

# Battling for hearts and minds: Sources of Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi soft power in the Middle East

Fatma Aslı Kelkitli 

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Istanbul Arel University, Istanbul, Turkey

## Correspondence

Fatma Aslı Kelkitli, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Istanbul Arel University, Istanbul, Turkey.

Email: [fatmaaslikelkitli@gmail.com](mailto:fatmaaslikelkitli@gmail.com) and [aslikelkitli@arel.edu.tr](mailto:aslikelkitli@arel.edu.tr)

## Abstract

This article examines the sources of Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi soft power in the Middle East through the utilization of Joseph Nye's soft power concept. The study is based on three claims. The first claim argues that there exists an increasing discrepancy between espoused values and actual practices in Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia at home, which may undermine their soft power. The second claim contends that cognizant of the fact that the Palestinian cause is a major concern for most of the Middle Eastern people, all of the three states pursue an active foreign policy to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians. Finally, the last claim upholds that Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been benefitting, albeit to varying extents, from high culture products such as education and popular culture products such as mass entertainment and tourism to appeal to the public in the Middle East.

## KEYWORDS

Iran, Middle East, Saudi Arabia, soft power, Turkey

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The slow but steady emergence of a multipolar world order, the gradual disengagement of the United States from the Middle East, and the waning leverage of traditional powers of the Middle East such as Egypt in shaping regional events in the wake of the turmoil of the Arab Spring paved the way for the exhibition of assertive and dynamic foreign policy behavior by other regional actors, namely Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, these three states did

not eschew utilizing hard power instruments such as military operations and embargoes in the face of perceived threats, growing security risks, and prospective opportunities.

The infiltration of terrorist elements and increasing numbers of refugees into Turkish territory through the Syrian and Iraqi borders, as well as the expanding sway of the People's Defense Units (YPG), the organization that was in close association with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Syria, has induced Turkey since 2016 to launch four cross-border military operations in Syria and to stage two cross-border operations in Iraq. Furthermore, Turkey occasionally resorted to air campaigns against the PKK targets in Iraq and Syria and built military bases and forward-operation posts in northern Iraq and northern Syria to weaken PKK's presence along the Turkish border (Çevik, 2022, p. 2).

Turkey also set its sights beyond its immediate neighborhood and backed up the United Nations (UN)-recognized government in Libya against the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar and signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the former on the delimitation of maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean in November 2019. The deal was followed by a security agreement, which made possible the deployment of Turkish military advisers and troops on Libyan soil (Benli Altunışık, 2020, p. 99). Turkey's military intervention changed the course of the conflict in Libya as it brought out the withdrawal of Haftar's forces from key towns in western Libya (Aydıntaşbaş & Bianca, 2021, p. 10). Turkey also did not hesitate to support Qatar when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a diplomatic and economic embargo on the country in June 2017. Turkey augmented the number of its military personnel in its base in Doha established in 2015 and clinched a military training cooperation accord with Qatar (Oztig, 2021, p. 109).

Iran, similar to Turkey, has been engaged with Iraq and Syria militarily. Iran sent advisory mission forces to Syria at the request of the Syrian regime and came to the assistance of the Iraqi government in its fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Dehshiri & Shahmoradi, 2020, p. 211). Iran's special bonds with the nonstate actors of the Middle East such as Hezbollah and Hashd Al-Shaabi and its alleged provision of weapons, military equipment, and funds to the Houthi movement in Yemen have also raised its influence in the Middle East (Adel, 2021, pp. 98–99).

Iran has also embraced an offensive naval strategy in the Persian Gulf since 2016, which strained its relations with its Gulf neighbors as well as with the United States and some European and Asian states. The new strategy encompassed the deployment and use of missiles, the development of new air defense systems such as drones in support of naval operations, and the conduct of military exercises which included offensive attacks (Dolatabadi & Kamrava, 2022, pp. 13–16). In accordance with this scheme, Iran seized American gunboats and British, Greek, and South Korean tankers, shot down an American drone over the Strait of Hormuz, harassed American warships, and held joint naval maneuvers with China and Russia (Dolatabadi & Kamrava, 2022, p. 12; pp. 15–17). There existed also allegations that Iran took part in sabotage activities against commercial vessels or offshore energy infrastructures in the region (Mazzucco, 2022).

Saudi Arabia began to make use of hard power tools largely in the course of the insurrections of the Arab Spring. Military units from Saudi Arabia and the UAE as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsula Shield Force were deployed in Bahrain in March 2011 to quell the uprisings against the ruling Al-Khalifa regime. Saudi Arabia started Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis in Yemen in March 2015 at the request of the then Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi with the contribution of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Sudan, and the UAE. Finally, Saudi Arabia spearheaded the June 2017

land, sea, and air blockade on Qatar to punish Doha because of its close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) parties across the region and its growing ties with Iran (Benli Altunışık, 2020, p. 97).

The offensive naval strategy pursued by Iran in the Persian Gulf brought out a Saudi response in the form of carrying out naval modernization initiatives and partaking in military drills with the United States. Riyadh purchased frigates from the United States, combat ships from Spain, and fast patrol boats from France (Thievon, 2023, p. 15). The Saudi Arabian Military Industries, in a joint venture with the Spanish shipbuilding firm Navantia, is also on the way to the construction of Avante-class corvettes (Binnie, 2022). Saudi Arabia participated in the naval exercises with the United States Central Command and even commanded the US-led Combined Task Force 152 on 29 August 2023 to protect maritime trade in and around the Strait of Hormuz (Divsallar, 2023).

Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia while vying for influence in the Middle East employed also soft power instruments to raise their profile. This study examines the sources of Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi soft power in the Middle East via the utilization of Joseph Nye's soft power conceptualization, which will be explicated in the following part.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” in a series of articles and in a book penned in the final days of the Cold War. Amidst debate of a prospective Japanese era in international politics in the 21st century, Nye contended that despite its increasing economic strength Japan still fell behind the United States with regard to co-optive/soft power (Nye, 1990a, p. 182). He defined soft power as “getting others to want what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment” and listed ideology, institutions, and culture as its main sources (Nye, 1990b, pp. 166–167). Nye underlined that soft power carried as much weight as hard power as it enhanced the legitimacy and allure of a state in the eyes of other states, which facilitated persuasion and emulation (Nye, 1990c, p. 32).

Nye's notion of soft power resembled to some extent Edward Hallett Carr's power over opinion (Carr, 1946, p. 132) and Steven Lukes' third dimension of power (Lukes, 2005, p. 11). Hans Morgenthau also emphasized the significance of a state's political philosophy, political policies, and political institutions in attracting the interest of other nations (Morgenthau, 2006, p. 162). Yet, positive attraction, persuasion, along with agenda setting which were regarded legitimate by other parties were stressed more strongly in Nye's concept of soft power (Nye, 2021, pp. 201–202).

Nye further elaborated on the sources of soft power in his book *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* in 2004. He pointed out that the soft power of a country stemmed from its political values, foreign policies, and culture. Nye pointed out three types of political values. These were values a state adopted at home, values a state championed in international institutions, and values it adhered to in its foreign policy (Nye, 2004, p. 14). In order for a state to boost its soft power, its domestic and foreign policy practices should comply with its values.

Nye highlighted that a state may expand its soft power capacity when its foreign policy choices are evaluated as legitimate and morally driven by other states. Policies, which were based on inclusive and far-sighted definitions of national interest as well the means that took into consideration international concerns to attain them, appealed more to the target audience

compared to the policies that took a narrow and myopic perspective and utilized unilateral means (Nye, 2004, p. 61).

The final source of soft power was the level of attractiveness of a state's culture both to the elites and to the broader population in other states. Nye drew a distinction between high culture such as art, education, and literature, which charmed the elites, and popular culture which focused on mass entertainment and thus had the capacity to reach out to a wider audience (Nye, 2004, p. 44).

