

Civilisational Soft Power in South and West Asia: Comparing Iran and India's Global Influence through the Case of Afghanistan

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Abstract: This paper examines how two major civilizational states India and Iran deploy soft power in Afghanistan through frameworks that are different from Joseph Nye's liberal, Western-centric conception of attraction. While Nye characterizes soft power as deriving from liberal democratic values like freedom, cultural openness and free market economy, this study argues that such assumptions overlook the deep historical, ethical, and civilizational foundations through which non-Western states cultivate legitimacy and influence. Building on Global IR scholarship and critiques of Eurocentric soft power theory, the paper delves into the concept of civilisational soft power, defined as attraction rooted in ethical worldviews, historical memory, cultural intimacy, and non-hegemonic political philosophy.

Using Afghanistan as a shared geopolitical and cultural example for Iran and India, the study demonstrates that India's soft power emerges from civilizational values such as VasudhaivaKutumbakam, Sarva Dharma Sambhava, ahimsa, cultural pluralism, development partnerships, and people-centric diplomacy. Iran's soft power, by contrast, is grounded in Persianate heritage, Shia symbolism, revolutionary ethics, anti-imperialist narratives, clerical networks, and ideological institutions that project a moral grammar of justice and resistance. Afghanistan, situated at the intersection of Persianate, Indic, and Islamic civilizational spheres—provides a unique context where these distinct models of attraction cross paths.

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative methodology to examine how Iran and India project civilisational soft power in Afghanistan. It draws on textual analysis, field-based secondary literature, documentary evidence from cultural, educational, and media institutions, and public-opinion surveys such as AISS, the Asia Foundation, and Gallup. Qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis are used to identify how each state constructs ethical, civilisational, and ideological meanings in its engagement with Afghanistan, while a structured comparison assesses how these narratives translate into attraction and influence in a shared arena. Through this approach, the study finds that civilisational soft power generates distinctive forms of influence that operate independently of liberal norms; that Iran's religious soft power can, at times, convert into hard power; and that India's influence remains predominantly developmental and non-coercive. Overall, the methodology enables a historically grounded and culturally sensitive understanding of non-Western soft power within an emerging multipolar order.

Introduction

Power has long been a central concept in the study of International Relations (IR), yet its meaning and expression have shifted across historical and geopolitical contexts. Classical thinkers predominantly viewed power through the lens of coercion, military strength and material capability...

However, the end of the Cold War created conditions for rethinking this traditional paradigm, and in this evolving global context Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power, defining it as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion. Nye's formulation quickly gained prominence, not only because it offered a vocabulary for understanding non-coercive influence but also because it resonated with the shifting priorities of global politics. Growing interdependence, the economic costs of war, and the rise of transnational challenges made it increasingly clear that military strength alone could not secure long-term stability. In this environment, states expanded their diplomatic, cultural, and ideational tools, reinforcing the relevance of attraction, credibility, and legitimacy in foreign policy.

Nye suggests that the main source of attraction derives from liberal norms, democracy, human rights, and open markets. This framing implicitly privileges Western experiences and institutions, making it difficult for states with alternative value systems to be recognised as legitimate soft power actors. Nye's concept has been widely critiqued for its Western-centric assumptions and many scholars argue that such assumptions reproduce a hierarchical vision of global politics in which Western norms define what counts as attractive or legitimate. It is argued that the intellectual roots of soft power long predate modern Western IR theory across Asia and the broader non-Western world. In non-western countries, the traditions of political thought articulated forms of influence grounded not in coercion but in ethical authority and cultural richness. This paper builds on these critiques to introduce the concept of civilisational soft power, a framework that moves beyond Nye's liberal assumptions and situates attraction in deep historical memory, ethical norms, cultural worldviews, religious thought and long-standing philosophical traditions. For many Global South states, soft power narratives often rest on a combination of historical consciousness, cultural depth, spiritual worldviews, and discourses of anti-imperialism. Unlike Western soft power, their influence derives from ethical relationality, shared civilisational memory, and symbolic resistance to global dominance.

Why India–Iran–Afghanistan?

India and Iran provide especially compelling cases for examining civilisational soft power. Both states draw on millennia-old civilisational traditions but deploy them in distinct ways. Afghanistan, positioned at the crossroads of Persianate, Indic, and Islamic worlds, serves as a shared cultural and geopolitical space where their soft power strategies intersect, overlap, and diverge.

Iran's soft power draws on Persian heritage, Shi'i symbolism, narratives of justice and resistance, and a network of cultural and religious institutions.

India's soft power emanates from *Vaughan* and *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* manifested in form of civilisational pluralism, cultural diplomacy, development partnerships, and historical linkages across the region.

Afghanistan thus becomes a meaningful site through which to explore how civilisational soft power is operationalized.

By situating civilisational soft power in Global IR and non-Western intellectual histories, this paper aims to:

Clarify how civilisational soft power expands and challenges Nye's original formulation.

Compare how India and Iran deploy civilisational ideas, symbols, and narratives in Afghanistan.

Demonstrate that influence rooted in ethical authority and civilizational memory can operate independently of Western liberal frameworks.

By situating civilisational soft power within the broader field of Global IR, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on the diversification of soft power scholarship. It explores the ways in which India and Iran operationalise civilisational narratives and cultural resources in Afghanistan, demonstrating that influence rooted in ethical worldviews and historical consciousness operates outside the normative boundaries of Western liberal soft power.

Conceptual Framework: Western and Non-Western Theories

Power has always been a central concept in the study of international relations, evolving continuously through historical, political, and theoretical developments. Classical thinkers from Thucydides and Machiavelli to Hans Morgenthau, Kenneth Waltz, and Robert Dahl, framed power largely in terms of coercive capability, military dominance, and the ability to compel others to act through force or material inducements. However, the changing global landscape in the late 20th century, particularly the end of the Cold War, prompted a gradual reconsideration of how states influence one another and how international outcomes are shaped. In this context, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in the late 1980s, significantly expanding the way scholars and policymakers conceptualized power. Nye defined soft power as *"the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments."*¹ Soft power derives from cultural appeal, political values, and the perceived legitimacy of foreign policy. Unlike hard power, which relies on force or material incentives, soft power works through persuasion, co-option, and voluntary alignment of preferences. As Nye explains, soft power is conveyed through resources and embedded within relationships between *agents* (those deploying soft power) and *targets* (those receiving it), producing behavioural change that is voluntary rather than coerced.² Since Nye first articulated the concept, soft power has become one of the most widely circulated and debated ideas in International Relations. Soft power is used to explain how states influence others not through force or pressure, but through attraction, persuasion, and the ability to shape preferences. When a country's culture is admired, its values are respected, and its foreign policy is viewed as credible, it becomes easier for that country to influence global outcomes. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 dramatically altered the global political landscape. The emergence of a unipolar world led by the United States, the transformation of economic production, the acceleration of globalization, and the rise of transnational threats forced states to rethink the nature of power. Traditional forms of statecraft based on coercion, war, military strength, and material dominance began to lose effectiveness. As Nye³ and Barnett and Duvall⁴ argue, the high economic costs of sustaining military power, along with growing global interdependence, made it increasingly clear that hard power alone could not secure long-term influence. In addition, modern challenges—climate change, global pandemics, natural disasters, terrorism, cybercrime, and mass migration—cannot be addressed by unilateral forces. They require cooperation, shared norms, and collective leadership from states.⁵ As a result, states began reorienting their foreign policies toward multilateralism, diplomacy, and transnational engagement. This shift created fertile ground for the broader acceptance of soft power as a legitimate and necessary foreign policy tool. The changed priorities of global politics align with Nye's analogy of the world as a three-dimensional chessboard, where military, economic, and transnational issues occupy different levels and require different strategies.⁶ The rising acts of global terrorism further questioned the reliability of military might in ensuring security, highlighting the need to complement force with values, legitimacy, and global partnerships. In this environment, soft power emerged not only as an alternative to hard power but as a way to shape global narratives, build coalitions, and foster long-term stability grounded in shared interests rather than coercion. In this context of global politics, Nye's concept of soft power gained prominence by explaining how states could shape global outcomes through attraction and credibility rather than through force. Scholars such as Gallarotti⁷ and Hayden⁸ argue that soft power supports a

¹Nye, Joseph S. (2005), "Soft power and higher education", Harvard University: 11-14

² Nye, Joseph S. (2011), "Power and foreign policy", Journal of Political Power, 4(L):9-24.

³ Nye, Joseph S. (1990), "Soft power", Foreign Policy, 80, Twentieth Anniversary: 153-171.

⁴ Barnett, Michael & Duvall, Raymond. (2005), "Power in International Politics" *International Organization*, 59(1), Cambridge University Press: 39–75.

⁵Nye, Joseph S. (2008), "Public diplomacy and soft power", Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 616: 94-109.

⁶Nye, Joseph S. (1990), "Soft power", Foreign Policy, 80, Twentieth Anniversary: 153-171.

⁷Gallarotti, Giulio M. (2017), "Soft power: What it is, why it's important, and the conditions under which it can be used effectively," Journal of Political Power, Wesleyan University.

