

## Soft Power in Iran–UK Relations: Culture, Media, and Geopolitics

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### Abstract

In the new era of international relations, soft power plays an increasingly significant role in foreign policy as a strategic complement to hard power. This research, focusing on the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom, aims to identify the capacities, tools, and challenges associated with the exercise of soft power by both countries in historical and contemporary contexts. The primary research question is: how, and through which components, has soft power influenced the formation or evolution of political relations between Iran and the United Kingdom? The research hypothesis posits that the Islamic Republic of Iran's purposeful and indigenous use of soft power can help bridge historical divides and lay the groundwork for reconstructing cultural and diplomatic interactions. The research method is qualitative, based on critical discourse analysis, and complemented by a comparative study of the soft power strategies employed by the two countries. In the theoretical framework, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power has been employed and adapted to the discourse of the Islamic Revolution. The findings are examined in three key areas: first, the nuclear conflict, where media and public diplomacy became tools for confrontational narratives; second, the context of sanctions, which demonstrated how economic measures can enter the realm of soft warfare; and third, regional geopolitical competition, in which Britain's soft power is exercised through cultural and media institutions, while Iran's soft power is manifested through networks of cultural civilization. The results indicate that soft power, especially when operating under conditions of structural distrust, can effectively mitigate tensions, influence public opinion, and facilitate new diplomatic pathways—provided that institutional coherence, a clear strategy, and a receptive cultural audience support it.

**Keywords:** Soft power, foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Britain, cultural diplomacy, media imagery, discourse of the Islamic Revolution, soft deterrence, strategic interactions.

## Introduction

The transformation of power dynamics in international relations from traditional hardware-based capabilities to software dimensions has fundamentally reshaped the foreign policy architectures of states in the twenty-first century. Within this evolving landscape, soft power has emerged as a strategically vital instrument, operating through persuasion, image construction, discursive influence, and cultural attraction rather than coercion or material inducement. This conceptual shift, pioneered by Joseph Nye, has provided scholars and policymakers with a nuanced framework for understanding how states can achieve their foreign policy objectives without resorting to military force or economic pressure. The Islamic Republic of Iran, endowed with a profound civilizational heritage, rich cultural capacities, and the distinctive discourse of the Islamic Revolution, possesses substantial potential for generating and deploying soft power in its international engagements. Yet, despite these inherent capabilities, Iran's political relations with the United Kingdom over recent decades have been predominantly characterized by competition, historical mistrust, and political confrontation. This paradoxical situation—wherein a country with significant soft power resources finds itself locked in adversarial relations with a major Western power—constitutes the central puzzle that this research seeks to address.

The primary research question guiding this investigation is: to what extent has soft power influenced the political relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom, and through which specific components and mechanisms have its strategic capacities been manifested in bilateral interactions? In response to this question, the research hypothesis posits that a purposeful, intelligent, and locally-grounded utilization of Iran's soft power capacities—particularly in the domains of culture, media, and public diplomacy—can effectively weaken diplomatic divides, enhance the country's international image, and create new pathways for constructive interaction with British society. However, this potential can only be realized if structural obstacles such as historical distrust, negative media portrayals, and strategic interventions from the opposing side are appropriately managed. The research accordingly aims to identify and critically analyze the role of soft power in shaping Iran-UK political relations, exploring how this concept has been operationalized in the foreign policies of both countries and examining the prospects for its more strategic employment to improve bilateral ties.

The innovation of this research lies in its analytical approach, which moves beyond conventional examinations of Iran-UK political relations to interrogate these dynamics through the intersecting lenses of soft power, public diplomacy, and geopolitical competition. Rather than treating soft power as a neutral or universally applicable concept, this study critically engages with its theoretical foundations and adapts them to the specific discursive and ideological context of the Islamic Revolution. By integrating international relations theory with the indigenous and revolutionary realities of the Islamic Republic, the research develops a localized analytical model that can illuminate how non-hard power capacities operate in asymmetric power relationships, particularly between a Western liberal-democratic state and a revolutionary Islamic system.

