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The Impact of Religious Democracy in Iran on Its Strategic Depth in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

Religious democracy, as the governance model of the Islamic Republic of Iran, presents a synthesis of divine legitimacy and popular legitimacy. This model, grounded in Islamic teachings and active public participation in political processes, has succeeded in establishing a distinct model of Islamic governance that holds particular appeal for Muslim nations in contrast to Western secular and liberal models. This article aims to examine the impact of this model on Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East by analyzing the discourse of the Islamic Revolution, sources of soft power, and the role of political participation in enhancing Iran's regional influence. The findings indicate that religious democracy, by creating an alternative model of Islamic governance, has played an effective role in shaping and supporting aligned movements, expanding cultural and media diplomacy, and legitimizing Iran's foreign policy. These forms of support have not been limited to political and security dimensions but have also functioned as components of Iran's soft power, thereby contributing to the expansion of the country's strategic depth within its surrounding environment. Furthermore, the article demonstrates that religious democracy has contributed to the consolidation of the political system's legitimacy at the domestic level and has also functioned as a source of soft power at the regional level. The integration of religious values with popular participation has presented a distinct image of Islamic governance that holds appeal for Muslim populations in the region and encourages their convergence with Iran. Consequently, religious democracy is not only a domestic governance model but also an effective regional strategy for enhancing Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East. This model has facilitated the formation of allied networks, strengthened the discourse of resistance, and reinforced Iran's position within regional geopolitical equations.

Keywords: Religious democracy; strategic depth; Islamic Republic of Iran; Middle East; soft power; Islamic Revolution discourse

Introduction

In the contemporary international system, states seek to expand their strategic depth in order to increase power, ensure security, and consolidate their position. In the literature of international relations, this concept refers to a country's ability to establish sustained influence in its surrounding environment and to affect political, cultural, economic, and security processes. Strategic depth, in essence, reflects a state's capacity to transcend its geographical borders and become an influential actor in regional and global environments. Over the past four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran, by utilizing the model of religious democracy, has been able to expand this



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capacity in the Middle East and achieve a distinctive position in the region's geopolitical equations. This demonstrates that strategic depth is not merely a military concept limited to defensive capability but rather a multidimensional instrument that can also be realized through soft power, normative legitimacy, and social cohesion (1, 2).

This article seeks to answer the fundamental question of how religious democracy, as a governance model, has contributed to enhancing Iran's strategic depth in the region. Addressing this question is of particular importance because religious democracy is not only a domestic model for governing the country but also a theoretical and practical framework for the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. Examining this issue can demonstrate how the combination of religious legitimacy and popular acceptance has become an instrument for enhancing Iran's soft power in its surrounding environment and has created internal and regional cohesion in the face of external pressures (3, 4).

Religious democracy, as a unique governance model, represents a synthesis of divine legitimacy and popular acceptance. Unlike Western liberal democracies, this model is founded on the integration of religion and politics and has been able to present an alternative model for Muslim societies in the region (5). Within this framework, political legitimacy is derived not only from the will of the people but also from religious foundations and the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih), which has contributed to the stability and cohesion of Iran's political system (6). This characteristic has led religious democracy to be recognized not only as a domestic governance model but also as an inspirational model at the regional level, thereby enhancing Iran's normative attractiveness.

On the other hand, the concept of strategic depth in geopolitical literature refers to a country's ability to influence its surrounding environment through cultural, political, economic, and security instruments (7). By utilizing religious democracy, Iran has been able to expand its strategic depth in the Middle East and consolidate its position through the discourse of the Islamic Revolution, support for resistance movements, cultural and media diplomacy, and domestic political participation (1, 8). These factors, collectively, have contributed to Iran's recognition not only as a regional power but also as a normative actor.

The significance of this issue stems from the fact that the Middle East is one of the most sensitive geopolitical regions in the world, historically serving as a field of competition among regional and extra-regional powers (9). In such an environment, Iran, by relying on religious democracy, has been able to present an inspirational model for Muslim societies and strengthen its strategic depth through soft power and normative legitimacy (10, 11). This indicates that religious democracy is not merely a domestic governance model but also a regional strategy for consolidating Iran's position within geopolitical equations.

Therefore, examining the impact of religious democracy on Iran's strategic depth is essential not only for understanding the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic but also for comprehending geopolitical and security developments in the Middle East. This article adopts an analytical approach to demonstrate how this model has functioned as a source of soft power, expanding Iran's regional influence and facilitating the formation of aligned and allied networks. Furthermore, analyzing this issue contributes to a better understanding of how religious democracy has been transformed into a strategic instrument in Iran's foreign policy and clarifies its position within regional and global dynamics.

Theoretical Foundations and Perspectives

Definition of Religious Democracy (Divine Legitimacy + Popular Acceptance)

Religious democracy is a governance model that emerged in the Islamic Republic of Iran and is based on the combination of two sources of legitimacy: divine legitimacy and popular acceptance. Unlike Western secular and liberal models, this framework emphasizes the integration of religion and politics and has presented an alternative model of Islamic governance with particular appeal for Muslim societies in the region (5, 6).

Divine legitimacy in this system originates from religious teachings and the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist, meaning that political authority derives legitimacy within the framework of Islamic law and religious leadership. This legitimacy is rooted in the ideological and religious beliefs of society and has enabled Iran's political system to maintain greater stability in the face of legitimacy crises. Alongside this, popular acceptance is realized through public participation in elections, active engagement in political and social spheres, and the general acceptance of the political system by the population (5). This acceptance reflects an organic relationship between the people and the political system, contributing to social cohesion and public trust, and ultimately enhancing resilience against external pressures.

This dual structure has created a system that remains faithful to religious values while also responding to the will of the people. Consequently, religious democracy has been able to present an alternative model in contrast to Western liberal democracies. In this model, popular participation serves as the source of acceptance, while the Guardianship of the Jurist serves as the source of divine legitimacy, thereby ensuring domestic political stability and strengthening social cohesion (6). This characteristic has enabled Iran's political system not only to withstand external pressures but also to benefit from dual sources of legitimacy that distinguish it from other governance models.