⁸ Hayden, Craig (2017), "Technologies of influence: The materiality of soft power in public diplomacy (Section overview)": 187-202, in Chitty, Naren et al. (2017), The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power, London: Routledge.

shift from coercion to cooperation by promoting trust, attraction, and moral authority. Soft power became a tool for understanding how states could build coalitions, win trust, and shape international norms without relying on force. By highlighting credibility, legitimacy, and the power of narrative, his concept helped broaden how scholars and policymakers understood power in international relations.⁹

Nye argues that only those states are able to exercise the highest levels of soft power whose dominant culture, ideas and political values align most closely with “prevailing global norms,” which he identifies as liberalism, pluralism, autonomy, democracy, and human rights.¹⁰ States with “less normative values” or more “parochial cultures” are less likely to generate soft power.¹¹ This conceptualization limits the ability of other states, particularly non-western states, to be recognized as legitimate soft power actors, despite the fact that states such as Iran actively employ tools typically associated with soft power. This conception of soft power being linked only to those countries that are closest to prevailing global norms reflects the hegemonic view of a dominant power such as the United States. In this regard, Craig Hayden states that Nye’s initial view of soft power argued for hegemonic control and simply formed a value-neutral interpretation of Gramsci’s hegemony thesis for policy makers.¹² Nye’s view of soft power ignores how “ideas are always relative, they originate in a given society or culture, they are not absolute and usually mean different things for different people.”¹³

Nye’s framework of soft power has been widely influential but has also attracted substantial criticism. Many scholars argue that his idea of “attraction” is shaped by Western experiences, especially the rise of U.S. global influence after the Cold War. This makes the concept appear biased toward liberal democratic values, global media reach, and consumer-driven cultural appeal—elements that reflect America’s own historical position rather than universal principles. Academics also note that similar ideas existed long before Nye. Concepts such as Max Weber’s notion of charisma, Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, Edward Said’s cultural imperialism and earlier studies of propaganda and influence all dealt with forms of attraction and persuasion. Importantly, intellectual concepts resembling soft power were articulated in several non-Western traditions centuries before the emergence of modern international relations. For example, **Kautilya’s Arthashastra** (4th century BCE), although known for its realist analysis of statecraft, emphasized the importance of *dharma* (righteousness) and good reputation in cultivating alliances. Kautilya argued that rulers who uphold justice, protect the weak, and demonstrate virtuous conduct inspire trust and voluntary allegiance—forms of influence more stable than coercion. His discussion of *prasada* (goodwill) as a political resource anticipates contemporary debates on legitimacy and attraction as foundations of power.¹⁴

Similarly, **Confucian political philosophy** in *The Analects* conceptualizes authority as rooted in moral example rather than force. Confucius posits *de* (virtue) as a form of magnetic attraction: a ruler who governs ethically becomes like the North Star—fixed, radiant, and naturally followed. The cultivation of ritual propriety, cultural refinement, and benevolence emerges as a strategy of influence that resonates more closely with soft power than with conventional notions of coercive control.¹⁵ In the Islamic philosophical tradition, **Al-Fārābī’s Virtuous City** presents yet another early articulation of attraction-based authority. For Al-Fārābī, the ideal ruler exercises power through wisdom, justice, and ethical excellence. Such leadership generates harmony because people willingly emulate the moral exemplar. He also linked education, shared values, and cultural sophistication to social cohesion—thereby identifying key elements of what would today be called cultural soft power.¹⁶

Building on this tradition, **Nasir al-Din Tusi** and the broader *adab al-mulk* literature elaborate a

⁹Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.

¹⁰ Nye, J.S. (2004) *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: PublicAffairs (page, 31–32, 62)

¹¹Ibid, 11.

¹² Hayden, Craig, *The Rhetoric of Soft Power: Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012 (page, 38).

¹³ Zahran, Maha, and Sue C. Ramos, “*International Relations Theory and Soft Power: A Comparative Analysis*.” In: Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox (eds.), *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* London: Routledge, 2010. (Page 24)

¹⁴Kautilya. (1992). *The Arthashastra*. (L. N. Rangarajan, Ed. & Trans.). Penguin Classics.

¹⁵Confucius. (1997). *The Analects*. (D. C. Lau, Trans.). Penguin Classics.

¹⁶Al-Fārābī. (1985). *The Virtuous City*. (R. Walzer, Trans.). Oxford University Press.

political ethic in which rulers cultivate admiration (*mahabbah*) through justice, honesty, compassion, and moral wisdom. Tusi's famous claim that "justice is the foundation of kingship" underscores how legitimate rule produces durable influence not by coercion but through the public's recognition of ethical authority. Taken together, these traditions demonstrate that soft power is not a modern Western innovation; it is part of a much older global conversation about the moral foundations of authority.¹⁷

One of the clearest examples of the idea of soft power in non-western world comes from **Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406)**. His concept of *'asabiyya* (group solidarity) explains why communities rise to power: their internal cohesion generates not only military effectiveness but also a form of moral prestige. When a dominant group triumphs politically or militarily, Ibn Khaldun argues, subordinate groups often internalize the cultural superiority of the victor, adopting its practices and losing confidence in their own traditions. This is effectively an early theory of soft power where influence arises not from coercion alone but from psychological acceptance, admiration, and the perceived legitimacy of the dominant group. For Ibn Khaldun, the attraction toward the victor does not necessarily reflect genuine cultural superiority but may emerge from psychological defeat.¹⁸

"The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his distinctive characteristics, his dress, his occupation, and all his other conditions and customs. The reason for this is that the soul always sees perfection in the person who is superior to it and to whom it is subservient. It considers him perfect, either because it is impressed by the respect it has for him, or because it erroneously assumes that its own subservience to him is not due to the nature of defeat but to the perfection of the victor."

The long intellectual history of political thought across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa demonstrates that what is now called *soft power* is not a modern liberal invention. Long before the rise of Western modernity, non-Western traditions articulated the idea that moral authority, ethical conduct, justice, and virtuous leadership generate influence more enduring than coercion. These traditions show that attraction, legitimacy, and ethical governance have been central to political thinking across the world for millennia, forming part of a much older and more diverse conversation about the foundations of power.

This study challenges the dominant Western assumption popularized since Joseph Nye's seminal work that attraction naturally emerges from liberal democracy, economic openness, and consumer culture.¹⁹ This assumption is rooted in a linear narrative of Western modernity that treats Western epistemologies and media infrastructures as universally applicable. In doing so, it marginalizes non-Western intellectual traditions, research and obscures the long-standing ethical, philosophical, and civilizational foundations through which many societies outside the West have historically cultivated legitimacy, admiration, and soft power. Most academic discussions of soft power have centered on its deployment by the United States and other Western states. In comparison, far less attention has been paid to how major non-Western powers like China, Russia, India and Iran utilize soft power.

Interestingly, Gary Rawnsley notes, soft power has become so en vogue that all states, dominant and non-dominant, are engaging in some sort of soft power practices to remain relevant and current with global norms.²⁰ A prime example is the case of Russia and Ukraine. International relations experts, viewing Russia through a Western-centric prism, are at a loss to explain the effectiveness of its soft power activities in Ukraine. To them, Russia does not and should not have any of the attractive qualities identified by Nye, and yet popular opinion polls in Eastern Europe and some areas of Ukraine suggest that Russia's use of soft power has been more successful than presumed by western scholars.²¹ China provides another example. China's resources are not considered attractive by many in order to allow China to wield influence and enhance its soft power as envisioned by Nye's concept of soft power, but

¹⁷Tusi, Nasir al-Din. (1964). *The Nasirean Ethics*. (G. M. Wickens, Trans.). George Allen & Unwin.

¹⁸Ibn Khaldun. (1967), *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* (Franz Rosenthal, Trans.), Princeton University Press:197

¹⁹Nye, Joseph S. (1990), "Soft power", *Foreign Policy*, 80, Twentieth Anniversary: 153-171.

²⁰Rawnsley, G. D. (2012). Approaches to soft power and public diplomacy in China and Taiwan.

In I. Parmar & M. Cox (Eds.), *Soft power and US foreign policy: Theoretical, historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 123–141). Routledge. (Page 124)

²¹Konrad Jagodzinski, 20 February 2025, Global Soft Power Index 2025: The shifting balance of global Soft Power, Available at; <https://brandfinance.com/insights/global-soft-power-index-2025-the-shifting-balance-of-global-soft-power>

China is enjoying considerable success using the tools of soft power in some so-called third world countries. Iran is not only a non-Western state; it also represents an example of a non-dominant power. Yet evidence has shown that Iran has had success in cultivating attraction and pursuing its objectives using soft power tactics. Throughout the past four decades or so, Iran has resisted the dominant global discourses by providing alternative moral, cultural, and ideological discourses. Discourses built around value-laden nodal points such as 'supporting the oppressed' are sceptical of the pillars that Nye establishes as resources for attraction like democracy, equality, and the rule of law. Alternatively, Iran has cultivated a discourse of anti-arrogance that is based on opposing any system with these three features. Iran criticizes any ideas, events, or processes conflicting with their anti-arrogance approach as part of its discourse it actively employs in the field of foreign policy.²²

Nye treats the sources of attraction as fixed and universal. He argues that states either have these soft-power qualities or they do not. This assumption that certain cultures, values, and policies are universally "good" and automatically attractive is central to Nye's view of how soft power works. Non-Western countries reject Nye's idea that attraction must come from the specific values he identifies as the basis of soft power.²³ This does not mean they reject the idea of attraction itself. Nor does it mean that Western values have no appeal for non-Western societies. Instead, it means that many non-Western states choose to build attraction in their own way, using their own values, rather than following the Western model. They try to reach their foreign-policy goals by creating a separate pathway of attraction that does not depend on Western norms.

