

# IRAN'S NEW SOCIAL MEDIA-FRIENDLY APPROACH

*The Islamic Republic of Iran entered into a new era of public diplomacy following Hassan Rouhani's victory in the June 2013 presidential election. Iran seeks both to revitalize its soft power tools and reach out to the international community through a more moderate, tolerant, and open dialogue policy. Digital diplomacy and social media have become increasingly important to this end. The author expounds on the new administration's social-media friendly approach to fulfilling its foreign policy goals, in addition to taking stock of the soft power initiatives undertaken by international actors, and the possible obstacles for Iran in employing these same methods.*

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**I**ranian civilization has always been a pivotal actor in global developments. Tracing back 2,500 years ago, for example, the Persian Empire invented *Chapar* (courier), the most developed communication system at that time.<sup>1</sup> Although *Chapar* may seem quite simple, Iran's emperors<sup>2</sup> expanded their control of and influence over different parts of the world using this system.<sup>3</sup>

As a country historically proven to be capable of applying soft diplomacy, Iran has always been under “cultural invasion” alongside economic and political sanctions of the West. The US has employed hard and soft power tools toward Iran, particularly since the administration of President George W. Bush, who approached Iran with what his administration called a “two clock strategy.” That is, the US government directed its policies at fulfilling two coercive objectives: changing both Iran's behavior and its regime through instruments of hard and soft power. The change in behavior was geared at curbing Iran's nuclear program, which was described as “non-peaceful.” Consequently, the US government tried to slow down and/or reverse this clock (i.e., change behavior) through economic and political pressure. At the same time, it tried to speed up the clock of regime change through instruments of soft power by employing powerful radio channels such as *Voice of America (VOA) Persian*, which is a method that is still employed today.

In light of the White House's detrimental policy on Iran, traditional diplomacy tools employed by Iran have not been helpful. Iran began to believe that in order to win the diplomacy war, it should resort to public diplomacy programs that attract, inform, persuade, and influence – that is, the necessity of public diplomacy became almost impossible to ignore.

To that effect, in 2013, after at least one decade of hard work on identifying its deficiencies and the country's need for infrastructural changes in soft diplomacy tools, Iran entered into a new era in terms of the use of its new public and digital diplomacy tools.

In the Digital Age of the 21st century, in which states have to compete in “net wars” and against “networks,” the coming to power of President Hassan Rouhani and his 11th administration heralded a much-needed reinvigoration of Iran's public and digital

1 “Chapar Khaneh” or “Chapar-Khaneh” is a term in Persian, meaning the “house of courier” referring to the postal service used during the Achaemenid era. The system was created by Cyrus the Great the founder of the Persian Empire and later developed by Darius the Great. Xenophon, *The Cyropaedia: or, Institution of Cyrus, and the Hellenics, or Grecian history. (Literally translated from the Greek of Xenophon)* TheClassics.us, 12 September 2013.

2 Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Eisenbrauns, 2002), pp. 62–64.

3 Herodotus, *Herodotus: The History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> There was a recognition that continuing to practice diplomacy as usual without effective public diplomacy was like trying to run a car without an engine. Rouhani's administration realized that the Internet and social media should be at the forefront of efforts to craft an alternative narrative to long-propagated narratives on Iran's peaceful nuclear activities and also promote the much-maligned status of Iran.

The US, on the other hand, reached the same level of understanding of the necessity of transformation through its coercive and sanction-oriented policies on Iran to a negotiation and soft diplomacy-based policy beginning in 2013. As US President Barack Obama stated in an interview published in *Huffington Post*, "We have done the same thing over and over again and there hasn't been any change – [we] should try something different..."<sup>5</sup> President Obama has taken charge of "trying something different" with Cuba and Iran by initiating discrete and patient diplomatic approaches.<sup>6</sup>

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### *A New Start: New Strategies, New Discourse*

News production and information-processing techniques and strategies adopted by global media giants are a clear indication of huge efforts undertaken by countries to utilize media as leverage in protecting and consolidating the superiority of their ideologies; achieving their policy goals in economic, cultural, and political issues; and shaping public opinion to be in line with their interests. This trend is indicative of the role and influence of media on public opinion, and these strategies represent the most effective instruments in current world politics – the symbol of a new era providing grounds for diplomacy and a "must" for foreign policy.

