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The web of Big Lies: state-sponsored disinformation in Iran

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ABSTRACT

The 2022 ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ protests in Iran have led to the escalation of state-sponsored online disinformation campaigns. This paper aims to examine how, amidst a growing legitimacy crisis, the Iranian regime has employed a ‘Big Lie’ to shatter hopes for change by discrediting influential dissidents and hindering the formation of an effective opposition movement. Three target groups have borne the brunt of this strategy: celebrities, political dissidents inside the country, and prominent opponents in the diaspora. By reviewing state-owned media content and tweets, this paper reveals a consistent pattern of character assassination against dissidents. The ruling regime’s ultimate goal is to foster a sense of public hopelessness for an alternative to the Islamic Republic. By conceptualizing the Big Lie online, the study engages with the mechanism of control in modern despotism in the age of the internet and social media.

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Introduction

In September 2022, nationwide protests shook Iran following the arrest by morality police of Mahsa Jhina Amini and her subsequent death in custody. According to Iranian officials, this was ‘the most dangerous and powerful riot’ against the ruling regime since 1979 (Khabar Online, 2023). Despite the regime’s successful use of force to quell street demonstrations, online activism emerged as a potent force. The 2022 protests invigorated anti-regime movements on social media to present an alternative narrative on power, politics, and accountability that challenges the official discourse. Social media afforded Iranians a platform to advocate for democracy, women’s rights, economic prosperity, and international engagement, undermining the regime’s narrative of popular loyalty to the highest Islamic jurist, Vali Faqih (Golkar, 2011; Rahimi, 2014; Salehi et al., 2020).

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (2021) has expressed concerns about a ‘war of narratives’ waged by external forces, particularly the United States and its allies, to turn Iranian citizens against the regime. In response, Iranian authorities have been actively restricting the internet, aiming to regain control over cyberspace and stifle dissenting

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voices. Beyond censorship, the Iranian regime has intensified online disinformation campaigns as a strategic tool to subvert alternative narratives.

A key component of disinformation operations is the 'Big Lie', a concept we use to denote a propaganda technique in which a series of attention-grabbing small lies form a cohesive and repeatedly asserted false narrative to distort reality across media platforms. This definition conceptualises the Big Lie as 'pyramid' organised by 'a configuration of smaller lies underneath,' (Jacobson, 2018). In the context of authoritarian regimes, the Big Lie is designed to present the official narrative as unquestionable truth. The Big Lie adopted in 2022/23 in Iran was a clear strategy to promote the idea that there can be no alternative to clerical rule in Iran. This Big Lie is designed to discredit influential dissidents and undermine any hopes for change. This Big Lie has relied on online technologies to reach a wide audience, specifically targeting tech-savvy opponents of the ruling regime.

In this context, this article examines the many components that serve as the foundation of the Big Lie, how they serve the ruling regime set the political narrative about the future of Iran and how the series of lies, untruths and slanders feed into the idea that there is no better alternative to the Islamic regime in Iran.

Despite a wealth of research on online mis/disinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; De Cock Buning, 2018; Earle, 2017; Leshner et al., 2022; Lucas, 2016; Morgan, 2018; Søre, 2016; Tsyrenzhapova & Woolley, 2021; Wardle, 2017), research on online Big Lies is rather underdeveloped. Former US President Donald Trump's Big Lie concerning the 2020 US Presidential Elections – which argued that the elections were stolen by the Democrats – has led to new interest in the concept (DiMaggio, 2022; Fahey, 2023; Kellner, 2023; Weinstein, 2023). However, research is still underdeveloped in exploring how online Big Lies work in authoritarian contexts. Iran is an interesting case study where the theocratic authoritarian regime has attempted to construct a Big Lie in the face of an unprecedented existential challenge.

Iranian political system has attracted serious scrutiny, with the literature examining authoritarianism, corruption and the crisis of political legitimacy crisis (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim, 2016; Kamrava, 2022; Parchami, 2024; Rivetti, 2017). The literature has also discussed various techniques the regime has used to control the internet, including widespread censorship and surveillance practices, and attempts to build an Iranian national internet in collaboration with China (Conduit, 2022; Michaelsen, 2018; Safshekan, 2017). This paper contributes to this literature by exploring the specific ways in which the Iranian regime has utilised a key tool of disinformation: the Big Lie.

Using data from state-owned media content and pro-regime tweets, we discover that in the face of growing opposition and waning legitimacy, the Iranian regime has added a new approach to its arsenal of disinformation. Originally, the Big Lie of the regime was that the United States ('the enemy') was behind every opposition attempt in Iran. All dissent has been tarnished by associating it with a hidden US agenda. However, this Big Lie has lost its power of persuasion in the recent years as the Iranian public gains access to global news online. The idea that the US is to blame for everything that is wrong in Iran is now met with skepticism. In 2022 Iranian protesters vocally rejected that notion (BBC Persian, 2022). Under such circumstances, the ruling regime has sought to construct a new Big Lie to fortify its position. While the old Big Lie remains at play at the general level, particularly through traditional media such as television programmes, the new Big Lie responds to new challenges in the wake of the popular

movement that targeted the regime as a whole, and is adapted for digital propagation. It is designed to destroy the opposition's image online and devastate public hopes for an alternative to the Islamic Republic.

