

The Semiotics of Collapse: A Treadstone 71 Forensic Analysis of the 'Like Pharaoh' Cognitive Warfare Campaign

Executive Intelligence Summary

The Islamic Republic of Iran currently navigates a convergence of existential crises that have forced its leadership into a defensive cognitive posture unprecedented in its forty-seven-year history. A forensic analysis—utilizing Treadstone 71 intelligence methodologies—reveals the "Like Pharaoh" propaganda campaign released by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in January 2026 as a critical artifact of this shift. This report deconstructs the regime's attempt to weaponize theological history against modern geopolitical adversaries through the lens of cognitive warfare matrices—structured analytic techniques—and the "Cheerleader-Zombie-Troll" dissemination model.

Regime messaging has moved beyond political argumentation to a narrative of "apocalyptic determinism." The state no longer seeks to persuade its citizens through policy success or nationalist fervor—it seeks to terrify and insulate them through theological inevitability. The equation of United States President Donald Trump and the Pahlavi dynasty with biblical tyrants like Pharaoh and Nimrod constitutes a cognitive quarantine designed to inoculate the regime's base against the resonant appeal of secular nationalism.

Forensic linguistic data—visual semiotics—and cyber-kinetic timelines synthesized in this report demonstrate that the "Like Pharaoh" campaign represents a symptom of ideological exhaustion rather than strength. The reliance on Bronze Age metaphors to counter twenty-first-century digital insurrections reveals a widening dissonance between the ruling clergy and an Iranian populace that has psychologically seceded from the theocratic state.

Semiotic Warfare: The Static Tomb vs. The Living Fire



A semiotic deconstruction of the competing visual narratives in January 2026. The regime utilizes symbols of 'death and pastness' (stone, gold, dust) to project inevitability, while the opposition employs symbols of 'life and agency' (fire, smoke, motion) to project change.

Treadstone 71 Methodological Framework

Understanding the nuances of the "Like Pharaoh" campaign requires a specialized analytical lens that transcends traditional political science. Treadstone 71 intelligence methods provide this framework by focusing on "Cognitive Warfare"—a domain that integrates cyber—information—and psychological operations to alter how a target population perceives reality.

Cognitive Warfare- The Techno-Social Engineering of Reality

Cognitive warfare operates as the weaponization of public opinion and individual thought processes. Treadstone 71 doctrine defines it not merely as deception but as "techno-social engineering". State actors utilize this capability to sway thoughts—perceptions—and actions by manipulating the information environment to such a degree that the target population cannot conceive of a viable alternative to the status quo. The objective disrupts the target's OODA Loop—Observe—Orient—Decide—Act.

- **Observe:** The adversary floods the observation channel with specific imagery—in this case—high-production videos of historical inevitability.
- **Orient:** The adversary provides a historical orientation that invalidates the target's current worldview—equating modern political figures with ancient villains.
- **Decide:** The target must choose between a "doomed" external alliance or a "divinely protected" internal state.
- **Act:** The intended outcome produces paralysis or "Informational Learned Helplessness" where the subject believes resistance yields no result.

Treadstone 71 methodologies assess adversaries for susceptibility to these cognitive weapons by analyzing social media vectors—information flows—and intelligence structures. Analysts must observe how the adversary employs distraction tactics and content creation to foster

distrust.

The Doctrine of Estekbar in Strategic Culture

Central to the Iranian regime's cognitive strategy lies the concept of *Estekbar*—Arrogance. This term functions not as a casual insult but as a rigid geopolitical category within Iranian strategic culture. *Estekbar* refers to any governance system that attempts to usurp the sovereignty that belongs solely to God. Treadstone 71 analysis reveals a direct correlation between domestic instability and the frequency of *Estekbar* references in state discourse.