As a result, the western and non-western countries promote two different tracks and competing discourses about what is attractive and why. There is a need to rethink what counts as a "source of attraction." Instead of assuming that Western values define what people should find appealing, sources of attraction must be identified from within the cultural, historical, and political context of each society. In other words, attraction should be built around what local communities value, not around what the West considers attractive.

A non-dominant power like Iran treats soft power not as the universalization of its own values but as the localization of sources of attraction based on the perceptions of its target audiences. In that context, listening to the targeted audience is central to this localization. In Afghanistan, U.S. policy makers would first 'listen' to the Afghan polity for examples wherein the sources of attraction it viewed as universal were reflected. For the U.S. practitioner of public diplomacy, listening is geared toward finding the pre-existing sources of attraction echoed in the target demographic, then highlighting how the U.S. is an exemplar of that source. This means that the United States in this case found the means to achieving the desired behaviour of attraction among the target population as well as the means of 'persuading' them that the United States is an attractive example of what they would want to strive to achieve. On the contrary, Iran would "listen" for a value intrinsic to that local audience. Supreme Leader Khamene'i sums up this process as follows: "Without knowing exactly the audience, one cannot plan precisely to influence their perceptions. The definition of the target audience depends on the internal and external environment, events and historical trends that have evolved over time. The target audience can be defined on the basis of factors such as language, religious beliefs, social and economic status, occupation, and others."²⁴ He also adds: "The correct understanding of the target audience's characteristics will allow us to then understand their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes towards us."²⁵ His conclusion is that, with respect to public engagement, "it should be noted that the focus should be on the audience. This has the highest value in providing benefits rather than penetrating them."²⁶ For Iran, the intent is to localize sources of attraction based on pre-existing values within the target audience in order to identify areas of shared consensus. By using this approach of achieving areas of consensus, the intervener can create a realignment of values that occurs through the process of

²² Ajili, H. et al. "Discourse Analysis, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's Relations with the United States of America." *Journal of Politics and Law*, 10, no. 5 (2017): 105–15

²³ Zahran, Maha, and Sue C. Ramos. "International Relations Theory and Soft Power: A Comparative Analysis." *International Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2010): 63–78.

²⁴ Khamene'i, Sayyid Ali. 2010. *Speech to the Assembly of Experts*. Tehran: Office of the Supreme Leader.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

creating a collective understanding. The study of soft power in non-western actors like Iran and India remains comparatively underdeveloped.²⁷ This gap has led to systematic underestimation of the soft power capacities of non-Western states.

Civilisational Soft Power in Non-Western States

The concept of civilisational soft power rooted in ethical relationality, historical consciousness, and non-hegemonic diplomacy offers a pluralistic lens for understanding global influence. Civilisational soft power refers to the capacity of a society to generate attraction through cultural heritage, philosophical traditions ethical worldviews, historical continuity, and relational practices and shape the preferences and behaviour of others through it. Rather than discarding Nye, it re-anchors soft power within plural moral geographies, offering three analytical advantages:

Historical depth: Influence emerges from long-term civilizational continuities rather than short-term policy instruments.

Ethical grounding: Attraction is linked to moral credibility—justice, humility, compassion, and truth.

Pluralist orientation: Legitimacy is articulated without mimicking Western liberal norms.

Decolonial IR scholars such as Amitav Acharya and Pinar Bilgin argue that Global IR must unlearn the hierarchies inherited from Eurocentric social sciences. Traditional soft power often reproduces such hierarchies by equating modernity with virtue and visibility with influence. A decolonial rethinking shifts the focus toward relational ethics—how a state embodies moral responsibility, civilisational humility, and solidarity. Within this decolonial framework, Iran and India offer two of the most compelling examples of non-Western philosophies of soft power. While both states draw on ancient civilizational traditions, they project influence through distinct moral, cultural, and ideological repertoires.

Iran's soft power is rooted in anti-imperialist resistance, Shi'a theology, and the geopolitics of defiance; Persian heritage.

India's soft power emerges from pluralistic civilizational ethics and practices such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*, *Dharma*, *Yoga*, and *Ahimsa*.

The preceding section demonstrates how Iran positions itself as an *ethical force of defiance* - a defender of oppressed peoples and a voice of Islamic justice and how India mobilizes a softer, more conciliatory civilizational vocabulary grounded in ***Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*** (*the world is one family*), ***Sarva Dharma Sambhava*** (*respect for all religions*), ***Ahimsa*** (*non-violence*)²⁸ and Gandhian moral persuasion. Together, these states represent two major templates of post-colonial soft power: one confrontational, one dialogical; one theological, one pluralistic; one built on the memory of resistance, the other on the ethics of coexistence. Together, these emerging powers articulate alternative models of soft power rooted in religio-ethical values, civilizational memory, and relational forms of diplomacy. Their influence does not rely on the universalism of liberal norms but grows from civilizational depth and moral positioning.

For both Iran and India, soft power functions not as a tool of dominance but as an ethical claim to legitimacy grounded in civilisational worldviews that contest liberal hegemony. Iran's cultural diplomacy functions despite geopolitical isolation; India's soft power coexists with development constraints and balancing acts between Western partnerships and Global South solidarity. Here, soft power becomes a form of normative agency a survival strategy and an assertion of civilisational voice rather than dominance.

²⁷ Zahran, Maha, and Sue C. Ramos. "International Relations Theory and Soft Power: A Comparative Analysis." *International Studies Review* 12, no. 1 (2010): 63–78.

²⁸ Ahimsa (Non-Violence), Gandhi and Global Citizenship Education (GCED) | UNESCO, Available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ahimsa-non-violence-gandhi-and-global-citizenship-education-gced>

Iran: Resistance Ethics, Justice, and the Moral Grammar of The Oppressed

Iran's post-1979 soft power is deeply grounded in a civilizational worldview that blends Persian culture, anti-imperialist ideology, Shia theology, and a distinctive moral stance centred on justice (*‘adl*) and resistance to oppression. Unlike the liberal foundations of soft power, Iran's soft power is rooted in religio-ethical authority, historicised narratives of resistance, and clerical legitimacy anchored in the seminaries of Qom. The Islamic Revolution reconfigured Iran's international identity as a counter-hegemonic civilizational state, seeking legitimacy not from Western recognition but from its self-claimed role as guardian of Islamic justice, protector of the oppressed, and vanguard against global arrogance.

Anti-Imperialism and the Defence of Muslim Causes as Moral Legitimacy

Central to Iran's civilizational soft power is an ethics of **moqāwamat** (resistance) that derives authority from Shia theology, particularly the paradigmatic martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala. This event is not merely devotional; it informs a contemporary political ethic that casts Iran's role as the defender of **mostaz'afin** - those dispossessed by imperialism, corruption, or domestic tyranny and the adversary of **estekbār-e jahānī** (global arrogance), a revolutionary term signifying U.S.-led hegemonic power structures. Concepts such as *isteqlāl* (independence), *adl* (justice), the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at Karbala, and the messianic ethics of Mahdaviyat shape Iran's international identity and allow the state to present its soft power as moral, anti-imperialist, and committed to protecting the oppressed — positioning itself not just as a government, but as the guardian of an Islamic revolutionary mission focused on justice and resistance.²⁹ This moral architecture is institutionalised in the Iranian Constitution. **Article 3(16)** obligates the state to ground its foreign policy in “Islamic criteria... and unsparing support to the mostaz'afin of the world.” Similarly, **Article 154** commits Iran to supporting “the just struggles of the oppressed,” emphasising ideological solidarity with liberation movements.³⁰ These provisions reflect Ayatollah Khomeini's belief that the revolution must transcend borders and serve as a universal moral project. His political thought emphasised an Islam “whose standard-bearers are the bare-footed, oppressed and poor people of the world”. This worldview fuses Shi'i notions of righteous struggle embodied in the figure of *Imam Hussain* — with a distinctly **Third Worldist** orientation that situates Iran within broader anti-colonial movements across the Global South. Thus, for communities grappling with imperial legacies, sectarian marginalisation, or socio-political dislocation, Iran's discourse of resistance and justice generates resonance beyond formal alliances. Iran has positioned itself as the vanguard of Islamic justice and the defender of oppressed communities, particularly Palestinians. Iran's foreign policy is fundamentally structured around anti-American and anti-Israeli commitments, presenting Iran not merely as a geopolitical actor but as a moral authority confronting global injustice. This resonates with communities shaped by colonial legacies, structural marginalisation, and grievances against Western dominance and this positioning generates attraction among communities who interpret geopolitics through the lens of historical injustice and Western domination.³¹

Iran's influence over Shia groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan illustrates the operationalisation of this narrative. Through support for Shia organisations, Iran successfully disseminated its anti-American message, strengthening ideological affinity and political loyalty.³² This unique form of attraction arises from shared religious identity, transnational networks of clerical authority, and narratives of Islamic solidarity elements central to Iran's civilisational soft power repertoire.

