Through exploring Iran’s public diplomacy at the international level, this article demonstrates how the Islamic Republic’s motives should not only be contextualised within the oft-sensationalised, material or ‘hard’ aspects of its foreign policy, but also within the desire to project its cultural reach through ‘softer’ means. Iran’s utilisation of culturally defined foreign policy objectives and actions demonstrates its understanding of soft power’s potentialities. This article explores the ways in which Iran’s public diplomacy is used to promote its soft power and craft its, at times, shifting image on the world stage.

Keywords: Iran; soft power; culture; foreign policy; public diplomacy

Introduction

Iran has a long history of showcasing its culture to the world, drawing on at times conflicting reference points. This has formed a key part of its public diplomacy since the time of the Shah and continues to influence the way the Islamic Republic projects influence on the world stage. Public diplomacy has a long history of providing a means for countries to project their soft power (Nye, 2008), and this article will explore the cultural aspects of Iran’s public diplomacy in this endeavour. In doing so, it will examine two elements of Iranian soft power projection: firstly culture-based initiatives and related foreign policy approaches, and secondly on defensive aspects that permeate the Islamic Republic’s conception of the utility of soft power. This will help to highlight a relatively unexplored aspect of not only Iran’s foreign relations, but also those of authoritarian regimes which, with the exception of China, remain somewhat under-researched. The emphasis is very much on ‘top-down’ initiatives, whereby the state has control over the aspects of soft power that it wants to project and harness. What is particularly instructive about the Iranian case, however, is the dualism that exists in the Islamic Republic’s power structure, with an elected President enacting much of Iran’s public diplomacy on the world stage, but with ultimate authority residing with the Supreme Leader who retains control of the levers of Iran’s soft power. Although this dichotomy is not always clear in Iran’s attempts at harnessing and projecting soft power, this article highlights some of the different ways in which it can be articulated. Thus Iran provides us with an example of how a unique theocratic regime enacts soft power on the world stage, while at the same time highlighting its complex power structure.

Following an explanation of soft power and its limitations as an analytical tool, the article provides a historical backdrop to Iranian soft power in the twentieth century. It then...
demonstrates how soft power projection has been enacted through culturally defined foreign policy approaches and initiatives, evidenced during the presidencies of both Mohammad Khatami (via his Dialogue among Civilisations initiative) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as well as the work of Iran’s ‘Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation’ (ICRO), through its network of Iranian cultural centres abroad. The article then moves on to look at the more defensive elements of Iranian soft power as articulated through the international, foreign-language output of the state broadcaster Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). This section will highlight the defensive posture assumed by the Islamic Republic, which sees the Supreme Leader asserting his authority through appropriating the soft power concept in the notion of a ‘soft war’ between Iran and the West.

Diplomacy and soft power

The idea of soft power developed by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004) was initially applied to US foreign policy. Its key premise can be defined as the ability to obtain what you want through co-option and attraction rather than the hard power of coercion and payment. In international politics, the soft power of a country rests primarily on its culture (in places where it is attractive to others) and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Political values are also significant, and in the case of America, Nye points out that promotion of democracy could be considered as such. The means by which this soft power is communicated is also important, as states look to integrate the notion of soft power into their diplomatic maneuverings, particularly those that are targeted towards a wider international audience beyond the confines of high-level deliberations between governments. Thus, public diplomacy becomes an important outlet for such propagation. Leonard, Stead and Smewing (2002, pp. 10–11) define three distinct purposes, or areas of public diplomacy – namely political/military, economic and societal/cultural. The latter is particularly important as public diplomacy plays an important role in acting as the means by which a country can promote its soft power. Public diplomacy can be seen as an instrument that mobilises a country’s soft power resources (Nye, 2008, p. 95). These can be mobilised through numerous channels, be they via broadcast media or cultural and information exchange, or at high-level discussions between heads of state/government and political speeches.

This article mainly focuses on the cultural elements of Iran’s public diplomacy, and will therefore primarily use the term ‘cultural diplomacy’ to define these actions. Cultural diplomacy involves the application of a state’s cultural policy abroad through the exchange of ideas, information, culture and the arts (Cummings, 2001, p. 1), with the intent of appealing to foreign audiences from publics to governments in the hope of enhancing their image. States have arguably become more image-conscious and seek to appropriate the benefits of advances in communication technology to promote themselves on the international stage. The speeches and statements from leaders and officials that help form the image of a state remain important as a means of promoting a certain image, and can act as a useful soft power tool themselves.

