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THE FACTORS OF IRAN'S DECLINING SOFT POWER IN THE ARAB REGION

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Following Khomeini's 1979 revolution, there was great sympathy for Iran in the Arab street. This sympathy was used to expand its influence at the grassroots level in the Arab region. As a result of the Iranian government's policy, Iran's image has been affected in the region. The behaviour of the Iranian government has revealed an expansionist ambition, which it pursues at the expense of its Arab neighbours. This behaviour was initially perceived during the war with Iraq and from Iran's extensive intervention in the region after the Arab Spring, especially in Yemen and Syria. These developments led to the erosion of Iran's "soft power." However, the Iranian model is no longer the revolutionary model that Arabs seek to emulate after their exposure to the racism inherent within it, in spite of Iran's attempts to use the Palestinian cause to win over Arab public opinion.

This study raises questions about the factors which have weakened Iran's soft power, the repercussions of the "Arab Spring" on Iran's status in the Arab region, and the indicators of its declining soft power as well as the implications of this decline in terms of Iran's ability to influence the Arab world.

Iran has worked to develop its soft power through which it seeks to improve its image in the Arab world. This soft power enables Iran to play an active role in the Arab region at different times. However, Iran's attempts to increase its influence after the Arab Spring had negative repercussions that led to the erosion of its soft power and adversely affected Iran's propaganda discourse in the region. Instead, Iran is now in a stand-off with other regional powers, which has affected its relations and influence in some countries and regions as well as at the grassroots level.

Accordingly, this study assumes the following:

- Iran's excessive use of hard and soft power in an attempt to influence its Arab environment has had negative consequences for its image in the Arab street and thus on its interests.
- The more Iran involves itself in Arab internal issues, the less effective is its soft power.

The study's questions can be addressed through the following:

I- Iran's Soft Power Sources

Iran's sources of soft power vary, including the following:

1- Cultural and Historical Status

This dimension plays a major role in shaping Iranian foreign policy and how Iran practices soft power towards its neighbours. "The Iranians believed, given their history and the greatness of their civilization, that their country should possess regional leadership," Ray Takeyh said.⁽¹⁾ This unique sense of Iranian superiority about their culture and civilization, specifically towards their Arab neighbourhood which is coupled with a perennial sense of insecurity, played a crucial role in building Iran's vision towards its neighbours. *Takeyh*, "The sense of superiority towards neighbours, the demagogue Arabs and simple Turks, reflects the essence of Persian cosmology [...] Iranian national pride, however, is accompanied by a sense of insecurity as a result of the sustained invasion of Iran by hostile forces. The Iranians have many doubts towards their neighbours' intentions and motives because they were exposed to invasions by the Mongols. These cruel invasions and the subsequent long periods of occupation have left an unforgettable impact on the Iranians, leading them to feel superior and suspicious of their neighbours alike."⁽²⁾ Moreover, the Persian identity has always fuelled hatred towards Arabs who are regarded as 'the other. Iranians believe that they are superior to Arabs in ethnicity, religion and language. Therefore they have wanted to erode the Arab-Persian bonds following the Muslim conquest of Persia. As a result, Iranians have argued that the Persian language is older than the Arabic language; the language of the Quran and that they descended from the Aryan race which is superior to the Arab race.' Finally they have a different version of Islam (Shiite Twelver) which calls for the absolute leadership of the guardian leader over all Muslims.⁽³⁾ The above mentioned historical and cultural narratives reflect the history of Iran's sense of superiority towards its neighbours and the desire to make them the targets of Iranian influence.

This sense of superiority was reinforced following the Khomeini revolution, which included a new set of concepts derived from Shiite political traditions. In addition, Iranians believe that they are a Shiite minority facing an threatening Arab Sunni majority. This has added to Iran's historical and cultural narrative that has shaped Iran's image of itself and others as well as its policies in the framework of its vision.

Due to Iranian decision-makers being aware of the negative repercussions generated by Iran's interventions in the Arab region - especially since the Khomeini revolution, the

importance of adopting new approaches centered on soft power as a means of shaping others and influencing their behaviour through seduction rather than coercion was evident. This resulted in attempts to replace the role of hard power in achieving Iranian interests in its Arab environment particularly. It was prioritized in the Iranian plan known as the "Iranian Decade Strategy" (2005-2025), and the 20th Iranian Plan "Iran: 2025." It sets out the "future perceptions" of Iran's role over 20 years. These plans aim to transform Iran into a central nucleus of multilateral influence in Southwestern Asia, which is generally the Arab region until the Sinai. ⁽⁴⁾

2- Cultural Sources

According to Joseph Nye, culture (at all branches and levels) is an important source of soft power generation for any country. Iran has a large inventory of soft power generation due to the richness of Persian culture, language, Iranian traditions and Shiism. One of Iran's soft power tools is to disseminate the Persian language and Shiite thought through newspapers, magazines, exhibitions, and seminars. This cultural policy is implemented by cultural attachés and advisers of Iranian embassies. Also, a number of official and popular Iranian institutions such as the Global Society of Ahl al-Bayt and the Islamic Reporting Organization, are all linked to promoting this cultural policy.

