



**A RESEARCH STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF EDUCATION ON SOFT POWER AND  
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THE CASE OF IRAN INTERNATIONAL AL MUSTAFA<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

*With globalization, hard power elements have lost their prior importance in interstate relations. In this context, states have focused on gaining the consent of other actors. In other words, the use of soft power has come to the fore. Within the scope of the use of soft power, states focused on gaining the sympathy of the people of the countries. The policy implemented within this framework is called public diplomacy. One of the most important elements of public diplomacy is education diplomacy. Due to the increasing importance of education diplomacy, many states attach importance to international education activities. In this article, the concepts of power, soft power, public diplomacy and education diplomacy are discussed at the conceptual and theoretical level. After examining the examples of USA, Germany, France and China, Iran education diplomacy, which determines the subject of the article, will be examined through the example of International Al Mustafa.*

**Keywords:** *Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, Education Diplomacy, Iran, International Al-Mustafa University*

**EĞİTİMİN YUMUŞAK GÜÇ VE KAMU DİPLOMASİSİNE OLAN ETKİSİNİN  
İNCELENMESİ: İRAN ULUSLARARASI EL MUSTAFA ÖRNEĞİ**

**ÖZET**

*Küreselleşmeyle birlikte devletlerarası ilişkilerde sert güç unsurları arka planda kalmaya başlamıştır. Bu bağlamda devletler, diğer aktörlerin rızasını kazanmaya odaklanmıştır. Yani yumuşak güç kullanımı ön plana çıkmıştır. Yumuşak güç kullanımı kapsamında devletler, ülkelerin halklarının sempatisini kazanmaya odaklanmıştır. Bu çerçevede uygulanan politikaya kamu diplomasisi denilmektedir. Kamu diplomasisinin en mühim alanı ise eğitim diplomasisidir. Eğitim diplomasisinin artan önemi nedeniyle pek çok devlet uluslararası eğitim faaliyetlerine önem vermektedir. Bu makalede de kavramsal ve kuramsal düzeyde güç, yumuşak güç, kamu diplomasisi ve eğitim diplomasisi kavramları*

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*anlatılmaktadır. ABD, Almanya, Fransa ve Çin örneklerini inceledikten sonra makalenin konusunu belirleyen İran eğitim diplomasisi Uluslararası El Mustafa örneği üzerinden incelenecektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Yumuşak Güç, Kamu Diplomasisi, Eğitim Diplomasisi, İran, Uluslararası El-Mustafa Üniversitesi*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Educational activities, in the simplest sense, are practices that involve the training of future generations by professional trainers in a planned and programmed manner. Because educational policies answer the question of what kind of future society wants to create in many dimensions such as culture, science and art. However, states do not only work for the development of their own societies through educational activities. It is known that states aim to strengthen their own image and raise individuals who sympathize with them by carrying out educational activities in other countries. In other words, states implement a public diplomacy aimed at gaining the sympathy of the peoples of the region and building their own image through the educational activities they carry out in other countries. This situation enables states to increase their soft power in international politics. Therefore, it is possible to say that educational activities have an international relations dimension, which can also be called education diplomacy.

In the context of international educational activities, it is possible to mention the Fulbright scholarships of the United States of America (USA), Germany's education through the Goethe Institute, France's student exchange policies or China's recently popularized Confucius Institutes. Because the mentioned educational activities are very important for these countries to spread their power and ideology to the world. Therefore, these educational activities, with their ideological character, have the quality of being an important tool that affects foreign policy-making processes. Moreover, people who are educated in these schools can take part in bureaucracy and academia as educated persons when they return to their own countries. This creates an environment in the interest of the actors who provide education.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran, which tried to spread the Shiitism to the world by applying the regime export policy, established the International Al-Mustafa University, which aims to teach the Qom-centered understanding of Islam, Iranian culture and Persian language, by taking various educational institutions as an example.

The Tehran administration, which tries to increase its soft power with its public diplomacy activities through the International Al-Mustafa University and prioritizes raising individuals who



sympathize with Iran, evaluates these schools as a tool to break the negative perception against Iran and uses them as the promotion mechanism of the Islamic Revolution ideology.

