

# Soft Power in the Middle East: The Invisible Skirmish

Written by Fadi Elhusseini

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/08/08/soft-power-in-the-middle-east-the-invisible-skirmish/>

FADI ELHUSSEINI, AUG 8 2016

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 failed to do. In this article, two soft power models in the Middle East are assessed and analysed: Iran and Oman.

### 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 remains loose and vague. Joseph Nye was the first to coin the term soft power and his definition of soft power is “getting others to want the outcomes that you want”, soft power, he said, “co-opts people rather than coerces them.”

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), expressed in its culture (which can be transmitted through various means including commerce, tourism, personal contacts, visits, and exchanges). Throughout his book, 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 ideas (globalization and democracy), sports and the Olympics, food, music, immigration, Nobel Prizes, the internet, video games, NGOs, brands (cars and electronics), peace keeping missions, and assistance to poor and developing countries (Nye 2004, 8-13). Nevertheless, the influence of soft power remains fragile and subject to distraction. Instability, chaos and wars are among the various conditions that undermine the effects of soft power.

### Iran and Soft Power

Iran has been always branded as a hard power, especially for its record of wars (with Iraq right after the revolution), alliances with regimes and groups widely recognized as violent or supporting terrorism and its fierce rhetoric against either the West or Israel. Nevertheless, whether you like it or not, Iran is moving slowly but steadily towards an extraordinary status and role in the Middle East. It 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 has used soft power, hard power, at times, and both, in what Nye and other scholars labelled “smart power” (Cammack, 2008).

Ali Bakeer finds that Iran’s soft power rests on three main pillars. First and foremost are history and culture, based on a three-thousand-year old civilization that 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 into synthesis of many with many other languages including Turkish, Hindi, Urdu, Armenian, Georgian, Swahili and others. The 5 million Iranians in the Diaspora play a significant role as well in spreading Persian culture through

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Iranian restaurants, goods, songs and other social aspects.

The second pillar is political values. Iran 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 foreign policy which is the largest source of soft power. The Iranian constitution refers clearly to the role of foreign policy, which is based on “Islamic” values, fraternal commitment to all Muslims and full protection of the oppressed around the world. These ideas, 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 aforementioned facts, 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 has become a palpable policy and Iran has been targeting 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 Huthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon).

Taking advantage of the widespread regional dismay at US policies, anti-American rhetoric has become part of Iran’s officials’ speeches. This was deemed a vital state branding tool that would promote Iran’s status as a regional leader in the 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 East leaders, Iran used pro-Palestine slogans to gain popularity among the Arab masses. Iran also tried 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 has emerged as the largest carmaker in the region, exporting over one million cars, trucks, and buses to over 30 countries in 2007 (Chorinm and Malka 2008). Finally, the nuclear deal gave Iran’s soft power another boost, especially as it was able to avoid war, lift sanctions and evade any bargaining on other issues (e.g. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Syrian regime).

## Oman and Soft Power

In the midst of critical regional developments, Oman appears as a peaceful oasis that remains above the fray. 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 on two basic foundations: peace-making and state-branding. These are naturally interlocked and Oman was adept enough in realizing noteworthy results thanks to its 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 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 the unique ability to absorb this grievance and send the message that the government would allow the province a distinctive culture and identity, as well as introducing huge development programmes and promoting strong economic growth. As a result, Dhofaris have responded well to the Sultan’s policy (Wheeldon 2014).

Similarly, as part of the revolutionary wave a series of demonstrations erupted in Oman, although 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 played a crucial role in attracting foreign direct investments. Just when others averted other regional projects, the Omani ones appear more appealing and promising. Not limited to economic gains, domestic stability, development projects and good governance helped

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raise Oman's status and hence explains the goal of state-branding. Since the Sultan took power in 1970, the country was revolutionized and transformed strikingly through substantial investments in the 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 8th 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 achievement for the period of 1970-2010 (Choe 2012).

Situated at a crossroads of cultures, Oman's multicultural identity gave the country the chance to promote itself as such. Muscat's famous slogan 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 included building and bolstering national pride. The sultanate tried to rejuvenate the feeling of pride among Omani nationals through emphasising 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 to Oman's Ministry of Information said:

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 disputes. When the other Gulf States opposed the US-Iran deal, Oman didn't only support it but it also hosted the secret talks between the two governments. It played an instrumental role in freeing three American hikers arrested by Iran on espionage charges in 2011 (Gupta 2015). This role helped Sultan Qaboos succeed in maintaining the trust and confidence of both the Americans and the Iranians and bringing them to the table behind closed curtains. One must concede then that the conclusion of the nuclear deal revealed an unforeseen Omani role.

This policy is not novel and holding the secreted talks between the two rivals during the Iraq-Iran war in Muscat is just another case in point. In Yemen, where Huthis are in control of the capital, Oman remains the only Gulf country whose embassy in Sana'a is still running. Oman did not take part in the Saudi-led "Decisive Storm", the military campaign against the Huthis and Saleh loyalists, and kept channels open with them. It also played a pivotal role in handing over the body of a Moroccan pilot whose jet crashed in territory controlled by the Huthis. Not surprisingly then, Muscat was be the logical destination for any potential negotiations between fighting 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, something that no other Arab or Gulf country could do. When almost every Arab and Gulf country boycotted and attacked Assad, Oman maintained its relationship with the Syrian regime. In August 2015 Syria's foreign minister met his counterpart in Muscat and in October in the same year the Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi met with Assad in Damascus (Cafiero 2016). In the same year, the sultanate mediated in Algeria in order to help contain an unforeseen sectarian crisis between Ibadi Amazigh and some Arab associates of the Maliki School (see Noon Post Editorial 2015).

## Conclusion

A comparative analysis of the aforementioned models was deemed necessary to highlight another form of competition in the Middle East: soft power. The employment of each model depends on certain tools and carries different goals. On the one hand, Iran's soft power model rests chiefly on ethnic and revolutionary values and reflects expansionist objectives. On the other hand, Oman utilizes low-profile soft power tools and a strategy with the aim of

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maintaining its status as a neutral actor and evading the effects of prevalent regional polarization. Thus far, Oman's quiet approach paid off and produced valuable results. The Iranian soft power model has been successful as well in attracting sympathizers, supporters and allies. However, Iran's model rests on values that, intertwined with other ideals, can be a source of conflict and hence can easily be transformed into hard power. In nutshell, one may argue that Iran's soft power can be another source of regional instability, while Oman's soft power seeks stability and peaceful resolution of conflicts.

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