- **Secure Regime:** The state attacks specific policies—sanctions—treaties.
- **Threatened Regime:** The state attacks the *ontology* of the enemy. By labeling Donald Trump and the Pahlavi dynasty as *Mostakberin*—The Arrogant Ones—Supreme Leader Khamenei removes them from the political sphere and places them in the theological sphere. Their defeat becomes guaranteed by scripture rather than contingent on military capability. This shift signals a defensive posture intended to consolidate the ideological base against perceived existential threats.

Structured Analytic Techniques (SATs)

This report employs Structured Analytic Techniques to overcome cognitive biases and ensure a rigorous assessment. These mechanisms externalize internal thought processes systematically.

- **Analysis of Competing Hypotheses:** We evaluate whether the "Like Pharaoh" campaign represents a position of strength or a defensive reaction to internal weakness.
- **Pattern Recognition:** We identify recurring motifs—such as the "dust" and "crumbling stone"—across multiple propaganda artifacts to establish a regime signature.
- **Timeline Analysis:** We correlate kinetic events—the 12-Day War—internet blackouts—with information operations to determine causality.

Operational Environment Assessment- The Crucible of Crisis

The "Like Pharaoh" video did not emerge in a vacuum—it appeared as a direct response to two catastrophic stressors that reshaped the operational environment in late 2025 and early 2026.

The Shadow of the 12-Day War (June 2025)

Regional power dynamics shifted fundamentally following the conflict of June 13–24, 2025—known as the "12-Day War". Iranian state media claimed victory by citing the survival of the revolution as the ultimate metric of success—yet Western and Israeli assessments depict tactical devastation. Israel's "Operation Rising Lion" utilized unprecedented intelligence penetration to eliminate thirty senior commanders and nineteen nuclear scientists within minutes of the conflict's initiation. Israeli warplanes flew uncontested over Tehran—refueling freely above Syria—and loitering drones destroyed more than half of Iran's missile arsenal. The strategic outcome proved inconclusive but psychologically damaging for Tehran. The regime retained its core instruments of repression—the IRGC and Basij—but lost significant conventional deterrence capabilities.

- **Casualty Narrative:** The "Like Pharaoh" speech explicitly references this conflict—claiming that the US President's hands are "stained with the blood of more than a thousand Iranians". This figure likely conflates military casualties with civilian collateral

- damage to maximize emotional resonance and vilify the adversary.
- **Nationalist Consolidation:** The regime initially exploited the aerial bombardments to construct a "rally 'round the flag" effect—momentarily muting internal dissent. However—this unity proved fragile and short-lived.

The Economic Collapse and the January 2026 Uprising

Economic realities shattered the nationalist veneer by late 2025. The cost of the war—combined with intensified sanctions—precipitated a currency collapse that erased the savings of the middle class and set the stage for the January 2026 uprising. Protests began on December 28, 2025—triggered by the collapse of the rial—and quickly metamorphosed into a revolutionary movement calling for the fall of the Islamic Republic.

- **Demographic Shift:** The uprising differed qualitatively from the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement of 2022. While 2022 focused on social liberties and involved women and youth—the 2026 coalition included laborers—bazaar merchants—and formerly loyal conservative factions from provincial hubs like Qom and Mashhad.
- **Pahlavi Resurgence:** Slogans shifted from reformist demands to explicit calls for the return of the Pahlavi monarchy. This resurgence poses a unique cognitive threat—offering a specific—historical alternative to the Islamic Republic—a "memory of modernization" that contrasts sharply with the current reality of isolation.

The Digital Siege

Regime authorities initiated a "digital kill switch" on January 8, 2026—reducing international internet connectivity to near-zero levels. Network traffic data indicates that IPv6 announcements fell by ninety-eight point five percent—creating a "digital darkness". This blackout served two distinct purposes.

1. **Kinetic Concealment:** Security services utilized the cover of darkness to employ lethal force—with death toll estimates ranging from two thousand to twelve thousand.
2. **Cognitive Monopoly:** The blackout created an information vacuum filled entirely by state propaganda—allowing the regime to launch a counter-offensive in the cognitive domain without competition from independent media.