This paper makes three inter-related contributions to the literature. Firstly, it sheds light on the politics of the Big Lie, exploring the circumstances within which an authoritarian regime would devise a new Big Lie, specifically for an online audience. Secondly, it adds to the literature on digital authoritarianism by examining the learning capacity and adaptability of authoritarian rule in Iran. This study offers a new perspective on the significance of social media and cyberspace as new battle-grounds of ideas. And finally, it takes the discussion of the Big Lie away from the major cases of the US and Russia and demonstrates the relevance of the Big Lie concept to authoritarian regimes in the developing world.

To shed light on how the big lie emerged as a core strategy in state-sponsored disinformation campaigns, this paper starts with a discussion of the Big Lie as a concept and its development in modern politics. Then, we explore the original Old Lie in the Iranian regime's propaganda and the development of the New Big Lie in recent years that reflects the ruling regimes' adaptability to the changing political landscape. This is followed by a discussion on the rise of disinformation operations in modern authoritarianism and how the concept of the Big Lie can contribute to this discussion. After a brief section on the methodology, we move to the empirical section where we investigate the lies employed against three dissident groups. The overarching message that is delivered consistently is that the Islamic Republic is irreplaceable by opposition groups. The discussion in this section examines how the ruling regime has sought to discredit influential voices, thereby fostering a sense of hopelessness. The paper concludes with a discussion of what the Iranian case reveals about the functions of Big Lies in modern authoritarianism.

Conceptual framework: Big Lies in modern politics

The history of political rule is awash with lies told by politicians to deceive and conceal in order to rule with ease. Almost 500 years ago Machiavelli suggested that 'Those princes who do great things have considered keeping their word of little account and have known how to beguile men's minds by shrewdness and cunning' (Machiavelli, 1993, p. 221). The advent of radio and television in the twentieth century gave way to a new, modern type of lying that is not only outlandish and colossal, but also widely disseminated and repeated frequently. This dynamic led to the rise of what came to be known as 'Big Lies' that dominated the discourse of the twentieth century totalitarian regimes such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

The concept of the Big Lie is contested. The term has been applied to various claims in the twenty-first century, including the George W. Bush administration's assertion that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and collaborated with al-Qaeda; Russian President Vladimir Putin's lie that Russian soldiers played no part in the annexation of Crimea in 2014; and Donald Trump's claim that the 2020 elections were stolen from him (Kellner, 2023). The latter Big Lie was constructed on a series of smaller falsehoods, including claims of voting irregularities, corrupt officials, and manipulated voting machines. Trump's Big Lie and the following insurrection in the US Capitol have led to a renewed interest on the concept of the Big Lie (DiMaggio, 2022; Fahey, 2023; Kellner, 2023; Weinstein, 2023).

Nonetheless, despite wide media coverage of Big Lies, conceptual discussion on the topic is scarce. The concept of the Big Lie remains poorly defined (Bowler & Donovan, 2024; Fahey, 2023; Jacobson, 2018) and often does not go beyond a short, cursory definition (see DiMaggio, 2022; Kellner, 2023). There is consensus in the literature that the Big Lie rests on the operational premise that if you tell a lie loud enough, long enough, and with enough authority, people will begin to believe it (Cavanagh, 2021). But what is a Big Lie? In asking this question, we recognise that a satisfactory definition of the term has not been provided in the literature. In a recent article, Edward Cavanagh argues that the Big Lie is ‘the strategy of subverting or even disregarding the truth in order to curry political favor’ (2021, p. 69). While succinct, this definition leaves out some of the most important aspects of the concept, especially those pertaining to its content.

In a recent study, Lulat argues that ‘the Big Lie, which is usually a condensation of an outrageous conspiracy theory, is one of the foundational pillars of demagogic propaganda aimed at the masses’ (2023, p. 112). This definition acknowledges the programmatic elements of the Big Lie even if the notion of ‘outrageous’ remains ambiguous. Zienert-Eilts (2024) mentions two key features of the Big Lie which differentiate it from other forms of disinformation: that it is based on incessant repetition and that it distorts perceptions to a degree that it creates an ‘alternative reality’ where the notion of truth itself is abandoned. We believe that presenting an ‘alternative reality’ is a useful yardstick to distinguish a Big Lie. It will be difficult to reverse this alternative reality where ‘smaller lies help reinforce the credibility of the big lie and create a channel of facile manipulation,’ (Mishra & Jaramillo, 2021).

This moves us to our definition, that a Big Lie is a propaganda technique in which a series of attention-grabbing small lies form a cohesive and repeatedly asserted false narrative, distorting reality across media platforms. This definition helps make sense of historical and current Big Lies. As such, a Big Lie is an overarching narrative, not a single conspiracy theory or a falsehood (DiMaggio, 2022). For example, the Nazi Big Lie was that Germany lost WWI due to Jewish betrayal (Zienert-Eilts, 2024). This message was a colossal lie as the reasons for Germany’s defeat had nothing to do with Jews. But this statement also contains many false messages, conspiracy theories, and other forms of falsehoods. It included a series of small lies to shape and reinforce the Big Lie, including that Jews are secretly running the world, controlling foreign governments, and influencing German political life; Jews deliberately targeted Germany, besieged it, and wanted to destroy it. A Big Lie covers every aspect of social, political, and economic life and provides an alternative reality (Zienert-Eilts, 2024).