From a theoretical perspective, religious democracy is not only a domestic governance model but also functions as a source of soft power. The attractiveness of this model for Muslim societies in the region stems from its integration of religion and politics and its emphasis on public participation alongside Islamic values. This characteristic has enabled religious democracy to play a role in Iran's foreign policy and to contribute to the normative legitimacy of the Islamic Republic's regional policies (12, 13). In essence, religious democracy has presented a model of Islamic governance that is compatible with both religious values and public participation, thereby making it an inspirational model for Muslim societies.

From this perspective, religious democracy has not only contributed to consolidating the domestic legitimacy of the Islamic Republic but has also functioned as a source of soft power at the regional level, strengthening Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East (1, 14). The combination of divine legitimacy and popular acceptance has positioned Iran as a distinctive model in the Islamic world and has facilitated the expansion of its normative and political influence in its surrounding environment. This demonstrates that religious democracy is not merely a domestic governance model but also a regional strategy that has contributed to consolidating Iran's position within the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East.

Definition of Strategic Depth and Its Distinction from Mere Influence

In the literature of international relations and geopolitics, strategic depth refers to a country's ability to establish a sustainable, multilayered, and reproducible sphere of influence in its surrounding environment. This concept is

not limited to temporary presence or short-term impact but rather reflects a country's capacity to consolidate its position within regional and global equations. Strategic depth represents a form of long-term investment in regional relations that enables states to rely on their social, cultural, and institutional foundations to preserve stability and power even during periods of crisis. Therefore, strategic depth must be understood as extending beyond a purely military instrument, as its cultural, political, economic, and normative dimensions are equally significant and can strengthen national security and state power against external threats (7).

In contrast, mere influence refers to short-term and limited impact on the surrounding environment, typically lacking sustainable institutional and social foundations. Influence may be achieved through propaganda tools or political pressure; however, in the absence of supportive structures and normative legitimacy, it tends to dissipate rapidly. Strategic depth is thus fundamentally distinct from mere influence because it is built upon social, cultural, and political networks and possesses the capacity to reproduce power over the long term (1). This distinction demonstrates that countries relying solely on temporary influence remain more vulnerable to environmental changes, whereas countries possessing strategic depth are capable of reproducing and sustaining their power over time.

The Islamic Republic of Iran represents a prominent example of a country that has operationalized the concept of strategic depth in practice. By utilizing the discourse of the Islamic Revolution, supporting resistance movements, engaging in cultural and media diplomacy, and promoting domestic political participation, Iran has expanded its strategic depth in the Middle East. This depth is not confined to military or political presence but is also reflected in the form of soft power and normative legitimacy. Through the creation of aligned and allied networks, Iran has achieved a position that extends beyond temporary influence and has emerged as an influential actor within the regional order (9, 14).

From this perspective, Iran's strategic depth is based not only on hard power instruments but also on soft power and normative values, which have contributed to its recognition as a stable and inspirational power in regional dynamics. In fact, the combination of religious legitimacy and popular acceptance within the framework of religious democracy has provided a foundation for the generation of Iran's soft power, thereby strengthening its strategic depth in the Middle East (12, 13). This characteristic distinguishes Iran from countries that rely solely on temporary influence and has transformed it into an inspirational model for Muslim societies and regional liberation movements.

Soft Power Based on Joseph Nye's Theory

The concept of soft power was first introduced by Joseph Nye in the 1990s and rapidly became one of the most significant theoretical developments in the field of international relations. Nye defines soft power as a country's ability to attract and persuade others through values, culture, and legitimate policies, in contrast to hard power, which relies on military or economic coercion (11).

This definition demonstrates that soft power, unlike hard power, is based on attraction and persuasion and enables countries to expand their influence in the international environment without direct reliance on coercive force. Soft power represents the ability to shape the preferences of others, meaning that countries can encourage others to adopt their values and policies through cultural and normative attractiveness, thereby establishing sustainable and non-coercive influence (2).

According to Nye's theory, the primary sources of soft power can be identified in three key domains:

• **Culture:** When a country's culture possesses attractiveness for others and encourages the acceptance of its values. Culture, as one of the most important instruments of identity formation, can facilitate social and political convergence at the international level. Cultural attractiveness is typically transmitted through art, literature, media, and lifestyle, enabling countries to create a positive image of themselves in the minds of global audiences (13).

• **Political values:** When a country's political system attains legitimacy and attractiveness both domestically and internationally. These values become effective when associated with principles such as justice, freedom, and public participation and when capable of generating public trust. Political values become a source of soft power when they are not only accepted domestically but also recognized internationally as a credible model (4, 15).

• **Foreign policy:** When a country's foreign policies are perceived as morally and normatively legitimate and encourage others toward cooperation. Foreign policy grounded in ethical principles and support for universal values can enhance a country's normative legitimacy at the international level and facilitate the expansion of sustainable relationships (2).

Within the framework of Nye's theory, the Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to strengthen its soft power in the Middle East by utilizing the cultural and ideological components of the Islamic Revolution, supporting oppressed populations, and employing public diplomacy. These efforts have been manifested through the discourse of resistance, emphasis on Islamic-revolutionary identity, and support for popular movements. Domestic research indicates that Iran, through this discourse, has enhanced its political and cultural attractiveness among Muslim societies and has presented an alternative model in contrast to dominant Western narratives (16, 17).

Therefore, soft power in Iran's foreign policy functions not only as a complementary instrument to hard power but also as one of the fundamental pillars in the formation of the Islamic Republic's strategic depth in the region. This demonstrates that Nye's theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for understanding Iran's foreign policy and the role of religious democracy as a source of soft power (2, 12). In essence, religious democracy, through its integration of divine legitimacy and popular acceptance, has enhanced Iran's normative attractiveness and has transformed it into an influential actor within the regional order.