Forensic Deconstruction of "Like Pharaoh"

Treadstone 71 analysis identifies the "Like Pharaoh" artifact as a textbook example of "Terminal Phase Propaganda". Regimes in their ascendant phase produce propaganda about the future—utopia—construction—the "New Man." Regimes in their terminal phase produce propaganda about the past—enemies—history—survival. Our forensic deconstruction dissects the video and speech across three dimensions—Visual Semiotics—Linguistic Patterns—and Historical Revisionism.

Visual Semiotics- The Sarcophagus and the Dust

The video's central image—a crumbling golden sarcophagus bearing Donald Trump's likeness—functions as a dense semiotic node.

Temporal Displacement Strategy State artists encase a living adversary in a tomb to engage in visual wish-fulfillment. This strips Trump of his agency in the present tense—where he threatens military strikes and tweets "help is on the way"—and relegates him to the museum of

history.

- **Symbolism:** The sarcophagus represents death and "pastness." It suggests that the adversary's power—while imposing—belongs to a bygone era.
- **Psychological Goal:** This attempts to reassure the regime's base that the enemy's power remains illusory and transient—a "spider's web" compared to the endurance of the Islamic Republic.

The Semiotics of Gold and Decay Forensic analysis of the poster's color palette reveals a reliance on golds—sandy browns—and deep shadows.

- **Gold as Hubris:** Gold in this context does not signify wealth but hubris—the false light of the tyrant that cannot illuminate the darkness of the grave.
- **The Texture of Frailty:** The "crumbling" texture serves as a visual metaphor for the fragility of *Estekbar*. The regime posits that American power resembles the stone of the Pharaohs—rigid—heavy—and imposing—yet brittle and subject to the inevitable erosion of time and divine will.

Audio-Visual Synchronization The artifact operates as a "music video" utilizing specific sonic signatures.

- **Soundscape:** Low-frequency drones evoke dread while crescendoing orchestral stabs evoke conflict.
- **Editing Pattern:** Forensic analysis suggests that editors synchronized the cracking of the stone sarcophagus with the emphatic beats of the Supreme Leader's speech. This creates a dissonance intended to signal control—The Leader speaks—and the enemy crumbles. It subliminally reinforces the idea that Khamenei's words *cause* the destruction.

Textual Analysis- The 19 Dey Speech

The speech delivered on January 9, 2026—19 Dey 1404—provides the textual backbone for the visual propaganda. A forensic linguistics approach reveals a carefully constructed rhetorical fortress designed to withstand the siege of current events.

Linguistic Tactics of Erasure Khamenei steadfastly refuses to name Donald Trump directly—referring to him instead as "That man who sits there" (*An babayi ke...*) or "This one".

