

Soft War

A new episode in the old conflict between Iran and the United States



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INTRODUCTION

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Holy Defense, also known as the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), was a titanic struggle pitting Iran's revolutionary regime and its Islamic values against not only Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, but more ominously the United States and the forces of Western imperialism. From the Islamic Republic's perspective, it won the war by marshaling its economic and military resources, repulsing the Western- and Gulf Arab-backed Iraqi invader from its soil, and showing the world that its revolution and Islamic values could not be vanquished by economic pressure and force of arms. As war veterans returned from the front, however, they soon found the very revolution and Islamic values they had fought for under attack. The enemy's weapons were no longer economic sanctions and high-tech arms, but rather culture and political ideals. The enemy's targets were no longer economic or military, but the hearts and minds of the Iranian people, especially the youth. The Islamic Republic, particularly the conservative political current who would come to control most elected and unelected centers of power in post-war Iran, struggled to find a language to articulate the nature of this ephemeral threat, alternatively calling it a "cultural assault," "cultural night-raid," and "cultural NATO," among other things. By the late 2000s, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Iranian conservatives had converged on a single term for this conflict: "soft war" (*jang-e narm*).

What is soft war? While the term is sometimes used loosely and propagandistically by Iranian officials, it arguably denotes a real conflict deeply rooted in Iran's modern history.¹ Soft war is the exercise of soft power by the United States on Iran such that it creates security challenges for the Islamic Republic and forces it to respond.² The main challenge of soft

war is that large segments of the Iranian population are attracted to the United States, embracing key elements of its culture and political ideals, anathema for a regime founded on Islamic values and anti-Americanism. As the gulf between the culture and political ideals of the Islamic Republic versus large segments of its population has widened, the regime's power to influence Iranians has weakened and it has come under pressure to change its policies in a number of domains. Iran's strategy to address this and other soft war challenges contains two main responses. The first is a hard response that seeks to control the conduits through which U.S. sources of soft power, culture, political ideals, and policies, enter Iran. These conduits include the Internet, satellite television, and universities. The second is a soft response that attempts to create indigenous sources of soft power that are attractive to Iranians. In practice, thus far Iran's strategy has placed greater emphasis on the hard response. Largely because the Iranian regime has failed to utilize the capacity of Iranian civil society to create attractive indigenous sources of soft power, the regime has been on the defensive in the soft war.

Part I of this analysis gives a basic definition of soft war and lays out a theoretical framework for understanding it using international relations scholar Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. Part II discusses the historical genealogy of soft war by tracing two distinct but interwoven threads: First, the rise of Islamic nativism in Iran, and second, the rise and fall of U.S. soft power in Iran from the mid-19th century to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Part III looks at the genesis of soft war under the Islamic Republic and how, while the terminology may be relatively new, the phenomenon it denotes is much older. Part IV analyzes Iran's soft war strategy, comprising of a hard and soft response. The conclusion assesses to what extent this soft war strategy has been successful and examines the factors which may shift the balance in this conflict.

1 For example, cyber-attacks are sometimes labeled as part of soft war. However, cyber-attacks constitute an exercise of coercive or hard power, whereas soft war, as normally used by Iranian conservatives, involves the exercise of what international relations scholar Joseph Nye calls "soft power." Such distinctions are crucial for understanding the nature of soft war and will be explored in greater depth in part I.

2 Although soft war can be analyzed in the context of the exercise of

soft power by any single Western state on Iran, the focus here is on the United States. This is because soft war in Iran today is typically invoked with reference to the United States.

I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Soft war as a conflict can be best understood using the idea of soft power coined by international relations scholar Joseph Nye, and is explained below using illustrations of the United States' exercise of soft power on Iran.³ According to Nye, soft power is the "ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. When you can get others to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction."⁴ Here sticks and carrots refer to the well-established idea of hard power, which grows out of a state's economic and military strength. Soft power, in contrast, comes from "the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies," what Nye collectively calls a country's "primary currencies," or sources of soft power. Nye emphasizes that "It is not smart to discount soft power as just a question of image, public relations, and ephemeral popularity... it is a form of power—a means of obtaining desired outcomes." He cites the example of U.S.-Pakistan security cooperation, positing that although Pakistani General Pervez Musharraf (1943-) found it in his interest to work with the United States in the War on Terror, the level of anti-Americanism in his country forced him to balance "concessions and retractions." Nye concludes that if the United States exercised greater soft power on Pakistan, there would be more concessions.⁵

Culture is perhaps the preeminent example of a source of soft power. Nye remarks that "When a country's culture includes universal values and its policies promote values and interests that others share, it

increases the probability of obtaining its desired outcomes because of the relationships of attraction and duty that it creates."⁶ The United States is the world's pre-eminent exporter of culture—including film, music, publishing and fashion—consumed by billions of people around the globe. American culture does not convey a uniform message. There are, however, persistent themes that emerge over time, for example individualism, and when packaged in the right way these themes can speak to international audiences and create a sense of attraction and shared values and interests. Through American culture, an Iranian may come to feel attracted to and share certain values and interests with the United States and its citizens. When this happens, and pro-American Iranians have the power to bring about change, the United States can more easily achieve its foreign policy objectives in Iran.

Political ideals are another major source of soft power and function in a similar way as culture. While the United States has no monopoly on the political ideals of self-determination, democracy or human rights, it is not for nothing that the United States was called the "leader of the free world" in the aftermath of the Second World War. Then and now, the United States is perceived by many as a defender of democracy and human rights around the world, although its credentials as an anti-colonial force have diminished significantly. Policies as a source of soft power are related to political ideals, but remain distinct. Nye points out that to the extent that U.S. policies are consistent with its political ideals, such as "democracy, human rights, and openness," the United States will be better positioned to benefit from the trends of the "global information age" and expand its soft power: "Government policies at home and abroad are another potential source of soft power...Domestic or foreign policies that appear to be hypocritical, arrogant, indifferent to the opinion of others, or based on a

3 The similarity between the terms "soft power" and "soft war" is likely not an accident. In fact, the concept of soft power may have been a template for formulating the idea of soft war. The Islamic Republic has a history of drawing on U.S. foreign policy and international relations concepts when formulating its own, often as a rejoinder. Thus, Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" became Mohammad Khatami's "dialogue of civilizations," and George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" became the Islamic Republic's "Axis of Resistance."

4 Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy." *Political Science Quarterly* Summer 119.2 (2004): 256.

5 Ibid., 257.

6 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 11.

narrow approach to national interests can undermine soft power.”⁷ Thus, for instance, recent revelations regarding U.S. cyber-surveillance practices toward U.S. citizens make it more difficult for the United States to promote human rights abroad and convince foreign elites and audiences to abide by human rights standards. The same is true with regard to policies such as drone strikes on Yemen and Pakistan, which undercut the ideal the United States projects about being a responsible actor, versus a rogue state, in global affairs.

Institutions are a source of soft power in a somewhat different way than those areas outlined above. For instance, international institutions can be a source of soft power through their agenda-setting prerogative. Using the example of international economic governance, Nye argues that international institutions working in this field “such as the International Monetary Fund and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, tend to embody liberal, free-market principles that coincide in large measure with American society and ideology.”⁸ When other states can be convinced to participate in these institutions, they adapt to American values and agendas, often reinforcing U.S. interests.

