



## Examining the Role and Narration of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization in the (2022 AD/1401 SH) Protests in Iran

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study analyzes the role of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK) in representing and steering the nationwide protests of autumn 2022 in Iran from the perspective of psychological operations and hybrid warfare. It demonstrates how the organization sought to construct a fabricated social reality against the Islamic Republic of Iran through targeted narrative-building.

**Method:** The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1995) and Teun A. van Dijk's cognitive-ideological framework (2006). Data were purposively collected from the organization's official media outlets (Simaye Azadi, Iran Azadi, statements of the National Council of Resistance, and affiliated social media channels) from September to December 2022 and systematically analyzed.

**Findings:** By employing techniques such as emotional provocation, antagonistic binary construction (us vs. them), appropriation of the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," simulation of the scale of uprising, making hero of protesters, victimization, persistent labeling of the ruling system, and the discursive linkage of internal and external "Resistance," the MEK produced a fully ideological and regime-change-oriented narrative of the protests. In doing so, it played an active role in the project of hybrid and cognitive warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Mahsa Amini functioned as a "Discursive nodal point," while the Iranian woman was framed as the "Revolutionary Subject," constituting the central signifiers of this narrative.

**Conclusion:** During the 2022 protests, the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization did not merely reflect reality; rather, it acted as an active agent in constructing a fabricated social reality and engineering public opinion. Its performance should be understood as part of a broader strategy of narrative warfare and psychological operations against the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, Iranian society has experienced multiple waves of social protests, movements that, while ostensibly rooted in economic and occupational demands, carried political and discursive messages at deeper levels. This trend became particularly pronounced from the early 2010s onward, manifesting in increasing complexity, structural tensions, and the emergence of deep social cleavages. In this context, various factors, including economic inefficiencies, the erosion of social capital, and the intensification of perceptual-media warfare by external actors, have contributed to the formation of multilayered, discursively driven protests that blur the boundary between public grievances and regime-change projects. Within this trajectory, the nationwide protests of 2022 following the death of Mahsa Amini represent a critical turning point in Iran's protest dynamics. These protests were distinctive in their geographical spread, the intensity of reactions, and the level of involvement by foreign and anti-regime actors. Unlike many previous protest waves, this period was marked by engineered narrative construction and multilayered hybrid warfare centered on opposition organizations and foreign media outlets, which transformed a social incident into a political-security crisis (Nasri, 2022 AD/1401 SH; Momeni, 2023 AD/1402 SH).

Within this framework, the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), as one of the most prominent opposition groups to the Islamic Republic, sought to play a guiding and destructive role in the 2022 protests by leveraging media outlets, social networks, fake news, and cognitive warfare. This organization, whose record includes collaboration with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War and the assassination of officials of the Islamic Republic, has, over the past decade, placed particular emphasis on projects of "Soft Regime Change" and infiltration into the minds and psyches of Iranian society through media and psychological operations (NCRI, 2022; Iran Interlink, 2023).

During the nationwide protests of 2022, the MEK attempted to actively shape public opinion by employing advanced psychological operations techniques. For years, the organization has based part of its regime-change strategy on the production and redistribution of narratives rooted in exaggeration, fabrication, and data distortion. During the 2022 protests, it sought to continue this strategy using newer media environments and more sophisticated psychological techniques. Given the organization's long history of politically exploiting domestic events in Iran, analyzing its psychological operations mechanisms can offer a useful model for understanding external media interventions in Iran's social transformations.

Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following main question: ‘How, and through which techniques, did the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization attempt to intervene in the 2022 protests through media and psychological operations and influence public opinion inside Iran?’ This question is particularly significant because, in recent years, the organization’s psychological operations have moved beyond classical forms toward extensive use of new digital platforms, including social networks, anonymous Telegram channels, fake Twitter accounts, bot networks, and the construction of artificial celebrities. Therefore, a scientific examination of this trend contributes to a deeper understanding of how the organization’s discourse is constructed in the new media environment.

The significance of this research can be examined from two perspectives: "First, providing a systematic and evidence-based analysis of the psychological–media mechanisms of one of the most active regime-change opposition groups; and second, assisting academic, media, and security institutions in identifying emerging forms of cognitive warfare and developing effective countermeasures. Moreover, by addressing a highly contemporary issue, this study helps fill existing research gaps in soft security and cognitive warfare."

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the techniques, methods, and mechanisms of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization’s psychological operations during the 2022 protests.

Secondary objectives include:

- A) Identifying the organization’s media narrative-building techniques on social networks.
- B) Examining the linkage between these narratives and anti-Iranian foreign actors.
- C) Analyzing the impact of the organization’s psychological operations on domestic audience perceptions.

This study addresses the following key questions:

1. What psychological and media techniques did the MEK employ during the 2022 protests?
2. What narratives did the MEK produce and disseminate during this period?
3. How these operations were connected to other foreign media actors?
4. To what extent did these operations influence public perception within Iran?