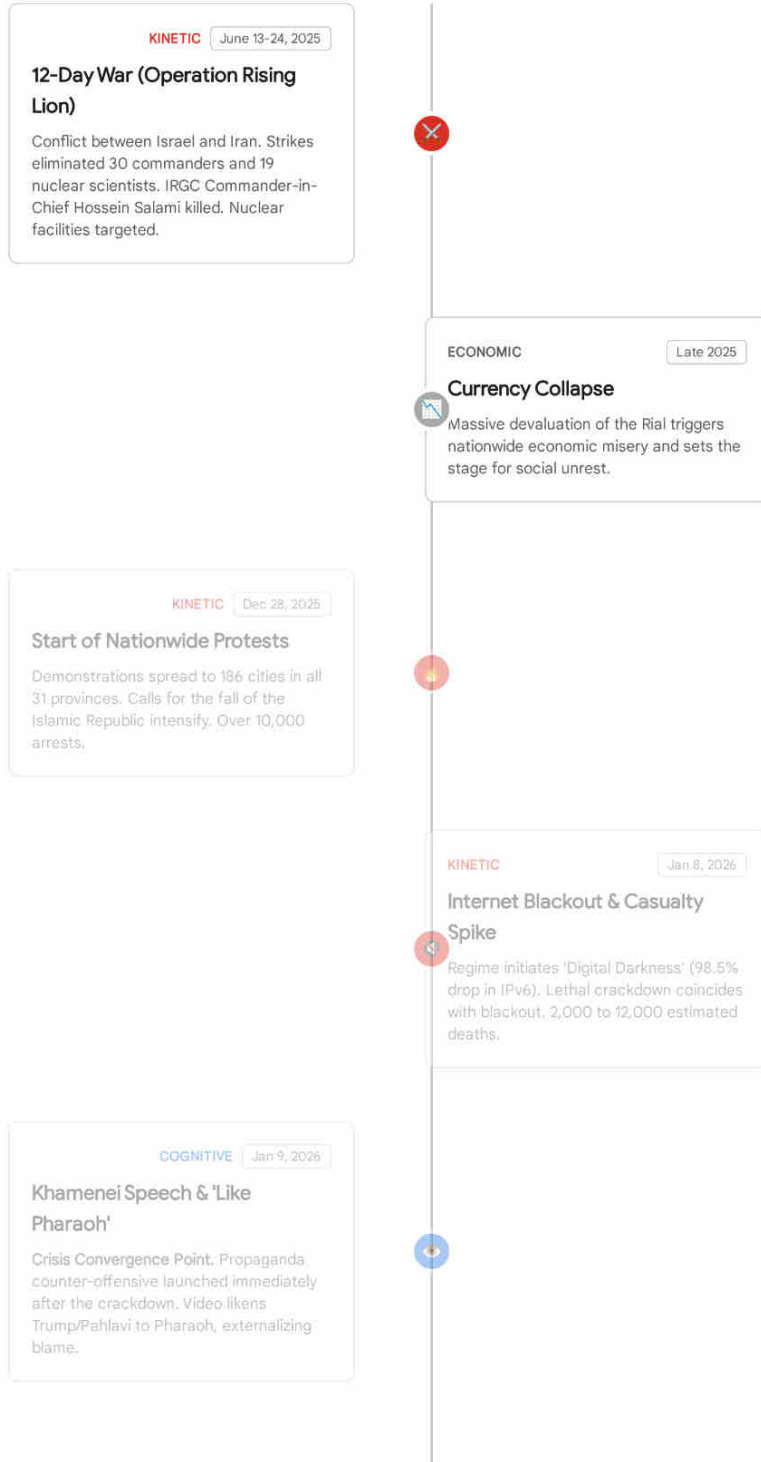
- **Demonstrative Pronouns:** Using "That man" reduces the President of the United States to a generic—interchangeable placeholder for evil.
- **Colloquial Disdain:** The phrasing *An babayi* carries a tone of informality and disdain—signaling that the enemy does not warrant a respectful address.
- **Erasure Effect:** This tactic attempts to deny the adversary status. Naming the enemy gives him power; reducing him to a pronoun makes him a passing phenomenon.

The Grammar of Certainty The concluding sentence—"This one will also be overthrown" (*In niz sargoon khahad shod*)—utilizes the future tense with absolute certainty.

- **Prophetic Tone:** Stylometrically—this mirrors the Quranic structure of divine promise—"The True Promise."
- **Active Voice:** The sentence

The Road to 19 Dey: Kinetic Triggers of the Propaganda Campaign

● Kinetic (War/Protest) ● Economic (Collapse) ● Cognitive (Propaganda)



Chronological reconstruction of the key events leading to the release of the 'Like Pharaoh' campaign. The timeline highlights the tight correlation between the internet blackout (Jan 8) and the propaganda release (Jan 9), indicating a coordinated cognitive counter-offensive.

Data sources: [IISS](#), [JINSA](#), Middle East Monitor, Iran International.