Soft power, through attraction and agenda-setting, can legitimize a state’s power in the eyes of others and lower resistance to a state’s pursuit of its goals. If a state’s sources of soft power are attractive, others are more likely to accede to its wishes. Likewise if a state can use institutions to channel or constrain the behavior of others, it is less likely to resort to hard power, sparing it economic and military costs. With this said, the exercise of soft power is more complex than first meets the eye. The same sources of soft power that are attractive in one context can be unattractive in another: Culture that may generate attraction in Tel Aviv may have the opposite effect in Riyadh. Similarly, U.S. political ideals and policies that may have a receptive audience in Tokyo may be met with much greater skepticism in Beijing. Context matters greatly; in part III we will show that since

1989 a unique context has existed in Iran whereby U.S. sources of soft power have been able to attract key segments of the Iranian population.⁹

While states have been aware of the concept of soft power in some form or another throughout history, the information revolution has created powerful new conduits for projecting soft power. A state’s culture, political ideals and policies can reach a far wider audience on a much larger scale than ever before. Ever more powerful and low-cost hardware combined with increasingly better software means the exchange of information may continue expanding and becoming faster, meaning that states will likely have to pay more attention to soft power in the future.¹⁰

The story of the conflict the Islamic Republic calls soft war is in many ways the story of the exercise of U.S. soft power on Iran. Two of the main impulses underlying the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979 were the creation of an Islamic social and political order in Iran and anti-Americanism, impulses which continue to operate today through Khamenei and the conservative political current. U.S. soft power on Iran poses security challenges for the regime because, in the context of the ongoing U.S-Iran geopolitical rivalry, it undermines both the social and political order conservatives seek to create and their anti-Americanism by creating a relationship of attraction and shared values between the United States and Iranians and alienating the latter from the regime. The sense of threat felt by the conservatives from U.S. soft power, and the articulation of soft war as a conflict with the United States, is best illustrated by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei:

Everyone today understands and knows that the confrontation between the Arrogance [United States] with the Islamic Republic is no longer like the confrontation of the first decade of the revolution. In that confrontation they exercised their power, and were defeated. That was a hard confrontation...However this is not the priority of the Arrogance for

7 Ibid., 14.

8 Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power.” *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 168.

9 Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

10 Joseph S. Nye, “The Information Revolution and American Soft Power.” *Asia-Pacific Review* 9.1 (2002).

confronting the Islamic regime. The priority today is what is called soft war; that is war using cultural tools, through infiltration [of our society], through lies, through spreading rumors. Through the advanced instruments that exist today, communication tools that did not exist 10, 15, and 30 years ago, have become widespread. Soft war means creating doubt in people's hearts and minds.¹¹

As if to underscore the seriousness of soft war, Brigadier General Masoud Jazayeri, deputy chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces General Staff, announced the creation of a “soft war headquarters” in late 2012 tasked with planning and executing Iran’s soft war strategy. Jazayeri explained soft war as follows:

The enemy, by making attractive and presenting the Western lifestyle and upbringing, by its scientific and educational monopoly, and by spreading Western social behavior and the production of deviant values and beliefs, carries out its strategies in the soft war.¹²

In investigating conservatives’ ruminations on soft war, a relatively consistent picture of their fears emerges. U.S. exercise of soft power on Iran has attracted segments of Iranian society away from the regime and toward the United States. Especially since 1989, the allegiance of many Iranians to the regime has weakened and Iranians have become more receptive to U.S. culture, political ideals and policies. This increases pressure for policy changes anathema to Iranian conservatives, including social and political reforms and reconciliation with the United States. Having defined soft war by grounding it in the IR concept of soft power, we will now try to more concretely understand it through its historical genealogy.

11 “Bayanat Dar Jam-e Kasiri Az Basijiyān Keshvar. (A speech to a large crowd of the nation’s Basij)” *The Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei*. 25 Nov. 2009. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

12 “Tashkil-e Gharargah-e Jang-e Narm dar Setad-e Koll-e Niruha-ye Mosallah. (The formation of a soft war headquarters in the Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces General Headquarters).” *Fars News Agency*. 01 Dec. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

II. HISTORICAL GENEALOGY

How did the soft war come about? This section traces the genealogy of soft war to two distinct but overlapping trends: first, the gradual development of anti-Western Islamic nativism in Iran from the 19th century onward as a result of the country's historical encounter with the West culminating in the Islamic Revolution of 1979; and second, the rise, fall and rise again of American soft power in Iran over the same period. Specifically, the precipitous decline of U.S. soft power in Iran following the 1953 Anglo-America-backed coup d'état significantly strengthened anti-Western Islamic nativists, who viewed Western influence on Iran as a malady they called "Westoxification," enabling their triumph in the revolution. In its first bloody decade of revolution and war the Islamic Republic, a strong anti-Western Islamic nativist streak ingrained in its DNA, attempted (with moderate success) to eliminate Western influence through policies such as the "Cultural Revolution." However, the traumatic experience of Iranian society with the Islamic Republic from 1979 to 1989, the coming of age of a new generation of Iranians during the post-Iran-Iraq War era, and American resurgence in the post-Cold War era all converged to increase U.S. soft power in Iran after 1989. For a regime in part premised on anti-Americanism, the increase of its rival's soft power undermines the Islamic Republic's hold over Iranian society, thereby creating security challenges. The decision of the Islamic Republic, dominated by Khamenei and the conservatives, to address these challenges through a hard and soft response has led to a conflict labeled by the regime and here as soft war.

Historical origins of anti-Westernism in Iran: 1813-1953

The history of Iran's encounter with modernity and the West often starts with the series of wars between Qajar Iran and Tsarist Russia, which culminated in the loss of significant Iranian domains in the Caucasus and Central Asia, enshrined in the treaties of Gulistan

(1813) and Turkmenchay (1828).¹³ These traumatic events signaled a process of long-term internal decline and imperial encroachment for Iran lasting more than a century. While imperial encroachment began with the loss of territory to Tsarist Russia, it culminated in a much more intimate and invasive penetration of the Qajar state at the political and economic levels. Qajar shahs, feeble and beholden to Great Britain, Tsarist Russia and a host of other European powers, virtually surrendered much of the state to these powers and their agents in Iran. The most reviled examples of this include the Tobacco Concession of 1890 and the Anglo-Persian Treaty of 1919.¹⁴ These treaties, concessions and conventions not only weakened the writ of the Qajar regime, but also inflamed domestic public opinion by undermining the interests and values of various social, political and economic forces.

One of the earliest proto-anti-Western movements was the Tobacco Revolt (1891), a nationwide boycott of tobacco triggered by the Tobacco Concession, which had given a British merchant control over the tobacco industry inside Iran, thereby disenfranchising Iranian farmers and merchants.¹⁵ A religious edict by a respected religious figure, Grand Ayatollah Mirza Mohammed Hassan Husseini Shirazi (1814-1896), became a rallying point for opposition to the concession and led to its repeal. Episodes such as this demonstrated the hostility to Western imperial policies in Iran and foreshadowed the potential of Shi'a Islam for political mobilization.

During this encounter with the West, the importation of Western political ideals also engendered resistance from certain forces, particularly from the Constitutional

13 Firuz Kazemzadeh, "Iranian Relations with Russia and the Soviet Union, to 1921." *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Ed. Avery Peter, Gavin R. Hambly, and C. P. Melville. Vol. 7. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991): 314-49.

14 Homa Katouzian, "The Campaign for the 1919 Agreement." *State and Society in Iran: The Eclipse of the Qajars and the Emergence of the Pahlavis*. (London: I. B. Tauris: New York, 2000): 88-120.

15 Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891-1892*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

Revolution onward. For example, the anti-constitutional forces, whose leading personages included such reviled figures as Mohammad Ali Shah (1872-1925) and Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri (1843-1909), opposed the creation of a Western-style constitution and parliament in Iran. In fact, the Shi'a clergy were one of the main bulwarks against modernization and Westernization as they believed these trends undermined the very basis of traditional power structures such as the Qajar court, landed nobility and the clergy itself.¹⁶ This history of Iran's encounter with the West and imperialism in many ways set the stage for the rise of anti-Western Islamic nativism after the Anglo-American-backed coup d'état in 1953.

A brief history of U.S. soft power in Iran: 1853-1953

Understanding the history of United States-Iran relations is crucial to comprehending the emergence of soft war today. Despite the strong influence of U.S. soft power in Iran in the first century of relations between the two states, the 1953 coup d'état and the subsequent policies of the United States and the Pahlavi regime in Iran in the following quarter century created a profound break in this soft power and laid the groundwork for soft war. We begin our analysis in the mid-19th century to better understand the full historical context of the emergence of soft war.

U.S.-Iran relations began a century before 1953 with the revered modernizing Iranian prime minister Mirza Taghi Khan Farahani (1807-1852), better known as Amir Kabir, who came into office in 1848. As outlined above, Qajar Iran found itself crushed between the imperial forces of Great Britain and Tsarist Russia. In the years between the Treaty of Gulistan and the 1953 coup, the Qajar and Pahlavi regimes found themselves constantly looking for a third force that could balance out Britain and Russia. Amir Kabir sought out the United States for precisely these ends. The United States' political ideals and policies—that is its anti-

colonialism as a nation that had thrown off the shackles of British control, combined with the fact that it did not have interests in Iran—made it an attractive force to counterbalance the imperial powers. In this sense, Amir Kabir can be called the original architect of U.S.-Iran relations. In October 1853 he helped conclude the Treaty of Friendship and Navigation between the two countries, shortly before he was killed and his foreign policy program of closer ties with the United States buried alongside him.