## **2. SOFT POWER CONCEPT**

The most important name that comes to mind when it comes to soft power is Joseph S. Nye, who first used the concept. Nye expressed the concept of soft power as states do not have to resort to the phenomenon of military power in order to achieve their foreign policy goals and use other methods in this context(Nye, 2003). So soft power is the power projection approach that largely pushes militarism into the background.

Nye used the definition of "soft power" for the first time in the book titled "The Obligation to Leadership: The Changing Nature of American Power" published in 1990 and included it in her article titled "Soft Power" compiled from the book in question(Keyik & Erol, 2019). According to Nye, who evaluates the assumption that American power is in a period of decline, soft power is a form of power use that prioritizes consent over force. Nye summed up this situation with the following words:

*If I can make you want what I want, then I don't need to force you to do what you want to do(Nye, 2005).*

As can be understood, the concept of soft power aims to gain the consent of other actors through the use of various factors rather than economic and military pressure. In other words, soft power is the ability of a state to present its interests to the liking of other actors and to impose these interests on them. After all, soft power is the situation where a state persuades other actors to act in line with their thesis. In this sense, soft power refers to a situation that aims to gain the consent of other actors by appealing to their perceptions and is much less costly than hard power.

### **2.1. A Soft Power Element: Public Diplomacy**

For a long time, public diplomacy has been one of the instruments used by states to increase their soft power in the foreign policy scene; It draws attention as a form of diplomacy whose importance has increased recently. Accordingly, public diplomacy studies in the literature are increasing day by day. In this case, digitalization in our age due to the technology revolution is also effective. Because, with the digitalization, the policy makers of the states have started to consider the public opinion of the countries they have determined as targets in their decision-making processes.

Commenting on the change in public diplomacy, N.J. Cull stated the following:



1. *Non-governmental organizations have started to replace international actors over time.*
2. *The said actors have tended to use new, simultaneous and global communication technologies instead of the existing mechanisms they use to communicate with international institutions and organizations.*
3. *Emerging new communication technologies blur preexisting sharp lines between local and international news circles.*
4. *Public diplomacy has started to use national tools and developing communication technologies more than the old propaganda tools.*
5. *Current developments have placed the concepts of "soft power" and "branding" in public diplomacy terminology as an element of prestige and global language.*
6. *The innovation that emerged in public diplomacy refers to the development of the "human-to-human" relationship, which has an inter-country facilitator role and includes all actors, instead of the "actor-to-human" communication of the Cold War.*
7. *The main task of the new public diplomacy was determined as "establishing relations". However, the main purpose of this new model has been determined as the management of the international ground(Sak, 2014). "*

Because of the transformation in question, states apply a diplomacy aimed at gaining the public opinion of the countries with which they are in contact. In this sense, the form of diplomacy that can be formulated as "from state to ring" is called public diplomacy(Ekşi, 2014). In other words, public diplomacy is the strategy that a state applies in order to create a public opinion in its favor in the country that it has determined as a target. This is the main difference that distinguishes public diplomacy from classical diplomacy.

## 2.2. Education as a Public Diplomacy Field

The emergence of public diplomacy as an area that serves the soft power of states has resulted in the discovery of the importance of educational activities by states. Thus, the concept of educational diplomacy has begun to be used in diplomatic literature as a sub-branch of public diplomacy.

In the globalizing world, states have made an effort to globalize their own education policies; that is, it is seen that they attach importance to educational diplomacy. For this reason, a rapidly globalizing education phenomenon emerges. Therefore, the number of international students in the world is increasing day by day.

## 3. EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY IN THE WORLD

Various developments in relation to globalization have caused the national education policies of the states to gradually transform into international education policies. In this context, states have turned to policies that were later conceptualized as soft power.

Actors who want to increase their soft power focus on public diplomacy activities. One of the most strategic areas of public diplomacy is education diplomacy. The leading countries in the world in terms of educational diplomacy activities are the USA, Germany, France and China.



### **3.1. USA's Education Diplomacy: Example of Fulbright Scholarships**

Reaching the position of the dominant actor in international relations after the Second World War, the USA does not only strengthen its power in military terms; It focuses on centralization in the context of image. That's why he gave importance to his soft power. Trying to market itself by highlighting the cultural dimension of globalization, the USA focused on conducting a public diplomacy aiming to promote its own values.