- structure implies that the overthrow functions as a universal law rather than a result of human political maneuvering.
- **Ambiguity of Agency:** The mechanism of overthrow remains unspecified—divine intervention—historical inevitability—or the hidden hand of the Hidden Imam. This ambiguity allows every listener to project their own agency into the prophecy.

Historical Revisionism- The Tyrant Taxonomy

The most critical element of the campaign involves the "Tyrant Taxonomy"—the grouping of Donald Trump with Pharaoh—Nimrod—Reza Shah—and Mohammad Reza Shah. This act of "historical flattening" collapses thousands of years of history into a single dimension of tyranny.

Pharaoh and Nimrod: The Cosmic Enemies Invoking these figures elevates the conflict to a cosmic struggle.

- **Pharaoh (Fir'awn):** Represents the state that challenges God's sovereignty. Framing the conflict as Moses vs. Pharaoh implies that divine protection shields the resistance.
- **Nimrod (Namrud):** Represents technological or civilizational arrogance—the builder of the Tower of Babel. This likely serves as a subtle nod to the "technological" nature of the US threat—cyber warfare and advanced weaponry—and its ultimate futility against divine will.

The Pahlavi Quarantine The inclusion of Reza Khan and Mohammad Reza constitutes the most operationally relevant aspect of the list.

- **Countering Nostalgia:** The 2026 uprising featured a massive resurgence in pro-Pahlavi sentiment—with chants calling for the "Blessing of Reza Shah's soul".
- **Cognitive Quarantine:** Placing the Pahlavis in the same category as Pharaoh allows Khamenei to attempt a "cognitive quarantine." He tells his followers that the Pahlavis are not Iranian modernizers or patriots but Quranic villains. The Supreme Leader attempts to make support for the Pahlavis religiously impossible for the faithful.

Disinformation and Cognitive Warfare Tactics

The "Like Pharaoh" video utilizes disinformation to manipulate perception and reshape the narrative regarding the protests.

The "Foreign Hireling" Narrative Khamenei attributes all domestic agency to foreign actors throughout the speech.

- **Denial of Indigenous Agency:** He refers to protesters as "saboteurs"—"vandals"—and "hirelings" who destroy property "to please the President of the United States".
- **Fabricated Motive:** In reality—inflation—currency collapse—and repression drive the indigenous protests. Admitting this would validate the protesters' grievances. Framing the unrest as a "performance for Trump" allows the regime to delegitimize the pain of the populace.
- **Emotional Severance:** This narrative aims to sever the emotional bond between the general public and the frontline protesters. If the public believes the rioters work as paid agents—they will not join them.

Fear Inducement and Scapegoating The regime deploys fear by equating protest with treason and divine punishment.

- **Blood Stains:** Khamenei accuses the U.S. President of having "hands stained with the blood of over a thousand Iranians"—referencing the 12-Day War. This serves to paint the U.S. as an implacable enemy of the Iranian people—undermining protesters' hope that foreign support might help them.
- **Psy-Op Message:** The subtext tells protesters: "America will use you and get you killed;

they are Pharaoh—not your savior".

The IRGC Cyber-Cognitive Machinery

The dissemination of "Like Pharaoh" was not an organic event—it resulted from a sophisticated cyber-influence operation managed by the IRGC and the Basij. Treadstone 71 intelligence identifies a specific structural model used by Iranian cyber forces—the **Cheerleader-Zombie-Troll** matrix.

The Structure of Influence- Cheerleaders, Zombies, and Trolls

The IRGC's "Soft War" officers operate within three distinct functional groups—each playing a specific role in amplifying the "Like Pharaoh" narrative.

1. The Cheerleaders (The Initiators) Cheerleaders act as the primary propagandists.

- **Composition:** These include official state media accounts—Khamenei.ir—government officials—and recruited influencers such as celebrities and athletes.
- **Function:** Their role is to seed the narrative. In this campaign—the "Cheerleaders" posted the high-resolution "Like Pharaoh" graphic and video clips simultaneously across platforms like X—Telegram—and Instagram. They provide the "official" signal and the content for the lower tiers to distribute.
- **Identification:** These accounts often display specific symbols—such as the national flag or images of General Ghasem Soleimani.