The main hypothesis of the research is that the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, through cognitive warfare techniques and extensive use of social media platforms, sought to shape public perception in line with its regime-change objectives by presenting a specific narrative of the protests. Within this framework, techniques such as emotional narrative construction, exaggeration of violence, fabrication of statistics, victim-centered imagery of protesters, and

the sanitization of the organization's own image were pursued through targeted dissemination of content in Persian-language media environments.

This research adopts a qualitative approach and employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Its theoretical framework is based on Norman Fairclough's three-level model, textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, and is reinforced by Teun van Dijk's context-oriented approach.

The analytical corpus consists of the MEK's official media content, including Simaye Azadi (<https://www.mojahedin.org>) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran (<https://www.ncri.org>), during the period from September to December 2022. Data were selected purposively and analyzed at lexical, semantic, and contextual levels. This method enables an examination of the linguistic, ideological, and social-contextual dimensions of the organization's narrative construction.

The research population includes all media productions of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization from October 2022 to March 2024. Due to the extensive volume of data, purposive sampling was conducted, focusing on the most viewed and most interacted-with content published on social media platforms and official websites. Emphasis was placed on content that generated the highest levels of redistribution and audience engagement. Data analysis was conducted using Critical Discourse Analysis with a focus on linguistic, semantic, and visual components. Each media message was examined based on the following axes:

- A)** The manner of representing actors (the people, the state, and the organization).
- B)** Psychological techniques employed (arising emotion, exaggeration, victimization).
- C)** Intertextual links and references to external sources.
- D)** Visual indicators and semiotic elements.

To validate the findings, two methods were employed:

1. Comparing the results with other credible domestic and international studies in the field of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization's psychological operations.
2. Reviewing the findings by two independent experts in media and psychological warfare to assess analytical accuracy and prevent potential bias.

The present study demonstrates several innovative features. First, it focuses on a systematic academic analysis of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization's psychological operations within a contemporary event that has thus far received limited scholarly attention. Second, the use of the organization's primary-source materials alongside a rigorous theoretical framework elevates the research beyond descriptive analysis toward a critical and analytical examination.

Third, linking the organization's discourse to broader trends of hybrid and cognitive warfare against the Islamic Republic of Iran strengthens the study's geopolitical dimension.

Despite studies on media discourse analysis of opposition groups, the novelty of this research lies in examining, using primary data and within a hybrid warfare framework, the media narratives produced by the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization regarding the 2022 protests. This innovation can be articulated along several key axes: the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to opposition media; a focused examination of a specific organization with a complex, multilayered history in soft warfare; and the analysis of a live, ongoing event that remains present in the collective memory of Iranian society. From this perspective, the study not only offers scholarly findings but may also serve as a foundation for formulating counter-policy strategies in the domains of media and soft security.

## **1. Theoretical Framework: Social Protests and Narrative Construction**

For a systematic and scientific analysis of media discourse, it is essential to recognize that media are not merely conveyors of messages but function as active agents in the construction of social reality. Through selection, emphasis, and omission of elements of reality, media create specific narratives of events that can shape public perception. Media narrative construction is a meaning-making process through which media, using language, imagery, and semantic structures, produce a version of reality that may or may not correspond to objective reality. This process becomes particularly salient during crises such as social protests, when competition among narratives for dominance over public opinion reaches its peak.

### **1.1. Key Concepts: Protest, Narrative, and Media Agency**

Given the central role of media in assigning meaning to social protests, it is necessary, prior to engaging with the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, to clarify the foundational concepts upon which this study is based: "Protest, narrative, and media agency. These concepts facilitate a deeper understanding of the context of the 2022 protests and establish a clear connection between discourse theories and the empirical analysis."

### **1.1.1. Protest**

In its general sense, protest is a social action that emerges in response to unjust conditions, oppressive structures, or widespread dissatisfaction. Depending on the social, political, and cultural context, it may range from symbolic expressions to street-level mobilization. From a discursive perspective, protest is not merely a behavioral reaction but a means of redefining collective identity and articulating political alternatives in the public sphere (Tilly, 2004: 3–4). In media discourse, how protests are narrated shapes their meaning and position within collective memory and public opinion.

### **1.1.2. Narration**

Narration extends beyond a mere sequence of events; it is a meaning-generating structure that provides events with form, direction, and logic. In discourse studies, media narratives function as tools for organizing social experience by selecting actors, constructing causal relations, and emphasizing or omitting specific elements (Toolan, 1988). Every narrative contains an evaluative and ideological framework and is stabilized in media through language, imagery, sound, and repetition. Political organizations, particularly in times of crisis, employ narrative construction to present their interpretation of reality as the dominant reading.

### **1.1.3. Media Agency**

A media agency is a conscious, strategic use of communication tools to influence public opinion, mobilize actors, and construct social reality. In the era of new media, political organizations and movements are not merely content producers but active players in the arena of meaning. The Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, through its satellite television channel "Simaye Azadi," its official website (<https://www.mojahedin.org>), and sustained activity on social media platforms, utilizes media as a tool for self-representation and distortion of the "Other." The organization's media agency constitutes a systematic effort to produce and disseminate alternative discourse, create emotional polarizations, and channel political emotions through narrative construction (Mojahedin.org, 2022).

