

The Ideological Appeal and Its Impact on Iran's Strategic Depth in West Asia

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This research was conducted to examine the ideological appeal and its impact on Iran's strategic depth in West Asia. The findings indicate that Iran's soft power, rooted in the values of the Islamic Revolution—such as justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed—has succeeded in strengthening the country's normative legitimacy within the public opinion of the Muslim world. This normative legitimacy has been reproduced through tools including public and cultural diplomacy, resistance media, and the Islamic Revolution discourse, manifesting concretely in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. In Iraq, religious and cultural diplomacy alongside support for the Popular Mobilization Forces; in Lebanon, the role of Hezbollah and resistance media; and in Yemen, moral support for Ansarullah, exemplify Iran's application of soft power to enhance its strategic depth. Despite external pressures and sanctions that have constrained Iran's economic and media capacities, the resistance discourse and popular support have managed to neutralize portions of these pressures. Ultimately, the research concludes that the soft power of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in conjunction with the Islamic Revolution, has become the most significant factor in expanding the country's strategic depth in West Asia, elevating Iran from the status of a dependent actor to that of a regional order-maker.

Keywords: Power, Soft Power, Islamic Revolution, Ideological Appeal, Strategic Depth, West Asia

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1. Introduction

The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1357 (1978–1979) marks a pivotal moment in the political and cultural history of the Middle East; a revolution that, unlike classical regime-change models, did not emerge through coups or foreign intervention but through popular mobilization, religious discourse, and cultural resistance. This transformation introduced a governance model based on religious democracy, presenting a novel form of Islamic governance in contrast to Western secular norms (Eftekhari & Jani Pour, 2022). From its inception, the Islamic Revolution functioned not only domestically but also regionally and globally as a source

of soft power, establishing a durable and normative influence in the Middle East through cultural, religious, media, and discursive components (Nasiri & Mohammadi, 2022).

Soft power is a concept first introduced by Joseph Nye in the 1990s, referring to the ability to attract and persuade others without coercion or threat (Nye, 2004). However, the experience of the Islamic Republic of Iran demonstrates that soft power can also be redefined within an Islamic-revolutionary framework, grounded in concepts such as resistance, justice, independence, the Islamic Ummah, and opposition to imperialism (Nasiri & Mohammadi, 2022). This form of soft power, unlike Western liberal models, has penetrated beyond elites to



resonate with popular masses, transforming into a tool for legitimizing Iran's foreign policy during crises.

In recent decades, particularly following the so-called Islamic Awakening, Iran's soft power has played a crucial role in shaping the political, social, and cultural behavior of regional nations. Shared religious rituals such as Ashura and Arbaeen, transnational media outlets like Press TV and Al-Alam, cultural institutions such as the Global Forum of Ahl al-Bayt and the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, and academic exchanges with regional universities have all functioned as instruments for transmitting Iran's soft power (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023). These components, in conjunction with hard power, have contributed to consolidating Iran's strategic depth in target countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The concept of "strategic depth" in this research refers to a country's capacity to establish sustainable, legitimate, and multi-layered influence within its surrounding environment, possessing high resilience and flexibility against external threats. The Islamic Republic of Iran has leveraged soft power to create networks of cultural, religious, media, and intellectual ties in target countries, which serve as strategic backstops during crises. This research demonstrates that Islamic Revolution soft power has evolved from a theoretical construct into one of the core pillars of Iran's foreign policy, successfully consolidating and strengthening the country's strategic depth in the tense and competitive environment of West Asia.

2. Components of Iran's Islamic Revolution Soft Power

In contemporary international relations, the definition of power has undergone a fundamental transformation, no longer limited to military and economic capabilities. In this new framework, non-material components such as culture, social values, political discourse, and historical narratives play a decisive role in shaping the behavior of international actors. This evolution has paved the way for the emergence of concepts like soft power, which operates through persuasion, legitimacy, and appeal rather than coercion (Nye, 2011).

The Islamic Revolution of Iran, as a historical and civilizational turning point, has offered a distinct model of soft power rooted in a system of indigenous religious, cultural, political, and social values. This model has not

only fostered national cohesion and political legitimacy domestically but has also generated a form of spiritual and political appeal that has led to the formation of strategic alliances in the regional and global arenas (Ghorbi, 2015).

Iran's soft power, unlike Western liberal models that rely on lifestyle appeal, individual freedoms, and secular democratic institutions, is built upon concepts such as justice-seeking, resistance to imperialism, religious democracy, spiritual orientation, and support for the oppressed. These components, through the Islamic Revolution discourse, have created a meaningful, identity-based, and political convergence among Muslim nations, particularly in West Asia, contributing to the strengthening of Iran's strategic depth (Jafari Pناه, 2022).

Over the past four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has utilized diverse soft power tools—including cultural diplomacy, transnational media, religious and cultural institutions, academic exchanges, and historical narrative-building—to establish indirect and sustainable deterrence against external pressures, economic sanctions, and security threats. This form of deterrence, unlike hard power based on coercion and threats, operates through persuasion, legitimacy-building, and role-modeling, often proving more effective in the long term for safeguarding national interests and consolidating Iran's regional standing (Eftekhari & Jani Pour, 2022).

The primary components of Iran's Islamic Revolution soft power are categorized under six main axes:

- **Ideological Components:** Resistance discourse, the principle of "neither East nor West," support for the oppressed, and emphasis on political and cultural independence.
- **Cultural Components:** The Persian language, committed art, Islamic-Iranian heritage, religious rituals, and cultural symbols such as Ashura and the Husayni movement.
- **Governance Components:** The model of religious democracy, political participation, popular legitimacy, and responsiveness of governing institutions.
- **Public Diplomacy:** Activities of institutions such as the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, the Global Forum of Ahl al-Bayt, and religious institutions.

- **Scientific and Technological Advancements:** Achievements in medical, nuclear, space, and higher education fields.
- **Media and Narrative-Building:** News networks such as Press TV and Al-Alam, and historical narratives of the Islamic Revolution.

3. Components of Iran's Strategic Depth in West Asia

In strategic literature, the concept of "strategic depth" refers to a political actor's ability to expand its sphere of influence beyond geographical borders and establish sustainable, multi-layered, and effective ties with its surrounding environment. This concept, particularly in the tense and competitive geopolitical landscape of West Asia, is considered one of the key components of national power and a vital instrument for preserving security, stability, and regional influence. The Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the main and influential actors in this region, has over the past four decades sought to consolidate, strengthen, and develop its strategic depth through the utilization of ideological, cultural, religious, security, and geostrategic capacities (Poursahan, 2023).

