IRAN'S SOFT POWER BORNE OF NECESSITY AND COMPLEXITY OF ITS MULTI-DIMENSIONAL AUDIENCE

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Abstract

Even measured against the Middle East's historically tumultuous dynamics, the dramatic political transformations witnessed in 2011 will shape global affairs for decades to come. The collapse of the ruling power structures in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, as a result of people's unprecedented street protests and the ongoing protests in Syria and Bahrain, were all unexpected events with global ramifications. In the midst of this turmoil with new national and international players and evolving political structures, Iran has attempted to use its soft power to exploit new opportunities and advance its narrow interests. The unpredictable outcome of these changes, coupled with a dearth of understanding about Iran's soft power capabilities and its intent, have proven to be a difficult mix for Western, particularly American analysts, as they attempt to predict Iran's future role in the region and the far-reaching implications of that role.

The authors of this article posit that regardless, of the eventual outcome of recent regional events, there should be little doubt that Iran will identify ways to take advantage of its soft power tools to productively serve its own interests. To that end, this article will show that Iran's employment of soft power has been an intrinsic element of its current political system. It has become a veteran practitioner of these tactical tools, and public diplomacy continues to remain indispensable for bolstering its internal claims of legitimacy.

Key Words

Iran, Middle East, Islamic Revolution, soft power, narrative, storytelling, 'Nezam'

'Soft Power' as Defined by Iranian Scholars

National exercise of soft power is thought to be one of the most effective tools available for propagating a country's public diplomacy agenda. It can increase a country's ability to influence others, strengthen international prestige, increases global interaction, and obtains better economic opportunities with an eye towards establishing and sustaining long-term relationships. When Joseph Nye first introduced "soft power" into the international relations lexicon, it was a reminder that hard power is not the only tool available to achieve national goals. Nye defined soft power as, "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced."[1] The central tools of soft power are cultural values, ideology, being a model for emulation, and appealing to commonly shared values. According to Nye, exercising soft power requires (1) persuasion, or the ability to convince others by one's arguments, and (2) attraction, the ability to pull others by one's example. He states, "Soft power uses … an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values."[2]

The concept of soft power is not an exclusively Western academic exercise, and understanding its implementation by non-Western countries is particularly significant in effectively countering and responding to it. Hamid Mowlana, in his book, *Global Information and World Communication: New Frontiers in International Relations*, published in Iran in 1986, defined soft power as an implicit power and suggests that religion, ethics, beliefs, ideology, and science are its fountainhead. In referencing Mowlana's definition, Manoucher Mohammadi, a former Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Education writes, "in soft power, mentality counts as the main basis upon which investments are made … attraction is being utilized in soft power to create common values."[3] Mohammadi further states, "soft power is related to those capabilities and moral strengths that indirectly affect the others' behaviors or interests through utilization of culture, ideals or moral values. Soft power is not political advertisement but comprises rational arguments and common values, and it influences public opinion outside and inside the country."[4] His perspective not only suggests that the relevance and utility of soft power is derived from a foundation of national character rather than merely being a tool in the service of national interest. It further posits that soft power "outshines and overcomes hard power in a sphere in which the power is derived from spiritual sources and mainly rooted in divine and religious faiths and beliefs."[5]

The domestic sources of foreign policy focus their attention on the degree to which the identities of actors are constructed by state-society relations. Seen through this prism, it is therefore not surprising that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the pursuant foreign policies of the Islamic Republic in the region have been so heavily reliant on soft power. Iran's considerable and effective utilization of its soft power has challenged Western observers, but should be seen as an intrinsic element in Tehran's projected self-image. Informed by this outlook, Iran's use of soft power carries a more complex dimension than that of Western scholarship on the subject and looks to capitalize on common bonds for a deeper spiritual and moral connection with its targeted audience rather than viewing soft power merely as a mechanism for pursuing political or strategic national interest.

Soft Power as an Intrinsic and Indispensable Foundation for the 'Nezam'[6]

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran fueled, mobilized, and directed a multi-faceted popular uprising into a unique theological structure. The success of Iran's revolution was due in large part to the political sagacity, persuasive rhetoric, and creative narratives utilized by Ayatollah Khomeini who masterfully homogenized opposition to the Shah's regime by appealing to the foundational beliefs of the various Shi'a factions, nationalist parties, and leftist groups. The uncommonly multi-dimensional identity of the Iranian public not only encouraged Ayatollah Khomeini to skillfully approximate the many cultural, social, and political ideals of the Iranian people; he was also able to formulate that a cultural identity that is broadly defined rather than narrowly parochial is a significant source of soft power. This effort is evident in the preferred slogans of the Revolution, which peppered Khomeini's speeches as he lobbied for a "revolution without borders."[7] This vision of Khomeini's revolution was aimed at increasing Iran's popularity in the Middle East through the collective rejection of American and Israeli presence in the region and included explicit animosity towards Israel, dubbed the "Zionist colonizer,"[8] to engender Shi'a solidarity with all "oppressed" Muslims. The foundation of these narratives was built on the theme of good resisting the oppression of evil.

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[1] Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The means to suceed in world politics* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Book Groups, 2004), preface x.