Theoretically, this research draws upon and extends Joseph Nye's foundational work on soft power, which identifies three primary sources of soft power: culture, political values, and legitimate foreign policy. According to Nye, when a country's culture is admired internationally, its political values gain global acceptance, and its foreign policy aligns with ethical principles and international norms, that country acquires a form of attractiveness that enables it to shape the global agenda in ways favorable to its interests (Nye, 2023, pp. 11-13). Unlike hard power, which operates through coercion and tangible resources such as military strength and economic sanctions, soft power functions indirectly through public opinion, cultural elites, media, scientific institutions, and social networks to influence the behavior of international actors. This distinction between "coercion" and "persuasion" as modalities of influence is fundamental to understanding how states can achieve their objectives without resorting to force. Some theorists have further conceptualized the strategic integration of hard and soft power as "smart power," emphasizing that these capabilities are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary when applied in innovative and coordinated frameworks (Nye et al., 2013, pp. 2-5).

While Nye's framework provides a valuable starting point, this research recognizes its limitations when applied to non-Western contexts. In the discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran, soft power is not merely an instrumental concept but constitutes an integral dimension of the system's ideological and civilizational identity. This discourse, rooted in values of justice-seeking, independence, support for the oppressed, moral integrity, and resistance to global domination, seeks to present an alternative model of international interaction—one that challenges the

prevailing liberal international order. Iran's soft power resources include its civilizational background, cultural capacities, Islamic spirituality, domestic media networks, and interfaith interactions, all of which are mobilized through institutions such as foreign media outlets (Press TV, Al-Alam, Sahar), international Islamic universities (Al-Mustafa), cultural attachés, Islamic unity conferences, and the cultural messaging of the Revolution. This research therefore aims to synthesize Nye's theoretical framework with the distinctive characteristics of Islamic Revolutionary discourse to develop an analytical lens capable of capturing the unique dynamics of Iran's soft power in its interaction with Western powers, particularly Britain.

Methodologically, this research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in critical discourse analysis as formulated by Norman Fairclough, which operates at three interconnected levels: (1) linguistic and lexical analysis of texts; (2) interpretation of the socio-political context of discourse production; and (3) examination of the relationship between discourse and power structures. This framework is particularly suited to the research objectives, as it enables the investigation of how soft power components are discursively constructed, contested, and operationalized in the media, diplomatic, and cultural discourses of both Iran and Britain. The analysis is complemented by a qualitative comparative approach that systematically examines the soft power strategies of the two countries at both official and unofficial levels. Data collection employs content analysis and document study methods, drawing on a wide range of sources including specialized books in international relations, domestic and foreign research articles, reports from reputable research centers, official foreign policy statements and documents, content from influential media involved in public diplomacy, and analyses published on news and analytical websites. To ensure data credibility, only sources with established scientific or journalistic authority have been utilized, and all data have been subjected to rigorous discourse-oriented and comparative analysis.

The literature review situates this research within existing scholarship on soft power in Iran-UK relations and related contexts. Darius Wainwright's doctoral dissertation, "A Special Relationship? The Soft Power of the United States and Britain in Iran, 1953 to 1960," provides a foundational historical examination of how cultural diplomacy, soft propaganda, and psychological operations were employed by the United States and Britain in Iran during the Cold War. Wainwright demonstrates how Britain, in the decline of

its global position after World War II, sought to use soft power tools to maintain its influence in Iran while both competing and cooperating with the United States (Wainwright, 2019, pp. 320-336). His subsequent book, "The Soft Power of the United States and Britain in Iran, 1953–1960," extends this analysis to show how cultural exchanges, media productions, and elite networks were mobilized to counter Soviet influence and shape the 1953 coup, revealing the intimate connection between soft power and national security objectives (Wainwright, 2022, pp. 64-79).

At the regional level, Feizi's dissertation on "Iran's Soft Power Strategy in Afghanistan" offers a critical non-Western perspective, challenging Nye's Western-centric framework and formulating a localized model for Iran's soft power based on cultural-linguistic ties, religious commonalities, and educational diplomacy. This work is particularly significant in demonstrating that Iran's soft power operates in ways not fully comprehensible within classical Western frameworks and therefore necessitates independent theorization (Feizi, 2018, pp. 8-22). At the policy level, the joint report by the UK Soft Power Group and the British Foreign Policy Group, "The Future of British Soft Power: Designing a Strategic Framework," provides a comprehensive mapping of Britain's soft assets and strategies, emphasizing the English language, creative industries, technology, and public diplomacy as key tools for preserving and expanding British cultural influence globally (UK Soft Power Group & British Foreign Policy Group, 2021, pp. 2-6). Finally, Rafi and colleagues' article on "Cultural Resources of Iran's Soft Power" explores the endogenous dimensions of Iran's soft power, demonstrating how cultural policies and developmental goals embedded in high-level documents structure Iran's national soft power infrastructure (Rafi et al., 2023, pp. 3-7).

