Imam Khomeini, Soft Power and the Islamic Revolution[1]

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The shaping of soft power in the Islamic Revolution (of Iran) can be discussed and analyzed from various angles. As to how Imam Khomeini as a solitary figure in exile managed to create a power by means of a comprehensive political mobilization that went beyond class borders; and that too in a society in which the individualist spirit and negative individualism dominated; and which simultaneously smashed the two-thousand five-hundred year-old monarchy and put an end to the all-round and all-pervasive presence and hegemony of the United States of America in Iran is something that can be weighed from various angles.

Concerning the various aspects of the Islamic Revolution (of Iran) and the speed of such a phenomenon, many of the thinkers and experts on social revolutions are astounded by the fact that in a short period, it was able to put an end to America's hegemony in Iran and to bring about the downfall of the most powerful regime in the Middle East. Without doubt, this reveals Imam Khomeini's power of mobilization of the population.

Indeed, the Islamic Revolution's (of Iran) soft power, dimensions, essence and religious concepts differs from the anthropological, epistemological and ontological scope of the dimensions of soft power as advocated by Joseph Nye and other western thinkers. With trust in God, self-confidence and faith in the people, Imam Khomeini put an end to the rule of internal despotism and foreign colonialism in Iran.

In this article, the writer has attempted to reexamine Imam Khomeini's historic role in the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran's soft power using the defined concepts and by relying on sections of his speeches and statements. Soft power is a new phenomenon although it has its origins in the very distant past. In other words, even though nowadays the term 'soft power' is widely and extensively used among the superpowers and governments however, since many centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, this concept was already well-known albeit not with this name.

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The origins of soft power can be clearly seen even in the thoughts of renowned strategists such as Confucius and San Tzu. The viewpoint of Tzu (sixth century B.C.) has generally targeted the enemy's willpower and its defeat. On the home front too he stresses on the leader and commander who possesses ethics, wisdom and fairness. Although the viewpoints of ancient oriental strategists such as Sun Tzu lay emphasis on the values of soft power's initiator, however, such a perspective is observed at an extremely high level in the Divine religions—and especially in Islam.

With the tendency of the principal structures of power from militarism towards economics and from economics towards culture and power of information, nowadays greater emphasis is placed on soft power and its profound and lasting effects. Based on this premise and with a view to the process of the concept of power, the case of national threats has been transformed as well. In fact, today in contrast with the past, the idea of military and classic occupation of countries or regimes is seldom a main concern; rather, there is more emphasis on occupation of intellectual foundations and beliefs of nations and on changing the mindset and intellectual sphere of human beings. Changing or structuring the mindset of individuals or creating unreal objectivities by means of the media forms the bedrock of the colonialist's new domination and shapes its cultural hegemony. In this method, instead of exercising the imperialist form of power, the policy of persuasion with its lasting impacts on nations is pursued leading to a kind of cultural legitimacy and justification for its administrator which is interpreted as cultural hegemony. At present, Joseph Nye is regarded as being the innovator of soft power. He explains that soft power has the capability of achieving objectives through persuasion and appealing to others instead of by coercion.

In the book "Power in the Distribution of Soft Power" Joseph Nye mentions that soft power includes: "the capability to achieve the desired objective through seduction and not coercion or corruption. Soft power arises from the attractiveness of the culture, political ideals and policies of a country. Our soft power increases when our policy is legitimate and acceptable from the viewpoint of others." In another section of his book, Nye considers the element of seduction which has a negative value connotation to it as being connected to soft power and explains thus: "Seduction is always more effective than coercion and there are many values such as democracy, human rights and individual opportunities that are intensely seductive." Concerning the topic of religion and

soft power, Nye indeed forgets religion and simply mentions that since several centuries organized religious movements have been in possession of soft power.

With a view to the fact that the origin of soft power and the West's epistemological, ontological and anthropological dimensions are totally different from Islam and Imam Khomeini's leadership viewpoints, this article has attempted to examine soft power, its dimensions, substance and sources in the Islamic Revolution (of Iran) with emphasis on Imam Khomeini's points of view.

Imam Khomeini and the Reproduction of Soft Power

Although Imam Khomeini's system of thinking is based on theoretical aspects originating from religious doctrines, however, some of the key elements of this system have played a central and fundamental role in the production of soft power in the three stages of destruction, establishment and perpetuation of the Islamic Revolution (of Iran). Imam Khomeini's self-development, knowledge of the time, stratagem, rare courage, trust in God, self-confidence and faith in the people, the element of commitment to religious obligation, etc…were aspects of this system that formed the bedrock of soft power in the Islamic Revolution. Imam Khomeini's unique personality traits that by themselves created a great appeal among the masses of people and even among the thinkers and intellectuals led to many of the western—and even American—writers to lavish him with praise and respect.