Despite the national security-related closure of some press and publishing agencies in Iran in the run-up to the 2013 election and, further, during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's eight-year presidency, the current administration has adopted supportive measures toward the press. The Rouhani administration has provided support to strengthen the relevant infrastructures based on the necessities for promotion

4 John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, "Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy," 5 November 2001.

5 William Luers and Thomas Pickering, "Cuba and Iran: A New Era for American Diplomacy?" *Huffington Post Blog Series "90 Miles: Rethinking the Future of U.S.-Cuba Relations,"* 20 January 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-luers/cuba-and-iran-a-new-era-f\\_b\\_6508150.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-luers/cuba-and-iran-a-new-era-f_b_6508150.html)

6 Luers and Pickering (2015).

of its media diplomacy through the collaboration of its official news agency, the *Islamic Republic News Agency* (IRNA). Working together with the *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (IRIB), Press TV, and some other media agencies has paved the way for close interactions of media diplomacy and foreign policy, though such efforts are not yet completely constructive or comprehensive.

The common understanding in Iran has been that public diplomacy should be explained in the same frame as official and state diplomacy. However, it seems that the responsible executive which have left the field of public diplomacy in favor of the opponents.

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The rhetoric used by Iranian officials during specific periods for the sake of defending the country’s national security was harshly inverted and misinterpreted as the “warmongering nature of Iran.” This not only put the nuclear negotiations at risk, but also provided opportunities for the West to use such language as leverage in making the dossier more security-oriented rather than peaceful, as well as making sanctions harsher. This provided legitimate grounds for Iran’s opponents to use their own public

diplomacy methods to control the narrative and prevented the world-view and self-view of Iran from being well-settled and harmonized both internally and with the international community. Faced with this challenging misinterpretation, the 11th administration began its attempts to resolve this through new diplomacy tools based on maximum engagement, as well as employing a new rhetoric. “Golf diplomacy” is a useful metaphor in describing this approach and it is a concept currently being uttered by mid-level officials in Iran. As patience is a common element of both golf and diplomacy, it seems that the new administration, in contrast to the previous era, has adopted “patience-oriented diplomacy.”

In understanding this challenge, Iran had begun to implement new strategies since 2013 by determining its goals and setting a new agenda that included the consideration of factors such as infrastructure improvements. Thus, the public diplomacy department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became active and involved. Furthermore, other related organs and entities became more organized and collaborative through cooperation with the IRNA, IRIB, Press TV, and other relevant

governmental and non-governmental organizations. Previously, the works and activities of these media organs proved relatively inconsequential in terms of cooperation that could lead to achieving a certain common goal. However, with the 2013 government, a professional public diplomacy approach was ushered in, which focused on the power of soft diplomacy to confront both propaganda and international pressures blocking Iran from fulfilling its foreign policy goals.

Iran wielded media-based strategies such as the distribution of books and pamphlets, production of motion pictures, and promotion of radio, television and Internet as well as other soft diplomacy tools such as cultural exchanges, negotiations, and an emphasis on cultural and civilizations values. This process has become more consistent and focused since 2013. In addition, Iran stepped forward to begin direct talks with other countries in an international diplomacy framework for its foreign policy initiatives.

*“In the course of Rouhani’s [election] campaign, Iran started to experience the real power of digital diplomacy.”*

Iran believes that strengthening the model prescribed by Islam regarding defending the legitimate rights of Muslims and rejecting the dominance policies of expansionists will make states play an active role and restore their rightful status in achieving an Islamic model of democracy, such as in the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Bahrain, and lately Yemen. Unlike some regional countries which have either been meddling and/or interfering in the internal affairs of these war-torn countries, Iran has applied more reasonable soft power-oriented policies.

