

IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolving soft power dynamics between Iran and Afghanistan after 2021, focusing on how Iran has utilized various strategies to influence Afghan society. Before the Taliban's return to power, Iran had successfully leveraged its anti-imperialist rhetoric, media outreach, educational institutions, and charity organizations to build a strong soft power presence in Afghanistan. Iran's advocacy for regional solidarity, particularly its vocal stance on Palestine and anti-Western activism, resonated with many Afghans, strengthening its image as a champion of resistance against imperialism. The study investigates how these tools have fared under the Taliban regime, which has implemented restrictive policies, particularly on media, education, and foreign influence. Through primary data gathered from journalists, experts, and international relations scholars, the study reveals that Iran's soft power has diminished under the Taliban. The regime's crackdown on media freedom, the closure of educational institutions, and its restrictive approach to NGOs and foreign organizations have curtailed Iran's ability to engage with Afghan society in the same way it did during the previous government. Despite these challenges, Iran has managed to maintain some influence by emphasizing its anti-imperialist stance and promoting regional connectivity through initiatives like the Chabahar port. However, the internal policies of both the Taliban and Iran, such as border tensions, have contributed to the erosion of Iran's previously strong soft power in Afghanistan, leaving it struggling to maintain the same level of influence in the region.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the soft power diplomacy between Iran and Afghanistan with a special focus on the Iranian strategies of soft power in the Taliban-led Afghanistan. The paper primarily examines the Iranian efforts of soft power assertion after 2021, when the Taliban came to power. As Iran has struggled to spread its influence and builds its soft power through different means and strategies, it is important to understand how does Iran assert its soft power and spread its influence in Afghanistan to make its regional influence maintained. When the Taliban

came to power in 2021, Iran was one of the first's countries to welcome them.

Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar Akhund, the leader of the Taliban's Political Commission, was invited to the Iranian capital for a week-long stay in January 2021 by Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif and Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the country's National Security Council. Zarif said that "the Taliban is a part of today's reality in Afghanistan," reprimanding those who had criticized the visit. Iran maintained its embassy, albeit at a reduced level, when

Taliban insurgents stormed into Kabul that August. According to reports, Iranian sources kept sending oil and gasoline into Afghanistan even after the Taliban asked that the supplies not be stopped. The Islamic Republic also made a significant diplomatic concession to the Islamic Emirate in February 2023: Iranian authorities allowed Taliban delegates to assume control of Afghanistan's embassy in Tehran (Lawson & Legrenzi, 2024).

Iranian policy toward the Afghan Taliban has been shaped by a wide range of intricate regional and bilateral variables. Their disputes are rooted in sectarian ideology. A protracted conflict over water supplies also contributes to the debate. But even with all of the challenges and inconsistencies in the two countries' relationship, Iran has not returned to the antagonistic stance it took against the Taliban in the 1990s. It has, on the contrary, worked to improve ties and has been instrumental in mainstreaming the second Taliban government since it took control of Kabul in August 2021. Tehran's ideologically motivated attempts to find alternatives to the US-dominated international order seem to be reflected in part in its recent overtures toward the Taliban. However, Iran's cautious acceptance of Afghanistan's new government is grounded in a realistic assessment of the observable outcomes it may hope to attain rather than simply in anti-American animosity. Tehran has been expecting that the Afghan Taliban will pay greater attention to Iran's political and security issues. The rising danger of terrorism from the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP), the water supply to eastern Iran, and the influx of Afghan refugees are the main concerns influencing Iran's ties with Afghanistan. Tehran has been very practical in its involvement to produce positive results on these concerns, while not having granted diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime. Through reconciliatory gestures, Tehran expects to deepen trust with Kabul (Vinay Kaura, 2024).

Iran has been involved in Afghanistan since the Taliban came to power in 2021. The relationship between the two has been facing ups and downs due to their mutual vulnerabilities, interests in each other and deep historical issues which cause problems in a smooth way of engaging each other.

Iran, due its economic and diplomatic superiority and dominancy, has been actively involved in Afghanistan to keep the regime on its side and continue its soft power strategies in Afghanistan. This paper is primarily focused on its soft power strategies in Afghanistan after the Taliban, in 2021.

Soft Power in International Relations

The idea of soft power has become widely used in research on non-coercive influence in international relations after the conclusion of the Cold War. The idea has been utilized by scholars to investigate how intangible assets like culture and political beliefs might increase a state's attractiveness to other countries by fostering respect, legitimacy, and adoration on a global scale. At first, the United States and other Western liberal democracies have been the main subjects of the literature on soft power (Lock, 2010). As a result, a large portion of the study has focused on how democracy, liberal principles, and the market economy contribute to the worldwide impact of Western nations. However, there is currently a growing body of scholarship on non-Western and non-liberal democracies. These studies have highlighted the importance of various soft power resources, emphasizing the part played by developing countries' economic models, cultural traditions, and religion. The Middle East's recent upheavals and wars have highlighted the growing significance of religion in the area as a tool for power projection, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Akbarzadeh et al., 2023).