3.1. Geopolitical Depth

3.1.1. Unique Geographical Position

The Islamic Republic of Iran occupies one of the most sensitive and strategic locations in the world, a position that, beyond natural and climatic factors, offers unique capacities for regional and global role-playing. Iran is situated at the intersection of three major geopolitical zones—Western Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent—and has simultaneous access to two strategic water bodies—the Caspian Sea to the north and the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea to the south—making it one of the few countries in the region with a dual-coastal position. This geographical feature has transformed Iran into a natural crossroads between north and south, east and west in Asia (Abbasi Semnani, 2025).

From a geopolitical perspective, Iran is located near two global energy centers—the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea regions. This proximity, in addition to enabling exploitation of vast oil and gas resources, has positioned Iran as a vital corridor for energy transit to global markets.

From a defensive standpoint, Iran's geographical position provides the capacity for deep defense.

From a geostrategic perspective, Iran is located at the heart of a historically contested region where global powers have historically vied for influence. Its proximity to crisis-prone areas such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen has enabled the Islamic Republic of Iran to emerge as a decisive and influential actor in many regional security developments. This position, in interaction with the political-ideological discourse of the Islamic Revolution, has allowed Iran to consolidate its strategic depth in the region through multi-layered diplomacy, resistance networks, and media narrative-building (Rajabi & Jafari, 2024).

Iran's geographical position should not be viewed merely as a natural advantage but as a strategic component that, in interaction with cultural, political, and security elements, functions as a foundation for the formation of strategic depth. This position has enabled Iran to transcend the role of a mere geographical actor and evolve into a multi-layered and sustainable influence player in regional and global equations.

3.1.2. Transit and Energy Corridors

The Islamic Republic of Iran, due to its unique geographical position, is located at the crossroads of four major strategic corridors of Eurasia, possessing unparalleled capacities to play a role in regional and transnational transit and energy corridors. This superior position has transformed Iran into a natural hub between east and west, north and south in Asia, enabling it to function as a "transit and energy hub" (Amirahmadian, 2025). Such a position is not only an economic advantage but also a geopolitical instrument for strengthening the country's strategic depth in its surrounding environment.

3.2. Ideological Depth

3.2.1. The Resistance Axis

The Resistance Axis, as one of the most prominent manifestations of Iran's ideological depth, is a transnational network of governmental and non-governmental actors in West Asia formed based on the Islamic Revolution discourse and principles such as resistance to arrogance, support for the oppressed,

rejection of subjugation, and defense of the Palestinian cause. Unlike traditional alliances based on the short-term interests of states, this axis relies on value-based, religious, and identity-based ties among nations and social groups, granting it high cohesion, sustainability, and legitimacy (Dehshiri & Ghafari, 2023).

The Islamic Republic of Iran, through the discursive capacities of the Islamic Revolution, has managed to create ideological and strategic convergence in various regional countries, particularly in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen, by supporting resistance groups. Groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Ansarullah in Yemen, and Palestinian resistance groups have not only played roles on the military front but also in cultural, media, social, and even public service domains. These groups, inspired by the Islamic resistance discourse, function as Iran's operational and cultural arms in the region and have formed a cohesive, active, and multi-layered front against common threats, particularly the Zionist regime, jihadist currents, and U.S. interventionist policies (Rajabi & Jafari, 2024).

A distinguishing feature of the Resistance Axis is its transnational nature. Unlike traditional alliances based on geopolitical or economic interests of states, which may collapse due to changes in government or international pressures, the Resistance Axis is built on shared ideological, identity, and cultural ties among nations and social groups. This feature has ensured the cohesion of the axis even during crises, such as political changes, geopolitical shifts, or intense international pressures (Nasiri & Mohammadi, 2022).

From a strategic perspective, the Resistance Axis functions not only as a deterrent against external threats but also as a platform for disseminating the Islamic Revolution discourse, strengthening social and cultural ties, and deepening Iran's strategic depth in the region. By creating social, media, religious, and cultural networks among regional nations, Iran has been able to penetrate into the grassroots of target societies and, during crises, benefit from popular support, social legitimacy, and cultural backing. Such influence, unlike purely political or military influence, possesses greater sustainability and flexibility against regional changes (Haraty, 2021).

In summary, the Resistance Axis should be analyzed as one of Iran's most important ideological depth tools—

not only at the state level but also at the level of nations and social networks. This axis has transformed the Islamic Revolution discourse into a common language of resistance in the region, thereby consolidating the Islamic Republic of Iran's strategic depth in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape.

3.2.2. *Dissemination of the Islamic Revolution Discourse*

The dissemination of the Islamic Revolution discourse has been one of the foundational and strategic principles of Iran's foreign policy since the early days of the revolution in 1357. This discourse, rooted in Quranic teachings, the historical experience of the Islamic Revolution, and principles such as justice-seeking, rejection of subjugation, support for the oppressed, unity of the Islamic Ummah, and religious democracy, differs from reductionist interpretations that equate "revolutionary dissemination" with interventionism or ideological imposition. In the thought of Imam Khomeini (RA) and the leaders of the Islamic Republic, this concept refers to "disseminating the message," "inspiring," and "awakening nations" to return to Islamic identity, independence, and resistance against global imperialism (Dehshiri & Ghafari, 2023).

The Islamic Revolution discourse, by presenting a model of religious governance, active resistance, social justice, and human dignity, has inspired popular and justice-seeking movements among regional nations, particularly during the Islamic Awakening. This discourse has been transmitted to regional countries through tools such as transnational media outlets like Al-Alam, Al-Kawthar, Press TV, and Hispan TV, cultural institutions such as the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, the Saadi Foundation, the Global Forum of Ahl al-Bayt (AS), and shared religious occasions such as Ashura, Arbaeen, and Fatimid days (Haraty, 2021).

From a strategic perspective, the dissemination of the Islamic Revolution discourse functions as one of the components of Iran's soft power, fostering a form of value-based, identity-based, and discursive convergence in the region. This convergence has particularly facilitated the formation of social-religious networks, cultural institutions, and resistance currents in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Bahrain, which have created intellectual, social, and cultural resistance against Westernization projects, cultural neoliberalism, and political imperialism (Nasiri & Mohammadi, 2022).

Studies indicate that the Islamic Revolution discourse, particularly among youth, elites, and justice-seeking groups in Islamic countries, has emerged as an alternative to secular, Western-oriented, and consumerist discourses. This discourse, emphasizing political independence, social justice, Islamic spirituality, and human dignity, has succeeded in creating appeal, legitimacy, and acceptance in the face of identity crises, value voids, and distrust in Western models (Rajabi & Jafari, 2024).