The historical context of Iran-UK relations, which provides essential background for understanding contemporary soft power dynamics, reveals a relationship of exceptional complexity. Officially commencing during the Safavid era, this relationship has undergone multiple phases of interaction, competition, and confrontation across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and post-Revolutionary periods. During the Qajar era, unequal treaties such as the 1919 Agreement and geopolitical maneuvers in competition with Tsarist Russia left enduring negative impressions in Iranian historical memory (Encyclopedia Iranica, 2016). The Pahlavi period witnessed Britain's active involvement in Iranian political developments, most notably through the design and execution of the

August 19, 1953 coup against Mohammad Mossadegh's national government—an event that not only profoundly impacted bilateral relations but became a primary source of Iranian historical distrust toward British policies (Britannica, 2025).

The 1979 Islamic Revolution fundamentally transformed Iran's foreign policy orientation, introducing principles of independence, rejection of domination, support for the oppressed, and opposition to neo-colonialism that directly challenged Western interests, particularly Britain's, which was viewed through the lens of imperialist discourse. Relations in the early revolutionary years were effectively suspended, exacerbated by events such as the occupation of the British embassy in Tehran (April 1980), the attack on the Iranian embassy in London (April–May 1980), and Britain's implicit support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. Despite attempts at rapprochement during the reformist period of the 1990s, these efforts consistently failed due to persistent mutual distrust, Britain's interventionist positions on Iran's internal affairs, and London's role in international sanctions against Iran's nuclear program. The 2011 attack on the British embassy in Tehran—in response to EU sanctions—led to the severing of diplomatic relations for several years, demonstrating the enduring influence of hostile psychological atmospheres, historical distrust, and ideological differences on bilateral relations (Tribune, 2023).

In recent decades, Britain has redefined its role as a mid-level player emphasizing cultural, media, and academic diplomacy, generating significant global soft power through tools including the BBC, the British Council, international universities, sports diplomacy, and English language education. In relation to Iran, Britain has sought to maintain its cultural and media networks while continuing political pressures, creating an environment for soft influence over public opinion, cultural elites, and Iranian youth. From Iran's perspective, this policy represents a strategy of influence and thought engineering aimed at undermining the discourse of the Islamic Revolution and transforming youth identity. In response, Iran has sought to strengthen its indigenous soft power through cultural diplomacy tools, overseas media, academic and religious institutions, and its moral and justice-seeking messages on a global scale, presenting its alternative discourse both regionally and globally (Greaves, 2008, pp. 12-19).

This research is structured as follows: following this integrated introduction, the Analysis and Discussion section examines (1) the historical context and structural barriers in Iran-UK relations, (2) a

comparative analysis of the two countries' soft power strategies across their institutional, value-based, and audience dimensions, and (3) the operationalization of soft power in three critical arenas of bilateral confrontation—the nuclear dispute, economic sanctions, and geopolitical competition. The Conclusion synthesizes the findings, addresses the research hypothesis, and offers policy recommendations for more effective utilization of soft power capacities in Iran-UK relations.

### **1. Historical Context and Structural Barriers in Iran-UK Relations**

The relationship between Iran and Britain stands as one of the most complex and challenging bilateral relationships in the contemporary history of West Asia. Officially commencing during the Safavid era, this relationship has undergone multiple phases of interaction, competition, influence, crisis, and occasional open confrontation across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and post-Islamic Revolution periods. The first official contacts between Iran and Britain date back to the seventeenth century when the British East India Company entered the Persian Gulf in pursuit of expanding its economic influence, leading to political and diplomatic interactions between the two countries. However, the nature of this relationship, especially from the nineteenth century onward, has primarily been based on colonial objectives and Britain's policy of influencing Iran's internal power structure to benefit from Iran's regional influence. During the Qajar era, the signing of unequal treaties such as the 1919 Agreement and geopolitical maneuvers in competition with Tsarist Russia left a negative image of Britain in the historical memory of the Iranian nation (Encyclopedia Iranica, 2016).

