

Opinion - Iranian Soft Power in a Post Soleimani Era

Written by Alison Assiter

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ALISON ASSITER, JAN 20 2020

On 18 January 2020 there were two demonstrations by Iranian dissidents in Trafalgar Square, London. One was the NCRI, with posters of Massoud Rajavi, who has been in hiding for many years and the other was a demonstration by the Marxist Fadaiin. Both demonstrations by exiled Iranians were supporting the protests that are taking place across Iran and both condemned the mass killing of protesters by the Islamic regime. There were reporters from many newspapers in the UK and from Agence Press covering these demonstrations. This press coverage of Iranian opposition group activity contrasts with coverage in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Qasem Soleimani on January 2nd 2020. Most of the press coverage in the West (apart from the Trump supporting press) highlighted condemnation of the manner of his killing and the risks to the Middle East and to the world of this 'unprovoked', illegal and foolhardy attack. See, for example here. However bad the deeds of this man, it was said, the manner of his killing was unjustified. A few days later, there was coverage of mourners in the streets of his hometown in Iran.

However, matters changed following the horrific accidental shooting down of the Ukrainian plane in Iranian air space and the death of all 176 passengers on board. Since then, press coverage in the West has taken a dramatic turn. There is now widespread coverage of the protests inside Iran and elsewhere against the regime of Iran and against Khomeini in particular. Most of the coverage takes the form of ascribing to the protesters the motive of anger about the plane being shot down.

I am sure that is one motive for the protests. However, in fact, the protests in Iran against the regime had erupted long before the killing of Suleimani, in November 2019 already. On November 15th, following the government announcement of 50% fuel price rises, street protests began in Tehran and some other cities. (See Fadaiin leaflet handed out on January 18th in Trafalgar Square). These protests spread to 180 cities and were initially peaceful. However, following vicious attacks on the protesters by the Revolutionary Guards, protesters attacked banks and military bases. (See Iranian government literature). These protests have been the most widespread since the revolution in 1979. In November and December, 1,500 people were murdered by the regime. The New York Times is one notable exception to the lack of press coverage. Despite the deaths, the demonstrations continued and have recommenced in recent weeks.

Many hold the US sanctions against Iran responsible for the price rises and for the shortages experienced by working people across Iran. No doubt these sanctions have had some effect on ordinary Iranians. However, to ascribe total responsibility to these sanctions does not hold water with many of the Iranian people who were shouting "they say the US is the enemy. Our enemy is right here."

To give a little background, the twin pillars of the Islamic revolution are (i) velayat –e – faqih... that the authority of the supreme leader is akin to that of the prophet Muhammad – equating to repression at home; and (ii) the export of Islamic fundamentalism all over the world. A section of the Qods force (of the Revolutionary Guards) is dedicated specifically to exporting fundamentalism. There is also considerable corruption on the part of the Mullahs in Iran.

In 1989 Khomeini wrote to Gorbachev 'I declare with frankness that the Islamic republic of Iran, as the largest and most powerful base of the Islamic world, can easily fill the ideological void of your system'.

In 1991 Rafsanjani wrote: 'As far as resources and equipment are concerned, I think we have a long way to go to

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catch up with our enemies. No matter how much we acquire, our enemies still have the upper hand. We should forget this wishful thinking that someday we may be able to challenge our main rivals in technology and arms...We need a power they do not have, a power superior to technology and arms. Our power lies in the nascent Islamic force awakening the world over... The Islamic republic's survival depends upon the support of such a global force...(Ressalat, 2001, p.38.)'.

Over the years, Iranian forces have been argued to be behind various 'terror' attacks across the world. There are also the well-known cases of influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. But there are, in addition, 'softer' ways of spreading the word of fundamentalist Islam from Iran. One example of the latter comes from perhaps a surprising source. A prominent campaigner against sex and relationship education in the UK is Dr Kate Godfrey-Faussett. She was one of the forces behind the protests that took place outside Birmingham schools recently. Again, this is a matter that is not widely reported in the UK. In a video (see below) Kate Godfrey-Faussett argues that lessons on LGBT+ relationships – which use story books to teach about different families – are part of a “social engineering programme” to corrupt children.

However, as well as making video like that one, she has also appeared on the Iranian regime's closely affiliated TV station, Press TV – who are reporting events at Parkfield School. See here and here. They may indicate nothing. But they could indicate some kind of interference by Iran in the affairs of a UK school.

Now, however, that the latest anti-regime protests are being more widely reported, they may begin to undermine the spread of Iranian soft power across the world and also lead to political and social change for the Iranian people.

Reference

Ressalat, 2001, in Mohammad Mohadessin, *Islamic Fundamentalism, The New Global Threat*, Seven Locks Press, 2001.

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Alison Assiter is Professor of Feminist Theory at UWE, Bristol, the author of a number of books and articles, including *Kierkegaard, Eve and Metaphors of Birth*, and a member of the editorial collective of *Feminist Dissent*.