In social science literature, theorists such as Stuart Hall and Nick Cobley (Hall, 1997; Cobley, 2001) emphasize that media, through framing, subject selection, metaphor usage, and lexical emphasis, do not merely reflect reality but actively "Redefine" it. Media narrative thus



represents a form of ideological representation capable of legitimizing or delegitimizing political actors.

Within this framework, media discourse analysis must move beyond surface-level description and address hidden mechanisms of narrative construction, power structures, and linguistic strategies. Media effectively "Mediate Reality," and analyzing this mediation requires approaches such as Critical Discourse Analysis and cognitive discourse analysis.

Accordingly, analyzing the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization's discourse on the 2022 protests requires a precise, multilayered theoretical framework. Political discourse, particularly during periods of social crisis, is not merely a reflection of reality but an integral component of the production of meaning, power, and legitimacy. Understanding the linguistic, media, and ideological mechanisms of organizations, therefore, requires reliance on theories capable of revealing the hidden layers embedded within media messages.

## **1.2. Fairclough's Model**

To uncover the latent layers of media discourse, Norman Fairclough's theoretical framework in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides an effective analytical tool. Through his three-dimensional model, Fairclough demonstrates how discourses simultaneously reflect and reproduce social realities. These three dimensions include:

### **1) Textual Level**

This level involves close analysis of vocabulary, syntactic structures, metaphors, omissions, and modes of reference. Here, language is examined as a tool for organizing meaning.

### **2) Discursive Practice**

This dimension focuses on the processes of discourse production, distribution, and consumption, revealing how texts are constructed, disseminated through media, and interpreted by audiences.

### **3) Social Practice**

This level addresses the broader social context, power relations, ideologies, and institutional structures within which discourse is produced. Fairclough (1995; 2003) emphasizes that discourse functions both as a means of representing the world and as an instrument of power and domination. He conceptualizes discourse analysis as a form of "Social Critique" that exposes the hidden ideological mechanisms embedded in language. Within this framework, the media discourse of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization can

be analyzed as an ideological instrument for shaping public opinion, delegitimizing the governing system, and constructing an alternative narrative of events.

This model enables the present study to systematically examine the organization's narrative construction mechanisms by integrating analyses of language, discursive processes, and social context.

### **1.3. Teun A. van Dijk's Discourse Theory**

Alongside Fairclough's approach, Teun A. van Dijk's cognitive discourse analysis is employed to gain deeper insight into the ideological dimensions of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization's media discourse. Van Dijk conceptualizes discourse not merely as text or speech, but as a multidimensional structure intertwined with cognitive systems, collective memory, and audience mental processes. According to him, language is the primary instrument for representing ideology and controlling social cognition (Van Dijk, 1998; 2006). One of the key concepts in van Dijk's model is the "Us/Them dichotomy." In this framework, ideological discourses divide the world into a virtuous, victimized, and resistant "Us" versus an oppressive, illegitimate, and hostile "Them," guiding audience cognition toward a particular interpretation of reality. This binary structure is especially effective in opposition discourses, serving as a powerful tool for social polarization and political mobilization.

Van Dijk argues that ideological discourses influence collective memory and audience orientation through mechanisms such as selective repetition of key terms, use of emotional metaphors, emphasis on victimhood, and the omission or distortion of opposing viewpoints (Van Dijk, 2006). This model is particularly illuminating for analyzing media discourses operating within political crises, such as the 2022 protests, where narrative competition plays a decisive role.

In the present study, van Dijk's approach enables us to demonstrate how the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), through the use of emotional language and polarized imagery, not only represents reality but also seeks to engineer the audience's cognition and construct an "Alternative Truth."

By combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model with van Dijk's cognitive framework, a comprehensive and coherent analytical structure is provided for examining media discourse, particularly in crisis contexts. Together, these two theories enable a multidimensional reading of texts that attends simultaneously to the linguistic and structural levels of messages, the



processes of meaning production and reproduction, and the broader ideological and social contexts in which discourse operates.

#### **1.4. Media Discourse Analysis of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization**

In the context of the 2022 protests, the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization sought to leverage its media capacities to construct a specific, directional narrative of events. This narrative was not merely a collection of news reports or analytical commentaries, but rather the outcome of a complex process of linguistic, cognitive, and ideological representations formed within the arena of narrative warfare.

In the following sections, drawing on the aforementioned theoretical framework, the MEK's media discourse will be systematically analyzed at three levels, linguistic, discursive, and social, to clarify how the organization has used media language to participate in reality construction, cognitive control, and the engineering of public opinion.

##### **1.4.1. First-Level Analysis: Language and Textual Structures in the Organization's Narrative**

During social protests, language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as a political and discursive action in the construction of social reality. From Fairclough's perspective, the first level of Critical Discourse Analysis focuses on the close examination of linguistic elements within texts, vocabulary, syntactic structures, metaphors, omissions, referential strategies, and semantic patterns, all of which shape audience perception (Fairclough, 1995).