[2] Nye, *Soft Power*, pp. 5-15.

[3] Mowlana, H. *Global Information and World Communication: New Frontiers in International Relations*. London: Sage Publications, First Edition, 1986. Cited in: Manouchehr Mohammadi, "Sources of Power in Islamic Republic of Iran," *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs* XX, no. 2 (2008): p. 5.

[4] Manouchehr Mohammadi, "Sources of Power in Islamic Republic of Iran," The Iranian Journal of International Affairs XX, no. 2 (2008): p.6.

[5] Mohammadi, "Sources of Power in Islamic Republic of Iran," p. 6

[6] Nezam is Iranian officialdom's preferred Persian term for 'regime' and it is best translated as 'political system' or 'power structure.'

[7] Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 204.

[8] 'Zionist Colonizers' is a phrase frequently invoked by Iranian government officials to describe Israel.

In reaction to the recent events of the Arab Spring, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has chosen to continue this narrative by describing Iran as the mother of an "Islamic Awakening" in the region. Echoing decade-old slogans, Khamenei, addressing a group of Iran's Air Force commanders and officials on February 8, 2012 stated, "the Islamic establishment is moving towards a real, lasting, strong, and durable identity which is defendable in the face of aggressions."[9] In Khamenei's view, these recent developments continue to serve as proof of the Nezam's legitimacy. "Today the slogans used by the Iranian nation have caught on in the region and those countries that followed the arrogant front are now standing beside the Iranian nation and pursuing their (Iranian nation's) objectives and slogans."[10] He has emphasized that elections and popular votes underpin the framework of religious democracy, the main essence of which is Islam. Further, he claimed, "Those who think that democracy originated in the West are wrong, because, although democracies in the Islamic establishment and the West look the same, their origins are different."[11] In this worldview, the framework of religious democracy is completely different than those of Western democracy, since the Western democracies are "oppressive."

Regarding the current uprising in Syria, in a meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Khamenei has been cited as saying, "The Islamic Republic will defend Syria because of its support for[12] the resistance front against the Zionist regime and is vehemently opposed to any intervention by foreign forces in Syrian internal affairs." As Ray Takeyh writes in his book, *Guardians of the Revolution* published in 2009, "Ahmadinejad and the Iranian clerical elites … employ such rhetoric as a means of appealing to public opinion in an inflamed region."[13] Referring to Ahmadinejad he further writes, "[through] his use of Islamic discourse and his appeals to local grievances, Ahmadinejad has managed to leapfrog the sectarian divide and allow a Shi'a Persian country to capture the imagination of Sunni Arabs."[14]

Pursuing this foreign policy agenda through the Islamic narrative in order to garner regional influence has served another important purpose for over thirty years. The skillful exercise of soft power to secure the Islamic Revolution's external legitimacy has become necessary for the Nezam's legitimacy to rule internally. However, as the ruling elite face a younger post-revolutionary generation, restless and distant from the values of the 1979 revolution, they have relied on Iran's international prominence to justify their continued monopoly on power. While Islamic doctrine is at the core of Iran's narrative aimed at attaining legitimacy and influence in the region, it reflects only one facet of the Iranian public's multi-dimensional identity, and although understanding the implication of the multiplicity of Iranians' identities requires its own separate discussion, at the very least it is worth a cursory glance here.

Using Soft Power and Dealing With Multi-dimensional Identities

The concept of identity comes from social psychology, where it refers to the images of individuality and distinctiveness ("selfhood") held and projected by an actor and formed (and modified over time) through relations with significant "others." Thus, the term, by convention, references mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other.

Iranian national identity is not an objective and static phenomenon. Due to Iran's ancient history, and its multi-ethnic and multi-religious make-up, various ruling elites have emphasized different identities to bind the population together to form cohesiveness and legitimize their rule over this varied population. Throughout the twentieth century, Iran has been through a series of dramatic political events that have been instrumental in the articulation and continuous construction and reconstruction of its national identity. Such events in the modern era include the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the rise of the Pahlavi Dynasty in the early twentieth century, the rise and the 1953 fall of Mohammad Mosadeq, the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. As Ansari also states, "many of the political debates in modern Iran revolve around the contestation between various definitions of Iranian nationalism and the determination to monopolize discourse by imposing an 'authentic'

version."[15] One of the chief identities places a premium on the historical narrative and the protection of Iran's ancient pre-Islamic achievements. The challenge to balance these two identities was addressed by former President Mohammad Khatami in a speech he gave to university students, staff, and clerics in Sistan va Baluchestan province on April 21, 1998. He said, "of course Iranians before Islam also had a civilization and things to be proud of … some also want, under the pretext of Islamism, to eliminate Iranian identity … Our identity is Iranian-Islamic."[16] This characterization of pre-Islamic Iranian identity draws from a national narrative of "imperial grandeur," which seemingly directly contradicts the Islamic character of the current Nezam. Yet even within this ostensibly incongruent value system, modern Iranian leaders have found means to extrapolate soft power advantages in order to solidify their international prestige, stature, and legitimacy for both external and internal authority. For example, the noted Iran expert Ali Ansari observed that:

> "Ahmadinejad himself is a good example of an individual whose Islamic devotion never gets in the way of an intensely nationalist perspective on the world and a profound belief that Iranians, blessed as they are, can achieve anything, if they put their minds to it. Belief and culture remain central to the Iranian world view, and it is consequently important to appreciate Iran's position as the quintessential 'soft power.'"[17]

The most evident example of the overriding necessity of exercising Iranian soft power in order to retain internal legitimacy can be seen by the Ahmadinejad Administration's active efforts to promote and celebrate Nowruz[18] on the international stage. This Persian New Year holiday is the embodiment of Iran's pre-Islamic heritage and is irrevocably tied with non-Islamic Iranian culture, art, and literature. The holiday is celebrated widely by over 300 million ethnic Turks, Kurds, Lurs, Gilakis, Armenians, Tajiks, Arabs, and Baluchis alongside Persians. Yet the Islamic Republic spearheaded the United Nations General Assembly effort to include the holiday as a non-religious internationally recognized day of celebration. Even more tellingly, in 2011, President Ahmadinejad expended considerable effort in inviting several dozen heads of state to Iran as guests of the government for a Nowruz celebration, even going so far as to propose gathering at Persepolis, the symbolic seat of Persian imperial power. This is a reflection not only of Iran's use of soft power to attract neighboring and internal ethnic groups, but more importantly, Iran's exercise of foreign policy soft power to attain internal legitimacy among its own population that is growingly less responsive to narrow Islamic identity ornamentation.

Soft Power as Applied Strategy

Public diplomacy is a manifest example of functional soft power, and in the repertoire of states, constitutes one of the most potent implements of global statecraft. In the modern practice of public diplomacy, "narrative strategies" are being employed to design persuasive winning stories, as Nye suggests it is about "whose story wins." In her expansive article published by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, Rhonda Zaharna draws from other academic scholarship in the field to note that the persuasive elements in storytelling are often overlooked. She writes, "The power of narration is in its ability to overcome, or really sneak undetected past people's persuasion radar."[19] This is particularly true in the modern computerized era as "narrative strategies are likely to become increasingly important in public diplomacy as social media tools proliferate and transform the global village."[20] Storytelling can engage people before they realize they are being influenced due to its two main components: transmission of ideas and the element of identification. In short, "Through identification their lessons become our lessons."[21] Through transmission and identification, storytellers can introduce new information to an audience despite their initial resistance. This critical piece of the public diplomacy puzzle is what Iran has become adept at exploiting. Over its thirty-three years of reliance and emphasis on soft power tools including public diplomacy, Iran has developed an aptitude for flexibility to overcome the natural disinclination of regional populations to accept Iranian narratives not withstanding divergent religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities. Iran has managed to distill shared values in a manner that is digestible to disparate audiences while not limiting itself to a narrow band of narratives.

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9 Press TV, "Leader: Islamic Awakening Proves Iran Legitimacy," Press TV, February 9, 2012, accessed on July 19, 2012, http://www.presstv.ir/detail/225612.html

10 Press TV, "Leader: Islamic Awakening Proves Iran Legitimacy"

11 Press TV, "Leader: Islamic Awakening Proves Iran Legitimacy"

12 Press TV, "Leader: Iran opposes any foreign intervention in Syria," Press TV, March 29, 2012, accessed on July 19, 2012, http://www.presstv.ir/detail/233736.html

13 Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 208.

14 Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, p. 208.

15 Ansari, Ali. 'Iranian Nationalism' in A Companion to the History of the Middle East. Edited by Yousef Choueiri. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. 320

16 Shabnam Holliday, Defining Iran: Politics of Resistance (Ashgate Publishing, 2011), p. 104.

17 Ali Ansari, "Exploring National Identities: Iran. World Views of Aspiring Powers" (presentation at the conference series at the Elliet School of International Affairs: The Sigur Center for Asia Studies, Washington, DC, September 2007) P.1

18 Nowruz is an ancient celebration of the solar calendar starting on the Spring equinox, usually March 21st each year.

19 Zaharna, R. "Oscars Lessons in the Persuasive Power of Stories and Storytelling." Cultural Posts, USC Center on Public Diplomacy (blog). March 8, 2012. Accessed on July 20, 2012, http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/newswire/cpdblog_detail/culture_posts_oscar_lessons_in_the_persuasive_power_of_stories_and_storytel/

20 Zahama "Oscars Lessons in the Persuasive Power of Stories and Storytelling."

21 Zahama "Oscars Lessons in the Persuasive Power of Stories and Storytelling."

Conclusion

As noted through the few examples related here, the Iranian state has become quite adept at using the soft power tools at its disposal to effectively manage its international affairs and even affect its domestic constituencies. We have shown that even preceding the Revolution and certainly during its existence, the use of soft power has been integral to both the state's sense of identity and its survival. With such strong disincentives for failure, the Iranian state's ability to influence regional events should not be underestimated or unexpected. Though there is little doubt that the Middle East will continue to see change, unless that change includes the Nezam ruling Iran, one thing will likely stay the same – Iran's persistent and practiced effort to influence the region.

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