Despite the importance, Iran attaches to the promotion of Iranian culture and the Persian language, there is no real interest in learning the Iranian language in Arab countries, and the Arab world is not interested in Iranian traditions. Therefore, the only access Iran has within the Arab sphere is through the dissemination of its Shiite doctrine.

3- Special Political Values

These values include democracy, elections, women's rights, and civil society. Iran believes that its creation of the concept of "religious democracy" as a hybrid political system can be a unique model for Iranian soft power as well as an alternative to traditional political systems that are globally known. The head of the Iranian Shura Council, Ali Larijani said, "One of the most important achievements of Imam Khomeini is him providing a model of 'religious democracy' that is based on popular elections and resistance to oppressors in accordance with Islamic values."⁽⁵⁾ Iran also presents itself as a stable country in a conflict-ridden region and the most moderate in the Middle East and the safest among various states. Thus, Iran is a unique model worthy of being an example for its neighbours.⁽⁶⁾

4- The Principles of Iranian Foreign Policy

A country's foreign policy can be one of the most important sources of its soft power "especially if it holds lofty values, international proposals, or initiatives that promote bilateral, regional, and international relations."⁽⁷⁾ It assumes further importance when others consider it as legitimate with moral dimensions. Iran's foreign policy is of utmost importance because it is the largest source of soft power generation for the country. The Iranian Constitution contains a clear reference to the foreign policy of the country in the first chapter devoted to "public assets." Article 16, Section 3, of the Iranian Constitution, refers to this topic by stipulating that, "the organization of the nation's foreign policy based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world." Article 152 states, "The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the domineering powers; mutual peaceful relations with nonaggressive states."⁽⁸⁾ This represents a source of soft power in Iran's foreign policy.

If we look at the concept of soft power, as Nye defined it, "The state must have spiritual and moral power through the ideas, principles, and morals it demonstrates." Iran used this in its slogans in the early years of its revolution, which was consistent with the aspirations of the peoples of the Third World. Thus, Iran was able to provide a vivid example of its ability to challenge the major countries, both eastern and western countries, to present its national model in accordance with its national interests. Iran's challenge has been intensified among its Arab neighbours by Tehran defending the Palestinian cause and making it a central issue in its foreign policy.

II- The Use of Iranian Soft Power Towards the Arab World

To have soft power, it is necessary to determine the direction of the region or the intended target in an organized manner that serves higher national goals. Therefore, the channels through which Iran's soft power has been exercised and directed have varied. The Iranian leadership drew up the 20-Year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2005-2025) as a reference document to determine the status and position of Iran in its regional environment. Khamenei described the Iranian 2025 Vision as one of the most important documents after the Iranian Constitution.⁽⁹⁾ The National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran underscores a set of factors that makes Iran an inspiring and influential model in the Arab and Islamic world, through several cultural and political tools; each can be further detailed as follows:

1- Cultural Tools: Promoting and Exporting the Iranian Model

The most important cultural tools used by Iran to direct its soft power in the region are:

A-Student Missions: Students and universities constitute a major base in Khomeini's thought. The Hawza and university students were critical elements in the Islamic Revolution against the regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi. Later on, they were identified as having special significance in relation to securing Iranian interests. The government targeted this segment which would in time become an elite that pledged its loyalty to Iran as well as constituting a fifth column working for Iran across the region. This model can be found in many cases. For example, 7,000 Yemeni students are studying in the Iranian city of Qom. Iran has been offering a number of scholarships for Yemeni students belonging to the Houthis at the Iranian embassy to study the Twelver doctrine in the Hawza in Tehran for four years.⁽¹⁰⁾ Iran is following the same policy with regard to Egyptian students. In September 2013, for example, the University of Tehran agreed to admit Egyptian students who had passed the Egyptian general secondary education with a low average. That year, the university accepted students with a high school average of 75 percent to study medicine, dentistry and those with an average of 70 percent to study pharmacy. However, those students would not have been accepted at their national universities to study social sciences and humanities.⁽¹¹⁾ We also find that Iran annually offers a significant number of scholarships to Syrian students. It annually provides more than 100 scholarships. For example, it offered 100 scholarships in 2016, and more than 500 scholarships in various disciplines in 2019.⁽¹²⁾