The notion of soft power is also a good exemplar of the importance of ideas in foreign policy. It is a concept that straddles both theory and practice, and its utility is evidenced in the widespread currency that it has among a range of governments. Scholars such as Ding (2008, 2010), Gill and Huang (2006), Paradise (2009), Wang (2008) and even Nye himself (Nye, 2005; Nye and Jisi, 2009) have written widely on China’s harnessing of soft power. These are important contributions in the light of China’s increasing importance on the world stage.
They highlight the importance placed by Beijing on utilising soft power resources, be it through its successful hosting of the 2008 Olympics, or its recent expansion of Confucius Institutes throughout the world. Soft power has also featured as an analytical tool in studies of Turkish foreign policy (Oğuzlu, 2007; Öniş and Yılmaz, 2009), and formed a key plank of its foreign policy discourse as articulated by current Foreign Minister Ahmet Davuţoğlu (2010). As we shall see, this is a trend that has entered policy-making circles in Iran too. Other studies have sought to provide empirical test cases for soft power (Gomes-Saraiva, 2014; Maliukevičius, 2013; Otmazgin, 2012), but with the exception of China, few thus far have attempted to explore the soft power ambitions of states that are perceived as authoritarian, and even less so those who operate a theocratic-based government such as Iran. The Iranian case is particularly instructive as it demonstrates how authoritarian states practice a form of soft power projection that is markedly state-led. This top-down approach is in contrast to Nye’s considerations of grassroots cultural exchange through non-state actors. One can therefore draw some similarities from Iran’s approach with those of China and Russia in terms of the state’s role in seeking an improvement in their public image on the world stage, while maintaining strict authority in their respective domestic polities. However, this article highlights the complexities of maintaining a consistent line in Iran’s case due to its complex internal power structure consisting of competing centres of power. Thus, we can see how the President performs one role in terms of representing Iran on the world stage, while the Supreme Leader maintains control over some important soft power tools, such as the Islamic Republic’s international media operations and its cultural attaches and related cultural outreach centres through the ICRO. While some hopes were raised by Khatami’s aspirations for improving civil society in Iran, thus furthering its soft power aspirations in the way that Nye would prescribe, these were ultimately stymied by a conservative backlash against Khatami’s reformist front in Iran. It also worth noting here that Iran’s large diaspora plays a major role in cultivating its own cultural industries that, if Iran was a Western-style democracy, could be part of a potentially more widely attractive cultural package. However, much of this content is developed by figures that have left Iran, often due to their differences with the Islamic Republic. Indeed, much of this output is viewed distrustfully by the Islamic Republic as part of a wider ‘soft war’ in which Iran is engaged in a battle for hearts and minds with the West via the international news media.

Up to this point, the term ‘soft power’ has been presented as a given. Many scholars who have applied the concept (see above) have focused on states increasing their attractiveness through cultural exchange and public diplomacy, as will this article to a certain extent. However, the concept itself is not without its critics. Lukes’ (1974) third face of power explores the ability to shape the wishes and desires of others too, but that does not mean a confluence with Nye. On the contrary, Lukes sees the notion of soft power as blunt because it fails to distinguish between the ‘different ways in which people’s interests can be influenced and the battle for their hearts and minds engaged’ (Lukes, 2007, p. 95). Hence there is a lack of distinction between processes that are disempowering and those that are empowering in their effects. There are myriad different ways in which such preferences can be shaped, and because power is a potentiality rather than an actuality (Lukes, 2007, p. 84), it is difficult to measure and may indeed never be actualised.

Mattern (2005) has also focused on the issue of attractiveness when exploring Nye’s concept. She notes that soft power should not be understood purely in terms of its juxtaposition with hard power, but that it can actually be seen as one and the same. This is explained through focusing on the idea of representational force, which posits that a certain degree of coercion
is inherent in the means utilised to deploy soft power as ‘[its] success will ultimately depend
on knowing how exactly to make their idea and themselves attractive to a target population’
(Mattern, 2005, p. 584). This could certainly be seen as relevant when one examines Iran’s
international media operations as will be discussed later on.

Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2014) focus on the inability of IR-based studies into soft
power to effectively trace or measure its impact. They focus on the concept of ‘strategic
narrative’ to help enhance understanding of soft power, arguing that it is such narratives that
‘directly address the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the inter-
national system’ (Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2014, p. 74). As we shall see, this has
an application to the Khatami period in his promulgation of a Dialogue among Civilisations.
Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (2013) have also applied the concept of ‘strategic
narrative’ to Iran’s actions during the first phase of negotiations over its nuclear programme.
It could be argued that Ahmadinejad attempted to use a particular strategic narrative as a
power resource in his dealings with Western powers, which as this article shows was in
marked contrast to his soft power maneuverings in other areas of Iranian foreign policy,
where a more traditional understanding of soft power can be discerned. Indeed, it is this less
critical understanding that has formed the basis for the bulk of Iranian academic and policy-
orientated analyses on Iran’s use of soft power since the Revolution. Jafarpanahi and
Mirahmadi (2012) have focused on the grassroots appeal of the Iranian Revolution in its
particularistic articulation of cultural values to the world. Others have outlined the necessity
for maintaining and increasing Iran’s soft power abilities (Golshanparveh, 2012; Iranian
Diplomacy, 2011), emphasised the geopolitical imperatives behind doing so (Harsij,
Toyserkani and Jafari, 2012), and traced its application and success in improving Iran’s
international standing (Harsij and Mollaei, 2009).

Iranian soft power in the twentieth century

Prior to the Revolution in 1979, Iranian cultural diplomacy was delivered in the context of
Iran’s civilisational weight and heritage, primarily focusing on the pre-Islamic elements of its
national identity as determined by the Shah. The image that the Shah sought to project to
Iranians and the wider world was one of forming part of a continual chain of Iranian
monarchy dating back to the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC), and the kingship of great
Iranian rulers. As Ansari (2012, p. 178) notes, this was arguably a narrative of Iranian history
appropriated originally from the West (through Western historiography on ancient Iran),
redefined and effectively re-exported. The most prominent articulation of this sense of
civilisational grandeur came in the celebration of 2,500 years of monarchy in 1971. Held at
Persepolis, the seat of the Achaemenid Empire, the hugely ostentatious ceremony saw leaders
from around the world in attendance. Iran’s cultural diplomacy became increasingly promi-
nent as its coffers were swelled by increasing oil wealth during the 1970s during which time
the Shah expanded his patronage of Iranian cultural institutions. The Shah’s wife, Empress
Farah, was prominent in the Iranian cultural scene as a patron of the arts and convenor of the
annual Shiraz Arts Festival where musicians, dancers and filmmakers from abroad performed
alongside their Iranians counterparts (Gluck, 2007).

Following the Revolution, Iran’s foreign policy was framed within the context of Islam.
Ayatollah Khomeini’s famous maxim ‘neither East nor West but Islamic Republic’ subse-
quently dictated Iran’s foreign policy priorities. In the 1980s, cultural diplomacy
was primarily concerned with export of the Revolution. Iran was seeking to apply a
universalistic conception of Islamic solidarity that was undermined by its particularistic Shi‘ia and Iranian nature. However, Jafarpanahi and Mirahmadi (2012) note that this period was particularly fertile one for Iran in that it was during this time that the world became aware of this particular brand of Iranian culture, steeped in Islam and seeking to expand its cultural influence beyond its borders. They argue that the strong ethical dimension of Iran’s foreign policy, instigated under Khomeini serves as a viable soft power resource in the Islamic world. Furthermore, Iran was able to expand its influence among Pakistan’s large Shi‘ia community through patronage of various groups there, although it has historically had a balancing act to play in keeping relations cordial with Pakistan. This ‘soft’ influence serves as a useful counterpoint to the close Saudi-Pakistan relationship that is at odds with Iran’s wider strategic interests. Thus we see a confluence of soft and hard interests, evidencing the important interrelationship between the two in terms of national interests.

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq War and the death of Khomeini, the Islamic Republic focused its efforts on rebuilding its war-ravaged economy. This marked a period of increasing pragmatism in Iran’s foreign relations as then-President Rafsanjani sought to mend fences with the Arab world and reach out to the West. Rafsanjani’s successor, Mohammad Khatami, built on this opening up, basing his foreign policy on the twin themes of détente and ‘Dialogue among Civilisations’ – the latter of which will now be explored further in terms of its value as a soft power tool.