In the Pahlavi era, Britain played a significant role in Iran's political developments. The most important turning point of this period was the active involvement of British intelligence in designing and executing the coup of August 19, 1953, against the national government of Mohammad Mossadegh, which led to the restoration of Mohammad Reza Shah's monarchy and increased Iran's dependence on the West. This event not only had a profound impact on bilateral relations but also became one of the primary sources of historical distrust of the Iranian nation towards British policies. In the years leading up to the Islamic Revolution, Britain continued to support the Pahlavi regime, an action that has been recorded in the political memory and revolutionary discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran as backing for the royal system (Britannica, 2025).

With the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the

establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the country's foreign policy entered a new phase based on principles such as independence, rejection of domination and subservience, support for the oppressed, and opposition to neo-colonialism. These developments posed a serious challenge to Western countries, especially Britain, which was viewed as part of the imperialist front from the perspective of the revolution's discourse. As a result, bilateral relations in the early years of the revolution, particularly after the occupation of the British embassy by protesters in Tehran on April 30, 1980, and the attack on the Iranian embassy in London from April 30 to May 5, 1980, along with Britain's implicit support for Saddam Hussein during the imposed war against Iran, were effectively suspended, and tensions remained high.

However, from the 1990s onward, particularly during the reformist period, both countries made attempts to revive diplomatic relations. However, these efforts often failed to achieve lasting success due to the continuation of mutual distrust, Britain's interventionist positions in Iran's internal affairs, and its role in international sanctions against Iran's nuclear program. One significant event in this context was the provocative attack on the British embassy in Tehran in 2011, which occurred in response to widespread EU sanctions centered around London, carried out by a group of protesters. This incident led to the severing of official diplomatic relations for several years, demonstrating that Iran-Britain relations remain heavily influenced by a hostile psychological atmosphere, historical distrust, and ideological differences (Tribune, 2023).

Despite numerous cultural and social capacities, the relations between Iran and Britain remain influenced by political-security challenges that pose serious obstacles to the practical application of soft power. Among the most significant of these challenges are Britain's historical record of intervention in Iran's internal affairs, its role in imposing unjust economic sanctions, London's biased positions on regional issues, and its overt or covert support for opposing movements against the Islamic Republic. These factors have created a deep-seated atmosphere of distrust towards Britain's true motives among both the public and political elites in the country, casting doubt on any cultural or diplomatic rapprochement. On the other hand, the support of British media such as the BBC for psychological warfare projects against the Iranian nation, the portrayal of the Islamic system in a negative light, and the biased coverage of internal protests are all considered examples of the

enemy's soft war, which are incompatible with the principles of cultural diplomacy. In such an environment, even positive efforts by artistic and scientific institutions face skepticism and do not proceed along their natural course (Rahdar et al., 2022, pp. 2-6).

In this context, the cultural and educational institutions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, including the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, the International University of Al-Mustafa, the cultural attachés of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the overseas programs of national media, play a crucial role in promoting Iran's cultural and spiritual aspects. If these capacities are utilized in a targeted and structured manner, they can facilitate the expansion of Iran's soft power in bilateral relations through interaction with intellectual and cultural centers in the United Kingdom, such as the British Council or its prestigious universities. Success in this path requires the development of a cultural roadmap aligned with the overarching foreign policy of the system, in which the red lines of the Islamic Revolution's discourse are preserved while creating a space for scientific and cultural interaction (Policy Exchange, 2023). Iranian culture, which possesses both deep historical roots and a perspective of cultural coexistence with pure Muhammadan Islam, has always been attractive to academic elites, Orientalists, and scientific institutions in the West. Cultural elements, including Persian literature, Islamic philosophy, traditional arts, Iranian architecture, and Islamic mysticism, have contributed to creating a humanistic, rational, and spiritual image of Iran in the eyes of Western elites. While Western media often portray Iran in a radical and violent light through negative and reductionist representations, actively utilizing cultural diplomacy can help correct these images and pave the way for a civilizational dialogue between Iran and independent British elites (Martin, 2005, pp. 38-52). These historical experiences and structural barriers have given rise to two fundamentally different soft power paradigms, each reflecting distinct worldviews, institutional arrangements, and strategic orientations. A systematic comparison of these paradigms reveals how historical legacies continue to shape contemporary soft power dynamics between the two countries.