On the occasion of Fulbright Scholarships, which is the most popular scholarship program in the USA, American citizen students and artists benefit from education and research opportunities in different countries; Students and researchers from other countries also enable them to receive training in different fields in America. The program in question currently offers active scholarships in 155 countries. It is known that an average of 8,000 students receive scholarships annually within the framework of the program. As a matter of fact, there are more than 800,000 Fulbright alumni worldwide(URL1, 2020).

### **3.2. Germany's Education Diplomacy: The Case of Goethe Institute**

The destruction caused by the Second World War and the embarrassment created by the crimes against humanity committed during the war caused the New Germany to turn to public diplomacy practices in a way to improve its international image. Within the scope of public diplomacy, the main field of diplomacy, which the Berlin administration attaches special importance to, has been education diplomacy.

The Goethe Institute draws attention as the most important tool used by the Berlin administration in these public diplomacy activities, which aims to popularize German through education diplomacy and to raise people who approach Germany with sympathy. As a matter of fact, the Goethe Institute with its head office in Munich introduces German language and culture to the world with 157 branches in 98 countries. The institute, which is an important public diplomacy tool serving Germany's soft power, has turned into a workshop for the promotion of German language and culture through cultural activities it carries out in a wide international education network. It should be stated that the Goethe Institute organizes activities within the scope of the concept of "Expanded Culture" and introduces German culture to the world both through education and other activities(URL2, 2020).



### **3.3. France's Education Diplomacy: International Student Scholarships**

The weight of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is felt in the education diplomacy of France. The Ministry promotes student and researcher mobility in order to make international student mobility attractive. As a matter of fact, on 7 March 2007, former French Minister of Foreign Affairs Philippe Douste-Blazy made the following statement about his country's education diplomacy:

*In a world where knowledge production is now the engine of economic development, the dissemination of knowledge is an important goal for us to attract future leaders from other countries with French resources(Akçay & Sancar, 2014).*

The French diplomat's emphasis on attracting future leaders to his country actually reveals the ultimate goal that the Paris administration wants to achieve in education diplomacy. The French organization serving this goal was founded in 1998 under the name EduFrance and this institution was named Campus France in 2007. The institution has 255 offices in 124 countries. More than 500 people work in these institutions(URL3, 2020).

### **3.4. China's Education Diplomacy: Confucius Institutes**

The origin of the Confucius Institutes goes back to 2002. Because since 2002, China has started to focus on language and cultural education just like the USA, Germany and France. Focusing on the teaching and promotion of Chinese since 2002, Beijing centralized language learning in 2004 and established the Confucius Institute, the educational diplomacy organization(Onal, 2020). The Confucius Institute programs initiated by the International Chinese Language Council Office are known as "Hanban" both in China and abroad(Duran & Yılmaz, 2020). The basic principles adopted by the Confucius Institutes can be listed as follows:

- Increasing the harmony between countries by developing multiculturalism by deepening friendly relations with other countries and nations,
- To help people from different countries and regions of the world to better understand the Chinese language and culture
- To promote educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other international communities
- To promote educational and cultural exchange and cooperation between China and other states(URL4, 2020).



### 3.5. International Al-Mustafa University in the Context of Iran's Educational Diplomacy Activities

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, trying to position itself as the center country of the Shia-Islam understanding, Iran started to spread the Shiism by implementing a foreign policy understanding based on the export of the regime and took care to support the Shiites in their countries.

When it comes to Iran's regime export policy, the use of militarist methods comes to mind. Because in Iran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, Hezbollah is waging proxy wars through Shiite militia groups and the Houthi-Ansarullah movement. However, Tehran's choice in international politics is not only based on hard power elements, but also includes intensive use of soft power. Therefore, the ideology of the state in Iran is reflected in its foreign policy.

