



Iranian activity to expand its regional religious-cultural influence through soft power

Dr. Raz Zimmt

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Overview

- ▶ At the beginning of September 2023, in cooperation with the Iraqi government, the Iranian authorities organized the ceremonies of the annual pilgrimage to the Shi'ite holy places (the Arbaeen). It was another expression of the Islamic Republic's ongoing efforts to expand its regional religious and cultural influence, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. On the eve of the Arbaeen ceremonies, Iranian media and commentators highlighted the importance of the ceremonies as a way for Iran to use soft power¹ to advance its status and regional influence.
- ▶ **In recent years, Iran has expanded its religious and cultural activities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It invests substantial effort in spreading Shi'ite Islam, Iranian culture, and the ideology of the Islamic Revolution.** As used by Iran, soft power includes elements of both Shi'a-religious and Iranian national-cultural features, chiefly the Persian language. Iranian institutions work to restore and expand the Shi'ite shrines in Syria and Iraq, establish religious and cultural centers, open schools and branches of Iranian universities, encourage the study of Persian in educational institutions, and promote communication and propagandist activities to spread the Islamic Republic's official positions and ideology.
- ▶ In addition to religion and culture, Iran exploits the socio-economic crisis in the Arab countries to increase its civilian influence by establishing social institutions that provide health, education, and welfare services, mainly to low socio-economic strata.

¹ The breakup of the Soviet Union and the transition to a unipolar world order increased the popularity of the concept of *soft power* in the study of international relations. The concept was coined by Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor. Soft power relates to countries' ability to use non-forceful means, such as culture, ideology, education, government institutions and an attractive economy to create global influence and cooperation. It contrasts with the traditional use of military or economic power to enforce a country's will on world politics. According to Nye, since the end of the 20th century, the use of soft power has increased, primarily by the United States, to exercise influence over others, due to the high cost of using military force. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York, 2004).

► **Iran's promotion of its influence through soft power is part of its efforts to establish itself in the Arab region.** Part of its activity is also intended to help create a sphere of influence which can be exploited to realize its strategic goals in the Middle East, including establishing itself militarily. From Iran's perspective, expanding its religious-cultural influence is one way to achieve strategic depth, an essential element of Iranian strategy. Its objective is to allow the Islamic Republic to broaden the front of its "struggle" against its enemies (essentially Israel and the United States) beyond its territory and create lines to defend itself far from its borders. From the Iranian perspective, expanding its regional influence depends not only on its military capabilities but also on its soft power.

Iran's use of the Arbaeen celebrations for soft power

► Over three million Iranian pilgrims arrived in Iraq at the beginning of September 2023 to participate in the Arbaeen ceremonies, which mark the end of the forty days of mourning for the death of the Shi'ite Imam Hussein. The Iranian authorities' organizing religious ceremonies was another expression of the Iranian Republic's continuing efforts to expand its religious and cultural influence in the Arab sphere, especially in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. During an interview, Dr. Ayoub Menati, an Iranian expert on international relations, said the Arbaeen ceremonies were an important venue for the Islamic Republic to promote its soft power. He said the traditions reflected Shi'ite solidarity and unity and served Iran as an essential diplomatic means to realize its foreign policy goals, such as strengthening ties with its neighbors, establishing Islamic unity, and improving its relations with Iraq (kurdpress.com, August 25, 2023).



Iranian pilgrims in Iraq (IRNA, September 2, 2023)

► According to an editorial published by the Mehr news agency on August 30, 2023, the Arbaeen ceremonies have become a source of soft power in the hands of the Shi'ites "to

oppose national, Marxist, and liberal ideologies." The spiritual power inherent in the rituals allows the Shi'ites to oppose Western hegemony and the dangers they face from the "Zionist regime" and radical Sunni Islam. The editorial emphasized the combination of the soft power inherent in the Arbaeen ceremonies and the hard power of the Shi'ites in the Middle East, which stems from the activities of the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" and the effort to establish a land corridor from Iran to Syria and Lebanon. The combination improves Shi'a's geo-political and geo-economic position in the new world order.

► Iran's soft power activities, including the Arbaeen ceremonies, can be viewed as another, complementary layer of efforts to establish its regional military, political, economic, and cultural influence. The efforts aim to develop a sphere of influence extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea, which will be used to realize its strategic goals in the Middle East, including establishing itself militarily.