The following sections focus on the role of culture in the foreign relations of the Islamic Republic. In doing so, they explore some initiatives of Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who have both utilised elements of cultural diplomacy in their foreign policies, be it through exchange and dialogue, or the use of cultural links to expand/enhance relationships (at the time of writing Hassan Rouhani has been in office for less than a year; therefore his views on soft power are included in the conclusion). They also outline how Iran operationalises some of its soft power through the cultural exchange and outreach work of ICRO.

**Presidential-led cultural diplomacy**

Mohammad Khatami came to power in a surprise landslide election victory in 1997, promising to open up to the world through détente and dialogue, and improve the state of civil society at home as part of a reformist current that had been gaining strength in Iranian politics throughout the 1990s. In terms of détente, Iran was looking to rebuild relations with Arab world and promote rapprochement with Europe, while the dialogue aspect came via Khatami’s concept of Dialogue among Civilisations. This was a concept that drew on his academic background. As an academically inclined politician and cleric, he was well versed in Western philosophy and many of his close advisers were familiar with the works of Habermas, Heidegger and others. The call for Dialogue among Civilisations, while often appraised in terms of its philosophical and theoretical underpinnings (Lynch, 2000; Mirbagheri, 2007; Seifzadeh, 2001), was first articulated within the context of the new President’s foreign policy priorities (Wastnidge, 2011). The Dialogue among Civilisations can be seen as a response to Huntington’s (1993, 1997) well-known ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis, emphasising cooperation and understanding between cultures instead of the inevitability of conflict. However, what is interesting in terms of soft power is how this concept was applied in Iran’s foreign relations at the time. Indeed, Khatami himself sees the concept as forming a ‘new paradigm’
in international relations, thus evidencing its efficacy as a foreign policy tool (Khatami, 2000, p. 2). This was an idea that came from a perception of Iranian civilisational weight and importance in the world, much in the same way that the Shah also sought to use similar cultural standing – albeit with different reference points that emphasise both Iran’s Islamic and pre-Islamic identity, or what Holliday (2010) terms ‘Islamist-Iranian’ identity. Thus, there was a distinct cultural turn within Iranian foreign policy thinking at the time, with Khatami emphasising the role of cultural and artistic exchange abroad and building civil society at home. The latter was a conception of civil society still framed with Islamic reference points but that was essentially seeking to improve rights of people in Iran by allowing greater freedom of speech and a freer press. Hence, there was something of a grassroots focus too, coming from these attempts to develop civil society at home in order to help stimulate greater exchange and collaboration abroad. Such attempts fit in with Nye’s views on political values being important to a country’s soft power capabilities. While the Islamic Republic cannot be seen as having any major clout historically in this regard, Khatami’s attempts at promoting reformist, modern Islamic politics did have a positive effect on its international image. Indeed, Iranian scholarship on the subject has emphasised this aspect as improving Iran’s international standing as a result (Barzegar, 2001; Lotfian, 1999; Naghibzadeh, 2002a and 2002b; Seifzadeh, 2001). Harsij and Mollaei (2009) note how the impact of increasing information and telecommunications technologies, combined with Khatami’s attempts to instigate wider debate on civil society within Iran and détente and dialogue globally, helped strengthen Iran’s prestige and standing in the world, pointing to the rise in foreign investment in Iran during this period as a clear indication of the benefits of such an approach. Harsij, Toyserkani and Jafari (2012) also point to the increase in Iranian cultural initiatives abroad via the ICRO during this period, and the targeting of certain regions – namely Central Asia and the Middle East, where Iran was able to use its cultural proximity as a bridge from which to expand relations.