## **2. Comparative Analysis**

The soft power strategies of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom are constructed upon fundamentally divergent assumptions, worldviews, tools, and target audiences, reflecting the broader civilizational and ideological chasm that separates these two

actors in the international system. Britain, emerging from the liberal-secular tradition of modern Western civilization, defines its soft power in terms of cultural hegemony, democratic values, individual freedoms, and free-market economics, seeking to project an image of itself as a stable, progressive, and norm-abiding actor on the global stage. The Islamic Republic of Iran, by contrast, operates within an entirely different paradigm, one rooted in the discourse of the Islamic Revolution and animated by concepts such as justice-seeking, independence, Islamic spirituality, support for the oppressed, and resistance to global imperialism. Rather than seeking integration into the prevailing Western-led international order, Iran's soft power strategy aims to present an alternative model of cultural and political interaction at both regional and global levels—a model that challenges the liberal consensus and offers a distinctive vision grounded in indigenous religious and civilizational foundations.

This fundamental divergence in worldviews manifests itself most clearly in the respective toolkits and institutional infrastructures that each country has developed to project its soft power. Britain has constructed a remarkably sophisticated and well-coordinated soft power apparatus over centuries of global presence, leveraging institutions such as the BBC, the British Council, prestigious universities, cultural festivals, museums, and artistic diplomacy to disseminate its cultural and political messages worldwide. Through strategic investments in global media, the English language, international education, and cultural exports, Britain has cultivated extensive networks of audiences, elites, and sympathetic constituencies across the globe. These institutions, while maintaining a veneer of scientific or cultural neutrality, effectively serve the broader interests of British foreign policy, producing strategic content that shapes global perceptions in ways favorable to British interests. The media policy of BBC Persian regarding internal developments in Iran, for instance, clearly illustrates the instrumental use of ostensibly independent media as a tool of political pressure and narrative construction. Iran, in contrast, operates under severe constraints, including international sanctions, an asymmetric global media environment, and limited financial resources, yet it has nonetheless developed its own set of soft power tools tailored to its specific ideological and cultural context. These include overseas media networks such as Press TV, Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, and Sahar; the International University of Al-Mustafa; cultural attaché programs; Islamic unity conferences; and the production of spiritual and value-oriented content designed to

resonate with specific audiences. The soft power discourse of the Islamic Republic primarily emphasizes justice, resistance to domination, support for oppressed nations, and the strengthening of Islamic and regional identity, an approach that has found particular resonance in the Islamic world, the resistance axis, and among marginalized communities globally (Deffi, 2025).

The differences between these two models extend beyond mere institutional arrangements to encompass deeper questions of value orientation and target audience selection. Britain's soft power strategy is oriented toward establishing and maintaining Western cultural hegemony, promoting secular values, and advancing liberal preferences among non-Western societies. Even when British cultural tools present themselves as neutral or apolitical, they carry implicit messages about the superiority of Western democracy, secular individualism, and free-market capitalism. In the realms of education, student exchanges, cultural productions, and international artistic projects, Britain subtly but consistently asserts the normative superiority of its own models over indigenous and religious discourses. The primary audiences for Britain's soft power are cultural elites, liberal intellectuals, younger generations, and social groups in developing countries who are already inclined toward Western modernity—particularly in nations like Iran, where cultural or political rifts with the West create fertile ground for external influence. Through these channels, Britain seeks to deepen existing divides between populations and their governments, gradually reshaping societal values in directions compatible with Western interests.