► **From the Iranian perspective, religious-cultural influence is a means of achieving strategic depth, an essential facet of Iranian strategy, especially given its limited conventional military capabilities.** The concept has increased in importance during the last decade because of the upheaval in the Arab Middle East. On several occasions, Ali Khamenei, the Iranian leader, emphasized the country's need for strategic depth as essential to Iran's security, and defined the Muslim nations as strategic depth for Iran. At a meeting with regime officials in May 2018, Khamenei stated it was essential to realize that Iran's presence in regional countries and the support of their populations constituted a strategic depth crucial to the Islamic Republic's national security (Tasnim, February 27, 2019). In October 2019, he stated that the expansion of strategic depth was sometimes more necessary than achieving the country's most critical missions and assigned responsibility for the task on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) (Ali Khamenei's website, October 2, 2019). Strategic depth allows Iran to extend the front of the "struggle" against its enemies beyond its territory and create security defense lines far from its borders to reduce its strategic isolation through both the expansion of the "axis of resistance" (the alliance of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen) and through establishing religious, cultural and economic influence in the Arab countries.

Soft power in Iran's regional policies

- ▶ For the Islamic Republic, soft power is important for its efforts to establish its strength and status, including in the Arab sphere. Since the end of the first decade of this century, Iran has become increasingly interested in the concept of soft power. Government officials, senior security officials, academic researchers, and journalists have been conducting a lively discussion about the idea as part of the comprehensive deliberations about the United States-led conflict between Iran and the Western countries and Iran's ability to advance its international status and regional influence through non-military means.
- ▶ In October 2022, meeting with students in officers' colleges, Khamenei said wars had become hybrids, combining a conventional military campaign with a soft campaign using intellectual, cultural, and cognitive tools. He emphasized the need to combine all the means and methods (Supreme Leader's website, October 3, 2022). Hassan Rouhani, the former president of Iran, also emphasized the importance of Iran's soft power. Meeting with commanders of the IRGC in September 2013, Rouhani said the Islamic Republic derived its strength from its regional "psychological dominance" and not from its conventional weapons (Iranian president's website, September 13, 2013). Iranian political commentators have also indicated the growing importance of soft power as a means to expand Iran's influence. On August 6, 2007, the conservative daily Resalat published an editorial titled "Soft Power." It emphasized the need to strengthen Iran's regional influence through soft power and argued that the expansion of Iran's regional influence depended not only on its military capabilities but also on its soft power, which could not be restrained by military force.

The components of Iran's soft power

- ▶ Iranian identity is characterized by a continuous tension between its two components, the Persian-linguistic-ethnic and the Shi'ite-Islamic. The complexity of Iranian identity is also clearly visible in soft power, which Iran uses as part of its efforts to expand its regional influence. It includes both religious-Islamic and Iranian national-cultural elements. Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic has adopted an official policy designed to bridge the gap between Shi'a and Sunna and to preach Muslim unity and the rapprochement of the two Islamic schools. Beginning in the early 1990s, the Iranian authorities established organizations that encouraged the idea of the unity of Islamic schools, led by the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought (Majma' al-Taqrīb Bayna al-Madhāhib), which

operated from the 1940s to the 1960s under Egyptian leadership and was re-established in 1990 in the office of the leader of Iran. The Forum, which operates alongside the Ahl al-Bayt association, holds religious activities, such as convening conferences to encourage dialogue between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims and organizing programs for Sunni Muslims to study Islam at the Shi'ite religious colleges in Qom.

► In recent years, Forum heads have visited Syria and Iraq in an effort to promote dialogue between Sunnis and Shi'ites. In July 2016, Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, the Forum's secretary general, visited Syria and Lebanon, where he met with senior Syrian and Lebanese officials and visited Islamic religious centers. Meeting with Imad Muhammad Deeb Khamis, the Syrian prime minister at the time, Araki said he had presented the Syrian minister of endowments with a proposal to expand Islamic unity in Syria by establishing frameworks for dialogue between Shi'ite and Sunni clerics to bring the various schools of Islam closer together. They also agreed to expand cooperation between the Forum and the Syrian Ministry of endowments (snn.ir, July 27, 2016). In April 2021, Hojjat-ul-Islam Hamid Shahriari, the Forum secretary general, visited Iraq, where he met with clerics, politicians, and local officials and called for a dialogue between Sunni and Shi'ite clerics to promote Muslim unity (IRNA, April 9, 2021).



Ayatollah Mohsen Arakhi (right) meets with Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general (Mashregh News, July 26, 2016)

► Despite efforts to promote Shi'ite-Sunni unity, the Islamic Republic has not changed its Shi'ite identity. It is an article of the Iranian constitution, which states that Twelver Shi'a is the state religion and a criterion for candidates to serve as the leader or president of Iran and discriminates against the country's Sunni minority. Although Iran does not limit its efforts to Shi'ite Muslims or condition the aid it extends to Muslim movements and organizations in the world on their willingness to embrace Shi'ite Islam, it prioritizes establishing its position and influence among Shi'ites.