2- Establishing Branches of Iranian Universities Abroad

Iran has been striving to open branches of Iranian universities in a number of Arab countries, including branches of the University of Azad in several Syrian and Iraqi cities, in addition to the expansion of its branches in Lebanon,⁽¹³⁾ a branch of the University of Tehran, the Islamic Azad University; the first Iranian university in Dubai which was inaugurated in 2004, the University of Shiraz, Shahid Beheshti University, Payame Noor University and finally the College of Modern Sciences in the United Arab Emirates. There are branches of Iranian universities in more than a

dozen Arab countries.⁽¹⁴⁾ They are very important for the expansion of Iranian influence in the Arab region.

The government in Iran uses educational, cultural, and charitable organizations abroad to support its hard power strategies. Ali Akbar Velayati announced the approval of the Syrian president in January 2018 to open Iranian university branches in a number of Syrian cities. He also declared the approval of the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq for the opening of Iranian university branches in several Iraqi cities including Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala, Basra, and Erbil. This reflects the same strategy employed by Iran for expanding the presence of Iranian universities in Lebanon.⁽¹⁵⁾ The expansion of Iranian universities abroad is part of Iran's soft strategy which aims at strengthening its ideology and expansionist policy throughout the Mashreq, gaining control of societies and institutionalizing its cultural presence, and creating elites that embrace the slogans of the Iranian revolution, and disseminate the Shiite doctrine of Twelver Shi'ism.

By expanding the presence of its universities, Iran is developing an integrated project to strengthen its political, military and cultural influence in the region, starting in Lebanon, moving to Syria, Iraq and then Yemen, and possibly to other countries.⁽¹⁶⁾ By spreading Iranian culture and Persian through its university branches, Tehran hopes to make Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen ready to accommodate Iranian cultural, political, religious and sectarian beliefs.

3- Media and Television Channels

A network of television channels that Iran is keen to establish is inseparable from its objectives of exporting the revolution and promoting Shiism in Arab societies. Iran has a media empire which is the largest in the region, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Agency, a government institution personally supervised by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, controls the media policies of all television and radio stations in the country in order for them to remain in accordance with state orientations.⁽¹⁷⁾ These media networks promote the slogans of the Iranian revolution. One of the most important channels directed to the Arab region, Al-Manar and Al-Alam, direct their news programs towards Arab public opinion in a focused manner.

4- The Dissemination of Shiism

Iran uses Shiism within the framework of its foreign relations on a large scale. It is an important element to generate soft power and to develop Shiite incubators that are loyal to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist to serve the Iranian project in the region. The importance of spreading Shiism is not only doctrinal, but it is also political because politics and religion are identified with the supreme leader whose use of soft power is critical with newly converted Shiites. Stemming from their doctrinal bonds with Iran, the (converted) Shiites have strong political affiliation and loyalty to Iran, given the fact that the Guardian Jurist is their political and religious leader.

Political Shiism is categorized as one of the tools of soft power through which Iran continues to export its Islamic revolutionary ideology in accordance with the "Umm al-Qura" or "Velayat-e Faqih" theory. It is the main pillar of the Iranian strategy in general. Iran uses all occasions and forums to promote its claims as being the ideal moderate system that is the best model of governance in the Islamic world.⁽¹⁸⁾

According to Iranian scholar Kayhan Barzegar, the use of Shiism in foreign policy is outdated. However, it became more effective after the crisis in Iraq in 2003. Shiism was involved in the generation of power and politics in the Middle East, which strengthened Iran's influence and role. It turned Iraq into a friend and ally of Iran. Shiites also supported

the effective presence of Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Near East in general, according to him.⁽¹⁹⁾

The opening of Iranian university branches in Arab countries in the Mashreq was part of the project to expand Shiism, and it has been escalating following Hezbollah's war against Israel in 2006. However, Hezbollah lost its popularity after the Iraq war in 2003, which revealed the sectarian reality of Iranian Shiism. The wave of Shi'ism has been escalating. For example, reports revealed the Iranian plan supported by the Lebanese Hezbollah for expanding its presence in Tunisia after 2011. A leader of the Ennahda movement Habib Louz confirmed that "foreign funding for sectarianism is constant, and Iranian funding for Shiite groups is obvious to spread their doctrine. According to many Tunisian observers, following the Tunisian revolution in 2011, Iran escalated its activities to spread Shiism, and the Iranian Cultural Centre in Tunisia is responsible for financing and organizing this tide. There are some Shiite associations, parties, and newspapers that are embedded in civil society, such as the Tunisian League for Tolerance, the Al-Wahda Party, and the Sahwa newspaper."⁽²⁰⁾