A Big Lie needs to be constantly repeated in order to achieve the desired effect. In the twentieth century, television and radio allowed dictators to propagate their lies to millions with ease. Thanks to their total control of the media landscape, they did not have to compete with alternative sources of information. In the twenty-first century, however, the rise of the internet and social media have complicated matters, as opposition groups use the internet to evade censorship. This has led authoritarian regimes to invest in cyberspace to spread propaganda and counter dissent.

The Big Lie in the Iranian regime’s propaganda

In 1981, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, declared that to save Islam, it is sometimes ‘obligatory to lie,’ emphasising that the Islamic regime

(*Nezam*) is one of the foundations of Islamic principles, and its protection should be prioritised over other principles (Bastani, 2018). Since the 1979 revolution, lying has become a tool through which the Iranian leadership attempts to impose a favourable narrative to gain legitimacy, deflect blame, and discredit its opponents (Bastani, 2018). Central to this strategy has been the Big Lie that the US is behind every anti-regime activity. Since 1979, this message has been widely promoted by various high-ranking officials to manipulate public perception. For example, the Supreme Leader Khamenei has said that the US is ‘the enemy of the Iranian people,’ not merely the clerical establishment (Donya-e Eqtesad, 2017). He has also characterised ‘America’s enmity towards Iran’ as ‘inherent’ and ‘permanent,’ (Khamenei, 2020). In Khomeini’s words: ‘we have not experienced as much damage from any other source as we have from America’ (Fars News Agency, 2013). This anti-US narrative has advanced the regime’s political agenda for many years and continues as an article of faith among the leadership. The official narrative aims to present the regime – which has been ruling with an iron fist for the past 45 years – as a victim and its opponents – who have been repressed at every opportunity – as tools of global oppression. When then-President Hassan Rouhani faced criticism in 2020, he said that critics should send their grievances to the right address: ‘the White House’ (IRNA, 2020). In response to the 2022 protests, sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, Supreme Leader Khamenei asserted that regardless of Amini’s death, ‘I say frankly that these incidents were planned by the United States, the Zionist regime and their followers’ (Donya-e Eqtesad, 2022). In fact, in his initial reaction to protests, he repeatedly emphasised the alleged involvement of the US, mentioning ‘America’ 11 times and ‘enemy’ 9 times in a single speech (Donya-e Eqtesad, 2022). Blaming the United States as the overarching cause of all issues and Iran as the helpless victim has been the original Big Lie in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

However, there are signs that this Big Lie has lost credibility among the public; vocal voices in the country have challenged accusations that the United States is the source of all problems in Iran. Since 2017, a poignant slogan has been trending in street protests: ‘Our enemy is right here; they [the regime] lie that it is America’ (Iran International, 2021). It has become increasingly challenging for the Iranian leadership to manipulate public perception with the tried and tired anti-US narrative. The regime response to the 2022 protests marked the rise of a new Big Lie: the assertion that opposition groups are incapable of presenting a better alternative or shaping a brighter future. This is aimed at fostering public despair over the lack of viable alternatives, thereby making aspirations for change hopeless.

This new Big Lie has been promoted by state-owned and pro-regime media outlets, especially through their online accounts (Farhikhtegan Daily, 2022; Iran Newspaper, 2022; Tasnim News Agency, 2023a). These propaganda activities have targeted influential dissidents with sensational lies, aiming to portray opposition figures as untrustworthy and to undermine hopes for a better alternative to the ruling regime. The old Big Lie was primarily propagated by high-ranking officials and traditional state media, such as television channels. The new Big Lie is predominantly disseminated in cyberspace with the assistance of mid-level officials, trolls, influencers, and various pro-regime social media accounts. This study will focus on the new Big Lie, exploring false narratives that have been constructed against opposition voices in social media.

Online Big Lies: a trend in authoritarian regimes

The deliberate dissemination of falsehood, termed organised lying, has historically played a significant role in politics, serving to advance political agendas and manipulate reality (Arendt, 1968; Corner, 2007; Scammell, 2014). This practice prioritises vested interests over the common good, allowing authoritarian regimes to exert control through information manipulation (Edwards, 2021). Notably, employing Big Lies are integral to organised lying and to shaping public perception, and to aiding authoritarian regimes in addressing legitimacy crises and influencing public opinion (Gaber & Fisher, 2022; Thornton, 2022).

In the twenty-first century, the strategic use of digital technologies to shape public discourse has become prevalent among autocratic regimes seeking to manipulate information (Sanovich et al., 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2017; Yilmaz et al., 2023). These regimes invest in online disinformation campaigns targeting dissidents, aiming to discredit influential figures and sow discord (Benkler et al., 2018; Feldstein, 2019; Gunitsky, 2015; King et al., 2017). Coordinated attacks against the credibility of opposition figures aim to thwart their initiatives and dominate political discourse (Kuznetsova, 2024; Stukal et al., 2022). For example, the Turkish government targets journalists and opposition leaders with false allegations of terrorism and espionage, while the Azerbaijani government conducts online campaigns to discourage political protests (Klatt & Boese-Schlosser, 2023; Geybulla, 2016; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). Similarly, the Chinese and Russian governments employ disinformation campaigns to discredit dissidents, framing them as economic fugitives or extremists (Kondratov, 2024; Lu, 2022; Myers & Mozur, 2019; Stewart, 2019). Russian disinformation efforts against Kremlin opponents aim to undermine their credibility and maintain control (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Lipman et al., 2018; Spaiser et al., 2017). The emerging common theme is the sophisticated use of social media to propagate the ruling regime's narrative and spread lies about challengers (Jansen & Dobrea, 2022; Stukal et al., 2019).

