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## Articles and Statements

### Religion as a Soft Power in the Iranian Foreign Policy

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#### Abstract

In recent decades, many countries have tended to use soft power as an influential tool in their foreign policies. A power that emphasizes the use of tools to create attractiveness for influencing and increasing authority in other countries. In the era of interdependence, the Islamic Republic of Iran is aware of the importance of soft power. Therefore, it takes the maximum advantage of using tools such as religion, culture and ideology in order to exercise its power over the regional countries. Specifically, the ideology of Islamic Revolution is one of the key tools that Iran uses to influence its neighboring countries. After the Islamic Revolution, Iran has been in search of new tools in order to promote its position in the Middle East; hence, it has attempted to transform every single tool as a form of soft power in order to speed up the process. In this paper, we tried to investigate the role of soft power and religion in Iran's current position in the region. Our findings indicate that the usage of soft power has a huge impact on the current position of Iran. Particularly, religion – as a key tool of soft power – has played an important role in consolidating and promoting the regional status of the country. In the field of culture and religion, Iran has many commonalities with the regional counties. The usage of concepts such as; denial of foreign domination, Islamic justice and the unification of religion and politics has had a big impact on its usage of soft power. Therefore, Iran has used soft power as a key tool in its foreign policy in order to expand its influence in the region.

**Keywords:** culture, foreign policy, ideology, Iran, religion, soft power.

#### 1. Introduction

Power is one of the key subjects of political science and a considerable case in the political context. This is due to the concrete and tangible significance of power in both domestic and foreign policies in order to implement programs, policies and national goals. In fact, power has the potential of ensuring security, changing the behavior of others and eliminating the threat. In the 20th century, typically the tangible elements of power (hard power) were considered as principle. However, the termination of the cold war, the increasing popularity of small actors and the transition of global arena has caused to reduce the prevalence of using hard power instruments and imposed the globe for the usage of soft power.

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One of the first soft power's theorists is Josef Nye. He proposes a triple division of power as; military, economic and soft power. Economic and military power are both hard in nature and soft power is different from them based on ability to shape others preference. Soft power has the ability to produces attractiveness and leads to obedience. In here, it is important to know that the economic capabilities are sometimes used as a source of hard power and sometimes as a source of soft power. According to these theories, the main question of this article is: how does the usage of soft power (religion) affect the regional status of Iran? Our findings show that the usage of soft power (religion) has paved the ground for Iran to consolidate and promote its position in the region.

## 2. Discussion

### Soft Power Theory

Soft power elements have been used more in domestic and foreign policy of countries. The basic elements of soft power are a combination of culture, political values and demands of foreign policy. As defined by Joseph Nye (1990) soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's cultural, political ideals and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced. The concept of soft power was defined by Joseph Nye in 1989. According to Nye, the theory of soft power is to force someone into accepting your thoughts and ideas without using physical force and power, but rather urging them, through using soft power, to follow your path. He believes in the idea that, in politics if you want others to do what you want them to do, you do not need to use physical force or threaten them. According to him, soft power is the way and power which attracts nation's thoughts and theories voluntarily (Nye, 2004). As a result, it can be said that hard power is the product of soft power. He believes that the positive values of a country in both domestic and international aspects can increase the soft power of that country. Domestically; being responsible to the human rights, implementation of justice and ethical accomplice, are all the positive values of a government. Internationally, any country which is far from conflicts, have good relations with foreign countries and international organizations and is in the meantime developed, is improvised with soft power values (Nye, 2004). As a result, it gets trust of others and shows the positive image of that country, and accordingly this causes others to concentrate and attracts other countries focus in foreign policy and makes it stronger.