The Shiite tide in Algeria has been rising dramatically through an integrated project by Iran to transfer Shiism to the most remote parts of the Arab world. Algeria has become concerned about the spread of Twelver Shi'ism, backed by Iran.⁽²¹⁾ This led to the public emergence of Algerian Shiites in the performance of Ashura rituals in a number of Algerian cities. In the same context, the Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr made statements calling for Shiite religious freedom to be respected, and calls on them not to surrender. These developments indicate the extent of the growing Shiite phenomenon in Algerian society.

Morocco announced the severance of relations with Iran in 2009 because it rejected the consistent activities of the Iranian authorities, in particular by its diplomatic mission in Rabat that endangered the fundamental religious elements of the Kingdom and the firmly-rooted identity of the Moroccan people, as well as the unity of their faith and Sunni Maliki doctrine, through pro-Shiite activities that the Iranian embassy in Morocco was involved in implementing.⁽²²⁾ This cut in diplomatic relations indicated the seriousness of the Shiite phenomenon that has intensified in Moroccan society, because of the proliferation of Shiism in a number of Moroccan cities, especially in the city of Al Hoceima.

Moroccan-Iranian relations have been at odds as a result of the Iranian government's interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom. In March 2019, Moroccan authorities accused Iran and Shiite elements in the Kingdom of threatening security and stability in Morocco after attracting thousands of Moroccans and provoking protests in various Moroccan cities, especially in the city of Al Hoceima in the north of the country. This city witnessed several social protests a few months ago.

A number of associations were harnessed by Iran to promote Shi'ism as a mechanism of control and to make it a source of inspiration for the Arabs because of the connection between Shiism and loyalty to Velayat-e Faqih in Iran. These associations include the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly, Conveying Islamic Message Organization, The World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, The Representatives of the Supreme Leader Abroad, and The Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation.

The Iranian case reflects the importance of soft power at the regional level. Iran has worked effectively by establishing Iranian cultural centers as a direct focal point in spreading Shiism along with public diplomacy, especially at the cultural level. Iran has resorted to activate its cultural centers because political channels had been paralyzed during the isolation imposed on the country following the 1979 revolution.⁽²³⁾

2- The Use of National and Religious Issues at the Arab Level

Iran has used a range of issues within its foreign policy to enhance its soft power in the region.

A- *The Palestinian Cause*: It was one of the most important causes to support Iran's use of soft power. It has helped Iran reach out to the Arab masses and present itself as a defender of Islamic holy sites and the vulnerable people of Palestine. Iran uses its involvement in the Palestinian cause and its special relationship with Hamas to attract Arab public support. Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, said, "While Sunni states remain silent about the inhumane crimes committed by the Zionist enemy, the major support for the oppressed Palestinian people is from Iranian Shiites."⁽²⁴⁾

The Palestinian cause has been Iran's best gain in the Arab world, especially after the rapprochement between a number of Arab governments and Israel. Iran presented itself as the sole defender of this central issue of Muslims. Through its support for the Palestinians, Iran was able to win a large Arab audience in order to implement Khomeini's saying in 1979, "All our policies are worthless if we have no hand in the Palestinian cause."⁽²⁵⁾ This has created a conducive environment for the acceptance of the Iranian role in the region. Iran's support has contributed to the acceptance of Shiism, and the Iranian role in the region, as confirmed by what has been witnessed in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.⁽²⁶⁾

B- *Anti-Western Rhetoric*: Through its hostile rhetoric against the United States, Iran has been able to gain the support of large segments of the Arab street. It took advantage of the feelings of popular anger at the Arab level towards the United States and the West in general, within its pursuit to strengthen its soft power in the region. Therefore, the revolutionary dimension has been and remains the main pillar of the Iranian political discourse, through which it was able to win the support of a large section of public opinion for its policies, especially at the regional level. Through this supportive discourse towards the Palestinian cause, Iran aimed to break the siege of the two elements included previously and gain a large sector of public opinion in its favour," Firas Elias said.⁽²⁷⁾ It seeks to attract the Arab street in order to create a suitable environment for accepting the Iranian regional role.