From this perspective, religious democracy has contributed not only to consolidating the domestic legitimacy of Iran's political system but also to functioning as a source of soft power at the regional level. By combining religious values with public participation, this model has presented a distinct image of Islamic governance that holds appeal for Muslim societies in the region and encourages their convergence with Iran (3, 6). This characteristic has enabled Iran's soft power, unlike that of many countries that rely primarily on hard power instruments, to be grounded in normative and cultural legitimacy, thereby strengthening the country's strategic depth in the Middle East (1, 11).

Critique of Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory in a Non-Western Context

Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, although considered one of the most significant theoretical achievements in the field of international relations and widely influential among scholars, encounters serious limitations in non-Western contexts, particularly within the framework of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. This theory, rather than constituting a universal framework, largely reflects the historical and political experience of the United States and the West and therefore requires reinterpretation and localization to adequately explain the cultural, normative, and political realities of Islamic societies. In fact, the sources of soft power identified by Nye are primarily grounded in Western cultural attractiveness, liberal-democratic values, and foreign policies based on international legitimacy. In

contrast, in Islamic societies, the sources of soft power possess a distinct nature and are more closely rooted in religious foundations, ritual traditions, and the discourse of resistance (2, 16).

Limitations of Nye's Theory in Non-Western Societies

Joseph Nye's soft power theory, despite its substantial contribution to international relations theory, faces significant analytical limitations when applied to non-Western societies, particularly within the ideological and political context of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The theory reflects Western historical experiences and normative assumptions, which limits its applicability in explaining the normative and ideological foundations of Islamic political systems. Consequently, its explanatory capacity requires adaptation and contextualization to account for the cultural and ideological structures of Islamic societies (3, 18).

1. **Emphasis on Liberal Values:** Nye conceptualizes soft power primarily in terms of values such as individual freedom, democracy, and human rights within a Western liberal framework (2). This emphasis leads to the marginalization of soft power capacities in non-Western societies that are grounded in religious and cultural foundations. In Iran, political and social legitimacy derives less from liberal values and more from religious teachings and the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist, which provides a distinct normative foundation for political authority (18, 19). This distinction highlights the limitations of Nye's theory in fully explaining Islamic political systems and their sources of legitimacy.
2. **Neglect of Religious and Spiritual Sources:** In societies such as Iran, the sources of soft power originate less from popular culture or Western media products and more from religious rituals, spiritual values, and the discourse of resistance. These sources have strengthened Iran's normative legitimacy and spiritual attractiveness at the regional level and have functioned as mechanisms of convergence among Muslim societies (3, 15). As a result, Nye's theory, without incorporating these religious and spiritual dimensions, cannot fully account for the nature and effectiveness of Iran's soft power.
3. **Insufficient Attention to Specific Geopolitical Conditions:** Nye's theory was primarily developed within the context of competition among major global powers and pays less attention to the specific geopolitical realities of developing countries or Islamic societies. In Iran's case, soft power is deeply intertwined with its geopolitical position and anti-hegemonic discourse. This characteristic has transformed Iran's soft power into not only a cultural and normative resource but also a strategic and security-oriented instrument (3, 14). Therefore, Nye's theoretical framework requires reinterpretation in order to adequately address the geopolitical and normative dimensions of Iran's regional role.

The Necessity of Redefining Soft Power within the Framework of the Islamic Revolution

The Islamic Revolution of Iran, by introducing a set of religious and political values and norms, has created the conditions for redefining the concept of soft power. Within this framework, soft power is not solely based on cultural attractiveness but also on religious legitimacy, the pursuit of justice, and resistance against external domination. This reinterpretation demonstrates that while Nye's soft power theory occupies an important place in international relations literature, it requires localization to adequately explain the realities of Islamic and non-Western societies (11, 12).

- **Integration of Religious and Political Values:** The Islamic Revolution has successfully integrated political values such as independence and social justice with religious principles, thereby presenting a distinct model of soft

power. This synthesis has contributed to Iran's recognition as a model of resistance and justice among Muslim societies (4, 14).

- **Public Diplomacy Based on the Discourse of Resistance:** Iran's foreign policy, through its support for the Palestinian cause and opposition to hegemonic domination, has generated normative legitimacy and strengthened the country's soft power. These policies function not only as diplomatic instruments but also as cultural and normative mechanisms that enhance Iran's regional influence (19, 20).

- **Religious and Ritual Culture:** Religious rituals such as Ashura and Arbaeen function as symbolic instruments of soft power and have contributed to fostering convergence among Muslim societies. These rituals, through their spiritual and social significance, possess substantial capacity to generate regional solidarity and normative cohesion (3, 15).

Accordingly, redefining soft power within the framework of the Islamic Revolution constitutes an unavoidable necessity. This reinterpretation can move Nye's theory beyond its Western-centric limitations and align it with the cultural and political realities of Islamic societies. Iran's experience demonstrates that soft power can be reproduced on the basis of religious legitimacy, social justice, and resistance against domination, thereby functioning as a strategic instrument in foreign policy and contributing to the expansion of the country's strategic depth (1, 3).

Domestic and International Research Background on Religious Democracy and Iran's Strategic Depth

A review of the existing literature indicates that a substantial share of domestic and international studies has concentrated on soft power, while relatively few have directly examined the relationship between religious democracy and Iran's strategic depth. This point itself signals a research gap that the present study seeks to address. In many of these works, religious democracy—as one of the principal sources of the Islamic Republic of Iran's soft power—is referenced implicitly, yet it has rarely been treated as the central axis of analysis. Therefore, reviewing the soft power literature is not only necessary, but also provides a basis for clarifying the position of religious democracy in enhancing Iran's strategic depth and for making its relevance to Iran's foreign policy more explicit (3, 11).

Domestic studies

- Alipour, in a book on the role of soft power in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran, examines U.S. foreign policy in the post–Cold War period and shows how soft and hard instruments have been employed in interaction with Iran. While the book highlights the salience of soft power in international relations, its primary focus on U.S. strategy leaves the role of religious democracy in generating Iran's soft power largely unaddressed. As a result, the analysis is oriented toward U.S. approaches and sidelines the Iranian model of soft power (2).

