The Rising Shi’ā Crescent: Iranian Smart Power and Implications for the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf

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Abstract: The circumstances of the American war in Iraq, the Arab Spring, and the international fight against Da’esh have provided an opportunity for the Islamic Republic of Iran to consolidate its power in the Middle East, as foretold by King Abdullah II of Jordan in his coining of the phrase “Shi’a crescent” in 2004. Iran’s successful resurgence can be attributed to its effective use of “smart power,” or the combination of soft and hard power tactics. Iran’s hard power, in the form of Shi’a militias and proxies, is supported with soft power tactics. These include Iran’s export of the ideals of the Revolution and its model of an Islamic Republic, its role as leader of the global Shi’ite community, and its investment in cultural diplomacy across the Middle East as well as its renewed engagement with the West.

Introduction

In 2004, in an article for the Washington Post, King Abdullah II of Jordan voices his concerns over Iranian meddling in the January elections in Jordan and Iraq. In the article, he uses a new term, the Shi’a “crescent,”1 to describe a resurgent Iran and its imminent domination of the Middle East, caused by the destabilizing nature of the American war in Iraq.2 He voices his fears that Iranian control will spread to other Sunni countries, noting that “even Saudi Arabia is not immune from this.”3

3 Baker and Wright.
Abdullah’s words were largely dismissed as alarmist, and the American invasion of Iraq continued to unfold. More than a decade later, the circumstances of American involvement in Iraq and Syria have resulted in an opportune moment for Iran to consolidate its power across the Middle East. The improvement of Iran’s geopolitical position due to the relative weakening of its neighbours, paired with Washington’s policy blunders and the awakening of Shi’a populations in light of the encouragement of democracy by the West has “opened up a strategic opportunity...for Iran to balance US power in the region.” But unlike the United States, whose use of hard power in the war in Iraq failed to encourage domestic support from Iraqis, Iran has implemented an effective policy of smart power, as defined by Joseph Nye. Iran has several soft power tools at its disposal including the revolutionary ideals of 1979, its position as leader of Shi’a Islam, and its cultivation of regional social, political, and cultural links. An additional element of Iran’s soft power is recently renewed diplomacy with the West, embodied by the end of international sanctions and the signing of the nuclear deal with the United States. Iran’s soft power tactics serve the dual purpose of underlining regional hard power with ideological elements and strategically engaging the West, therefore adding legitimacy to Iran as a rational actor on the global stage. Iran’s use of soft power, exemplified by the aforementioned examples, and its use of hard power, exemplified by the arming and financing of Shi’a militias, mark significant foreign policy changes that have resulted in Iran’s effective consolidation of power across the contemporary Middle East.

This paper will discuss the soft power tools at Iran’s disposal and how it has used them to compliment hard power tactics in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, amounting to an effective use of smart power by a rational international

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4 “The Shia Crescendo,” The Economist.
actor. Iran’s use of soft power, designed to appeal to various audiences in the East and the West, has given its military involvement a more multi-faceted and more long-term dimension and represents a foreign policy decision that could greatly improve Iran’s political position on the global stage. The limitations, then, on this paper, will be on the discussion of the mechanisms and politics of Iranian military involvement. In-depth analyses will therefore not be afforded to the civil war in Lebanon, Syria, or Yemen, as the focus is on how soft power has complimented Iran’s military efforts, rather than on how Iran’s hard power, interacting with a plethora of other actors, including Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States, has influenced the geopolitical scene.