III- Factors Which Contributed to the Decline of Iranian Soft Power After 2011

Several factors have contributed to the decline of Iran's soft power in the region post-2011, which will be discussed below:

1- Iran's Role in Iraq

While the "20-Year Plan" is expected to turn Iran into a source of inspiration for its Arab and Islamic environment, the elements adopted to increase the effectiveness of Iran's soft power were counterproductive, especially Iran's involvement in its Arab environment after the Arab Spring that erupted in 2011.

Iran's soft power had already reached the Arab world in 2006 due to the Hezbollah-led war in southern Lebanon. However, it began to decline with the US occupation of Iraq in 2003. This is coupled with Iranian control of Baghdad's power centers and its devotion to sectarianism as a basis for politics, which excluded the Sunnis. This Iranian project in Iraq revealed to a large segment of the Arab public Iran's colonialism and its sectarianism towards Sunnis. Similarly, Iran practices sectarian policies towards Arabs in the Iranian province of Ahwaz. The results of opinion polls in the Arab world have revealed that Iran's policy towards the countries experiencing Arab Spring uprisings had negatively affected its image in the Arab world.⁽²⁸⁾

Iranian behaviour in Iraq and its blatant interference in its internal affairs have shown that Iran is nothing but a colonial power and it is relentless in using all its power to destroy this country in accordance with its interests. "After the collapse of the military state institutions

as a result of the US intervention, Iran had promptly created militias on a sectarian and ideological basis. Consequently, it contributed to motivating its loyalists to reach power in Baghdad on a mission that has been quite successful," according to Deutsche Welle.⁽²⁹⁾ This is the same practice that was applied in other ways by Iran during its interventions in Yemen and Syria since they are considered as model countries to enshrine Iran's regional hegemony.

2- The Iranian Role in Syria and Yemen

Following the revolutions of the Arab Spring, specifically in Syria, it became clear that Iranian intervention has obvious sectarian dimensions aimed at extending Iranian control over the region within the so-called Shiite Crescent, by deepening the sectarian dimension of the conflict in Syria. In 2012, the battle of Qusayr, the leader of the Quds Force Qasem Soleimani's handprint was obvious. He conducted the war alongside the government and against the opposition, aided by the Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shiite militias. This battle was the focal point because it fuelled the sectarian dimension of the Syrian war.⁽³⁰⁾

Iran's efforts to perpetuate the sectarian dimension of the conflict, both in Syria and Yemen, to reproduce the Iraqi experience, have resulted in the Arab street rejecting Iranian policies since they seek to create sectarian minorities in those societies. Arab popular opinion recognizes the seriousness of these sectarian pockets which Iran attempts to plant. Thus Iran has lost its credibility, given the fact that it was admired for decades since the Khomeini revolution.

On the other hand, Iranian interference in the Yemen conflict - like Syria - has created a public outcry in Arab circles, given its role in fuelling war between Yemenis and creating continued instability in the country.

3- Iran's Selective Interaction With Arab Spring Uprisings.

The revolutions of the Arab Spring break down the credibility of the Iranian foreign policy discourse. Iran looked at what happened in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya and the subsequent rise of Islamic currents as an extension of the Islamic revolution in Iran or the Islamic awakening.⁽³¹⁾ However, it is starkly contradicting itself because of its persistent support to the Assad government against the revolution in Syria, and the Houthi insurgency against the legitimate government in Yemen. These contradictory positions have negatively impacted Iranian soft power, especially as Iran's involvement in these conflicts has deeply affected the foundations of its foreign policy as mentioned in the Iranian Constitution.

Thus, Iranian interventions in Syria and Yemen through using hard power tools do not indicate that Iranian soft power is simply deteriorating but actually it confirms that it has failed. The Iranian 20-Year Plan, conducted after the US invasion of Iraq, has failed to achieve its goals; making Iran a source of inspiration for its Arab surrounding.

4- Iranian Attempts to Penetrate Arab Societies

One of the important factors that weakened Iranian soft power was the exposure of Iran's intention to create Shiite enclaves in Sunni Arab societies. They pose a risk to the religious security and sectarian unity of these societies. Iran has tried to take advantage of the conditions experienced by many Arab countries since 2010, to implement its 20-Year Plan. This plan is to be accomplished through the deliberate dissemination of Shiism in a blatant way. This generated official and popular Arab responses against this Iranian policy. This is given the aggressive agenda of Iran in Syria and its previous involvement in destroying the political life in Iraq. Iran dominates the decision making of certain countries where the public believe that it pursues a sectarian policy as in Iraq and Syria. This signals Iranian failure in using sectarianism in its favour.⁽³²⁾