Soft power has a historical background in human beings' social life. With the development of expanded cultures and improvement of relationships and information through integrated media, countries of the region and the world have put lots of budget in this. The topic of war and soft power in today's circumstances are one of the main issues in which all countries are contained off. The success of soft power depends mainly on the good background, popularity and activities of the actor in international platform. Because of this, the three main issues of the soft power can be summed up in culture, politics and economy. Relations between the countries when based on cultural aspects cannot be loosened or weakened. In cultural aspects architecture, knowledge and education has an import and place in making of the soft power. Formation of educational centers and interchange programs for the students creates strong roots of the soft power, this was the reason that Nye puts special place in theory of soft power, and emphasized over religion and ideology in such that he believes; after the Iraq war, because of religious attachments between Iran and Iraq, soft power and the influence of Iran increased dramatically in Iraq. It's the reason that the political leaders of Iraq focus more on Iran because of having cultural and religious similarities. Joseph Nye in the essay of Soft Power and Higher Education writes that colleges and universities can be beneficial to foreign policy of the United States of America and improvement of soft power through good understanding of debate and dialogue (Nye, 2005).

Most of the observers believe that the educational centers of the United States of America are good sources of soft power to be used domestically and internationally. According to the definition of soft power, the elements of soft power which are presented and mentioned in Islam are much different from the elements of soft power theory presented by Joseph Nye, but practically the foreign policy of Iran is based and followed according to theories of Nye. The soft power sources of Iran which it considers it as Islamic are values including sacrifice, martyrdom, spirituality, justice believes, Islamic Government (Velayat-e faqih), right orientation and independence. Based on these values, the Islamic Revolution besides creating cultural turning point in internal affair, lead

to the awakening of Islamic societies, particularly in Shia-centric regions. Before the Islamic revolution, Iran felt danger from both regional and World Powers. Its main aim was to reserve its borders and independence. At the beginning, the leaders of Islamic Revolution were following and moving with the slogans of pure Islam and with an idealistic mentality, but with the passing of time, it started followed the politics of reality that includes elements of soft power such as Persian culture, Shia religion and mentality of Islamic Revolution, Leaders of Islamic Revolution of Iran used the religion, especially Shiism in its internal and external politics as a soft power value, such that after the 1979 Revolution, described themselves as the defenders of all Muslims.

### **Soft Power Resources**

In Nye's view, soft power has three general resources. They are culture, political values and internal and external policy.

#### **Culture**

Culture is a group of values and actions that give meaning to a community. When a country's culture contains global values, the probability that good result will be achieved at a low cost will increase. In Nye's view, USA has a global culture (Nye, 2008).

#### **Political Values**

Political values of a country can be source strength and can cause the attraction of resources. Indeed governments can make themselves to be attracted or repulsed through expanding their values. Values such as democracy, freedom of expression and promotion of human rights are all attractive values of politics (Asgari, 2010).

#### **Internal and External Policies**

Internal and external policies can either amplify or embrace soft power. If the policies are arrogantly and meanly and the politicians do not consider people's votes, then it will negatively affect the usage of soft power. For instance, regulating policies in such a way that can mobilize others without using threats and betraying can be an essential way of using soft power (Nye, 2008). In Nye's view, if the foreign policy of a country is legitimate in the eyes of other players then its popularity will increase.

### **Elements of the Influence through Soft Power in Iran**

#### **Cultural Influence of Iran in the Region**

Iran managed to maintain its language and culture throughout the history as independent, and with the embrace of Shiism, it could even create a unique place for itself in the Muslim world. Although Iran is alone in terms of language and religion in the region but it has managed to rule Shiite religious minorities in other countries and in some cases through common language and culture, to expand its policies. Around and its neighbors, Iran does not have any unified and natural ethnic kind. Even countries that are closer to Iran as part of this order, such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan, are quite far away from Iran religiously and those who are religiously close with Iran, such as Azerbaijan and Iraq, are quite far away from Iran by ethnicity and language differences but beside all such religious and linguistic differences, it has been able to expand and increase its influence in the region through revolutionary slogans and cultural activities (Arjomand, 1981). One of the developments in the global system has been the change in nature and forms of power, and influence to promote soft power over hard power. Countries that have wisely used the elements such as culture, civilization, history and geography as a form to impress others have more authority in national and global politics (Nye, 1990). Iran, historically, exists in the world politics as a country that has a very sophisticated civilization. From one side, having history, culture and civilization and from the other side as a country with largest Shiite population and heir of the first religious revolution in the modern world, has been the center for soft power. In reality "soft power, is the production of a positive image and reputation in the view of others, using tools such as culture, history, ideals and human values indirectly affect the interests and behaviors of other countries. So, soft power is a social phenomenon and related to the peripheral components compared to other instruments of foreign policy and has the greatest influence (Nye, 2004).