Iran's approach to audience engagement is markedly different, reflecting its distinct ideological commitments and its status as a revolutionary state seeking to challenge the established international order. The Islamic Republic defines its audiences along two primary axes: internationally, it targets oppressed nations, Muslim communities, the marginalized, and justice seekers across the globe; domestically and regionally, it focuses on revolutionary youth, independent elites, and nations striving for cultural and political independence from Western domination. Rather than seeking to assimilate these audiences into a Western cultural framework, Iran's soft power aims to empower them by offering a model of independent, spirituality-centered, and justice-oriented progress that can be realized while preserving indigenous religious and cultural identity. This model has been widely adopted, particularly in Muslim countries and across the resistance axis, thereby strengthening Iran's soft power as an inspiring alternative to

Western cultural dominance (Emami, 2023, pp. 8-11). Efforts to portray a humane, resilient, and ethics-centered image of Islamic Iran form a central component of the Islamic Republic's media strategy, even as these efforts are constantly challenged by the hostile global media environment (The Baron, 2024).

Perhaps the most consequential difference between the two soft power models lies in the realm of institutional coherence and strategic coordination. Britain's soft power apparatus benefits from a high degree of integration and synergy among its cultural, media, educational, and even security institutions, enabling the country to project a consistent and coordinated message across multiple channels simultaneously. This institutional coherence allows Britain to respond swiftly to emerging challenges, adapt its narratives to changing circumstances, and maintain a persistent presence in target societies. The Islamic Republic of Iran, despite its significant efforts in the media and cultural sectors, has consistently faced challenges related to institutional redundancy, inter-agency coordination failures, and the absence of a cohesive overarching cultural strategy over decades of operation. The lack of a comprehensive synergistic strategy among institutions such as the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, and various academic and religious organizations has sometimes led to duplication of efforts, dispersion of resources, and contradictory messaging. Additionally, international sanctions, a persistently hostile global media environment, and the closure of many international platforms have posed serious obstacles to the effectiveness of Iran's soft power, limiting its reach and undermining its credibility in certain contexts (Akbarzadeh, 2021, pp. 12-17).

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to conclude that Iran's soft power is simply a weaker or less effective version of the British model; rather, it operates according to a fundamentally different logic that reflects the distinctive nature of the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary state with civilizational aspirations. The emphasis on people-centered engagement, spiritual capacities, regional authority, and discursive sincerity are advantages that distinguish and authenticate the soft power of the Islamic Republic compared to the Western version (Sadeghi, 2025, pp. 12-19). Iran's soft power is not merely an instrumental tool of foreign policy but an integral dimension of the system's ideological and civilizational identity, rooted in values that cannot be reduced to the utilitarian calculus of Western public diplomacy. The country's civilizational background, cultural capacities, Islamic spirituality, and connections with

religious communities across the world provide resources that are not easily replicated or countered by conventional Western soft power instruments. Britain's soft power, by contrast, while remarkably effective in its own terms, remains fundamentally tied to the liberal-secular framework from which it emerges, limiting its appeal in societies where religious identity, resistance to domination, and indigenous cultural authenticity are highly valued.

These two models reflect fundamental differences in the philosophy of cultural interaction and public diplomacy, differences that are clearly evident in the bilateral relations between Iran and the United Kingdom. Britain's approach, with its emphasis on indirect persuasion, cultural modeling, and international institutionalization, seeks to gradually transform the normative environment in which Iranian society operates, subtly reshaping values and perceptions over time. Iran's approach, with its emphasis on resistance discourse, Islamic solidarity, and justice-seeking, seeks to mobilize existing cultural and religious affinities to build alternative networks of influence that challenge Western hegemony. The tension between these two paradigms is not merely a matter of competing strategies but reflects a deeper contestation over the very meaning of legitimate international order and the proper relationship between culture, power, and identity in global politics. Understanding this fundamental divergence is essential for any meaningful analysis of Iran-UK relations, as it reveals why bilateral interactions have remained so fraught despite occasional periods of diplomatic engagement, and why soft power has emerged as such a critical arena of competition between these two historically entangled actors (Chatham House, 2025; Emami, 2023, pp. 13-24). Understanding this fundamental divergence is essential for any meaningful analysis of Iran-UK relations, as it reveals why bilateral interactions have remained so fraught despite occasional periods of diplomatic engagement, and why soft power has emerged as such a critical arena of competition between these two historically entangled actors.

