

Soft Power and the Persian Gulf

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, MAY 15 2009

In October 2009, Iran was due to host athletes from the Muslim nations in order to celebrate “harmony” in the Islamic World. But, ironically, Tehran has had to cancel the Islamic Solidarity Games because Arab states demanded that the Persian tag should be removed from the competition’s medals and promotional posters. In a quite astonishing manner, 27 countries led by Saudi Arabia refused to compete unless the waterway was called the “Arabian Gulf” instead of the “Persian Gulf”.

Although Iran had already spent £6.7 million preparing for the games, it rejected the demand and stated, “Games or no games, the historic name of Persian Gulf remains eternal”.

Iran has not been enjoying warm relations with the Arab states in recent years. A number of issues, including the nuclear programme and Iranian interventions in Iraq and Lebanon, have made the majority of Arab states hostile towards Tehran; boycotting the games will only cause the situation to deteriorate further. The Islamic Solidarity Games was more than an occasion for sports. Iran was aiming to use the occasion to improve its image in the Islamic World and strengthen ties with her neighbors in the region.

Whilst, from a strategic standpoint, neighboring Arab states should not be interested in further isolating the Islamic Republic, this is exactly the impact of their boycott. It is a fact that, the more Arabs marginalize Iran, the more they push her to strengthen ties with “virtual states” such as Hezbollah and Hamas. It has been proven that Iran does not need significant regional alliances to expand her influence over the region. In absence of strong interstate relations, Tehran has never hesitated to maintain the balance of power by acting as a patron for military organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas and now the Mahdi Army in Iraq.

Clearly, Iranian support for these organizations undermines the interest of many Arab states in the region. But have the Arab states themselves done much to offer an alternative to Tehran? No, instead of engaging Iran diplomatically, they actively take measures to alienate their isolated but powerful neighbor.

Those Arab states that boycotted the games completely ignored the role of soft power in international relations. Soft power includes the use of culture and ‘nonpolitical’ agencies for influence over other nations and states. However, boycotting the games over an issue, which is extremely close to the hearts and minds of Iranians will only add to the sense of anti-Arabism among the Iranian people and encourage the political leaders to maintain their isolationist position in the region.

The Iranian people are extremely proud of their culture and history and these cultural issues should therefore be brought into diplomacy. Diplomacy is not only about negotiation over distribution of power, it is also about understanding complex historical and cultural issues. These would prove effective in dealing with Iran.

Perhaps it is far too optimistic to ask for cultural understanding, when insensitive and antagonistic policies are affecting everyday politics in the region. However, in the case of Iran, it is vital to understand these socio-historical complexities to open up alternative channels for negotiation. The new administration in America has acknowledged these sensitivities – Obama has brought Iranian history and culture into the political discourse to address Iranian leaders. Of course, he did not perform a political miracle, but he certainly defused rising tensions by speaking a

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language that people like to hear in Tehran. But why do the regional actors who fear the Iranian “threat” not take these issues on board? Instead, they boycott an important event hosted by Iran, because Tehran did not bow to their demands to change the historic name of Persian Gulf to the “Arabian Gulf”. This is indeed political short sightedness and merely the latest example of a failure of diplomacy in the region.

The history of disagreement over the name of the waterway goes back to 1960s. The proposed name of “Arabian Gulf” is the legacy of Arab nationalism led by Kamal Abdol Nasser, an Egyptian nationalist who attempted to unify the Arab world against western imperialism. In the '60s, Iran was in the 'western camp' and the Shah was the main protector of the west's interest in the region. Kamal Abdol Nasser, the vanguard of Pan-Arabism, was ideologically antagonistic towards Iran's pro-western position in the region and he was the first to suggest that the Persian Gulf should be renamed the “Arabian Gulf” to punish Iranians! Although, the idealism and aspirations of Arab nationalism has died out, the issue of renaming the Persian Gulf has continued to be the source of tension between Iran and the Arab World.

However, the Arab effort to impose the name “Arabian Gulf” has proved to be fruitless. Iranians and some international bodies have strongly resisted Arab pressure. They constantly have referred to Greek, Roman, Persian and Arabic sources to show that Persian Gulf is the historical name for the waterway. They have also referred to the legality of the term. In all legal documents and treaties in international organizations, Persian Gulf is the name that is recognized. As if these were not enough; at the Twenty-third session of the United Nations in March-April 2006, the name of Persian Gulf was confirmed again as the official term to be used by members of the United Nations.

Although the Arab states have been facing international obstacles to meet their unrealistic demands, they persist to call the Persian Gulf, “Arabian Gulf”. This time they took it further and created a bitter international row which undermined constructive diplomacy in the region.

The Arab states must know a stable Middle East cannot come about without having Iran on board. In that light, the more they alienate Tehran, the more they undermine the prospects of trust building in the region.

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