

Main Article

Soft Power Models in the Middle East

Fadi Elhousseini

Abstract *The Middle East remains of major geostrategic importance. Global powers found in the recent developments an opportunity to chart their way into the region; sending troops and reinforcements, rebuilding alliances and restoring old relations. Amidst this chaotic environment, a number of regional forces opted to adopt a different approach: soft power. It is obvious that such forces have found in soft power an efficient tool that can achieve what tanks and jets have failed to do. In this article, four soft power models in the Middle East are assessed and analysed: those employed by Turkey, Iran, Qatar and Oman.*

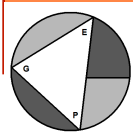
Introduction: What is Soft Power?

Soft power refers to the ability to change what others think and do through attraction and persuasion rather than compulsion and coercion. Scholars are still divided and fail to agree on an exact definition of soft power, which thus remains a loose and vague concept. Joseph Nye was first to coin the term “soft power” and his definition of *soft power* is “getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye 2004).

Nye (2004: 5) finds that the crux of soft power is shaping the preferences of others; yet resources (either culture or laws or institutions) are significant in determining the effectiveness of soft power. The resources that produce soft power come chiefly from the values an actor (either an organization or a state) expresses in its culture, that can be transmitted through various means including commerce, tourism, personal contacts, visits, and exchanges.

Throughout his book *Soft power*, Nye tries to demonstrate the various means of soft power, including public diplomacy, speeches, state branding, drama and TV shows, movies, education (universities, books, and scholarships), scientific centres, culture and notions (globalization and democracy), sport and Olympics, food, music, immigration, Nobel Prizes, Internet, video games, NGOs, brands i.e. brand names (cars and electronics), peacekeeping missions, and assistance to poor and developing countries (Nye 2004: 8-13).

Soft power and hard power can work in conjunction and the lack of clarity and the difficulty to assess its success led to the emergence of “smart power” as a new, hybrid concept. Nye conceptualizes *smart power* as something lying between hard and soft power that can be considered a sort of “third way”. To elaborate, this new concept in foreign policy studies (and practices) is based on the combination of: a) thesis: to coerce through hard-power means (military, economic and financial power); b) antithesis: to attract the other so as to achieve



interests through soft-power means of attraction and persuasion; and c) synthesis: a third way that is neither hard nor soft power, but a skilful combination of both—“smart power”.

Nevertheless, the influence of soft power remains fragile and subject to distraction i.e. befuddlement, disagreement and misunderstanding. Instability, chaos and wars are among various conditions that undermine the effects of soft power.

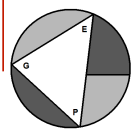
Turkey and Soft Power

For Turkey's part, Turkish statesmen have repeatedly stressed the importance of soft power in achieving Turkey's vision and strategy toward the Arab World. Turkey could skilfully utilize its interdependence concept and soft power skills to bridge differences and burry old doubts. With its economic success story (ranked 16th economy in the world; fully-emerged as a regional hub for international investments) Turkey's economic capabilities have been employed as a successful soft power instrument others might wish to emulate and this has become known as the “Turkish Model”. The latter is deemed an important soft power tool that Turkey has nourished over the years and it is widely seen as a product of the compatibility of Islam and democracy and the moderation of Turkish Islam and Turkish modernization on the country's long path of democracy that is based on state-instilled secularism (Göksel 2012: 104-110).

As soft power has accompanied and facilitated the new Turkish posture in the Arab World, Turkey's intensified engagement and active presence varied in forms between direct political involvement, economic and financial assistance, cultural and educational support, social and artistic aspects, mediation and humanitarian aid. Turkey also launched various political initiatives including the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR) agreement in collaboration with Brazil in 2010. The latter agreement served Turkey in its state branding and public diplomacy where it demonstrated to Middle Easterners it being the instigator of independent policies rather than a follower of particularly the US foreign agenda.