In the media discourse of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, language is used not only to convey news but also to create an alternative, emotionally charged narrative of the protests. Through the repetitive use of keywords such as "Khamenei's IRGC forces," "The brutal regime," "Martyrs of the path to freedom," and "Shots fired at the heart of Iran," the organization seeks to portray the Islamic Republic as a "Violent Other," while simultaneously representing protesters as symbols of an "Oppressed people." Within this linguistic structure, concepts are heavily ideological, and the use of war-like, bloody, and heroic metaphors amplifies emotions, inciting collective sentiment (Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, 2022b; retrieved from <https://www.mojahedin.org/news/848573>).

Within van Dijk's theoretical framework, such language exemplifies the "Us/Them" dichotomy, in which "Us" encompasses people, victims, and protesting youth, while "Them" refers to the military, government leaders, and ruling power structures. The attribution of the most negative characteristics to the other (such as "Criminal," "Killing Machine," and "Agent of repression") alongside heroic portrayals of "Us" constitutes a classic mechanism of cognitive control and ideological bias induction (Van Dijk, 2006). See also the political discussion on the prospects of a "Revolutionary Uprising" broadcast on *Simaye Azadi* (2022 AD/1401 SH), retrieved from <https://www.mojahedin.org/news/849045>.

Lexical analysis reveals that MEK-affiliated media not only select specific terms but also reinforce them through persistent and selective repetition in headlines, captions, subtitles, and voice-overs, thereby contributing to the normalization of violence and making emotional of reality. This linguistic strategy serves to construct a narrative depicting a "People's battle against a brutal enemy." (Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, 2022 AD/1401 SH (b); see also <https://www.mojahedin.org/news/848573>)

#### **1.4.2. Second-Level Analysis: Production and Reproduction of Protest Discourse**

The second level of Fairclough's CDA model examines discursive processes, how media texts are produced, through which channels they are distributed, and how audiences consume and interpret them (Fairclough, 2003). This level represents the intersection of text with institutional and media structures, where media act not merely as reflectors of events but as active agents in meaning engineering and public opinion management.

During the 2022 protests, the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization employed a coherent and multilayered media apparatus to produce and reproduce protest discourse. This apparatus included:

1. The satellite television channel *Simaye Azadi*;
2. The news-analytical website *Iran Efshagar* (<https://mojahedin.org>, 2022);
3. Active social media accounts (Twitter/X, Instagram, Telegram) utilizing targeted hashtag campaigns;
4. Documentary videos, edited subtitles, and daily podcasts (Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, 2022 AD/1401 SH (b); <https://www.mojahedin.org/news/848573>)

Across these platforms, messages were reproduced in a guided and repetitive manner, from continuous broadcasting of scenes of repression and bloodshed, to the magnification of victim

figures such as Mahsa Amini and Nika Shakarami, to quasi-journalistic analyses emphasizing the "Imminent collapse of the regime" (<https://mojahedin.org>).

In Fairclough's framework, such representations constitute not merely media content but discursive actions aimed at reproducing ideology and constructing political reality.

Moreover, the organization amplified its message through cooperation and discursive synergy with foreign Persian-language media outlets such as Iran International, Voice of America, and occasionally BBC Persian. This process of "Mutual reflection and reinforcement" created a form of discursive synergy through which a particular narrative of the protests gained legitimacy and circulation across multiple media platforms (BBC Persian, 2022).

From van Dijk's perspective, this process illustrates the gradual consolidation of collective memory through the repetition of specific propositions and the use of lexical branding. Each exposure to images of confrontation and recurring terms such as "Repressive regime" or "Freedom movement" adds a new cognitive layer to the audience's mental schema

#### **1.4.3. Third-Level Analysis: Social Context, Ideology, and the Objectives of MEK Discourse**

At the third level of Fairclough's analysis, attention shifts to the social context and power structures within which discourse emerges, operates, and contributes to their reproduction or destabilization (Fairclough, 1995). At this stage, analysis moves beyond text and media production into the domain of ideology, domination, resistance, and struggles for legitimacy.

As a political actor positioning itself as an alternative to the Islamic Republic, the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization has consistently sought to exploit moments of crisis, particularly popular protests, to gain legitimacy and embed itself within collective memory. The 2022 protests, as one of the most extensive and resonant social mobilizations of the past two decades, provided the organization with a strategic opportunity to promote a radical and regime-change narrative as the dominant discourse through its media outlets (Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, 2022 AD/1401 SH (a); <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

Within the organization's media discourse, concepts such as "Nationwide uprising," "Revolutionary Leadership Council," and "National Liberation Army" are carefully selected and reproduced (Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization, 2022 AD/1401 SH (b)). Statements by the so-called Liberation Army broadcast on *Simaye Azadi* (27 Mehr 1401 / October 19, 2022; <https://www.iranntv.com>) serve simultaneously to:

- Emphasize the "Popular" nature of the protests.
- Consolidate the organization's role as the "Only organized force ready to replace the system."

This process corresponds precisely to what van Dijk describes as discursive strategies of speaker legitimization (van Dijk, 1998): presenting oneself as the authentic voice of the people while depicting the other as a repressive, bloodthirsty, and irreformable regime (Simaye Azadi, 2022 AD/1401 SH).