The above-mentioned authoritarian regimes have employed online disinformation to discredit dissidents, attempting to manipulate their citizens to perceive alternatives to the regime as tarnished – corrupt and dangerous. They link opposition figures to a foreign enemy and describe them typically as corrupt, extremist, and terrorist. This practice points to the relevance of an overarching Big Lie to conceptualising authoritarianism. It also points to the persistence and evolution of this practice over the last decades. The Big Lie in the information age has gained significant reach and force. By engaging in a sustained campaign of propagating disinformation in cyberspace, authoritarian regimes have multiplied their capacity to reach every corner of society. While this extensive reach does not necessarily equate with successful persuasion, it highlights a new chapter in the evolution of authoritarianism in the information age, and the value of the Big Lie strategy for the ruling regime's drive to retain power.

Since its inception, the Iranian theocratic regime has systematically targeted influential dissidents by claiming that they are agents of the US or Israel – the Big Lie. This narrative has targeted various groups from the leaders of the 2009 Green Movement to human rights activists, journalists, and filmmakers. However, the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protests heralded a new atmosphere. The regime faced a crisis of credibility and its Big Lie was met

with broad scepticism. The experience undermined the regime's ability to discredit prominent dissidents. The increasingly assertive voices of anti-regime opposition online – and calls for an 'end to dictatorship' (New York Magazine, 2022) – forced the regime to scale up its efforts and move beyond the old Big Lie. A new Big Lie emerged that propagated the message that opposition groups were incapable of offering a better alternative to the ruling regime. While the old Big Lie focused on portraying dissidents as agents of the US, the new Big Lie targets the personal character of opposition figures with a series of sensational lies to undermine any hope beyond the rule of the Islamic regime. This message has been at the core of state-backed online disinformation post-2022. The Iranian leadership has attempted to create an alternative reality in which all influential dissidents are seen as untrustworthy, leaving the population with no choice but to resign to the ruling clerical regime.

Methodology

This paper draws on online content spanning from November 2022 to November 2023. This was a pivotal period. The nation-wide 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests erupted in September 2022 and lasted for months. Dissidents made extensive use of online platforms to challenge the regime, share information and organise impromptu rallies. The regime saw this as an existential threat, as the protestors chanted 'down with dictator', an obvious reference to the Supreme Leader. The Woman Life Freedom movement was seen as an imminent threat to the continuity of the system which required not only traditional responses of suppression but a robust response on the digital frontier. The ruling regime's new Big Lie was formulated and propagated online in this period. This study examines two types of Persian sources to shed light on how the regime targeted influential opponents in cyberspace.

First, stories published by state-affiliated online media is examined to show they are the primary sources of lies in various cases. We have canvassed prominent Iranian news agencies such as Fars News Agency, Tasnim News Agency, Hamshahri Online, and the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA). Starting from November 2022, these media outlets began a concerted effort to promote the idea that the opposition could not present a viable alternative to the Islamic Republic, stressing that the ruling regime is irreplaceable. This campaign focused on undermining the credibility of influential dissidents through character assassination and lies.

Second, in order to identify how narratives crafted by state-affiliated media have been disseminated to social media, we selected 290 posts on X (formerly Twitter). They were selected due to their connection to lies published by official media and their narratives in reinforcing pro-regime objectives at the expense of the opposition. Also, these tweets were specifically chosen for their publication within three days of the initial narratives crafted by official media. This defined time period helps detect the rise of coordinated waves of online campaigns. X was chosen as the focus for this research because it has become a key online battleground between opponents and supporters of the Iranian regime over the past decade (Kermani, 2020).

Analysing these two types of sources reveals how official and unofficial online agents of the regime have coordinated their efforts to portray influential dissidents as untrustworthy individuals.

Online Big Lies in post-2022 Iran

Between 2009 and 2022, the Iranian regime encountered four nationwide protests challenging its rule. It is widely noted that the political legitimacy of the ruling regime is significantly challenged (Gerecht & Takeyh, 2023; Vakil, 2022). This legitimacy crisis has serious repercussions for the reach of its political narratives. The old Big Lie, that the US is behind every anti-regime activity, has increasingly lost credibility. Disillusionment with the official line is clearly evident in cyberspace. The internet serves as a venue for dissidents to promote their own narratives and coordinate collective action (Khiabany & Zayani, 2018).

Initially, the Iranian leadership sought to suppress online dissent through internet censorship but soon grasped the importance of online disinformation to manipulate public perceptions. The Iranian regime has invested in troll armies, hiring people aligned with its own ideology as ‘officers of the soft war,’ and forming some 3500 ‘cyber battalions’ (Mehr News Agency, 2021). The message of cyber warfare is explicit in official vernacular. These cyber battalions play a significant role in advancing state-sponsored disinformation campaigns against dissidents. In 2022, Gen. Hossein Salami, the commander in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), delivered a speech to the ‘officers of the soft war,’ saying that ‘Today cyberspace is the new battlefield’ (Aftab News, 2022). In a rare interview, Rouhollah Momen-Nasab – Secretary General of the Islamic Revolutionary Front in Cyberspace – acknowledged that they had created ‘fake accounts in the name of prominent dissidents,’ conducting ‘psychological operations’ to discredit opposition voices (Khabar Online, 2022).