The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) is one of the most significant vehicles for this outreach. Operating in Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and beyond. The IKRC

²⁹ <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/10095/Mahdaviat-A-key-concept-to-understanding-religion>

³⁰ Constitution Of The Islamic Republic Of Iran retrieved from <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/4205c7/pdf>

³¹ Mozaffari, M. (2013). The role of ideology in Iranian foreign policy. In C. Therme, H. E. Chehabi, & F. Khosrokhavar (Eds.), *Iran and the challenges of the twenty-first century: Essays in honour of Mohammad-Reza Djalili* (pp. 189–204). Mazda. Page (198)

³² Vatanka, A. (2015). *Iran and Pakistan: Security, diplomacy and American influence*. I. B. Tauris. (Page 244)

collaborates with governmental and non-governmental organisations in nearly 40 countries.³³ Its transnational welfare networks are not merely technical development initiatives; they constitute a form of *ethical statecraft* aimed at cultivating loyalty and moral indebtedness among grassroots communities.

Institutionalisation of Religious Identity: HauzaIlmiyya Qom, Marja'iyat-Taqlid

A second pillar of Iran's soft power strategy has been the post-revolution effort to spread Shiism and cultivate religious affinity through ritual, symbolism, and theological education. Ceremonies such as *Ashura* and *Arbaeen*, commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, serve not only as religious observances but as powerful political narratives centred on supreme sacrifice for justice through resistance against tyranny.³⁴ Through state-supported rituals, media, and transnational networks, Iran frames contemporary geopolitical struggles, especially Palestinian resistance, Hezbollah's confrontation with Israel, and anti-imperialist movements as extensions of the Husaynian paradigm. This ritual politics performs three functions:

It constructs a moral binary between the oppressed and oppressor.

It provides a symbolic lexicon for movements aligned with Iran.

It fosters emotive solidarity among Shia communities globally.

Iran has actively internationalised Ashura ceremonies, framing them as universal moral events rather than sect-specific rituals. In Iraq, the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala serve as hubs of transnational Shia identity, strengthened by Iranian cultural and economic patronage.

In addition, the HauzaIlmiyya of Qom, which continues the long-standing Persianate tradition of religious scholarship, has become not only a centre of Islamic jurisprudence but also an instrument of transnational ideological formation. The institutions such as al-Mustafa International University train thousands of clerics from Asia, Africa, and Europe, who return home as carriers of Iranian interpretations of Shia jurisprudence and political theology. Through marja'iyat, the authority of senior clerics who serve as sources of emulation (Maraji-e Taqlid) Iran cultivates deep emotional, intellectual, and religious loyalties across the Shia world.³⁵ Taqlid (emulation) is not only a personal spiritual act; it is a mechanism through which Iran extends clerical influence into Iraq, Lebanon, the Gulf states, South Asia, and Afghanistan.³⁶

Two mechanisms underpin this influence:

Educational soft power—The expansion of Iranian-funded seminaries, particularly al-Mustafa International University, allows Iran to train thousands of clerics from Asia, Africa, and Europe. These students often return home with networks, pedagogies, and worldviews shaped by Iran's revolutionary Shia discourse, thereby embedding Iranian influence within local religious ecosystems.³⁷

Doctrinal dissemination—Concepts such as **Wilayat-e-Faqih (rule of the jurist)**, **Mahdaviyat** and **Intizaar**³⁸ (**eschatological messianic expectation**) form the core of Iran's doctrinal export. Their spread provides Iran with symbolic authority and legitimacy that non-clerical states cannot replicate. Thus, the clerical establishment functions as a civilizational infrastructure, enabling Iran to project cultural-intellectual authority that operates independently of its diplomatic institutions. In countries with substantial Shia communities, Iran leverages existing religious and cultural ties to deepen influence. Iraq provides a notable example: the shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala symbolise centuries of Persian-Shia intellectual exchange, and Tehran's continued cultural and economic investments in these centres

³³Mehrnews. (2014). Imam Khomeini Relief Committee offices set up in eight foreign countries [in Persian], 21 January. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/2223839>.

³⁴ ABNA. (2014). Ashura ceremonies attract millions across the Shia world. AhlulBayt News Agency. <https://www.abna24.com/>

³⁵Sabrina Mervin. "Introduction", in Sabrina Mervin (ed.), *The Shi'a worlds and Iran*, London, SaqiBooks, 2010, pp. 9-26. 2007.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷International and Public Relations Office, al-Mustafa International University, *An Introduction to al-Mustafa International University* (Qom: MIU, 2009)

³⁸ <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/10003/The-responsibility-that-comes-with-awaiting-the-Savior-Imam>

extend its civilisational reach beyond political borders.

In addition, through scholarships, exchange programmes, and university partnerships facilitated by Iranian embassies, Iran cultivates long-term cognitive and emotional ties among students, scholars, and clerical trainees. This approach mirrors pre-modern Persian civilisational practices, where intellectual exchange across the Persianate world was a key mechanism for building influence.³⁹

Cultural Diplomacy and the Global Promotion of Persian Language

Iran also deploys cultural diplomacy centred on the Persian language, literary heritage, and shared civilisational history. Iran has actively promoted Persian cultural values across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and the Caucasus. Language promotion is central to this effort.⁴⁰

The Saadi Foundation (bonyad-e Saadi), has over 80 cultural representatives worldwide, leads initiatives to expand Persian language teaching abroad.⁴¹ Its mission reflects a broader state strategy of using linguistic affinity as a soft power resource. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation, affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, complements this effort by organising conferences, publications, and academic collaborations focused on Persian literature and philology, it also works to project Iran's soft power in Shia communities, extended Muslims world and in some non-Muslim countries as well.⁴² ICRO was established in 1995 for the purpose of 'homogenising the Islamic Republic's multifarious cultural diplomacy networks' and for 'coordinating Iran's bilateral cultural initiatives with other states'.⁴³ The main activities of the ICRO include organising cultural and religious events in different countries, promoting Persian-language learning centres and building links with cultural institutions in host countries. In addition, it produces books about Iranian culture and the Islamic Republic which are available to

the public at the cultural centres associated with the ICRO.⁴⁴ ICRO has office in various countries in the region, including Iran's neighbours Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey and Tajikistan.⁴⁵

Support Oppressed against the Oppressor

This civilizational ethos positions Iran as a protector of dignity, especially among communities affected by colonial violence, authoritarianism, or Western interference. Such narratives disproportionately resonate across the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and parts of South and Central Asia (Keshavarzian 2020). Iran's soft power is thus less about projecting a lifestyle or a consumer culture, and more about articulating a moral stance.

It noteworthy that *Nelson Mandela* expressed gratitude to Iran for its support to black people against apartheid South Africa, a fact documented in Mandela's own archival remarks.⁴⁶ Iran likewise supported Bosnian Sunni Muslims during the 1992–95 war, in terms of political support, advisors and material which won Iran goodwill among Bosniaks despite sectarian differences. Iran has also cultivated long-standing ties with Cuba⁴⁷ and with Venezuela, illustrating Iran's willingness to align with non-Muslim or secular regimes that it regards as resisting Western domination.⁴⁸ Also, Iran at huge

³⁹ Nazar and Recknagel, 'Controversial Madrasah Builds Iran's Influence in Kabul'

⁴⁰ Mozaffari, M., & Akbar, A. (2022). Iran's soft power in Azerbaijan: Shifting cultural dynamics in the post-Soviet era. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 1–19. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13569775.2023.2169305>

⁴¹ Rezaie-mehr, S., & Vafaei, A. (2020-21). The analysis of the Persian language and literature teaching in the development of the Islamic Republic of Iran's cultural diplomacy [in Persian]. *Rahburd-eijtemei farhangi*, 37, 65–92. Page (84)

⁴² Mehrnews; July 18, 2026, The Status of the Spread of the Persian Language in the World/We Are with You and We Are Not with You; www.mehrnews.com/news/3714646.

⁴³ Edward Wastnidge, 'The Modalities of Iranian Soft Power: From Cultural Diplomacy to Soft War', *Politics* 35(3/4) (2015): 370

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Nelson Mandela Centre / Mandela speeches — "Address by President Nelson Mandela ..." (archival speech mentioning thanks to Iran) retrieved @ http://www.mandela.gov.za/mandela_speeches/1996/960912_iran.htm

⁴⁷ Tehran Time, January 30, 2010-Iran, Cuba seek expanded economic co-op, visit at

<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/213286/Iran-Cuba-seek-expanded-economic-co-op>

⁴⁸ Aljazeera, June 11, 2022- Iran, Venezuela sign 20-year cooperation plan during Maduro visit at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/11/iran-venezuela-sign-20-year-cooperation-plan-during-maduro-visit>

cost has consistently supported Palestine politically, diplomatically, and materially, with Iranian leaders repeatedly affirming that support for the Palestinian struggle is a constitutional and ideological obligation rooted in the principle of defending the oppressed.⁴⁹ Taken together, these cases substantiate the Iranian leadership's claim that ideological commitments to anti-imperialism and protection of the oppressed are central pillars of its civilisational-claim to influence beyond the West.