- Sabouri, in a book on U.S. soft power in foreign and security policy, analyzes neoconservative perspectives and emphasizes hard-instrument consequences in the production of soft power. Similar to Alipour's work, this study remains largely U.S.-centric and preserves the gap regarding systematic examination of Iran's indigenous soft power model. From this standpoint, the work is theoretically relevant but does not directly answer the present study's central question concerning religious democracy and Iran's strategic depth (2, 11).

- Golshanpajouh, in a book on the Islamic Republic of Iran and soft power, identifies Iran's soft power sources as the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, Islamic–Iranian culture, political legitimacy, the religious-democracy model, public diplomacy, scientific advances, and media. This is among the limited studies that explicitly points to

religious democracy as a source of soft power and considers it a supportive foundation for Iran's foreign policy. Its importance lies in highlighting the linkage between religious legitimacy and popular acceptance as a reinforcing factor of Iran's soft power (12, 19).

- Eftekhari and colleagues compiled a collection of conference papers on Basij and soft power, including theoretical foundations, comparative discussions, and the role of Basij as social capital in producing soft power. The collection suggests that social and popular resources can strengthen Iran's soft power; however, religious democracy is not analyzed as an independent variable. In practice, the emphasis falls more on social capacities, and the direct connection to the religious-democracy model receives limited attention (14, 19).

- Pourahmadi, in a book on soft power and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, examines the relationship between Iran's foreign policy and its soft power. Despite the relevance of the topic, the analysis is often assessed as limited and does not provide a deep explanation of the role of religious democracy in producing soft power and enhancing Iran's strategic depth (3, 14).

- Biki, in a book on the soft power of the Islamic Republic of Iran with Lebanon as a case study, examines Iran's soft power sources across three levels: politics, culture, and economy. A principal critique is treating the economy as a soft power source, given that it often belongs more directly to the domain of hard power. Nevertheless, the Lebanon case remains significant because it suggests that Iran has been able—through the Islamic Revolution discourse and support for resistance groups—to consolidate cultural and political standing in its surrounding environment (8, 20).

- Moradi, in a book on power and soft war from theory to practice, compiles a set of papers that largely address general definitions and less frequently engage practical mechanisms. The work is predominantly conceptual and does not directly analyze the role of religious democracy in generating soft power (11, 16).

- Eta'at, in a book on geopolitics and Iran's foreign policy, proposes three patterns—neutrality, accommodative adaptation, and protest-oriented behavior—and shows how geopolitics affects Iran's strategic depth. The importance of this work lies in foregrounding Iran's geopolitical position as a key factor in expanding strategic depth, while still giving comparatively limited attention to religious democracy as a source of soft power (7, 9).

Domestic articles

- Kalantari and Rasouli, in an article on the role of geopolitical factors in Iran's defense strategy, identify a large set of geopolitical components and extract a broad range of roles framed as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The article suggests that Iran's strategic depth is not grounded solely in hard power and defensive capability, but that cultural, social, and normative factors also play an essential role. Its significance lies in indirectly emphasizing the linkage between soft and hard resources and in showing that consolidating Iran's regional position requires a combination of both. From the standpoint of the present research, Iran's strategic depth is not merely a product of military capacity; it is also reproduced through social legitimacy and cultural capacities—a point consistent with the concept of religious democracy and its role in strengthening internal cohesion and regional legitimacy (1, 7).

- Asadi, in an article on geopolitical changes in Iraq and the transformation of Iran's foreign policy strategy, examines the consequences of the fall of the Ba'ath regime and argues that this change created a strategic opportunity for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq and prevent Iraq from re-emerging as a threat to Iran's national security. The study indirectly highlights the importance of Iran's soft power and normative legitimacy in its

surrounding environment, because Iran's influence in Iraq is framed as not solely dependent on military or political presence but also shaped by social, cultural, and religious support for aligned groups. Asadi's findings suggest that Iran has been able—by leveraging the resistance discourse and religious legitimacy—to consolidate its strategic depth in Iraq. This indicates that religious democracy, as a legitimate and attractive model, can help generate trust and convergence in Iran's surrounding environment (3, 20).

International studies

- Allen Chong, in a book on soft power in foreign policy, examines the role of globalization and the information environment in transforming foreign policy and treats communication technologies as a major factor in producing soft power. The importance of this perspective is that it clarifies how communication tools can amplify cultural and normative attractiveness—an issue relevant to Iran insofar as the Islamic Republic has employed media and digital environments to reinforce the resistance discourse and its normative legitimacy (8, 21).
- Ashley Tellis and colleagues, in a book on measuring national power in the post-industrial era, emphasize the role of knowledge and information in strengthening soft power. This line of analysis foregrounds the role of knowledge and information technology in producing soft power, which can be aligned with arguments that Iran's soft power is not restricted to cultural and religious foundations but can also be strengthened by scientific and technological capacities (2, 4).
- Michael Cox, in a book on soft power and U.S. foreign policy, presents a collection of studies on U.S. soft power sources and the European Union's efforts to influence the Middle East. The work shows that soft power has been treated as a tool for regional influence by Western actors. Comparing these efforts with Iran's policies suggests that the Islamic Republic has also employed soft power to consolidate its position in the Middle East, but—through religious democracy and the resistance discourse—has presented a model distinct from Western approaches (11, 22).
- Stewart Clegg, in a book on frameworks of power, surveys different understandings of power and emphasizes social power. This perspective highlights the importance of social resources in producing power—an issue relevant to Iran, because religious democracy, by relying on popular participation, can strengthen social legitimacy and thereby reinforce Iran's soft power (5, 12).
- Gene Sharp, in a book addressing power and nonviolence, analyzes the role of public consent and cooperation in producing political power and examines historical cases of nonviolent action. This argument suggests that political power can emerge without military coercion and can be built on popular consent—an idea compatible with religious democracy in Iran, where political legitimacy is framed as resting on the combination of popular acceptance and religious legitimacy (5, 6).
- Joseph Nye, in his foundational work on soft power and the means of success in world politics, introduces the concept of soft power and presents it as a key strategic logic in foreign policy. This work is commonly treated as the starting point for theorizing soft power and provides a framework for analyzing state behavior. Iran, within such a framework, can be read as redefining its soft power resources through Islamic–Iranian culture, the resistance discourse, and religious democracy (11, 16).
- In a book on public diplomacy in international relations, Melsen examines the role of communication instruments and the “export” of Iran's Islamic Revolution in the formation of an ideological state. The importance of this

contribution lies in its direct attention to Iran and its emphasis on how public diplomacy and communications can expand Iran's soft power at the regional level (8, 17).

