant. One Iranian political scientist is quoted emphasizing that "our enemies have well understood the importance of cyberspace in the war with Islamic Iran and with the development of filter-breaking software they are trying to bring the public opinion of the people of Iran to their side" (Nezafati, August 28, 2010). The digital media proved their worth particularly in the spreading of false information, such as the presence of Musavi during demonstrations when he was not (*Keyhan*, June 25, 2009), and the dispersion of a manipulated account of what happened to Neda Aqa-Soltani<sup>12</sup> (*Keyhan*, February 17, 2010). "At that juncture the BBC Persian made use of non-professional camera pictures of the rioters and thus spread their

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<sup>11</sup> Reza Khatami, Fa'ez Hashemi, Mohammad Khatami and Karbaschi are mentioned.

<sup>12</sup> Neda Aqa Soltan became an icon of the 2009 protests after bystanders filmed her death and broadcast it on the internet. She was shot by a member of the *Basij* (Iran's militia of volunteers), but the government claimed her death was a set-up by the West.

propaganda to international domains”, a Keyhan analytical news report recounts (*Keyhan*, June 17, 2009).

Soon, it is argued, the Western propaganda campaign after the election started to live a life of its own. “The Western leaders were then deceived by the psychological warfare of their own intelligence services that also fed the Western media and they started to express their stances against Iran on this basis” (*Keyhan*, June 29, 2009). This self-deception is blamed on the West’s lack of understanding the truth of what happens in Iran, and its tendency for wishful thinking (Mohammadi, July 12 2009), which made them miscalculate the events, put aside diplomacy, and support the rioters (Safari, July 15, 2009). That the West made a big mistake here was emphasized in a later article (Mohammadi, Februari 18, 2010), which argued that if it was not for the 2009 events, the “massive number of networks” of the Western intelligence agencies in Iran would have been much harder to expose and neutralize.

This self-deception of Western leaders and policy makers was rooted for a large part in misinformation, hardliners argue. According to them, the demonstrations which took place after the elections of 2009 were a sign of deception among a small number of Iranians. The majority meanwhile stood strong behind the elected president. It is the unawareness of this domestic situation which made the enemy miscalculate grossly:

‘A big mistake of the American officials and officials of a number of European countries and their media and broadcasting agencies is that in their discourse and propaganda, they have failed to differentiate between their own lackeys, elements and rioters and millions of Iranians who have chosen to vote for a different candidate other than Dr Ahmadinezhad; they think that these people are unaware of foreign interference in Iran’s affairs’ (Mowlana, July 2, 2009).

The 2009 events provided a challenge to Iranians, hardliners admit, but by their popular strength they were able to overcome their external enemy, as they had done many times before in Iran’s long history:

‘Although the water may be muddied and the atmosphere murky and some people, for a short time, are not able to see clearly, our people carried 14 centuries of experience on their shoulders’ (Zare’i, December 21, 2009).

Since the summer of 2009, hardline sources continue to emphasize that the self-deception of the West about the possibilities for regime change in Iran continues. Despite the failure of their preplanned velvet coup in 2009, Western media continue to support the Green Movement. BBC, VOA and others remain a platform for Musavi’s “inflammatory statements” (*Keyhan*, September 7, 2009) and these and other Western and counterrevolutionary media keep trying to revive the movement by the spread of false information or tainted accounts of developments in Iran (Hoseyni, March 7, 2010). Some evidence of this came during the *Ashura* events of late 2009, as one article recounts:

‘[Western media] set fire to a few dustbins and boxes, and traffic signs and by creating smoke and traffic and shouting anti-revolutionary slogans, reproduced the scene of a demonstration and posted the recorded footages of the above web sites taken with closed frames, while deliberately shaking their cameras, so that in case anyone is

following these web sites instead of mourning, would assume that there is a demonstration and he has been left behind' (*Keyhan*, December 28, 2009).

Similar accusations of manipulation of the facts were made after *Chaharshanbe Suri* (the last Wednesday before the Iranian New Year), when the West was accused of a

'continuation of psychological operations against the Iranian people by pretending that the leaders of the sedition are not yet dead and are still breathing ... The aim of such propaganda is to cover up the present position and the real state of the leaders of the sedition, and to hide the fact from the public that they have suffered a "stroke"' (Shari'atmadari, March 13, 2010).

After the anniversary of the 2009 elections in June 2010, *Keyhan* reported that the BBC and other Western news agencies "merely carried some archived photographs of the last year's rallies reporting that eye-witnesses stated that scattered gatherings were held!" (*Keyhan*, July 14, 2010).

