

Original Paper

Educational Diplomacy of Islamic Republic of Iran as the Soft Power Strategy in the Middle East

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Abstract

Nowadays, many countries are trying to increase their soft power authority using the university communication facilities. Educational exchanges and the creation of university branches in different parts of the world, especially in countries where there are common cultural fields, give these countries the opportunity to interact with elites and students expand their influence. The university sector, as the most important and effective branch in creating the future of a country, will have a great impact on understanding and cultural alignment between nations.

In this regard, one of the important regions that have a lot of common cultural identity with the Islamic Republic of Iran is the Middle East region. This article aims to answer the question of how the Islamic Republic of Iran can use its academic capabilities as the educational diplomacy in order to promote its position as soft power in the Middle East. Accordingly, Iran can use the cultural capacities, the Persian language, the common background of civilization and the capability of its higher education, especially in the field of university exchanges to empower its soft power authority in the region.

Keywords

Education Diplomacy, Iran, Soft Power, Middle East

1. Introduction

The culture factor is the most stable and effective element among the foreign policy elements of countries including political, military, economic and cultural elements, which helps to achieve other goals. In this framework, cultural diplomacy forms an important aspect of the country's foreign policy (Schneider, 2010). Cultural diplomacy allows countries to directly establish a stable spiritual

relationship with the people of foreign lands, both ordinary people, and elites, for its political, economic, military, and security purposes. This diplomacy is especially applicable between nations that have a common culture and civilization (Tenkorang, 2019).

In the meantime, Middle East is very important in the cultural diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of Iran due to its presence in the geo-culture and civilization field of Iran (Dehshiri & Taheri, 2016).

The diplomacy that was used in the region, cultural diplomacy has a significant position. From the point of view of the Islamic Republic of Iran, common Iranian-Islamic identity, historical explanation establishing close cultural relations with middle east countries. Iran believes that the common culture has helped to develop friendly relations with these countries; it will create mutual understanding and regional cooperation (Wastnidge, 2015). The fact that cultural borders are wider than political borders allows the Islamic Republic of Iran to use these capacities to increase its soft power by using scientific and educational tools (Azadi et al., 2015).

However, it must be mentioned that despite the existence of common and deep connection between Iranians and the people of this region, and despite the signing of multiple cultural agreements between the parties, the level of cultural interaction of the Islamic Republic Iran's relations with countries require more attention (Ganbarloo, 2021). Ignoring cultural factors will cause Iran to lose golden opportunities in the region and reduce Iran's success rate with the presence of regional and trans-regional powers in the Middle East (Yazdani, 2020).

Different countries of the world have invested a lot on cultural and educational exchange programs, based on their cultural strength. One of the most important programs of cultural diplomacy in the field of education is to pay attention to the issue of attracting and exchanging foreign students in order to increase its soft power in other target countries while transferring its values to foreign academics and students (Lassegard, 2016).

On this basis, paying attention to the capacity of universities and the capacity of higher education in diplomacy is a very important factor in order to increase the soft power of countries. This is the same important theory for countries like Iran, which has considerable capacity in the university and scientific sectors to empower its soft power in the region (Dehshiri et al., 2016). As a critical regional player, the Islamic Republic of Iran has many scientific and cultural capacities for developing its soft power, and accordingly this factor pave the way for Iran to empower its authority conducting educational diplomacy.

2. Soft Power and Educational Diplomacy

According to the theory of constructivism, each country appears in the scene of the international community with a "certain identity" which is the product of their beliefs, values, norms, ideology, territory, etc. (Fosnot, 2013). The people of each country, by identifying themselves within certain territorial borders, carry the same values, norms, beliefs and ideologies that separate them from the people of the neighboring land who lack those values and beliefs (Shannon & Kowert, 2012).

In fact, Constructivism Theory extends the change of identities at the structural level and creation of new beneficial identities in common areas respectively. It mostly refers to the explanation of what is created in the international space due to the emergence of these new identities (Yoders, 2014). However, Joseph Nye's soft power approach has an explicit reference to build or change new identities using new tools such as cultural and educational diplomacy in the international system (Nye, 1990).

The concept of soft power aims to gain the consent of other actors through the use of various factors rather than economic and military pressure. In other words, soft power is the ability of a country to present its interests and power to other nations to impose their goals to them indirectly (Gill & Huang, 2023).

The interaction of constructivism theory and soft power is to find the authority and objectivity of "humans, their beliefs and opinions" to undergo identity redefinition and changes in peoples' behavioral priorities (Guzzini, 2013). The constructivism, which tries to explain international events by using identity factors and domestic culture resources of countries, is the best and most suitable approach to understand the relationship between the two concepts of "identity" and "soft power" (Feklyunina, 2016).

Therefore, the most important and effective way to get to know the culture and customs of a country and remove misconceptions is to attract people from other countries to be among the people of your country and socialize with them. From this point of view, cultural exchanges as a part of intercultural communication can play an important role in exporting culture and soft power (Tella, 2021).