- Nye, in a later work on the erosion of soft power in U.S. foreign policy, criticizes interventionism and points to declining attractiveness in the Persian Gulf. This perspective underscores the role of normative legitimacy in maintaining soft power—an issue also relevant to Iran insofar as the Islamic Republic has sought to strengthen its normative legitimacy in the region through emphasis on independence and resistance (2, 14).
- Afila Seliktar, in an article on Iran's geopolitics and the export of the Revolution, argues that Iran has built an "Axis of Resistance" through proxy warfare and mobilization of Shi'a minorities. The article highlights Iran's soft power in the form of the resistance discourse and religious legitimacy and suggests that Iran has increased its strategic depth in the Middle East by combining cultural, religious, and political resources (1, 20).

Research Method

The research method of this article is qualitative analysis with a descriptive–analytical approach. Data have been collected through library-based sources, scholarly articles, and discourse analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's official discourse.

Research Findings

The Discourse of the Islamic Revolution

The discourse of the Islamic Revolution, as one of the most significant achievements of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is grounded in three core pillars: social justice, political independence, and resistance to external domination. These three pillars not only articulate the foundational principles of the Islamic Revolution, but also provide a normative framework for Iran's domestic and foreign policy. They have functioned as both theoretical and practical foundations that have guided the Islamic Republic's macro-level policies across multiple arenas.

Social justice, as the central pillar of this discourse, emphasizes equitable distribution of resources, protection of disadvantaged groups, and opposition to economic inequalities. This principle has strengthened the domestic legitimacy of the system and, at the regional level, has projected an image of Iran as a defender of justice and an advocate for the oppressed. Political independence, the second pillar, is defined as liberation from dependence on external powers and the preservation of autonomy in national decision-making. This principle has increased Iran's resilience in the face of international pressures and has offered a model of independence and self-reliance for Muslim societies in the region. Resistance to external domination, the third pillar of the Islamic Revolution's discourse, signifies standing against threats posed by great powers and defending Islamic–national identity. This pillar has contributed to positioning Iran as a symbol of resistance at the regional level and has increased its normative legitimacy among Muslim societies (5).

A defining feature of this discourse is its emphasis on the linkage between religion and politics and its presentation of a distinct model of Islamic governance. Within this framework, religious democracy has not only consolidated the legitimacy of Iran's political system domestically, but has also functioned as a source of soft power at the regional level. This has enabled the Islamic Republic of Iran to acquire an inspirational standing among Muslim societies and to expand its strategic depth through cultural and normative influence (6). This linkage

between religion and politics has offered a model of governance that is compatible both with Islamic values and with public preferences, thereby enhancing Iran's normative attractiveness at the regional level.

From the perspective of foreign policy, the Islamic Revolution's discourse—through its emphasis on resisting hegemonic domination and supporting liberation movements—has strengthened Iran's normative legitimacy at the regional level. By portraying Iran as a defender of justice and independence, this discourse has increased the country's political and cultural attractiveness among Muslim societies (12). Moreover, the discourse of the Islamic Revolution has facilitated the formation of aligned and allied networks, thereby expanding Iran's strategic depth in its surrounding environment. It has functioned not merely as a political instrument, but as a cultural and social framework that has contributed to Iran's role as a normative actor within the regional order (14).

Overall, by integrating the three pillars of social justice, political independence, and resistance to external domination, the discourse of the Islamic Revolution has presented an alternative model of Islamic governance in which religious democracy is framed as a system grounded in divine legitimacy and popular acceptance. This discourse has not only consolidated the domestic legitimacy of Iran's political system but has also operated as a source of soft power at the regional level, thereby enhancing Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East (1, 19).

Support for Aligned Movements

One of the key findings of this study is the role of religious democracy in legitimizing the Islamic Republic of Iran's support for aligned movements in the region. By drawing on religious legitimacy (rooted in the Guardianship of the Jurist and Islamic teachings) and popular acceptance (broad public participation in political and social arenas), Iran has been able to justify its support for groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and the Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi) in Iraq as a normative and value-based policy (9, 20). This dual legitimacy has enabled Iran to frame such support not merely as a political or security action, but as part of a broader religious and social mission.

These forms of support are not limited to military or security dimensions; they also constitute an element of Iran's soft power. By emphasizing the discourse of the Islamic Revolution and slogans such as justice, independence, and resistance, the Islamic Republic has strengthened its normative legitimacy among Muslim societies. This has led aligned movements to perceive Iran not only as a political and security supporter, but also as a cultural and value-based model (16).

In practice, Iran's support for these movements has created an identity-based linkage between Iran and Muslim societies—a linkage grounded in shared Islamic values and resistance to external domination. This identity linkage has elevated Iran from being a purely political actor to functioning as a normative and cultural power in the region. In other words, religious democracy has strengthened the legitimacy of Iran's support for aligned movements and has transformed this support into a component of the Islamic Republic's soft power (3, 15).

From a strategic standpoint, supporting aligned movements has increased Iran's strategic depth in the region by creating a network of regional allies and partners that can serve as a support base for Iran's foreign policy during crises. Additionally, this support has helped project an image of the Islamic Republic as a defender of justice and independence—an image that enhances Iran's normative attractiveness among Muslim societies and facilitates the expansion of the country's cultural and political influence (1, 10).

For these reasons, support for aligned movements can be regarded as one of the most important practical manifestations of religious democracy in Iran's foreign policy. These forms of support have not only contributed to

consolidating the Islamic Republic's domestic legitimacy, but have also expanded Iran's strategic depth at the regional level and strengthened its position within the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East (9).