The death of Amir Kabir, however, did not end attempts at engaging the United States. In the 1880s, Naser al-Din Shah (1831-1896) revisited the establishment of better ties with the United States. Under President Chester A. Arthur (1829-1889), the United States established high-level diplomatic ties with Iran, sending Ambassador S.G.W. Benjamin (1837-1914) in 1883 to Tehran as chargé d'affaires to create what would eventually become a permanent mission.¹⁷ In 1886, Iran sent Haj Hossein Gholi Khan Motamed al-Vezareh (1849-1937) as minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary to Washington.¹⁸ He was soon given the sobriquet “Haji Washington” for being the first high-level Iranian representative in Washington, D.C. Haji Washington wrote glowingly in his reports back to Tehran about American culture, political ideals and policies. He saw the United States as the nation of the future, a model Iran should endeavor toward, and a potential ally who could alleviate Iran's strategic dilemmas.

Despite the establishment of governmental ties during the 19th century, Iranians' day-to-day experience with America was mostly through missionaries, scholars and other private citizens. One of the most prominent centers of secondary education in Iran today, Alborz High School, was founded by American Presbyterian missionary James Bassett (1834-1906).¹⁹ A young Princeton-educated Presbyterian missionary, Howard

¹⁶ This is not to say that all of the Shi'a clergy fell into this category. In fact, segments of the clergy were one of the main driving forces behind the Constitutional Revolution.

¹⁷ Badi Badiozamani, *Iran and America: Rekindling a Love Lost*. (New York: East-West Understanding, 2005): 5-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ Thomas M. Ricks, “Alborz College of Tehran, Dr. Samuel Martin Jordan and the American Faculty: Twentieth-Century Presbyterian Mission Education and Modernism in Iran (Persia).” *Iranian Studies* 44.5 (2011): 627-46.

Baskerville (1885-1909), became a martyr of the Constitutional Revolution after he transformed his class of students at the American Memorial High School in Tabriz into a pro-constitutional column and led them into battle.²⁰

Americans in government capacities also played significant positive roles in Iran's national progress through institution-building. After the Constitutional Revolution, Jewish-American financial expert William Morgan Shuster (1877-1960) was appointed by the young Iranian parliament at the recommendation of U.S. President Howard William Taft in 1911 to put Iran's disastrous financial affairs in order.²¹ The diligent work of Shuster to promote tax collection and administrative efficiency endangered the interests of the British and Russians, who profited greatly from the disorder and corruption in Iran. As a result the Russian government gave an ultimatum to parliament to remove Shuster, and its military forces bombarded parliament to force Shuster out in December 1911.²² The departure of Shuster led to public demonstrations. Renowned composer and poet Aref Ghazvini (1882-1934), considered the father of Iranian protest music, even wrote a poem-song defending Shuster as a savior of the nation and lambasting domestic corruption of politicians and the intervention of foreign powers:

*Woe upon the house whose guest departs it
Lay down your life and do not let the guest
leave
If Shuster leaves Iran, Iran will be thrown to
the wind
Oh youth do not let Iran be rent asunder
You [Shuster] are life to the dead body, you are
the life of a world, you are royal treasure, You
are eternal life, God willing you will remain,
God willing you will remain...*²³

20 James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988): 16.

21 U.S. State Department adviser Arthur Chester Millsbaugh (1883–1955) played a similar role to Shuster during the Pahlavi regime. See: Arthur Chester Millsbaugh, *Americans in Persia*. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1946).

22 W. Morgan Shuster, *The Strangling of Persia*. (New York: The Century Co., 1912).

23 Homa Katouzian, "Poetry of the Constitutional Revolution." *Homa*

It was, not surprisingly, what many consider the first clashes of the Cold War that drew the United States into Iran at a strategic level. In 1946, the Soviet Union, which had occupied northern Iran between 1941 and 1945 as part of the Allied struggle against Nazi Germany, reneged on its promise to withdraw from Iran and helped create two client states in Iran's Kurdistan and Azerbaijan regions.²⁴ It was decisive American pressure under President Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) that forced the Soviets to withdraw in May 1946. These episodes before 1953 placed the United States in a very positive light in Iran. As the examples above demonstrate, the first century of U.S.-Iran relations was strongly positive and a period during which U.S. primary currencies were very attractive in Iran. With the dawn of the Cold War, however, a century of goodwill would be rapidly undone.

Operation Ajax and the rise of anti-Americanism: 1953-1979

The tumultuous events of 1953 and the quarter century that followed would see the collision of more than a century of good U.S.-Iran relations with a strong anti-Western current in Iran's polity, leading to the birth of a potent anti-Americanism that laid the foundations of soft war. The events of Operation Ajax, the August 1953 coup d'état that overthrew the democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and suppressed the oil nationalization movement, have been well documented and will not be elaborated upon here.²⁵ Suffice it to say that the United States, with the provocation of Great Britain, played a major role in the overthrow of Mossadegh and the establishment of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi as an absolute monarch. There are several ironies in the central role the United States played in the coup. First, for

Katouzian. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

24 Fernande Raine, "Stalin and the Creation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Party in Iran, 1945." *Cold War History* 2.1 (2001); Archie Roosevelt, Jr. "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad." *Middle East Journal* 1.3 (1947).

25 Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. (Hoboken: J. Wiley & Sons, 2003).

much of the pre-Cold War era the United States had had an anti-colonial streak, in part because of its history as a British colony. During Mossadegh's oil nationalization campaign President Harry Truman did not take kindly to British machinations in Iran and was not enthusiastic about Britain's efforts to foment a coup. Second, Mossadegh himself was at times considered an Americophile and looked to the United States, in much the same way Amir Kabir had, to balance out what he considered to be the nefarious influence of Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Despite this alignment of thinking and interests, however, the Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969) administration took steps to neutralize Mossadegh, in part because it viewed the oil nationalization issue through a Cold War lens. The fear was that Iran's pro-Soviet communist party was waiting in the wings to seize power.²⁶

The 1953 coup resulted in a wave of political repression and the establishment of a government pliant to American and British interests on Cold War and oil issues. The coup left an indelible mark on 20th century Iranian politics and played a key role in creating the extreme anti-Pahlavi and anti-American sentiments that led to the revolution in 1979. Given what we now know about the illusory nature of the communist threat in Iran during this period, it appears that the United States obliterated soft power that it had built up over a century in order to secure British oil interests. Subsequent history makes it clear that this prize may well have not been worth the price. But the coup is only a part of the story of the rise of anti-Americanism in Iran in the quarter century between the fall of Mossadegh in 1953 and the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979.

Several other aspects of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran created outrage in Iranian public opinion. The U.S.-Israeli contribution to the creation of the Pahlavi regime's despised secret police, the National Security and Intelligence Organization (SAVAK)—responsible for the arrest, torture, and execution

of hundreds of Iranians—was perceived as a very real manifestation of U.S. oppression of the Iranian people. The Richard Nixon administration's attempt to make Iran its regional policeman under the Guam Doctrine created a sense that Iran no longer had even the semblance of an independent foreign policy. The coup and the strong support provided by the United States to the Pahlavi regime also made many Iranians feel that the latter only existed at the whims of the former. In the long term, this meant that the worst of the Pahlavi regime's excesses became associated with the United States.²⁷ The hand of the United States was seen as being behind every negative occurrence: the Pahlavi regime's troubling human rights record, its lopsided economic policies, and the capitulation of 1964 which exempted U.S. government personnel and their families from the Iranian justice system. From this perspective, which began to gain wide acceptance in the late 1960s, those who sought to strike down the Pahlavi regime believed they had to first strike at its puppeteer, the United States. As Nye warns can happen when political ideals and policies clash, this mismatch between U.S. political ideals such as human rights and democracy and its Cold War foreign policy seriously eroded the attractiveness of U.S. primary currencies in Iran and created an environment where anti-Americanism thrived.