5- Politicization of Shiism

The sectarian dimension no longer seems to be an inspiration or a source of Iranian soft power generation. It may often play a negative role in deepening Iran's regional isolation. Particularly, Iran depends on the sectarian factor to mobilize Shia minorities in the region while it is unable to prove that it does not engage in sectarian policies in a number of states. This, therefore, leads to an automatic rejection of the Iranian plan or project in the Arab region.⁽³³⁾

The Arab policies seeking to besiege Iran's Shiism in many Arab countries reveal that Arabs realize the risks posed by Iran's exploitation of sectarianism, as the bedrock of its regional activities, to incite sectarianism in their countries. This is confirmed by a report issued by the Carnegie Center that discusses sectarianism in Iran's policy which is apparent through Iran's regional behavior since the Arab Spring. The report reveals that the IRGC views itself and the regional political battlefield as a whole from a sectarian perspective. The statements and behavior of IRGC officials attest this point made by the report. The IRGC's agenda in the Middle East is sectarian. The report cites several examples, including the assertion of Qasem Soleimani, who refers to Iraq as a model in which "the Shiites have gained the right to govern" to indicate the extent of Iranian influence. Iran is seeking to reproduce this model in many Arab countries such as Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria.⁽³⁴⁾ It works to create this model in other Arab countries such as the Maghreb specifically by supporting Shiism, in order to create Shiite enclaves and minorities loyal to Iran. It, however, will not hesitate to turn them into a means of extortion against regional systems .

IV- Indicators of Iran's Soft Power Decline

A range of indicators can be monitored to determine Iran's declining soft power in the regional environment. They will be discussed below.

1- Regression of Iran's Image in Arab Public Opinion

As statistics show in 2009, the number of pro-Iranian writers declined. Out of a total of 138 articles dealing with the 2009 Iranian elections, there were eight pro-Iranian articles (5.79 percent) and 59 opposition articles (42.75 percent), while there were 71 neutral articles (51.44 percent).⁽³⁵⁾

In an attempt to answer questions in regard to the Arab world's perception of Iran and its nuclear program, the Zogby Research Centre conducted an opinion poll in six Arab countries. The results showed that the Arab world is increasingly concerned about Iran's nuclear policies and ambitions, and its lack of confidence in the outcome of the negotiating process undertaken by the P5 + 1 group.⁽³⁶⁾

According to statistics in 2008, support for Iran was high, ranging from 70 percent to 80 percent in many Arab countries. By 2011, this had fallen by more than 60 percent to 70 percent in most countries.⁽³⁷⁾ Iranian sectarian politics played an important role in the decline of support for Iran. In the eyes of many Arabs, Iran is no longer the main actor for resistance and it is perceived as a neighbor with dangerous and deceptive agendas. Polls conducted in 2014 about whether Iran contributes to the stability of the region showed that 74 percent to 88 percent of Jordanians, Egyptians, Saudis and Emiratis and 57 percent of Iraqis had negative responses. Iran was seen as fuelling sectarian conflicts in Arab countries. Tehran's role in supporting the Assad government in Syria resulted in changing Iran's status in Arab public opinion.⁽³⁸⁾

In addition, statistical research shows that most Arabs support their governments' very negative views towards Iranian policies, while " a credible October 2014 commercial survey found a mere 13 percent of respondents expressing even a "somewhat" positive view of Iran." ⁽³⁹⁾

One of the most important indications of Iran's declining image in some Arab countries was when hundreds of demonstrators stormed the Iranian consulate in the southern Iraqi province of Basra. The protesters also burned and lowered the Iranian flag and raised the Iraqi flag amid cheers against Iran and its role in Iraq. This was during popular protests in the province against the deteriorating economic situation.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The demonstrators attacked the headquarters of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU).

The results of the legislative elections that took place in Iraq indicate the decline in the popularity of parties affiliated with Iran, including the alliance of Sairoon, the cross-sectarian coalition that won the majority of parliamentary seats in the legislative elections in 2018.⁽⁴¹⁾ Moreover, Iran's image amongst Shiites has deteriorated. This can be clearly noticed in the participation of Shiites in the October-2019 protests in Iraq and Lebanon, demanding an end to Iran's meddling in their domestic affairs.