## Implications

The hardline analysis of the 2009 events is directly supportive of the status quo, and is based on implicit and explicit presumptions. The first is that the elections of 2009 were free and fair, and that Ahmadinejad is therefore the rightful President of the Islamic Republic. The second presumption is the conclusion which is drawn from the "historical" election turn-out: this shows that Iranians continue to support the Islamic Republic, and have trust in the system (Shari'atmadari, August 6, 2009). The people who voted for other candidates than Ahmadinejad, should not be mistaken for people who are against the system (Mowlana, July 2, 2009). The third presumption underlying the hardline analysis follows from the second: those protesting against the election result belong to a minority. This minority does not only disregard the fact that Ahmadinejad was chosen by an overwhelming majority, but also disregard the will of the Iranian people, who continue to have trust in the system of the Islamic Republic. They are not serving the interest of the Islamic Republic and rather seek to undermine it. This is not a matter of having a different opinion: "it is an issue of opposition, confrontation, dealing a blow to the system and drawing swords against the system and the revolution," Khamene'i warns. His answer to such threats is simple: "The system confronts such issues" (September 11, 2009).

Within this narrative it is not difficult to explain the treatment which Iran's 'Greens' have received since the start of the demonstrations in 2010. Friday Prayer leader Hojjat-ol Eslam Ahmad Khatami two weeks after the elections suggested to the authorities "to deal severely and ruthlessly with the leaders of the agitations whose fodder comes from America and Israel so that everyone learns a lesson from it" (June 26 2009). This is but one example of how by linking domestic dissent to foreign intervention, the Iranian regime justified the use of violence against protestors as well as harsh sentences against activists. Reformist activists' status as traitors of the Islamic Republic has equated them with enemies such as Abdolmalek Rigi, commander-in-chief of *Jundallah* until his capture in 2010. *Jundallah*, an organization based in Iran's *Baluchistan* (an area dominated by Sunnis) which claims to fight for Sunni rights, has claimed responsibility for a several bombings in Iran over the last few years. Hardline discourse points at similarities between *Jundallah* and the Green Movement (both implicitly and explicitly): both are used by foreigners to destabilize the country (*Keyhan*, July 17, 2010, March 1, 2010, and July 5, 2010) – something to which representatives from both groups

confessed (Sarayani, March 3, 2010) – and both received training and consultation from outsiders (*Keyhan*, July 5, 2010 and December 10, 2009b). Some sources even suggests direct cooperation between the two groups: “Normally the groups that receive the honour of acting as servants of the superpowers very fast manage to find others of the same inclinations as themselves”, Sarayani notices (March 3, 2010). Musavi’s silence after the arrest of Rigi is taken as an illustration of his shared fate as “lackey of imperialism”. It seems, *Keyhan* suggests, Rigi’s arrest made Musavi nervous (*Keyhan*, March 1, 2010).

## So many Similarities

The hardline narrative on the 2009 events is ridden with references to similarities: between the 2009 and the 1953 coup, between reformists and the West, between the Green Movement and counterrevolutionary groups, and between Green Movement activists and the ‘terrorists’ of *Jundallah*. The 2009 events are seen as a conspiracy between these outside and inside enemies to overthrow the regime. Through this narrative, hardliners provide a coherent and inherently consistent account of the 2009 events, echoed among hardliners in the leadership, government, and media. It ties in with popular narratives of Western interference in Iran, which is broadly shared among the Iranian public and characterizes Iranian broader foreign policy discourse. State control over the media aims to ensure that this narrative reaches the Iranian public, and that no counter narrative is available.

Whether the regime succeeds in convincing Iranians of their version of the truth, is a matter of debate. Estimates of the number of people who took part in the June 2009 post-election demonstrations suggest large numbers of Iranians no longer accept the official narrative. There seems considerable space for a counter-narrative through word of mouth and the new media. Any research inquiring into the possibilities for political success of the Green Movement should take into account this discursive dimension. Starting from the assumption that for political success of the movement a convincing counter-discourse is needed, it would be valuable to study the elements of this discourse (or discourses), explore what its discursive strategies are, and see in what way it challenges the existing discourse.

However, whether challenged or not, the narrative described in this paper functions at the level of state elite as the official narrative, and serves to justify its policies at home and abroad among this elite. As such, it provides the context for domestic and foreign policy behaviour of the current regime. This has two implications for Western policy makers. One the one hand, one could argue that much of the damage is already done in the sense that Western governments before and after the 1979 Revolution have with their policies contributed to the framing of opposition as outside interference. It would therefore be worthwhile to investigate how framing was made possible, and to create awareness among Western policy makers how their policies, which are supposedly intended to weaken the regime, are used by the regime to the opposite effect. On the other hand, even while past behaviour cannot be reversed, the battle of ideas of Iran is ongoing and Western policy continues to have an effect on this. As said, there remains space for a counter narrative in Iran which emphasizes the indigenous nature of reform efforts. It is important that Western governments do not undermine this narrative, by being constantly aware of what their statements and policies mean in Iran’s domestic context.



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## About the Author

Maike Warnaar is lecturer in International Relations at the University of Amsterdam and PhD Candidate at the University of St Andrews. Her research inquires into the ideological context of Iranian foreign policy.



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For more information contact:

Juliette Verhoeven  
General Coordinator  
Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia  
University of Amsterdam  
Department of Political Science  
Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237  
1012 DL Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
E-mail: J.C.Verhoeven@uva.nl

Kawa Hassan  
Knowledge Officer  
Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia  
Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries  
P.O. Box 85565  
2508 CG the Hague, the Netherlands  
www.hivos.net  
E-mail: khassan@hivos.nl

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