► In recent years, Iran has expanded its religious and cultural activities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, investing considerable effort to spread Shi'a. Iran develops, and builds mosques in Najaf and Karbala, cities holy to Shi'a and important destinations for pilgrims from around the globe. For example, hundreds of millions of dollars were invested to develop and expand the tomb of Imam Hossein in Karbala. The project is led by Hassan Palarak, who heads the Headquarters of Renovating the Holy Shrines, established under the direction of the leader of Iran and managed by IRGC operatives to renovate the Shi'ite shrines in Iraq and Syria.



Hassan Palarak (second from the left) next to the former commander of the Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani (checked shirt), during a visit to Najaf (ABNA, August 18, 2018)

► In Syria, Iran is also involved in restoring the Shi'ite shrines damaged in the civil war, especially the shrine of al-Sayyidah Zaynab, Muhammad's granddaughter, a precinct south of Damascus. In recent years, Iran has purchased many nearby houses. Strengthening the shrines, encouraging religious tourism, and turning them into centers for Shi'a studies are intended to enhance Syria's Shi'ite identity. In November 2018, Palarak visited Syria to supervise the reconstruction project Iran is carrying out near the shrine precinct. A statement issued by the information department of the Headquarters of Renovating the Holy Shrines said that once the restoration of the shrine compound had been completed, a three-story pilgrim guest house would be constructed on an area of 1,500 square meters (.37 acres) (ISNA, November 10, 2018).

► Iranian efforts to spread Shi'a include establishing religious and cultural centers in eastern Syria for its promotion. In June 2019, a delegation of Iranian preachers and Qur'an reciters was sent to Syria and participated in religious ceremonies in several cities. During the visit, an Iranian news agency reported that Iran intended to expand religious activity in Syria and establish centers for Qur'an studies (iqna.ir, June 9, 2019). In recent years, Syrian opposition sources have reported the conversion of some Sunni mosques into Shi'ite religious centers. In May 2021, a Syrian news channel reported the transformation of a Sunni mosque into a

Shi'ite religious center in the town of al-Ghabra near the Albukamal area on the Syria-Iraq border (Hussainiya). According to the report, Shi'ite flags and banners were placed over the mosque, the Sunni residents, who live in an area populated entirely by Sunnis, were forbidden to approach it, and it was placed under the supervision of pro-Iranian militia operatives (DeirEzzorNow Twitter account, May 3, 2021).

► One of the methods used by the Iranians to establish their position in Syria is an attempt to increase the number of Shi'ite residents by settling them in places that were destroyed during the war or whose inhabitants fled. Since the Iranians understand that the demographics in Syria are far from guaranteeing a Shi'ite hegemony, they focus on strategically important areas such as large cities and the borders with Iraq and Lebanon. Therefore, during the Syrian Civil War, the Iranians and their proxies exchanged Shi'ite and Sunni populations, for example, in the town of al-Qusayr, a Sunni enclave in an Alawite-Shi'ite area located at a crossroads leading from the Lebanese border to the city of Homs. On several occasions, the Syrian opposition has accused Iran of trying to change the demographic composition in the areas near Damascus. For example, opposition sources claimed Iran demanded that as part of resolving the crisis in Syria, the Sunni residents living in Zabadani in southwest Syria be moved to areas under the control of the rebels in northern Syria, while the Shi'ite residents living in the Shi'ite villages of Fua and Kafriya be moved to areas under the control of the Syrian regime (al-Jazeera, August 15, 2015). In December 2021, Syrian sources reported that with Iranian encouragement and the assistance of the IRGC and pro-Iranian militias, approximately sixty Iraqi Shi'ite families took over residences in the city of Palmyra as part of Iranian efforts to change the city's demography. According to the report, the families moved from the town of Albukamal to buildings in Palmyra which had been taken over by pro-Iranian militias (Ayn al-Furat, December 16, 2021).

► In eastern Syria, Iran is working to expand its religious-cultural influence through cultural centers that work to mobilize support and spread Shi'a among the local population. The main cultural center was established in Deir ez-Zor in 2018 and operates through local branches in other areas in eastern Syria. In addition to cultural and recreational activities, the center provides free medical and educational services, enrichment classes for students, and courses in English and computers (BBC in Persian, June 17, 2023). The center also has propaganda activities to promote the ideology of the Islamic revolution. In September 2021, an opposition Syrian news website reported that according to local sources in the town of Hatla, north of

Deir ez-Zor, the Iranian cultural center had distributed sums of money worth about 5,000 Syrian pounds (about 38¢) to each child who participated in the Arbaeen ceremonies organized by the local center and associations affiliated with Iran (Sada al-Sharqia, September 28, 2021).