An article published by the *Journal of Crisis Management and Emergency Situations*, affiliated with the IRGC, has listed a number of tactics that can be applied to control public protests. The article, titled ‘Psychological operation and its impact on riots,’ has conducted a survey involving 380 ‘officers’ and ‘elites’. Among the top-priority tactics are: ‘Spreading the rumour that there is infiltration among the protesters’; ‘trivializing the demands of protesters’; ‘revealing dependence of the leaders of the protests’; and ‘creating new news waves’ (Amiri & Nafavi, 2016, p. 76). These tactics suggest that organised lying would constitute a crucial aspect of the ‘psychological operations’ orchestrated by state-sponsored officers in the so-called soft war. The post-2022 state-backed online disinformation campaigns have been conducted in these conditions, aiming to develop the new Big Lie and target influential dissidents.

The 2022 protests: the surge of Big Lies

The ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ protests that unfolded in Iran in 2022 ignited a surge in state-sponsored disinformation on social media platforms. The resonance of these protests grew exponentially as advocates for the establishment of an effective alternative within opposition groups against the Islamic Republic took their message online. Against the backdrop of the a deepening legitimacy crisis, the ruling regime intensified efforts to develop the Big Lie that there were no better alternatives for Iran. In a typical iteration of this Big Lie, the IRGC-owned Tasnim News Agency (2022a) argued that opposition groups would never provide an alternative because not only were they ‘corrupt’ but

the Islamic Republic is based on 'Iranian national and Islamic identity' and the opposition could not offer anything better. State-owned Borna News Agency (2022) wrote:

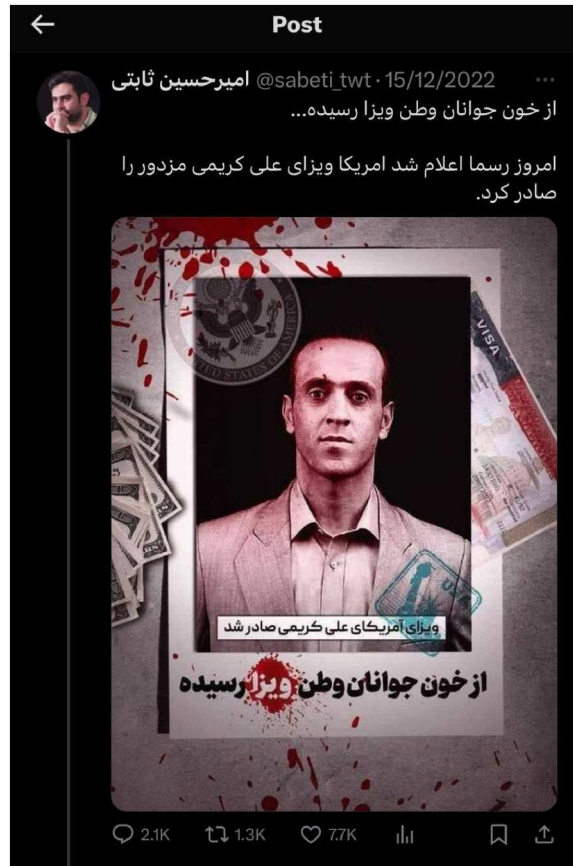
If not the Islamic Republic, who else will be? The monarchists? The People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran? The secularists? The secular democrats? The reformists? The pro-West and Pro-American agents? The ethnic groups? Which one of these can represent the entire Iranian people? Which one can build a better Iran? None of them. None of them accepts the leadership of another. And most importantly, none of them has a brilliant track record.

As such, the New Big Lie has targeted the credibility of influential dissidents, aiming to malign them as untrustworthy. Since 2022, the Big Lie propaganda has particularly focused on three primary groups. First, celebrities have found themselves increasingly in the crosshairs, as their influence over public opinion makes them potent figures in shaping alternative narratives. Second, political dissidents in the country have become prime targets, with the regime aiming to limit their impact. Lastly, prominent opponents in the diaspora have not been spared, as the regime seeks to disrupt their ability to present an alternative. In essence, key figures from these targeted groups are seen to represent a threat to the regime due to their capacity to influence public sentiment.

(A) Celebrities

With the widespread use of social media, celebrities have garnered significant attention in Iran, often amassing over one million followers on Instagram. In exceptional cases, like that of Ali Karimi, the legendary Iranian footballer, the number of followers is around 15 million. This shows their capacity to influence citizens. In the 2022 protests, celebrities were very active in raising their voices against the Islamic Republic and showing their solidarity with protesters. At that time, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei, Iran's chief justice, warned that those who benefited from the system to build a career but aligned themselves with the enemy 'must pay the price' (Hamshahri Online, 2022). In January 2023, Iranian MPs announced that they would prepare a bill targeting 'celebrities and popular figures' for 'any comment in case of contradiction with the statements of the official authorities' (Hamshahri Online, 2023). The IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency noted, 'A celebrity can cause more damage than a military person due to the connected network in society' (Fars News Agency, 2022). While the popularity of celebrities has surged, state-sponsored Big Lie propaganda has attempted to discredit them. Their aim is to reinforce the Big Lie that opposition voices are incapable of forming a better future.