This paper examines the soft power rivalry between Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East by making use of Nye's notion of soft power. Although liberal American values inspired Nye to put forth the concept originally, he acknowledged in his later writings that the power of attraction was not inherently liberal or American, and soft power depended on the minds and perceptions of the target audiences (Nye, 2021, p. 201). Accordingly, the International Relations (IR) literature has witnessed the emergence of works, which concentrated on soft power strategies of non-Western great powers such as China (Gill & Huang, 2006; Shambaugh, 2015; Wang, 2008) and Russia (Dorosh & Voiat, 2022; Efremenko et al., 2021; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015) since the mid-2000s. Yet, the soft power endeavors of non-Western middle powers that aim to enhance status in their surrounding regions is still an under-researched matter in IR literature which will be examined in this study.

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

This article is a descriptive-analytical study that scrutinizes three cases on a comparative basis via the utilization of Nye's soft power concept. This method is useful for this survey as it provides detailed information pertaining to soft power sources of middle powers through an in-depth examination of Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi examples. Moreover, it enables the application of a Western-originated theory to a Middle Eastern context and reveals to what extent these three cases adhere to the original theory's major precepts.

Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are middle powers<sup>1</sup> in the Middle East with predominantly Muslim populations. They have demonstrated a high degree of interest and involvement in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring. Yet, these three states differ largely in terms of the political models they offer to the Middle East. Turkey positions itself as a conservative democracy that pays attention to the grievances of the Islamic community across the globe. Iran defines itself as a religious democracy, which carries out a resolute all-out Islamic resistance against the 'oppressors' both in the Middle East and in the wider world. Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy, projects the image of a flag-bearer of moderate Islam against the encroachments of radical Islamic movements. Therefore, the article draws on John Stuart Mill's System of Logic/Most Similar Systems Design with the political model selected as the independent variable.

This study is based on three claims. The first claim avers that there exists an increasing discrepancy between espoused values and actual practices in all of the three states at home, which may undermine their soft power. The second claim argues that cognizant of the fact that the Palestinian cause is a major concern for most of the people in the Middle East, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia pursue an active foreign policy to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians. Finally, the third claim maintains that all of the three states have been benefitting from the products of high culture such as education, and popular culture such as mass entertainment and tourism to appeal to the public in the Middle East.

There are a few works in IR literature that appraise the soft power potential of Turkey (Benli Altunışık, 2008; Guida & Göksel, 2018; Omid, 2021), Iran (Wastnidge, 2015), and Saudi Arabia (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012) in the Middle East. Comparative studies, which compare and contrast the soft power capacity of these three states, however, are scarce notwithstanding Mabon's book (Mabon, 2016) and Ciftci and Tezcür's article (Ciftci & Tezcür, 2016). Mabon concentrated on the soft power rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whereas Ciftci and Tezcür investigated the public opinion dimension of soft power competition between Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. This article, different from the former, adds Turkey to the equation as Ankara has proven to be a formidable player in the Middle East that uses both hard power and soft power instruments to raise its stakes following the Arab Spring. Furthermore, it focuses on, unlike the study of Ciftci and Tezcür, which throws light on the outcomes, sources of Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi soft power in the Middle East.

#### **4 | CONSERVATIVE DEMOCRACY, RELIGIOUS DEMOCRACY, AND MODERATE ISLAM: THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN THE CHAMPIONED VALUES AND ACTIONS**

Turkey has been ruled by successive Justice and Development Party (JDP) governments since November 2002. In its first decade of governance, the JDP underscored its commitment to the improvement of the democratic credentials of Turkey while preserving the traditional Islamic values of the society. Turkey's desire to kick off accession negotiations with the European Union (EU) coupled with the JDP's struggle to limit the power of bureaucracy and military in Turkish political life precipitated the realization of political reforms, which provided progress in human rights, rule of law, and gender equality.

Turkey pursued a democracy promotion agenda in the Middle East in the mid-2000s. Turkish officials, including the then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, stated on numerous occasions that democratization was key to the establishment of peace and stability in the region (Oğuzlu, 2007, p. 94). A Turkish academic, Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, became the Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in December 2004 in a bid decided by vote for the first time. Turkey hosted the first ministerial conference on women's role within the OIC in November 2006; Erdoğan and the then State Minister for Women and Family Affairs Nimet Çubukçu both stressed the importance of enhancement of women's role in the political, economic, and social spheres of life (OIC, 2006, pp. 1–2).

When the waves of Arab Spring swept the Middle East in the early 2010s, Turkey lent considerable support to the MB movements and called on the long-standing autocratic leaders of the region to pay heed to the pleas for democracy. The JDP organized many workshops between 2011 and 2013 to train Brotherhood-leaning groups in political campaigning, political party program preparation, communication strategy development, and women and youth engagement (Jabbour, 2022, p. 9). The JDP's democratization from below experience might be an inspiration for the Arab world and might strengthen Turkey's regional position. Yet, domestic developments in Turkey beginning from Spring 2013 have exposed the increasing inconsistency between words and deeds.

The Gezi Park demonstrations, which started in late May 2013 as protests against an urban development project planned to remove one of the rare green areas of Istanbul to re-erect an Ottoman-era building in the form of a shopping center, transformed into a civil

unrest that lasted until early June. The protestors criticized the government on the grounds of lacking public consultation, violating democratic rights, and applying media censorship. The incident elicited a harsh response from the government, which resulted in significant backsliding in freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The July 15, 2016 coup d'état attempt of the Fethullah Gülen congregation and the ensuing declaration of a state of emergency that remained in force for 2 years further limited the fundamental rights. Moreover, the presidential system was inaugurated in July 2018, while centralizing power in the hands of the president to the detriment of the Parliament, increased executive control over the judiciary. A severe setback for women's rights transpired as well when Turkey in March 2021 withdrew from the Council of Europe's Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence although it had become the first country to sign the Convention a decade ago (International Commission of Jurists, 2021). All in all, Turkey seemed to drift away from the democratic ideals it had advocated for a long time.

Iran presented itself as a religious democracy founded on Islamic, national, and revolutionary values with an emphasis on the protection of human rights and consolidation of legal and social justice (Khameni, 2023). Tehran accentuated in its constitution of December 1979 that it supported the worldwide emancipatory struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor. The regional upshot of this counter-hegemonic ideology came out as a defiant foreign policy, which challenged the strategies of the United States and its allies, especially Israel, in the Middle East.

The democratic features of the political system in Iran have eroded continuously in the last 15 years. Mass protests that erupted in the country due to the alleged electoral fraud in the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections were suppressed with strict measures. From then on, the ruling regime has routinized the exercise of disproportionate use of force against protests even during the presidency of relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2022a). Furthermore, the mass disqualification of popular candidates by the unelected Guardian Council during the 2021 presidential elections engendered record-low voter turnout (about 49%) (Hafezi, 2021), which demonstrated the dissatisfaction of the Iranian people with the current political atmosphere in the country.

Gender equality in Iran is way behind the global standards despite the regime's emphasis on legal and social justice. Iran has not acceded to any international agreement on the elimination of discrimination and violence against women (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2022a). Women do not have the same rights as men in political representation, marriage, divorce, higher education, inheritance, or travel. The strict enforcement of hijab and chastity law by President Ebrahim Raisi in July 2022, which brought more restrictions to women in public life (Tayebi, 2022), and the death of Mahsa Amini under the custody of morality police in Tehran in September 2022 attested further the precarious conditions of women and the ailing situation of democracy in Iran. The Bill to Support the Family by Promoting the Culture of Chastity and Hijab which was approved by the Iranian Parliament in September 2023 but has been sent back by the Guardian Council in October 2023 for the revision of formal deficiencies will put additional pressure on the Iranian women who defy compulsory veiling as they may face prison terms up to 10-year, flogging, high fines, travel restrictions, and deprivation of online access (UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2023).

Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), who was appointed as the crown prince of Saudi Arabia by his father King Salman in June 2017 and has become since then the de facto ruler of the Kingdom, declared in October 2017 that Saudi Arabia was returning to moderate Islam and would destroy extremism (Bruton, 2017). Arabia is the birthplace of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. It is also home to Islam's holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. The Saudi dynasty in an alliance with the conservative Wahhabi sect since the foundation of the state capitalizes on these advantages to promote its version of Islam. However, strong criticisms coming from the Western world, especially from American politicians such as Hillary Clinton regarding the Kingdom's financial contribution to radical Islamic terrorist groups (Independent, 2016), led Riyadh to scale down the export of its religious ideology and to announce that it would embrace principles of tolerant Islam. In line with this reasoning, Saudi Arabia restrained the activities of the Committee for Commanding Right and Prohibiting Vice, known as religious police, and decided to stop funding foreign mosques (Sputnik International, 2020). Yet, the police retained the right to carry out online surveillance of citizens suspected of moral degradation. In conformity with the public decency law introduced in September 2019, Saudi men and women might be detained for dress code violations (Project on Middle East Democracy, 2021).

Saudi women were granted the right to vote and to be candidates for the first time in the December 2015 municipal elections during the reign of King Abdullah (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, 2022b). Saudi Arabia also eased some of the restrictions on women under the leadership of MbS. They obtained the right to drive cars and go to cinemas, concerts, and sports events. Women over 21 could receive passports and travel abroad without the permission of a guardian and could work at some low-profile jobs although to get married or to have certain healthcare, they still needed the approval of a guardian (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

King Salman and MbS did not tolerate dissent, however, as proven by the treatment given to the Saudi citizens who maintained a critical attitude toward the wrongdoings of the ruling regime. Jamal Khashoggi, a columnist in the Washington Post who was critical of the human rights violations and censorship of the Saudi government, was assassinated at the Istanbul consulate of Saudi Arabia in October 2018. The UN probed the death of Khashoggi and issued a report, which concluded that his killing was premeditated and Saudi Arabia was responsible for the execution (UN General Assembly Human Rights Council, 2019, p. 3). Furthermore, Riyadh pursued a policy of intimidation and detention toward women activists who tried to bring together other women to mobilize against some restrictions such as imprisonment and mistreatment of political prisoners and the guardian system (Al-Rasheed, 2021, p. 264).

Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia encounter difficulties at home in living up to the values they promote. While democratic aspects of the political systems in Turkey and Iran retrograde dramatically and steadily, Saudi Arabia's version of moderate Islam excluded tolerance toward dissident voices. This situation coupled with these states' belligerent attitudes in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, may undercut their soft power in the region as demonstrated by the results of the Arab Opinion Index 2022, a survey conducted in 2022 in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha. According to the survey, 72% of the respondents supported a democratic political system and 71% of them uttered that democracy was the most suitable system of governance for their home countries (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023). Therefore, aware of these shortcomings for some time, all of the three states have elevated the Palestinian cause to their foreign policy priority list to continue to appeal to the Middle Eastern populations.

## 5 | THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE: ENDEAVORS FOR POLITICAL RESOLUTION

Seventy-six percent of the respondents of the Arab Opinion Index 2022 stated that the Palestinian cause was a concern for all Arabs (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023). Having taken into account this established fact for many years, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia embarked upon initiatives to seek a political settlement to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or to relieve the grievances of Palestinians at the least to gain popularity in the region.

Turkey has taken an increasing interest in the Palestinian issue since the mid-2000s. The January 2006 election in Palestine, which brought to power Hamas, an offshoot of the Egyptian MB, had prompted apprehension in the Middle East Quartet as Hamas denied the existence of Israel. Therefore, the Quartet conditioned the extension of foreign aid to the Palestine National Authority (PNA) upon Hamas' recognition of Israel, its commitment to nonviolence, and its recognition of all previous agreements between Israel and the PNA. Turkey viewed Hamas as the elected representative of the Palestinian people and tried to persuade it to comply with the conditions of the Quartet (Ertosun, 2017, p. 210).

Israel's Operation Cast Lead of December 2008–January 2009, which gave rise to many civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, became a milestone for Turkey's Palestine policy. In the aftermath of the incident, Turkey changed its policy of following a balanced course between Israel and the PNA in favor of the PNA and resorted to a policy of exposing Israel's disproportionate use of force against the civilians (Bayraktar, 2019, p. 38). This development strained relations with Israel progressively and led to the Davos crisis of January 2009 and the Blue Marmara Flotilla raid of May 2010. Turkey helped the PNA become more visible in the international area by supporting the UN proposal to elevate Palestine's status to nonmember observer state in November 2012 and by backing up Palestine's admission to the Interpol in September 2017. Turkey also continued to provide humanitarian aid to the residents of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

The new turn in Turkey's foreign policy sparked controversies with the United States occasionally, especially when Ankara considered some of Washington's decisions damaging to the Middle East Peace Process. When President Donald Trump publicized on December 6, 2017, that the United States would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and would move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the OIC held an extraordinary summit upon the initiation of Turkey and adopted a resolution which underlined that the move would disregard and provoke the feelings of the Muslim world (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). Moreover, the UN General Assembly approved on December 21, 2017, the resolution ES-10/19 introduced by Turkey and Yemen, which highlighted that the decision of the United States was null and void (UN General Assembly, 2017). Turkey criticized the US decision to curb financial assistance to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018a) as well as the decision to close the Office of the Palestine Liberation Organization (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018b). Finally, Trump's peace plan of January 2020, which envisaged a series of Palestinian enclaves surrounded by an enlarged Israel, which would also keep East Jerusalem, provoked the ire of Erdoğan who stated that Turkey would never accept the proposed plan, which would destroy Palestine and hijack Jerusalem (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, 2020).

Turkey's pro-Palestine foreign policy line, although complicated by its relations with Israel and the United States, earned it some credit among the Palestinians according to the results of a



report released by the Arab Barometer in May 2023. Turkey was enunciated as the most favored external player (69%) by the Palestinians living in the West Bank including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, followed by China (34%) and Iran (30%) (Shikaki, 2023, p. 63). Yet, the rest of the Arab world was ambivalent regarding Turkey's standing concerning the Palestinian issue as according to the Arab Opinion Index of 2022, 43% of the respondents evaluated Turkish policy toward Palestine positively while 41% of them delivered an opinion in the negative direction (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023).

Iran has considered the Palestinian issue as an example of injustice and oppression since the early days of the Islamic Republic and called on the Islamic world to pay more attention to the plight of the Palestinians. In May 1990, the Iranian Parliament ratified the Law to Support the Islamic Revolution of the Palestinian People to assign ministries, public institutions, and state-affiliated foundations to extend political, financial, and educational help to the Palestinian cause (Alavi, 2020, p. 107). Tehran has been convening international Intifada conferences since 1991 on an occasional basis to which representatives of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad attended along with the delegates of Muslim countries and Muslim NGO members (Samii, 2006). Iran, similar to Turkey, embraced Hamas' election victory of 2006, as Hamas was seen as part of the resistance bloc owing to its refusal to recognize Israel. Shortly after Operation Cast Lead, Iran also organized an international conference in support of Palestine and the Iranian Parliament ratified an act, which set 18 January as Gaza Day (Alavi, 2020, p. 122). Furthermore, Tehran set up the Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza to build housing units, schools, and mosques and to reconstruct a hospital and Gaza's university campus (Aarabi, 2021).

Iran has been skeptical of the peace proposals put forth for the resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict since the early 1990s. While Turkey opted for a two-state solution, Iran argued that any solution that recognized the Israeli state would threaten the security and stability of the Middle East (Kardas, 2011). Accordingly, Iran became quite critical of Trump's peace plan and the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Seyyed Abbas Mousavi dubbed it as the “treason of the century” (Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). Iran introduced its own peace plan in November 2019, which included the enforcement of the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland and the conduct of a national referendum among the people of Palestine of all creeds who inhabited the land before the issuance of the Balfour Declaration (UN Security Council, 2019, p. 4).