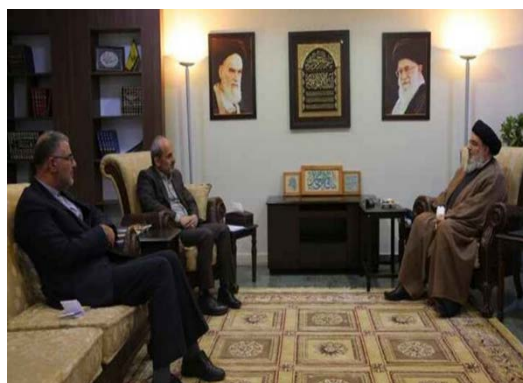
The Iranian Cultural Center in Deir ez-Zor (Ayn al-Furat, December 4, 2021)

- ▶ In early June 2023, the Iranian-Syrian Friendship Association held a ceremony in eastern Syria to mark the 34th anniversary of the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution. It was held in coordination with the Syrian Ministry of Culture and the Iranian Cultural Center in Deir ez-Zor and attended by Iranian representatives, led by Haj Rasool (in charge of the cultural centers in eastern Syria), Syrian regime representatives and local tribal leaders. During the ceremony, a documentary on Khomeini's life was screened, and an exhibition glorifying his achievements was presented (naharmedia.net, June 4, 2023).
- ▶ Iran also invests in education in Syria and Iraq, and during the past decade opened dozens of private Shi'ite schools in several Syrian cities and branches of Iranian universities that also offer religious courses. At the beginning of 2018, Ali-Akbar Velayati, Ali Khamenei's advisor on international affairs, who heads the network of private Azad private universities, met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who agreed on the establishment of branches of the university in several Syrian cities (Farhikhtegan, January 17, 2018). A similar agreement was signed in February 2019 between Azad University and the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The agreement was intended to expand scientific, research, and academic cooperation between the two countries, including conducting joint studies and conferences (Tasnim, February 13, 2019).



Velayati meets with President Assad in Damascus (Mehr, January 16, 2018)

► Moreover, Iran works to expand its influence through the State Broadcasting Authority. In recent decades, Iran has made a substantial financial investment in constructing an extensive system of foreign language television, radio, and Internet broadcasts as part of the soft campaign beyond its borders. The Iranian Broadcasting Authority's international service operates in various languages to promote Iranian-Islamic culture and spread the Islamic Republic's official positions and ideology in the world media. In 2003, Iran inaugurated the Arabic TV channel al-Alam, and in 2006, the second service in Arabic, al-Kawthar, was launched; it focuses more on religious matters. In May 2021, Peyman Jabali, head of the Broadcasting Authority, visited Lebanon and met with Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah secretary general, and Ziyad al-Nakhalah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad secretary general. Jabali stated that the "axis of resistance" achievements had changed the regional political map, and the media should invest more significant efforts explain the victories. He emphasized the need to expand cooperation between the Iranian Broadcasting Authority and the "resistance front" media (al-Aalam, May 30, 2023).



The head of the Iranian Broadcasting Authority with the secretary general of Hezbollah (ISNA, May 28, 2023)

► Alongside the religious-Islamic-Shi'ite component of Iran's efforts to promote its influence through soft power, Iranian institutions also work to expand Iranian culture and knowledge

of the Persian language. Iran has worked to promote Persian study programs in several regional countries in the previous decade. In an interview with the Iranian news agency, Dalal Abbas, who lectures in Persian language and literature in Lebanon, said Persian language courses were offered in non-governmental Lebanese universities. She said Iran supported the study of Persian in Lebanon, where it is studied in fifteen schools by more than 2,000 Lebanese students (IBNA, June 3, 2019). Courses in Persian are also given in several Syrian universities. Interviewed by the Iranian news agency Tasnim, Noor al-Hada Mahfouz, head of the Persian department at Damascus University, said Syrian students showed great interest in learning Persian (April 19, 2021). During a visit of Mohsen Haji-Mirzaei, Iranian minister of education, to Damascus in January 2020, he emphasized the importance of teaching Persian in the Syrian education system and asked his Syrian counterpart to allow choosing Persian as a foreign language in Syrian schools, along with, English, Russian and French (IRNA, January 23, 2020).