With its efforts, the current government has created a supranational psychological operation to either confront international media hegemony or to implement dynamic diplomacy in order to connect with and/or meet the will of public opinion. In one way, this approach helped the government to neutralize psychological warfare employed by some main actors through diplomacy. In another way, it was used to convince the influential states, especially on issues like the legitimate and inalienable right of Iran to employ nuclear technologies for peaceful purposes that had placed it under constant pressure, including four decades of sanctions on accusations of so-called “non-peaceful use of nuclear technologies.” This approach has emerged to be more tangible and effective with Iran’s nuclear negotiations being handed over to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the new administration. Today, despite the politically challenging aspects of the Syrian crisis coupled with the beginning of the Yemeni war, Iran’s new diplomacy still proves to be effective.

### *New Rhetoric and a Social Media-Friendly Approach*

The foreign policy approach of Iran's pre-2013 administration seems to have made the gaps with the West more prominent and caused the securitization of the nuclear dossier. This trend was misused by some key international actors as a bargaining chip against Iran. Adding fuel to the fire, any attempts by Tehran at emphasizing the peaceful nature of its nuclear activities were ineffective in such a tense political atmosphere and gained no success in de-securitizing its peaceful nuclear activities or repairing its image. Given this falsely harsh and violent image of Iran based on rhetoric, the establishment or improvement of constructive ties and communication with the international community, as well as the promotion of exports and foreign investment became undoubtedly arduous. This is, in fact, a clear indicator of the significance of public diplomacy or people's diplomacy to promote a positive image of Iran in the international arena. To move Iran forward, there is an inevitable need to couple public diplomacy with digital diplomacy, which centers around the use of the Internet and new information technologies to help achieve diplomatic objectives, whether it be to promote Iran's international reputation or combat foreign media propaganda.

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Given the challenges that Iran has been facing, recommendations to re-create a separate institution dedicated to public diplomacy, in addition to the relevant bodies established previously, have been taken seriously by President Rouhani since the beginning of his presidential campaign. His election strategies sought to coordinate the myriad of information operations being carried out along with particular emphasis on the use of the Internet and social media technologies charged with monitoring, analysis, exposure, and countering

of adversary propaganda and disinformation activities on a sustained basis. In the course of Rouhani's campaign, Iran started to experience the real power of digital diplomacy.

The active involvement of Iran's diplomatic body, especially the great efforts by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's first “Digital Minister,” increased the enthusiasm and hopes of the Iranian public towards the country's foreign policy. At the same time, Dr. Zarif's highly sophisticated application of new social media

in presenting a reasonable and rational image of Iran was in fact an attempt at the de-securitization of Iran's peaceful nuclear activities.

From its rise to power in 2013, the current administration and its cabinet have concentrated on social media and social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. This, in particular, indicates the vast capacity that helped Iran to recover its public diplomacy strength at home and beyond its borders. President Rouhani explained this in a tweet proclaiming: "All my efforts are for Iranians to benefit information from around the world, as this is their right."

President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif's embrace of social networking has helped cast the new administration in a moderate light while also distancing it from the manner of diplomacy of the 9th and 10th administrations under Ahmadinejad. For example, in a Twitter exchange with Nancy Pelosi's daughter, Zarif effectively declared that Holocaust denial was not Iran's national stance.<sup>7</sup> Another example is Zarif's Twitter response to a carpenter from Texas who challenged Zarif's tweet regarding the use of chemical weapons and militarism. When the carpenter asked: "Does that include nuking Israel," Zarif replied: "We do not have nukes, they do."<sup>8</sup>

*"Rouhani's administration has used social media in an effort to garner international support and as a medium to convey its position to the outside world."*

Zarif's YouTube video titled "Iran's Message: There is a Way Forward" also contributed to efforts to gain support for the country during the nuclear negotiations. The nearly six-minute clip in English, released in November 2013 just before the interim nuclear agreement was signed, shows Zarif defending Tehran's nuclear program based on the principles of "dignity and respect."