Smart Power: A Definition

To understand Iran’s successful combination of soft and hard power, it is necessary to define both terms. Hard power coerces through tangible resources such as military force or payment, punishing or bribing parties into submission or compliance. Soft power, alternately, is an ability to “convince or persuade others to follow your example, without coercing them, offering them rewards or deceiving them.” In essence, it is the ability to convince others to “want what you want.” A state using soft power establishes a positive, enviable image of itself that other states or individuals wish to emulate. A lack of the deception associated with hard power also allows the state to establish reliability and lasting trust between itself and other states. Although hard power is oftentimes necessary, soft power “ultimately configures the context within which other nations make decisions in ways that favour the interests of soft power nations.” Smart power, then, is the ability to emotionally appeal to groups of people, ensuring their loyalty and consequently convincing them to pursue the same agenda

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10 Ibid.
11 Gallaroti, 250.
using the same methods, derived from hard power.\textsuperscript{12} Due to the threat of nuclear war and the cost of maintaining sophisticated weapons and armies, the use of smart power is now more important than ever if a state is to succeed on the world stage. The American war in Iraq is a fitting example of a failure to implement a smart power strategy. Without sufficient attention to soft power, American involvement in Iraq has “increased rather than reduced the number of Islamist terrorists throughout the past five years [since 2003].”\textsuperscript{13} More recently, this failure is exemplified by the rise of radical Islam in light of the negative social effects of drone strikes. Unlike the United States, Iran softens its hard power tactics with a desire to improve diplomatic relations with other countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf, thereby improving its diplomatic position.

**Iran and the Model of the Islamic Republic**

The first and most powerful soft power tool at Iran’s disposal is its role as both an Islamic Republic and a leader of Shi’a Islam. Firstly, and more broadly, Iran has proclaimed itself a champion for Islamic unity, especially in light of what Iran sees as the inability of Sunni countries to withstand Western influence.\textsuperscript{14} Due to Iran’s traditional view that it is “the rightful leading power in the Persian Gulf area and the natural leader of the Middle East,”\textsuperscript{15} it, then, emerges as a role model, willing and capable of filling the void created by the failure of Pan-Arab nationalism.\textsuperscript{16} Secondly, Iran’s connection to Shi’ite Muslims across the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, and


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

Central Asia is also significant, especially with regard to the support of Shi’a opposition parties in Lebanon and Yemen, among other countries. These two soft power aspects, tied closely to the ideologies of the Islamic Republic, have aided Iran in establishing lasting influence.

Despite the sectarian differences between Sunni and Shi’a Islam, Iran has proclaimed itself as the defender of the Muslim world in the face of corrupt, anti-Islamic regimes. Furthermore, Iran has taken steps towards modernizing the Islamic Republic, emphasizing a political system with democratic elements supported by a large voter turnout, as well as introducing reforms to religious restrictions. Especially with the elections of so-called moderate presidents such as Hassan Rouhani, Iran has made promises to improve freedom of press and women’s rights and has also encouraged the formation of civil society groups.\textsuperscript{17} Notably, the Islamic Republic also raised the literacy rate from 40% during the Shah to 85% in 2000, as well as achieving 50% female enrolment in universities.\textsuperscript{18} For the aforementioned reasons, Iran has succeeded in projecting a much more positive post-Revolution image, as well as rebranding itself as the future of Islam. This is significant because, through this improved image, Iran has managed to prove the robustness of its political model and punch above its weight. This is exemplified by its involvement in the fight against Da’esh. Particularly during the Arab Spring, Iran presented itself as the potential leader of a united Islamic republic that would be created through the removal of geopolitical as well as sectarian borders. Ultimately, said republic would be fashioned after Iran’s own political model.\textsuperscript{19} Iranian authorities strategically supported popular demands in Arab Spring countries for increased communication between governments and people as a way to win favour with local populations and undermine the control of domestic governments and the United States.\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{17} Adila Masood, “Political Islam: The Case of Iran.” \textit{The Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs} 19.4, 2000, 89.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Çakmak, 56.
\end{flushright}
stemmed from their allusion to the Islamic Cultural Revolution of 1979\textsuperscript{21} as the beginning of the “Islamic Awakening.” The Arab Spring, as Iran claims, was therefore simply a continuation of the demands for freedom and democracy posited by the Iranian people in their overthrow of the Shah in February of 1979. An indication of the success of Iran’s political soft power was a thaw in the relations between Iran and Egypt in 2011, precipitated by the Muslim Brotherhood’s response to Iranian rhetoric, and exemplified by Egyptian approval for Iranian warships to pass through the Suez Canal for the first time since 1979, an act seen as a direct provocation against Israel.\textsuperscript{22} Although Egypt’s relationship with Iran has since changed, this moment in time shows the possibility of cooperation. Although Iranian relations with Arab countries in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf are fluid and subject to change, again, soft power tactics and diplomacy allow for an increased likelihood of rapprochement.