Civilizational Soft Power of India: Pluralism, Non-Violence, and the Ethics of Harmony

India's soft power is shaped by its pluralistic civilizational ethos formed through centuries of cultural synthesis, philosophies like **Dharma**, **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, **Ahimsa of Emperor Ashoka**, **Sarva Dharma Sambhava**, **Yoga**, **Ayurveda** and the non-violent political struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi continues to inform both domestic political imagination and external engagement. India's cultural treasures from classical dance and music to Yoga, Ayurveda, cuisine and the global reach of Bollywood constitute significant reservoirs of attraction that underpin its civilizational soft power.

The principle of **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, originating from the *Maha Upanishad* expresses a worldview in which humanity is bound together through moral reciprocity, shared responsibility, and a collective destiny. Rooted in spiritual inclusivity, this civilizational philosophy serves as the foundation of India's cultural diplomacy and soft power, emphasising cooperation, compassion, and interconnectedness in an increasingly globalized world. India operationalizes the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in its foreign policy, particularly in moments of global crisis. Examples such as India's humanitarian assistance during the Turkey–Syria earthquake under **Operation Dost**, and the **Vaccine Maitri** initiative during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrate how this ancient principle continues to shape India's international engagement.⁵⁰ Guided by this ethos, India's cultural diplomacy promotes global unity, peace, and collective well-being, offering important insights into how civilizational values can strengthen India's influence on the global stage.

Invoked frequently in India's diplomacy, it frames the state not as a hegemonic actor but as a civilizational mediator committed to dialogue, mutual respect, and collective responsibility. This perspective shapes India's approach to foreign relations, privileging cooperation and understanding over confrontation (Tharoor 2012; Rajagopalan 2021). UNESCO's frameworks on cultural and civilizational dialogue also acknowledge this principle (UNESCO 2021). Complementing this universalistic worldview is the principle of **Sarva Dharma Sambhava** (respect for all religions). This ethos has anchored India's internal pluralism and shaped its external image as a land of religious coexistence. As Radhakrishnan notes, *dharma* represents a moral code upheld not by coercion but by collective conscience—a living ethical spirit that evolves with society. In political practice, *dharma* translates into adherence to ethical conduct, non-aggression, and respect for international law. These values subtly influence India's foreign policy behaviour, legitimising humanitarian action and moral leadership in global affairs.⁵¹

Guided by these civilizational principles of *Dharma* (duty) and **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, India has repeatedly extended humanitarian assistance beyond the boundaries of nationality or political alignment. Operation Raahat (1–11 April 2015) stands as a major example, evacuating over 5,600 individuals—including nearly 960 foreign nationals from more than 40 countries—from conflict-ridden Yemen. Among those rescued were Pakistani and Bangladeshi citizens, underscoring India's willingness to place humanitarian duty above geopolitical tensions. A similar gesture occurred during the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war, when Indian diplomatic efforts facilitated the evacuation of a stranded Pakistani student, Asma Shafique, who publicly thanked the Indian Embassy for securing her safety.⁵²

⁴⁹Iranian official statements affirming constitutional and ideological commitment to Palestine. Visit at <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=101202>

⁵⁰Suchak, P., Siddhapura, J., Joshi, A., & Pandya, V. M. (2025). *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: A timeless philosophy for today's global challenges*. International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR), 12(1). (Page 602)

⁵¹For more explanation of dharma see Gautam, Pradeep Kumar (2016): Understanding Dharma and Artha in Statecraft through Kautilya's Arthashastra, IDSA Monograph Series n° 53, New Delhi, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

⁵²NDTV Report (2022, March 9). *Watch: Pakistani student thanks Indian Embassy, PM Modi for rescuing her from Ukraine..* <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/india-rescues-pakistani-student-stranded-in-ukraine-2811954>

These acts of cross-border humanitarianism unfolded despite fraught bilateral relations, reflecting an ethos rooted in civilizational ethics rather than political reciprocity. Earlier, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vande Bharat Mission enabled the movement and evacuation of several foreign nationals stranded in Chinese cities.⁵³ Collectively, such actions demonstrate India's crisis-response posture as one guided by principles that transcend national, political, or ideological boundaries.

Ahimsa

A Sanskrit word basically meaning non-violence/harm. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy and later globalised through Mahatma Gandhi, ahimsa forms a key pillar of India's civilizational soft power. India's emphasis on peaceful cohabitation, non-aggression, and the resolution of disputes through nonviolent means directly reflects this foundational value. Gandhi revitalised Ahimsa by transforming it into a strategic instrument of political action. His use of non-violence as a tool for moral persuasion rather than passive submission reshaped political consciousness in India and inspired 20th-century civil rights and anti-colonial leaders such as James Bevel, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela.

For Gandhi, the practice of *Ahimsa* extended far beyond avoiding physical harm. It also required rejecting destructive mental and moral behaviours such as hatred, malice, harsh speech, dishonesty, and falsehood each of which he regarded as subtle forms of violence that violated the principle of non-harm. "*Gandhi considered Ahimsa to be a powerful creative force guiding individuals towards Satya, the 'Divine Truth', through all human encounters.*"⁵⁴ Leaders such as Sri Ramana Maharishi, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore further shaped this moral-civilizational philosophy, reinforcing India's distinct voice in global affairs. As Hymans (2009) notes, India's peaceful decolonisation marked "Indian soft power's finest hour". It proved that moral authority and not military might could shift the trajectory of global politics.

Yoga

Yoga and Ayurveda represent two of India's most influential instruments of civilisational soft power. Yoga, rooted in a 5,000-year-old tradition and shaped by the metaphysical frameworks of Sāṃkhya, the Upanishads, and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, embodies India's holistic philosophy of harmony between body, mind, and spirit. Preserved through centuries of practice across South Asia, yoga has become a global wellness movement and one of India's most successful forms of non-hegemonic influence. The most spectacular example of using cultural heritage in foreign relations came with the establishment of International Yoga Day by the UN. Together with International Non-Violence Day, established by the UN in 2007, and celebrated on 2 October – the day of Mahatma Gandhi's birth – this was the second recent important recognition of India's contribution to humanity.⁵⁵ The UN's adoption of International Yoga Day, the expansion of yoga centres worldwide, and institutional support from WHO highlights its global reach and credibility. As a form of wellness diplomacy, yoga acts as a cultural bridge that connects diverse societies with India's ethical traditions.

Acceptance of Different Religions as Civilizational Soft Power

India's religious and cultural landscape amplifies the civilizational soft power narratives, which is rooted in its historic capacity to embrace, absorb, and harmonize an extraordinary range of religious beliefs and practices. This pluralistic ethos—more than any single cultural or political instrument—forms the moral core of India's global influence. Unlike regions that evolved within narrowly defined religious identities, India developed through millennia of cultural layering, intellectual cross-pollination, and devotional diversity. Religious tolerance, acceptance, and coexistence are not modern constructs; they are foundational civilizational values that have shaped India's identity and strengthened its soft-power reach across Asia and beyond.

⁵³ Ministry of External Affairs (India), Annual Report | 2020 21
https://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/33569_MEA_annual_Report.pdf

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Patryk Kugiel, (2017), *India's Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy*, Routledge / Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Ancient Roots of Pluralism: Early Civilizations and Vedic Thought

India's civilisational pluralism originates in the Indus Valley civilization, where early communities worshipped multiple supernatural forces through ritual symbols and proto-yogic practices. This diversity expanded with the arrival of the Aryans, whose pantheon of thirty-three Vedic deities—as celebrated in the Rig Veda—laid the foundation for a religious universe later metaphorically described as comprising 330 million gods, symbolising Hinduism's vast inclusivity rather than literal enumeration. By the 6th century BCE, this pluralistic landscape deepened with the rise of nearly sixty-three heterodox sects, ranging from the materialist Charvakas to the ascetic Ajivikas. Jainism and Buddhism emerged as major movements challenging Brahmanical orthodoxy, with the Buddha promoting an ethical and rational path that rejected notions of a supreme creator or eternal soul. Together, these traditions illustrate a distinctive civilizational pattern in which diverse metaphysical ideas coexisted, competed, and evolved—forming the foundation of India's enduring religious and philosophical pluralism.

Buddhism as a Global Civilizational Bridge

In India's soft-power strategy, Buddhism holds a distinctive diplomatic and cultural significance. India's Buddhist heritage is a major soft-power asset. **Bodhi Gaya**, where the *Buddha* attained enlightenment, attracts one in six foreign visitors to India. Other pilgrimage sites Sarnath, Kushinagar, Rajgir, Vaishali form the Buddhist Circuit, drawing pilgrims and scholars from across Asia. The presence of the Dalai Lama and Buddhist artistic and architectural heritage in India also reinforces India's role as the "Caretaker of Buddhism."