Without access to such a message, Western journalists and interpreters would have had to translate and analyze the words of Iranian officials and could have conveyed it in their own frame. Social media has helped Iranian officials shape the narrative around their nuclear ambitions.

The relatively considerable shift in perceptions toward Iran since 2013, especially the perceptions in the US and Europe, could be due in part to the public relations

<sup>7</sup> Javad Zarif's personal Twitter page, [www.twitter.com/@JZarif](http://www.twitter.com/@JZarif) 9:54 AM – 5 September 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Javad Zarif's personal Twitter page, [www.twitter.com/@JZarif](http://www.twitter.com/@JZarif) 8:38 AM – 5 September 2013.

campaign that is being conducted by Iran through both social media and public diplomacy initiatives. Rouhani's administration has used social media in an effort to garner international support and as a medium to convey its position to the outside world.

### *A Concluding Perspective: Looking Ahead*

The most daunting hurdle for Iran's public diplomacy has been how to best use its soft diplomacy tools to reach out to the world, as well as harmonizing and reconciling inconsistencies between its foreign policy and public diplomacy. Embracing digital diplomacy has been key in these efforts.

It is clear that since assuming office President Rouhani has committed to changing the status of Iran in the international community. Iran, as part of a new statecraft initiative, has begun to use new media technologies to engage in "digital conversations" with the West and the East to better convey its message of peace and solidarity as the sole answer to the world's problems.

The West's "whiz-kids" have taken to heart the notion that "it is not whose Army wins but whose story wins."<sup>9</sup> Rouhani's digital (Digi) diplomats, on the other hand, recognize digital diplomacy as a great chance to focus efforts on crafting a message that will appeal to stabilizing peace and security both for the region and Iran.

The way President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif used Twitter to wish Jews around the world a happy Rosh Hashanah in September 2013, commanded world attention and seemed to herald a new era of social media diplomacy and public exchange. This stunning exchange of direct Twitter diplomacy from Tehran represented a fundamental change for a nation that for years seemingly cared little about its capabilities in the application of soft diplomacy.

Iran has thus initiated a new discourse based on soft diplomacy, but is being challenged by the hawkish stances of some key international actors that have demonstrated a considerable shift from their soft diplomacy in recent years by maximizing the application of their massive hard diplomacy tools. The defeat of their hard power and aggressive stances, and the success of Iran's win-win diplomacy in recent months in the framework of nuclear negotiations with P5+1, proved to be a prime example of how diplomacy can resolve crises. This success has once more proved Iran's historical capability to take advantage of soft power diplomacy, either for interaction or for confronting the regional or international counteraction exhibited by others.

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen Hallams, "From Crusader to Exemplar: Bush, Obama and the Reinvigoration of America's Soft Power," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 2011).

With the nuclear negotiations continuing, albeit with ups and downs, paying attention to some of the basic strategic goals and priorities of Iran's foreign policy – the de-securitization of its international position, recovering its global status, and the constructive and effective interaction with the international community – gives us the idea that Iran has optimistically embarked upon a long and challenging path of engagement with the world. What if, however, the ongoing nuclear talks were to bear an unexpected result or be prolonged? Would this affect Iran's newly restructured soft diplomacy and new friendly approaches toward social media? While it is ultimately the strength and seriousness of the will of the government and the nation – rather than the sheer volume of tweets, blogs, and texts – that would ultimately shape success for Iran, the entirety of Iran's domestic and international issues will influence the condition and future of its social media-friendly approaches to diplomacy.

Whatever the effects may be, Iran will insist that current approaches be upheld considering the crucial support given by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, as well as popular support continues. Iran is well aware that any inconsistency in this regard will once again provide the opportunity for other international actors or opponents to exploit these inconsistencies and generate new fronts for attack against Iran's interests.