Studying Persian at Damascus University (Tasnim, April 19, 2021)

► Iran also encourages the study of Persian in Iraq. In November 2020, Mohammad Reza Talari, the head of the scientific department at the Iranian Cultural Embassy in Baghdad, reported an increase in the number of people learning Persian in Iraq. He said the cultural association gave dozens of Persian courses at various levels at the Iranian cultural center in Baghdad (Tasnim, November 23, 2020). Iran also uses Persian New Year (Nowruz) ceremonies to promote its cultural influence in the Arab world, especially among the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, who are culturally closer to the Iranians (IRNA, March 23, 2023).

Iranian social-civilian activity

► Iran and its proxies also exploit the socio-economic crisis in the Arab countries to increase Iranian influence at the civilian level, focusing on the lower socio-economic strata in the depressed, peripheral areas, for example, districts in eastern Syria, led by Deir ez-Zor, and in the south, especially in Daraa, Suwayda and Quneitra. One of the institutions is the Iranian

Jihad al-Bina Association, which maintains an extensive system of social institutions dealing with health, education, finance, welfare, and communications. Its activities in Syria and Lebanon are carried out both directly and through the organization's branch in Lebanon.² The Association undertook the rehabilitation of schools which were destroyed in the civil war in Syria (damascusv.com, July 27, 2022).



The office of the Iranian Jihad al-Bina Association in Deir ez-Zor (Syria.tv, May 16, 2018)

► In recent years, Iran has announced its intention to build several thousand housing units in Syria. In November 2019, a contract was signed by the Iranian and Syrian housing ministers for the construction of 30,000 housing units by Iranian companies in Syria. However, similar to many other agreements between the two countries, nothing came of it (Mehr, November 26, 2019). Iran sent extensive humanitarian aid to Syria during the Syrian Civil War, mainly through the Red Crescent. Iran also provided Syria with assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and after the earthquake that struck Syria in February 2023. Following the quake, Iran sent over ten cargo planes to Syria, bringing medical equipment, medicine, and food for the victims. Iran apparently also exploited the flights to transfer weapons, various systems and equipment to upgrade Syria's aerial defense capabilities (Reuters, April 12, 2023).

² For further information see the ITIC June 26, 2019 report, "Jihad al-Bina Association in Lebanon: A Hezbollah social foundation engaged in construction and social projects among the Shiite community, being a major component in Hezbollah's civilian infrastructure."



Iranian aid for the Syrian earthquake victims (ISNA, February 14, 2023)

- ▶ In Lebanon, Iran supports social-civilian activity, especially that led by Hezbollah. It is part of Iran's overall aid to Hezbollah, estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars a year. After the Second Lebanon War, Iran invested heavily in south Lebanon and offered various social services, such as establishing schools and medical centers and providing social services. Iran is the leading financier of Hezbollah's Foundation for the Wounded, which treats thousands of Hezbollah operatives who have been injured in the organization's various arenas of military belligerence since 1982. It treats their injuries and deals with their rehabilitation and reintegration into Lebanese society. It also engages in extensive informational activities to increase support for Hezbollah, especially among the younger generation. Iranian involvement in Hezbollah activities was evident in the visit of a Foundation delegation to Iran in February 2018, when its members met with Esmail Qaani, then deputy commander of the Qods Force, who presented the Foundation with a certificate of appreciation.³
- ▶ Another Iranian-supported Hezbollah social institution is the Martyr's Foundation, part of whose budget is transferred to Hezbollah from Iran. The Foundation was established in 1982 during the First Lebanon War as a branch of the Iranian Martyr's Fund, an Iranian institution established by Khomeini to help the families of the martyrs in the Iran-Iraq war. The purpose of the Lebanese Martyr's Foundation is to care for the families of Hezbollah operatives who were killed during their activities in the organization and provide them with various social services. The institution provides social and economic support for the families of Hezbollah martyrs, including social assistance, education, financing the costs of medical treatment, and owning and operating an extensive network of hospitals and medical institutes in Lebanon.⁴

³ For further information see the ITIC June 5, 2019 report, "Hezbollah's Foundation for the Wounded: purpose, modus operandi and funding methods."

⁴ For further information see the ITIC April 11, 2019 report, "Hezbollah's Martyrs Foundation: purpose, mode of operation and funding methods."

In June 2015, the head of the Iranian Red Crescent Society, Amir-Hossein Ziaei, inaugurated a new medical center in Baalbek in the Lebanon Valley. The three-story center covers an area of 1,200 square meters and includes hospital rooms, an operating room, a recovery room, a blood bank, a pharmacy, and a physical therapy room (IRNA, June 5, 2015).



The delegation of wounded Hezbollah operatives meets with Iran's leader Khamenei (Iranian leader's website, July 13, 2018).