Editorial Note

The article presents a timely and sorely needed analysis of the soft-power (and hard-power) policies of four countries in the Middle East since the rise (and arguable fall) of the Arab Spring; two of these (Turkey and Iran) are major powers in that region and beyond. Yet the small Arab Gulf states Qatar and Oman also turn out to be central players; particularly their conflict-resolution efforts have been more crucial and effective than their small size would suggest.

There remain some issues with the central concepts applied in the article, however. Fadi Elhusseini rightly points out that scholars do not agree on common definitions of "soft power". But then one starts to wonder whether there are agreed, or at least good, definitions of "hard power". The author does not further debate the contestability of these and other concepts, like "smart power".

The author's descriptions of the supposedly well-intentioned and effective 'soft power' policies of Turkey, Iran, Qatar and above all Oman—at least in the largest parts of each section on these countries—may be contestable as well. One certainly should critically review and 'test' any specific, self-congratulatory claims by the governments in question. Particularly statements from any Ministry of Information—hardly an objective and independent source even in the best of times—should not be taken at face-value.

Thus regarding the "fraternal commitment to all Muslims" stated in the Iranian Constitution, one should a) critically ask and assess the veracity of this statement in practice, and b) ascertain whether it refers to both Sunnis and Shi'ites, including heterodox Sufis within both or even outside these branches of Islam—or whether it just refers to 'true' Muslims i.e. Shi'ites as understood by Iran's theocracy.

On a broader note, the author could also have discussed in more detail—and discarded or confirmed if possible—the frequent reports of these countries' contributions to sectarian tensions and conflicts in neighbouring countries (Syria, Yemen, etc.), whether through soft- or hard-power means. Think for example of the recent incursions of the Turkish Army in Northern Iraq and even Northern Syria. They seem to be examples of hard power. At the very least Turkey attempts in these instances to apply 'smart power' i.e. a combination of hard and soft power.

Incidentally, one should not automatically assume that all soft power is 'good' and all hard power is 'bad'. It all depends on the timeliness and proportionality of the means chosen, and on the motivations behind it.
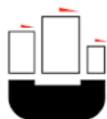
Fadi Elhusseini does make some good critical observations in the Conclusion. But some of these could have been made in the preceding sections as well, so that the reader then is reassured that the author does indeed critically review the claims made by the governments of the countries in question.
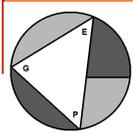
Finally, some more observations on the cumulative effects of these soft-power policies by these countries would have been preferable. For instance, do they reinforce each other and really help to bring peace and stability—or do they compete with each other, and thereby hamper conflict resolution or even paradoxically help to stoke or even bring about violent conflicts? How optimistic can one be about the 'rise of soft power' in the Middle East, and how optimistic can one be that this soft power will really help to end, solve and prevent future conflicts in the region?

- Caspar ten Dam, Executive Editor

NB: do you have any comments on Fadi Elhusseini's article? Please send these to info@ethnogeopolitics.org, or through the contact form at www.ethnogeopolitics.org.

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