Cultural and Media Diplomacy

The Islamic Republic of Iran's cultural and media diplomacy has been among the most significant instruments for transmitting the messages of religious democracy to its surrounding environment and to the broader Islamic world. By leveraging the capacity of transnational and regional media, this diplomacy has disseminated the discourse of the Islamic Revolution to wide audiences and has offered an alternative image of Iran in contrast to Western narratives. Media outlets such as Al-Alam, Press TV, and other Arabic-language networks have played a key role in representing the discourse of the Islamic Revolution. By emphasizing justice, independence, and resistance, these outlets have increased the Islamic Republic's cultural and political attractiveness among Muslim societies and have presented Iran as a normative actor at the regional level (16, 21).

This media diplomacy has not been confined to transmitting political messages; it has also been active in cultural and social domains. Media productions—including news programs, documentaries, films, and political analysis—have, by focusing on Islamic and popular values, reinforced Iran's normative legitimacy at the regional level. As a result, the Islamic Republic's media have functioned as part of Iran's soft power and have expanded the country's strategic depth by fostering cultural and identity-based convergence (12). By representing Iran's Islamic-revolutionary identity, these media have projected an image compatible with both religious values and the public aspirations of Muslim societies, thereby strengthening trust and regional convergence (3).

From an international relations perspective, Iran's cultural and media diplomacy can be understood as complementary to its official foreign policy. By creating a network of audiences across the Arab world and the broader Islamic world, these media have transformed the discourse of religious democracy into a source of soft power and have contributed to consolidating Iran's position in regional equations (8, 9). In effect, the Islamic Republic's media have promoted a model of Islamic governance that links religious values with popular participation—an image that has particular attractiveness for Muslim societies in the region.

Moreover, Iran's cultural and media diplomacy has expanded beyond traditional broadcasting through the use of modern communication tools and digital spaces. Social networks and digital media have become platforms for transmitting messages of the Islamic Revolution and religious democracy, engaging younger audiences and new generations as well. This indicates that cultural and media diplomacy is not merely a promotional instrument, but a normative and multilayered strategy in Iran's foreign policy that has strengthened the country's strategic depth within its surrounding environment.

Domestic Political Participation

Domestic political participation constitutes one of the most important components of religious democracy and plays a direct role in strengthening the legitimacy of the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The regular conduct of elections, widespread public participation in political processes, and active engagement in civil and social institutions present an image of internal stability and cohesion that has also been reflected at the regional level. This popular participation has contributed to legitimizing Iran's foreign policy and has demonstrated that the Iranian political system is founded on public consent and social support (6). In essence, domestic political participation is not merely a procedural electoral mechanism but rather a symbol of the organic linkage between the population

and the political system. This linkage has reinforced public trust, strengthened social cohesion, and enhanced the country's capacity to withstand external pressures.

From the perspective of international relations, domestic political participation functions as a source of soft power. Widespread public participation in elections and political institutions sends a clear signal to regional and global actors that the Islamic Republic of Iran is governed not only on the basis of divine legitimacy but also on the foundation of popular acceptance. This characteristic has contributed to Iran's recognition as a model of political stability and social participation in its surrounding environment (12). This normative signal has increased Iran's political attractiveness at the regional level and has positioned it as an inspirational model for Muslim societies.

Furthermore, domestic political participation has contributed to expanding Iran's strategic depth, because the image of internal stability and social cohesion enhances the country's ability to influence its surrounding environment. The higher the level of public participation in political processes, the greater the perceived legitimacy of the political system in the external environment, thereby strengthening Iran's soft power in the region. This demonstrates that religious democracy, through reliance on domestic political participation, has succeeded in consolidating internal legitimacy while simultaneously functioning as a source of soft power in the external arena (3, 9).

As a result, domestic political participation is not only a legitimacy-enhancing factor but also a strategic instrument in Iran's foreign policy, contributing to the consolidation of the country's position within regional geopolitical dynamics. By projecting an image of Iran as a political system grounded in public consent and Islamic values, this participation has increased the normative attractiveness of the Islamic Republic and has served as a foundation for expanding Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East (1).

Religious and Revolutionary Foundations of Islamic Soft Power

In Joseph Nye's conceptualization, soft power is primarily defined in terms of Western cultural attractiveness, liberal-democratic values, and foreign policies grounded in international legitimacy (2). However, the Islamic Revolution of Iran has introduced a distinct model of soft power based on its own religious, normative, and ideological foundations. This model may be conceptualized as "Islamic soft power," which has generated a particular form of legitimacy and attractiveness at both regional and global levels and has positioned Iran as a distinctive actor within the geopolitical order of the Middle East (12, 16).

Conceptual Differences from Liberal Soft Power

Liberal soft power is largely grounded in global media networks, Western cultural products, cinema, music, and modern lifestyles, deriving legitimacy from the acceptance of international institutions and liberal-democratic values (2, 11). In contrast, Islamic soft power is rooted in religious rituals, sacred symbols, and the culture of resistance. Religious ceremonies such as Ashura and Arbaeen have functioned as powerful cultural and religious symbols, fostering convergence among Muslim societies and serving as instruments of public diplomacy (3, 15).

Political legitimacy in liberal soft power is defined through universal liberal values, whereas in Islamic soft power, legitimacy is grounded in religious principles, justice-seeking, and independence. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, through its support for the Palestinian cause and opposition to hegemonic domination, has generated normative legitimacy at the regional level (18, 19).

The operational functions of these two models also differ. Liberal soft power primarily operates through cultural and media diplomacy, whereas Islamic soft power, in addition to these mechanisms, emphasizes value-based and normative diplomacy grounded in resistance and justice. This distinction demonstrates that Islamic soft power is not merely a cultural instrument but a normative and ideological framework that has shaped Iran's foreign policy in a distinct manner at the regional level (4, 14).

Religious and Revolutionary Foundations of Islamic Soft Power

Unlike liberal soft power, Islamic soft power is firmly grounded in religious and revolutionary principles. These principles function not only as normative and ideological sources but also as practical instruments that have enhanced the legitimacy and attractiveness of the Islamic Republic of Iran at regional and global levels.