Political Patronage of Religious Tolerance: Mauryan to Medieval Period

India's political leadership historically reinforced this ethos of coexistence. Chandragupta Maurya, though a follower of Jainism, encouraged diverse religious communities to flourish. His grandson, Emperor Ashoka, after converting to Buddhism, issued edicts urging respect for all sects and discouraging religious disparagement. Ashoka's policies represented one of the earliest state-led articulations of religious tolerance and pluralism by protecting the rights of other communities. Subsequent Buddhist and Hindu rulers continued to uphold these civilizational values.

India, an Umbrella of Faiths: Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Beyond

The medieval arrival of Islam further contributed to India's religious diversity. Over a millennium, Hindus and Muslims lived together, intermixing traditions in architecture, music, literature, and everyday culture. The Mughal Empire, particularly under Emperor Akbar, institutionalized policies of religious tolerance by abolishing discriminatory taxes, inviting scholars of varied faiths to debate in the Ibadat Khana, and advancing the notion of *sulh-i-kul* (universal peace). Mystical figures such as Kabir and Guru Nanak further bridged communal divides by emphasizing shared ethical principles and condemning sectarianism. Their teachings nurtured the composite culture of South Asia, where devotional traditions like Bhakti and Sufism evolved in parallel, each influencing the other.

Today, India remains one of the most religiously diverse nations on Earth. It hosts the world's third-largest Muslim population who are predominantly local converts, not descendants of foreign invaders. Hinduism's internal acceptance of diversity expressed by Swami Vivekananda's notion of not just tolerance but *active acceptance*—is encapsulated in the principle of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava*, the belief that all paths to the divine are equally valid. This spiritual inclusivity underpins India's model of secularism, which does not demand the absence of religion but insists on respect for all.

India's civilizational openness also welcomed foreign religions centuries before their consolidation elsewhere. Jewish communities are believed to have arrived in Kerala as early as the first millennium BCE to escape persecution; local rulers offered protection and integration. Christianity reached India with St. Thomas the Apostle around AD 53, long before spreading across Europe. Over the centuries, Christianity flourished, especially in South India, with churches, schools, and social institutions contributing to national life. India's Christian population—though only about three

percent—exceeds that of some major European nations and remains a vibrant part of the country's pluralistic fabric. India hosts one of the world's largest Shia communities, which coexists peacefully with Sunnis—contrasting sharply with countries like Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan where sectarian violence remains endemic. These comparative patterns highlight India's distinctive capacity for internal religious accommodation.

Modern political events further illustrate India's pluralistic character. Shashi Tharoor famously noted that during the 2004 elections, a Catholic (Sonia Gandhi) led her party to victory, appointed a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) as Prime Minister, who was sworn in by a Muslim President (A.P.J. Abdul Kalam)—all in an overwhelmingly Hindu-majority nation.⁵⁶ This convergence of diverse religious identities within the highest levels of political leadership reflects the deep societal acceptance of interfaith legitimacy. While occasional tensions rise, often fuelled by political opportunism, such divisions have never permanently undermined India's longstanding commitment to religious coexistence. The values of tolerance and pluralism remain embedded in the country's social fabric.

Civilizational Soft Power in Afghanistan: A Shared Arena

*Afghanistan serves as an important site to analyse how Iran and India deploy their distinct civilizational soft power in parallel. Both countries possess long histories of engagement with Afghanistan—linguistic, cultural, religious, economic, and intellectual. Both rely on **deep civilizational memory** to cultivate influence.*

Iran's Civilisational Soft Power in Afghanistan

Ideologically, Iran frames its presence in Afghanistan through a narrative of shared civilisational kinship and moral obligation. Afghanistan, particularly its Persian-speaking regions, is portrayed within Iranian strategic thought as part of the historic Persianate world—a cultural geography linked through language, literature, poetry, and religious institutions. This civilisational framing allows Iran to present its influence not as foreign intervention but as cultural stewardship rooted in centuries of scholarly, linguistic, and spiritual interchange. The prominence of Persian language, the deep imprint of Shia ideology among Afghan Hazaras, and the longstanding transnational networks of clerical mobility between Herat, Kabul, Mashhad, and Qom provide Iran with a dense substrate on which ideological messaging can be layered. This civilisational lens enables Iran to embed its messaging within deeply local idioms:

Brotherhood of common language: Iran promotes Persian (Dari) through the Saadi Foundation, textbook distribution, teacher training, and literary festivals in Herat and Kabul.⁵⁷

Cross-border clerical mobility: Afghan seminarians travel to Qom and Mashhad, creating long-term networks of Iran-trained clerics who shape community discourse on justice, martyrdom, resistance, and Shia political ethics.⁵⁸

Shared religious symbolism: Karbala narratives resonate strongly among Hazaras⁵⁹, who have historically experienced injustice—allowing Iran's revolutionary rhetoric to merge with local memories of persecution.

Iran's civilisational soft power in Afghanistan is not sustained merely by ideological discourse; it is operationalised through a dense institutional architecture that blends cultural diplomacy, religious education, welfare provision, and strategic communication. The ideological foundation is operationalised through a set of highly institutionalised soft-power infrastructures. Iran's key cultural and religious organisations, the Islamic Culture and Communication Organisation (ICCO), the Al-

⁵⁶Tharoor, S. (2007). *A Myth and an Idea*. In *The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power* (pp. 3–12). New York: PublicAffairs.

⁵⁷Iran and Afghanistan's Commonalities Based on the Persian Language Go Beyond What Can Be Considered a Threat Available at: <https://avapress.com/en/news/313727/iran-and-afghanistan-s-commonalities-based-on-the-persian-language-go-beyond-what-can-be-considered-a-threat>

⁵⁸Mehdi Khalaji, 'Balancing Authority and Autonomy: The Shiite clergy post Khamenei,' Research Notes No 37, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2016, p 6

⁵⁹Tabataba'i, Muhammad Husayn. 1981. *Shi'ite Islam*. Translated and edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Albany: State University of New York Press. (Page 196)

Civilisational Soft Power in South and West Asia:
Comparing Iran and India's Global Influence
through the Case of Afghanistan

Mustafa International University network, the Saadi Foundation, and the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC), play central roles in shaping Iran's influence across Afghanistan's religious schools, cultural centres, universities, and welfare economies. ICCO's cultural centres in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif serve as important centres for religious seminars, Persian literary events, Ashura commemorations, and Qur'anic competitions. Through the Saadi Foundation, Iran actively promotes Persian language teaching, distributes textbooks, trains teachers, and supports cultural programming that subtly aligns Afghan identity with the Persian-Islamic civilisational sphere.

Religious education forms the backbone of Iran's soft power projection, especially among the Shia Hazara population. Al-Mustafa International University, headquartered in Qom, operating through an extensive transnational network, educates thousands of Afghan students in jurisprudence, philosophy, theology, Qur'anic sciences, and revolutionary thought. Many graduates return to Afghanistan as clerics, teachers, mediators, and ritual leaders, carrying with them a distinctly Iranian interpretation of Shia orthodoxy. This creates a generational cycle of clerical influence that ties Afghan religious authority to Iranian seminarian training pathways.⁶⁰ Alongside clerical education, Iran funds Hawzas, mosques, charitable religious institutions, and shrines across West Kabul, Bamiyan, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. These religious spaces routinely host Ta'ziya gatherings on Ashura and Arbaeen in Iranian-styled Majalis, and sermons commemorating the event of Karbala and Shia resistance. In this environment, Iranian theological themes and Khomeinist political messages are absorbed through familiar devotional rhythms. Ritual life thus becomes a vehicle through which political meanings are internalised, enabling Iran to diffuse its ideological vocabulary without overt propaganda. Iran's soft power in Afghanistan also manifests in strategic deployment of transnational Shia solidarity, particularly through its engagement with the Hazara community. Iran's long-standing cultural patronage of the Hazaras rooted in shared religious identity, historical persecution, and diaspora connections has positioned Iran as a protector and benefactor. The mobilisation of the Fatemiyun Division, a militia composed largely of Afghan Hazaras recruited to fight in Syria, is frequently portrayed by Iran not as coercive militarisation but as an extension of Shia resistance lore. Iran frames the participation of Fatemiyun fighters in Syria as an act of sacred defence, linking them to the Karbala paradigm and embedding their struggle within Iran's broader narrative of transnational resistance to oppression and takfiri extremism.⁶¹ While the military dimension of Fatemiyun falls outside traditional soft power, the symbolic capital Iran derives from portraying Afghan fighters as heroes of resistance enhances its ideological prestige among segments of the Hazara population.