Regarding the public diplomacy policies implemented by Iran, Muharrem Ekşi made the following determination:

*The most important motive for Iran to formulate its foreign policy as public diplomacy is the policy of gaining the Shiite population living under Sunni governments, based on the assumption that Iran cannot win Sunni administrations due to the Shia sect. For this reason, Iran has structured the basic orientation of its foreign policy towards the people, not from the state to the state(Ekşi, 2017).*

The sector that stands out in Iran's soft power practices and public diplomacy activities related to this is education. Because Tehran tries to raise individuals who have internalized its own ideology in various countries of the world through its educational activities and while doing this, it includes its embassies and cultural centers in the relevant countries. It is known that Iran tries to introduce its own culture, language and religion through Persian Learning Centers and Quran courses in these cultural centers. However, it is insufficient to describe these institutions to explain Iran's education diplomacy. Because the most important educational institution that serves the soft power of the Tehran administration is the International Al-Mustafa University. Therefore, this university is the most strategic educational institution that contributes to Iran's soft power.

#### 3.5.1. The Structure of the International Al-Mustafa University

International Al-Mustafa University started its activities in 1979 in Kum, an important city in terms of Shiism. Apart from the city of Kum, the university has campuses in Mashhad and Isfahan, which are the second largest cities in Iran. Apart from these cities, the university has campuses in the capital cities of Tehran, Rest, Gorgan, Tabriz and Kashm("Al Mustafa Üniversitesi, İran'ın küresel İslam okulları ağı - İran Amerikan Forumu - İran Amerikan Forumu," n.d.).





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El-Mustafa University provides education at all levels academically, and the main objectives stated on the university's official website regarding the activities of the institution can be summarized as follows:

- To train devout lawyers, researchers, teachers and thinkers
- To explain and introduce the Islamic perspective that takes the Quran as a reference
  - disseminating scientific knowledge in Islamic theories, divine teachings and social sciences (“Al Mustafa Üniversitesi, İran’ın küresel İslam okulları ağı - İran Amerikan Forumu - İran Amerikan Forumu,” n.d.).

The university, in which the emphasis on Islam is clearly seen in its aims, emphasizes the Ehl-i Beyt culture at the stage of defining its mission. Therefore, it can be stated that the International Al-Mustafa University has an important place in Iran's Shia-based policies and that individuals trained in this university are raised as individuals who will internalize Tehran's interpretation of Islam. The policies implemented by the university to achieve these goals can be listed as follows:

- To provide an education based on moral values
- Respecting Islamic traditions
- To ensure that basic references of all religions are learned, including other religions, and to produce translation studies in this context
- To have a research-based education approach
- To serve the establishment of unity between Muslim countries

The faculties in the El-Mustafa University, which provides training in order to implement the aforementioned strategies and objectives, are as follows:

- Faculty of Qur'an and Hadith
- Faculty of Islamic Sciences
- Faculty of Qur'an and Hadith
- Faculty of Fiqh and Education (Theology)
- Faculty of Philosophy and Theology
- Faculty of Ethics and Education
- Faculty of Language and Literature
- Faculty of Social Sciences





International Al-Mustafa University accepts students in four main groups. The first of these are Iranian citizens. The second is foreigners residing in Iran or coming to Iran for educational purposes. In the third group are people who live in the countries where the university has branches. In the last group are people who enroll in the distance education system of the university. This shows that the International Al-Mustafa University also operates outside of Iran.

It is seen in the researches that the university's turning point in terms of opening abroad was in 2003. As a matter of fact, the university, which started to provide electronic education at the international level in the virtual environment in 2003, has contacted thousands of young people from more than 100 countries. In addition, the university has opened branches in various countries that offer formal education opportunities. Moreover, it is known that the university has opened representative offices in many countries where there is no branch.

According to information available from open sources, the International Al-Mustafa University is actively engaged in education activities on five continents as of 2020. The University provides education services in centers in Asia (33), Africa (29), Europe (26), America (12) and Oceania (2) (“Al Mustafa Üniversitesi, İran’ın küresel İslam okulları ağı - İran Amerikan Forumu - İran Amerikan Forumu,” n.d.). This means that the university is active in 102 countries in total.

### **3.5.2. International Al-Mustafa University's Activities Outside Iran**

The countries that Iran has focused on in terms of its Middle Eastern orientation are Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which are geographically Middle Eastern, and these countries include Afghanistan, which is accepted as Middle Eastern due to its geographic location in South Asia. can be expressed. For this reason, these countries, which are also mentioned in the Middle East activities of the International Al-Mustafa University, have an extremely strategic character.