Religious rituals and sacred traditions: Religious ceremonies such as Ashura and Arbaeen possess significant capacity to foster convergence among Muslim societies. These rituals have reinforced Iran's religious and cultural identity and have functioned as instruments of public diplomacy, aligning regional audiences with the values of the Islamic Revolution (3, 15).

Revolutionary values: The core values emerging from the 1979 Islamic Revolution—including independence, social justice, support for the oppressed, and resistance to domination—have functioned as sources of soft power. These values have contributed to positioning Iran as a model for liberation movements and resistance groups in the region (4, 14). The integration of religious values with revolutionary principles has distinguished Iran's soft power from Western liberal models and has generated a distinct form of normative legitimacy.

The discourse of resistance: The resistance discourse represents one of the central foundations of Islamic soft power. By emphasizing opposition to hegemonic domination and support for regional liberation movements, this discourse has strengthened Iran's legitimacy and attractiveness among Muslim societies (19, 20). The resistance discourse is not merely a political stance but a normative value aligned with the religious and social beliefs of many regional societies, thereby reinforcing Iran's soft power.

In summary, the religious and revolutionary foundations of Islamic soft power demonstrate that this model, unlike liberal soft power, is rooted in spiritual and normative legitimacy. These foundations have contributed to creating an inspirational image of Iran among regional and global audiences and have transformed soft power into one of the central components of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Iran's experience illustrates that Islamic soft power is grounded not only in cultural attractiveness but also in normative and spiritual legitimacy, which has made it a strategic instrument for enhancing Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East (1, 3).

Scientific Advancements and Symbols of Self-Reliance as Iran's Soft Power

The scientific advancements of the Islamic Republic of Iran in strategic domains such as nuclear technology, medicine, and space science should not be interpreted solely as technological achievements; rather, they must be analyzed within the framework of soft power and as symbols of national independence, resistance, and self-reliance. These achievements have emerged under conditions of severe international sanctions and external pressure. Consequently, their significance at regional and global levels lies not only in their technical value but also in their representation of Iran's national capability and cultural-political resilience. These developments have contributed to projecting an image of Iran as an innovative, resilient, and independent nation, thereby strengthening its strategic depth within its surrounding environment (1, 3).

Nuclear Technology

Iran's achievement of the complete nuclear fuel cycle, the development of advanced centrifuges, and the production of heavy water carry not only technical importance but also significant political and cultural implications. Iran has demonstrated that even under conditions of restriction and external pressure, it is capable of pursuing indigenous technological development. These achievements have contributed to strengthening Iran's regional legitimacy by demonstrating technological independence and national resilience. Moreover, Iran's emphasis on the peaceful use of nuclear energy in areas such as medicine and agriculture has become part of its broader soft power strategy, challenging threat-oriented narratives and fostering greater trust among neighboring countries. In this sense, Iran's nuclear technology has evolved beyond an energy resource and has become a symbol of scientific independence and resistance (12, 18).

Medicine and Healthcare

In the medical field, achievements such as the production of biopharmaceuticals, advances in stem cell research, and progress in cancer treatment have reduced dependency on foreign imports and have transformed Iran into a regional center for medical treatment. These advancements have not only scientific importance but have also functioned as instruments of soft power by enhancing Iran's credibility among regional populations. The expansion of specialized medical centers and the provision of advanced healthcare services have attracted foreign patients and contributed to the growth of medical tourism. This process has created a humanitarian and scientific image of Iran and has strengthened cultural and social relations with neighboring countries. From this perspective, Iran's medical progress has served not only to improve domestic healthcare but also as an instrument of health diplomacy, reinforcing the country's regional influence and strategic depth (3, 14).

Space Technology

The launch of indigenous satellites such as Noor, Fajr, Omid, and Nahid must be interpreted within the broader context of political and cultural symbolism. These achievements demonstrate Iran's capacity to secure an independent position in the domain of advanced space technology alongside major global powers. Beyond their scientific applications, these developments function as symbols of national strength and technological self-reliance and have inspired developing countries at the regional level. The symbolic importance of these achievements lies in their representation of Iran as an independent technological actor and as a model of self-sufficiency in advanced scientific domains (1, 4).

Overall, from the perspective of soft power, these scientific advancements function not merely as technological accomplishments but as instruments of persuasion and legitimacy-building. By demonstrating scientific capability under conditions of sanctions, Iran has projected an image of resilience, innovation, and independence. This image has strengthened Iran's cultural and political standing in the international system and has contributed to enhancing its strategic depth. Iran's scientific progress has thus become an integral component of its broader soft power strategy, reinforcing domestic confidence while simultaneously offering an inspirational model for developing countries (3, 12).

Future Opportunities and Threats to Iran's Soft Power in the Middle East

The soft power of the Islamic Republic of Iran will face a combination of opportunities and threats in the future, and the effective management of these dynamics will play a decisive role in shaping Iran's position in regional and global equations. Soft power is not a static capacity but a dynamic phenomenon shaped by internal and external conditions. Its future trajectory will depend on Iran's ability to capitalize on opportunities while effectively managing emerging threats through strategic policymaking, institutional coordination, and coherence among cultural, political, and media institutions (2, 3).

Opportunities

1. **Expansion of Public and Cultural Diplomacy:** Increasing scientific and cultural exchanges with regional and global actors can strengthen Iran's international image. Initiatives such as hosting foreign students, organizing international conferences, and supporting religious gatherings such as the Arbaeen pilgrimage can reinforce shared Islamic identity and position Iran as a cultural and spiritual reference point in the region. These efforts contribute to reproducing Iran's soft power and enhancing its normative legitimacy (17).
2. **New Media and Digital Platforms:** The use of social media and cultural influencers offers opportunities to communicate Iran's narratives to younger generations and enhance cultural attractiveness. Digital media platforms play a critical role in shaping public opinion, and effective utilization of these tools can significantly enhance Iran's global soft power presence, particularly among youth audiences in the region (21).
3. **Strengthening the Axis of Resistance:** Continued support for resistance movements and alignment with regional actors enhances Iran's normative legitimacy and strategic depth. This transnational network has positioned Iran as a central actor within the regional resistance structure and has contributed to strengthening its cultural and political influence in West Asia (1, 20).
4. **Expansion of Scientific and Technological Cooperation:** Developing scientific and technological partnerships with aligned countries can enhance Iran's soft power through knowledge exchange and innovation. These collaborations contribute not only to scientific advancement but also to the creation of transnational intellectual and cultural networks, reinforcing Iran's normative legitimacy and strategic depth (3, 4).