As an aside, it is important to note that Iran’s aggressive anti-American and anti-Israel rhetoric has also won it many allies in the Middle East. Although many Sunni States are threatened by Iran, they deem the threat from Israel and the United States far greater and are therefore susceptible to Iran’s influence as well.\textsuperscript{23} Again, Iran’s soft power is significant, especially considering Turkey’s attempt to claim the Arab Spring as resulting from its own soft power influence. Iranian policymakers largely discredited this notion by pointing out that Turkey’s model of secularization is incompatible with and unsustainable for Arab Spring states.\textsuperscript{24} Iran’s clear support of the spread of Islam and its emphasis on brotherhood amongst Muslims, therefore, allowed it to profit off of the Arab Spring. The export of Iran’s image as a defiant, robust and competent Islamic Republic, especially in the face of constant American pressure, is very strategically significant. This also led to Iran’s subsequent ability to influence new allies such as

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{23} Çakmak, 59.

\textsuperscript{24} Monier, 428.
Egypt, despite historically difficult relations and sectarian differences. Poignant examples of Iran’s influence regionally are surveys conducted in Cairo, Egypt and Amman, Jordan in 2007, illustrating the popularity of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.\(^{25}\) It is, therefore, evident that Iran effectively implements smart power, by increasing its visibility and influence through soft power and arming its political aims with hard power.

### Iran’s Role as Leader of Shi’a Islam

Although Iran’s pan-Islamic strategy for the Arab world fits its broader political narrative, it is only relatively successful when compared to Iran’s potential sway to influence the global Shi’ite community, due to the nature of Iran as a Persian, Shi’ite State. The failure of Arab Spring states to change hegemonic discourse in the Middle East and promote pan-Arabism during the Arab Spring has led to a lack of a unified Sunni bloc. This, in turn, has allowed Iran to exercise its influence undisturbed on Shi’a minority populations in Sunni-majority countries due to the lack of a collective Sunni response. This is of course not to mention Iran’s influence in countries with Shi’a majorities and Sunni governments, such as Iraq.

The so-called identity crisis of the Arabs due to the failure of pan-Arabism results in poor nation building, causing populations to associate more with ethnic, sectarian or religious affiliations than with their own nationalities.\(^ {26}\) This creates rifts in society that can be exploited by other actors. Considering, then, that “Shi’ites in Iraq and across the Middle East are more loyal to Iran than to their own countries,”\(^ {27}\) Iran can capitalize on political Shi’a Islam to achieve results in democracies across the Middle East, effectively consolidating power through indirect means. This is especially possible due to the

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\(^{26}\) Çakmak, 59.

\(^{27}\) Quotation from Hosni Mubarak in 2006, Ibid, 53.
boycott of elections by Sunni populations. Examples include the Iraqi presidential election of 2005, boycotted by the Sunni population on the orders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)\textsuperscript{28} or Egypt’s presidential election of 2005, which suffered an extremely high abstention rate of 75\%\textsuperscript{29}. Furthermore, the acceptance of a Shi’ite leader is more likely due to the championing of populist Arab issues, such as Israel, by leaders such as Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah of Hezbollah\textsuperscript{30}. The threat is therefore not exclusively from Iranian proxy militias, but from Iran’s ability to influence disenfranchised populations to seek political change. Iran, as a relatively democratic state, in comparison to others in the Middle East, that has not allowed itself to be dominated and has successfully withstood pressure from the West and from Israel offers an attractive model to dissatisfied populations.