Furthermore, the repeated use of statements such as "This uprising marks the end of the system," "Resistance units are expanding," or "The Liberation Army is ready to enter Iran" constitutes part of the organization's linguistic policy aimed at constructing a sense of imminent regime collapse. These techniques can be analyzed through Fairclough's concept of discursive presupposition, whereby specific meanings are naturalized without being explicitly stated.

Additionally, the organization's media narratives operate heavily on emotional registers. From the portrayal of grieving mothers to edited scenes of street repression, all elements are designed to generate anger, empathy, and a perceived necessity for collective action. This aligns with van Dijk's conceptualization of the cognitive dimension of discourse and the engineering of beliefs and attitudes.

Ultimately, the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization's discourse surrounding the 2022 protests represents an attempt to redefine Iran's reality from the perspective of a structured opposition equipped with media tools, aiming to monopolize revolutionary discourse in the minds of domestic and international audiences.

In sum, analysis of the MEK's media discourse regarding the 2022 protests demonstrates that the organization has consciously employed linguistic, syntactic, semantic, and discursive mechanisms to represent a particular version of reality and, through it, strengthen its position in the field of political struggle. From Fairclough's perspective, this discourse derives meaning not only at the lexical or syntactic level but also in ideological and social domains, serving to reproduce or redefine power relations. Simultaneously, van Dijk's framework clarifies how cognitive mechanisms and semantic strategies are utilized to persuade audiences, create polarizations, and stabilize specific beliefs within the target society. Accordingly, the MEK's media discourse can be understood as a coherent effort at narrative construction, meaning production, and collective memory formation during moments of

crisis, an effort in which media function not merely as reflectors of reality but as effective agents in its construction.

Given the theoretical framework presented, particularly Fairclough's three-level model and van Dijk's ideological approach, it is now necessary to more precisely elaborate the foundational concepts upon which the forthcoming analysis is based. Three key concepts, "Protest" as a social and political action, "Narrative" as a meaning-making tool, and "Media Agency" as a strategy of discourse production and representation, provide a deeper understanding of the discursive function of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization's media. These concepts serve as mediating links between theory and empirical analysis, paving the way for the subsequent chapter.

## **2. The Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization and the Narrative of Protests: Narrative Functions and Media Strategies**

Following the analysis of the media discourse of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MEK), the focus now turns to the organization's modes of narrative construction regarding the 2022 protests. By drawing on its media capacities, most notably *Simaye Azadi* (Freedom TV) and its official website (<https://www.mojahedin.org>), the MEK has sought to craft a representation of street unrest that aligns with its own discursive objectives. This process of narrative construction is not merely aimed at presenting a particular image of social reality; rather, from the perspective of political discourse, it constitutes an effort to redefine the organization's relationship with society and the ruling power. In this section, the MEK's master narratives and subsidiary narratives concerning the protests are examined, with particular emphasis on the dominant themes circulating in its official media outlets.

### **2.1. The Master Narrative: The People–Regime Binary as a Battle Between Good and Evil**

At the core of the MEK's media narrative of the 2022 protests lies a moral–evaluative binary between a "Wronged, aware, and heroic nation" and a "Repressive, corrupt, and illegitimate government." This binary serves as the overarching framework for the organization's media discourse and is repeatedly reproduced across its messages, reports, statements, and visual productions. Within this narrative, the protests are not framed as a social or economic crisis but rather as a "Freedom-seeking uprising" and a "revolutionary movement," the legitimate

historical continuation of decades-long struggles by the Iranian people against "Religious Dictatorship." (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2006)

For example, in a visual report broadcast by *Simaye Azadi* on 17 September 2022 entitled "The Response of the Uprising People to the Repressors in the Streets of Tehran," scenes depict young protesters confronting security forces. Throughout the video, the narrator emphatically declares:

"This generation will not return; this uprising is a revolution; these people are the Army of Freedom." (*Simaye Azadi*, 2022 AD/1401 SH; <https://www.iranntv.com>)

This symbolic language not only portrays the people as conscious agents but also places them within the organized framework of the "Army of Freedom," a term uniquely associated with the organization's military wing, the National Liberation Army of Iran.

Recurring slogans such as "Death to the oppressor, whether Shah or Supreme Leader," "Woman, Life, Freedom," and "Army of Freedom, Freedom, Freedom," prominently highlighted in the MEK's visual and written reports, serve to reinforce this narrative binary and intensify revolutionary rhetoric (MEK Website, 2022 AD/1401 SH; <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

In its official statements, particularly during the early weeks of the protests, the MEK persistently reiterates concepts such as "Nationwide uprising," "The risen people," "The National Council of Resistance," and "The National Liberation Army of Iran." For instance, Statement No. 69 of the National Council of Resistance (21 September 2022) declares:

"These protests are not a blind reaction, but the manifestation of the Iranian nation's historical will to overthrow the entirety of the Velayat-e Faqih regime. The National Council of Resistance, the sole democratic alternative, stands ready to transfer sovereignty to the people."