Anti-imperialism and Westoxification: 1953-1979

The Tudeh & anti-imperialism

Anti-Americanism in Iran is often associated with the Khomeinists who seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran in 1979. Yet in adopting anti-imperialism and especially anti-Americanism as key elements in their ideological framework, the Khomeinists were not innovating but merely tapping into the *zeitgeist* and a pre-existing deep reservoir of negative feelings toward the United States in the Iranian polity. The intellectual machinery of anti-Americanism was in fact pioneered by the Iranian left and a group which

²⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, "The Tudeh Party." *Iran Between Two Revolutions*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982): 281-325.

²⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, "Iran in Revolution: The Opposition Forces." *MERIP* 75/76. Mar. - Apr. (1979).

political scientist Mehrzad Boroujerdi has called Iranian nativist intellectuals.²⁸

Arguably, the foundations of the virulent anti-Americanism of the 1979 revolution were laid by the Tudeh Party of Iran (*Hezb-e Tudeh-e Iran*), Iran's pro-Soviet communist party. Despite facing a high level of repression throughout its life, the Tudeh during the 1940s and 1950s was able to build one of the most disciplined and effective mass political organizations in Iran's modern history.²⁹ Given the Soviet Union's tremendous soft power at the time, the Tudeh became a magnet for intellectuals and left a strong imprint on the opposition politics of the period.³⁰ It was one of the first political parties in Iran to articulate a coherent anti-Imperialist, and specifically anti-American, discourse. This was in line with the organization's Cold War politics, which demanded unwavering loyalty to the Soviet Union and hostility to its enemies. As a CIA report from 1949 stated:

From 1946 on, the [Tudeh] party organs have parroted Soviet pronouncements about the U.S. ... A party directive of October 1948 ordered that "the U.S. in general and U.S. policy in Iran, with emphasis on the arms credit program in particular, should be subject to severe press attacks" ... [Tudeh] has flatly accused the U.S. of having an imperialistic policy "designed to enforce American political, economic, and military rule all over the world."³¹

The Tudeh was almost unique in advocating a strong anti-Americanism during the oil nationalization campaign. While the Tudeh was heavily repressed after 1953 and would never quite regain its former strength, its anti-Americanism would live on and combine with a broader backlash against the United States after 1953. As outlined above, this backlash

was aggravated by the policies of the Pahlavi regime, which were perceived as having America's full backing.

Iranian nativist intellectuals & Westoxification

The Anglo-American coup d'état in 1953, U.S. foreign policy in the post-coup era, and many of the Pahlavi regime's unpopular policies, which were attributed to the United States, led to a precipitous decline in U.S. soft power in Iran. In such a climate, the Tudeh's anti-Americanism could thrive. The intellectual and organizational vacuum left by the effective repression of the Tudeh and National Front in the post-coup era meant that the mantle of anti-Americanism was picked up by a younger generation who were radicalized by their experiences during this period. Diverse in origin, this generation was defined by a group which Boroujerdi has called Iranian nativist intellectuals. Boroujerdi defines "nativism" as "the doctrine that calls for the resurgence, reinstatement or continuance of native or indigenous cultural customs, beliefs and values. Nativism is grounded on such deeply held beliefs as resisting acculturation, privileging one's own 'authentic' identity, and longing for a return to "an unsullied indigenous cultural tradition."³² Whereas the Tudeh's communism and the National Front's liberal nationalism had been Western in origin, Iranian nativists rejected all that was Western as an affliction and sought to rediscover Iran's authentic identity. Put in Nye's soft power framework, nativists rejected Western primary currencies for indigenous ones. In the post-1953 nativist turn these intellectuals did not emphasize Iran's pre-Islamic "Aryan" identity, but an Islamic one. As Ali Shari'ati, one of Iran's most prominent intellectuals and the leading political thinker of this period, pointed out:

Islamic civilization has worked like scissors and has cut us off completely from our pre-Islamic past... Our people do not find their roots in these civilizations. They are left unmoved by the heroes, geniuses, myths, and monuments of

28 Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

29 Abrahamian, "The Tudeh Party."

30 L. P. Elwell-Sutton, "Political Parties in Iran 1941-1948." *Middle East Journal* 3.1 (1949).

31 "The Tudeh Party: Vehicle of Communism in Iran" Rep. no. ORE 23-49. (Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, 1949): 7.

32 Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, 14.

*these ancient empires. Our people remember nothing from this distant past and do not care to learn about the pre-Islamic civilizations... Consequently, for us return to our roots means not a rediscovery of pre-Islamic Iran, but a return to our Islamic, especially Shi'i, roots.*³³

Many of the most prominent intellectual architects of this Islamic nativist project were lay secular and religious thinkers. Few others, with the possible exception of Shari'ati, exemplify the lay Islamic nativists better than Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Over the course of his career, Al-e Ahmad migrated from the secular left to Islamic nativism. His 1962 monograph, entitled *Westoxification*, was an intellectual bombshell that set the tone for Islamic nativism in Iran for decades to come, and is perhaps one of the most important intellectual sources of the soft war today.

Al-e Ahmad popularized *Westoxification* to the extent that the concept became a staple of the Iranian opposition's critique of the Pahlavi regime's modernization program and continues to exist in the Islamic Republic's political lexicon. *Westoxification*, according to Al-e Ahmad, was an affliction that alienated Iranians from their roots, perpetrated by the West through its penetration of Iran and through *Westoxicated* Iranians. Al-e Ahmad viewed the West, via its machinery and technology, as being corrosive to traditional Iranian society.³⁴ As Boroujerdi points out, "Al-e Ahmad believed that this pandemic could result in the eradication of Iran's cultural authenticity, political sovereignty, and economic well-being."³⁵ The "vaccine" posited by Al-e Ahmad to the disease of *Westoxification* was Shi'a Islam, which he maintained had attained a special place in the Iranian social psyche as an inseparable aspect of Iranian identity.³⁶

This anti-Western Islamic nativism had a profound influence in shaping the post-1953 political opposition, and with the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 moved from the intellectual margins to underpin the Islamic Republic's ideological framework.

The Islamic Revolution and the height of anti-Americanism: 1979-1989

While the Islamic Revolution of 1979 began as a pluralistic movement against the Pahlavi regime, it ended with the triumph of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his Islamist followers. At the center of the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic created by Khomeini was a political Islam deeply influenced by the post-1953 Islamic nativism. From the outset the new regime, which had authoritarian tendencies, was premised on asserting an authentic Islamic identity for Iran and anti-Westernism. The decline of U.S. soft power in Iran was thus accelerated by the Islamic Republic, which tapped into the genuine popular enthusiasm for the revolution to create its own sources of soft power and to attack conduits of U.S. soft power. Whether the culture of the Islamic hijab, which promoted modesty, or the political ideal of "Guardianship of the Jurist" (*velayat-e faghih*), which attempted to reconcile divinely sanctioned government with popular participation, the Islamic Republic was able to generate new sources of soft power with genuine popular support inside and outside the country.

The new regime's authoritarian tendency alongside its anti-Westernism worked together to restrict U.S. soft power and its conduits. Mass media, including television, radio, books, newspapers, magazines, films and music cassettes, were regulated to include content produced by the regime and exclude content deemed "un-Islamic." Universities, important centers for the production of knowledge and elites, were also brought under attack. What came to be known as the Cultural Revolution is perhaps one of the clearest expressions of the political consequences of anti-Western Islamic nativism. In July 1980, Khomeini appointed seven trusted subordinates to

33 Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, 470.

34 For example, see Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West*, 70: "As the machine entrenches itself in the towns and villages, be it in the form of a mechanized mill or textile plant, it puts the worker in local craft industries out of work. It closes the village mill. It renders the spinning wheel useless. Production of pile carpets, flat carpets, felt carpets is at an end."