Iran's continuous and unwavering support to the Palestinian cause helped the country to transcend sectarian limitations. Yet, Tehran's obvious unwillingness to recognize the existence of Israel along with the difficulties of the execution of its peace plan might turn the tide against it as proven by the results of the Arab Opinion Index of 2022. The survey revealed that only 31% of the respondents gauged Iranian policy toward Palestine positively while 52% of them viewed it negatively (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023). Moreover, Tehran was viewed less favorably by the Palestinians (30%) compared to Turkey (69%) based on the results of the Arab Barometer Palestine Report of May 2023 (Shikaki, 2023, p. 63).

Saudi Arabia, similar to Iran, presented a peace plan in February 2002 to untie the Palestinian–Israeli knot. The plan anticipated full normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to 1967 borders. In March 2002, during the Beirut Summit of the Arab League, the Arab Peace Initiative based on the Saudi proposal was accepted (Podeh, 2018, p. 574). However, both Israel and the United States rejected the initiative due to its call for the return of displaced Palestinians (Kamrava, 2013, p. 162). Riyadh, different from Ankara and Tehran, reacted positively to the Trump peace plan and advised

Israel and the PNA to discuss the proposal and reach a compromise (Abdelaziz, 2020). Saudi Arabia's attitude coupled with its behind-the-scenes normalization attempts with Israel might have caused its slide down to fifth place (24%) after Turkey, China, Iran, and Russia in the list of external players perceived favorably by the Palestinians based on the results of the Arab Barometer Palestine Report of May 2023 (Shikaki, 2023, p. 63).

Saudi Arabia makes good use of the organs of the OIC to position itself as an important contributor to the Palestinian cause. Riyadh is a member of the al-Quds Committee and Ministerial Contact Group on the Question of Palestine. Although Iran is also a member of the former and Turkey takes part in the latter, their impact on these structures remains low due to Saudi Arabia's political and economic influence over some members (Egypt, Jordan, Morocco) as well its financial contribution to the al-Quds Fund and its Waqf.

The Israeli–Palestinian issue constituted one of the significant aspects of the foreign policy designs of Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia with regard to the Middle East. Turkey worked actively to ameliorate the perceived injustices inflicted upon the Palestinians while both Iran and Saudi Arabia came up with their separate peace proposal for the resolution of the conflict. Although none of the three states was able to bring out a permanent settlement to the conflict, their efforts augmented their visibility in the eyes of the Middle Eastern public, which was further bolstered via the export of their cultural products to the region.

## 6 | ATTEMPTS TOWARD CULTURAL DIFFUSION: HIGHER EDUCATION, MASS ENTERTAINMENT, AND TOURISM

Turkey has utilized higher education as a high culture product extensively since the early 2010s. Turkey rebranded its Great Student Exchange Project of the early 1990s as Turkey Scholarships in 2012 under the aegis of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) by increasing the number of beneficiary countries and expanding its scope. The students originating from the MENA received 23% of 4316 scholarships at the undergraduate and graduate levels in 2022 (YTB, 2022, p. 38). Apart from the bursars, Turkish universities host 144,776 students from the MENA according to the 2023 figures (Council of Higher Education, 2023). Moreover, affiliates of some state institutions such as the Turkey Diyanet Foundation (TDV) supported higher education institutions abroad. Islamic University of Gaza in Palestine where 160 students studied became one of them (TDV, 2022, p. 24).

Turkey welcomed academics from the MENA via the Mevlana Exchange Programme and bilateral MoUs. Iranian (365), Syrian (318), and Egyptian (127) academics formed the majority of the incoming researchers from the region (Council of Higher Education, 2021). The academic ranking of Turkish higher education institutions, however, did not augur well. Three Turkish universities appeared in the 401–500 band in Times Higher Education's World University Rankings 2023 list (Times Higher Education, 2023), one Turkish university featured in the 401–500 band in QS World University Rankings 2023 list (QS Top Universities, 2023), and one Turkish university found its way into the 401–500 band in CWTS Leiden Ranking (2023). These results may divert brilliant students and academics of the MENA away from Turkey, which may harm its soft power potential in the future.

Turkish television series, widely watched by the Middle Eastern viewers have been instrumental to enhance soft power capacity of Turkey since the mid-2000s. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents from the 16 Middle Eastern states<sup>2</sup> avowed that they watched Turkish

television series in a study published by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) in January 2014 (Akgün & Senyücel Gündoğar, 2014, p. 23). The final episode of the popular Turkish drama *Silver* was watched by 85 million people throughout the Middle East (Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013, p. 2364). The Saudi MBC Group had broadcasted more than 50 Turkish serials in the MENA region (Guida & Göksel, 2018, p. 156) until March 2018 when the Company removed all the Turkish content from its channels following the Saudi–Turkish rift over Qatar. Yet, the Middle Eastern people's interest in Turkish television series persisted. Until the revocation of the MBC's decision in October 2022, the Middle Eastern audience watched the serials on Netflix, YouTube, illegal websites, or from the websites of the Turkish television networks (Berg, 2023, pp. 36–37).

The successful blending of traditional values with contemporary lifestyles won favor of the Middle Eastern people. The educated, independent, strong-willed female characters of these serials who hewed out a career for themselves while also taking care of their families appealed to the Middle Eastern women. The historical dramas aired on Turkish Radio and Television Corporation, the national public broadcaster, as well as on television channels of government-leaning businesspeople, which adopted a counter-hegemonic narrative embellished with Islamic parables and portrayed Turkish people in the role of heroes stroke a chord with the Middle Eastern men (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013, p. 18).

The Turkish movies, albeit to a lesser extent compared to the serials, also aroused interest in the Middle Eastern viewers. The thrillers *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* and the *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*, the epic action film *Conquest: 1453*, and the biopic *Bergen* recorded some success at the box office. *Bergen*, which was based on the tragic life story of a famous Arabesque singer (Belgin Sarılmışer-Bergen) of the 1980s who was killed by her ex-husband in 1989 made a hit with the Gulf states. The movie's realistic reflection of the gender divide, domestic violence, and femicide in Turkey gripped the female audience of the Gulf as they were able to relate some of the problems the heroine faced on screen to their experiences in their home countries (Cengiz, 2022). The increasing reception of Turkish movies in the MENA also instigated the prominent movie distributor company, Empire Entertainment, to partner with the Istanbul-based entertainment firm BG Film in September 2022 to produce and distribute Turkish movies across the region (Arab News, 2022).

The growing interest in Turkish television series and movies motivated the Middle Eastern people to visit Turkey (Yezdani & İzci, 2015), which became another significant product of popular culture that contributed to the expansion of Turkish soft power. The signing of visa exemption agreements with Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, and Tunisia facilitated this process. According to the statistics from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, more than eight million tourists from the MENA visited Turkey between 2007 and 2022 (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023). Istanbul, Aegean, and Mediterranean sunny spots, towns on the Black coast, as well as cities of cultural importance such as Bursa, Konya, and Van welcomed many visitors from the region.

Iran, similar to Turkey, utilized higher education as a high culture instrument to diffuse its soft power in the Middle East. Tehran retained some potential in the educational field as there existed three universities in the 301–400 band and seven universities in the 401–500 band in Times Higher Education's World University Rankings 2023 list (Times Higher Education, 2023), one Iranian university ranked in the 301–400 band, and another one ranked in the 401–500 band in QS World University Rankings 2023 list (QS Top Universities, 2023). Iran also had its share of one university in the 101–200 band, one university in the 201–300 band, three universities in the 301–400 band, and six universities in the 401–500 band in CWTS Leiden

Ranking (2023). Iranian universities established branch campuses in states with Shiite populations such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, and in Gulf countries, which hosted large Iranian diaspora such as Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE (Sawahel, 2017).

Iran welcomes students from Shiite communities in the Middle East. Ahlul Bayt International University, Al-Mustafa International University, Amirkabir University of Technology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, and Tehran University host students from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen (Aboutalebi, 2020, Qasemi, 2019; Wali, 2017, p. 78). Yet, there is a controversy stirring up pertaining to some of these students. They are alleged to be trained to contribute to the espionage and military activities in Iran's proxy wars in the region. Interestingly, following a meeting between the representatives of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Education Deputy of the popular mobilization forces (PMF), Tehran University announced that it would accept members of the PMF as students. This declaration drew the ire of some Iranian students as they argued that easy entry of the PMF members to Tehran University violated the principle of equal education opportunities (Iran International, 2023). Al-Mustafa International University, which specialized in Shiite Muslim theology and educated clergymen to spread Iran's brand of Islam on the other hand, was accused of recruiting foreign fighters to take part in the Syrian War (Bazhan, 2020).

