

Shiism and Soft Power: the Case of Iran

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Abstract

To judge Iran's international position by relying on most journalistic and academic accounts things could not be better for the country's rulers. After years of domestic turmoil and international conflict, Iran seems to have emerged reclaiming the position it had under the Pahlavi monarch as a regional power. But with the crucial difference that this time it acts in line with original revolutionary slogan, 'Neither East, Nor West, Islamic Republic is the best', as an independent actor with an extensive and expandable constituency in the region and beyond. In view of its relatively meagre economic and politico-military resources, does Iran thus present a equally telling, but particularistic example of the efficacious exercise of *soft power* as EU, the comparative case most often mentioned in recent debates on the virtues and vices of US's increasing reliance on military power? In attempting to answer this question, this paper discusses the evolution of Shiism, Iran's distinguishing source of soft power, as it reached the crossroads of Iran's two great twentieth century revolutions. An examination of the common democratic promises of both revolutions and their divergent democratic and theocratic outcomes provides a historically and theologically grounded comparative platform for assessing what may be described as the real, 'opportunity' (soft and hard power) cost of the new republic's theocratic turn following the victory of the 1979 revolution.