(MEK, 2022 AD/1401 SH (b); <https://www.mojahedin.org>)

Within this framework, the organization presents itself not as an external actor but as an integral part of the "Collective will of the nation," possessing the capacity to lead and guide the protests. Repeated references to notions such as "Organizational Readiness," the "Leader of the Resistance" (Maryam Rajavi), and the "Revolutionary Leadership Council" in official statements all serve to consolidate this narrative position (MEK, 2022 AD/1401 SH (a); <https://www.ncr-iran.org/fa/>).

Strategically, this master narrative pursues three objectives:

- 1) Delegitimizing the Islamic Republic by portraying it as the "Enemy of the people."
- 2) Legitimizing the protests by representing the people as "Conscious and heroic subjects."
- 3) Consolidating the role of the MEK as the sole organized force and political alternative.

This narrative construction exemplifies the "Construction of reality through language," a concept central to critical discourse analysis, particularly within Norman Fairclough's theoretical framework, where language is used to represent events in accordance with discursive and ideological objectives (Fairclough, 1995). From Van Dijk's perspective, such narrative representations contribute to the stabilization of structures of domination and resistance at both cognitive and social levels (Van Dijk, 2006).

## **2.2. The Narrative of Woman as a Revolutionary Subject**

In the MEK's media discourse surrounding the 2022 protests, Iranian women are represented not merely as symbols of suffering or repression, but as revolutionary, conscious, and pioneering subjects within the "Battlefield for freedom." This representation goes beyond conventional portrayals of women as victims, positioning them instead as heroes, leaders, and active agents, thus simultaneously carrying a strong political-ideological charge (Van Dijk, 2006: 123). Within this framework, the portrayal of women functions not only as an expression of identity but also as a discursive strategy for legitimizing resistance.

The central symbol of this representation is undoubtedly Mahsa Amini, a young woman whose death, according to the MEK's narrative, ignited a women-led revolution against religious dictatorship. In much of the organization's media content, Mahsa Amini is referred to as "Another name for freedom." For example, in a special *Simaye Azadi* program titled "Mahsa: The Silenced Voice of All Iranian Women" (broadcast on 24 September 2022), the host states:

"Mahsa was not just a girl; she was the initiator of a revolution. She became the standard-bearer of women who were suppressed for decades but now stand upright."

(*Simaye Azadi*, 24 September 2022 AD/1401 SH; <https://www.mojahedin.org>)

Similarly, an official MEK statement issued on 17 September 2022 declares:

"The killing of Mahsa Amini is the boiling point of rage that has burned for years in the hearts of Iranian women. This blood marks the beginning of an uprising, an uprising that women will lead."



(MEK, 2022 AD/1401 SH (a); <https://www.mojahedin.org/news/87560>)

In this narrative, Mahsa is portrayed as a symbol of suppressed yet resistant women, from which a broader image of women as the vanguard of revolution emerges. Such representation not only aligns with the organization's ideological structure, which emphasizes female leadership, but also serves as a strategy to legitimize women's centrality within the discourse of resistance. This process can be explained through the concept of "Semantic polarization" in critical discourse analysis, whereby women are positioned as the positive pole in opposition to the system of Velayat-e Faqih as the negative pole (Fairclough, 2001: 69).

For instance, posts published during the first week of October 2022 on the MEK's official Telegram channel (@MojahedinTV) feature images of Mahsa Amini accompanied by phrases such as "Iranian women began with Mahsa; they will end with overthrow." Expressions like "Woman, the flame of revolution" and "Woman, the end of Velayat" alongside Mahsa's image clearly indicate that this portrayal goes beyond individual commemoration and functions as a semantic tool for political narrative construction (Fairclough, 2001: 84).

### **2.2.1. Mahsa Amini as a Symbol of Discursive Rupture**

Within the MEK's narrative system, the death of Mahsa Amini functions not merely as a tragic event but as a nodal point, a concept derived from Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse referring to points around which other signifiers are organized (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 112). The organization frames Mahsa's death as a symbolic rupture in the existing order, a rupture that, in its view, marks the beginning of the end of the Velayat-e Faqih system and transforms Mahsa into the central signifier of the protests.

In a statement published on the organization's official website on 17 September 2022, Mahsa Amini is described as "The undeniable symbol of public hatred toward the morality police and the entire misogynistic system." The statement continues:

"This blood will not sleep; Mahsa is no longer just a name, but the beginning of a path that will continue until the victory of the Iranian people."

(MEK, 2022 AD/1401 SH (a); <https://www.mojahedin.org/news/87560>)

From Van Dijk's (2006) perspective, the primary function of such narratives is to mobilize collective memory in the service of discursive identity formation. By representing Mahsa as a young woman whose death awakened the conscience of society, the MEK facilitates the

production of a unifying narrative, one that simultaneously positions the ruling system as the primary enemy and protesting women and youth as victim-heroes (Van Dijk, 2006: 173).

From Fairclough's (1995) viewpoint, this narrative constitutes part of the "struggle to control the meaning of events." By framing Mahsa's death as a direct outcome of the political-religious system, the organization seeks to challenge the dominant definitions offered by official media and to present an alternative meaning to public opinion.