Intriguingly, Turkey also has intensified its mediation efforts that included mediation between Syria and Iraq, Syria and Israel and Hamas and Israel. Through its aid organization the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı*, TİKA) and other NGO's, Turkey provided economic assistance to various Arab countries including Somalia, Sudan and Palestine.

Humanitarian aid varied and came in either the form of official assistance or through Turkish organizations and business associations. Culturally, Turkey held numerous academic conferences and seminars and offered a lot of scholarships for Arab students. Among the various tools of Turkey's new foreign policy, the “culturalist” aspect played a significant role in the formation of specific impacts and perceptions within the Arab world toward Turkey. For instance, Turkey was able to enjoy unprecedented popularity in the Arab world making soap operas as one of the most effective soft-power tools Turkey could employ. Since 2008,



any average Arab citizen would sense the evolution in Turkish drama and its cultural effect on Arab societies (Ari & Pirincci 2010: 6).

This engagement policy has paid off in several ways and Arab intellectuals, activists, youth leaders, and even officials have taken a keen interest in this activism and called to emulate what became known as the Turkish Model. For example, the leader of Al-Nahda, Rachid Ghannouchi referred to Turkey as “the right model” for Tunisia (Göksel 2012: 60). However, with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the ensuing developments defused much of the effect of Turkey's soft power. As such, many Arabs began to brand Turkey as a hard power, which as been threatening to intervene militarily (the case of North Iraq), calling to ouster of heads of state (such as Assad in the case of Syria) and even being engaged in military actions (like the case of downing the Russian fighter jet at the Syrian-Turkish border in November 2015).

Iran and Soft Power

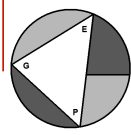
In contrast, Iran has been typically branded as a hard power, especially given its record of wars (like with Iraq right after the Islamic Revolution), alliances with regimes and groups widely recognized as violent or supporting terrorism and with fierce rhetoric against either the West or Israel. Nevertheless, whether one likes it or not, Iran is moving slowly but steadily towards an extraordinary soft- or smart-power status and role in the Middle East. It has succeeded in introducing a unique pattern whereby it is adept at converting hard power and coarse policies into effective and efficient soft-power tools that serve its image and reputation. Throughout the past decade, it used soft power at times, hard power and both, in what Nye and other scholars labelled as smart power (Cammack 2008).

Ali Bakeer finds that Iran's soft power is based on three main pillars. First and foremost is a history and culture that is based on a three-thousand-year-old civilization that always has had an impact on neighbouring regions. In the same context, tourism and cultural events are other important sources and Iran is classified as one of the best ten destinations in terms of history and archaeological sites.

The Persian language can be seen as a major source of attraction since it has entered in the synthesis of many other languages including Turkish, Hindi, Urdu, Armenian, Georgian, Swahili and others. The five million Iranians in the Diaspora play also a significant role in spreading Persian culture through Iranian restaurants, goods, songs and other social aspects.

The second pillar concerns political values. Iran has introduced a unique political model that stems from its hybrid political system which adopts the concept of "religious democracy". As a unique model of its kind and source of Iranian soft power, this model constitutes a substitute for traditional systems and is considered an appealing model for religious Muslims.

The third pillar is a foreign policy which is the largest source of soft power. The Iranian Constitution refers clearly to the role of a foreign policy which is based on “Islamic” values,



fraternal commitment to all Muslims and full protection of the oppressed around the world. These offerings, along with the Iranian propositions on revolutionary and religious principles, are considered the bases of Iran's soft power (Bakeer 2013).

In light of the aforesaid observations, Iran, thus far, has adopted an ever-widening array of instruments to bolster its soft power and build alliances and partnerships throughout the Muslim and the Arab worlds. Shiism became a palpable policy and Iran has been contacting Shiites in many countries around the world, through media campaigns, establishing cultural and religious centres, financially supporting Shiite minorities and recently politically and militarily assisting Shiite communities with the aim of strengthening their role and influence within their societies (for example Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon).