As the ideological leader of Shi’a Islam, Iran stresses support and brotherhood between Shi’ites, as well as applying a generous undercurrent of monetary support to issues in order to establish trust with Shi’ite communities. For example, this is shown through the billions of dollars Iran has invested in the reconstruction of infrastructure and medical facilities in Iraq\textsuperscript{31}. Although there are differences amongst Shi’a communities, their frequent alienation and brutal repression in Sunni countries make many of them susceptible to Iranian influence, especially in light of the “success story” of the Iranian Shi’ite State\textsuperscript{32}. As Iran gains power and influence in the Middle East, Shi’a communities, who are often clustered in the same areas, more confidently voice their outrage against their governments\textsuperscript{33}, allowing for unrest that could result in gains in Iran’s favour. A pertinent example of this is Saudi Arabia’s Shi’a community, which has repeatedly

\textsuperscript{28} Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. \textit{ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror}. New York: Regan Arts, 2015, 42.


\textsuperscript{31} Maximilian Terhalle, “Are the Shia Rising?” \textit{Middle East Policy} 14.2, 2007, 75.

\textsuperscript{32} Çakmak, 61.

\textsuperscript{33} “Grumblings and Rumblings: Shias in the Gulf,” \textit{The Economist}. 77
struck out against Saudi authorities, and is considered by the regime as “potentially a fifth column for Iran.”

The ideological support of militias such as Hezbollah, with Hasan Nasrallah, who frequently consults Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei for theological and ideological guidance, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen, create proxies that are more in tune with the foreign policy goals of Iran, as well as being more loyal in the long run. When interviewed, a commander of the Syrian branch of Hezbollah’s reason for fighting was ideological rather than opportunistic; he said, “each country is a separate operation, but the goal is one…a Guards of the Shia Revolution, one force across the whole region.”

Again, through the use of soft power, Iran creates cohesion that is not dependent on threats or incentives but on credibility and attraction.

However, it must be noted that Iran’s projection of itself as the leader of Shi’a Islam, while providing an ideological and religious foundation for their foreign policy, serves a predominantly political purpose. This is underlined by Iran’s significant and historic rivalry with Saudi Arabia for regional hegemony. Each state sees itself as the undisputed leader of Islam, and more importantly, recognizes sectarianism and identity politics as the ideal tools for the consolidation of political power in weak and failing states.

In the wake of the Revolution in 1979, Iran’s clear position as leader of Shi’a Islam saw large Shi’a populations in Gulf Arab states become “legitimate targets for expansionism.”

Iran’s continued practice of agitating Shi’a populations throughout the Middle East continues to undermine the legitimacy of Saudi religious authority and pose a significant challenge to their regime.

The eruption of conflict in Palestine, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and most notably Syria has provided fertile ground for renewed

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34 Çakmak, 54.
35 Siperco.
36 “The Shia Crescendo,” The Economist.
39 Ibid.
sectarianism⁴⁰ and new competition for power between Tehran and Riyadh. This is exacerbated by economic competition regarding oil and more recently, by the signing of the nuclear deal with the United States and the threat of a Western détente with Iran, which puts Saudi Arabia in an unfavourable position. In the light of the execution of prominent Shi’a cleric Nimr Al-Nimr by the Saudi government in January 2016, widely viewed as a direct provocation against Iran, tensions between the two states have risen, amounting to the severing of diplomatic ties.⁴¹ At this point, it is hard to say whether there will be a direct conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia or whether there will be a rapprochement in the future. A deeper analysis of Saudi-Iranian relations is, however, outside the scope of this work.

