

## CINEMA AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE IN THE PORTFOLIO OF IRAN'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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**Abstract:** *The present article sets as a vector of analysis the emergence of Iranian cinema as a tool of influence in the portfolio of Iran's public diplomacy. Given the speed of propagating symmetrical and asymmetric tensions in the current global security architecture, Iran has made it clear that the use of new cultural, religious and linguistic tools that go beyond traditional diplomacy will help brush up its own reputation. Building its research hypothesis on the question: "Does the Iranian cinematographic art represent an opportunity to shape the minds and hearts of the Western public and to promote a different image of the Iranian people in the world?", the article aims to demonstrate that Iran is in the process of country rebranding, giving public diplomacy an innovative direction, translated by the open and decentralized participation of citizens on the political stage, through the multidimensionality of civil society approaches, and even through the blurring of the role of political entities on the traditional way of thinking about diplomacy. Thus Oscar or other international awards winning directors, actors and films have become facilitators of propagating the Iranian culture and identity throughout the world, while the interaction between aesthetics and the social and political issues of Iran's third millennium creates the space for a debate about the new wave of Farsi films that gives birth to a new narrative of Iranian cultural diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** *cultural diplomacy; Iranian cinema; soft power; message; aesthetic paradigms*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse about public diplomacy involves undoubtedly the universe of international relations and the studies placed both in the conceptualization field as well as the diplomatic apparatus, in which are analyzed the most opportune manners of communication between a government and a foreign public and the best ways to influence the opinions and attitudes of the Other.

In this paradigm of analyzing how public diplomacy tends to establish a closer communication with the civil society, to determine a direct interaction with the target audience and to obtain a real-time feedback with immediate consequences at the level of diplomatic strategies, a lot of countries in the Middle East, area dominated by conflicts, ambitions and competitions, tend to adopt soft power strategies in order to obtain benefits and to gain influence on the foreign policy of another country.

Thus, a state like Iran has adopted this form of strategic diplomacy as a mark of diplomatic mobilization to dilute the hard issues and bring to the forefront the soft tools by promoting its cultural values, pre-Islamic religious beliefs, educational

platforms, in order to cancel the image of the country included on the Axis of Evil by Washington and to re-insert into the international diplomatic club.

Why Iran's public diplomacy? Because Iran is the revolted child of the Middle East catapulted by the West to the rank of regional and global threat, given that, 39 years ago, the Islamic revolution and its religious speech provoked a definitive fracture of the Western values, and its polemic nuclear program, reactivated after the war with Iraq, has become a focus point of fears on regional and global security, and is suspected of being used for military purposes. On the other hand, despite the Iranian nuclear agreement reached in 2015 between Iran and the Western community (the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany), Tehran continues to be a source of tension in the Middle East.

The virulent rhetoric against Israel and the calls to delete it on the map of the world, the Holocaust denial, the financial support of the terrorist entities, the maintenance of inter-confessional conflicts in Yemen, or the interference in Syria and Iraq are marks that Iran can promote a double standard speech, that

includes a lot of engaging messages towards the West and, equally, many other exciting messages addressed to the oppressed of the world. Because Rūḥollah Ḥomeynī has transposed into the political field the Manichean eschatology on the bipartition of the world in Good and Evil, so that he places into opposition the oppressed or the disinherited and the arrogant or the colonialists of the world:

The health and the peace of the world depend on the annihilation of the arrogant, and while these illiterate hegemonists dominate the Earth, the disinherited do not take possession of the patrimony given to them by God (Anṣārī, 1996: 28).