In the most beautiful of descriptions, Yerevan Abrahamian praises Imam Khomeini as being the manifestation of Imam Ali's (PBUH) virtues (such as of courage, righteousness and political sagacity). Although Imam Khomeini's unique personal characteristics was a factor that appealed to a diverse spectrum of both Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals in Iran and the world, however, by applying his own unique intellectual qualities, he succeeded in producing a lasting, cultured and dignifying—and to put it in a single phrase—soft power. Its vibrant and enthusiastic ramifications and manifestations are still seen conspicuously at the national, regional and global level more than three decades since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Imam Khomeini's intellectual system comprises of numerous elements whose positive output is the production of a soft power that is considerably more powerful than both the hard and soft power of global imperialists and colonialists. Indeed, should this soft power be guided properly then it will lay

the foundation of Islamic development and civilization and ensure a bright future for the world of Islam. Sequel to this, we shall mention some of the categories, sources or mechanisms of production of soft power by Imam Khomeini:

Imam Khomeini's Conviction in Acquiring and Attaining Power

Although lust for power and instrumental use of it is censured by Islam and religious doctrines and in the practical biography of Imam Khomeini with the exception of the spirit of undertaking religious obligation, one does not observe any ambitiousness and lust for power. However, the interesting point is that Imam Khomeini has in a beautiful sentence categorically endorsed acquisition of power and the worthy objective of attaining power in the specific sense of the term for the world's inhabitants as below:

"I categorically declare that the Islamic Republic of Iran is investing with all the means at its disposal for revival of Islamic identity of Muslims all over the world; and there is no reason for not calling upon the Muslims of the world to pursue the principles of acquiring power in the world; and not put a stop to the ambitiousness and greed of the masters of power, wealth and deception. We must plan for the promotion of the objectives and interests of the deprived (Muslim) nation."

"We need to strive with all our strength with regard to the people of the world and take care of the problems and difficulties facing the Muslims and support the fighters (of Islam), the hungry and the deprived and downtrodden—and we must consider this as the cornerstone of our foreign policy. We declare that the Islamic Republic of Iran is forever the sponsor and sanctuary of the world's free Muslims; and as a military and impregnable stronghold, Iran shall secure the needs of the soldiers of Islam and acquaint them with Islam's ideological and educational fundamentals; and likewise, train and educate them in the principles and methods of fighting against the regimes of faithlessness and polytheism."

Imam Khomeini's viewpoint about power and its substance, sources and method of acquiring it differs totally from the current discussions of power in the world. Imam Khomeini sees power not as an objective; rather as a means—a means with the help of which it is possible to achieve lofty religious values such as happiness and human dignity, to guide mankind and implement justice and equity or to put it in a single phrase, implement the 'Hodud' Divine limits.

Factor of Creation of Awareness and Dissemination of Information

The factor of creating awareness and disseminating information which was among the most critical elements in the mission of the Divine Prophets and the Infallibles (PBUT) was aimed at securing mankind's happiness and prosperity both in this world and the hereafter. It had always existed in Imam Khomeini's behavioral tradition, and formed the bedrock of his movement and of the agitation of the deprived, the oppressed and Muslims, which in turn helped in the recreation of certain dimensions of soft power. Imam Khomeini considered negligence, indifference and self-estrangement on the one hand and the role of aliens and their domestic agents on the other hand to be the root causes of the backwardness of nations and Muslims and thus, directed his entire efforts towards creation of awareness, giving inspiration and sponsoring movement of nations:

"From now on we must take this awareness that our nation has found, seriously so that it continues. We are paying the price of this negligence for the past three-hundred years."[1] He reckons the indifference of nations to be the result of their negligence and the negligence imposed by the hegemonic powers and their local agents and mentions the damage inflicted on the country to be connected to this element of negligence: "A country suffers losses when its people are indifferent to the losses."[2]

Or on another occasion, Imam Khomeini asserts: "Muslims must discover themselves; it means that they ought to understand that they have a culture; that they have a country; that they have a personality…they (the global arrogant hegemonic powers) have created such a culture for us that cause us to lose our character and personality and (so that) they take away everything that we have and (including) our respect and dignity."[3]

Another noteworthy point is that Imam Khomeini considered 'awakening' to be the first step for release from subjugation and domination of superpowers and self-determination of nations. Indeed, as the focal point of inspiration and agitation, the element of awakening created such a power at the regional and global level that it challenged their imposed and arrogant order and even their hegemony:

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[1] *Sahifeh-ye-Imam*, vol. 5
[2] Ibid., vol. 13
[3] Ibid., vol. 6

"It is necessary for a nation that wants to be independent to awaken first. In the mystical journey to Allah too, the men of mystic knowledge have said that the point of awakening is the first stage. Throughout history and in recent centuries, there have been attempts at putting the nations of the Third World in a state of slumber; in negligence and in state in which they do not care for their own personality and regard their own personality to be basically dependent on others."[1]