For example, a campaign was launched claiming that celebrities were urging people to protest as a means to qualify themselves for a US Green Card (Jahan News, 2022). This narrative was amplified on social media. In a tweet with more than 1800 likes – a significant number in Persian tweets – a pro-regime user said sarcastically, 'Celebrities say: Dear people of Iran, take to the streets and riot so that we can get visas, green cards, and asylum' (Yas, 2022). Another user tried to mock celebrities and their followers, stating that 'worthless people, celebrities, who sell themselves and their homeland for free with the promise of a green card; Worse than that, there are those who follow them,' (Javadi, 2022). On the same theme, another user posted 'celebrities are busy, completing their resume for a green card,' (Yazdan-Parast, 2022).



The celebrated footballer Ali Karimi became the target of a deliberate and sustained smear campaign. Karimi was vocal in his support of the protest movement to his large social media following. He is also wealthy with assets worth dozens of millions of US dollars. This factor played into the hands of the regime narrative when the majority of Iranians earn around US\$200 per month. A host of state-owned TV channels used a photo-shopped image and claimed on Twitter: 'Ali Karimi's US visa was granted, derived from the blood of the country's youth' (Sabeti, 2022). This post received more than 7700 likes and 1300 retweets.

The photoshopped picture was disseminated by other pro-regime accounts. We found at least 43 tweets with the same picture and caption posted on 15 and 16 December 2022. They sought to propagate the narrative that Karimi supported 'riots' to distinguish himself for Washington and gain a US visa, a clear strategy to tarnish his public standing.

Moreover, pro-regime accounts propagated the rumour that Karimi had sold his accounts on Instagram and X to Israeli intelligence services, Mossad, for US\$2.5 million. We reviewed 40 tweets with the same message; similar keywords on Karimi were used between 3 and 4 November 2022. These posts received up to 2500 likes, typically from accounts affiliated with the regime and its cyber warriors, indicating a coordinated campaign.

The second false narrative orchestrated by the Big Lie campaigns targeted women celebrities who appeared in public without wearing the mandatory hijab. They were labelled as mentally ill, a distorted characterisation crafted by the regime's judiciary system, a rare, if not unprecedented story with coordinated media coverage. At least two actresses, Afsaneh Baygan and Azadeh Samadi, who removed their hijab after the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests were forced to undergo weekly psychological treatments for alleged mental illness (Etemad Online, 2023). Their action in promoting a hijab-less lifestyle was perceived by the regime as symbolically encouraging other women to do so. This was a deliberate attempt to stigmatise these celebrities and discredit their message of defiance. State-affiliated newspaper Hamshahri, covered the narrative on its front page with an article – titled 'treatment of celebrity with a judge's prescription' – claiming that 'bipolar disorder is the hidden illness of celebrities' (Hamshahri, 2023). Subsequently, pro-regime accounts on X started spreading the court's sentence for Bayegan and Samadi, emphasising that they had to go to see psychologists. For example, a user tweeted a photo of Samadi, saying that according to the court she has to take a psychological test every 6 months. His tweet, with four joy emojis, received more than 1700 likes and 160 replies, mostly mocking Samadi (Nazi, 2023). Another user highlighted that 'The period of appeasement with celebrities who disturb the mental security of society is over. Details of the court's judgment for Afsaneh Bayegan [shows it], particularly the part that [she] should be referred to a psychologist once a week 😊' (Barekati, 2023). We noted 25 posts by accounts affiliated with the ruling regime between 16 July and 19 July 2023, that attempted to propagate the narrative that Samadi and Bayegan present a threat to society due to their psychologically compromised state of mind.

This analysis reveals a concerted campaign to discredit celebrities, and an official stigmatization of mental illness. In response, four Iranian psychology and psychiatry associations reacted by issuing a letter to the head of the judiciary. They described the sentences issued as 'an abuse of psychology' and dismissed it as a common tactic in human history to subjugate political opponents. They provided examples, including the long-term Soviet imprisonment of dissidents in psychiatric hospitals; or the application of psychiatric diagnosis in the US history when dealing with rebellious slaves (Iran International, 2023a).

The aforementioned narratives illustrate the prominence of organized lying. The new Big Lie in the wake of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement rested on sustained and systematic dissemination of state propaganda in cyberspace. The origin of these lies can be traced back to the message in official media regarding the opposition's failure to present an alternative to the Islamic Republic. The campaign against celebrities who support anti-regime protestors was aimed at tarnishing their credibility and undermining their public standing. Portraying celebrities as opportunistic and mentally unstable made them look untrustworthy and their message of change delusional. All this was designed to kill hopes for change.