From a practical standpoint, the dissemination of the Islamic Revolution discourse has been pursued through public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, religious diplomacy, and media narrative-building. Institutions such as the Islamic Culture and Communication Organization, the Global Forum of Ahl al-Bayt (AS), universities hosting foreign students, and multilingual media networks have played a key role in transmitting this discourse. Additionally, Iran's active presence in shared religious occasions such as the massive Arbaeen pilgrimage has strengthened social, religious, and cultural ties among regional nations, creating a foundation for deepening Iran's strategic depth (Dehghani Firouzabad & Sharifi, 2023).

In summary, the dissemination of the Islamic Revolution discourse should not be viewed merely as an ideological principle but as a practical strategy in Iran's foreign policy. This discourse has functioned as a soft power and strategic depth tool through the combination of cultural, media, and religious instruments, offering a local and inspiring alternative to Western models.

3.3. Security-Military Depth

3.3.1. Defensive Deterrence Capability

Iran's defensive deterrence capability, as one of the core components of the country's hard power, plays a fundamental and decisive role in ensuring national security, preserving territorial integrity, and consolidating Iran's regional standing in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. This capability has developed in response to persistent threats from extra-regional powers, particularly the United States and the Zionist regime, within the tense and competitive regional environment. Iran's defense strategy, based on principles such as "active deterrence," "defense in depth," and "asymmetric warfare," aims to prevent any

external aggression or threat through reliance on domestic capacities, significantly increasing the cost of military action against the country (Ansari Fard & Hajiyousefi, 2024).

3.3.2. Regional Alliance Networks

Iran's regional alliance networks, as one of the key components in forming the country's security-military depth, have played a decisive role in strategic deterrence, expanding regional influence, and countering extra-regional threats. These networks, unlike formal alliances based on political agreements or short-term interests, are formed on shared ideological, religious, cultural, and common threats, possessing high cohesion, sustainability, and social legitimacy. Such structures, rather than relying on states, are based on popular and identity-based ties, thereby increasing their resilience and longevity against political changes (Rajabi & Jafari, 2024).

The Islamic Republic of Iran, through the Islamic Revolution discourse and principles such as support for the oppressed, opposition to occupation, rejection of subjugation, and defense of the Palestinian cause, has managed to establish a network of strategic allies in various regional countries by supporting resistance groups. These networks, with their popular base, religious legitimacy, and ideological cohesion, have succeeded in forming a counter-front against Western-Arab interventionist projects, including the Abraham Accords, the Arab NATO, and U.S. military presence in the region (Nasiri & Mohammadi, 2022).

3.4. Economic and Energy Depth

3.4.1. Oil and Gas Reserves

The Islamic Republic of Iran, with its vast oil and gas reserves, has established one of the main pillars of its economic, geopolitical, and strategic power in the energy sector. These resources not only form the foundation of the national economy but also function as instruments of regional influence and diplomatic leverage in foreign policy. Iran, with approximately 157 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (9.3% of global reserves) and over 33 trillion cubic meters of natural gas (17% of global reserves), ranks second globally in gas reserves and fourth in oil reserves. This position has transformed Iran

into one of the key players in the global energy market (Dehghani Firouzabad & Sharifi, 2023).

From a strategic perspective, Iran's oil and gas reserves are not only the main source of foreign currency earnings but also function as national power levers in regional and international interactions. Iran has utilized these resources to establish a presence in the energy markets of neighboring countries such as Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Armenia. Gas exports via pipelines, electricity sales from gas power plants, and participation in energy swap projects with Central Asian countries are part of Iran's grand strategy to exploit these reserves to strengthen the country's economic and energy depth. These interactions, while creating mutual dependencies, have enabled Iran to find alternative revenue streams during sanctions, maintain regional influence, and strengthen economic resilience (Shahnavazizadeh et al., 2024).

3.4.2. Regional Energy Policy

Iran's regional energy policy is one of the key dimensions of the country's grand strategy for consolidating economic, geopolitical, and strategic depth. This policy, designed with a precise understanding of Iran's position in global and regional energy equations and aiming to maximize the utilization of hydrocarbon resources for national interests, views energy not only as a source of foreign currency but also as a soft power instrument, diplomatic leverage, and a connector of shared interests with neighboring countries (Shahnavazizadeh et al., 2024).

A distinguishing feature of Iran's energy policy is its multi-layered nature. This policy is not limited to energy exports but includes technical diplomacy, technology transfer, human resource training, participation in joint refinery and petrochemical projects, and active presence in international energy institutions. Iran, through active membership in organizations such as OPEC and the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF), has sought to play a role in shaping energy market rules, defending the interests of producer countries, and countering consumer monopolies. Additionally, the proposal to establish a regional energy market with the participation of neighboring countries is part of Iran's efforts to institutionalize long-term, sustainable, and multi-dimensional cooperation in the energy sector (Ansari Fard & Hajiyousefi, 2024).

From a political economy perspective, Iran's regional energy policy is a smart and multi-faceted response to economic sanctions and international pressures. By establishing energy ties with neighboring countries, Iran has managed to neutralize part of the effects of sanctions, create alternative export routes, and simultaneously utilize energy as a tool to strengthen its strategic depth. This policy, in interaction with cultural, security, diplomatic, and geopolitical components, has enabled the Islamic Republic of Iran to establish a sustainable, multi-layered, and shared-interest-based influence in its surrounding environment— influence that is not only economic but also strategic, social, and political.

4. Analysis of the Impact of Islamic Revolution Soft Power on Iran's Strategic Depth in West Asia

4.1. The Role of Cultural-Ideological Values in Strengthening Strategic Depth

This research demonstrates that Iran's cultural and ideological values of the Islamic Revolution are among the most important sources of the country's soft power and have directly contributed to increasing Iran's strategic depth in West Asia. These values, rooted in religious teachings, Islamic-Shiite identity, justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed, have created a form of normative convergence among Muslim nations in the region. In essence, the Islamic Revolution, by presenting a different cultural-ideological framework, has elevated Iran's position from a mere political-military power to a normative and spiritual power (Esfandiari, 2021).

One of the most prominent manifestations of these values is the Ashura culture and religious rituals such as the Arbreen pilgrimage. These rituals, as symbols of resistance and sacrifice, are recognized not only within Iran but also in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen as shared cultural models. Such rituals have succeeded in strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy and creating a foundation for attracting regional social and political groups. Recent studies indicate that religious ceremonies and cultural rituals of Iran, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, have directly contributed to strengthening social and political convergence with Iran (Hosseinzadeh, 2023). These rituals, beyond their religious aspect, have a political function and have acted as instruments of cultural diplomacy, thereby

contributing to consolidating Iran's position in its surrounding environment.