### **3. Soft Power in Action**

The confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Britain has increasingly manifested through soft power dynamics across three interconnected arenas: nuclear tensions, economic sanctions, and geopolitical competition. Since 2003, Britain has leveraged its media infrastructure—particularly BBC Persian—to shape international and domestic public opinion regarding Iran's nuclear program, promoting a narrative centered on "ambiguity in objectives," "possible

concealment," and "proliferation risk" that prepared Western audiences for diplomatic pressure and sanctions (Gov. UK, 2025). This negative soft power approach has been complemented by Britain's active role in designing multilateral sanctions through the UN Security Council, where economic measures function not merely as hard power tools but as discursive weapons legitimized through media narratives emphasizing "nuclear threat," "human rights violations," and "regional destabilization" (UK Sanctions Notice, 2025, p. 2). British outlets including Reuters, The Guardian, and aligned think tanks have produced analytical reports, documentaries, and roundtable discussions that synergized hard power (sanctions) with soft power (public persuasion), contributing significantly to Iran's international isolation during the 2010s. Concurrently, Britain has maintained its post-colonial influence in West Asia through cultural diplomacy, transnational educational networks, human rights institutions, and region-focused media, projecting an image as a "stable, human rights-supporting, and pro-local development" actor in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Lebanon, and Egypt—a strategy distinct from American hardware-oriented approaches, emphasizing instead "soft intervention in cultural, media, and elite structures" (Gov. UK, 2025).

In response, Iran has deployed its own soft power arsenal to counter British narratives across all three arenas. Regarding nuclear tensions, Iranian outlets such as Press TV, Al-Alam, and English-language news agencies have promoted an alternative narrative of "legitimate nuclear rights," "structural injustice in the international system," and "Iran's peaceful approach," while Iranian diplomats at international forums have emphasized professionalism, rationality, and rights-oriented discourse to project a civilian nuclear energy framework (Rezaei et al., 2025, pp. 8-13). On the economic sanctions front, Iran has framed sanctions as an "unjust system of domination," "oppressive," and "violations of economic human rights," seeking to delegitimize Western narratives while raising regional and global awareness of sanctions' humanitarian dimensions (ICLG, 2025). In geopolitical competition, Iran has drawn upon discursive capacities rooted in resistance, Islamic solidarity, and cultural-religious connections with Shia and freedom-seeking communities across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain, creating a multi-level civilizational-political influence model encompassing ideological and cultural dimensions. Through resistance-oriented media, affiliated academic networks, cultural institutions, and regional charities—tools grounded in collectivist concepts of community, resistance, justice,

and social faith rather than individualistic Western frameworks—Iran has expanded its regional influence in West Asia, producing a distinctive soft power paradigm that operates in direct competition with British geopolitical interests (Sadeghi, 2025, pp. 5-6). This three-dimensional confrontation reveals how both states have transformed traditional power rivalries into complex battles for narrative dominance, public persuasion, and discursive influence across media, diplomatic, and regional spheres. While the preceding analysis has demonstrated how soft power has been weaponized in bilateral confrontation, it also reveals potential pathways for more constructive engagement. The very mechanisms that have been used competitively—public diplomacy, elite networks, and mediating institutions—can, if strategically redirected, serve as tools for reducing tensions and building alternative channels of communication.

#### **4. Mechanisms for Enhancing Soft Power in Bilateral Interactions**

In the structure of today's global foreign policy, public opinion, the elite community, media, and civil institutions play a decisive role in shaping the behavioral patterns of states. Public diplomacy, as a branch of soft power, seeks to establish direct communication with the people and elites of target societies, presenting a favorable image of the country of origin. In the relations between Iran and Britain, despite the official and diplomatic atmosphere affected by historical distrust and structural challenges, there are still communication potentials at the elite level that can act as "gap-bridgers for political fault lines." Joint academic programs, cultural conferences, scientific collaborations, student and faculty exchanges, and even joint film and documentary productions can enhance the social capital of bilateral relations and create platforms for reducing political tensions (Berinsky, 2015, pp. 2-7). The Islamic Republic of Iran, relying on its domestic and global elite capital, is capable of conveying the discourse of independence, dignity, and ethical orientation to the world in a peaceful manner. It should be noted that utilizing public diplomacy within the framework of Islamic Revolution values is not meant as appeasement towards Western powers, but rather as a logical explanation of the resistance discourse in a human and cultural format.