2- The Lack of Credibility in Iran's Regional Policy

A great deal of evidence reveals that the momentum characterizing the Iranian model after Khomeini's 1979 revolution has begun to lose its appeal and credibility, especially at the level of Iranian foreign policy. The foreign policy of any country will be a tool of soft power for it when others perceive it as "legitimate and having moral and ethical authority." By applying this to the Iranian case, we note that its foreign policy has lost much of its attractiveness, credibility and legitimacy. Iran's Constitution rejects the interference in the internal affairs of other nations, but despite this Iran has been involved in many domestic issues in countries such as: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen.

An opinion poll confirms that 56 percent of Arab respondents oppose the statement: Iran still maintains the initial values of the revolution. 92 percent believe that Iran is not a role model for governance, 66 percent state that Iran is an undemocratic country, and 59 percent of the respondents support the establishment of joint Arab military forces to deter Iran from intervening in the region.⁽⁴²⁾ This means that Iran's foreign policy is no longer a tool for creating soft power. However, soft power has failed to promote the Iranian model among its Arab neighbors. In creating a state of hostility with its Arab neighbors, Iran, which prioritizes the weak and vulnerable in its foreign policy, has become an interventionist state and the source of decline of many vulnerable nations with its interventionist policies causing pain.

The statement of the Arab summit held in Makkah in May (2019) included, "an emphasis on the solidarity and standing of Arab countries in the face of Iranian interventions [...] and condemned Iranian interference in the Syrian crisis and its influence on the unity of Syria."⁽⁴³⁾ The statement condemned the Iranian-backed Houthi militias' acts of sabotage against merchant ships in the UAE's territorial waters. The statement emphasized that "The Arab countries seek to restore security and stability in the region. The only real way to do so is that the countries in the region must respect the principles of good-neighborliness and refrain from using or threatening to use it to interfere in the internal affairs of states and to violate their sovereignty. The behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region is contrary to those principles and undermines the requirements of confidence. Therefore, it threatens the security and stability in the region directly and seriously. The statement also stresses that the relations of cooperation between the Arab states and the Islamic Republic of Iran should be based on the principle of good-neighborliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of states and the respect for their sovereignty."⁽⁴⁴⁾ The details of this statement reflect the definite emphasis on the negative view shared by most Arab countries towards Iran and reject its interventionist policy in the Arab neighborhood, which confirms Iran's loss of legitimacy and moral authority.

3- Growing Opposition to Iran's Interventionist Policies in the Arab World

Iranian intervention to spread the Shiite doctrine has provoked a state of Arab resentment, especially since the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring revolutions. Campaigns that were launched in many Arab countries, especially in the Maghreb, to confront the Shiite tide were important indicators of the decline in Iranian soft power in the Arab region. In particular, this region was never concerned before with sectarian conflicts until Iran's advent.

The export of Shi'ism to Sunni Arab societies has become a major point of contention between Iran and Arab states, including those that have been classified as allies such as Algeria. It has, become one of Iran's soft power tools but this policy has been rejected by Arab states, despite Shiite communities existing in Arab societies.

If the first few years, after the beginning of the Arab Spring, had confused officials in Arab countries and distracted them from paying attention to the Iranian role, the realization about Iran's strategy emerged later, represented by campaigns in a number of Arab countries against the Shiite tide. Many indicators highlight the general rejection of Iran's missionary work in several Arab countries. Starting from Egypt to Mauritania, people launched campaigns to kick-out the Shiite tide that was advanced particularly through book fairs. In 2014, the Egyptian authorities confiscated three shipments of Shiite books from Iraq at Cairo airport.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The Egyptian authorities confiscated Shiite books about the thought of Shiite leader Ahmed Rasim al-Nafis in August, 2015.⁽⁴⁶⁾