On the other hand, justice-seeking and support for the oppressed as ideological values of the Islamic Revolution have positioned Iran as a supporter of liberation movements and resistance groups in the region. These values have led to Iran being perceived not only as a political power but also as a normative and ethical power in the region. This position has directly contributed to increasing Iran's strategic depth, as normative legitimacy has created the foundation for establishing regional alliance networks and strengthening the Resistance Axis (Mohammadi et al., 2022 #379115).

Furthermore, the literature of the Islamic Revolution and committed art have also functioned as another cultural component, transmitting Iran's political and ideological messages through artistic and media formats. These tools, beyond their cultural aspect, have carried political and identity messages and have succeeded in aligning regional audiences with the Islamic Revolution discourse. For example, cinematic productions and documentaries related to Islamic resistance in Lebanon and Palestine have solidified Iran's image as a supporter of resistance and contributed to strengthening Iran's soft power at the regional level (Fatahi Ardakan & Mahmoudi Oghli, 2022).

This analysis concludes that Iran's cultural-ideological values have succeeded in increasing the Islamic Republic's strategic depth in West Asia by creating a shared Islamic identity, strengthening normative legitimacy, and supporting liberation movements. Consequently, it can be said that Iran's soft power has not only been based on material or military resources but has also been built on spiritual and cultural values, enabling the country to consolidate its strategic position in regional equations.

4.2. Public Diplomacy and Revolutionary Identity as Regional Influence Tools

Iran's public diplomacy can be considered one of the most important soft power mechanisms in international relations. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which primarily focuses on interactions between governments and political elites, public diplomacy emphasizes direct engagement with public opinion, social groups, and cultural and academic elites in target countries. The

Islamic Republic of Iran, through cultural, media, scientific, and religious tools, has succeeded in presenting a distinct and unique identity at the regional and international levels. In essence, Iran's public diplomacy not only transmits political and cultural messages but also strengthens the normative and spiritual legitimacy of the Islamic Republic among Muslim nations through emphasis on revolutionary identity (Hosseinzadeh, 2023).

Iran's revolutionary identity, formed on the basis of resistance discourse, independence, and support for the oppressed, has functioned as a spiritual and value-based framework that has attracted regional audiences. This identity has introduced Iran as a country that stands against foreign imperialism and is alongside the oppressed nations of the region. Such an image has succeeded in transforming Iran into a spiritual and political reference for liberation movements and resistance groups in West Asia (Esfandiari, 2021).

From a theoretical perspective, Iran's public diplomacy can be analyzed within the framework of "normative power." Iran, by emphasizing religious and revolutionary values, has succeeded in creating a form of spiritual legitimacy that operates beyond geographical borders. This normative legitimacy has enabled Iran to penetrate into the social and cultural layers of regional countries without the need for military or economic domination.

4.3. Resistance Discourse and Attraction of Regional Groups

The resistance discourse can be considered one of the most prominent components of Iran's soft power, playing a fundamental role in increasing the country's strategic depth in West Asia. This discourse, rooted in the teachings of the Islamic Revolution and based on principles such as standing against foreign imperialism, supporting the oppressed, justice-seeking, and independence, has succeeded in consolidating Iran's normative and spiritual legitimacy among Muslim nations (Esfandiari, 2021).

The main feature of the resistance discourse is the creation of a shared regional identity—identity that operates beyond geographical borders and has succeeded in gathering various political, social, and cultural groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen around the axis of opposing foreign domination and defending

national independence. This shared identity has not only penetrated the political elites but has also gained traction among the general public, leading to the formation of a transnational network of regional allies (Hosseinzadeh, 2023).

One of the most important functions of the resistance discourse is attracting regional groups and transforming them into strategic allies of Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran, by emphasizing religious and revolutionary values, has succeeded in attracting groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and Ansarullah in Yemen as practical and cultural arms of itself. These groups have not only aligned with Iran on the military front but have also done so in cultural, media, and political domains, functioning as carriers of the Islamic Revolution discourse (Abbasi et al., 2022).

The resistance discourse has also succeeded in strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy at the regional level. Unlike Western powers that primarily rely on economic and media tools for influence, Iran, by offering a value-based discourse, has succeeded in gaining popular trust and support. This normative legitimacy has led to Iran being recognized among Muslim nations as a supporter of resistance and justice, securing a special position in regional equations (Salami et al., 2022).

From a cultural-media perspective, the resistance discourse has succeeded in expanding its messages at the regional level. Media outlets affiliated with the Resistance Axis, cinematic productions and documentaries related to Islamic resistance, and religious rituals such as the Arbaeen pilgrimage have all functioned as cultural tools, solidifying Iran's image as a supporter of resistance (Mohammadi et al., 2022 #379115). These tools have not only reflected Iran's narrative of justice and independence but have also succeeded in introducing the resistance discourse as a normative alternative to Western-Arab narratives.

From a strategic perspective, the resistance discourse has succeeded in increasing the political and security costs of any action against Iran. Because any threat against Iran is perceived as a threat against the entire Resistance Axis. This has enabled Iran to possess a form of soft deterrence that complements the country's military and defense capabilities. In essence, the resistance discourse, by creating a network of popular and transnational allies, has provided Iran with pre-

emptive defensive lines that increase the country's strategic depth against external threats.

4.3.1. *Foundations of the Resistance Discourse in Iran's Foreign Policy*

The resistance discourse, as one of the main pillars of Iran's foreign policy, has deep roots in the ideological and cultural foundations of the Islamic Revolution. This discourse is not merely a temporary political strategy but a normative and value-based framework that has succeeded in distinguishing Iran's foreign policy from other regional and global models. In essence, resistance in the view of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a reflection of the historical experience of the Iranian nation in opposing foreign imperialism and the manifestation of religious teachings and principles of justice-seeking and independence—principles that have been reflected in the country's slogans and grand policies since the Islamic Revolution (Esfandiari, 2021).

One of the main foundations of the resistance discourse is standing against global arrogance and imperialism. The Islamic Revolution from the very beginning, with the slogan "neither East nor West," emphasized political independence and opposition to foreign interference. This principle has been manifested in Iran's foreign policy through support for liberation movements, opposition to the military presence of foreign powers in the region, and efforts to reduce dependence on global power blocs. Such an approach has succeeded in introducing Iran as an independent and resilient actor against external pressures and strengthening its normative legitimacy at the regional level (Salami et al., 2022).