On the note of sectarian competition, a short comment is needed. Scholars have long questioned Iran’s ability to control and influence Shi’a communities and have claimed that Iran’s soft power is vastly exaggerated.⁴² This can be due to differences in language, culture, and practice across Shi’a communities or the historical divide between Arabs and Persians. It is often simply due to long-standing antagonisms between states, such as those between Egypt and Iran. Although it is arguable that Iran’s sway over Shi’ites is limited, the existence of ideological rhetoric as a tool to consolidate confidence domestically and project power internationally is undisputable. Sectarian rhetoric allows Iran to legitimize its authoritarian rule and identify and combat real and perceived political challenges, domestically and regionally. Iran’s role as the defender of Shi’a Islam, militarily, economically, and ideologically, especially in the face of collapsing states across the Middle East, lends Iran’s realpolitik foreign policy a more multifaceted dimension. As long as Iran’s conviction in its own soft power product remains strong it will have an effect on oppressed Shi’ite populations and more importantly, on their

⁴⁰ Marc Lynch, "Why Saudi Arabia Escalated the Middle East’s Sectarian Conflict." In The Gulf’s Escalating Sectarianism, Project on Middle East Political Science, 7.


⁴² Rahigh-Aghsan, and Jakobsen, 563.
governments. For example, the current proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen illustrates how far Arab countries will go to quell concerns of the rise of a “Shi’a crescent.” In this way, despite criticism, the model of Iran as a Shi’ite leader will remain competitive.

Iranian Cultural Diplomacy

Depending on its audience, Iran also offers soft power products that differ from Shi’a Islam. The Iranian government, in a “top-down” fashion, has strategically implemented social, cultural, and political policies to proliferate its soft power in the Middle East. It has chosen to frame its rhetoric in one of two ways, either through shared Islamic Shi’ite culture or with an emphasis on shared historical and cultural ties to the Persian civilization, depending on which country is in question. If pertaining to the former, Iran’s primary method of promoting and preserving Shi’a Islam is through social and cultural dialogue with other Shi’a states. Iran uses its Islamic culture to create transnational religious networks of mosques, clerics, and seminaries thereby directly influencing religious communities, notably in Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria. Furthermore, Iran’s direct engagement of local communities creates lasting loyalty between non-Iranian Shi’ites and the Iranian government, long seen as the guardian of all Shi’a Muslims. Iran sponsors Shi’ite citizens through religious tourism to Shi’ite Holy Sites in Iran and Iraq such as Qom, Karbala, and Najaf and by funding student exchanges with religious institutions in Iran, as well as by directly responding to the concerns of Shi’ite communities. For example, Iran has accessed Pakistan’s large Shi’a

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45 Çakmak, 53.

46 Forrest, 114.
community (roughly 34.6 million people)\(^{47}\) by funding the construction of sites of worship, arranging religious education in Iran for thousands of Pakistani students, and providing religious guidance from Ayatollah Khamenei.\(^{48}\) Iran’s strategic benevolence and the violent political climate of sectarianism in Pakistan again allow Iran the opportunity to potentially consolidate power through a proxy achieved through soft power and further supported by hard power.

Evidence of heavy community outreach is also visible in Iran’s most valuable allies in the region, Shi’ite-run (arguably Iran-run) Iraq and Alawite-run Syria. In the campaign “to win hearts and minds,” to use the American term, in Iraq, Iran leads efforts to reconstruct and protect Shi’ite Holy Places, and encourages Iranian tourism to Holy areas.\(^{49}\) This resulted in one million Iranians travelling to Iraq on pilgrimages in 2008, stimulating the Iraqi economy.\(^{50}\) Most significantly, throughout the American war in Iraq, Iran circumvented Iraqi authorities to provide free medical treatment and surgeries for wounded civilians, as well as electricity and 1,000 tonnes of cooking gas.\(^{51}\) Iran’s investment in the building of deep relationships with the Iraqi people is evident and made the eventual spread of Iranian influence throughout the Shi’ite population a more natural process.\(^{52}\) Diplomatic relations are equally close with Syria, but the focus is more on Iran’s recognition of the parallels between the Syrian and Iranian civilizations and their importance for world history. For example, cultural centres host book fairs and culture weeks in Syria that present Iranian Islamic art, calligraphy, and