In order to exert influence beyond national boundaries without running the danger of direct and expensive military conflicts, soft power became a strategic goal. The discussion of soft power initially sparked worries about the United States' comparatively weaker standing in world affairs following the conclusion of the Cold War. The notion was formally introduced to the study of international relations by Joseph Nye, who maintained that the United States might continue to preserve its hegemony by using its soft power resources more effectively, even in the face of global shifts that enhance the relative strength of other countries. He described soft power as co-optive power that operated by "getting others to

want what you want," in contrast to the conventional understanding of power as being founded on compulsion (Nye, 1990) Nye also maintained that by properly utilizing three domestic resources—culture, political principles, and foreign policies—a nation may enhance its soft power capabilities (Nye, 2008).

In international politics, soft power may be strengthened or expressed through a variety of tactics. Given that the foundation of soft power is attraction, Nye had maintained that a variety of elements, including political beliefs, cultural norms, and foreign policy, among others, serve as its origins (Nye, 1990). As this paper is focused on the foreign policy of Iran, we should stick to it as a matter of importance. According to the research that are currently available, one potential mechanism for attraction is the replication of effective policies or the spread of standard practices. Rhetoric and discourse dominance are a second possible soft power mechanism. Changing the prevailing language might assign responsibility for a specific global issue, which could lead the person being blamed to act rather than stay neutral. Soft power assertion can become more viable if a certain discourse has been changed and a dominant discourse has been established through the employment of language and symbols from conventional or new media channels (Rothman, 2011).

Thirdly, cultural diplomacy is a key tool in modern diplomacy that helps nations increase their soft power and influence internationally. As demonstrated by illustrating the mutually reinforcing relationship between educational exchanges and cultural influence, the function of higher education ties across the Atlantic in bolstering soft power is closely tied to diplomatic dynamics. Soft power may enhance a nation's attractiveness and image sharing, but its influence on global events is sometimes complicated by geopolitical subtleties and strategic goals. Therefore, it becomes essential to have a thorough knowledge of cultural diplomacy that recognizes the multifaceted difficulty of influencing current international engagements while also appreciating its ability to change perceptions and strengthen diplomatic ties (Nye, 2012).

Fourth, the concept of public diplomacy has undergone significant changes in the context of modern diplomatic operations, particularly with the introduction of new technologies and the participation of players other than states. States may effectively mobilize public opinion to influence government-led foreign affairs initiatives to increase their influence in the area or globally by implementing PR techniques, cultivating relationships, and encouraging active engagement on social media platforms (Lock, 2010). Finally, educational exchanges are an essential component of the contemporary diplomatic environment, acting as a conduit for cross-cultural understanding and the dissemination of tactful influence. Academic exchange programs are often used as a tool for public diplomacy, fostering cordial relations between nations despite political tensions (Cho & Jeong, 2008).

Research Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the soft power dynamics between Taliban-ruled Afghanistan and Iran, with a particular focus on how Iran asserts its soft power in the region following the Taliban's return to power. The research utilizes both primary and secondary data, drawing from official sources such as government newspaper reports, interviews with experts, journalists and scholars of International Relations to understand Iran's strategic use of soft power tools in Afghanistan. Soft power refers to the ability of a country to influence others through cultural, diplomatic, or ideological appeal rather than military or economic force. In the case of Iran, this study explores various methods through which it projects its influence, such as cultural diplomacy, religious ties, media influence, and development assistance, to strengthen its presence in Afghanistan. The researcher conducted interviews with about ten respondents, five journalists and five scholars and experts of international and regional politics based in Afghanistan. The analysis is conducted thematically, allowing for an in-depth examination of the specific ways in which Iran's soft power is asserted and how it interacts with the Taliban-led government. By investigating these soft power tactics in the

Afghan context, the study provides insights into how Iran navigates its regional ambitions and adapts its strategies in a changing geopolitical landscape. The research aims to map the broader implications of Iran's soft power efforts not only in Afghanistan but also within the larger Middle Eastern region, shedding light on how countries utilize non-coercive means to foster influence and control. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of Iran's evolving foreign policy and its efforts to maintain or expand its regional influence through soft power, especially in the context of a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

Iran's soft power strategies

This section discusses the strategies Iran has deployed for its soft power projection in the region surrounding it. Iran managed to maintain its language and culture throughout the history as independent, and with the embrace of Shiism, it could even create a unique place for itself in the Muslim world. Although Iran is alone in terms of language and religion in the region but it has managed to rule Shiite religious minorities in other countries and in some cases through common language and culture, to expand its policies. Around and its neighbors, Iran does not have any unified and natural ethnic kind. Even countries that are closer to Iran as part of this order, such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan, are quite far away from Iran religiously and those who are religiously close with Iran, such as Azerbaijan and Iraq, are quite far away from Iran by ethnicity and language differences but beside all such religious and linguistic differences, it has been able to expand and increase its influence in the region through revolutionary slogans and cultural activities.

Iran was able to strengthen and increase its soft power in the area as a result of the Islamic Revolution, which was characterized by the slogan of Islamic unity and the support of downtrodden people. A favorable reputation and image in the eyes of the public, both domestically and internationally, are the results of soft power. For a variety of factors, including religion, language, and the export of revolutionary ideals, the Islamic Republic of Iran has created the ideal environment for the growth of its soft power in

the area. From one perspective, the Islamic Republic of Iran's cultural identity has developed as a result of the growth of soft power (Ebrahimi, S., 2019). Iran uses a variety of tactics to increase its power, including setting up centers and holding conferences, creating charitable organizations under the guise of helping the poor by constructing hospitals and schools, providing scholarships to entice students, creating highly sectarian films and television shows with cutting-edge technology, and setting up religious travel groups in the targeted nations (Ahmadi, 2010).