The second foundation of the resistance discourse is support for the oppressed and justice-seeking. This value, rooted in Islamic teachings, has introduced Iran as a supporter of oppressed nations and resistance groups in the region. Continuous support for the Palestinian cause, backing for Hezbollah in Lebanon, support for resistance groups in Iraq and Yemen, are prominent examples of this principle. These actions, not only have a political dimension but also function as ethical and normative symbols, strengthening Iran's legitimacy among Muslim nations. As a result, Iran is perceived not only as a political power but also as a moral and spiritual power in the eyes of many regional communities (Abbasi et al., 2022).

The third foundation is the creation of a shared Islamic-revolutionary identity. The resistance discourse, by emphasizing religious and cultural values, has created a form of normative convergence among Muslim nations. Religious rituals such as Ashura and the Arbaeen pilgrimage, beyond their cultural and religious aspects, have taken on political functions and have acted as symbols of resistance against oppression and imperialism. These rituals have succeeded in strengthening social and cultural ties among Muslim nations and creating a shared Islamic-revolutionary identity, placing Iran at the center of the Resistance Axis (Hosseinzadeh, 2023).

The fourth foundation is the media and cultural function of the resistance discourse. Media outlets affiliated with the Resistance Axis, artistic and literary productions of the Islamic Revolution, have succeeded in expanding the messages of resistance at the regional and global levels. These tools have not only solidified Iran's image as a supporter of resistance but have also succeeded in attracting new audiences among the general public. Cinematic productions, documentaries related to Islamic resistance, and political-cultural literature of the Islamic Revolution have all played a role in reproducing the resistance discourse and solidifying Iran's narrative of justice and independence against Western-Arab narratives (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023).

4.3.2. *Impact of the Resistance Discourse on Regional Groups*

One of the main functions of the resistance discourse is the formation of the Resistance Axis. This axis, composed of political-military groups and movements in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine, has been formed under the inspiration of Iran's resistance discourse. This network has succeeded in creating a strategic convergence among non-state and state actors in the region and has transformed Iran into the center of gravity of this axis (Abbasi et al., 2022). The Resistance Axis is not merely a political-military alliance but a normative-cultural network that has succeeded in reproducing the values of the Islamic Revolution at the regional level.

The second function is changing the regional balance of power. The presence and influence of Iran-aligned groups have led to a shift in the regional balance of power in favor of the Resistance Axis. For example, the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon against the Zionist regime

and the role of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq against terrorism are examples of the direct impact of the resistance discourse on regional security equations (Salami et al., 2022). This shift in the balance of power has not only manifested on the military front but also in the political and cultural spheres, enhancing Iran's position in regional equations.

The third function is strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy. The resistance discourse has succeeded in introducing Iran as a supporter of justice and independence among Muslim nations. This normative legitimacy has not only attracted resistance groups but has also generated widespread popular support for Iran. Mass Arbaeen pilgrimages and popular support for anti-occupation movements are examples of this legitimacy (Hosseinzadeh, 2023). In essence, Iran's normative legitimacy has succeeded in strengthening social trust at the regional level and transforming Iran into a spiritual reference for justice-seeking movements.

The fourth function is expanding cultural and media influence. Media outlets affiliated with the Resistance Axis, artistic productions, and literary works of the Islamic Revolution have succeeded in expanding the messages of resistance at the regional and global levels. These tools have solidified Iran's image as a cultural-ideological power and have contributed to increasing the country's strategic depth in the soft power domain (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023). Media and cultural productions related to resistance have succeeded in solidifying Iran's narrative of justice and independence against Western-Arab narratives and offering a normative alternative to the general public of the region.

Finally, the fifth function of the resistance discourse is creating strategic deterrence. The presence of Iran-aligned groups in the region has led external powers to consider Iran and its allies as a deterrent factor in their security calculations. This deterrence has not only strengthened Iran's national security but has also elevated the country's regional standing (Sadat Hashemi, 2022). In essence, the resistance discourse has succeeded in increasing the political and security costs of any action against Iran and functioning as a soft shield against external threats.

4.3.3. *Role of Commander Qasem Soleimani in Strengthening the Resistance Discourse*

Commander Martyr Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, is considered one of the most prominent contemporary figures in Iran's foreign policy, playing an irreplaceable role in strengthening and consolidating the resistance discourse. His importance is not limited to military power; his activities in cultural, social, and diplomatic fields have also been influential, transforming the resistance discourse from an ideological slogan into a practical and effective strategy in the region. Soleimani, through the integration of military power, field diplomacy, and cultural symbolism, transformed the resistance discourse into one of the main pillars of Iran's soft power.

One of Soleimani's most important roles was creating and consolidating the Resistance Axis. He established direct connections with resistance groups in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, creating a cohesive network of Iran-aligned forces. This network functioned as Iran's strategic arm and contributed to increasing Iran's influence depth in the region (Abbasi et al., 2022). Under Soleimani's leadership, the Resistance Axis evolved into a transnational structure that not only operated on the military front but also in social and cultural domains. This cohesion enabled Iran to be recognized as the center of gravity of resistance in the regional equations.

Another role of Soleimani was transforming the resistance discourse into a practical discourse. He succeeded in implementing the values of the Islamic Revolution, such as justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed, on the ground. His direct presence in resistance fronts, from Lebanon to Iraq, enabled the resistance discourse to move from a theoretical level to a practical one, gaining greater legitimacy among Muslim nations (Salami et al., 2022). This practical implementation of values transformed the resistance discourse from a purely ideological framework into a tangible and effective strategy in regional politics, demonstrating that resistance is not merely a slogan but a viable strategy.

Soleimani also played a prominent role in field diplomacy. Unlike formal diplomacy, which primarily operates at the state level, he established direct connections with resistance group leaders and regional populations, creating trust and convergence. This field

diplomacy enabled Iran to be recognized as a genuine supporter of resistance and strengthened the country's normative position in the region (Hosseinzadeh, 2023). In essence, Soleimani succeeded in creating an informal but effective diplomacy that complemented the Islamic Republic's formal diplomacy and solidified Iran's image as a moral and spiritual power.

On the other hand, Soleimani's charismatic personality and cultural symbolism have solidified the resistance discourse in the regional public opinion. After his martyrdom, the massive Arbāeen pilgrimages in Iran, Iraq, and other regional countries demonstrated that Soleimani had become a symbol of resistance and steadfastness against foreign domination. This cultural symbolism enabled the resistance discourse to penetrate more deeply among Muslim nations (Sadat Hashemi, 2022). His personality became a symbolic capital for the Islamic Republic, operating beyond national borders and strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy.