35 Ibid., 68.

36 Ibid., 72.

the Council of the Cultural Revolution (CCR), which was tasked with Islamizing the university space and curriculum and did so through two primary means.³⁷ First, a regime-backed student group, the Office for Consolidating Unity in Seminaries and Universities (OCU), enforced a strict Islamic code of behavior and dress, expelled “un-Islamic” students and faculty and quashed dissent. Second, the CCR attempted to Islamize university curricula, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. During the 1979-1980 academic year, the regime closed universities to Islamize them, and an unprecedented purge commenced. When universities reopened in 1983, only 148,117 of 217,174 students were allowed to return. An unknown number were never allowed

37 The members of the Council included Jalaledin Farsi, Shams Al-e Ahmad (brother of the famous Jalal Al-e Ahmad), Rabani Amlashi, Mohammad Javad Bahnoar, Hassan Habibi, Ali Shariatmadari and Abdul-Karim Soroush.

to enter university from high school. Purges also expelled numerous faculty members.³⁸

Therefore, in the years immediately following the revolution the balance of soft power shifted in favor of the Islamic Republic. Yet by the end of the decade following 1979 the pendulum began swinging in the other direction. The reasons for this were manifold, but included the suffocating social atmosphere, the absence of political pluralism promised by the revolution, the bleak economic situation, the execution, torture and imprisonment of tens of thousands as part of the revolutionary terror, and hundreds of thousands of casualties in the Iran-Iraq War. The changing international situation after 1989 decisively pushed the pendulum in favor of U.S. soft power. This is the milieu in which soft war emerged.

38 Mehrak Kamali, “Goftogu Ba Mohammad Maleki: Kasi Az Ma Nazar Nakhaast (Interview with Mohammad Maleki: No One Asked for Our Opinion).” *M.ghaed*. Dec. 1999. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.



III. SOFT WAR IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

While the term soft war itself has only existed since the late 2000s,³⁹ it captures a conflict that the regime has faced since its inception. Given the Islamic Republic's authoritarian tendencies, its Islamic and anti-American foundations, and its 30-year long conflict with the United States, it is not difficult to see why the ability of U.S. soft power to influence a large segment of Iran's population poses security challenges for the governing authorities. For instance, in the realm of political ideals the desire of many Iranians for democracy and human rights in the Western sense can run counter to the Islamic Republic's political ideal of "Guardianship of the Jurist." When those segments of the Iranian population who share American political ideals actively struggle for them, as some believe happened in the Green Movement demonstrations, they can threaten the ideological edifice of the Islamic Republic and the power of Iranian conservatives.

Of course, we must be careful not to essentialize the Islamic Republic in the discussion of soft war. Not all political currents in the Islamic Republic have been fully committed to anti-Western Islamic nativism—especially since 1989. It is the conservatives, who tend to be more politically authoritarian and socially conservative than their rivals and dominate the majority of the regime's elected and unelected centers of power, who have been most committed to nativism and felt most threatened by U.S. soft power. What follows traces how the United States once again came to exercise soft power on Iran after 1989.

Shift in the balance of soft power: 1989-present

The swinging of the pendulum back toward U.S. soft power in Iran dates to the late 1980s/early 1990s. Domestically, the death of Khomeini, the

need for reconstruction in the bloody aftermath of the revolution and war, and dissatisfaction with the regime among Iranians at large created the impetus for wide-scale change within Iran. Internationally, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the American unipolar moment vastly expanded U.S. soft power and made it more difficult for Iran to ignore this power. From this point forward, three mutually reinforcing processes would make Iran fertile soil for U.S. sources of soft power.

First, a new and younger generation of Iranians, a product of the post-revolution baby boom, who had not experienced the Pahlavi regime, the Islamic Revolution or the Iran-Iraq War as adults, began to mature. They entered society via universities, the workplace and polling booths, and took their place as citizens. The old slogans of the revolution did not represent many of their needs or desires. Having grown up in the socially suffocating, economically bleak and politically repressive revolutionary and war eras, these young citizens sought greater social freedom, economic opportunity and political representation.⁴⁰ Second, this new generation drove and in turn was driven by developments on the political front. The presidency of Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989-1997) kicked off Iran's re-opening to the world via limited economic liberalization and diplomatic gestures. Then in 1997 Mohammad Khatami was elected president (1997-2005). The Reformists, led by Khatami, riding on the needs and desires of the younger generation and their disaffected parents, broke onto the political stage and won successive electoral victories in presidential and parliamentary elections. The Reformists' advocacy for "civil society," entailing greater social, political and cultural pluralism, and "dialogue of

39 The earliest example found by the authors was in 2007.

40 Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Post Revolutionary Iran and the New Social Movements." *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979*. Ed. Eric J. Hooglund. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002): 3-18.

civilizations,” which involved the re-establishment of friendly ties with the West, somewhat expanded the social and political space in which the new generation could make their demands. Finally, the relatively more open atmosphere in universities beginning in 1989 and gradually improving until 2005 created a unique space for Iranian academics and students, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, to explore a broader range of ideas. Universities once again became vibrant forums for a wide range of social, political, economic and cultural debates where Western ideas were able to exert an increasingly powerful influence. The movement to translate Western works into Farsi familiarized Iran’s best and brightest at elite universities with the West’s intellectual legacies.

These three mutually reinforcing processes created a small opening through which U.S. sources of soft power could trickle in, and advances in communications technology that took hold in Iran in the mid-1990s turned this trickle into a flood. Satellite television and the Internet became powerful new conduits for the U.S. primary currencies. Before the mid-1990s Iranians’ access to alternative communication media not approved by the regime was limited to Western radio broadcasts and bootlegged audio and video cassettes which were carefully circulated between friends and family. With the entry of illegal satellite dishes Iranians now had access to a wider selection of content, from television series that promoted alternative lifestyles to news programs that presented narratives starkly different from those of the regime. The global Internet, introduced around the same period, had a similar effect but on a larger scale because of its accessibility through universities, cafes and eventually homes. Popular demand, the Khatami administration’s investment in telecommunication infrastructure, and weak regulation of the Internet early on made it an especially potent conduit for U.S. sources of soft power.

These processes in the post-1989 context transformed Iran’s youth in the cultural, social and political spheres into a group that the regime had increasing

difficulty controlling, particularly in urban areas where most Iranians reside. Western culture, despite being officially banned, was gradually seeping into the bones of Iranian society. Regime-enforced social norms began to change as well, with many youth rejecting traditional Islamic values for Western ones. The crème of Iran’s youth, those who performed well in the grueling national university entrance exams and won international science olympiads, opted to pursue careers in the West because of the lack of opportunities in Iran and the attractiveness of cutting-edge Western universities. This started the first major wave of brain drain since the revolution and war. On the political front, the political ideal of Guardianship of the Jurist came under critique in public spaces and regime policies were scrutinized as never before. When taken together, this meant that there was an increasingly large gap between the culture, political ideals, and policy preferences of large segments of society on one hand and the regime on the other.

The concepts of “cultural assault,” “cultural night-raid” and “cultural NATO,” predecessors of the concept of soft war in the regime’s lexicon, emerged in this context. What elevated the exercise of U.S. soft power on Iran to a “war” for Iranian conservatives during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) were geo-political tensions with the United States and the fear of regime change. The color revolutions of the former Soviet bloc in the 2000s, which had varying degrees of U.S. support, convinced the Islamic Republic that its own people could be co-opted by the United States as Trojan horses to overthrow the regime. Indeed, this fear seemingly became a reality during the June 2009 to February 2011 Green Movement demonstrations. To Iranian conservatives, the demonstrators of the Green Movement represented culture, political ideals, and policy preferences anathema to their own. In the aftermath of the repression of the Green Movement, the regime decided that an improved strategy for the soft war was needed. The next section covers the Islamic Republic’s strategy in the soft war. The regime is still grappling with how to deal with U.S. soft power and has only been partially successful in responding to it.

IV. HARD & SOFT RESPONSES

What has the Islamic Republic's strategy been for fighting the soft war? It has not formally articulated a coherent strategy, but from a observation of its actions the image of a *de facto* strategy emerges. This strategy has rested on two pillars: a hard and soft response. As we will show, while the Islamic Republic has been relatively successful in using coercive means to limit U.S. primary currencies (hard response), it has been much less successful in creating attractive indigenous primary currencies (soft response). This is because primary currencies, or sources of soft power, are not monopolized by the state but are mainly produced by civil society. The repression of civil society by the Iranian state has crippled its ability to generate attractive sources of soft power. Given the Islamic Republic's emphasis on controlling conduits of U.S. sources of soft power through a hard response, we begin by investigating three examples of these conduits before turning to the regime's strategy in earnest.