One crucial instrument for soft power is education. Iran has several educational networks to win people over and cultivate a positive image. With its main office in Qom, Iran's religious capital and theological hub, Al Mustafa International has a large regional network. In addition to producing individuals who adhere to Vilayat e Faqih's Khomeinist philosophy, the al-Mustafa network is a rich source of recruits for Iran's Quds Force, the IRGC's most important overseas expeditionary branch. Students are motivated to defend Iranian-interpreted Islamic objectives in conflict areas by such intellectual foundations. Additionally, Al-Mustafa prepares clerics from all over the world to propagate Khomeini's interpretation of anti-imperialism in their respective countries. In addition to educating Shi'a's clergy, Iran is funding scientific studies to attract students (Abbas & Jahangaiz, 2020).

Bonyads are non-state entities or parastatal foundations that primarily represent Iran's soft power potential and have the capacity to significantly impact Iran's foreign policy actions. They engage in a variety of activities that come under the categories of media, commerce, philanthropy, and culture. They produce the Islamic Republic's powerful soft power initiatives and help spread Iran's ideology. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) is another crucial element. Iran's main network for distributing help outside of the borders of the Islamic Republic is the IKRC. It seeks to foster goodwill among nations and gain support for the revolutionary Islamic doctrine. IKRC's humanitarian endeavors focus on the underprivileged, elderly, and needy as well as the disadvantaged segments of society. The services

offered by IKRC include medical care, food assistance, computer lessons and vocational training, fuel and blanket distribution, interest-free loans, and marital counseling. Another Iranian NGO, also known as a bonyad, is Ahl ul Bayt World Assembly (ABWA), which works internationally through a network of educational, cultural, and religious establishments with the goal of spreading Iran's worldview. The phrase "Ahl ul Bayt" technically translates to "People of the House of the Prophet," but in the context of ABWA, it refers to Shiites (Steckler, 2018).

To spread its beliefs and ideas both domestically and internationally, the Islamic Republic has made strategic use of electronic media. The main instruments of Iran's strategic diplomacy are state-owned international satellite networks. Since its founding in 1979, the Islamic Republic has launched several cultural, educational, and religious projects to protect its interests abroad and to promote a favorable and appealing image of Iran both domestically and internationally. Iranian government has intentionally developed strategies exploring socio-political and cultural lines to disseminate its soft power across the area. There are four key institutional institutions entrusted with undertaking Iranian public and cultural diplomacy initiatives. The Office of the Supreme Leader has direct control over the majority. Each of these institutions has a head chosen by the supreme leader himself, and some are headed by ministers chosen by the president and then confirmed by the Iranian Majles. All four institutions' strategic planning, however, must be in accordance with the foreign policy goals set forth by the Iranian National Security Council. These institutions include the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Company (IRIB), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

Throughout the region, Iran has pursued a number of medical diplomacy programs. In the process, the nation has adopted a number of strategies, such as establishing medical centers abroad, promoting international scientific collaborations, providing scholarships to international medical students, exporting and donating medical equipment, offering medical assistance to neighboring countries, and hosting patients from

other countries. One effective medical diplomacy program is for states to offer scholarships to foreign students (Dolatabadi & Kamrava, 2021). After 2021, the scenario has been systematically changed. It is important to understand how these strategies have been implied after 2021.

Iran's Soft Power Projection in Afghanistan under the Taliban

This section explores the various strategies and tools Iran uses to project its soft power in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, with a focus on their applicability in post-2021 era. It provides a detailed analysis of how these strategies, both traditional and innovative, function in the context of Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power. The discussion begins with an examination of religion's pivotal role in Iran's soft power efforts, given the shared Shiite religious ties between the two nations. It then covers other key elements, including Iran's promotion of an Islamic union and its support for oppressed people, framing it as a champion of the disenfranchised. Iran also establishes charity organizations under the guise of humanitarian aid, such as building schools and hospitals, and offers scholarships to attract Afghan students. Additionally, Iran produces sectarian media content, including movies and TV series, utilizing advanced technology to shape public opinion. The section also delves into Iran's role in organizing religious tourism, supporting educational initiatives, and leveraging Bonyads (charitable foundations) to extend influence. Cultural and public diplomacy tools are also explored in depth, highlighting how Iran uses these methods to foster cultural ties, reinforce political objectives, and shape perceptions in Afghanistan. Overall, the section offers a comprehensive view of Iran's multifaceted approach to soft power projection in the post-Taliban Afghan context.