4.3.4. *Resistance Discourse as a Regional Order-Maker*

The resistance discourse in Iran's foreign policy has functioned not only as a normative and cultural framework but also as a regional order-maker. This discourse, by creating the Resistance Axis and strengthening convergence among political-social groups in different countries, has shaped a new structure of regional relations that opposes the desired order of external powers. In essence, resistance has succeeded in offering an alternative to Western-imposed orders and establishing a model based on independence, justice, and resistance to foreign imperialism in the West Asian geopolitical landscape.

The first manifestation of the resistance discourse's order-making role is the creation of the Resistance Axis. This axis, composed of governmental and non-governmental actors in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine, has stood against foreign imperialism under the inspiration of Iran's resistance discourse. This network has succeeded in creating a parallel order in the region based on independence, justice, and opposition to occupation (Abbasi et al., 2022). The Resistance Axis has, in practice, replaced structures dependent on Western powers and established a model of transnational cooperation based on religious and revolutionary values. The second order-making function of the resistance discourse is deterrence against external powers. The

presence of Iran-aligned groups in the region has led extra-regional powers to consider Iran and its allies as a deterrent factor in their security calculations. This deterrence has succeeded in changing the balance of power and shaping a new security order in West Asia (Salami et al., 2022). In essence, the resistance discourse, by creating a network of popular forces and resistance groups, has increased the political and security costs of any action against Iran and created a form of soft deterrence that complements the country's defense capabilities.

The third order-making function is strengthening the normative and social legitimacy of the regional order. Unlike imposed orders based on hard power, the resistance discourse has succeeded in gaining its legitimacy through popular support and religious values. Mass Arbaeen pilgrimages and widespread popular support for resistance movements are evidence of the social acceptance of this new order (Hosseinzadeh, 2023). This social legitimacy has enabled the resistance order to be accepted not only among political elites but also among the general public and to function as a legitimate alternative to imposed orders.

The fourth order-making function is creating cultural-ideological convergence among Muslim nations in the region. The resistance discourse, through religious rituals, resistance media, and Islamic Revolution literature, has succeeded in creating a shared identity that strengthens the foundations of the new regional order (Sadat Hashemi, 2022). This cultural-ideological convergence has succeeded in uniting Muslim nations around the axis of justice-seeking and independence, laying the groundwork for a regional order based on Islamic-revolutionary values.

The fifth order-making function of the resistance discourse is creating an alternative regional order in opposition to the desired order of Western powers. This alternative order, based on independence, justice, and resistance to foreign imperialism, has succeeded in consolidating Iran's position as a normative and order-making power in West Asia. In essence, Iran, through the use of the resistance discourse, has succeeded in offering a different model of regional order based on spiritual and cultural values and has increased the country's strategic depth in its surrounding environment.

5. Factors Affecting the Increase or Decrease of Iran's Soft Power Influence

Iran's soft power over the past four decades has been influenced by a set of internal and external factors. These factors can function as opportunities or threats and can increase or decrease Iran's influence in the regional and international environment. Analyzing these factors is essential for strategic analysis of Iran's soft power, as it shows that cultural-ideological resources and the resistance discourse can only strengthen the country's strategic depth if the foundations of public diplomacy, media, and international interactions are properly managed.

5.1. The Role of Public Diplomacy and Cultural-Scientific Interactions

Public diplomacy and cultural-scientific interactions can be considered one of the most important soft power tools of the Islamic Republic of Iran, playing a decisive role in increasing the country's strategic depth over the past four decades. This type of diplomacy, through the utilization of cultural, scientific, and social capacities, has succeeded in portraying Iran's image at the regional and international levels and creating a foundation for attracting new audiences. The importance of this tool lies in the fact that, unlike traditional diplomacy that primarily operates between governments, public diplomacy focuses on direct engagement with nations and public opinion, thereby strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy.

The first function of Iran's public diplomacy is creating direct connections with nations. The Islamic Republic of Iran, through international conferences such as the "Islamic Unity Conference," support for religious rituals like the Arbaeen pilgrimage, and sending cultural delegations to various countries, has succeeded in strengthening the shared Islamic-revolutionary identity (Akhandi Nematabad & Moteqi, 2022). This direct connection with nations has enabled Iran to be recognized not only at the governmental level but also at the public opinion level as a spiritual and cultural power. The second function is scientific and academic interactions. The Islamic Republic of Iran, by accepting foreign students in its universities, holding joint scientific conferences, and sending professors and researchers to regional countries, has succeeded in

transmitting its scientific and cultural values. These scientific interactions have not only elevated Iran's scientific standing but have also functioned as a soft power tool, creating a foundation for establishing scientific-cultural networks between Iran and regional countries (Hosseinzadeh, 2023). These scientific networks have succeeded in creating sustainable ties between Iran's scientific and cultural elites and those of other countries, thereby strengthening the country's strategic depth.

The third function is the use of media and new communication tools in public diplomacy. Iranian international media outlets such as Press TV and Al-Alam have succeeded in presenting different narratives of regional developments and solidifying Iran's image as a supporter of resistance. Additionally, the use of social networks and cultural influencers has succeeded in transmitting Iran's messages to the youth and increasing the country's cultural appeal (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023). These media outlets have succeeded in reproducing the resistance discourse against Western-Arab narratives and introducing Iran as a normative alternative.

The fourth function is strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy through public diplomacy. Iran, by emphasizing values such as justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed, has succeeded in strengthening its normative legitimacy among Muslim nations. This legitimacy has enabled Iran to be recognized as a spiritual and cultural reference in the region and increase its strategic depth (Sadat Hashemi, 2022). Iran's normative legitimacy has succeeded in strengthening social trust at the regional level and transforming Iran into a spiritual reference for justice-seeking movements.

5.2. *The Impact of Media and Positive Image of Iran*

Media can be considered one of the most important soft power tools of the Islamic Republic of Iran, playing a fundamental role in portraying the country's cultural-ideological identity over the past four decades. Media, through content production, narrative-building, and positive image-making, has succeeded in influencing public opinion at the regional and international levels and solidifying Iran's position as a supporter of resistance and justice. The importance of media lies in the fact that they are not merely communication tools

but also legitimacy-building and identity-forming mechanisms that have succeeded in reproducing the resistance discourse beyond national borders.

The first function of media is portraying Iran's revolutionary identity. International television networks such as Press TV and Al-Alam have succeeded in presenting different narratives of regional developments and introducing Iran as an independent and justice-seeking country. These media outlets, by focusing on the values of the Islamic Revolution and principles such as independence and support for the oppressed, have succeeded in strengthening the resistance discourse at the international level (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023). In essence, Iranian media have succeeded in presenting an alternative narrative against dominant Western-Arab narratives, introducing Iran as a normative and spiritual power.