At the international level, the Dialogue among Civilisations initiative was applied in Iran’s relations with other states seen as fellow inheritors of great civilisations. As a result, we see its citation in bilateral relations with Italy (in terms of both countries’/civilisations’ roles as centres of world religion), India (in terms of cultural and linguistic links) and even erstwhile regional foe Egypt (as ‘great wings of Islamic civilisation’). The importance of culture has been emphasised by former Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance Ataollah Mohajerani, who when asked about the role of culture in Iran’s foreign policy during the Khatami era stated: ‘In that time culture was the main and the first element in Mr Khatami’s government. It was very clear, for example, that the Minister of Culture was so important, sometimes more important than the Minister of Foreign Affairs!’ Certainly Mohajerani played an active role in Iran’s foreign diplomacy as the Dialogue among Civilisations spawned numerous cultural exchanges and workshops with other countries. An important moment in the concept’s application on the world stage came with Khatami’s inaugural address to the UN General Assembly in 1998. In his speech, Khatami sought General Assembly approval to designate the year 2001 as the United Nations ‘Year of Dialogue among Civilisations’ (Khatami, 1998). The motion was subsequently passed and represented a significant public relations coup, insofar as it provided international endorsement of an initiative from the Islamic Republic. In this endeavour Khatami was seeking to draw on Iran’s soft power assets as a means of ‘appealing to others through shared values and resources’ (Nye, 2004, p. 5) and seeking to set the agenda in world politics through co-opting people rather than through coercion. This draws upon a basic appropriation of Nye, in terms of the utility of culture as a tool in international affairs.
However, the more nuanced interpretation offered by Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2014) is also pertinent when looking at this period because there is arguably a strategic narrative being applied here. Khatami was applying narratives at the three levels described by Roselle, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin (2014, p. 76) – namely, international system narratives (about how the world is structured – in Khatami’s case in civilisational units); national narratives (Khatami’s using of a specific Iranian-Islamic identity that was projected to the world); and issue narratives (Khatami setting out the policies/ideas that are deemed to be desirable and how they are to be accomplished – i.e. through Dialogue among Civilisations). Each of these can be viewed as power resource within their own right, articulated as they were through Iran’s public diplomacy.

Khatami’s successor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) has become one of the most well-known and arguably notorious international leaders of recent times. If one looks back at the Ahmadinejad Presidency, most will remember it as being characterised by a return to revolutionary rhetoric, with his very public haranguing of Israel being a clear example of how not to improve a country’s image. Indeed, Nye himself, when interviewed by Iran’s Fars news agency, noted that although Iran’s soft power capability had been partly enhanced in the Muslim world, its overall soft power had been harmed more widely due to his stance on Israel.3

Away from the media spotlight on Iran’s nuclear negotiations, and the at times confrontational rhetoric that coloured relations with the West, Iran’s cultural diplomacy continued to be active during the Ahmadinejad era. The policies that Iran pursued towards Central Asia are a good example of how Iran drew upon its soft power resources during this period, in particular with the fellow Persian-speaking nations of Tajikistan and Afghanistan, with relations often framed in terms of their shared culture and language. Iran has sought to make use of its cultural and historical links with Central Asia ever since the states of the region gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Iran regularly draws on cultural commonalities such as the celebration of the Persian new year Nowrooz across the region, and invited regional heads to the first international celebration of Nowrooz in Iran in 2010. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran sought to establish a ‘Union of Persian Speaking Nations’ between the three Persian-speaking states, which drew on cultural linkages as a means of furthering cooperation and making use of the common Persian bonds amongst them.

Iran’s soft power reach in Afghanistan during this period has arguably been helped by the US-led overthrow of the Taliban. As a result, Iran has been able to exert its influence in culturally proximate areas of Afghanistan, such as around the western city of Herat, and among the Shi’ia Hazara minority who have been the recipients of large-scale Iranian investment in its educational and religious networks. Iran’s soft power reach has also been further enabled by another US-led military campaign on its other border in Iraq, where the current Shi’ia-led government there has close ties to Iran. Again this has led to increasing Iranian investment, particularly in the holy Shia cities of Karbala and Najaf, thus building on existing cultural links and furthering Iran’s strategic reach at the same time.

Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation (ICRO)

The ICRO can be viewed as a key instrument of Iran’s cultural diplomacy. The organisation was formed in 1995 as a means of homogenising the Islamic Republic’s multifarious cultural diplomacy networks, which up until that point had been carried out through a variety of state-linked institutions that lacked coherency. The ICRO is responsible for coordinating Iran’s
bilateral cultural initiatives with other states and in some ways it can be seen as a similar enterprise to the British Council, or Confucius and Goethe Institutes. It is affiliated to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and carries out its activities under the guidance of the Supreme Leader who directly appoints members of the ICRO’s ruling council. Its primary aim is to promote the ideals of the Revolution, encourage Islamic unity and strengthen relations with Muslim countries. Its importance in terms of Iran’s soft power reach is that it appoints the senior cultural representatives (known as ‘cultural councilors’) serving abroad. These representatives work independently but sometimes in cooperation with Iran’s embassies (who come under the control of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs), and head up Iran’s cultural centres abroad. The main initiatives it undertakes in terms of delivering Iranian soft power will often depend on the country in question, but primarily involve organising Iranian cultural weeks/exhibitions, arranging cultural and religious events for Iranians living abroad, building links with cultural institutions in the host country and promoting Persian language learning. The ICRO also runs the Al-Hoda international publishing house, which produces literature on the Islamic Republic and Iranian culture in 25 languages and supplies much of the resource for the libraries that are open to the public at the ICRO cultural centres.