In complex relationships such as those between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom, non-governmental institutions, scientific and religious intermediaries, international cultural organizations, and even city diplomacy can play a significant role. In recent decades, some interactions have occurred

through scientific associations, research centers, religious institutions, and even among religious leaders, which have helped neutralize part of the official atmosphere of distrust. The Islamic Republic of Iran has also sought to present an ethical, justice-seeking, and dialogue-oriented image of its foreign policy through the expansion of cultural activities, participation in international conferences, and the dissemination of peace-seeking messages within the framework of the resistance discourse. However, it must be noted that mediating institutions will only be effective if recognized by both parties and protected from interference and informational influences (Nandkeolyar, 2025, pp. 3-6).

### **Conclusion**

The results of this research indicate that soft power, contrary to the common perception that it can only be utilized within Western contexts and through a liberal model, can also play an effective role in international relations through indigenous, cultural, and civilizational forms. A comparative study between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United Kingdom reveals that both countries, guided by their distinct worldviews and discourses, have adopted different yet purposeful strategies in the realm of public diplomacy and soft power. In this regard, Britain, with its colonial legacy and structural ties to the Western international system, has been able to leverage a coordinated network of media, cultural institutions, international education, and strategic investment to shape a global narrative in its favor. In contrast, despite external limitations, media sanctions, and negative portrayals, the Islamic Republic of Iran has created local and identity-based capacities for producing spiritual, cultural, and resistance-oriented soft power through the discourse of the Islamic Revolution—capacities that hold significant potential for expansion at both regional and global levels.

In response to the main research question regarding how soft power can influence the development of political relations between Iran and Britain, the findings suggest that non-hard power tools such as cultural diplomacy, international media, elite communications, scientific exchanges, and strategic narrative-building can create an interactive space within the tense relations between the two countries, especially when formal diplomatic channels are constrained by historical, political, or security pressures. If designed intelligently and aligned with global developments, these components can serve as instruments to soften the diplomatic atmosphere and redefine the perception of the "other"

in the minds of target societies.

The central hypothesis of this research—which posits that the purposeful utilization of soft power components can pave the way for the enhancement of political relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Britain, provided that historical challenges, misunderstandings, and interventions by third powers are adequately managed—is confirmed based on the analyses presented. Multiple pieces of evidence, including the impact of media from both sides, the role of cultural institutions, the willingness of specific segments of the scientific and artistic elites to engage in dialogue, and the function of mediating institutions during times of tension, all indicate that the capacities of soft power can remain active even in the context of historical distrust, as long as they are deployed through a coherent strategy and a non-rhetorical approach.

The future outlook for political relations between Iran and Britain from the perspective of soft power, although still constrained by obstacles such as mutual distrust, negative media portrayals, and value conflicts, also reveals untapped and underutilized capacities at the elite, academic, artistic, and cultural levels between the two countries. These capacities can shift bilateral interactions from mere ideological competition toward discursive competition and cultural coexistence. Redefining Iran's soft power within an artistic, spiritual, and humanistic framework—independent of prevailing confrontational models—not only helps repair the country's international image but can also transform the foundations of long-term political relations. Conversely, if Britain shifts its focus from a persistent interventionist and media-centric perspective to elite dialogue models and independent cultural interaction, it will create the groundwork for establishing a balanced, albeit non-aligned, yet respectful relationship.

Based on these findings, the research not only strengthens the theoretical framework of soft power in Iran-Britain relations but also carries direct implications for policymaking. In other words, soft power is not merely an analytical concept; with strategic design and institutional coherence, it can become a practical tool for improving bilateral relations. Therefore, it is recommended that cultural and diplomatic policymakers of the Islamic Republic of Iran, relying on integrated and cross-sectoral strategies, enhance the coherence of the institutions responsible for soft power—such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, international media, and universities—and design a multi-phase program for targeted engagement with British scientific, cultural, and artistic elites.

Securing appropriate funding to establish chairs for Iranian studies in reputable British universities, supporting joint research projects, producing bilateral media content, enhancing media literacy, and training multilingual experts domestically are among the strategic actions to be pursued in this direction. At the same time, it is worth noting that soft power will only become an effective tool in foreign policy if it transitions from a passive state to an active element in shaping public opinion and constructing international narratives.

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