Consequently, Mahsa Amini is portrayed not only as a victim of state violence but as a signifier of the collapse of the ruling system's discursive legitimacy. This portrayal provides the organization with a foundation for linking the 2022 protests to its broader narrative of "Regime Overthrow," a goal repeatedly referenced across its discourse at different levels (2022; <https://www.mojahedin.org/i/news/87812>).

#### **2.2.1.1.    Subsidiary Narrative 1: The Nationwide Uprising as a Point of Historical Accumulation**

In the MEK's media discourse, the 2022 protests are not framed as isolated incidents or momentary reactions but as a "Nationwide Uprising" with deep historical, social, and revolutionary roots. Expressions such as "Nationwide revolt," "The uprising of the Iranian people," and "Coordinated popular struggle" were repeatedly used on *Simaye Azadi* TV and the organization's official news platforms, particularly throughout October 2022 AD/1401 SH (Simaye Azadi TV, October 2022 AD/1401 SH; <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

The purpose of this narrative is to foster a perception of national unity against the ruling system, minimizing geographical fragmentation and replacing it with a cohesive, coordinated image of the "Nation" confronting the "Regime." In numerous media contents, the organization references events such as the June 20, 1981, uprising and the protests of the 1990s and 2010s, attempting to portray the 2022 protests as a natural continuation of its historical struggle.

From a discourse-analytical perspective, the repeated use of action-oriented terms such as "Uprising," "Revolution," and "People Risen up," alongside the omission or marginalization of terms like "Limited Protest" or "Unrest," reflects deliberate lexical engineering by the organization, engineering aimed at legitimizing structural change and de-stigmatizing armed resistance (Fairclough, 2001: 52).

### **2.2.1.2. Subsidiary Narrative 2: Unarmed People versus Armed Repression, Constructing a Heroic Image of the Victim**

In continuation of the organization's narrative line, the moral and evaluative binary of "unarmed people/armed repression" is strongly emphasized. By underscoring the protesters' defenselessness and the state's violence, the organization seeks to guide the audience toward a moral judgment. Expressions such as "People with Empty Hands," "Cries against bullets," and "Unarmed youth" are repeatedly used across the organization's official media outlets, including its website (<https://www.mojahedin.org>) and *Simaye Azadi*, as well as its Telegram channel (MojahedinTV@, October 2022 AD/1401 SH).

For example, a report entitled "Who Fired at the People?" states:

"It was not the people who committed violence. It was the government that responded to cries with bullets. What we witnessed in the streets of Sanandaj, Zahedan, and Tehran was the most one-sided form of state violence imaginable."

(<https://www.mojahedin.org/news/87859>)

From Van Dijk's perspective, this type of discourse relies on ideological polarization: "We, the oppressed and unarmed" versus "They the repressive and heavily armed." Such a structure simultaneously generates empathy and legitimizes resistance (Van Dijk, 2006: 174). By employing a "Victim dramatization" strategy, this narrative stirs the audience's moral outrage and enhances the legitimacy of the protest.

### **2.2.1.3. Subsidiary Narrative 3: Linking Domestic and Exiled Resistance, Unifying the Front of Struggle**

In its media narrative, the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization seeks to establish a strategic and discursive link between "Street-level struggles inside the country" and "Organized resistance abroad." This linkage serves not only to reinforce the legitimacy of the protests but also to consolidate the organization's central role in these developments (cf. Simaye Azadi, 2022 AD/1401 SH (a)).

In many programs and analyses broadcast on "Simaye Azadi" television, a sense of shared fate and alignment is depicted between protesters in the streets and members or supporters of the organization in exile. For instance, reports from rallies in Paris, Berlin, or Stockholm show men and women holding photographs of those killed in the protests while chanting slogans identical to those voiced by protesters inside Iran. This media representation conveys

a clear message: resistance is unified and transcends borders (Simaye Azadi, 2022 AD/1401 SH (b); <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

One official organizational statement declares:

"The uprising of the Iranian people in the streets is the continuation of the same path that organized resistance in exile began decades ago. Today, the blood of martyrs in the streets of Tehran is linked to the cries of their comrades in Camp Ashraf."

(Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization of Iran, 2022 AD/1401 SH, Official Statement; <https://www.mojahedin.org/i/news>)

Within Fairclough's theoretical framework, this representational strategy can be understood as an instance of intertextuality, that is, the linking of diverse texts and narratives to construct a coherent discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Through this method, the organization reproduces its claim to centrality and historical continuity in the resistance movement.

Simultaneously, this narrative aims to construct an image of a "Unified front of resistance" confronting a "Monolithic and repressive regime." Such binary framing not only elevates the organization's legitimacy in the eyes of the audience but also strategically allows it to present itself not as an external force, but as an integral part of the "National uprising of the Iranian people." (Van Dijk, 1998; <https://www.mojahedin.org>)

#### **2.2.1.4. Subsidiary Narrative 4: "Woman, Life, Freedom," Discursive Appropriation and Identity Rearticulation**

The slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," which became one of the central symbols of the 2022 protests, was not merely echoed in the MEK's media but reinterpreted and redefined to align with the organization's historical identity and ideological discourse (<https://www.mojahedin.org>, 26 September 2022).