Allies in Taliban

The main reason for the present strengthening of links between Qom and Kandahar is that, before regaining control in the nation, Taliban Supreme Leader Akhundzada had surrounded himself with the Taliban group that was once known as the "Helmand Shura" (also termed the "Iranian Taliban"). Important Taliban figures like Sadr

Ibrahim, Qayum Zakir, and Daud Muzamil (who was killed by the ISKP) make up the Helmand Shura. Akhundzada was himself connected with the group before he became the deputy supreme commander under Mullah Akhtar Mansour. During the 2010s, Helmand Shura members were known to use bases in the Iranian districts of Zabul and Zahedan, and some of them continued to live with their families in Iran. Members of this Taliban faction are mostly Panjpai tribal Pashtuns, from which the current Taliban supreme leader's Noorzai tribe hails (Mehran, 2023).

Akhundzada, a longtime lieutenant of Mansour, was pro-Iranian, just like his old employer. As the supreme commander of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 2021, he nominated Sadr Ibrahim, a member of the Helmand Shura, as the deputy to Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in order to monitor the latter and his Haqqani Network. In order to deter another ambitious opponent, Mullah Yaqoub Mujahid, the defense minister and the son of Taliban founder Mullah Omar, he also named Qayum Zakir as deputy minister of defense. Iran's influence in Kandahar is demonstrated by the significance of this Iran-affiliated Taliban faction to Akhundzada's hold on power (Ahmad Sayer Daudzai, 2024).

Iran's foreign policy strategy in Afghanistan has changed recently, departing from its long-standing partnerships with Persian-speaking organizations like the Northern Alliance and, more recently, the National Resistance Front (NRF), which is headed by Ahmad Massoud, the son of renowned anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Rather, Iran has deliberately allied itself with the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist organization that formerly posed a direct ideological threat to the Shia-dominated government in Tehran. The fact that Iran has turned its back on its erstwhile partners in favor of supporting Taliban elements signifies a dramatic shift in its soft power strategy (اصبح, 2023). According to Najib Afghan, an Afghan journalist, Iran's decision to support the Taliban is part of a broader effort to secure its own geopolitical objectives in the region. By maintaining close ties with the Taliban, Iran ensures that Afghanistan remains a relatively stable neighbor, where its influence can be preserved despite the shift in the political

landscape. Afghan suggests that this pragmatic alliance with the Taliban is aimed at securing Iran's strategic interests, allowing it to project power and influence through softer means, such as cultural and political leverage, rather than military intervention. While this decision has resulted in the abandonment of Iran's traditional Persian-speaking allies, it reflects Tehran's prioritization of stability and its desire to safeguard its interests in a rapidly changing regional environment. Thus, Iran's engagement with the Taliban is not simply a political shift but part of a larger strategy to maintain its regional influence and preserve its soft power in Afghanistan.

Anti-Imperialism slogans

Iran has been using and reinforcing the anti-imperialist slogans since 1980s, in the region to attract people and assert its soft power. After Taliban came to power, they have engaged them in a strategic manner. In a televised interview, Iran's ambassador to Kabul, Hasan Kazimi Qomi, described the Islamic Emirate as a "part of the "axis of resistance"" and a firm ally in the fight against Zionism. Senior Taliban figures expressed support for Iran's retaliatory missile strike against Israel in April 2024. The Iranian foreign ministry arranged for Taliban representatives to meet with Isma'il Haniyyah, the political head of the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS), when they arrived in Tehran a month later to attend funerals for Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian. By late June, the Islamic Republic and Islamic Emirate had begun discussing how they could take "joint action" in support of Hamas. Jameel Ahmed, a journalist, expressed the view that when Ismail Haniyyah, a prominent Palestinian leader, was killed in Iran, the people of Afghanistan found themselves sympathizing with both Palestine and Iran. This sentiment reflected the deep-rooted solidarity that Afghan people have traditionally felt for the Palestinian cause, which is seen as a symbol of resistance against oppression. However, Ahmed pointed out that Iran's influence in Afghanistan was particularly significant in this context, as the Iranian government has long employed soft power to shape perceptions and foster ties with Afghan

society. Iran's cultural, religious, and political influence, especially among Afghanistan's Shia population, played a crucial role in cultivating a sense of affinity towards Iran. Through media, religious outreach, and diplomatic efforts, Iran has been able to assert its presence and create a favorable narrative in Afghan minds, framing itself as a defender of oppressed peoples, including Palestinians. Thus, while the Afghan people's sympathy for Palestine was undeniable, Iran's strategic use of soft power ensured that its own role in the Middle East remained central in shaping Afghan opinions and allegiances. This dynamic underscores the intersection of regional geopolitics and local sentiments in Afghanistan, where international and ideological forces often converge.

Ahmed Kreem, a scholar of International Relations, highlighted Iran's strategic use of anti-imperialist rhetoric as a key element of its foreign policy, particularly in Afghanistan. According to Kreem, Iran effectively directs this rhetoric toward Afghan society, targeting both the general population and, crucially, the Taliban's rank-and-file members. The central aim of Iran's rhetoric is to position itself as a champion against Western imperialism, a narrative that resonates deeply with many Afghans who share a history of resistance against foreign intervention. By framing its policies in opposition to imperialism, Iran seeks to garner the support of Afghan people, especially those who feel marginalized or oppressed. Furthermore, Kreem emphasized that Iran's influence over the Taliban is a key component of its strategy. If Iran can sway or influence Taliban foot soldiers, it would have a much easier time achieving its broader regional objectives. Given the Taliban's hold over Afghanistan, their cooperation or alignment with Iranian interests would allow Tehran to strengthen its geopolitical position, countering rival powers in the region. In this way, Iran's rhetoric becomes not just a tool of ideological persuasion, but a strategic means to extend its influence in Afghanistan and beyond.