Several factors are involved in the development of the country's soft power, which if managed properly, can also create internal cohesion, lead to the growth of the country's prestige and position in international political arena. With features that culture has on one hand, it can be used as a threatening element, and on the other hand, as a booster to social order aside from economy and politics which are introduced as one of the important elements of soft power resources. Governments in the soft power give much attention to the cultural foundation and try to reach their

targets by using the cultural element. Iran's Islamic Revolution with the slogan of Islamic union and supporting oppressed people were the reason due to which Iran could improve and expand its soft power in the region. Soft power is the product of a positive image and gaining reputation in the domestic and foreign opinion of the people. The Islamic Republic of Iran, for many reasons (religion, language and export of revolutionary ideas), has provided the necessary conditions for its soft power in the region to be expanded. From one aspect, the development of soft power has led the development of cultural identity in the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the other hand, this increscent of soft power has led Iran to face threat from global and regional powers that are against the Islamic Republic (Ahmadi, 2010). This refers to the concept of 'soft power' developed by the American Professor of Political Science Joseph Nye in the 1990s to describe the ability of a country to use economic or cultural influence to achieve its objectives peacefully without military force (Ahmadi, 2010). Soft Shiism refers specifically to the promotion of the Iranian regime's hard-line 'Twelver' Shiite ideology in the targeted countries through economic or cultural influence. This strategy is separate to the use of military power, being pursued by means as given below (Alsulami, 2016):

- Establishing centers and conducting conferences to eliminate psychological barriers and eradicate hostility from Sunnis toward Shiites.

- Establishing charity organizations under the pretext of assisting the needy through building schools and hospitals where this can be used to promote Shiite ideology.

- Offering scholarships to attract students to Qum city and its 300 religious institutes run and financed by the Universal Islamic Center, which is controlled by the Iranian regime's intelligence service. More than 50,000 students from 70 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas are educated, or more correctly, indoctrinated in these institutes on an annual basis, before being sent back to their countries to proselytize on behalf of the regime.

- Producing heavily sectarian movies and TV series using state-of-the-art technology targeting the beliefs of the audience in an effort to eradicate Sunni hostility toward Shiites and convince the audience to embrace Shiite ideology and concepts.

- Launching dozens of satellite propaganda channels and websites such as Al-Alam channel to promote false and fabricated 'news' reports in support of the Iranian project.

- Organizing religious tourist groups in the targeted countries to influence other people and make them accept Shiite ideology. For example, religious tourism has enabled Shiites to establish a presence in predominantly Sunni Syria. Around 1.5 million Iranians visit Syria every year, particularly the Sayeda Zainab shrine in Damascus, which has been ranked the third holiest Shiite shrine in the world after Najaf and Qum, giving the Shiite clergy a pretext for a permanent presence in Syria.

- Using the relatively free environment in some countries such as those in Europe and the Americas to preach Shiite ideology and convert Sunni Muslims in these countries to Shiism, particularly targeting those who face financial problems. The Shiite centers in the Netherland, Belgium, Italy, and America play a major role in this field, using financial inducements to attract people to the Shiite ideology, despite the massive poverty in Iran itself. Besides all these efforts, still, Iran could not achieve its goals until the 9/11 incident in the region, but oppositely was facing isolation both in the region and in the world. After the 9/11 incident, with the upcoming foreign political changes of the United States of America, the invasion of Afghanistan with the reason of the destruction of the Taliban regime and the invasion of Iraq with the reason of having weapons of mass destruction; Shias once again gained power in the Middle East, specifically in Iraq, and they used it as an opportunity. This led to anger of the anti-Shia Muslim communities, especially Salafi, who then funded and tried their best to create new-armed groups in the region. This led to the instability in the countries and regions, which included both Shias and Sunnis living together in the same geography.