Bonyads, the parastatal charitable foundations that provide social, cultural, and educational services in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria and which are answerable only to the Supreme Leader and his local underlings constitute other significant sources of Iranian soft power in the Middle East. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), established in 1979 to distribute assistance to the poor, especially in rural areas in Iran, (Saeidi, 2004, p. 489) offers food aid, medical services, vocational training courses, and marriage support in Lebanon. The Lebanese branch of the organization is directed and run by Hezbollah cadres. They help the dissemination of Iranian political ideals and cultural values among the Lebanese people through the organization of competitions based on Khomeini's teachings, commemoration of the anniversary of the Iranian Islamic revolution via ceremonies, and coordination of Quds Day activities (Abbas & Jahangaiz, 2020, p. 124). The Iraqi branch of the IKRC provides food assistance to families in need and conducts technical and vocational training courses (Watkins, 2020, p. 15). The IKRC also offered scholarships and financed the construction and repair of hospitals and residential buildings in Palestine and Syria.

The Foundation of Martyrs and Veteran Affairs was set up in 1979 to take care of disabled veterans and surviving relatives of the revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (Saeidi, 2004, p. 488). The Lebanese branch, administered by Hezbollah, provides in-kind transfers and housing services to the widows and orphans of the people who lost their lives during the military conflicts with Israel. The organization also runs schools in Lebanon which propagates Iran's ideology and instructs Persian language (Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2008, pp. 60–62). The Shi'ite charities in Iraq with links to Iran have been raising funds for the PMF, their families, and displaced populations since the beginning of the campaign against ISIS in 2014 (Watkins, 2020, p. 16). The Head of the Foundation of Martyrs and Veteran Affairs Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi signed an MoU with the Iraqi authorities in March 2022 to build homes and to establish a branch of Iran's Shahed University to admit students from the families of deceased Iraqi servicemen and veterans (Iran International, 2022a). Tehran also revealed plans to set up the Union of Martyrs' Foundations of the Resistance Axis which would bring together foundations in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon under a single roof (Iran International 2022b).

The Foundation of the Oppressed and Disabled that was founded in 1980 to ensure assistance to disabled individuals (Jones, 2020, p. 44) comes out as another active bonyad in the

Middle East which operates mostly in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The Lebanese branch functions under the name of the Association for the Wounded (Jenkins, 2016, p. 165). It is controlled by Hezbollah and is responsible for treating the injuries of Lebanese people wounded in skirmishes with Israel. Iranian-affiliated bonyads seem to expand the soft power of Tehran, especially in Iraq and Lebanon where they have cultivated long-standing networks boosted by traditional Shi'ite transnational connections (Jenkins, 2016, pp. 163–164).

Iran was also engaged in cultural diplomacy activities to strengthen its bonds with the Shiite communities in the MENA and to raise its clout across the region. Accordingly, the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, organized international film festivals, conferences, tourism exhibitions, theater festivals, award ceremonies, food festivals, Persian literature courses, literary festivals, seminars, and symposiums (ICRO, 2023). The Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly brought together Shiite scholars and leading religious leaders from around the world every 4 years for a conference in Tehran (Wastnidge, 2018). Iran launched Al-Kawthar TV in 2006 which broadcasted religious and cultural programs to reach out to the Shiite Arab audience in the MENA.

Iran countenanced the offering of Persian language courses and Persian language teaching programs in high schools and universities in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria (Akbar, 2023a, pp. 234–235; Abbas & Jahangaiz, 2020, p. 122). In Iraq, Iran published an online Persian teaching magazine called *Mina* to facilitate the Iraqi students' exposure to the Persian language and regularly donated Persian language textbooks to the universities (Akbar, 2023b, p. 436). Tehran also opened up Shiite seminaries, known as hussainiyas in Deirez-Zor, eastern part of Syria where Persian language courses were taught (Wallace, 2022).

The most striking popular cultural product of Iran is its innovative, subtle, and fascinating cinema. Iranian film directors, scriptwriters, actors, and actresses won many awards (Golden Bear, Golden Lion, Oscar, Palme d'Or) in acclaimed international festivals. IFilm, an Iranian entertainment network owned by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, has been dubbing and broadcasting Iranian movies and Turkish television series for the Arabic-speaking world since 2010. It recorded some success in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia (Rad, 2012). The state-sponsored "Mohammad, Messenger of God" movie, which concentrated on the childhood of the Prophet Mohammad, however, faced a serious backlash from Saudi Arabia and was banned in Arab countries.

Iran also invested in religious television series which were usually broadcasted in the MENA region during the month of Ramadan. These serials depicted the lives of prophets such as Jesus and Joseph and relatives/companions of the prophets such as the Virgin Mary and Imam Ali (Helmy, 2010; Tehran Times, 2020) from an Islamic point of view. Yet, these television series received criticism from some of the groups in Egypt and Tunisia due to the impersonation of these religious figures. The Center for Islamic Research, an affiliation of the Al-Azhar University in Egypt, objected to the serial that examined the life of Prophet Joseph from childhood to adulthood on the grounds that it violated the prohibition of visual depiction of prophets in Islam (Suleiman, 2010). In a similar vein, four lawyers in Tunisia requested the local religious authorities to ban the broadcasting of Iranian television series as they impersonated prophets, their wives, their children, and their companions (Toumi, 2010).

Iran is home to many shrines and tombs, scattered in the cities of Astane-e-Ashrafie, Jolfa, Mashhad, Qom, Ray, and Shiraz, which belong to grandsons of Shiite imams. Iran tries to grow the religious tourism industry through visa exemption (Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey), e-visa (Oman), special visa (Jordan), visa-on-arrival agreements, and the development of its tourism

infrastructure. The religious sites of Iran have experienced increasing visits from the Shiite citizens of Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman in the past years (Tehran Times, 2019), thus contributing to the soft power potential of the country.

Iran positioned itself as the defender of Shiite holy places in the Middle East. Tehran undertook construction, expansion, and restoration works in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria under the guidance of the Holy Shrines Reconstruction Headquarters which was set up by Khamenei and run by the Revolutionary Guards' Kawthar Foundation. The Iranian construction companies expanded the Imam Hussein Shrine in Karbala, repaired and expanded the Imam Ali Shrine in Najaf, expanded the Al-Askari Shrine in Samarra, and carried out repair and reconstruction tasks in two shrines in Baghdad (Davison, 2020). Iran also rebuilt mosques in Lebanon within a year after the 2006 war and paid special attention to the protection of the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in Syria (Akbar, 2023a, p. 231).

Saudi Arabia, like Turkey and Iran, benefited from higher education as a high culture product to expand its soft power. The government of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi universities offered generous scholarships to the Middle Eastern students. The Islamic University of Medina welcomed Muslim students to provide training in classical Islamic sciences (Mandaville & Hamid, 2018, p. 11).

The Council of Ministers decided in September 2022 to issue long-term and short-term educational visas to attract students, academics, and researchers from all over the world, including the MENA (Saudi Gazette, 2022). This decision may increase the academic performance of Saudi universities, which have already been in a progressive trend. There existed one university in the 101–200 band, two universities in the 201–300 band, three universities in the 301–400 band, and one university in the 401–500 band in Times Higher Education's World University Rankings 2023 list (Times Higher Education, 2023). Two universities appeared in the 101–200 band, one university featured in the 201–300 band, and two universities ranked in the 401–500 band in QS World University Rankings 2023 list (QS Top Universities, 2023); whereas one university situated in the 101–200 band, one university in the 201–300 band, and one university in the 401–500 band in CWTS Leiden Ranking (2023).