Threats

1. **Continuation of Economic and Political Sanctions:** Sanctions may constrain Iran's ability to implement cultural and scientific initiatives and limit its international engagement. These restrictions weaken both economic capacity and cultural outreach, thereby reducing Iran's ability to project soft power effectively (10).
2. **Media Competition and Negative Representation:** Western media efforts to shape negative perceptions of Iran pose challenges to its normative legitimacy and cultural attractiveness. Such media competition can influence global public opinion and reduce the effectiveness of Iran's soft power strategies (8).
3. **Domestic Challenges:** Economic difficulties, cultural management limitations, and constraints in media production may undermine Iran's soft power potential. Internal weaknesses can limit the country's ability to

fully leverage its external opportunities and reduce its cultural attractiveness in the regional environment (14).

4. **Regional Geopolitical Changes:** Political transformations in neighboring countries and external efforts to weaken Iran's regional networks may pose significant threats to its soft power. These developments may reduce regional convergence and limit Iran's influence in its surrounding environment (1, 22).

In summary, Iran's soft power faces significant opportunities—including the expansion of public diplomacy, the effective use of digital media, strengthening of regional alliances, and scientific cooperation—as well as substantial threats such as sanctions, media competition, internal challenges, and geopolitical instability. The extent to which Iran can enhance its strategic depth in West Asia and the broader international system will depend on its ability to transform opportunities into sustainable capacities and effectively neutralize emerging threats through strategic policymaking and institutional coordination (2, 3).

Conclusion

The examination of the theoretical foundations and empirical findings of this study demonstrates that religious democracy constitutes not only a domestic governance model but also a geopolitical strategy and a source of soft power for the Islamic Republic of Iran. By integrating divine legitimacy—derived from religious teachings and the principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist—with popular acceptance manifested through widespread participation in elections and political processes, this model has presented a distinct form of Islamic governance. This model has exhibited particular attractiveness in contrast to Western secular and liberal paradigms and has served as an inspirational framework for Muslim societies in the region.

From a domestic perspective, religious democracy has strengthened social cohesion and political stability through broad public participation in elections, councils, and political institutions. This participation has not only ensured the sustainability of political legitimacy but has also projected an image of public trust and social consent that resonates beyond national borders. Domestic legitimacy, in this sense, has functioned as a foundation for foreign policy, enhancing Iran's resilience in the face of external pressures and reinforcing its capacity to maintain strategic autonomy.

At the regional level, religious democracy has contributed to expanding Iran's normative and cultural influence through the discourse of the Islamic Revolution, support for aligned movements, and cultural and media diplomacy. The revolutionary discourse, with its emphasis on justice, independence, and resistance, has consolidated Iran's normative values in the regional environment. Support for aligned movements has further strengthened Iran's position as an active regional actor, enhancing its political and cultural influence. In addition, cultural and media diplomacy, facilitated by modern communication technologies, has enabled the transmission of religious democracy's normative messages to broader audiences and has contributed to shaping a favorable image of Iran within the Islamic world.

Moreover, scientific advancements and symbols of self-reliance in strategic sectors such as nuclear technology, medicine, and space science have functioned as components of Iran's soft power. These achievements have demonstrated Iran's capacity for indigenous development and innovation despite external pressures and sanctions. Such advancements have strengthened domestic confidence while simultaneously projecting an image of Iran as an independent, resilient, and innovative nation. This image has contributed to enhancing the country's strategic

depth by reinforcing its normative legitimacy and increasing its attractiveness in the regional and international arenas.

Despite facing challenges such as sanctions, international pressure, media competition, and geopolitical transformations, religious democracy has remained a resilient and sustainable model. Through the integration of religious values and social participation, this model has provided a durable source of soft power and strategic depth, capable of reproduction even under conditions of crisis. Its normative foundations and social legitimacy have enabled Iran to maintain influence and continuity in both domestic and regional contexts.

In conclusion, religious democracy must be understood not merely as a domestic governance structure but as a comprehensive strategic framework in Iran's foreign policy. This model has enabled Iran to emerge as a normative actor in the regional order and has facilitated the formation of allied networks and the consolidation of resistance-oriented discourse. Religious democracy has thus played a central role in enhancing Iran's strategic depth in the Middle East by simultaneously consolidating internal legitimacy and functioning as a source of soft power in the external environment.

Recommendations

- **Strengthening domestic democratic institutions to enhance regional legitimacy:** This measure can reinforce social cohesion internally while presenting a model of political stability at the regional level.
- **Expanding cultural and media diplomacy with emphasis on the values of religious democracy:** Developing international media platforms and producing culturally relevant content can enhance the effective communication of religious democracy's normative message.
- **Reassessing regional policies to promote convergence with Muslim societies:** Establishing new frameworks for cultural, economic, and political cooperation can further enhance Iran's strategic depth.
- **Utilizing the intellectual capacity of religious scholars and academic elites to articulate this model internationally:** Leveraging scholarly expertise can strengthen Iran's normative legitimacy and ensure the sustainability of its soft power.
- **Investing in scientific and technological development as symbols of national self-reliance:** Scientific achievements should be more systematically integrated into Iran's soft power strategy to reinforce its image as an independent and innovative nation.
- **Establishing transnational cultural and social networks:** Supporting shared religious rituals, academic collaborations, and cultural exchanges can foster deeper identity-based convergence between Iran and Muslim societies and contribute to expanding Iran's strategic depth.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

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Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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