The ICRO have offices around the world including several European capitals, but they are most active in neighbouring countries, with Pakistan hosting eight ICRO centres and Turkey two. One of the most active ICRO offices is in Tajikistan, where the organisation has provided funding for the expansion of Persian language and literature resources in the country and coordination for a number of conferences and cultural events related to shared cultural figures such as the great Persian poet Rudaki. While the focus is on fellow Muslim states, the ICRO operates cultural centres across the non-Muslim world too and has a reasonably flexible remit in terms of the type of cultural outreach that it initiates. In this way, Von Maltzahn (2013, p. 221) notes that Iranian cultural diplomacy through the ICRO ‘react[s] to local characteristics, by studying to whom it can reach out in each region, finding points of commonalities’. Thus, we see emphasis on figures relevant to the Persianate world in the ICRO’s activities in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, on the one hand, and a fostering of religious ties among fellow Shi’ia communities in Lebanon and Pakistan, on the other.

The ‘soft war’: defending the Islamic Republic

While the above exploration of culturally framed foreign policy approaches and cultural exchange point to a seemingly benign but still strategically useful aspect of Iranian soft power, the following demonstrates its second, more defensive face. During the Ahmadinejad Presidency that the idea of soft power entered the Iranian political discourse, reflecting the concept’s utility as not only an analytical tool but as a principle determinant of foreign policy. Consequently, the Iranian Presidential Research Institute sponsored fora and published papers on soft power (Almadari, 2008; Hejazi, 2008). Iran gained increasing popularity among the neighbouring publics, particularly in the Arab world, where Mozaffari (2013, p. 198) argues Iran has increased its soft power reach during the Ahmadinejad Presidency through its aims of defending the rights of Muslims worldwide. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle (2013, pp. 128–139) have applied the strategic narrative concept to Ahmadinejad’s handling of the nuclear issue, noting the battle of narratives in negotiations between Iran and the West. Ahmadinejad often framed his foreign and domestic policies in terms of justice and spirituality, invoking a strand messianic thinking in his pronouncements. This is relevant in terms of trying to make his argument persuasive to certain audiences, but as with trying to spread the Revolution previously, is undermined by its particularistic nature. On wider issues of injustice,
Ahmadinejad arguably helped garner some wider support for Iran’s stance, particularly as it courted leftist regimes in Latin America with moderate success.

During this period, the term ‘soft war’ entered Iran’s foreign policy lexicon as a result of the attempted penetration of Western media and cultural programmes and cyber-attacks on Iran. The phrase has gained currency among Iranian politicians, who note that tools of soft power are used in soft war against it via a ‘concentrated, directed and strategic series of information-related actions (through international radio and other means) by the United States and the West’ (Price, 2012, p. 2398), or what Iranian officials term a ‘cultural NATO’. The Islamic Republic has a long history of resisting attempts at Western cultural penetration, be it through banning of Western satellite television and music, and enforcement of Islamic cultural principles on society. However, the idea of ‘soft war’ shows just how far the concept of ‘soft power’, and its tools, has come into Iran’s foreign policy thinking. This idea broadly coincides with the increase in Iran’s international media operations and can be seen in part as a defensive measure aimed at protecting Iran from perceived cultural imperialism. It is worth noting that the development of this idea, while taking place during Ahmadinejad’s tenure, was primarily the work of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Basij militia (Adelkhah, 2010; Posch, 2013), who took the lead in formulating the response to the protests surrounding the disputed 2009 Presidential elections which saw Ahmadinejad remain in office. Thus, the soft war concept has backing and input directly from the Supreme Leader, who regularly uses the term in his speeches, equating it with psychological warfare and propaganda, citing it as a ‘war fought through cultural means and influence’.