Najib Afghan, an independent journalist based in Afghanistan, underscored Iran's significant influence within Afghan society, noting how the country has strategically engaged with different regions of Afghanistan based on cultural and

linguistic ties. In the northern provinces, Iran's influence is particularly strong, owing to the shared linguistic and cultural similarities between the people in these areas and Iran. The people in northern Afghanistan can easily understand Iranian media, which helps Iran effectively communicate its narratives and build a deeper connection with this population. In contrast, the southern and eastern provinces, where the majority speaks Pashto, are also a key target for Iranian influence. While language differences pose a barrier, Iran has adapted by reaching these regions through social media and electronic media outlets in Pashto. By broadcasting its anti-imperialist rhetoric in a language that resonates with the local population, Iran successfully conveys its ideological messages. This approach allows Iran to frame itself as an opponent of foreign intervention, particularly Western influence, which appeals to many Afghans who have experienced the impact of prolonged foreign presence. Through these media strategies, Iran manages to maintain a broad and multifaceted influence across Afghanistan, aligning with both cultural and political sentiments in various regions.

The role of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Company (IRIB)

Twenty-nine production centers make up the IRIB world service, which also comprises dozens of radio stations, seven worldwide satellite television stations, and a large stream-capable website with programming in thirty-two languages targeted at a global audience. This comprises programming in Pashto, Tajik, and Dari that is aimed at Afghanistan. These several IRIB platforms are purposefully designed to support Iran's attempts to express opposing viewpoints that contradict the dominant viewpoints of Western nations.

In previous regime the media linked with Iran or links with IRIB, were functioning freely and even under the official sponsorship. In the previous administration era, Reuter said that "Nearly a third of Afghanistan's media is backed by Iran, either financially or through providing content"(Reuters, 2012). The Afghan National Directorate of Security spokesperson, Lutfullah Mashal, said that the Islamic Republic was connected to the newspaper Ensaf, the television

networks Tamadon and Nour, and both. He said that Iran controls Nour TV's newscasts and political programming. "Its programs are intended to support Iranian policies in Afghanistan and to incite the Afghan people against American forces." Mashal said that the majority of Tamadon Television's themes, analysis, and news and political programming are prepared in accordance with the Islamic Republic's leaders' directions. It forces the population to believe viewpoints that are contrary to Afghan national interests and consistent with Iranian goals by asking specialists who work for the Islamic Republic to remark (IranWire Citizen Journalist, 2022). As early as 2021, it was claimed that the Iranian consulate in Herat reimburses the local TV stations Esteghlal, Taban, and Vatan 24 for their pro-Islamic Republic advertisements (Daniel Dayan, 2021).

According to Qari Baraktullah Rasuli, the Taliban's Ministry of Justice spokesperson, who posted the announcement on X, formerly Twitter, and media reports, the Taliban recently announced the closure of Tamadon TV, claiming that the broadcaster was associated with the Harakat-e-Islami political party since the Taliban outlawed such affiliations and was operating on "seized land" (CPJ, 2024). Citing transgressions of "national and Islamic values," the Taliban shut down the Islamic political groups Noor and Barya TV. As part of broader media restrictions following their takeover in 2021, the Taliban have shut down other broadcasters, such as Radio Nasim in central Daikundi Province, Hamisha Bahar Radio and TV in eastern Nangarhar province, and Radio Sada e Banowan in northeastern Badakhshan province (CPJ, 2024).

Dawood Noori, an expert in regional politics, discussed how the Taliban's increasing crackdown on media in Afghanistan is significantly undermining Iran's soft power in the country. According to Noori, the Taliban has specifically targeted Iranian-backed media outlets, restricting their coverage or banning them entirely, as part of a broader effort to control the media landscape. These Iranian-backed outlets, which had been instrumental in projecting Iran's ideological influence in Afghanistan, are now facing significant challenges due to the Taliban's strict media policies. The Taliban's heightened scrutiny

of all media, not just those affiliated with Iran, has created a climate where freedom of journalism is severely constrained compared to the period before the Taliban's return to power. Noori suggests that while this media crackdown limits Iran's ability to use media as a tool of soft power in Afghanistan, it can be seen as a positive development for the country's sovereignty. He argues that these Iranian-backed outlets often functioned as instruments of international propaganda, promoting Tehran's foreign policy goals rather than fostering independent journalism. Therefore, the restrictions imposed on these outlets not only limit Iranian influence but also contribute to a more controlled, albeit less free, media environment in Afghanistan, reflecting the Taliban's tightening grip on the information space. The Taliban's campaign against Iranian-backed media outlets in Afghanistan is significantly diminishing Iran's ability to project its soft power in the country. Media expert Ahmed Kareem explained that many of the television programs and films aired by these outlets are directly produced in Iran, often focusing on Islamic religious topics, especially promoting Shia Islam. These broadcasts, which feature hosts speaking with an Iranian accent, create the impression that they are not just influenced by Iran but are, in fact, an extension of Iranian state media. Kareem noted that there is little distinction between the content aired by these Afghan-based outlets and that of Iran's official broadcasting network, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). This close alignment with Iran's domestic media made these outlets powerful tools for spreading Iran's ideological narratives, including religious and political views that sought to cultivate sympathy for Iranian policies and bolster its regional influence. However, with the Taliban tightening its control over Afghan media, including banning or restricting such Iranian-affiliated programs, Iran is losing this crucial avenue for soft power projection. As the Taliban limits access to these broadcasts, Iran's ability to shape public opinion and maintain influence in Afghanistan's media landscape is rapidly diminishing.