The conduits of U.S. soft power

The Islamic Republic's leadership considers the Internet as one of the biggest purveyors of U.S. primary currencies. Not only can the Internet be used to consume a wide range of content in multiple formats, it also serves as an optimal tool for communication and social networking. Gmail, Facebook and Twitter are all perceived as conduits for seditious individuals to communicate and create social networks that undermine Iranian society's Islamic socio-cultural values and the regime's political ideals and policies.⁴¹

Another challenge has been the creation of an alternative Farsi media targeted at Iranians by Western governments and Iranians in the diaspora, mainly via satellite television. The Voice of America

(VOA) Persian News Network (PNN) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Persian service have now become major sources of Farsi content, especially news. VOA's former show *Parazit*, a weekly political satire program, gave a satiric look at the regime's leadership not provided by traditional media within Iran, to popular acclaim among young Iranians.⁴² Manoto TV, a private satellite network with a greater focus on entertainment, showcases a new generation of Iranian actors, broadcasters and musicians as well as decidedly Western-leaning socio-cultural values. The network has found success by its ability to attract talent and showcase work that falls outside of the regime's boundaries. As this alternative media grows, it makes U.S. sources of soft power easier for Iranian audiences to absorb and threatens to divert them from regime programming.

A third key conduit of soft power are universities, and in particular social sciences and the humanities. As outlined in Part III, despite the Cultural Revolution, Western social sciences and the humanities began re-entering Iranian universities in a major way in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the regime has not always strictly problematized the diffusion of Western social sciences and the humanities through Iranian universities as soft war, statements by senior Iranian leaders make clear that it is viewed within the same framework. Iran's supreme leader has stated quite succinctly why the threat of the diffusion of Western "human sciences," the term used in Iran for the social sciences and humanities, through Iranian universities can be seen as part of soft war. Speaking to a gathering of seminary students, Khamenei warned of the dangers and alien nature of Western human sciences to Islamic Iran and underlined why it is important for the country to produce its own indigenous human science:

⁴¹ "Momen-Nasab: Beware the Evils of Google!" *IranPolitik*. 23 Aug. 2011. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

⁴² "Iran's 'Daily Show.'" *CNN*. 13 Jan. 2011. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

*This human science which is current today has content which is essentially in opposition to the Islamic movement and Islamic regime; it relies on another ideology, it has another argument, and has a different goal. When these [human sciences] become current, officials become trained according to them; the very same officials come to lead universities, the national economy, and domestic, foreign, and security policies, etc.*⁴³

Hard responses

The core of the Islamic Republic's strategy for dealing with U.S. soft power has been overwhelmingly characterized by the use of hard responses—the use of coercive measures—to disrupt the conduits of U.S. primary currencies. In September 2012, the Islamic Republic announced implementation of phase one of the National Information Network (NIN) project. According to the regime, this initiative seeks to severely limit Iranians' access to the global Internet by creating a national intranet. Phase one took 42,000 sensitive government computers offline and onto the NIN, and later phases would do the same for most other computers in the country.⁴⁴ By forcing most inside Iran onto the NIN, the regime could not only more effectively limit the content individuals consume, but would also be able to better monitor them and feed them with state-produced content. As of the time of writing, however, it remains unclear what the NIN will look like in its final form and how isolated Iranians will be from the Internet.

Even without the NIN, however, the regime still has a fairly powerful Internet filtering regime in place. With the assistance of Chinese, Russian and European telecommunications software and hardware makers,⁴⁵ the Islamic Republic has been

able to create mechanisms to block ordinary Iranians from seeing content it deems undesirable, monitor their activities and slow the Internet down to a trickle during sensitive periods when e-mail and online social networks could help mobilize large numbers of people. This process was intensified by the creation of the cyber police in February 2011, which enabled the regime to bring its persecution of online activists within a legal framework and apply prison sentences and physical intimidation as means to control their activities.⁴⁶ The arrest of blogger Sattar Beheshiti, who later died in police custody, is just one example of this.⁴⁷ The process of greater state control over the Internet has also been extended more informally, for instance by an IRGC affiliate's acquisition of Iran's main Internet provider and largest telecom firm, the Telecommunication Company of Iran (TCI).⁴⁸

Like much of the Islamic Republic's policymaking, however, the use of hard responses to limit the penetration of U.S. sources soft power through the Internet has been done in an ad hoc and diffuse manner. With the creation of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), formed under the direct orders of Khamenei to institute a comprehensive policy plan for cyberspace, this may now be changing.⁴⁹ The SCC brings together a wide range of key power-brokers in the regime, including the president, speaker of parliament, chief justice, commander of the IRGC and minister of intelligence, among others.

To confront the beaming of foreign satellite television programs into Iran, the regime has used similarly hard responses. The sale and possession of unlicensed satellite dishes and receivers in Iran is punishable under the law by fines and prison

43 "Bayanat dar Didar-e Tolab, Fozala va Asatid Hawzeh-ye Elmieh Qom (Speech in a meeting with the students and scholars of the hawzeh of Qom)." *The Center for Preserving and Publishing the Works of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei*. 21 Oct. 2010. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

44 "Iranian Information Minister: National Internet to Cut off All Government Computers from the World Wide Web." *IranPolitik*. 19 Sept. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

45 Eli Lake, "Fed Contractor, Cell Phone Maker Sold Spy System to Iran." *The Washington Times*. 13 Apr. 2009. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

46 "Fata, Vahed-e Jadide Polic-e Iran Bara-ye Control-e Faza-ye Internet. (Fata, a new Iranian police unit for controlling the Internet)." *BBC - Persian*. 23 Jan. 2011. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

47 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iranian Facebook Activist Sattar Beheshiti Feared Dead in Custody." *The Guardian*. 07 Nov. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

48 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iran Tightens Online Censorship to Counter US 'shadow Internet.'" *The Guardian*. 13 July 2011. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

49 "The Islamic Republic Takes Another Decisive Step Towards Controlling Cyberspace in Iran." *IranPolitik*. 28 Mar. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

sentences.⁵⁰ Outside these legal deterrents, the regime regularly raids homes in order to collect or destroy satellite dishes on people's rooftops. Finally, the regime uses satellite jamming to block much of the undesired satellite transmissions from beaming into Iranian homes. These latter two policies have even generated varying degrees of criticism from within the regime.⁵¹

The Islamic Republic's policies for fighting the soft war in universities have been similar to those used during the Cultural Revolution of the 1980s, albeit less extreme. Since 2005 many professors have been forcibly retired or purged,⁵² and this process was accelerated after the Green Movement demonstrations.⁵³ Since 2006 the regime has created a "star" system to identify troublesome students and exclude them from higher education.⁵⁴ In Iran's hyper-competitive education system, where admission to elite universities can be the difference between success and failure in life, the star system has had a chilling effect on campus social and political activism as well as students' desire to pursue social science and humanities degrees. The regime has also historically had a system of quotas that ensures that there is a higher proportion of university students from its core constituencies, including the Mobilization Resistance Force (better known as the "Basij"). Next, the regime has once again started imposing the Islamic moral code in universities,

limiting male-female interaction and implementing a dress code. Finally, sensing a threat from the high proportion of females in universities and decreasing marriage and birth rates, the regime created quotas in 2012 to limit women in universities.⁵⁵

The regime has supplemented the hard response in its strategy by building better conduits of the sources of soft power. Domestically, this has been characterized by an increasing presence online, such as the creation of a Facebook account by Khamenei,⁵⁶ and greater professionalism in existing media outlets. Abroad, this has entailed the creation of new conduits. The prime example of this has been Press TV, the Islamic Republic's 24-hour English-language international news channel. Press TV plays to foreign audiences by emphasizing Islamic, anti-Imperialist and anti-American themes. It is questionable, however, how successful these efforts have been. At best, they appear to be half measures that repackage Iran's waning primary currencies at home and abroad. The Islamic Republic's real shortcoming, however, has been in generating new attractive indigenous sources of soft power.