African politics is also very interesting in terms of foreign policy strategies implemented by Iran in line with the aforementioned goals. In this context, Iran's African strategy is shaped as an ideological policy in which cultural and religious elements come to the fore, at least at the discursive level. The strategy in question is mostly implemented through the use of soft power elements in the context of public diplomacy. Within the scope of the use of soft power elements, the activities of the International Al-Mustafa University, which is the subject of this thesis, in the African continent are extremely important. International Al-Mustafa University provides education to hundreds of students in African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Comoros, Uganda, Congo and Senegal(URL6, 2020).



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When Iran's foreign policy is examined, it is seen that Tehran wants to establish a balance against the pressure of the USA by getting closer to European countries and pursues a policy that includes softer rhetoric towards European actors. In a sense, Iran aims to neutralize the American propaganda that tries to demonize itself by establishing good relations with European states.

The courses opened in the European branches of the International Al-Mustafa University are instrumental in the Europeans getting to know Iran, and various conferences and symposiums are held at these universities in order to propagate Tehran's foreign policy. In this context, it is seen that the activities of International Al-Mustafa University in France, Germany and England have an extremely strategic importance.

In addition to the events organized by the International Al-Mustafa University in France, it also offers education in fields such as Basic Islam, Persian Language and Literature, and History. In Germany, the university, which is active in Berlin, tries to promote the Iranian ideology rather than educational activities and organizes activities for this purpose(URL7, 2020). The branch of the university in England is the institution located in the capital London and is called Islamic College. This school, which provides master's and doctorate education, is one of the rare schools that provide Islamic education in Europe(URL8, 2020). An academic journal under the name of Journal of Shiite-Islamic Studies is also published within the college(URL9, 2020). Therefore, the university serves to promote the ideology of the Islamic Revolution at an academic level.

In addition, as stated while expressing the university's priorities, International Al-Mustafa University is located in other geographies of the world; especially in Asia-Pacific countries. These activities are carried out under the Islamic College in London. Therefore, the activities of International Al-Mustafa University in London are not limited to England. In this context, it is known that Islamic College has branches in various countries such as Japan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and the Philippines(URL9, 2020).

### **3.5.3. The Role of Al-Mustafa University on Iran's Foreign Policy**

It is seen that International Al-Mustafa University both contributes to Iran's public diplomacy process and its soft power through its activities in various countries, and also serves to develop science, education and cultural relations between the relevant states and Iran.

The university offers the opportunity to create public opinion and to use the Shiites as a pressure group in the relevant countries through various activities it carries out in its branches and representative offices. As a matter of fact, this situation was also reflected in the activities of the university. Therefore,



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when the effects of the university are examined, its role in Iran's foreign policy, or in other words, its contribution to Iran's soft power becomes more understandable.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

With the globalization process, there has been a transformation in diplomacy which enabled public diplomacy to replace classical diplomacy shaped through interstate diplomatic negotiations. The success of public diplomacy serves to increase the soft power of actors. In this context, education diplomacy is one of the leading fields of public diplomacy that contributes to the soft power of actors.

In this study, Iran's educational diplomacy activities were examined. Before the example of Iran, the Fulbright scholarships of the USA, the Goethe Institute of Germany, the international education policies of France and the Confucius Institutes of China, which set an example in terms of educational diplomacy, were examined and the way the actors, who are actually the role models of education diplomacy, handled and applied the subject. From this point of view, the International Al-Mustafa University, which is at the center of Iran's education diplomacy, has been examined.

Iran's educational diplomacy cannot be considered as institutions that only engage in educational activities. Because Tehran effectively uses educational activities as an important part of its foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the activities carried out within the scope of this diplomacy are activities that aim to introduce the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, even though they are carried out with the emphasis on cultural activities. In this context, it can be claimed that the International Al-Mustafa University constitutes an important pillar of Iran's "Revolution Export" policy.

Iran has realized the increasing importance of education diplomacy around the world after the 2000s. For this reason, it has started to provide educational activities in various countries of the world through the International Al-Mustafa University. As a matter of fact, after the 2000s, it is obvious that Iran's investment in international education has paid off. The Tehran administration is increasing its soft power through the aforementioned university, destroying the negative image of Iran in the international community and raising people who sympathize with it and internalize Iran's ideology, culture, language, religious creed and other values.

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