\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Forrest, 115.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.


ceramics, as well as film and poetry. Through these cultural exchanges, it is the mission of both countries to revive Islamic culture and resist the negative effects of globalism for Islam, notably Westernization.\textsuperscript{53} Through cultural diplomacy, Iran wishes to create understanding between itself and Syria and therefore appeals to a varied demographic of Syrians. To encourage positive relations, Iran offers scholarships and trips to Iran to students in the department of Persian language and literature at Damascus University (opened in 2005, with the help of Iran), and recognizes members of the Syrian religious and political elite with annual awards for “fostering Syrian-Iranian relations.”\textsuperscript{54} Again, this commitment to familiarizing the population with Iran’s policies and goals smoothens Iranian use of hard power in Syria and its support of the Assad regime, depicting it as brotherly rather than geopolitically opportunistic. The continued survival of Assad’s regime in Syria represents a critical opportunity for Iran to consolidate its power through a close alliance and take the first step towards outfoxing Saudi Arabia on the Syrian stage and making a bid for regional hegemony. This adds another layer of significance to Iran's ability to project its soft power as a tacit component to military intervention, here exemplified by cultural initiatives.

More generally, Iran acts through the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, a state-run chain of cultural centres teaching the ideals of the Revolution and improving relations between Muslim countries, as well as teaching the Persian language and civilizational history and culture.\textsuperscript{55} The ICRO takes orders directly from the Ayatollah, therefore exporting exactly the foreign policy and regional goals of Iran.\textsuperscript{56} Acting most successfully in Syria, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Pakistan\textsuperscript{57} the ICRO has opened offices around the Middle East, in in large European cities such as Paris, in some Muslim African countries, and notably in Bosnia and Albania in the Balkans, and is key for coordinating bilateral initiatives between Iran and other countries, tailoring them to the

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 42.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 43-45.
\textsuperscript{55} Wastnidge, 371.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 366.
\textsuperscript{57} Von Maltzahn, 49.
countries’ shared diplomatic history. With respect to countries in Central Asia like Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Iran pursues a policy based on sharing of culture and language, such as a Union of Persian-Speaking Nations, shirking religious initiatives in order to better navigate diplomatic relations. As explained by Edward Wastnidge in his piece on Iranian cultural diplomacy, “Iran regularly draws on cultural commonalities such as the celebration of the Persian New Year Nowrooz across the region, and invited regional heads to the first international celebration of Nowrooz in Iran in 2010.” The ICRO also helps connect the Iranian diaspora with the Islamic Republic. As Iran evidently realizes the importance of maintaining relations with Iranians living abroad, the ICRO also hosts cultural events and publishes works through its publishing house, Al-Hoda. It is also worthy to note that Iran has a significant network of international media, starting with Al-Hoda, which publishes materials on the Islamic Revolution and Iran in twenty-five languages. The Islamic Republic of Iranian Broadcasting (IRIB) also takes orders directly from the Ayatollah, again stressing the closeness between these cultural institutions and the government. Iran controls two channels in Arabic, Al-Alam and Al-Kowthar, specifically aimed at Shi’ite communities in the Arab world, an English channel, Press TV, and Hispan TV, broadcast in Latin America in Spanish, as well as numerous channels and newspapers in Farsi. IRIB is a useful tool of influence, as Iran presents its narrative on world events, therefore providing an alternative to Western media and again underlining the necessity of a focus on the point of view of the Muslim world.