His messages were full of appeals to the world's disinherited to revolt against the arrogant forces for release from the yoke of the American, European and the former Soviet hegemonic forces. It is noted that the Soviet Union is included in the category of Evil as a promoter of the atheistic discourse.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Interpreted to be an amount of efforts to win hearts and minds, the public diplomacy has distanced itself from diplomacy tributary of state secret, of protocol and of hard power steps, so it is a political exercise that continues through a lot of soft and smart means, and, this time, is involving the ordinary citizen. Understood as an instrument in the soft power portfolio, this type of diplomacy forces communicators to make better use the strategies and to innovate the tools of persuasion, because a truly effective diplomacy in the third millennium is no longer the exclusive prerogative of foreign ministries. The encrypted and elitist character is marginalized in favor of a multifaceted vision that brings the simple citizens, universities, social networks or the private sector to the fore, making them part of the big internal or external policy decisions (Potter, 2009: 33) and establish a less vertical and more horizontal communication report. Public diplomacy is defined to be

a form of international political advocacy directly openly by civilians to a broad spectrum of audience, but usually in support of negotiations through diplomatic channels (...). It is not a form of political warfare, although it may be used in combination with political warfare (Smith, 1989: 7).

Conjugated with propaganda, conventional military force, economic and diplomatic actions, public diplomacy occupies a prime position in

political war strategy. (Smith, 1989: 14). Fertile in the field of definitions, the expression "public diplomacy" refers to soft power, a concept established by Joseph Jr. Nye, and which incorporates the ability of a country to achieve the desired results by persuasion and not by coercion (Nye, 1990: 166). Power, in this context, is increasingly associated with education, culture, technology and economic growth, because

power is the ability to alter the behavior of others to get what you want (Nye, 2006).

Placed in antonymy with the notion of hard power, soft power is in possession of the levers of modeling and strengthening a country's image, because

soft power is to achieve what you want through attraction rather than through coercion or reward (Nye, 2002: 60).

According to Nye, the ability of a nation to become attractive in the arena of globalization is given by its culture, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 2014), because, ultimately, the art, literature, culture, religious customs, national characteristics or ideological customs are the defining components of that country that do not perish and which remain deeply rooted in the global collective mentality.

The political scientist Joseph Nye introduces public diplomacy into the soft power category, because by relying on culture, attitudes and values, the desired results are achieved by the ability to seduce (Nye, 2004). In this grille of interpretation, the perception of the message is essential, because communicators have the responsibility to build messages that have credibility among the target receptor, then they project them in the media and duplicate them with actions and events aims at developing inter-human relationships and promoting brands and country brand.

The diachronic exploration of public diplomacy and its multitude of definitions lead to Mellison's idea that

the origins of contemporary public diplomacy, and the current debate on the need for more public diplomacy, are dominated by the US experience (Mellison, 2005: 6).

given that Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University consecrated the phrase "public diplomacy" and referred to

the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications (Cull, 2006).

However, the events that marked humanity after the year 2000 have also forced the academic environments and governments of many states of the world to focus their attention on the advantages of public diplomacy in international relations, whose key words are "engagement", "dialogue" and "mutuality".

"Expression of broader patterns of change in diplomacy" (Gonesh *et al.*, 2005:4), public diplomacy has the ability to penetrate the environments and to be heard there "where traditional diplomacy cannot reach" (Gonesh *et al.*, 2005:5), and through the nature of its activities, it promotes transparent activities of "direct communication" with other states, in order to shape their thinking. (Malone, 1985:199). Considered to be an integral part of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy "reveals the soul of a nation", because it

seeks to demonstrate national values which might be shared with foreign audiences" and it creates relationships and "a neutral platform for people-to-people contact" (...) in order to foster a mutual understanding (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

### 3. IRANIAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ECOSYSTEM

Drawings, Iran has the advantage of a "cultural and material power (...) based on its identity and geographical circumstances", but also by the fact that it benefits from the support of all socio-professional segments such as the bazaar, clergy, intellectuals and young people when it is about preserving of national interests. Operating in Islamic terms and aspiring to mobilize Muslim populations around the *ommat-e eslāmī* (Islamic community) concept, Iran appealed repeatedly to a diversified tool to disseminate ideologies and views, but also to blot out the negative image propagated globally. In this context, Iran is

actively pursuing activities in the sphere of public diplomacy, a number of Iranian political and religious entities engaging actively in dissemination missions of political messages, attired in cultural, religious or linguistic forms (Sharp, (2005: 114). In this perspective, a generous Iranian interest-promoting infrastructure has created, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, assisted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, being at the forefront in organization and implementation of cultural programs outside of Iran.