Iran's soft power is further entrenched by a parallel welfare infrastructure that fills gaps left by the Afghan state and international organisations. The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) distributes food aid, provides health services, supports widows with monthly stipends, and funds scholarships⁶² for poor students' programmes concentrated mainly in Hazara-majority areas such as Dasht-e-Barchi (Kabul), Bamiyan, and Daykundi. These interventions help Iran cultivate moral authority and emotional loyalty among marginalised populations who have historically suffered exclusion from state structures. By framing its welfare outreach as support for the *mostazafin*, Iran aligns its aid with its constitutional foreign policy principle of protecting the oppressed. This moral narrative transforms welfare provision into a symbolic act of guardianship rather than charity, positioning Iran as an ethical actor that responds to suffering when others ignore it. Welfare thus becomes a powerful tool for shaping affective ties and embedding Iranian values within local communities.

Beyond religion and language, Iran's soft power extends into the humanitarian and social welfare domain to fill the gap left by the Afghan state and international organisations.⁶³ The Imam Khomeini Relief Committee (IKRC) distributes financial relief, food, health services, supports widows

⁶⁰ Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, and Ali Akbar, (2023). Iran's soft power in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Edinburgh University Press. (Page 80)

⁶¹ The Two Faces of the Fatemiyun (II): The women behind the fighters, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/regional-relations/the-two-faces-of-the-fatemiyun-ii-the-women-behind-the-fighters/#:~:text=The%20first%20dispatch%20in%20this,toughest%20battles%20of%20the%20conflict>.

⁶² Afghan students living in Iran and educational problems -1, Available at: <https://www.irna.ir/news/83155937>

⁶³ Majidiyar, Ahmad, and Ali Alfoneh. "Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Imam Khomeini Relief Committee." *Middle Eastern Outlook*, no. 4, American Enterprise Institute, July 2010

with monthly stipends, and funds scholarships for poor students across Hazara-dominated areas such as Dasht-e-Barchi (West-Kabul), Bamiyan, and Daykundi.⁶⁴ Welfare provision serves dual purposes: first, addressing genuine socioeconomic needs in underserved communities; and second, cultivating long-term loyalty and moral indebtedness to the Iranian state. The moral framing of such aid supports the oppressed and solidarity with victims of structural marginalisation reinforces Iran's self-presentation as a guardian of justice and protector of downtrodden communities. The IKRC's operations in Afghanistan fit within Iran's broader transnational welfare strategy, which spans Lebanon, Syria, Pakistan, and Tajikistan and is designed to build durable emotional and political ties with populations historically excluded from state support.

Iran's media presence in Afghanistan represents one of its most dynamic soft power mechanisms. Networks such as Tamadon TV, AhlulBayt TV, Sahar TV, and other Persian-language satellite channels disseminate a mix of religious, cultural, and political content that aligns Afghanistan's information ecosystem with Iranian narratives.⁶⁵ These outlets broadcast anti-imperialist discourse, critiques of U.S./NATO intervention, coverage of Palestinian resistance, and commemoration of religious events such as Muharram and Arbaeen. In addition, Iran's cultural productions such as films, serials, historical dramas are watched in big numbers across Afghanistan, strengthening Iran's aesthetic and moral appeal. Through media, Iran creates an alternative intellectual space that competes with Western liberal narratives and resonates with Afghan publics disillusioned by war, corruption, and foreign intervention.

Examples Of Iranian Soft Power from Afghanistan

Herat University Partnerships

Herat, often described as the cultural heart of the Persianate world, has been a focal point of Iranian soft power. Herat University maintains long-standing academic partnerships with Mashhad's Ferdowsi University, AllamaTabatabai University and Tehran University, involving joint conferences, faculty exchanges, shared research projects, and scholarships. These collaborations embed Iranian academic norms and cultural narratives into Afghanistan's educational sector, reinforcing Iran's authority as a cultural and intellectual reference point.^{66,67}

Reconstruction and Cultural Restoration

Following 2001, Iran positioned itself as a civilisational patron by investing in cultural and physical reconstruction in western Afghanistan. Its projects included the restoration of Herat's historic sites, construction of roads linking Herat with the Iranian border, and the extension of electricity from Iran into Afghan territory. Unlike Western reconstruction efforts, often framed in technical or developmental terms, Iranian projects were presented as a *civilisational duty* rooted in shared history and cultural kinship. These investments helped Iran consolidate influence at a time when Afghanistan was saturated with competing international actors.⁶⁸

Ritual Life and Cultural Authority in West Kabul

In West Kabul—home to a dense Hazara population—Iran-funded mosques and Hussainiyas have become centres of ritual authority. During Muharram, mourning events inspired by Iranian ritual forms are a common sight; Arbaeen commemorations are mobilised through Iranian logistical support; and Majalis feature Iranian-style Rawda recitations and political sermons invoking resistance, martyrdom, and justice. Through such ritual infrastructures, Iran embeds its ideological worldview in

⁶⁴Kagan, Frederick W., Kimberly Kagan and Danielle Pletka, Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan. American Enterprise Institute / Institute for the Study of War, (page, 81)

⁶⁵Roshangar, B. (2009, April 19). *Mohseni: Prozh-e Bast Salta-e Iran dar Manteqa [Mohseni: The project of Iran's expansion of hegemony in region]*. Kabul Press. Retrieved from <http://www.kabulpress.org/my/spip.php?article3319>

⁶⁶ATU Signs MoU with Herat University. Retrieved from: <https://atu.ac.ir/en/news/5470/atu-signs-mou-with-herat-university>

⁶⁷ '40,000 Afghans Enrolled in Iranian Universities', Outlook Afghanistan, 28 August 2019, Retrieved from: http://www.outlookafghanistan.net/national_detail.php?post_id=24402

⁶⁸Nader, Alireza, and Joya Laha (2011), Iran's Balancing Act in Afghanistan. RAND Corporation.

the everyday religious practices of Afghan Shias.

Manifestation of Iran's Soft Power in Mobilization of Fatemiyun

The Fatemiyun Division, composed largely of Afghan Hazara fighters deployed by Iran to Syria, occupies a complex but significant space in Iran's soft power architecture. While militarised, Iran frames the Fatemiyun not as mercenaries but as heroes participating in a sacred defence (*Defā-e Moqaddas*) against terrorism and injustice. Iranian media depict Afghan fighters as inheritors of the Karbala paradigm, their sacrifices positioned within Iran's broader 'Axis of Resistance'. This narrative enhances Iran's symbolic capital among segments of the Afghan Shia community, even as the militarisation dimension remains contentious in some circles.⁶⁹

India's Civilizational Soft Power in Afghanistan

India's engagement with Afghanistan represents one of the most sophisticated and enduring examples of civilizational soft power which manifests across development, humanitarian care, education, cultural diplomacy, and everyday human interactions creating a reservoir of goodwill unmatched by most regional actors.

Civilizational Affinity and Cultural Connectivity

Afghanistan and India share centuries of historical, cultural, and spiritual engagement through migration, trade, the Silk Route, Sufism, linguistic affinities, and courtly culture.⁷⁰ This civilizational memory ensures that Afghans often perceive India as a neighbour with profound cultural resonance rather than a distant foreign power. **Bollywood cinema** and Indian television have played a particularly influential role. By the 1970s, Kabul's cinemas regularly screened Hindi films, and by the post-2001 era, Bollywood became ubiquitous through satellite television, DVDs, and smartphones. Popular serials such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*, dubbed in Dari, became social phenomena, reportedly silencing city streets during broadcasts.⁷¹ Bollywood's impact extends beyond entertainment: it creates a linguistic and cultural bridge, making Hindi/Urdu widely understood, while normalizing pluralistic narratives where Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and secular protagonists coexist. This projection of **Sarva Dharma Sambhava** reinforces tolerance for religious diversity and presents India's pluralistic ethos as emotionally compelling and socially familiar to Afghans. Through cinema, Afghans encounter Indian cultural values as resonant and aspirational laying the foundation for enduring soft power.⁷²

Development as Ethical Diplomacy

India's reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan exemplify *Dharma, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and *Ahimsa*, prioritizing civilian led development over military engagement. India pledged over USD 2 billion for reconstruction after 2001, one of the highest regional contributions, but the distinguishing factor lies in the nature of its assistance.⁷³ Projects are conceived as long-term investments in Afghan welfare rather than geopolitical instruments reflecting India's civilizational ethics. For example, Zaranj-Delaram Highway connects Afghanistan to Iran's Chabahar port, diversifying trade routes and reducing reliance on Pakistan.⁷⁴ The Afghan-India Friendship Dam (Salma Dam) provides electricity to tens of thousands of households and irrigates thousands of hectares, embodying both developmental and symbolic significance. Small Development Projects (SDPs), clinics, vocational centers, schools, and women-focused livelihood initiatives prioritize community support, sustainability, and gender inclusion, reflecting India's principle of *Seva* (service).⁷⁵

⁶⁹Tobias Schneider, 'The Fatemiyoun Division: Afghan Fighters in the Syria Civil War', Middle East Institute, 15 October 2018, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/fatemiyoun-division-afghan-fighters-syria-civil-war>

⁷⁰ Destradi, Sandra. 2018. "India: A Reluctant Partner for Afghanistan." *The Washington Quarterly* 37 (2): 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926212>

⁷¹ Tharoor, Shashi. 2014. *India: A Civilizational State*. New Delhi: Aleph.

⁷² Kugiel, P. (2017). *India's Soft Power: A New Foreign Policy Strategy*. Routledge.