Education and university can play a key role in building identities or changing constructed identities and enable the country to fulfill national interests and produce and reconstruct such an attractive and representative culture that even affects transnational audiences (Baxter, 200; Gordon & Whitchurch, 2010).

Regarding the relationship between education and politics, it should be noted that the educational system, in addition to acting as a precondition for the formation of the political system, is also considered a determining element in its implementation and continuation (Persson, 2015; Saltman, 2018).

The educational system with the functions of education for the progress and continuity of the society and the transfer of culture as the hidden goal of the educational system seeks to transfer its national identity to its audience (Youdell, 2010).

In this regard, accepting a student is considered as important cultural exchange that can have an important impact on the transfer of the culture, norms and values of the destination country due to the longer duration of stay, association and deeper communication as the hidden tool of soft power strategy (Bohman & Borglin, 2014). Nowadays, prestigious American universities are one of the tools and examples of the soft power of this country, which play a significant role in transferring American values to foreign students, some of whom become political and government officials of their country after graduation. In fact, American universities indirectly export the value, cultural and political

preferences of the United States to other countries (Luqiu & McCarthy 2019 and Ostashova, 2020). Accordingly, the influence of the soft power of education itself in identity formation is so significant that after the end of World War II and defeating Japan, the United States of America changed the Japanese education system tried to weaken the power of Japan's coherent identity during educational reforms (Yasushi & McConnell, 2015). Nowadays, it has become one of the main priorities of the policy makers, so that universities have moved towards this diplomacy in order to gain international prestige and image, to raise the quality of education, reputation, and transfer social-cultural values in the form of soft power (Adam & Lerg, 2015).

3. Soft Power and Educational Diplomacy of Iran

Iran's Islamic revolution is based on Islamic ideology and culture in the era of ideologies aims to propose a new approach in the field of foreign policy and international relations. To do so, Iran uses culture as the best tool in its foreign policy along with military power and economy, and applies new tools and policies to influence other nations and countries without war and violence (Soltani & Amiri, 2010). One of the most important of these tools is "educational diplomacy" and the most important element of it is scientific and educational exchanges, including "attracting and accepting foreign students" (İnan, 2022).

In education diplomacy, accepting of a large number of international students and researchers in the countries is considered as a social indicator of the soft power of the governments, leading to mutual understanding and recognition between the countries (Arslan & Sezgin, 2023). Educational and student exchanges have helped to create an attractive and positive image of a country and improve the hope and prospects of the country to achieve desirable results (Wei & Hu, 2018).

Among the four elements of the national goals of Islamic Republic of Iran including power, security, development, and promotion of Islamic Iranian culture and the revolution values in other countries, the last one is the most prominent one respectively. Educational policy of Iran aims to train international students who have a culture similar to Iran's culture (in the sense of knowledge, beliefs, values, insights, norms, customs) and act as individuals after returning to their countries to support the interests of Iran in destination countries, mainly in Middle (Akbar, 2023).

In general, the phenomenon of international students is considered as one of the important and effective variables in the higher education policy, and it is the source of various scientific, social and cultural activities which considered as the soft power policy in the form of educational diplomacy (Ryan, 2012).

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The presence of foreign students in the country provides a suitable opportunity to present a decent and appropriate picture of Iran and provides the necessary conditions to reach an agreement on common

global values which considered a brilliant opportunity to transfer Islamic revolution values (Azadi et al., 2015).

In is regard, it is believed that the policy of accepting foreign students in Iran is considered as one of the most important strategies of cultural exchanges in the Republic of Iran and is considered one of the most important tools of cultural diplomacy in the form of educational policy (Dehshiri & Faghihi, 2019).

Iran has followed a cultural pattern in attracting international students since 1980. This means that promoting the goals of the Islamic revolution in the target countries, which are mainly Islamic and Arab countries, has been a priority. The purpose of accepting foreign students is to support talented young people from Islamic countries, and provide a suitable platform for more and better recognition of the Islamic Republic, to introduce, publish and develop Iranian Islamic culture and values (Majidi & Shojaei, 2021).

By taking advantage of its soft power sources including ideology, scientific materials, Iranian culture, and general Iranian thoughts, along with giving various scholarships and suitable advertisements, Iran provides the foundation for the presence of foreign students in the country. During their studies, foreign students take Iranian cultural and ideology and perspectives and they play as the role of cultural ambassadors and sources of enlightenment in their own countries (Dahshiri & Taheri, 2015).

The internationalization of higher education and, as a result, the acceptance of international students from destination countries, mainly from the Middle East can create the promotion of national identity and empower legitimacy and global image and international dignity by taking advantage of the country's educational potential by accepting foreign students (Rezaie Mehr et al., 2020).

The strategy of attracting international students in Iran is considered as a symbolic cultural strategy whose purpose is to present a peaceful atmosphere in Iran; in a way that even students from other countries can study in a really calm and secured country. In fact, the purpose of this approach is to reveal the positive image and diplomatic position of Iran (Molaei, 2018).

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