2. The Zombies (The Amplifiers) Once the content is seeded—the "Zombie" networks engage.

- **Composition:** This group consists of internet bots—automated software—and human operators managing multiple fake accounts—"sock puppets".
- **Function:** Their task is to endorse—like—and republish Cheerleader posts to create an illusion of mass consensus and "herd instinct".
- **Scale:** Treadstone 71 intelligence suggests that nearly 50% of accounts in such campaigns can be low-follower or dormant accounts activated solely for amplification.
- **Tactic:** They trick social media algorithms into trending hashtags like #Pharaoh or #DownWithArrogance—making the regime's narrative visible to the general public outside the immediate follower network.

3. The Trolls (The Attackers) Trolls represent the most sophisticated branch of the operation—focused on "cognitive sabotage".

- **Goal:** They aim to sow doubt—confusion—and division among the opposition.
- **Verbal Radicalism:** Trolls often pose as extreme opposition members—making absurd or violent demands to discredit the movement and make it appear dangerous or irrational to the general public.
- **Despair Induction:** They flood opposition channels with messages reinforcing the regime's narrative—such as "Trump will betray us just like last time" or "The protests are dying down".
- **Degrading Discourse:** They turn serious political developments into polarized "sports games"—forcing users to pick a side in a way that prevents rational dialogue.

Dissemination Vectors and the Paradox of Access

A critical irony of this campaign involves the "platform paradox." While the regime enforced a near-total internet blackout for the domestic population—the "Digital Siege"—its cyber operatives utilized high-speed—unfiltered connections to flood international platforms.

- **Domestic Vector:** State TV and SMS blasts deliver the "Like Pharaoh" message to a captive audience unable to fact-check or see alternative views.
- **International Vector:** The Zombie and Troll armies project strength and unity to the outside world—attempting to deter foreign intervention by signaling that the regime's base is mobilized and defiant.
- **Echo Chamber:** IRGC-linked news agencies—Tasnim—Fars—mirrored the Supreme Leader's claims—and their content was systematically shared in pro-regime Telegram groups. This creates an echo chamber effect where loyalists hear the same message across all available channels.

Target Audience Analysis- The Psychology of "Estekbar"

The "Like Pharaoh" campaign contains distinct psychological payloads for three specific audiences. Treadstone 71's "Target Audience Analysis" reveals the segmented nature of this cognitive operation.

Audience 1- The Base (Basij and Loyalists)

Objective- Reassurance and Consolidation. **Message:** "Do not panic—History is on our side."
Mechanism: The historical analogy provides a comfort blanket. By framing the chaos of the uprising as a replay of the Moses vs. Pharaoh narrative—Khamenei tells his followers that they are part of a divine script. If Trump is Pharaoh—his defeat is not just probable—it is inevitable. This allows the security forces to rationalize the violence they commit—they are not shooting hungry citizens—they are fighting Pharaoh's army. **Goal:** Preventing defection within the security forces and maintaining ideological cohesion during the crisis.

Audience 2- The Protesters (The "Gray" Layer)

Objective- Demoralization and Division. **Message:** "Resistance is futile—you are pawns."
Mechanism: The campaign portrays protesters as "hirelings" and "saboteurs". This lie delegitimizes their grievances. More importantly—the video warns them that they are betting on a "losing horse." If Trump/Pharaoh is destined to fall—then anyone aligning with him will share his fate. **Goal:** Inducing "Informational Learned Helplessness"—the belief that no matter what they do—the external "savior" will fail—so they might as well submit.