Education as a tool

There are campuses of Iran's Al-Mustafa International University in Afghanistan. With branches in around 60 countries, the university is a state-funded Shia seminary in the tradition of the Qom Seminary's Islamic Propaganda Bureau. The university's dean, Ali Abbasi, stated in an interview that around half of the students at its Kabul branch are Tajiks and Sunnis, while students from 83 different countries attend the school. Although the website of the Kabul branch said that around 4,500 scholars were enrolled there till 2019, it is unclear exactly what is being taught there since the Taliban takeover. According to observers, Al-Mustafa has emerged as Iran's primary instrument for spreading Shi'ism outside (Iran Insight, 2023). In the Iranian budget for 2020–2021, the university received about \$80 million, making it more significant than ever. Al-Mustafa is thought to receive additional funding from the office of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the companies he controls. Analysts are of the notion that Al-Mustafa houses a massive army of prospective admirers of ayatollahs who might propagate their ideology over the globe (Farda, 2017).

About 40,000 international students attended Iranian institutions in 2019, with 3,000 enrolled in medical schools, according to data published by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. Iran has around 296 medical students in 2019. In addition to building hospitals and educating medical personnel, it also exports and donates products, medical supplies, and medications to other nations (Dolatabadi & Kamrava, 2021). Afghan female students will be admitted to the female-only institutions of Hazrat-e Masoumeh University of Qom, Kosar University of Bojnurd, and Alzahra University of Tehran in 2023, according to a statement made by Vahid Haddadi-Asl, deputy minister of science for foreign affairs. Alzahra University declared that it is prepared to accept up to 50 students; however, if additional dorms become available, the quota will be raised. Additionally, according to Haddadi-Asl, Hazrat-e Masoumeh University of Qom would admit at least 300 Afghan women students for both online and offline courses. According to a Ministry of Science official named

Mohammad Mohammadi Masoudi, 108,000 students from 117 countries have enrolled at Iranian institutions for the current academic year, which began on September 23. Afghan nationals make about 25% of the international students enrolled in Iranian universities, he claimed. The students' subjects include various branches of science, research and technology, health and medical education, humanities, Islamic sciences, Persian language and literature, law, the foundations of Islamic law, management, economics, psychology, social sciences, engineering, agricultural sciences, animal sciences, and basic sciences (Tehran Times, 2023).

Dawood Noori, an expert in regional politics, highlighted Iran's use of its educational system as a tool for ideological influence. According to Noori, Iran runs a specialized educational program that targets foreign students, particularly those studying social sciences, with a curriculum that promotes deeply religious and ideological perspectives. By educating these students—who come from various countries, including Afghanistan—Iran seeks to shape their worldviews in line with its own political and religious ideologies. The aim is to inject a specific type of ideological understanding, which not only aligns these students with Iran's religious and cultural values but also fosters a sympathetic outlook toward Iran's broader foreign policy goals. When these students return to their home countries, they carry with them not just academic knowledge but a deep sense of solidarity with Iran, often advocating for policies that reflect Tehran's geopolitical ambitions. This strategy of ideological exportation allows Iran to cultivate a network of individuals who can influence public opinion and decision-making in their respective countries, furthering Iran's political and strategic interests. Noori's analysis underscores how education can be a powerful tool for soft power, enabling Iran to expand its influence and align foreign sympathies with its regional objectives.

Akbar Ahmed, a journalist, discussed how Iran uses its scholarship programs as a form of soft power to shape the ideological outlook of foreign students, particularly from regions like Afghanistan. According to Ahmed, these scholarships are designed to attract students and

mold them into sympathizers of Iran, with a worldview that closely aligns with Iranian perspectives. The scholarship programs expose students to Iranian narratives that emphasize resistance against imperialism, but in doing so, they also foster the idea that Iran is the sole legitimate actor capable of leading such resistance. This ideological training subtly frames the world through the lens of Iranian foreign policy, positioning Iran as the central force in combating foreign domination. As these students return to their home countries, they bring back not only academic knowledge but also a deep-seated belief in Iran's role as a defender of sovereignty and independence. Ahmed argues that this process of ideological influence is more than just education—it is a strategic use of soft power, where Iran shapes the perceptions of future leaders and intellectuals to support its geopolitical ambitions. In this way, Iran effectively exports its worldview and creates a network of advocates who reinforce its ideological and political goals within their own societies.