Through Iran's cultural centers under the aegis of the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, which, for its part, is subordinated to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, which keeps a close watch for the preservation of Islamic culture and the removal of any ideological and cultural influences, Tehran has set a lot of goals and principles for the dissemination of Iran's culture, civilization and realities throughout the world, especially as Imam Ḥomeynī has stressed that culture is the essence of a country's existence.

If, immediately after the Islamic Revolution, Iranian leadership built its public diplomacy portfolio around the export idea of its Revolution, then the emphasis shifted on the strengthening of the Shi'a sphere and enhancing the regional influence, calling itself a defender of the rights of the Third World's disinherited (Sharp, 2005:115-116).

Therefore, into the Shi'a populations in a Sunni-dominated Middle East, Persian Gulf and Central Asia, Iran has used and continues to use soft power tools to increase its influence, proceeding with "reputation and image management", because "Tehran presents itself as a reliable partner and ally and pushes a triumphalist narrative that claims God and history are on its side", to "economic leverage", given that "Tehran has strengthened trade and investment in Shi'a areas for profit and for leverage". Iran also make use of "bonds of solidarity with Shi'a communities around the world that can serve as external bases of support for its policies and as allies should it be attacked" and of "propaganda and spin" through "Arabic-language news and entertainment broadcasts that reflect Tehran's propaganda line" (Eisenstadt, 2011:2).

The 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war taught the Iranians to cherish the land of the homeland and the international sanctions on its controversial nuclear program also taught them that they must make compromises to regain their place at the table of the international community. Guided by the motto of the Persian poet Mawlānā Ḡalāl ad-Dīn

Muḥammad Rūmī "Raise your words, not voice. It is a rain that grows flowers, not thunder," Iran of the 21st century seems to be returning to cultural diplomacy, its leadership being aware that the very generous Persian cultural and civilisation fund can open those doors that often remain closed to politicians (Shoamanesh, 2017).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has become aware of the need to resurrect its multi-milenary past in order to win the minds and hearts outside the country by: popularizing the pre-Islamic civilization; developing a lot of cultural programs dedicated to the greatness of Persian imperialism; the initiation of cultural actions dedicated to Iranian traditions and customs such as the *Nowrūz*/ New Year in the entire geographical area of the *-stān*, running programs dedicated to political days in the Islamic space, such as the Qods International Day; the organization of theological courses in Shi'a theological seminars, which surpassed the Shi'a seminars in Iraq; diversification of full-time educational offers addressed to young people from various forms of education around the world; transferring to the online environment, in a lot of languages, with external addressability, state-controlled Iranian media and, last but not least, by encouraging artistic activities.

At this perspective, it may be talking about a diplomacy of music, of Persian calligraphy, a diplomacy of religion, diplomacy of literature, or Iranian film diplomacy, given that Iranian artists have become Iran's ambassadors around the world, and a soft power source still insufficiently exploited source, which can make incremental changes to the perception of others about Iranian identity.

#### 4. IRANIAN CINEMATOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE

The Iranian cinema industry has a history marked by its experimentation, nationalistic effervescence, decline and new opportunities (Naficy, 1979:443), which emerged after 2000, when Iran got in a new era of re-affirmation on the world stage. Thus, despite the censorship, the Iranian film industry benefited from the involvement of generations of intellectuals who have tried to provide an authentic perspective on Iran. Many Iranian films have competed in various international film festivals and have won important prizes, demonstrating to the world that the new generation of Iranian filmmakers is a sophisticated and original one, and Iranian art consumers have managed to get off Ḥomeynī's belief that the cinema is a form of *ġarbzadegī* (West-struckness).

Therefore, films such as "A Separation" (*Ġodāy-ye Nāder az Sīmīn*; 2012) or "The Salesman" (*Forūšandeh*; 2017), produced by Aşġar Farḥādī, won the Academy Award for Foreign Language Film, in 2011, and Golden Globe, highlighting the way in which Iranian cinema, with a relatively low budget, can change the image of this nation accused of having a dual-use nuclear program.