Iran’s international media operations

Iran’s international media output is another conduit through which it attempts to extend its soft power reach. The international broadcast media is under the control of the state broadcaster Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which is directly subordinate to the Supreme Leader who appoints its head every five years in accordance with the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. The world service arm of IRIB seeks to promote Iranian culture and civilisation to an international audience, expounding the Islamic Republic’s worldview in light of perceived biases in the international news media in particular. There is also a strong defensive element within this thinking as the Islamic Republic has long been subject to broadcasts from Western media organisations which it sees as being hostile, such as Voice of America, numerous private stations run by the Iranian diaspora and, more recently, BBC Persia. IRIB currently operates five international news channels. Iran’s first 24-hour foreign language international news channel, the Arabic language Al-Alam, began broadcasting in 2003. It is aimed primarily towards Iraq, but also covers news on Lebanon, Palestine, Africa and Iran. The channel launch was ‘simultaneous with the US invasion of Iraq’, and it aims to adopt ‘an active media policy vis-à-vis the west’s one-sided news imperialism’ (Al-Alam News Website, 2014). Iran’s second Arabic-language service, Al-Kowthar, was launched in 2006 and focuses more on religious programming reaching out to fellow Shi’ia communities in the Arab world. IRIB also provides programming for the Hezbollah media outlet Al-Manar in Lebanon, thus furthering Iran’s media reach – albeit indirectly.

Perhaps the most well-known Iranian media enterprise in the West is its 24-hour English language international news channel Press TV, launched in 2007. Press TV emerged as English-language, rolling news operations began to proliferate in the early 2000s. It sees itself as offering a different perspective to CNN, BBC World, Al-Jazeera English and others by
providing a platform for ‘neglected voices and perspectives’ (Press TV, 2014). In 2011 Iran also launched Hispan TV, a Spanish-language station broadcasting to Spain and Latin America, which reflects the ties cultivated between Iran and Latin American states, most notably Venezuela and Cuba, during the Ahmadinejad era. As with Press TV, however, Hispan TV was also removed from the main satellites in 2013 as a result of the tightening sanctions against Iran.

It is worth noting here that all of the above international media operations are complemented by comprehensive news websites available in the target audience language and Persian. Iran has also sought to expand its presence in cyberspace more broadly as part of the ‘soft war’ strategy, with websites such as ‘psyops.ir’ (under the moniker of ‘Soft War and Psychological Operations’) and others being set up to document US-led ‘psyops’ against Iran and Iranian responses to them. As noted previously, this is a strategy that is primarily in the hands of the IRGC, and can be seen as representing the Supreme Leader’s preference to not only defend Iran from cultural imperialism, but also go on the offensive through establishing a clear state narrative on issues of concern to Iran in the international media. It is not surprising that these enterprises adopt a more zealous stance considering their close association with the IRGC and other conservative elements within the Islamic Republic. This is in part a reactive strategy aimed at countering perceived Western biases and penetration, which in former IRGC head Yahya Rahim Safavi’s words seeks to ‘block the enemy’s cultural onslaught by using our own culture’ (cited in Adelkhah, 2010).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Iranian soft power is multifaceted and enacted through a range of different channels. Since Khatami, there has been a consistent emphasis on cultural diplomacy and an expansion of Iranian cultural centres abroad. With Khatami it is clear to see a harnessing of a broad-based conception of Iranian identity that was presented to the world – one of a great civilisation that had cultural weight, something that could subsequently be applied in foreign relations and cultural diplomacy more specifically. The Ahmadinejad era saw a continuation of culturally framed foreign policies in relations to Central Asia, enhancing Iran’s ties with its fellow Persian-speaking nations, and capitalising on its transnational religious linkages with Shi’ia communities beyond its borders.

At the time of writing, President Hassan Rouhani has sought to integrate the soft power trend into Iranian foreign policy thinking, speaking of the need to utilise ‘soft power diplomacy’ in its relations and emphasising the role of press and media in particular as conduits (Rouhani, 2014). To this end he is also keen to increase press freedom, promote women’s rights and encourage greater activism by civil society groups, which has arguably had a knock-on effect on Iran’s image and helped the current nuclear negotiations, thus showing how material ends can be met through crafting a positive image for the world. An example of this thinking can be seen in the ‘Meet Iran’ initiative. Its Twitter feed is run by Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and acts as a form of digital diplomacy with its stated aim of ‘providing a more nuanced idea of #Iran. One tweet at a time.’ This mission statement alludes to the public image considerations of the Rouhani government and the desire to craft a new image on the global stage. The irony, of course, is that the channels being used by this part of the Iranian government are still officially banned in the Islamic Republic.