Taking advantage of the widespread regional dismay about US policies, anti-American rhetoric became part of Iran's official speeches. This was deemed one of the vital state branding tools that would promote Iran's status as a regional leader in face of foreign "hegemony". As a result, Iran was able to form a network of regional allies under the name of "Resistance Axis".

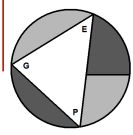
Similar to other Middle-Eastern leaders, Iran has used also pro-Palestinian slogans to gain popularity among the Arab masses. Iran also tries to expand its influence through trade and investment. For instance, Iran cooperates with Turkey and Malaysia to design and manufacture cars for Islamic markets and its state-owned Khodro Company emerges as the largest carmaker in the region, exporting over one million cars, trucks, and buses to over thirty countries in 2007 (Chorinm & Malka 2008).

Finally, the Nuclear Deal gave Iran's soft power another boost, especially it was thus able to avoid a war with the United States and/or Israel, lift the sanctions and evade any disadvantageous bargaining results on other issues (e.g. Hamas, Hezbollah, support for the Syrian regime).

Qatar and Soft Power

In practice, Qatar represents an evident illustration of the successful use of soft-power tools in the Arab World. State-branding proved to be a successful tool to Qatar's desire to promote itself as a neutral and progressive leader in the Arab and Islamic World and to gain more regional and international recognition. Not limited to state-branding, Qatar utilized various soft-power means, including hosting conferences, sport games (e.g. the Twelfth Arab Games in 2011), investments in various realms (like Islamic charities, culture and education, sport clubs, banks, Aljazeera, Qatar Airways, and in 2008 Qatar unveiled Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030 on a generational project of State-branding (Ulrichsen 2014: 38-45).

Hence, one could argue that Qatar's soft power rests on three main pillars. First is a state-branding whereby the Qatari leadership has tried to promote the status of Qatar internally and externally. Domestically, the Qatari leadership worked on bolstering the national



identity through investments in national and cultural monuments, symbols and events (e.g. the first Qatar National day was declared in 2007).

Externally, Qatar has worked on promoting its status on two levels: politics and leisure. On the political level, Qatar has been proactive in appearing as a neutral and progressive leader in the region through various activities including hosting the Islamic Conference, investing in Islamic charities, mediating between political rivals in Lebanon, intra-Palestinian factions, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Darfur and recently in freeing Djibouti prisoners in Eritrea.

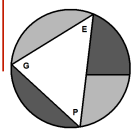
On the leisure level, Qatar has been working hard to appear with a different identity and qualities when compared to its proximity. Hosting fashion, art and sport events like tennis championships, Arab Games, organizing the upcoming Soccer World Cup in 2022, investing in and buying famous European clubs, and investments in tourism and travel—notably Qatar Airways is just a case in point.

The second pillar of Qatar's soft power that helps in state-branding as well, is *Aljazeera* TV channel which has been founded in 1996. *Aljazeera* was able to achieve unprecedented success in the Arab world and served as the voice of many ordinary Arabs in various realms. Opposing the American and Western narrative, *Aljazeera* gained fame among Arabs and represented a pan-Arabism[ist] view, especially with the 9/11 tragic events and the ensuing developments (Ulrichsen 2014: 48-49). The significance of *Aljazeera* appeared clearly with the eruption of popular revolts during the Arab Spring in 2011 where the channel was widely believed to have a crucial role in inspiring and mobilizing Arab masses.

The third pillar of Qatar's soft power is investment in education, culture and research. The most notable initiative in that regard is the Qatar Foundation of Education, headed by the wife of Emir Hamad, Sheikha Mozah. With this in mind, again Qatar has been able to project itself as an educational and cultural hub, providing a wide array of programs, services, scholarship and launching successful initiatives and hosting academic and cultural conferences and events.