Iran, through the provision of funding, the organization of festivals and cinemas, or the distribution of cinematographic productions via The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), has realized that film art can serve as a tool for capitalizing of its own cultural heritage and influencing world public opinion (Rad, 2012). The delicate exploration of the Iranian social universe and reflections on the disappointment and the desperation of Iran's intellectuals transform Iranian film into the most accessible form of experimentation of the culture and psychology of the Iranian people. Thus, cinematographic productions that emerged after 1997, just after the presidency was taken over by a reformist statesman, are a breath of fresh air by deliberately alienating from the theme of Islamic values and state ideology (Cathcart, 2014:1).

Thus, new stories dominate contemporary cinematography, such as the anxieties and socio-economic problems of the ordinary Iranian family, which got Shannon Kelley, head of public programs at the University of California's Los Angeles campus, to say that it is

a cinema that's very engaged first with its own history and culture. (...) The beauty of their work translates to other cultures (Shakil, 2009).

Iran's award-winning cinematography belongs to the period marked by profound social and political changes, where shy democracy forms invaded Iran and allowed Iranian artists to penetrate the modern society (Cathcart, 2014:5) and to popularize their own cultural values by exploring such topics as "populism, family, nativism, *ta'ārof* (etiquette) and gender identity" (Cathcart, 2014:6). The characters of Aşġar Farḥādī's and Oscar-winning films

are marked by emotional complexity (...), the narrative structure are intricate (...) and (...) embrace (...) those themes that (...) were absent from post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema: domestic and social conflicts (Rugo, 2017: 3).

But that is astonishing is the success of Iranian productions not only in the West cinemas but also

in Islamic space, given that the social dilemmas reflected in films such as "A Separation" are found in any other Islamic society, noting that the Middle East audience is a good market for Shi'ite religious movies, which enjoys record audiences in Lebanon, Bahrain, Morocco and even Saudi Arabia (Rad, 2012).

In the Central Asia region, due to the linguistic element (Tadjics are Farsi speakers, and in the other states terminated in *-stan* suffix are ethnic groups speaking Persian dialects), religious factor, geographical proximity, holy days and common beliefs such as *Nowrūz* (Azadi, Maghsoodi, Mehrpouyan, 2015: 670-671), Iranian sitcoms and soap operas are successfully exported, so that, in 2011, Armenia's state television recorded the largest rating of Iranian soap opera production (\*\*\*) Khabaronline.ir, 2011).

Also in Tajikistan, in 2008, an educational miniseries titled "Alphabet Garden" recorded rating among those who wanted to learn Persian, and in Turkmenistan, at the level to 2011, more than ten Iranian films were translated (Azadi, Maghsoodi, Mehrpouyan, 2015:677-678).

The presence and the nominees of Iranian films at various international festivals reveal an unprecedented force in the Iranian film industry where the new wave of filmmakers introduces new aesthetic and thematic elements, transposed into a realistic and neo-realist European-style tradition, which combines equally, a lot of features specific to modern art (De Vault, 2012).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Realizing that public diplomacy can gather adhesions in a very short time and disseminate a lot of percussive messages with benefits at the level of the image, Tehran has reconverted its strategies of diplomacy towards smart area, because the culture, education, and communication programs may reduce the political gap with the Western community, the exchange of ideas being preferred to conflicts of any kind.

Therefore, the international recognition of Iranian film industry denotes the interest shown by all those involved of the filmmaking process to prove that Iran has not only a nuclear program or a bellicose speech to Israel, but it is synonymous with art and culture, where the main Iranian character reveals to the public his political, social and economic issues.

Without the magnitude of Hollywood, Iran's film industry is, according to Richard Pena, the director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center in

New York, "one of the most exciting in the world today" (Miller, 1992), which successfully combines the cosmopolitan and traditional style, reflects Iran's sociopolitical pathway for the last 39 years, and which also brings to the forefront a new generation of artists ready to demonstrate to the world that Iranians can offer a non-propagandistic film, where historical, geographic, aesthetic, economic and political elements provide Iranian cinema with an original cultural framework.

Iran is undergoing a country rebranding process, appealing to the refining of public diplomacy techniques in order to cancel the state image that is hostile to the West, ready to renegotiate its position as a nation to be taken into account in the negotiation of global affairs.

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