In 2018, the Algerian authorities closed the Iranian pavilion at the Algiers International Book Fair, which included some 2,000 titles, most of them were Shiite and offensive to the Prophet, peace be upon him. The management of the Algiers International Book Fair decided to confiscate all books in the Iranian pavilion and expel its employees.⁽⁴⁷⁾ During the 2016 exhibition in Algeria, authorities seized a group of Shiite books that were considered offensive to Muslim mothers. A decade earlier, in 2007, Algerian authorities closed the al-Ameer pavilion, represented by the Lebanese publishing house, because it was displaying Shiite books. In the same context, as part of the efforts to curb the Shiite tide, the Algerian authorities arrested 400 Algerians who returned from Iraq and Iran after they participated in Ashura rituals in Karbala, Iraq, and Iran in November 2017, because of leaflets that were discovered praising some Shiite political figures and leaders.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Although the Algerian strategy is not well-defined, Ali Rajab says that "The pace of confrontation of the Algerian authorities against the manifestations of Shiism in the country has escalated against the background of activists warning of Iranian efforts to spread Shiism in Algeria. Subsequently, the cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in Algeria Amir Moussaoui was expelled, after he was charged with spreading Shiism in the country of "one million martyrs."⁽⁴⁹⁾ A campaign by activists called the "Algerian campaign to expel the Iranian cultural attaché " in Algeria gained momentum with 12,140 followers on Facebook. This campaign represented a rejection of the Iranian model, a declaration of its failure and growing public awareness of the dangers of the Iranian role. This campaign was strengthened by Arab perceptions of Iran's involvement and its role in supporting instability in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Moroccan authorities launched its war against Shiism in 2009, in accordance with its decision to sever diplomatic relations with Iran. This was against the backdrop of the Iranian reaction to Morocco's support for Bahrain against Iranian statements considered to be in violation of Bahrain's sovereignty and threatening its security and stability.⁽⁵⁰⁾ The severance of relations with Iran was an expression of rejection towards Iranian policies regarding the targeting of Moroccan sectarian unity.

Mauritania was no exception to the rule. It informed "the Iranian ambassador that it no

longer accepts any activity by the embassy or its affiliates to change the doctrine or faith of Mauritanian society," shortly after it seized one of the country's most important Shiite centers, Imam Ali Complex. The Mauritanian government quickly became aware of the seriousness of the Shiite tide in the country. As a result, it closed two Shia centres in the capital Nouakchott.⁽⁵¹⁾ One Majmaâ was established in the Dar el-Naim district in Nouakchott when some Mauritians first announced their embracing of Shiism, with organized activities inside the country and trips to Iran. "Mauritanian media reported that the authorities recently banned all pro- Hezbollah activities," *HesPress* said. Iran's ally in Lebanon, was designated by Nouakchott as a terrorist organization.⁽⁵²⁾

The coincidence of the Mauritanian authorities' decision with Morocco's decision to sever ties with Iran, and the decision to expel the Iranian cultural attaché in Algeria, reveal the near-total collapse of the Iranian soft power project in the Maghreb. Iran had wanted its soft power to be a means for marketing its image in societies that do not suffer sectarian conflicts. These countries are aware of the dangers of the Shiite project that was supervised by diplomatic missions in the Arab Maghreb. These missions supervise similar activities in Arab countries in the Mashreq. They have a tangible presence after turning Shiite minorities into militias implementing Tehran's agendas in the region.

The most important factor to take into account is that Iran possessed the necessary soft power tools that enabled it to play an active role in the Arab region, at public and official levels. However, Iran's perception of its Arab neighbours as a barrier to its expansion westward has prompted the region to wage wars against it. Successive governments in Iran did not differ in their perception towards their Arab neighbourhood and thus its pursuit to expand at the expense of the region is one of the constants in Iranian policies.

The data has shown that the use of hard power exercised by Iran with its neighbours, and the use of some soft power tools have been counterproductive. Consequently, the interventionist tendency through the use of hard power in the Mashreq countries - its intervention in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen - has eroded the legitimacy of Iranian foreign policy as well as its moral and ethical authority. This moral authority constituted a key reason of Arab sympathy towards Iran following Khomeini's revolution, but has now fallen from the equation of Iranian soft power.

Attempts to influence through soft power, which Iran considered a preferred tool to infiltrate Arab societies, such as the export of Shi'ism to other countries (as in the case of the Maghreb countries), also had negative repercussions after the emergence of Iranian interventionism in the Mashreq states. Shiite minorities were used as militias to implement the Iranian project. The Arab Maghreb countries have realized the danger of the formation of these minorities in their societies, which can be turned into tools of blackmail and pose a threat to security in these countries.

Therefore, the export of the Shiite doctrine became a source of fear and concern instead of being an inspiration and a means of identifying with Iranian values, and a tool to serve Iranian interests. It also became a source of tension because fears increased after several events, especially after the Iranian intervention in Syria and Yemen. Therefore, what was considered as an instrument of Iranian expansionism conversely became a source for limiting Iranian influence in the region. Most importantly, the Iranian policy of interventionism in the region has established negative and perhaps hostile impressions among Arab public opinion. Thus, Iran is no longer an inspiration neither for its values nor for its model of governance. It has also been rejected in an environment where it used its soft power. The geopolitical field where it saw its opportunity to expand has become an area of resistance, which rejects Iranian expansionism; there is no longer a sense of identification and attraction towards Iranian values. Thus, Iran's intervention has killed its ambition of expansion among its neighbours.

Endnotes

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