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# A Comparative Analysis of Iran and Turkey's Soft Power Towards the Syrian Crisis

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## Abstract

The Syrian crisis has been one of the most complex international issues in the last decade, becoming a source of competition between regional and global powers due to its duration and the involvement of multiple actors. The country has held strategic significance in foreign policy for two main reasons: firstly, as the central country in the axis of resistance for Iran, and secondly, as a strategic depth in Turkey's Ottomanism policy. This article aims to explore the application of soft power to the Syrian crisis, focusing on the commonalities and differences between Iran and Turkey through a comparative approach within the framework of the soft power theory. By examining the historical, religious, and political values of the two countries, we find that their soft power foundations have led to both similarities and contradictions in their approach to the Syrian crisis. The study utilizes data from library and documentary sources to

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provide a descriptive and analytical comparison of the challenges and opportunities associated with the soft power of both countries in relation to the Syrian crisis.

The emergence of a process called globalization has led to the emergence of new forms of power and, accordingly, new forms of security interactions. Investigating the nature of power in today's global politics has given rise to the concept of soft power and created a place for it in international politics. Sources of soft power, unlike hard power which has a military and economic basis, are based on culture and thought. Of course, according to Joseph Nye, soft power encompasses more than just cultural power. Soft power relies both on the method of agenda-setting policy and on the power of attraction (Nye, 2008: 151). The Islamic Revolution of Iran has been an effective phenomenon in the Middle East region due to its appeal in its slogans, goals, methods, content, and common religious, historical, regional, and international conditions. This revolution caused a kind of Islamic awakening and revival based on returning to the ideology and school of Islam, and especially among the young generation, it created a kind of fascination and return to Islamic thoughts and ideas. An idea that believes Islam has guidance for all human affairs and managing them (Blanks, 1999: 88). Considering that culture is viewed as one of the most important sources of soft power and religion as the main manifestation of culture is one of the main foundations of the Islamic revolution, according to its ideological background and geopolitical and geostrategic position, the Islamic Republic of Iran has huge aspects of soft power.

In Iran's neighborhood, the entry of Islamists into Turkey's political scene turned the country's politicians' eyes from Europe to the Middle East. Turkey correctly realized that decades of looking to the West and over-emphasizing Europe and America had led to an unbalanced and one-sided foreign policy for this country. For this reason, Turkey looked at Islamic countries and the West simultaneously (Öztürk and Baser, 2022: 714). Due to Turkey's history, culture, and many commonalities with Middle East countries, this country quickly became an active player in the regional arena. Turkish politicians introduced themselves as a successful model of combining religion and democracy in governance, putting efforts into increasing soft power and its acceptability among educated youth and the middle class in Arab countries of the Middle East (Ismaili et al., 2016: 181).

Following the Arab Spring and the instability of Arab governments, Takfiri groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS occupied large parts of Syrian territory by severely weakening the government of this country, bringing Syria into a cri-

sis that continues today. This crisis turned Syria into a field of conflict between major regional powers including Turkey and Iran to gain regional influence and hegemony. The question arises: What are the commonalities and differences between Iran and Turkey in the use of soft power in the wake of the Syrian crisis? In response to this hypothesis, the foundation of the soft power of the two countries based on different historical, religious and political values has caused both similarities and contradictions in the use of soft power by the two countries after the Syrian crisis. By comparing the opportunities and challenges of using soft power in combination with hard power for the two countries, we aim to show which country's strategy in Syria was accompanied by relative success or failure.

It seems Turkish politicians consider developments in Syria an opportunity to expand influence, increase role, and ultimately gain regional hegemony. However, not using a principled approach in facing the Syrian crisis, incurring high costs, and exacerbating political and security crises in Syria disrupted Turkey's soft power. Consequently, the regional position of the Turkish government has degraded in the region. On the other hand, field realities such as the stability and relative stability of the Syrian government after the country's crisis and the defeat of Takfiri groups show that Iran's approach to regional influence and maintaining strategic depth in Syria has strengthened Iran's position and increased its soft power.

**Key words:** Soft power, strategic depth, Iran, Syria, Turkey.