⁷³ Dr. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (2016). India's role in the economic stabilization of Afghanistan. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/12959.pdf>

⁷⁴ Abdali, S. M. (2016). *Afghanistan–Pakistan–India: A paradigm shift*. Pentagon Press.

⁷⁵ Cartwright, J. (2009). India's regional and international support for democracy: Rhetoric or reality? *Asian Survey*, 49(3), 403–428. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.3.403>

Economic Integration and Ethical Partnership

India's economic engagement with Afghanistan demonstrates **VasudhaivaKutumbakam**, prioritizing Afghan prosperity without coercive conditionalities. The 2003 Preferential Trade Agreement and India's 2011 decision to grant duty-free access to nearly all Afghan exports exemplify acts of economic solidarity, with India becoming Afghanistan's largest export destination by 2013.⁷⁶ India also supported the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, hosted investment summits, and committed to projects such as the Hajigak iron ore initiative, reinforcing a vision of Afghanistan as a partner in regional prosperity rather than a strategic.⁷⁷

Education, Knowledge, and Human Capital

Education is perhaps the most transformative element of India's soft power. Thousands of Afghans annually received ICCR scholarships and ITEC training in civil service, agriculture, law, healthcare, and entrepreneurship until 2021. These initiatives embody India's civilizational belief that **Gyana** (knowledge) is transformative, producing Afghan graduates who acquire technical skills alongside exposure to India's multicultural democracy and pluralistic values. India also supports school construction, teacher training, and university linkages, reinforcing the notion that human capital development is foundational to national stability.⁷⁸

Health and Humanitarian Engagement

India's role as a **life-saving partner** in Afghanistan is a deeply felt dimension of its soft power. Indian generic medicines dominate Afghan pharmacies, while thousands of patients travel to India annually for advanced medical treatment, fostering personal bonds and narratives of hospitality. India's vaccine donations during COVID-19, support to hospitals, training of medical personnel, and provision of ambulances exemplify Joseph Nye's argument that soft power grows strongest when a state enhances human wellbeing.⁷⁹

Cricket Diplomacy and Cultural Bridges

Cricket represents a symbolic and practical connector. India nurtured Afghanistan's cricketing talent through infrastructure, training, and hosting opportunities. Cricket academies, domestic league participation, and mentorship from Indian players turned sport into a tool of youth engagement, national unity, and cross-cultural admiration. Cricket diplomacy exemplifies the civilizational ethos, offering Afghans joy and aspiration in a society fractured by decades of conflict.

Yoga and Civilizational Soft Power

Yoga sessions served as a subtle expression of India's civilizational soft power in Afghanistan, promoting values of peace, inner well-being, communal solidarity, and cultural openness. The Momtaz Yoga Center, founded by Fakhria Momtaz in 2015–2016, became Kabul's first women-only yoga studio, offering yoga, meditation, and wellness services aimed especially at Afghan women coping with the trauma of prolonged conflict and social marginalization.⁸⁰ Simultaneously, yoga sessions held in diplomatic contexts such as during International Yoga Day celebrations at the Embassy of India in Kabul served as a tool of cultural diplomacy. These events offer Afghans exposure to Indian civilizational heritage and project India as a benevolent, culturally rooted partner concerned with holistic well-being.

⁷⁶Blarel, N. (2012). India: The next superpower? India's soft power: From potential to reality. In N. Kitchen (Ed.), SR010. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science. <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43445/>

⁷⁷Das, A. (2016). India's neighbourhood policy: Challenges and prospects. *Jindal Journal of International Affairs*, 4(1), 18–37. <http://www.jsia.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/angana-das.pdf>

⁷⁸ Dr. Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (2016). India's role in the economic stabilization of Afghanistan. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kabul/12959.pdf>

⁷⁹Pant, H. V. (2013). India in Afghanistan: A trajectory in motion. *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, 17(1), 103–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973598414524121>

⁸⁰Afghanistan's only yoga studio: A calm oasis for war-weary women, Available at; <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/2/25/afghanistans-only-yoga-studio-a-calm-oasis-for-war-weary-women>

Diplomacy and Regional Influence

India's diplomatic engagement via SAARC, Heart of Asia, UN mechanisms, and strategic partnerships reinforces its reputation as a responsible regional actor. India has consistently supported Afghan sovereignty and democratic institutions without deploying military force, strengthening its moral and civilizational authority. Public opinion surveys confirm this: a 2010 BBC/ABC/ARD poll recorded 71% favourable views of India among Afghans, with minimal negative perception—indicative of influence derived from lived experience rather than propaganda.⁸¹ After Taliban's takeover of Kabul, despite not formally recognizing the new government, India has continued to provide humanitarian and development assistance, emphasizing people-to-people relations and sustaining long-term goodwill. Such initiatives reflect India's civilizational approach: valuing human life and well-being as central to its engagement, thereby strengthening enduring soft-power influence in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Acts of assistance—whether humanitarian, developmental, or moral—are universally capable of generating goodwill among ordinary people. However, what differentiates the quality and durability of the goodwill produced is not merely the act itself, but the ethical consciousness behind the act, which varies according to cultural traditions, moral and civilizational philosophies. Actors may extend help for interest-driven purposes, or they may do so from altruistic and value-driven motives. When the instrumental motives of a state are exposed, the resulting loss or gain of credibility can undermine its soft power or generate deeper, longer-lasting legitimacy and respect.

While Western norms continue to exert global influence, they no longer command universal assent. Rather, on the basis of Ibn Khaldun's thesis of dominant and dominated and Huntington's criticism of western civilization it could be argued that Western soft power is not an independent moral force but a derivative phenomenon, one that flows from centuries of military dominance over the rest of the world. Consequently, as this dominance recedes in parallel with the rise of states like India and Iran, the Western soft-power may also erode.

This distinction is crucial when evaluating civilizational soft power, a domain where actors such as India and Iran explicitly invoke historical, religious, and philosophical traditions as the moral basis of their foreign engagement. Civilizational values, however, cannot remain abstract. Their credibility depends on their translation into lived reality through policy, practice, and performance. A state may speak of universalism, compassion, or solidarity, but unless its actions are perceived as consistent with these values, the civilizational claim becomes hollow.

Moreover, civilizational soft power differs significantly from Joseph Nye's West-centric formulation. Nye's model largely assumes rational institutional action, attraction through culture, political values, and foreign policy as perceived externally. Civilizational soft power, by contrast, embeds these actions within a moral-philosophical consciousness that shapes how the provider understands its own behaviour and how the recipient population interprets the intention. While liberal states and civilizational states may undertake similar actions—such as sending food aid or building schools, the meaning of the act differs according to the ethical universe that animates it.

For example, the United States and India may both send humanitarian aid to a famine-stricken country. The material outcome may be identical, but the consciousness and civilizational framing behind the act differ substantially. India's assistance is often situated within the value of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, a civilizational ethic that emphasizes the moral duty to care for all humanity beyond borders or identities. Similarly, Iran's outreach is framed within the Shia revolutionary concept of supporting the *mostazafeen* (the oppressed) and resisting *estekbar-e jahani* (global arrogance). These values may sometimes overlap in practice such as when both countries build hospitals or provide

⁸¹Tellis, A. J., & Mukharji, A. (2010). *Is a regional strategy viable in Afghanistan*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/regionalapproachpdf>

development aid but at their core they rest on different historical, philosophical, and religious foundations.

Because these civilizational frameworks differ, the soft power they produce also differs. India's civilizational soft power tends to manifest in the form of cultural familiarity, non-interference, developmental assistance, and trust-building.

It is evident that Iran has successfully transformed its religious soft power among Afghan Shia communities into hard power, most visibly through the mobilization of fighters for the defence of Shia holy shrines in Syria. Iran provides not only ideological narratives but also a highly organized institutional ecosystem that cultivates commitment, discipline, and a sense of transcendent purpose. Seminaries such as the *Hawzallmiyya* in Qom and Mashhad offers intensive religious education that socializes students into doctrinal frameworks centred on sacrifice, resistance, and martyrdom for justice. When these Shia students return to their communities, this training becomes a powerful channel through which Iran's narratives of duty, protection of holy shrines, anti-takfiri struggle, and loyalty to the *wilayat-e-faqih* are disseminated. In this way, Iran's religious soft power is not passive cultural influence but an active mechanism of mobilization, capable of converting shared faith and religious authority into organized and strategic hard power on the battlefield.

In contrast, India adopts a cautious and fundamentally benign approach in Afghanistan, concentrating on cultivating a positive national image rather than pursuing militarized or ideological influence. A striking paradox in this context is that while Pakistan names several of its ballistic missiles after medieval Afghan conquerors of India such as Ghaznavi, Ghauri, and Abdali, figures remembered in India for their invasions it is India that has earned genuine goodwill in the land of those very conquerors. Because India already enjoys substantial soft power among ordinary Afghans, built through development projects, scholarships, cultural outreach, and a reputation for non-interference, it becomes comparatively easier for New Delhi to build rapport with any government that comes to power in Kabul. Yet what other tangible strategic benefits India has extracted from this benign image remains a subject requiring further research.

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