Building the sources of soft power

While in the first decade after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 the Islamic Republic was able to build attractive indigenous sources of soft power and even project soft power abroad, since 1989 its soft power has declined. At least two causes have been at the center of this decline. First, the Islamic Republic lacks the economic dynamism that is often a prerequisite for producing the financial and social capital that underlies attractive sources of soft power. Second, there has been no systematic government policy for allocating adequate funding and providing the right legal and regulatory framework to facilitate the production of attractive sources of soft power. Iranian conservatives, who have dominated the regime in the post-1989 period, have blocked elite-

50 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Nothing Comes Between Iranians And Their Satellite Dishes -- Not Even The Police." *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*. 13 Mar. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

51 "When It Comes to Fighting the 'Soft War,' Iran Only Has Hard Tools." *IranPolitik*. 25 Apr. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

52 Nazila Fathi, "Iranian Leader Wants Purge of Liberals From Universities." *The New York Times*, 06 Sept. 2006. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

53 "Purge of Independent-Minded Professors Underway." *International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran*. 19 Apr. 2010. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

54 The star system, under the auspices of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, assigns a star to a student's record for a first offence, which can range widely from 'moral' (i.e. not adhering to the Islamic dress code) to 'political' (i.e. distributing leaflets), resulting in a warning. A second star is assigned to a student's record after their second offence, meaning that students are only allowed to re-enter university by accepting certain terms and conditions. Finally, a third star for a third offence means that a student is excluded from higher education in Iran. For more on the purges, see Frances Harrison, "'Mass Purges' at Iran Universities." *BBC*. 20 Dec. 2006. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

55 Zakiyyah Wahab, "Universities in Iran Put Limits on Women's Options." *The New York Times*. 20 Aug. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

56 "Iran Cyber Front: Khamenei Likes Facebook." *IranPolitik*. 28 Dec. 2012. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

and grassroots-level initiatives for creating attractive sources of soft power.

The lack of a vibrant economy places significant restraints on the creation of attractive primary currencies for generating soft power. The United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, Japan, and, increasingly, emerging economies such as China and India, to list just a few, have all been able to develop attractive sources of soft power in part because of powerful economies. For example, the United States' economic vitality has allowed it to create well-funded and advanced film, music and fashion industries that are able to market their best cultural products globally. Likewise, the powerful U.S. economy has enabled the creation of well-endowed universities that conduct cutting-edge research and attract some of the world's top minds, consequently setting much of the international research and teaching agenda. Although Iran has enormous economic potential, its economy has faced chronic problems and been unable to produce long-term growth.

Next, the Islamic Republic's restrictions on both elite and grass-roots social, political and cultural freedoms, as well as poor state-civil society relations, undermine Iran's ability to create attractive sources of soft power. Nye points out that the sources of soft power are not monopolized by states to the same extent that hard power is, but are largely produced by civil society.⁵⁷ Iran has ample material to create sources of soft power that are attractive within Iran and internationally, yet the regime's limitations on freedoms inside Iran as well as its recycling of primary currencies from the first decade of revolution and war prevent innovation in this area. The Islamic Republic's sources of soft power have not been renovated to adequately synchronize with the everyday experience and tastes of ordinary Iranians today, particularly youth.

In the area of culture, there is a treasure trove of artifacts from Shi'a culture, non-Islamic Iranian culture, and the Islamic Republic's culture which, if adapted to contemporary circumstances, could

prove very attractive. Yet, for instance, despite the capacity of Shi'a culture to capture a new generation through novel forms and presentations, the regime has insisted on an orthodox interpretation of this faith and restrained lay and clerical religious intellectual and artistic innovators, limiting its appeal. Non-religious artists who have nonetheless shown interest and competence in dealing with Shi'a themes have found themselves impeded. Take the Islamic Republic's treatment of Bahram Bayzai, a pillar of Iranian cinema who wrote the screenplay for *The Day of the Event*, the popular film which masterfully retells the story of Ashura, the Shi'a holy day that commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hossein.⁵⁸ Not only has the Islamic Republic not been able to create a film industry capable of absorbing and facilitating the work of such a talent, but it has actually impeded his career. We can also point to composer Hossein Alizadeh's acclaimed symphony *Ney-Nava*, which has been interpreted as representing Imam Hossein's martyrdom on Ashura. Such works show the potential of various musical forms to popularize Shi'a culture.⁵⁹ But rather than supporting innovative indigenous music, no less than Khamenei himself has spoken out against listening to and making music. Fashion is another case in point. The regime has fought against Western fashion since the revolution and continually frets about the "immodest" fashion of youth today. But it has failed to formulate attractive alternatives that most young Iranians today would readily embrace; in many quarters the Islamic hijab promoted by the regime is seen as a symbol of its backwardness and oppression of women. This need not be the case. Muslim women around the world, especially in places like Turkey but also in Iran itself, have been adapting the hijab into an Islamic fashion that can be appealing while retaining its original goal of religious modesty.

Non-Islamic Iranian culture has been consistently marginalized because of the regime's ideological proclivity toward Shi'a Islam. But here too there is much unexploited potential, which could help create sources of soft power that could prove attractive and

58 *Rooz-e Vaghe'eh (The Day of the Event)*. Dir. Shahram Asadi. Screenplay by Bahram Bayzai. Hedayat Film, 1994. Film.

59 Hossein Alizadeh, *Ney-Nava*. Mahoor Publication, 1983. Cassette.

57 Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

counteract U.S. sources of soft power. Iranian classical literature, from Ferdowsi to Molana to Khayam, is deeply popular at the grass-roots level in Iran and even in the West, where artists have interpreted such works for modern audiences. But in Iran itself not only is there little state support for promoting classical culture, it is often treated with suspicion by Iranian conservatives. Modern Iranian culture is perhaps even more repressed and neglected than classical Iranian culture. Giants of modern Iranian literature and poetry such as Sadegh Hedayat, Mahmood Dowlatabadi and Ahmad Shamloo are not actively promoted as some of Iran's finest cultural products, and it is left to Iranian artists and ordinary people to highlight them inside Iran and the diaspora.

Finally, the Islamic Republic's culture since 1979 provides a reservoir with great potential to create attractive sources of soft power. Take the Iran-Iraq War, called the Holy Defense by the regime. The war, potentially the most important event in the Islamic Republic's history, has a very important place in the regime's culture as a titanic struggle in which the nation paid a tremendous price in blood and treasure to defend itself against hostile foreign forces bent on its destruction. Today, however, the war is commemorated in much the same way it was during the 1980s and 1990s, making it more difficult for the younger generation to relate to it. Holy Defense Cinema, a sub-genre of film in Iran dealing with the war and its aftermath, today produces films that are formulaic and ideological in their portrayal of the war effort and come off as propaganda. Religious filmmaker Morteza Aviny's classic documentary on Iranian soldiers on the frontlines of the war, *Narrative of Conquest*, is a great example of a work that was well received during its heyday more than two decades ago but has lost much of its appeal due to overuse by the regime and the inter-generational disconnect in Iran.⁶⁰

However, there are exceptions, such as *Passion for Flight*,⁶¹ the popular Iranian television series about the

U.S.-trained F-14 Tomcat fighter pilot and martyred war hero Abbas Baba'i, and *Attack on H3*,⁶² a war film about the spectacular Iranian air force operation against an Iraqi military base during the war. The work of film director Ebrahim Hatamikia can also be placed in this category, and the impediments placed before him by the regime are emblematic of the latter's self-defeating approach to culture. An Iran-Iraq War veteran and highly regarded filmmaker who has specialized in Holy Defense Cinema, Hatamikia has nonetheless faced numerous obstacles, such as censorship from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and has not received systematic support to leverage his talent. The United States, in contrast, has become quite adept at exploiting the attractive cultural potential of its military and conflicts around the globe. The U.S. Department of Defense's relationship with the American film and television industry has produced many movies and shows that lionize the U.S. military and contextualize and promote U.S. foreign policy. Special operations forces-themed television shows such as *The Unit* or films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* are great illustrations of this, helping create a culture that reinforces the high social status of U.S. military personnel and their mission.

Likewise, many of the regime's political ideals date back to the first decade after the revolution and have lost much of their potency over the years. The theory of the Guardianship of the Jurist is a case in point. Conceived of as a divinely and popularly ordained form of government and enthusiastically supported by Iranians in 1979, this political ideal has become less responsive to the popular will, resembling more a form of sacred kingship. Yet here too innovative clerical religious thinkers such as late Grand Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri have proposed ways of renovating this political ideal, which maintains much of its content while allowing greater popular participation. Montazeri's interpretation of the Guardianship of the Jurist sees its legitimacy as coming through election by the people (*entekhab*). Yet

60 *Ravayat-e Fath (Narrative of Conquest)*. Dir. Morteza Aviny. IRIB 1, Aviny. Online. Accessed 03 July 2013.