Audience 3- The International Community (Washington/Tel Aviv)

Objective: Deterrence through Irrationality. **Message:** "We operate on a different timeline."
Mechanism: By invoking Nimrod—who warred against God—the regime signals that it views conflict not in military terms but in cosmic terms. It signals a willingness to endure "martyrdom" and vast suffering rather than capitulate to "Arrogance". **Goal:** This functions as a "Madman Theory" inversion—convincing the adversary that the regime is too ideologically rigid to be coerced by rational levers like sanctions or limited strikes.

Strategic Outcomes- The Failure of the Pharaoh Narrative

Despite the sophistication of the dissemination and the semiotic depth of the content—the "Like Pharaoh" campaign exhibits signs of strategic failure. It represents a regime communicating in a dead language to a population yearning for a new future.

The "Zoomer" Disconnect

The core demographic of the 2026 uprising—Generation Z and the late Millennials—does not resonate with the Quranic archetypes of Pharaoh and Nimrod in the way the revolutionary generation of 1979 did. They are digital natives focused on economic survival and secular liberty. The "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement established a new semiotic vocabulary—burning headscarves—dancing in the streets—and cutting hair. These are symbols of *personal agency*. In contrast—the "Like Pharaoh" video offers symbols of *divine agency*. It asks the youth to wait for God to destroy their enemies. This passive narrative clashes fundamentally with the active—kinetic nature of the protests.

The Boomerang Effect

There is a high risk of cognitive blowback. By constantly referencing "The Tyrant"—*Taghut*—the regime invites the public to draw their own parallels. As the "Like Pharaoh" video plays—showcasing a crumbling dictator—many Iranians likely see not Donald Trump—but Ali Khamenei. The chants of "Death to the Dictator" heard in 186 cities suggest that the Iranian street has already identified who the "Pharaoh of the Age" truly is. The regime's attempt to project the Pharaoh label onto Trump functions as a defensive projection—a psychological attempt to rid itself of the very label it fears most.

Wrap

The "Like Pharaoh" campaign stands as a testament to the capabilities of the IRGC's cyber apparatus but an indictment of the regime's ideological bankruptcy. It effectively used the Treadstone 71 "Cheerleader-Zombie-Troll" model to dominate the information space during a blackout—but it failed to win the "Cognitive War." The regime successfully hid the bodies during the "Digital Siege," but it could not hide the truth of its own ossification. The video stands as a tomb—not for Donald Trump—but for the narrative potency of the Islamic Republic itself. The "Like Pharaoh" narrative is not a projection of strength—it is the final defensive wall of a theocracy retreating from reality into mythology.

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Campaign Effectiveness Assessment: 'Like Pharaoh' Impact Scorecard

TARGET AUDIENCE	OBJECTIVE & TACTIC	STRATEGIC OUTCOME	RATING
The Base Basij & Loyalists	Obj: Prevent defection and panic. Tactic: Historical/Religious prophecy as a "comfort blanket" to ensure survival.	Successfully consolidated the ideological core. Reassured security forces that regime survival is divinely guaranteed.	 High
The Protesters The "Gray" Layer & Youth	Obj: Demoralization ("Resistance is futile"). Tactic: Fear inducement; portraying opposition as a "losing horse" allied with tyrants.	Failure. The "Zoomer" generation rejected the ancient metaphors. Failed to impose a cognitive blackout; Pahlavi sentiment persists.	 Failure
International US & Regional Adversaries	Obj: Deterrence. Tactic: Signaling "irrationality" and willingness to endure "martyrdom" (Cosmic War).	Net negative strategic outcome. Failed to deter external pressure; rhetoric perceived as a symptom of ideological exhaustion rather than strength.	 Mixed

Treadstone 71 assessment of the campaign's cognitive impact. While the regime successfully consolidated its core base, the campaign failed to demoralize the opposition or deter international pressure, resulting in a net negative strategic outcome.

Data sources: [Analysis of the "Like Pharaoh" Propaganda Video](#), [The Semiotics of Collapse](#)