Not limited to the Qatar Foundation, Doha (Qatar's capital city) has founded numerous educational and cultural centers, think tanks and universities such as the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, the Brookings Doha Center, the Rand-Qatar policy institute and others (Ulrichsen 2014: 52). In a similar way, Qatar has made assiduous efforts to pioneer in the field of research and development of clean(er) energy fuels.

With these notable achievements Qatar has been able to attain and cement a novel status seemingly incompatible to its size and far removed from the traditional stereotype of the Gulf region. Not surprisingly then, Qatar's rise has become the center of scholar and academic attention.



Oman and Soft Power

In the midst of the regional critical developments in the region, Oman appears as a peaceful oasis that rests aloof from the enticements of sectarian strife and power politics. This reality comes as a result of Oman's entrenched set of qualities, beliefs and values that prioritize peace. For Oman, soft power means peace. Oman's soft power rests basically on two basic foundations; peace-making and state-branding. These are naturally interlocked and Oman has been adept enough in realizing noteworthy results thanks to its domestic stability. In other words, stability is a crucial element in this equation and this encompasses both domestic and foreign (mainly regional) stability (Choe 2012).

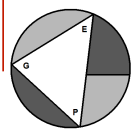
Domestically, Oman is a peaceful and internally stable country. With the assistance of Iran (under the reign of the Shah), Pakistan and Britain, Oman preserved its unity and was able to crush a foreign-backed Marxist insurgency in the 1970s in the westernmost province of Dhofar (Cafiero 2016). Sultan Qaboos demonstrated a unique ability to absorb this wave of grievances with the message that the government would allow the province to develop its distinctive culture and identity and introduced huge development programmes and promoted strong economic growth. As a result, Dhofaris have responded well to the Sultan's policy (Wheeldon 2014).

Similarly, as part of the popular revolutionary wave a series of demonstrations erupted in Oman during 2011, albeit these protests were peaceful and showed respect for the Sultan. In return, Sultan Qaboos accepted the petitions and undertook a number of steps to contain the unrest, including reshuffling the governing cabinet and promising to give the Legislative Council more powers. The Sultan also pledged to create 50,000 government jobs and provide a monthly benefit of \$390 to the unemployed (Worrall 2012: 106-115).

Consequently, domestic stability has been an important asset for Oman and has played a crucial role in attracting foreign direct investments and when others averted other regional projects, the Omani ones have appeared more appealing and promising. Not limited to economic gains, domestic stability, renaissance projects and good governance served raising Oman's status and hence the goal of state-branding. Since the Sultan took power in 1970, the country was revolutionized, modernized and transformed strikingly through substantial investments in various fields.

Oil revenues were pumped into public and private sectors, allowing business to provide consistent growth and an increasing number of jobs. A huge network of roads, schools and hospitals were built and as an eventual result, the WHO (World Health Organization) ranked Oman's healthcare system as the eight-best in world in 2000 (Wheeldon 2014). In a report issued in November 2010, the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) ranked Oman as number one out of 135 countries in the world in terms of human development achievements for the period of 1970-2010 (Choe 2012).

With a crossroads of cultures, Oman's multicultural identity gave the country the chance to promote itself as such. The famous slogan in Oman's capital Muscat became "a country



where people of different ethnic backgrounds live in harmony and open to other peoples, irrespective of religion, customs and heritage”. State-branding was not limited to international recognition, but also building and bolstering a national pride at home. The Sultanate tried to rejuvenate this feeling of pride among Omani nationals through upping Oman's long history and tradition (Choe 2012).

Perhaps Oman's activism in the field of mediation and international peace demonstrates Muscat's soft-power capabilities and highlights the second aspect of its strategy towards foreign and regional stability. Oman believes that any dispute between countries should be resolved through dialogue. Ibrahim al Hamdani, Adviser at Oman's Ministry of Information says: “Oman has always been the peacekeeper and a strong advocate of international friendship and harmony since the blessed Renaissance and has always kept its ideals of keeping away from any conflicts whatsoever. This neutral position gives Oman the unique advantage of being a mediator in international issues”.