The second function of media is creating media diplomacy. Iranian media have not only transmitted political and cultural messages but have also succeeded in attracting global audiences through the use of different languages. This media diplomacy has enabled Iran to present alternative narratives against dominant Western narratives and solidify its image as a normative power (Akhandi Nematabad & Moteqi, 2022). Iranian media diplomacy has succeeded in attracting young people and cultural elites through the use of new communication tools, particularly in cyberspace, thereby expanding the reach of Iran's soft power.

The third function of media is strengthening Iran's normative legitimacy through positive image-making. Artistic productions, documentaries related to Islamic resistance, and the portrayal of religious rituals such as the Arbaeen pilgrimage have succeeded in solidifying Iran's image as a spiritual and justice-oriented supporter among Muslim nations. This positive image-making has enabled Iran to secure a special position in regional public opinion (Sadat Hashemi, 2022). In essence, media have succeeded in solidifying Iran's normative legitimacy at the regional level through the reflection of religious and cultural values, transforming it into a spiritual reference for justice-seeking movements.

The fourth function of media is the use of new communication tools. Social networks and cultural influencers have succeeded in transmitting Iran's messages to the youth and increasing the country's cultural appeal. These tools, with their speed and wide

reach, have succeeded in increasing the influence of Iran's soft power at the global level (Mosavi & Qasemi, 2022). New media have succeeded in creating direct and unmediated connections with audiences, transmitting Iran's messages in engaging and suitable formats for the needs of the new generation, thereby strengthening the country's soft power in the cultural and social domains.

5.3. Sanctions and External Limitations

Sanctions and external limitations can be considered one of the most important factors reducing Iran's soft power; factors that have been continuously imposed by the United States and some Western countries over the past four decades. These sanctions have not only limited Iran's economic capacity but have also affected the country's cultural, scientific, and media capacities. In essence, sanctions have been designed as a political pressure tool to prevent the expansion of Iran's cultural and normative messages in the regional and global environment and to weaken Iran's image in global public opinion.

The first impact of sanctions is the reduction of soft power's economic and infrastructural capacity. Financial and banking restrictions have prevented Iran from fully participating in international cultural and scientific projects. This has led to a reduction in academic interactions, limitations in sending students and professors, and a decrease in Iran's capacity to host cultural and scientific events (Salami et al., 2022). As a result, Iran's capacity to produce and portray cultural messages at the international level has decreased, and the country's ability to create scientific-cultural networks has been limited.

The second impact is the limitation in access to new media and communication technologies. Sanctions have caused Iran to face serious challenges in developing international media and using new communication technologies. These limitations have reduced Iran's ability to transmit its cultural and political messages to global audiences (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023). Particularly in the digital age, where new media and social networks play a decisive role in shaping public opinion, Iran's lack of access to these technologies has resulted in a portion of the country's soft power capacity remaining unused.

The third impact is the creation of a negative image of Iran in global public opinion. Western media, taking

advantage of the sanctions environment, have attempted to introduce Iran as an isolated, uncooperative, and threatening country to international order. This negative image-making has led some global audiences to become distrustful of Iran's cultural and normative messages (Akhandi Nematabad & Moteqi, 2022). In essence, sanctions have not only created economic limitations but have also functioned as a foundation for a psychological and media war against Iran.

However, it should be noted that the resistance discourse has succeeded in compensating for some of these limitations. Iran, by emphasizing values such as justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed, has succeeded in maintaining its normative legitimacy among Muslim nations. Widespread popular support for the Resistance Axis in regional countries demonstrates that sanctions have not been able to fully weaken Iran's soft power (Hosseinzadeh, 2023). In essence, the resistance discourse has succeeded in neutralizing some of the pressures resulting from sanctions through the creation of a shared Islamic-revolutionary identity and strengthening spiritual legitimacy, continuing to introduce Iran as a spiritual and cultural reference in the region.

6. Future Opportunities and Threats of Iran's Soft Power

Iran's soft power in the future will face a set of opportunities and threats that can determine the country's position in regional and global equations. Analyzing these factors shows that Iran's soft power is not a static capacity but a dynamic phenomenon dependent on internal and external conditions. In essence, the future of Iran's soft power depends on the country's ability to utilize opportunities and confront threats, requiring smart and coordinated policymaking among cultural, political, and media institutions.

6.1. Opportunities

The first opportunity is expanding public and cultural diplomacy. Increasing scientific-cultural interactions with regional and global countries can strengthen Iran's positive image. Accepting foreign students in Iranian universities, holding international conferences, and supporting religious rituals such as the Arbaeen pilgrimage are important opportunities that can

strengthen the shared Islamic-revolutionary identity and introduce Iran as a cultural and spiritual reference in the region (Akhandi Nematabad & Moteqi, 2022).

The second opportunity is new media and cyberspace. Using social networks and cultural influencers can transmit Iran's messages to the youth and increase the country's cultural appeal. New media, with their wide reach and speed, have played a significant role in shaping public opinion, and Iran can elevate its soft power at the global level through smart use of this capacity (Hajimineh & Mahmoudi Yamin, 2023).

The third opportunity is strengthening the Resistance Axis. Continued popular support for resistance groups in the region has increased Iran's normative legitimacy and strengthened the country's strategic depth. The Resistance Axis, as a transnational network, has succeeded in transforming Iran into the center of gravity of resistance in West Asia, and this capacity can continue to solidify Iran's position in regional equations in the future (Abbasi et al., 2022).

The fourth opportunity is increasing scientific and technological interactions. Developing scientific and technological cooperation with like-minded countries can elevate Iran's soft power in the fields of knowledge and innovation. These collaborations not only elevate Iran's scientific standing but also function as a soft power tool, creating a foundation for establishing scientific-cultural networks between Iran and regional countries (Hosseinzadeh, 2023).

6.2. Threats

The first threat is the continuation of economic and political sanctions. Sanctions can limit Iran's capacity to implement cultural and scientific projects and prevent the expansion of international interactions. These limitations not only reduce Iran's economic capacity but also weaken the country's ability to portray cultural and normative messages (Salami et al., 2022).

The second threat is media competition and negative image-making. Western media, using new communication tools, attempt to distort Iran's image and reduce the country's normative legitimacy. This media competition can lead to distrust among parts of the global public opinion toward Iran's messages and reduce the country's cultural appeal (Sadat Hashemi, 2022).

The third threat is internal challenges. Economic problems, weaknesses in cultural management, and

limitations in media productions can reduce the appeal of Iran's soft power. In essence, internal weaknesses can render external opportunities ineffective and prevent Iran from fully utilizing its soft power capacities.