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59 Wastnidge, 370.
60 Ibid, 371.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
As an aside, it is interesting to note that the Presidents of the Islamic Republic often play a very large role in advocating for cultural diplomacy. This ranges from Mohammed Khatami, who advocated for a “Dialogue among Civilizations” as the beginning of a détente with the West, to his successor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who refocused Iran’s cultural policy towards Muslim brotherhood in the region, a venture in which he was relatively successful. The efforts of Iran to unite the region under its leadership are indicative of a desire for widespread influence felicitated through soft as well as hard power. Iran’s efforts are especially impressive in light of more than thirty years of crippling economic sanctions and international alienation, as well as a geopolitical situation in the Middle East that has become increasingly difficult to navigate. Iran’s top-down cultural initiatives range in scope, depth, content and audience, and have successfully improved Iran’s regional image, despite its obvious military involvement in the arming and funding of Shi’a proxy militias.

Conclusion

In addition to the tools of Shi’a Islam, the Persian civilization, and Iranian initiatives in the region, the Islamic Republic has greatly improved its position through renewed diplomacy with the West. The signing of the nuclear deal on 14 July 2015, after more than thirty years of crippling economic sanctions and poor international standing, will have significant implications for the region and for Iran’s success in the future. Firstly, Iran’s re-acceptance into the international community by the five members of the Security Council plus Germany, has been named a “triumph of diplomacy,” and guarantees a vast improvement of the economy, including an estimate of $185 billion worth of foreign investment from the European Union and a re-entry into the oil market. Secondly, the re-emergence of Iran on the world stage has upset the balance of power in the Middle East, exemplified by Saudi Arabia and Israel’s vehement

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opposition to the deal. Iran’s increased political and economic clout in the region gives further importance to Iran’s use of smart power. This will allow Iran to pursue a two-track foreign policy. It can seek diplomatic recognition and common ground in the fight against Da’esh from the West, and engage its regional neighbours with hard power and soft power tactics.

And although Iran’s web of soft power is formidable, as Joseph Nye puts it, “Even though North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il likes to watch Hollywood movies, that is unlikely to affect his nuclear weapons policy.” In other words, soft power on its own, much like hard power on its own, is not enough. And behind Iranian soft power is an imposing force of Iranians and non-Iranians that are loyal to Iran for reasons precisely related to its projection of political and ideological soft power. Iran has capitalized on the fear of Sunni extremism or anti-Islamic Western meddling, whichever fits the narrative more cleanly that day, in order to arm, train, and finance powerful Shi’a militias such as the Mahdi Army or Badr Brigade (the military arm of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq), Hezbollah, and their subsequent recruitments in Syria, through them exerting direct control on Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria respectively. Iran’s military involvement is intensified by the reinforcement of Bashar al-Assad’s military with members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Quds Special Forces. Iranian funds are also present in Sunni groups, whose activities could lead to opportunities for Iranian consolidation of power, these being the National Defence Force in Syria, the Iraqi Kurds, and Hamas, for example. Iran also offers tacit support to an international web of Shi’ite communities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Yemen. Iran therefore, in addition to seizing power across the Middle East through proxies, has influenced them to seek the same geopolitical and

65 Ibid., 487.
66 Nye, Obama’s Smart Power, 7.
67 Forrest, 101.
68 Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Iran and Daesh: The Case of a Reluctant Shia Power.” Middle East Policy 22.3, 2015, 44.
strategic goals as the Islamic Republic. It is for this reason, Iran’s successful combination of hard and soft power, that King Abdullah’s prediction in 2004 of a revival of Iranian power was not only accurate but quite astute. The emergence of a grave security threat in the form of the Da’esh and the threat of renewed sectarian violence mean that Iran’s smart power strategy and its regional engagement will soon be tested. The conflict, however, also grants Iran the chance to re-emerge definitively on the world stage. The spread of Iranian influence and military might also represent Iran’s best political position since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Its smart power, then paired with the circumstances of the end of international sanctions and the signing of the nuclear deal with the United States,⁷⁰ have created an ideal opportunity for the Islamic Republic to take regional leadership and mark a critical point in its history. Iran’s Shi’a crescent, then, has just begun to rise.

Lines in the Sand: Shiites as % of Muslim Population

SOURCES: Pew Research Centre, US Department of State
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