Several universities in Afghanistan, including Payame Noor University, Kateb University, Khatam Al Nabiyeen University, and Danishgah e Azad University, continue to function under the Taliban regime. These institutions have ties to Iran, which has maintained significant influence in the region. However, according to Ahmed Kareem, a senior lecturer in International Relations, while many of these Iranian-backed universities are still operational, their functioning has notably changed since the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Before the Taliban's takeover, these universities operated relatively freely, with a more diverse academic environment and international engagement. After the Taliban's rise, however, the universities have faced severe restrictions, particularly in terms of academic freedom, gender segregation, and foreign partnerships. Many educational programs that were once offered may no longer be available, and faculty members may have to adapt to the new ideological framework imposed by the Taliban. This shift has drastically altered the academic landscape, with Iranian-backed institutions operating under more

conservative guidelines, and certain activities being curbed or monitored more strictly.

The role of Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO)

The Iranian Embassy in Kabul and the four consulates located around the country are supported by the ICRO's three cultural centers in Kabul, Herat, and Jalalabad. For instance, ICRO's education-focused work in Afghanistan has revealed that improving the country's reading infrastructure is one of the main priorities of the Afghan people. Therefore, in 2018, ICRO in Kabul gave almost 2400 books, 350 volumes of Roshd periodicals, and 20 Qurans to 11 institutions in the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan (Feizi, 2018). After the Taliban, it has continued its operation but has been under strict restriction from the Taliban. Ahmed Nadeem, a former NGO member, observed that the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) had a significant presence in Afghanistan during the previous Afghan government, where it operated freely, promoting Iran's cultural and ideological agenda. ICRO's cultural centers, educational programs, and media initiatives were instrumental in fostering Iran's influence, particularly among Afghanistan's Shia community. However, since the Taliban's return to power about a year or two ago, Iran's ability to project soft power through ICRO has been severely restricted. The Taliban has imposed stricter controls on foreign influence, particularly from countries like Iran, and has placed significant limitations on cultural and media activities that do not align with their own vision of Islamic governance. ICRO, once able to operate openly, now faces greater obstacles in disseminating its content, whether through cultural events or religious programming, due to the Taliban's tight grip on media and education. This shift marks a major setback for Iran's soft power strategy in Afghanistan, as the Taliban's policies aim to reduce external ideological influence, especially from neighboring Iran, which is seen as an outsider seeking to impose its own religious and political perspectives. Thus, ICRO's operations in Afghanistan have become

more covert and constrained under the Taliban regime.

According to Kareem, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) has adapted to the new political realities in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power. While its operations have faced significant challenges, ICRO has found ways to continue its work, albeit with a more discreet approach. The organization's activities have shifted to align with the Taliban's restrictive environment, which places limits on foreign cultural and ideological influence. Despite these restrictions, ICRO continues to cultivate pro-Iran sentiments within Afghanistan, particularly among its Shia communities. By adjusting its strategies, ICRO focuses on subtler means of promoting Iran's cultural, religious, and political narratives. For example, the organization may rely more heavily on personal networks, religious gatherings, and educational programs that emphasize shared religious values and the Shia faith, rather than overt media campaigns or large-scale public events. Additionally, ICRO has maintained its educational programs, offering scholarships to Afghan students, particularly from the Hazara community, to study in Iran, thus fostering long-term ideological ties. While Iran's visibility and influence in Afghanistan are now more constrained under Taliban rule, ICRO remains active, working behind the scenes to maintain and expand Iran's soft power, demonstrating its ability to adapt to the changing political landscape.

Charity and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee

The IKRC was significantly active in Afghanistan in the previous government. Iran has been suspected of spreading its conservative form of Shi'a Islam globally through the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and other state-sponsored nonprofit organizations. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, a well-known organization with strong ties to the Iranian government, has seen several of its Afghan offices shut down by the Taliban. With a lengthy history of activities in Afghanistan, the charity was registered with the Taliban's Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and is led by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The charities are perceived as

being connected to Tehran's long-standing endeavor to export the Islamic Revolution and disseminate anti-Western propaganda. Many of the organizations support the impoverished while the prohibition is in effect and construct mosques and schools (Bezhan, 2023).

Noori highlighted the changing landscape of humanitarian work in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power. Before 2021, a charity organization operating in Afghanistan had registered with the Taliban and was able to function relatively freely, providing essential services such as education, financial aid, and charitable support under its official banner. The organization's efforts were widely recognized, contributing significantly to the welfare of Afghans in a range of sectors. However, after the border clashes, the Taliban took a more restrictive approach towards such foreign and local organizations, closing down all offices of this charity. This decision marked a shift in the Taliban's policies, reflecting its tighter control over NGOs and aid organizations, particularly those with foreign affiliations or perceived external influence. The closure of the charity's offices not only disrupted its operations but also limited the access of vulnerable Afghans to critical services that were previously provided. While the charity had once played an important role in supporting the Afghan population, the Taliban's actions demonstrate how shifting political dynamics and internal policies can severely impact soft power and humanitarian assistance, limiting the reach of such organizations in the country.