In many "Simaye Azadi" programs, this slogan is presented not simply as a feminist or social demand, but as "The distilled essence of the people's resistance against dictatorship." In other words, the organization seeks to rearticulate the slogan within its own ideological framework and connect it to its historical tradition of struggle (Simaye Azadi, 2 October 2022; 24 October 2022).

For example, in an analytical discussion on the program "Resistance Special," the host states: "The slogan 'Woman, Life, Freedom' means the end of despotism; it means freedom for the entire nation, and this is precisely the cause for which the Mojahedin have sacrificed their

lives for years. Women such as Ashraf Rajavi are living embodiments of this slogan in contemporary Iranian history."

(Simaye Azadi, 26 October 2022; live broadcast)

Here, a form of semantic appropriation is evident: "The organization attempts to redefine circulating protest concepts within its own conceptual framework. From the perspective of Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, this constitutes a purposeful discursive act aimed not merely at reflecting reality but at reconstructing reality within an ideological framework."

(Van Dijk, 2008: Discourse and Power)

Moreover, the emphasis on the historical role of women within the organization, from Ashraf Rajavi to the all-female Leadership Council, causes the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" to be presented in the organization's media not only as a call for gender equality, but as proof of the organization's ideological progressiveness in the project of liberation. This rearticulation represents an effort to marginalize competing discourses and consolidate the organization's position as the authentic, deeply rooted discourse of emancipation ("The Role of Women in Leading the Freedom Movement," *Resistance Face* special issue; <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

### **2.3. Media Narrative Construction and the Organization's Discursive Strategy**

An examination of the MEK's master narrative and subsidiary narratives regarding the 2022 protests reveals that the organization's discourse goes beyond mere representation of social developments. By employing narrative mechanisms, it actively seeks to engineer meaning and construct political reality. The master narrative of an "Uprising for Overthrow" functions as a central framework within which multiple subsidiary narratives are embedded, gaining coherence through functions such as legitimizing struggle, articulating collective identity, consolidating the organization's role as the vanguard of protests, and delegitimizing state authority (cf. analyses published in the section "Iran Rises Up" on the organization's official website: <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

Within this structure, the use of discursive binaries "People/Repressors," "Woman/Oppression," "Sacrifice/Betrayal," or "Martyrdom/Crime," creates an emotionally and morally charged opposition between the state and the people. Through images, slogans, symbols, and the re-reading of events within the organization's historical narrative, the protests are reframed from isolated acts of dissent into a "Continuous revolutionary

movement" tied to the organization's ideological lineage (cf. for example, *Simaye Azadi* documentaries on the anniversaries of the November 2019 victims and the 2022 protests; *Simaye Azadi*, 30 October 2022).

In other words, the organization's narrative construction is not simply a representation of reality, but an active media practice aimed at imposing a particular interpretation of events, legitimizing the organization's strategy, and achieving discursive hegemony within the arena of social struggle. This narrative function positions the organization not at the margins of the protests, but at their symbolic center (National Council of Resistance of Iran, "The Protests of the Iranian People and the Role of Organized Resistance," 30 October 2022; <https://www.mojahedin.org>).

## Conclusion

The analysis of the MEK's media discourse surrounding the 2022 protests demonstrates that the organization, as a longstanding opposition force, has utilized its media capacities to produce and disseminate narratives that not only reflect events but are explicitly designed to shape public opinion, reinforce its own discursive legitimacy, and undermine the official discourse of the Islamic Republic. By placing particular emphasis on the death of Mahsa Amini, the organization elevated this event as a "Symbol of discursive rupture," thereby fostering collective identification and providing a foundation for legitimizing the master narrative of a "Nationwide uprising against the regime."

The persistent use of binary oppositions such as "People/Government," "Women/Repressors," and "New Generation/Obsolete System," combined with narrative devices like heroization, victimization, and labeling, constitutes a core strategy for constructing the meaning of the protests. These patterns are deployed to arouse emotion, mobilize affect, and alter perceptions of state authority, demonstrating that media here functions not as a mirror of reality but as an active agent in constructing social reality, in line with the theoretical frameworks of Van Dijk and Fairclough.

Analysis of the linguistic, discursive, and ideological layers of the MEK's media output reveals that the organization's primary objective is to construct a coherent and radical narrative of public discontent, one in which the organization positions itself as the defender and representative of the people, while the government is depicted as the agent of repression and violence. This representation not only challenges the legitimacy of the dominant

discourse but also reconstructs, in the audience's mind, the legitimacy of radical political actions, including violence or rebellion, by portraying the people as defenseless victims.

Ultimately, the MEK's media discourse regarding the 2022 protests reveals a clear pattern of deliberate narrative construction, ideological language use, and psychological operations. Rather than primarily documenting on-the-ground realities, this pattern serves to expand the organization's confrontational discourse and strengthen its position among opponents of Iran's political system.

In light of these findings, comparative analysis of the narrative strategies employed by other opposition groups, including Persian-language foreign media and other ethnic or political movements, could open new avenues for a deeper understanding of media functions in social protests. Additionally, examining how these narratives are received by domestic audiences remains a crucial topic for future research, offering insights into the interaction between the production and consumption of protest discourse.

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