In this respect, Oman played a valuable role in narrowing differences between various parties in recent disputes. When the other Gulf States opposed the US-Iran nuclear deal, Oman did not only support it but it also hosted the secret talks between the two governments.

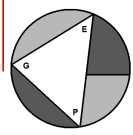
Oman's neutral position gave the country a unique advantage of being a mediator in international issues. It played an instrumental role in freeing three American hikers arrested by Iran on espionage charges in 2011 (Gupta 2015). This position made Sultan Qaboos succeeds in maintaining the trust and confidence of both the Americans and the Iranians and bringing them across the table behind closed doors. One must stress then that the successful signing of the Nuclear Deal has revealed an unanticipated and crucial Omani role.

This policy is not novel and holding the secret talks between the two rivals during the Iraqi-Iranian War in Muscat is just a case in point. In Yemen, when Houthis are in control of the capital, Oman remains the only Gulf country whose embassy in Sana is still operational.

Oman did not take part in the Saudi-led “Decisive Storm” military campaign against the Houthis and former President Saleh's loyalists and kept channels open with them. It also played a pivotal role in handing over the body of a Moroccan pilot whose fighter jet fell in territories controlled by the Houthis. Not surprisingly then, Muscat would be the logical destination for any potential negotiations between the warring parties.

Not limited to the Yemeni debacle, Oman has leveraged its neutrality to develop trustworthy relationships with all sides in the Syrian crisis, enabling the Sultanate to serve as an acceptable mediator that no other Arab or Gulf country could. When almost every Arab and Gulf country boycotted and attacked the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, Oman maintained its relations with the Syrian regime.

In August 2015 Syria's foreign minister met his counterpart in Muscat and in October of the same year the Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi had met with Assad in Damascus



(Cafiero 2016). In the same year, the Sultanate mediated in Algeria in order to help containing an unexpected, sudden sectarian crisis between Ibadi Amazigh and some Arabs associated with the Maliki School (see *Noon Post* Editorial 2015).

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the aforementioned models or policies of four Middle Eastern countries has been deemed necessary to highlight another form of competition in the region: soft power. The employment of each model depends on certain tools and carries different goals. Nonetheless, the influence of soft power remains fragile and subject to distraction. Instability, chaos and wars are among various conditions that ultimately undermine the effects of soft power.

Turkey has been able to achieve unprecedented accomplishments through its soft power, yet it has been hard to maintain these gains with the eruption of the Arab Spring and resulting regional instability. Likewise, Qatar has been able to raise its regional and global significance in record time, yet with the mounting state of polarization all the achievements have been undermined dramatically at a later stage.

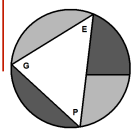
Iran's soft power model lies chiefly on ethnic and revolutionary values and reflects expansionist objectives as well. However, the Iranian soft power model does not rest on solid ground as its values intertwine with other values that can be a source of conflicts and hence can easily be transformed into hard power.

Finally, Oman has utilized low-profile soft-power tools and strategy with the aim of maintaining its status as a neutral actor and evade the effects of prevalent regional polarization. This quiet approach has paid off and produced Oman with coveted results.

In a nutshell, one may argue that both Turkey's and Qatar's soft power models have proved to have ephemeral effects only; Iran's soft power model can paradoxically be another source of regional instability if it either resorts to hard-power tools or if its soft-power tools have unanticipated escalatory, polarizing effects; and Oman's soft power model arguably seeks stability and peaceful resolution of conflicts—and successfully so.

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A previous (already peer-reviewed) August 2016 version of this article can be found on *E-International Relations*: www.e-ir.info/2016/08/08/soft-power-in-the-middle-east-the-invisible-skirmish/.



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