(B) Political dissidents within Iran

The second group targeted by the Big Lie propaganda consists of political dissidents and activists within Iran. To counteract their influence, the regime has predominantly favoured the strategy of arresting them. This approach is deemed more cost-effective when

compared to dealing with celebrities, who enjoy a wide reach in society and can potentially generate heightened international attention. Despite the preference for arrests, there have been instances where the authorities opted for an alternative tactic – discrediting political dissidents. Once again, the regime has employed organised lying and Big Lies against its opponents. Molavi Abdol-Hamid, the influential leader of the Sunni minority in Baluchestan – located in the southeast of the country – has been the primary target. Since September 2022, he has consistently emphasised that people should have the right of self-determination. In December 2022, he declared, ‘It is impossible to stay in power with public dissatisfaction’ (Ensaf News, 2022). In April 2023, Abdol-Hamid stated, ‘Every government in the world, whether Islamic or non-Islamic, must be supported by the people, and no government can survive by force of arms’ (VOA, 2023). In September 2023, he reiterated, ‘The ruler is determined by the people, not by God, and a government can continue its work as long as the overwhelming majority of the people want it’ (Iran International, 2023b). Abdol-Hamid’s persistent anti-regime position energised his followers to take to the streets almost every Friday for a year since the ignition of the ‘Woman, Life, Freedom’ movement in September 2022. In November 2022, a leaked report from the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency revealed that Supreme Leader Khamenei had ordered that Abdol-Hamid ‘should not be arrested but should be discredited’ (Radio Farda, 2022). This order could be the main driver that has prompted the supporters of the Islamic Republic to craft lies against Abdol-Hamid, aiming to operationalise Khamenei’s directive to discredit him. The rise of multiple narratives against Abdol-Hamid in a short period further underscore how he became a victim of the new Big Lie campaign against influential dissidents. For example, in June 2023, the IRGC-affiliated Tasnim News Agency claimed that Abdol-Hamid had planned to use a forged paid invoice to attend the Hajj ceremony in Mecca, Saudi Arabia but it was discovered by the authorities (Tasnim News Agency, 2023b). Abdol-Hamid released a statement rejecting Tasnim’s report. Nevertheless, the story of the fake invoice was significantly promoted by pro-regime accounts on X. We identified 42 tweets, posted between June 18 and June 20, 2023 that shared Tasnim’s story and amplified the narrative that ‘one of the leaders of the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ movement had used a fake invoice for Hajj.’

The attempt to discredit Molavi Abdol-Hamid has been a consistent process. In November 2023, he was once again targeted, when Fars News Agency claimed that at the Grand Makki Mosque of Zahedan, ‘80 unauthorized miners were discovered mining bitcoins, abusing the mosque’s free electricity’ (Fars News Agency, 2023a). The Grand Makki is the largest Sunni Mosque in Iran and is managed under the supervision of Abdol-Hamid. This led to a new wave of disinformation against Abdol-Hamid on X. We identified 72 posts in the first three days of the news. They directly attacked Abdol-Hamid and used the hashtag ‘merchant of Makki Mosque.’ They spread a narrative about how he urges the government to be ‘just’ while violating the law and justice himself. A few days later, a third wave of online disinformation arose against Abdol-Hamid. This time, Fars News Agency and Tasnim News Agency released a video, alleging that the US National Security Agency (NSA) had ‘directly’ shipped twenty-two Starlink kits – for access to satellite internet – to Abdol-Hamid’s office, but Iranian intelligence services had discovered them (Fars News Agency, 2023b; Tasnim News Agency, 2023b). The video included confessions from individuals claiming that the kits were intended for Abdol-Hamid. The news outlets framed it as a mission for the ‘reproduction of riots.’ Pro-regime accounts swiftly

disseminated the video on social media. One user emphasised, 'If you remain unfamiliar with Molavi Abdol-Hamid's identity, pay attention to these confessions. There have been peculiar and suspicious shipments of Starlink from America reaching Abdol-Hamid,' (Abdollahi, 2023). In response, Abdol-Hamid said that 'state-owned media have resorted to lies' in an attempt to silence critics and create discord within the public sphere (Ensfaf News, 2023).

The case of Molavi Abdol-Hamid illustrates the use of lies to discredit opponents, with regime cyber warriors closely following traditional media and reinforcing official lies. Similar to the case of celebrities, the regime has sought to spread attention-grabbing lies against Abdol-Hamid to sell its new Big Lie. It presents opposition leaders as cheats and untrustworthy, throwing doubt on the prospects of any alternative they could offer. Using social media to spread lies and engage in a deliberate character assassination has become a key component in propagating the new Big Lie in the digital age.

(C) Prominent dissidents in the diaspora

The third group subjected to the Big Lie propaganda comprises prominent dissidents residing in the diaspora. The regime's strategy involves attempting to undermine their credibility by portraying them as morally or financially corrupt. This orchestrated effort aims to degrade and humiliate these individuals while concurrently disseminating a narrative that erodes public trust in their characters. For example, as the Pahlavi dynasty seems to regain a presence in the minds of Iranian citizens, the current ruling regime has escalated its attacks on its predecessor. The primary objective is to discredit Prince Reza Pahlavi, son of the late Mohamadreza Shah and a prominent symbol of opposition to the ruling regime. On 17 January 2023, Ali Bahadori-Jahromi, the spokesperson of the Iranian regime, tweeted that the former Shah had taken national assets with him when leaving Iran in 1979. According to him, these included 'two crowns containing 5000 pieces of diamonds, 50 pieces of emeralds, and 368 pieces of pearls.' His post received more than 2.6 million views, 7200 likes, and 2600 retweets (Bahadori-Jahromi, 2023). It was an obvious false story, as the two crowns are housed in the National Jewellery Museum in Tehran. A few days later, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage had to confirm that the two crowns are indeed in the Tehran Museum (Zarghami, 2023). However, the purported tweet sparked a new wave of activity on social media among pro-regime accounts. We reviewed 68 tweets, posted between 17 and 20 January 2023, employing the hashtag 'the Shah stole [Iran]' to target Reza Pahlavi. Pro-regime users attempted to propagate the idea that Reza Pahlavi should be held accountable for the assets allegedly [?][?]stolen' by Mohamadreza Shah.