Saudi Arabia hosted 7610 students from Yemen, 6627 students from Syria, 3687 students from Palestine, 3453 students from Jordan, 1189 students from Lebanon, and 671 students from Kuwait (Bridgestock, 2021). Although incoming students from the Arab states remarked that common language expedited getting acquainted with the Saudi culture, female students revealed that they encountered difficulty in communicating with men (Almutairi, 2020, p. 8). Students coming from Syria also pointed out that they were not accustomed to gender segregation in universities.

Saudi Arabia fell behind Turkey and Iran to capitalize on mass entertainment for cultural diffusion. The movie industry is quite small and it produces a limited number of documentaries and feature films annually. The Turkish television series, in terms of quantity and quality, overwhelm their Saudi counterparts. Cognizant of these shortcomings, Saudi Arabia declared cinema a priority area in its plans to develop the entertainment industry. The Council for Cinematography was founded within the Ministry of Culture in March 2018. The Red Sea International Film Festival was launched in Jeddah in March 2019 with a special fund to support the development, production, and post-production of Arab and African films. The Muvi Cinemas, Saudi Arabia's first homegrown cinema brand also set up Muvi Studios in May 2022 to produce top-quality Arabic movies (Sambidge, 2022).

The cities of Mecca and Medina are visited by the Muslim populations of the Middle East regularly to perform Hajj or Umrah, which is a significant boost to the soft power potential of

Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has embarked on investment projects in tourism in the form of heritage sites, resort towns, and theme parks since the launch of the Saudi Vision 2030 in January 2016, the strategic framework to diversify the economy. Saudi Arabia has also been issuing tourist visas since 2019 and has been promoting the country as a vacation destination for families (Ladki et al., 2020, p. 645).

The products of high culture as well as popular culture are being used extensively by Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia to increase their influence in the Middle East. All three states activated scholarships, academic exchanges, and training programs with the aim of building long-lasting relationships with the prospective key individuals of the Middle Eastern countries. Turkey has achieved better in making use of mass entertainment and tourism to draw the interest of the people of the region compared to Iran and Saudi Arabia due to its relatively more open and vibrant sociocultural environment.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have been resorting to instruments of hard power increasingly in the Middle East since the Arab Spring. Turkey carried out cross-border military operations in Iraq and Syria and developed security cooperation with the Libyan and Qatari governments. Iran was involved in military tasks in Iraq and Syria and pursued an offensive naval strategy in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia led the military attack against the Houthis in Yemen and the diplomatic and economic blockade against Qatar while also initiating a naval modernization program buttressed by military exercises with the United States in the Persian Gulf. Yet, these states were also aware that the policy of flexing military muscles might backfire unless accompanied by a strategy of utilizing soft power. Accordingly, Ankara, Tehran, and Riyadh competed to export their political models to the Middle East. However, the inconsistency between the values and practices diluted their capability to maintain sustained attraction. The democratic backsliding in Turkey, the increasing grievances of Iranian women, and the harsh treatment of Saudi dissidents by the Saudi government laid the problems of the models of conservative democracy, religious democracy, and moderate Islam bare. To minimize the losses, all of the three states initiated an active policy of attempting to reach out a resolution of the Palestinian issue while also striving to alleviate the plight of the Palestinians.

The dissemination of products of high culture and popular culture to the target audience carried as much weight for Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia as the appreciation of their political values and acknowledgment of their foreign policy decisions. Ankara, Tehran, and Riyadh attached special importance to cultural diffusion owing to the fact that cultural contacts with the populations of the Middle East might correct misinformation, remedy misperceptions, and ensure attraction. Although there existed an intense rivalry among the three states to attract the Middle Eastern students for higher education, Turkey got ahead of Iran and Saudi Arabia when it came to luring the people of the region through products of popular culture.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

## ORCID

Fatma Aslı Kelkitli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0164-8736>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This study adopts the hierarchical/positional definition of middle power, which denotes the medium ranking of a state in terms of material capabilities (See Cooper et al., 1993, p. 17; Ping, 2005, pp. 51–53).
- <sup>2</sup> These Middle Eastern states were Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, and Yemen.

## REFERENCES

- Aarabi, K. (2021, June 1). Don't let Iran's regime win the battle for hearts and minds in Gaza. *Fikra Forum*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-let-irans-regime-win-battle-hearts-and-minds-gaza>
- Abbas, S. Q., & Jahangaiz, M. (2020). Iran's foreign policy towards Lebanon: Success story of synergy between hard and soft power. *Journal of Research in Social Sciences*, 8(2), 116–134.
- Abdelaziz, M. (2020, January 31). Arab reactions to Trump's peace plan. *Fikra Forum*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-reactions-trumps-peace-plan-analysis-and-recommendation>
- Aboutalebi, S. (2020, September 5). Why studying in Iran? *Tehran Times*. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/452076/Why-studying-in-Iran>
- Adel, N. (2021). The crescent of influence: The rise of Iran as a regional power in the Middle East. *Revue Espace Geographique et Societe Marocaine*, 53, 89–106.
- Akbar, A. (2023a). Iran's soft power in Syria after the Syrian civil war. *Mediterranean Politics*, 28(2), 227–249.
- Akbar, A. (2023b). Iran's soft power in the Middle East via the promotion of the Persian language. *Contemporary Politics*, 29(4), 424–445.
- Akgün, M., & Senyücel Gündoğar, S. (2014). *The perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2013*. TESEV Foreign Policy Programme. [https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report\\_The\\_Perception\\_Of\\_Turkey\\_In\\_The\\_Middle\\_East\\_2013.pdf](https://www.tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/report_The_Perception_Of_Turkey_In_The_Middle_East_2013.pdf)
- Alavi, S. A. (2020). Iran and Palestine: Past, present, future. Routledge.
- Almutairi, Y. M. N. (2020). International students' experiences at a Saudi university and academic leaders' perceptions regarding them. *Societies*, 10(70), 1–14.
- Al-Rasheed, M. (2021). *The son king: Reform and repression in Saudi Arabia*. Oxford University Press.
- Arab Center Washington DC. (2023). *Arab opinion index 2022: Executive summary*. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-opinion-index-2022-executive-summary/>
- Aydıntaşbaş, A., & Bianca, C. (2021). Useful enemies: How the Turkey–UAE rivalry is remaking the Middle East. *European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief*, 380, 1–22.
- Bayraktar, B. (2019). The Palestinian question in Turkish foreign policy from 1990s to 2010s. *Gazi Akademik Bakış*, 12(24), 19–43.
- Bazhan, F. (2020, December 30). U.S. sanctions put spotlight on Iran's international network of religious seminaries. *Radio Farda*. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-u-s-sanctions-religious-seminaries-network-al-mustafa/31014198.html>
- Benli Altunışık, M. (2008). The possibilities and limits of Turkey's soft power in the Middle East. *Insight Turkey*, 10(2), 41–54.
- Benli Altunışık, M. (2020). The new turn in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East: Regional and domestic insecurities. In S. Colombo & A. Dessi (Eds.), *Fostering a new security architecture in the Middle East* (pp. 91–113). Istituto Affari Internazionali.
- Berg, M. (2023). *Turkish drama serials: The importance and influence of a globally popular TV phenomenon*. University of Exeter Press.
- Bertelsmann Transformation Index. (2022a). *Iran country report*. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/IRN>
- Bertelsmann Transformation Index. (2022b). *Saudi Arabia country report*. <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/SAU>