### **Political Influence of Iran in the Region**

Iran's Islamic Revolution is considered as one of the most important political events in the second half of the 20th century in the world. This revolution happened in a country in which before the revolution existed Pahlavi government which was an ally of America in the Persian Gulf. Victory of Iran's Islamic Revolution in Iran led Iran to be against America's policies. After the revolution, the political leaders attempted to export revolution to other countries. In order to fulfill



this aim, they headed towards cultural and political activities. This led Shiites who lived in the Persian Gulf states be inspired by the Islamic Revolution of Iran and stood against the regime in their country and demanded their political power. The 1979 Revolution which led to the creation of an Islamic State in Iran brought fundamental changes in its foreign policy as well like other areas. The new supreme leader of Iran's revolutionary regime declared the base of Iran's foreign policy and Iran's identity on slogan of ("neither East nor West, the Islamic Republic") and it finalized that the slogan should be the base of Iran's foreign policy (Tareq, 1982). But the question was what this slogan meant for the policy formers of new emerging states. Abolhasan Bani-Sadr, the first President of Iran, mentioned about the definition of the slogan neither East nor West and how they could define it in their foreign policy, as "this means that you should not give an opportunity and time for foreign forces to intervene in your internal affairs" (BBC Persian, 2004).

Export of the revolution was one of the main goals of the leaders among the Iranian revolutionaries, after the formation of the Islamic Republic and pushing of the nationalists from power, slowly adopted which was named as export of revolution to other countries. Based on this policy, closeness towards the Islamic movements and support for revolutionary movements in Muslim countries and then support for liberation movements (even non-Muslim) were on the agenda (Esposito, 1999). In addition to these, support of revolutionary leaders to the Palestinian people and being against Israeli and American policy in the region attracted the interests of nations of the region (Senyurt, 2012). This refers to the politicization of the Shiite doctrine, which takes place after Shiite communities have been established in the targeted countries, with Shiite minorities in these nations being used to achieve Iran's ambitions. With Shiites indoctrinated to regard Iran as their spiritual homeland and the center of their religion, they are induced to betray their original countries and act as agents for Iran and its expansionist ambitions. In other words, the Iranian regime has adopted a strategy of isolating Shiite communities in other nations from their wider societies and changing their loyalties to be primarily to Iran rather than to their original homelands. These Shiite communities have adopted hostile behavior toward their own nations and compatriots who hold other ideologies (Alsulami, 2016). The Iranian regime's strategy of politicizing Shiism in the targeted countries is achieved by use of the following techniques (Alsulami, 2016):

Establishing loyal political parties and movements in the targeted countries to change the domestic political landscape in favor of the Iranian project; consequently, a significant number of Shiite parties and movements have emerged in many countries of the world, especially in the Arab world, including Amal Movement and Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Higher Council, Da'wa Party, Al-Sadr current and others in Iraq; the Islamic Labor and Da'wa Party, and the Shiite Reconciliation Association in Bahrain; the National Islamic Coalition and Peace and Justice Gathering in Kuwait; Al-Haq and Umma Party, the Believer Youth Movement (now Ansarollah) in Yemen; the Unity Party in Tunisia; AlSabireen Movement in Palestine; the Islamic Unity Party in Afghanistan; Applying Al-Ja'fari's Beliefs Movement in Pakistan; the Shiite Islamic Movement in Nigeria; and the National Iranian-American Council (NIAC) in the United States. The aforementioned parties and movements are dedicated to promoting the Iranian regime's interests in their own countries either by exerting pressure on their governments as with the Lebanese Hezbollah or by bringing down any political movements which challenge Tehran's interests like the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who, backed by Iran, have frustrated the GCC countries' initiative for a political solution in Yemen since occupying the capital Sana'a in 2014.