Najib Afghan observed that the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) was one of the few organizations that remained fully active in Afghanistan after the Taliban's return to power, primarily due to its focus on emergency relief and charity work. Unlike other NGOs or aid groups, whose activities were curtailed or shut down due to the Taliban's tightening control, the IKRC's operations continued as it was perceived as a purely humanitarian entity, not associated with political or ideological influence. The organization provided essential assistance such as food, medical supplies, and emergency aid to vulnerable populations in Afghanistan. However,

despite its relief efforts, the IKRC's operations were eventually halted, a move that could significantly undermine Iran's soft power in the region. The committee had been an important tool for Iran to build goodwill and enhance its image in Afghanistan through direct, tangible assistance. With its closure, Iran loses a crucial mechanism for fostering positive relations with the Afghan people, which had been a key aspect of its soft power strategy. This setback could limit Iran's influence and presence in Afghanistan, making it more challenging to maintain its soft power narrative of support and solidarity with the Afghan population during times of crisis.

Regional outreach and Chabahar

Iran has been luring Taliban and for that matter the people of Afghanistan over giving them a regional outreach and connectivity which will enhance economic activity and trade facilitation. Amir-Abdollahian then got in touch with India's Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar last year and made arrangements for the urgent delivery of medication and grain to Afghanistan via the freshly opened Iranian port of Chabahar. Iran promised to help India provide wheat, medications, and coronavirus vaccinations to Afghanistan in 2022, since the country was experiencing a severe humanitarian crisis (Express News Service, 2022). Iran's plans to build the Chabahar Port have been welcomed by the Taliban, who see it as a viable alternative to Pakistan's Karachi Port. They are in favor of the port's growth because they think it would improve Afghanistan's economic stability. In 2023, commerce between Afghanistan and India was \$773 million. More investment in Chabahar is advantageous for regional commerce, according to the Afghanistan Chamber of Industries and Mines (Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 2024). In order to expand bilateral trade and commerce further, Tehran sponsored an Iran-Afghanistan Joint Economic Committee meeting in November 2023, attended by the Taliban's Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. It was the first such gathering since the Taliban's return to power. The two nations have agreed to form more working groups to determine what obstacles stand in the way of economic cooperation. This resulted in a

technical delegation from Afghanistan visiting Iran on February 24, 2024, partly to evaluate the Chabahar Free Trade Zone's infrastructure and capacity to manage Afghan products (Salehi, 2024).

Najib Afghan's observation highlights Iran's strategic use of soft power in Afghanistan, particularly through its promotion of the Chabahar port and its humanitarian efforts. By emphasizing its involvement in the development of Chabahar, Iran is not only promoting economic connectivity but also crafting a narrative of itself as a responsible regional partner. This port, which is positioned as an alternative to Pakistan's Gwadar, plays a symbolic role in Iran's diplomatic efforts, allowing it to project itself as an economic lifeline for Afghanistan. Furthermore, Iran has actively engaged in providing humanitarian aid during Afghanistan's periods of economic instability, positioning itself as a benevolent neighbor. Through these actions, Iran enhances its soft power by appealing to the Afghan population's immediate needs—offering assistance and cooperation while simultaneously boosting its image as a supportive, stable, and trustworthy actor in the region. This approach contrasts with hard power methods like military intervention and instead focuses on building influence through cultural, economic, and humanitarian means. By leveraging media channels and diplomatic platforms, Iran seeks to strengthen its ties with the Afghan people and government, fostering goodwill and regional influence during times of crisis, all while framing itself as a positive force in Afghanistan's recovery and stability.

Conclusion

This study examines the shifting dynamics of Iran's soft power in Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Before this shift, Iran had successfully cultivated significant soft power influence in Afghanistan, largely through its engagement with media, universities, and religious institutions. These platforms were instrumental in projecting Iran's cultural and ideological appeal, promoting its anti-imperialist stance, and fostering goodwill among the Afghan population. The Iran-Afghanistan relationship was rooted in shared religious ties, economic

cooperation, and Iran's vocal support for regional issues such as the Palestinian cause, which resonated with many Afghans. Iran's soft power was also bolstered by its involvement in infrastructure projects like the Chabahar port, which was seen as a key to enhancing regional connectivity and countering Pakistani influence in the region.

However, the rise of the Taliban dramatically altered this landscape. The Taliban's strict policies, particularly their clampdown on media freedom, the closure of universities, and the restriction of women's rights, led to the erosion of Iran's previous avenues for soft power engagement. Under the Taliban, many of the institutions that Iran had leveraged to promote its image, such as universities and media outlets, were either shut down or severely restricted, limiting Iran's ability to reach Afghan society in the same way it had before. Furthermore, the Taliban's conservative policies created a more hostile environment for foreign influence, reducing Iran's capacity to project its image as a progressive or supportive neighbor. Despite these challenges, Iran has managed to retain some soft power leverage through its regional initiatives, such as supporting Afghanistan's connectivity via the Chabahar port, and its diplomatic outreach to the Taliban. While the Taliban's refusal to fully embrace the international community has complicated these efforts, Iran's diplomatic engagement with the group allows it to maintain some influence. Still, Iran has struggled to restore the same level of soft power it once enjoyed under the previous Afghan government, where its image as a stable, supportive, and anti-imperialist actor had been more effectively cultivated. The shifting political landscape in Afghanistan, shaped by the Taliban's ascension, has therefore presented a significant challenge for Iran in regaining its lost influence in Afghan society.

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