- Binnie, J. (2022, December 5). Navantia signs MOU to deliver more Saudi naval vessels. *Janes*. <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/navantia-signs-mou-to-deliver-more-saudi-naval-vessels>
- Bridgestock, L. (2021, April 18). Middle Eastern students abroad: In numbers. *TopUniversities*. <https://www.topuniversities.com/blog/middle-eastern-students-abroad-numbers>
- Bruton, F. B. (2017, November 6). Prince Mohammed bin Salman aims to rebrand Saudi Arabia. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/prince-mohammed-bin-salman-aims-rebrand-saudi-arabia-n817201>
- Carr, E. H. (1946). *The twenty years' crisis 1919–1939: An introduction to the study of international relations*. The Macmillan Press.
- Cengiz, S. (2022, September 1). *How the Gulf fell in love with Turkish cinema*. Gulf International Forum. <https://gulffif.org/how-the-gulf-fell-in-love-with-turkish-cinema/#:~:text=The%20proximity%20between%20the%20Gulf,set%20halfway%20around%20the%20world>
- Çevik, S. (2022). Turkey's military operations in Syria and Iraq. *SWP Comment*, 37, 1–8.
- Ciftci, S., & Tezcür, G. M. (2016). Soft power, religion, and anti-Americanism in the Middle East. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12, 374–394.
- Cooper, A. F., Higgott, R. A., & Nossal, K. R. (1993). *Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order*. UBC Press.
- Council of Higher Education. (2021). *Target-oriented internationalization in higher education*. <https://www.yok.gov.tr/Documents/Yayinlar/Yayinlarimiz/2021/yuksekogretimde-hedef-odakli-uluslararasılaşma.pdf>
- Council of Higher Education. (2023). *Student statistics: Number of students according to the nationality*. <https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>
- CWTS Leiden Ranking. (2023). *List*. <https://www.leidenranking.com/ranking/2023/list>
- Davison, J. (2020, December 2). Iran expands shrines and influence in Iraq. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-iran-shrines/>
- Deal between Iran, Iraq martyrs' foundations irks Iranians. (2022, March 6). *Iran International*. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202203063370>
- Dehshiri, M. R., & Shahmoradi, H. (2020). Resurgence of geopolitical rivalry in the MENA after the 'Arab Spring'. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14(2), 194–215.
- Divsallar, A. (2023, September 15). *From normalization to non-aggression: The next step in Iran–Saudi ties*. Middle East Institute. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/normalization-non-aggression-next-step-iran-saudi-ties>
- Dolatabadi, A. B., & Kamrava, M. (2022). Iran's changing naval strategy in the Persian gulf: Motives and features. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1–18.
- Dorosh, L., & Voiat, B. (2022). Soft power of the Russian Federation: Instrumental and perceptual dimensions. *Russian Politics*, 7(1), 31–68.
- Efremenko, D., Ponamareva, A., & Nikulichev, Y. (2021). Russia's semi-soft power. *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, 25(1), 100–121.
- Empire Entertainment, BG Film partner to bring Turkish films to MENA region. (2022, September 13). *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2161741/%7B%7B>
- Ertosun, E. (2017). Turkey and the Palestinian question: The shift of roles in foreign policy. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 26(1), 203–219.
- Gallarotti, G., & Al-Filali, I. Y. (2012). Saudi Arabia's soft power. *International Studies*, 49(3–4), 233–261.
- Gill, B., & Huang, Y. (2006). Sources and limits of Chinese 'soft power'. *Survival*, 48(2), 17–36.
- Guida, M., & Göksel, O. (2018). Reevaluating the sources and fragility of Turkey's soft power after the Arab uprisings. In H. Işıksal & O. Göksel (Eds.), *Turkey's relations with the Middle East: Political encounters after the Arab Spring* (pp. 151–168). Springer.
- Hafezi, P. (2021, June 20). Khamenei protégé wins Iran election amid low turnout. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/>
- Helmy, H. (2010, September 29). Iranian series about the Prophet Joseph reignites visual depiction debate. *Egypt Independent*. <https://egyptindependent.com/iranian-series-about-prophet-joseph-reignites-visual-depiction-debate/>

- Hillary Clinton emails leak: Wikileaks documents claim Democratic nominee ‘thinks Saudi Arabia and Qatar fund Isis’. (2016, October 11). *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/hillary-clinton-emails-leak-wikileaks-saudi-arabia-qatar-isis-podesta-latest-a7355466.html>
- Human Rights Watch. (2023). *Saudi Arabia events of 2022*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>
- ICRO. (2023). *Events*. <https://en.icro.ir/National-Events>
- International Commission of Jurists. (2021). *Turkey's withdrawal from Istanbul Convention a setback for women and girls' human rights*. <https://www.icj.org/turkeys-withdrawal-from-istanbul-convention-a-setback-for-women-and-girls-human-rights/>
- Iran and its enormous potential for religious tourism. (2019, September 22). *Tehran Times*. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/440411/Iran-and-its-enormous-potential-for-religious-tourism>
- Iran International. (2022a March 6). Deal between Iran, Iraq martyrs' foundations irks Iranians. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202203063370>
- Iran International. (2022b, March 11). Iran plans Union of ‘Martyrs’ Foundations’ with Iraq, Lebanese allies. *Iran International*. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202203110736>
- Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2020). *Spokesman raps US' shameful plan for Palestine*. <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/572461/spokesman-raps-us%E2%80%99-shameful-plan-for-palestine>
- Jabbour, J. J. (2022). After a divorce, a frosty entente: Turkey's rapprochement with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia: Strategic necessity and transactional partnership in a shifting world order. *IFRI*. [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/2jabbour\\_turkey\\_sa\\_uae\\_mai2022.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/2jabbour_turkey_sa_uae_mai2022.pdf)
- Jenkins, W. B. (2016). Bonyads as agents and vehicles of the Islamic Republic's soft power. In S. Akbarzadeh & D. Conduit (Eds.), *Iran in the world: President Rouhani's foreign policy* (pp. 155–175). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones, S. G. (2020). *Containing Tehran: Understanding Iran's power and exploiting its vulnerabilities*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200110\\_Jones\\_ContainingIran\\_WEB\\_v2.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/200110_Jones_ContainingIran_WEB_v2.pdf)
- Kamrava, M. (2013). Mediation and Saudi foreign policy. *Orbis*, 57, 152–170.
- Kardas, S. (2011, October 11). Arab Spring sees Turkish-Iranian rivalry take a new turn. *Eurasian Daily Monitor*. <https://jamestown.org/program/arab-spring-sees-turkish-iranian-rivalry-take-a-new-turn/>
- Karim Akbari, actor TV series “Imam Ali (AS)”, “Mokhtarnameh” dies of COVID-19. (2020, October 30). *Tehran Times*. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/454081/Karim-Akbari-actor-TV-series-Imam-Ali-AS-Mokhtarnameh>
- Khameni, S. A. (2023). *20 year national vision*. <https://irandatportal.syr.edu/20-year-national-vision>
- Kraidy, M. M., & Al-Ghazzi, O. (2013). Neo-Ottoman cool: Turkish popular culture in the Arab public sphere. *Popular Communication*, 11(1), 17–29.
- Ladki, S., Abimanyu, A., & Kesserwan, L. (2020). The rise of a new tourism dawn in the Middle East. *Journal of Service Science and Management*, 13, 637–648.
- Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mabon, S. (2016). *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft power rivalry in the Middle East*. I. B. Tauris.
- Mandaville, P., & Hamid, S. (2018). Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy. The Brookings Institute. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/fp\\_20181116\\_islam\\_as\\_statecraft.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/fp_20181116_islam_as_statecraft.pdf)
- Mazzucco, L. J. M. (2022, October 30). Iranian naval strategy: the strengths and weaknesses of confrontationalism. *Gulf International Forum*. <https://gulrif.org/iranian-naval-strategy-the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-confrontationalism/>
- Morgenthau, H. J. (2006). *Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace*. McGraw-Hill.
- Nye, J. S. (1990a). The changing nature of world power. *Political Science Quarterly*, 105(2), 177–192.
- Nye, J. S. (1990b). Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171.
- Nye, J. S. (1990c). *Bound to lead: The changing nature of American power*. Basic Books.
- Nye, J. S. (2004). Soft power: The means to success in world politics. PublicAffairs.
- Nye, J. S. (2021). Soft power: The evolution of a concept. *Journal of Political Power*, 14(1), 196–208.
- Oğuzlu, T. (2007). Soft power in Turkish foreign policy. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1), 81–97.
- OIC. (2006). *Report of the first ministerial conference on women's role in the development of OIC member states*. <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=3026&refID=1113>
- Omid, A. (2021). Turkey's grand strategy. *Insight Turkey*, 23(4), 11–25.

