

Book Review

Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, and Ali Akbar. *Iran's Soft Power in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 182p. ISBN 978 1 3995 1745 4 (hardback)

Iran's soft power policy in its neighboring and regional states has been a subject of serious scholarly research from various perspectives since at least the 2010s¹, and the present work is an important contribution to the study of this topic.

This book outlines the main directions and characteristics of Iran's soft power policy towards its eastern neighbors, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan, beginning with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The authors provide a detailed examination of the primary tools used by Iran in various spheres, including cultural, religious, social, media, ideological, and educational domains.

The book comprises nine chapters, including the Introduction (pp. 1-20) and the Conclusion (pp. 153-157). The Introduction is succeeded by Chapter 2 (pp. 21-32), which delves into Iran's historical influence on Afghanistan and Pakistan from the pre-Islamic era through the early modern period. This chapter elucidates the historical exchange of ideas, populations, languages, and commerce between Iran and the Indian subcontinent, as well as between Iran and Greater Khorasan. It also discusses how Iran capitalizes on its imperial legacy, specifically that of the Persian Empire, to cultivate positive relations with contemporary Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Chapter 3 (pp. 33-53) investigates the general dynamics of Iran's relations with Afghanistan and Pakistan, emphasizing Tehran's primary concerns. As has been shown by the authors, in the case of Afghanistan, the main issues include the illicit opium trade from Afghanistan to Iran, the influx and presence of Afghan refugees in Iran, and the Helmand River water-sharing dispute. Regarding Pakistan, Iran is worried about the rise of sectarianism and the presence of jihadist Sunni Baluch militant groups finding refuge in Pakistan. The chapter notes that Afghan interviewees criticized Tehran's treatment of Afghan refugees and highlighted the water dispute as a major concern. Pakistani interviewees cited the Saudi influence and border security issues as significant sources of mistrust and tension.

Chapter 4 (pp. 54-71) highlights Iran's strategic interests in Afghanistan and

¹ See, e.g., Wilde 2013; Westnidge 2015; Mayeli and Motiee 2016; Mkrtchyan 2017; Gabedova and Turmanidze 2017; Valiyev 2018; Sadeghi and Hajimineh 2019; Soboleva and Karimi Riabi 2021; Akbarzadeh et al. 2021; 'Abbasi et al. 2022; Mozaffari and Akbar 2022; Akbar 2023a; 2023b; etc.

Pakistan, supported by primary data collected from both countries. It emphasizes Iran's goals to export natural gas to Pakistan and India and concerns about foreign military presence, such as Soviet troops in the 1980s and U.S. forces from 2001 to 2021. Additionally, as the authors have noted, while Iran views the Chabahar and Gwadar ports as complementary, Pakistan perceives the Chabahar Port as a security threat due to India's involvement.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 72-95), Iran's ideological and cultural influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan is examined. The chapter analyzes the resources and strategies Iran uses to foster its influence in both countries, leveraging its sizeable Shi'a population and Persian heritage. As it has been shown, Iran employs these cultural and ideological tools to enhance its image, but the impact varies. Iran's influence is stronger in Afghanistan due to significant investments in educational and media infrastructure. In Pakistan, Iran's influence is more limited, primarily affecting Shi'a communities in regions like Gilgit-Baltistan and Parachinar. According to interviews conducted by the authors, Iran's political gains stem from its influence on Shi'a populations in both countries.

Iran's political influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the 1979 Islamic Revolution is examined in Chapter 6 (pp. 96-115). In Pakistan, as shown by the authors, Iran's influence has mostly been limited to Shi'a groups and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). In contrast, Iran has had a broader and more significant influence in Afghanistan, especially during the Karzai administration, by directly engaging with policymakers. The book proves that Iran's efforts in Pakistan have not been as successful in extending into formal politics.

Chapter 7 (pp. 116-134) analyzes Iran's economic influence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It investigates how Tehran uses economic tools like coercive diplomacy and sanctions to achieve political goals and how this influence is perceived in both countries. It has been shown that the fall of the Taliban in 2001 enabled Iran to strengthen its economic ties with Afghanistan, while Iran's economic relationship with Pakistan has experienced ups and downs.

Iran's use of soft power in Afghanistan and Pakistan to recruit Shi'as for Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun, supporting the Assad regime in Syria, is examined in Chapter 8 (pp. 135-152). According to the authors, this recruitment by Iran's IRCG, not involving Kabul or Islamabad, does not fit the standard definition of hard power. However, as shown by the authors, it demonstrates Iran's soft power leverage for military and geopolitical gains. The book proves that Afghan recruits, mostly Hazara refugees, were enticed with promises of residency and financial benefits, while Pakistani recruits were motivated by the protection of sacred Shi'a shrines in Syria. The study found no

evidence of local religious groups' involvement in the recruitment process, as noted by the authors.

Unfortunately, the authors missed an important study published in 2022 on the motivations behind the inclusion of Afghan refugees in the Fatemiyoun brigades (Schwartz 2022). This research, which, like this book, was based on interviews, could have been valuable for examining the topic of Chapter 8, particularly in terms of comparing existing data.

In the concluding chapter (pp. 153-157), the authors present a synthesis of the key arguments from the preceding chapters to demonstrate how Iran's soft power instruments have been employed and received in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to understanding the specifics and issues of Iran's soft power policies in individual countries, particularly Afghanistan and Pakistan. The research value is enhanced by its use of not only existing theoretical literature and media publications but also data obtained from qualitative interviews. This study paves the way for examining Iran's soft power policy in different regions using the same prism and approaches, helping to find existing differences and commonalities.

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