The fourth threat is regional geopolitical changes. Political changes in neighboring countries and efforts by external powers to weaken the Resistance Axis can pose a serious threat to Iran's soft power. These changes can lead to a reduction in regional convergence and limit the scope of Iran's influence (Mosavi & Qasemi, 2022).

7. Conclusion

Iran's soft power, from the beginning of the Islamic Revolution to the present, has been formed based on values and principles that distinguish this revolution. Justice-seeking, independence, support for the oppressed, and spiritual orientation are the most important components that have not only functioned as sources of normative legitimacy in the domestic arena but have also, at the regional and global levels, solidified Iran's image as a spiritual and normative power.

The Islamic Revolution has provided a foundation for the reproduction of Iran's soft power in various forms. The first important variable is public and cultural diplomacy. Iran, through accepting foreign students, holding scientific conferences, and supporting shared religious rituals such as the Arbaeen pilgrimage, has succeeded in transmitting the values of the revolution in a soft manner. These actions have not only strengthened the shared Islamic-revolutionary identity but have also introduced Iran as a cultural and spiritual reference among Muslim nations.

The second variable is media and normative narrative-building. Iranian international media outlets such as Press TV and Al-Alam have succeeded in presenting different narratives of regional developments and solidifying Iran's image as a supporter of justice and resistance. These media, by focusing on the values of the Islamic Revolution, have provided an alternative narrative against dominant Western narratives, emphasizing independence, justice, and spirituality. In essence, media have played a significant role in portraying Iran's revolutionary identity and strengthening the country's normative legitimacy.

The third variable is the resistance discourse. This discourse, as the most important source of Iran's soft power, has succeeded in strengthening the country's

normative legitimacy in the global Muslim public opinion. Iran's support for resistance groups in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, beyond the military dimension, has functioned as a cultural-ideological symbol, introducing Iran as a supporter of nations. The resistance discourse has succeeded in reflecting the values of the Islamic Revolution at the regional level and transforming Iran into a normative and order-making power.

The fourth variable is the role of charismatic leaders. Figures such as the late Commander Qasem Soleimani have succeeded in elevating the resistance discourse from a theoretical level to a practical one. Soleimani, through field diplomacy, direct connections with resistance groups, and cultural symbolism, has strengthened Iran's normative legitimacy at the regional level and introduced Iran as a moral and spiritual power. In summary, focusing on soft power variables shows that the Islamic Revolution has been the main source of production and reproduction of this power. The values of the revolution, media, public diplomacy, and the resistance discourse, all working together, have succeeded in solidifying Iran's positive image in regional public opinion and increasing the country's strategic depth. Therefore, Iran's soft power cannot be understood without its connection to the Islamic Revolution, as this revolution has been the main source of Iran's normative and cultural legitimacy in West Asia and has succeeded in transforming the country's soft power into a strategic tool in foreign policy.

Iran's strategic depth in West Asia should be viewed as a direct product of the interplay between the values of the Islamic Revolution and the application of soft power. The Islamic Revolution, by emphasizing principles such as justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed, has succeeded in creating a new identity in the Muslim world that gradually transformed into a source of Iran's normative legitimacy at the regional level. This normative legitimacy, when reinforced by cultural, religious, and media tools, has succeeded in establishing Iran's sustainable influence in various regional countries and increasing the country's strategic depth.

In Iraq, Iran, through religious and cultural diplomacy and shared rituals such as the Arbæen pilgrimage, has succeeded in strengthening the shared Shia identity and consolidating its social legitimacy among the Iraqi people. In addition, Iran's support for the Popular

Mobilization Forces against ISIS has provided a security deterrence dimension. This combination has enabled Iran to establish its position both at the popular and security levels in Iraq and increase its strategic depth in the country.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah, as Iran's strategic ally, is a prime example of the integration of soft and hard power. Iran, through media and cultural support, particularly the Al-Manar network, has succeeded in solidifying the resistance discourse in public opinion. At the same time, Hezbollah's military capability in confronting the Zionist regime has strengthened Iran's security deterrence. This combination has enabled Iran to establish both social legitimacy and security deterrence in Lebanon and increase its strategic depth in the country.

In Yemen, Iran has solidified its image as a supporter of oppressed nations through moral and political support for the Ansarullah movement. This soft support, combined with Ansarullah's military deterrence against external aggression, is another example of the integration of Iran's soft and hard power within the Resistance Axis. This combination has succeeded in strengthening Iran's position in the Arabian Peninsula and increasing the country's strategic depth.

Therefore, Iran's strategic depth in West Asia is not based solely on hard power but is grounded in normative legitimacy and cultural-ideological appeal. Iran's soft power has succeeded in solidifying the country's image in the public opinion of the Muslim world and creating a foundation for sustainable influence in regional countries. At the same time, the security and military backing has ensured the preservation of this normative legitimacy against external threats.

In summary, Iran's strategic depth in West Asia is the result of a multi-dimensional strategy that has succeeded in transmitting the values of the Islamic Revolution through cultural and media tools and, at the same time, establishing the necessary security deterrence. This strategy has enabled Iran to be recognized as an order-making power in the region and to consolidate its position in the political and security equations of West Asia.

The power of the Islamic Republic of Iran in West Asia cannot be explained solely in terms of hard power or soft power alone; rather, it must be viewed as a multi-dimensional power that has succeeded in transforming into an order-making actor in the region through the

integration of various components. This multi-dimensional power has its roots in the values of the Islamic Revolution and is reproduced through cultural, media, religious, and security tools.

On one hand, Iran's soft power, by emphasizing justice-seeking, independence, and support for the oppressed, has succeeded in consolidating the country's normative legitimacy in the public opinion of the Muslim world. This normative legitimacy, through public diplomacy, resistance media, and the Islamic Revolution discourse, has transformed Iran into a spiritual and normative power in the region. On the other hand, Iran's security and military backing has ensured the preservation of this normative legitimacy against external threats and enabled it to be sustained in regional countries.

The tangible examples of this multi-dimensional power are visible in the Resistance Axis. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, Iran has succeeded in increasing its strategic depth by combining soft power (cultural diplomacy, media, resistance discourse) and hard power (security deterrence and military support). This combination has not only consolidated Iran's position at the popular and social levels but has also succeeded in providing the necessary security deterrence against external threats. Iran's multi-dimensional power has also led to the creation of an alternative regional order. This order, based on the values of the Islamic Revolution and the resistance discourse, has stood against the desired order of Western powers. The Resistance Axis, as a cohesive network of like-minded actors, is a prime example of this order-making, having succeeded in creating both cultural-normative legitimacy and strengthening security deterrence.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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