- Over 50,000 international students register for 'Study in Saudi Arabia' program. (2022, October 25). *Saudi Gazette*. <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/626336/SAUDI-ARABIA/Over-50000-international-students-register-for-Study-in-Saudi-Arabia-program>
- Oztig, L. I. (2021). Regional dynamics and the future of Middle East strategic alliance. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 30, 102–115.
- Ping, J. H. (2005). *Middle power statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific*. Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Podeh, E. (2018). Saudi Arabia and Israel: From secret to public engagement. *The Middle East Journal*, 72(4), 563–586.
- Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. (2020). *We will never accept plans that erase Palestine and usurp Al-Quds*. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/116484/-we-will-never-accept-plans-that-erase-palestine-and-usurp-al-quds>
- Project on Middle East Democracy. (2021). *Fact sheet-Double vision: Promises vs. reality in Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia*. <https://pomed.org/publication/fact-sheet-double-vision-promises-vs-reality-in-mohammed-bin-salmans-saudi-arabia/>
- Qasemi, S. (2019). The factors of Iran's declining soft power in the Arab region. *Journal for Iranian Studies*, 3(10), 75–88.
- QS Top Universities. (2023). *QS world university rankings 2023: Top global universities*. <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2023>
- Rad, J. (2012, March 6). *The public diplomacy aspect of the Iranian Oscar win*. USC Center on Public Diplomacy. <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/public-diplomacy-aspect-iranian-oscar-win>
- Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism. (2023). *The distribution of incoming foreign visitors according to nationality (2007-2022)*. <https://yigm.ktb.gov.tr/TR-9851/turizm-istatistikleri.html>
- Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2017). *Resolution adopted at extraordinary meeting of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers to review the situation following the US Administration's recognition of the City of Al-Quds Ash-Sharif as the alleged capital of Israel, the occupying power, and its decision to move the US embassy to Al-Quds*. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/resolution-adopted-at-extraordinary-meeting-of-the-oic-council-of-foreign-ministers-to-review-the-situation-following-the-us-administrations-recognition.en.mfa>
- Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2018a). *Press release regarding the United States ending its financial contributions to UNRWA*. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-228\\_-abd-nin-unrwa-ya-yonelik-mali-katkisini-sonlandirmasi-hk\\_en.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-228_-abd-nin-unrwa-ya-yonelik-mali-katkisini-sonlandirmasi-hk_en.en.mfa)
- Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2018b). *Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in response to a question regarding the closure of the Office of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Washington, DC*. [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc\\_-62\\_-vasington-da-yerlesik-filistin-kurtulus-orgutu-temsilciligini-nin-kapatilmasi-hk-sc\\_en.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-62_-vasington-da-yerlesik-filistin-kurtulus-orgutu-temsilciligini-nin-kapatilmasi-hk-sc_en.en.mfa)
- Riyadh stops funding foreign mosques: 'Turning point in fight against Islamism'—Geopolitician. (2020, January 27). *Sputnik International*. <https://sputnikglobe.com/20200127/riyadh-stops-funding-foreign-mosques-1078141974.html>
- Saeidi, A. A. (2004). The accountability of para-governmental organizations (bonyads): The case of Iranian foundations. *Iranian Studies*, 37(3), 479–498.
- Sambidge, A. (2022, June 3). *Saudi's leading cinema group to make films for Arabs by Arabs*. Arabian Gulf Business Insight. <https://www.agbi.com/articles/saudis-leading-cinema-group-to-make-films-for-arabs-by-arabs/>
- Samii, B. (2006, April 14). Iran: Intifada conference in Tehran has multiple objectives. *RFE/RL*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/1067669.html>
- Sawahel, W. (2017, March 21). *Ambitious but secretive Arab education provider: Iran*. Al-Fanar Media. <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2017/03/ambitious-secretive-arab-education-provider-iran/>
- Sergunin, A., & Karabeshkin, L. (2015). Understanding Russia's soft power strategy. *Politics*, 35(3–4), 347–363.
- Shaery-Eisenlohr, R. (2008). *Shi'ite Lebanon: Transnational religion and the making of national identities*. Columbia University Press.
- Shambaugh, D. (2015). China's soft-power push: The search for respect. *Foreign Affairs*, 94(4), 99–107.
- Shikaki, K. (2023). *Arab Barometer VII-Palestine report*. [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab-Barometer-VII\\_Palestine-Report-2021-2022.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab-Barometer-VII_Palestine-Report-2021-2022.pdf)
- Suleiman, M. (2010, October 3). Azhar wants ban on Iranian Prophet Joseph show. *AlArabiya News*. <https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2010%2F10%2F03%2F121082>

- Tayebi, A. (2022, July 7). Iranian President orders enforcement of hijab and chastity law for women. *RFE/RL*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-president-orders-enforcement-hijab-chastity-law/31933583.html>
- TDV. (2022). *2022 annual report*. <https://tdvmedia.blob.core.windows.net/tdv/MedyaOdas%C4%B1/Raporlar/TDV%20-%20Faaliyet%20Raporu%20-%202022.pdf>
- Tehran University students oppose admission of Iraqi militias. (2023, July 14). *Iran International*. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202307146999>
- Thievon, K. (2023). New ambitions at sea: Naval modernisation in the Gulf States. *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*. <https://www.iiss.org/en/research-paper/2023/06/new-ambitions-at-sea-naval-modernisation-in-the-gulf-states/>
- Times Higher Education. (2023). *World university rankings 2023*. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2023/world-ranking>
- Toumi, H. (2010, August 14). Tunisia lawyers want ban on Iran TV series. *Gulf News*. <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/tunisia-lawyers-want-ban-on-iran-tv-series-1.667807>
- UN General Assembly. (2017). *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 21 December 2017*. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N17/462/00/PDF/N1746200.pdf?OpenElement>
- UN General Assembly Human Rights Council. (2019). *Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions*. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/296/91/PDF/G1929691.pdf?OpenElement>
- UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2023). *Iran—concerns over Chastity and Hijab Bill*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/09/iran-concerns-over-chastity-and-hijab-bill>
- UN Security Council. (2019). *Letter dated 1 November 2019 from the permanent representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3834983#record-files-collapse-header>
- Wali, K. (2017, October 6). *Al-Mustafa International University: Globalization of Shiism*. Ahwaz Monitor. <https://ahwazmonitor.info/articles/al-mustafa-international-university-globalization-of-shiism/>
- Wallace, H. (2022, September 24). *Iran's soft power offensive in eastern Syria*. Small Wars Journal. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/irans-soft-power-offensive-eastern-syria>
- Wang, Y. (2008). Public diplomacy and the rise of Chinese soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 257–273.
- Wastnidge, E. (2015). The modalities of Iranian soft power: From cultural diplomacy to soft war. *Politics*, 35(3–4), 364–377.
- Wastnidge, E. (2018, November 12). *Religion and geopolitics in Iranian foreign policy*. The Foreign Policy Centre. <https://fpc.org.uk/religion-and-geopolitics-in-iranian-foreign-policy/>
- Watkins, J. (2020). Iran in Iraq: The limits of 'smart power' amidst public protest. *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series*, 37, 1–21.
- Yezdani, İ., & İzci, İ. (2015, September 3). Al Istanbul: How Turkey's largest city became a hub for Arab tourists. *Hürriyet Daily News*. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/al-istanbul-how-turkeys-largest-city-became-a-hub-for-arab-tourists-87876>
- Yörük, Z., & Vatikiotis, P. (2013). Soft power or illusion of hegemony: The case of the Turkish soap opera "colonialism". *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 2361–2385.
- YTB. (2022). *2022 annual report*. <https://tbbsweb.azureedge.net/tbbsweb/Page/About/TB-Rapor-2022-ENG.pdf>

**How to cite this article:** Kelkitli, F. A. (2024). Battling for hearts and minds: Sources of Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi soft power in the Middle East. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12328>