On another occasion, Imam Khomeini remarks: "Awakening is the first step; the first step is awakening; in the mystical journey too, awakening is the first step. In this mystical journey which is a Divine and spiritual journey as well, awakening is the first step; and Islamic states, Muslim nations, the oppressed nations all over the world have awakened; and the blacks in (the United States of) America are paying the price for this awakening and God willing, they will be victorious."[2]

Benefiting from Islam and Religious Doctrines

The most important center of production of soft power in the Islamic Revolution (of Iran)—the manifestation of which can be observed in the uniform and comprehensive political mobilization of the masses of people and the various social classes—it was religion and religious doctrines that with Imam Khomeini's unique initiatives and outstanding creativities were used as the Revolution's locomotive. However, the spirit dominating over Islam's ideas and directives is a spirit de corps that at its core guarantees and embraces the unity and solidarity of Muslims. Although theoretically speaking, there is plenty of emphasis placed on unity and belief in the Rope of Allah (cling to the Rope of Allah and do not be disunited) as an element that imparts respect and dignity to Muslims, however, the drawing of inspiration from the preponderance of alien western, secularist and materialist ideas and agents of despotism affiliated to them, has led to the destruction of the spirit de corps, the Islamic solidarity and unity of Muslims both at the indigenous and national level as well as internationally.

Indeed, the approach of knowingly and deliberately promoting and analyzing materialist and secularist ideas with the support of the west and their affiliated domestic agents had targeted the eradication of beliefs and values that were

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[1] *Sahifeh-ye-Imam*, vol. 14
[2] Ibid., vol. 12

established in the aforesaid (Third World) countries. Prevalence of the spirit of negative individuality and individualism and in the words of Abrahamian, the lack of getting along of two Iranians with one another even when it concerned receiving money from a third person in Iran reveals the prevalence of the spirit of discord and corruption of spirit of collectivism and the disintegration of Iran's society by the end of the 1970's decade. The position of Islamic and Third World countries too until the end of the twentieth century and some of them until today is not much better than that of Iran in that period.

The victory of the Islamic Revolution was the beginning of the end of the prevalence of the spirit of inertia, stagnation, indolence and disunity in Iran and in the world of Islam. Herein, Islam and its religious teachings acted as the most important factor of unification in Iran and thereafter among the region's Muslim masses of people. In his book entitled "Religion, Soft Power and International Relations" after referring to the Shah of Iran's downfall and making a comparison of Iran's Revolution with those of some other countries of the region such as Egypt, Iraq, Syria and China, Jeffrey Haynes emphasizes that Iran's Revolution was the foremost recorded revolution whose ideological superiority and dominance, organizational setup, its guidance of individuals and avowed objectives were all religious. It is said that its guiding principles have been adapted from the Holy Quran and traditions of the Prophet of Islam (SA).

By means of diverse and varied statements Imam Khomeini has acknowledged unity and solidarity of the nation change in the course of mankind's history, prevalence over arms and weaponry, overcoming satanic powers, etc…as being influenced by Islam while he acknowledges defeats to be the outcome of indifference vis-à-vis this religion and its lofty values. A number of his statements speak of the importance and preeminent position of Islam in reproduction of power as well as in preserving the Islamic system and the noble values of the Islamic Revolution (of Iran): "They (the superpowers) are afraid of Islam; they are not afraid of me and you; they are afraid of Islam. It was Islam that cause the youth to prevail over tanks and artillery and that enabled the nation to prevail over all things and over all powers."[1] "The transformation that occurred in the souls of Muslims was the key to their victory."[2]

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[1] Ibid., vol. 8
[2] Ibid., vol. 6

The clear religion of Islam has given respect and dignity to the believers and Muslims (وﷲ العزه و لرسوله وللموء منین) and has restrained them from accepting the hegemony of disbelievers that paves the way to their self-defeatism. (لن یجعل ﷲ للکافرین علی المئومنین سبیلا) However, colonialism and domestic despotism has in the course of time by means of cultural attack and domination and by repression taken away from them their spirit of self-confidence and belief in the self which is the most critical element of cultural identity of the societies of the Third World and the world of Islam.

With a clear understanding of colonialist and totalitarian actions and policies on the one hand; and with profound knowledge of religious teachings on the other, Imam Khomeini succeeded in reviving the critical element of self-confidence in the people of Iran, in Muslims and in nations of the Third World. Just for example, we herewith mention a few of his statements: "Man himself is the starting point of all defeats and victories. Man is the source of victories and the source of defeat. Man's self-confidence is the source of all issues.[1] On another occasion, he states: "We ought to believe that we ourselves can (do the job); this belief that we can perform this task is the starting point of everything. When this belief takes hold, we resolve; when a nation resolves, then all of them remain committed to the task; they pursue the task."[2]

[1] Ibid., vol. 14
[2] Ibid.