Another target of the Big Lie was Nazanin Boniadi, a prominent human rights activist and actress extensively involved in advocating for the 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests in the international community. In November 2022, when Boniadi attended a session at the United Nations and presented a case against the ruling regime in Iran, the official news agency, IRNA, published an article in which Boniadi was described with an offensive sexual label about her alleged relationship with Tom Cruise. The pejorative term may be translated into English as 'sex toy of Tom Cruise' (IRNA, 2022). The same story was published by Tasnim News Agency just two days later, and other state-controlled news websites also republished it (Tasnim News Agency, 2022b). Simultaneously, the offensive slur

was disseminated on X, with pro-regime cyber warriors posting content along the same line to discredit and humiliate Boniadi. We reviewed 30 tweets posted between 3 and 6 November 2022 that attempted to discredit Boniadi using the same offensive sexual narrative. They used the case of Boniadi to portray opponents to the Islamic Republic as corrupt, and lacking in dignity and morality. In this vein, Vahid Yamin-Pour, the then deputy of Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth, tweeted, 'The promotion of Nazanin Boniadi ... is a testament to the long-standing desire of the West: The Iranian woman is considered alive and free only when she is a dancer and in the arms of foreigners' (Yamin-Pour, 2022). His post received more than 4400 likes and around 700 retweets.

The Iranian regime has employed attention-grabbing lies to undermine the credibility of dissidents in the diaspora. The regime systematically promotes the narrative that there is no viable alternative to the current state of affairs outside the borders of the country. It is part of the Big Lie propaganda that opposition figures are untrustworthy, and the Iranian people should not expect a better future with them. The ruling regime was clearly concerned about the message presented by dissidents and took measures to construct and promote false narratives to discredit them and undermine public confidence in them.

The regime took advantage of social media, where lies can be spread easily. For instance, the tweets from the government's spokesperson on 'stolen crowns', with over 2.6 million views, illustrate the capacity of social media in disseminating falsehoods. It should also be noted that posts on X receive likes, retweets, quotes, and mentions, creating a vast network for the Iranian regime to disseminate its narratives. Also, the Iranian leadership was aware that, due to a legitimacy crisis, traditional narratives should be replaced with character assassination and the humiliation of opponents. Therefore, the regime opted to employ the new Big Lie, attempting to humiliate prominent dissidents.

Conclusion

Since the 2022 'Women, Life, Freedom' protests, the ruling regime in Iran has intensified its disinformation campaigns to control the narrative. Since its establishment, the clerical regime has attempted to control the public by blaming the US for any anti-regime activity and domestic crisis. This narrative constituted the original Big Lie, propagated by high-ranking officials, typically in traditional media. However, this Big Lie has lost its traction as the public questions the veracity of the anti-US narrative. Blaming the US for everything that is wrong in Iran is simply too convenient. A new Big Lie has emerged in this space, primarily in the digital sphere to bolster the regime's narrative in a time of crisis. State-affiliated online media and pro-regime accounts on social media have been the main propagators of the new Big Lie which seeks to convince the public that there is no better alternative to the Islamic regime by depicting opposition actors as corrupt and untrustworthy. The message being is that there is no future without the Islamic regime. To this end, the regime has designed a series of small lies and falsehoods to shape its Big Lie.

The state utilisation of the Big Lie strategy rests on two primary reasons. First, there is compelling evidence that social media provides an environment conducive to the rapid and extensive dissemination of lies, outpacing the spread of truth. Second, the Islamic Republic has grappled with a significant legitimacy crisis, experiencing four nationwide anti-regime protests from 2009 to 2022. This has limited the regime's ability to maintain

the facade of popular support. Instead, the regime has turned to systemic disinformation campaigns to discredit dissidents and undermine public hopes for an alternative. Aware of its inability to garner loyalty, the regime has attempted to spread hopelessness to ward off threats and enhance its chances of survival. A common pattern emerges within state-sponsored Big Lie campaigns against the three targeted groups. Humiliating opponents was seen as key for discrediting them. The new Big Lie, which combines conspiracy theories and slander, aims to portray influential opponents as opportunistic, corrupt, and self-serving. The ultimate objective of the Big Lie is to spread the belief that there is no alternative to the Islamic Republic, extinguishing hopes for a future without the ruling regime.

This case serves as a compelling example of how an authoritarian regime utilises digital technologies to navigate crises and ultimately enhance its chances of survival. It illustrates how modern authoritarianism can operate against the backdrop of a legitimacy crisis, by leveraging social media. Authoritarian regimes have the capacity and resources to flood social media with repeated and persistent lies, making the digital age susceptible to the promotion of Big Lies. The post-2022 developments in Iran have provided an apt case study.

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