Nonetheless, both Rouhani, and particularly his foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (who served as Iran’s ambassador to the UN during the Khatami Presidency) are keen Twitter
and Facebook users. They represent a social media-savvy, pragmatic element of Iranian politics that seeks to make use of modern public diplomacy methods which have thus far had a broadly positive role in re-crafting the Islamic Republic’s image on the international stage. Internally this has provoked renewed debate on the legality in Iran of other social media channels and mobile applications that conservative elements feel may undermine the Islamic Republic’s moral fabric. However, at the time of writing, the social media channels that are used to represent Iran outwardly remain active, be they through the personal accounts of key figures such as Rouhani and Zarif and initiatives such as ‘Meet Iran’, or its international broadcast media in the form of Press TV. This implies a tacit recognition that while the debate continues internally as to how far Iranian society should be allowed to use social media, the advantages it affords in public diplomacy terms mean it will continue to be a feature in Iran’s international relations.

This article has illustrated how culture can be a valuable tool in international affairs. The complexities inherent in exploring Iranian soft power are brought into sharp focus when one explores the instrumental aspects of Iranian soft power projection. While the diplomatic initiatives and public diplomacy of governmental representatives made use of Iran’s soft power potential, it is in the tangible operationalisation of these resources that one can observe the real centre of power in the Islamic Republic. The examples of the ICRO and international media operations demonstrate how the Supreme Leader maintains his influence through Iran’s active soft power initiatives, utilising its cultural representatives abroad and maintaining control of its media output, which remains vital in projecting his worldview. The latter is key to Iran’s defensive strategy as part of its perceptions of a wider soft war. These two case studies can be assessed as having contrasting aims insofar as the ICRO focuses on diplomacy in its cooperative sense while international media operations are broadly defensive. However, they both derive their authority from, and have direct links to, a common source – the Supreme Leader. Ultimately, presidential power is circumscribed in Iran by that of the Supreme Leader. Thus while Iran’s Presidents have, through their more itinerant role, played a key role in its public diplomacy with varying degrees of success, it is the Supreme Leader and his closest confidants who sets the strategic tone, particularly domestically, and who has made use of elements of soft power thinking in maintaining its at times defensive posture. There is nuance within this approach, though, as the public diplomacy enacted through social media channels that are banned within Iran demonstrates an understanding of the need to take advantage of the benefits they offer.

While not necessarily the revisionist actor of old, the Islamic Republic still seeks to counter prevailing orthodoxies and set the agenda itself. This also fits with elements of the conception of ‘representational force’, insofar as the varying expressions soft power, from Khatami to Khamenei, can be viewed as ‘tangible tool[s] that can be amassed and deployed through concerted effort’ (Mattern, 2005, p. 588). Thus, Iranian political actors have arguably conceived soft power in much the same way as they do hard power. The Islamic Republic provides a unique example of how soft power is both understood and enacted by authoritarian states, showing the importance of ‘top-down’ initiatives that differ from elements of Nye’s conception of soft power. In this way it demonstrates both the utility of Nye’s original concept, insofar as it has been taken on and reinterpreted by the Islamic Republic, and also its limitations as an analytical tool, by highlighting the confluence of hard and soft power considerations in the way Iranian soft power is articulated in differing strategic, and at times defensive, narratives.
About the author

Edward Wastnidge is Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at the Open University, UK. His main areas of research are the foreign policy of Iran, and the politics and international relations of the Middle East and Central Asia. His book, Diplomacy and Reform in Iran: Foreign Policy under Khatami is forthcoming with I.B. Tauris in 2015. Edward Wastnidge, Lecturer in Politics and International Studies, Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK. E-mail: edward.wastnidge@open.ac.uk Twitter: @EdwardWastnidge

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Dr Raia Prokhovnik for her encouragement and support in the writing of this article. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Enactments programme in the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance (CCIG) at the Open University. I also thank the three anonymous reviewers and Politics editor Dr Kyle Grayson for their constructive suggestions and comments.

Notes

1 This is drawn from the authors’ unpublished PhD thesis noted above. Examples of the applications of the concept can be seen across primary sources such as official speeches published in English and Persian. Some examples can be found in the following (the list is non-exhaustive and for illustrative purposes only):


References