61 *Passion for Flight (Shogh-e Parvaz)*. Dir. Yadollah Samadi. IRIB 1, 2007-2011. Film.

62 *Attack On H-3 (Hamleh Be H-3)*. Dir. Shahriar Bahrani. Sureh Cinema, 1994. Film.

rather than seize on political ideals with the potential to attract, the regime has responded by empowering political ideals that move in the opposite direction, such those espoused by Ayatollah Mohammad-Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi. He has argued for a version of Guardianship of the Jurist whose legitimacy is derived from God, in other words “installation” (*entesab*) by the Shi’a clergy acting as intermediaries for God. In this version of Guardianship of the Jurist the people have little say.⁶³

Policies are another source of soft power in which the Islamic Republic has had a serious deficit in the post-war era, not only because regime policies often ignore the pulse of society but also because existing policies have been riddled with failures. Let us look at this in the context of the social, political and economic spheres. In the social sphere the policy of the regime has been to crack down on the impulse of Iranian youth toward greater social freedom. Iranian conservatives today interfere extensively in the people’s social lives. The regime continues to expend considerable energy carrying out raids by police and other security forces on individuals whom it deems inappropriately dressed. Or take the regime’s 2012 decision to place limits on women’s entry to universities and eliminate them from certain majors altogether at some universities. In a world in which the general trend for women appears to be towards greater emancipation, this policy seeks to limit the place of women in society, the economy and politics. Policy shortcomings in the political sphere have already been noted above, but are elaborated upon here. The revolution of 1979 took place in part as a reaction to the Shah Mohammad-Reza’s closing of the political space—he *de jure* turned the country into a single-party state—at a time when society had become intensely politically conscious. Today, Iran’s political system often also looks to be moving in the direction of greater exclusion, even of some of its own elites, despite an ever greater clamor by youth to become engaged in politics.

The Islamic Republic’s greatest shortcoming, however, has perhaps been in the economic realm, despite Iran’s endowment with substantial natural

and human resources. Successful economic policies that benefit people can be a great source of soft power. Take Japanese Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda’s famous “Income-Doubling Plan” of 1960, which not only promised economic growth but actually translated this into tangible benefits for ordinary people. Likewise the Communist Party of China (CPC) has based a good deal of its legitimacy and appeal to the world in the last two decades on its success in generating economic growth. Iranian policies like the “Targeted Subsidy Plan” (*tarh-e hadafmanidiy-e yaraneha*), which sought to remove subsidies that had become a great source of inefficiency in the Iranian economy, could have been packaged as part of a larger and more coherent economic plan that would have stimulated growth and benefited citizens.⁶⁴ But political infighting has mangled implementation of the plan, and it is now perceived as contributing to inflation. Policies as a source of soft power can be very attractive when they resonate with political ideals, society’s needs and are successful. Policies in the Islamic Republic often seem to do none of the above.

Finally, the Islamic Republic has also been unable to leverage institutions as a source of soft power. The regime may not be in a position to create or utilize global institutions to set the international agenda the way the United States does. However, it can use smaller-scale and local institutions to at least take the initiative in setting the agenda within Iran and perhaps even the region, especially through centers of knowledge production such as universities, research centers and policy think-tanks. The circumstances for this do not yet exist in Iran. Centers of knowledge production, especially universities, live under a cloud of repression that stunts creativity and prevents Iranian knowledge producers (students, professors, researchers, etc.) from interacting with peers around the globe and disseminating their ideas. As noted earlier, much of Iran’s academic talent also goes abroad due to poor conditions in Iran. Interestingly, the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), headed by Hassan Rouhani just prior to his election as president

63 Davoud Feirahi, *Nezam-e Siasi Va Dolat Dar Islam (political Regime and Government in Islam)* (Tehran: SAMT, 2007): 275-87.

64 Dominique Guillaume, et al. “Iran - The Chronicles of the Subsidy Reform.” *International Monetary Fund*. 1 July 2011. Online. 3 July 2013.

in June 2013, may be an important milestone in terms of creating agenda-setting institutions as sources of soft power and its work is likely to greatly inform the Rouhani administration.

The Islamic Republic's current, *de facto*, soft war strategy appears to be having mixed results. The use of hard responses has enabled the regime to limit the diffusion of U.S. primary currencies in Iran. If carried to its extreme, including cutting Iranians off from the Internet, this may be successful in reducing Iranians' exposure to U.S. sources of soft power. The regime's inability to generate attractive sources of soft power, however—which appears to

be a consequence of neglect rather than of failed policy—is a fatal flaw in its strategy. Iranians are not flocking to the regime; they are going abroad or into their own private realms. To address this critical shortcoming, the Islamic Republic would need to strengthen its economy and, more importantly, allow greater social, political and cultural freedoms—as in the countries able to produce attractive sources of soft power. As things stand, Iranians, particularly youth, are susceptible to U.S. sources of soft power and in many instances are becoming alienated from the regime. This does not bode well for the regime's future.

CONCLUSION

Soft war is a conflict rooted in Iran's encounter with Western imperialism from the 19th century onward, and more specifically in the Islamic Republic's geopolitical conflict with the United States since 1979. It is the expression of two interwoven strands of the regime's, and specifically Iranian conservatives,' DNA: Islamic nativism and anti-Americanism. For a regime that claims an authentic Islamic identity, rejects the influence of the United States, and has the ambition to control much of its citizens' social, political, and cultural lives, the exercise of U.S. soft power poses security challenges. Iranians attracted to U.S. primary currencies can internalize their values, thereby often simultaneously rejecting the values of the regime. The divergence between regime and society—strongly exacerbated by U.S. soft power—is not an abstract concern, but one that can manifest itself in the form of concrete security challenges, forcing the regime to respond.

As we have argued, however, the Islamic Republic's soft war strategy is flawed, particularly in its ability to create attractive indigenous sources of soft power. This has led to a soft power deficit vis-à-vis the United States. By focusing on a hard response, the regime can limit the diffusion of U.S. primary currencies in Iran. But this is not a real solution, because it does not address the root cause of why U.S. primary currencies have had such attractive power in Iran: the relative unattractiveness of the regime's own primary currencies. Economic failure is one pillar of this deficit. More important, however, is the regime's repression of civil society, particularly the artistic and intellectual elites, who are often the creators of attractive sources of soft power. These sources cannot be mechanically produced by throwing money at them, but require the participation of civil society to come about. The Islamic Republic's current soft war strategy, though not a total defeat, is not a path to victory.

Still, this state of affairs cannot be taken for granted, and at least two factors in the immediate future could change this trajectory. One important factor could be the election of Rouhani as president of the Islamic Republic and the re-orientation of social, cultural, and policies that could result. Rouhani's election campaign was in part premised on softening certain aspects of recent Iranian government policy, corresponding to the hard response discussed above, while strengthening social, political, cultural, and other freedoms, corresponding to the soft response. If Rouhani fulfills these campaign promises, Iran will be in a much better position to create attractive sources of soft power. Another factor may be the impact of U.S. economic sanctions on Iran. President Barack Obama and the U.S. Congress, like U.S. leaders before them, have claimed that the sanctions and other policies that seek to pressure Iran are not targeted at the Iranian people. But ordinary Iranians are the ones suffering the most from the ways in which sanctions have seriously exacerbated the Iranian economy's existing problems. These impacts are reaching most levels of peoples' lives, affecting food prices, access to medicines, ability to travel and study abroad, etc. This policy contradicts American proclamations of friendship and respect toward Iranians because it undeniably and very directly hurts ordinary people and becomes a believable bogeyman which the regime can exploit. This schizophrenic policy, causing pain to what many believe to be the most pro-American population in one of the most anti-American regions, undermines the attractiveness of U.S. sources of soft power in Iran. This could alienate a new generation of Iranians, as U.S. support for the Pahlavi regime did from 1953 onward, leading to a new wave of anti-Americanism. The United States should consider its current policies in light of this and the much longer history it has with Iran, minimizing aspects which harm Iranians who share much with the American people. After all, it is these Iranians, and not the United States' coercive economic and military measures per se, who hold out the best hope for a peaceful long-term friendship between the two nations and an end to the soft war.

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