Establishing alliances with other Shiite sects in the country, more particularly in predominantly Sunni nations, despite their differences, in order to form a homogenous Shiite core group loyal to the regime under the false pretext of protecting Shiite communities in these nations. In fact, these groups are part of the Iranian regime's effort to acquire new spheres of influence and to establish proxies to promote its interests in these countries, such as the group formed to call for the "restoration of the Alawi branch to its Ja'fari Shiite origin" in Syria. The work of the prominent Iraqi Twelver Shiite cleric, Hassan Shirazi, in the 1960s played a major role in building Iranian links with the Syrian Alawis and encouraging their talented sons to study in the Iranian city of Qum. In addition, Shirazi succeeded in making the Sayeda Zainab shrine in Damascus the third holiest shrine in Shiism after Najaf and Qum. Other Shiite clerics such as Mousa Al-Sadr, Muhsin Al-Hakim, and Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah followed in Shirazi's footsteps and established the Al-Khusaibi movement among Nusairi people in Syria.

These figures argued that the only theological differences between Twelvers and Nusairis are minor issues and do not touch the essence of Shiism. Consequently, a decision was taken in 1980 in the Syrian city of Qardaha, the center of the Nusayri sect and hometown of the Assads, to dispatch 500 young Alawi students to study at the holy sites in Qum to become experts in the Ja'fari sect. Hence, a long-term strategic alliance was established between the Nusayri regime in Syria and Khomeini's clerical followers in the wake of the 1979 Revolution. This relationship turned into effective Iranian hegemony over Syria after the inauguration of Bashar Assad president of Syria in 2000, which recently turned into complete control following the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 and Assad's brutal efforts to maintain power in which he soon became completely reliant on Iran. Due to this, Iran with paying concentration to its national interest, by using the Shia factor in the Middle East, countries it did make mass cultural, political and social influences, and this religious politics of Iran led to huge evolution in the Middle East.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper, the conceptual, historical and theoretical contexts of soft power in Iran's foreign policy have been discussed. Iran, through its history, religion, language, and culture, has been able to expand its soft power throughout the Middle East, especially after the Islamic Revolution, and through this could achieve its political and social goals in the Middle East. Power as one of the main concepts of political science means the ability to influence the change in the behavior of others in order to achieve the desired outcome. In the global world of the modern age, Joseph Nye's thoughts regarding the new forms of power and the new instruments of affiliation are very important. In such an era, the Islamic Republic of Iran has fully taken the advantage Nye's thoughts. Comparing to other regional countries, Iran has more advantageous tools to implements its influence as a soft power in the region. These tools are such as culture, rich history, dynamic human resources etc. Iran's ancient history, its ancient civilization and rich culture have always been the most significant and effective factors to pave the ground for its presence in the regional affairs. On the other hand, the skilled human capital and the attention paid to the spread of science and knowledge in Iranian society in twentieth century ended up the country to improve its influence in the region.

After the Islamic Revolution, Iran emphasized on delivering the revolution ideology-based on Islamic Shiite thoughts-to other countries. In this way, Iran stated to use soft power in practice. However, since the Islamic Revolution faced many challenges in the beginning, therefore, Iran was forced to use hard power to a certain extent in its foreign policy, but as time passed and the problems started to get resolved, soft power became the main policy among Iranian politicians, because it was one of the most effective tools at a lower cost.

In this article, it aims to examine the factors of soft power and their effects on Iranian foreign policy, and as well some suggestions regarding the issue. Considering our research hypothesis, it is argued that the use of religion as a soft power has played an important role in consolidating and promoting to the position of Iran in the region. On the other hand, the factors that provided the necessary ground for the usage of soft power are such as; scientific and technological advances, cultural richness of Iran as well as relations with many countries of the region and finally the new Islamic Revolution.

The theoretical framework chosen in this article is the "soft power theory" of Josef Nye. According to Nye's theory, when military power is not the only factor of extending power, governments chose to utilize other components such as soft power, religion, culture and ideology. In the modern age, using soft power can attract people's minds without any threat and pressures. Therefore, any country that has more potential tools of soft power and has the ability to use it correctly has the more power.

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