Public Diplomacy of Turkey and Iran: The Syrian Case

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ABSTRACT

Although the concept of public diplomacy has had long history, its meaning and tools have been changing, which also leads to increase its role in foreign policy. This article analyzes the public diplomacy of Turkey and Iran, regarding their foreign policies towards Syria between 2010 and 2016, and the media role in both countries' public diplomacy.

This study found that public diplomacy in both Turkey and Iran has been increasingly paid more attention by their decision-makers, while attempting to maximize their own regional soft power. This makes them to be more curious and concerned about each other's foreign policies. Within that framework, the media has been playing a significant role for both countries' public diplomacy and foreign policy while constructing the self and the other's image. The contents of news in both Turkey and Iran on each other are primarily based on the description of "I" as peace-seeker and "the other"- as tension-increaser in the region, which would inevitably lead to new challenges for these countries while attempting to create favorable environment to their own foreign policies in Syria.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Foreign Policy

Türkiye ve İran'ın Kamu Diplomasisi: Suriye Örneği

ÖZET

Kamu diplomasisi kavramının uzun bir geçmişi bulunmakla birlikte, anlam ve araçları değişmekte ve dış politikadaki rolü de artmaktadır. Bu makale, Türkiye ve İran'ın, 2010 ile 2016 yılları arasında Suriye'ye yönelik dış politikalarına ilişkin, kamu diplomasilerini ve medyanın bu iki ülkenin kamu diplomasisindeki rolünü analiz etmektedir.

Bu çalışma, Türkiye ve İran'da, bölgesel yumuşak güçlerini arttırmak maksadıyla, karar alıcılar tarafından kamu diplomasisinin hızla önem kazandığını göstermektedir. Bu durum iki ülkeyi karşılıklı olarak bir diğerinin dış politikalarını daha fazla merak ve takip etmesine neden olmuştur. Bu bağlamda, medya her iki ülkenin kamu diplomasisi ve dış politikasında kendi ve diğer ülkenin imajını yapılandırmada önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Türkiye ve İran'daki haberlerin birbirleri hakkındaki içerikleri öncelikli olarak kendisini barış-arayan, diğerini bölgede tansiyon arttırıcı olarak tasvir etmektedir. Bu durum da Türkiye ve İran'ın Suriye dış politikaları bağlamında karşılıklı olarak yeni sorunların doğmasını kaçınılmaz kılacaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kamu Diplomasisi, Türkiye, İran, Suriye, Dış Politika

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1. Introduction

Strategic geographical location and the cultural assets of Turkey and Iran have made them to be crucial regional powers for the regional stability. Not only the hard power, but also soft power of both Turkey and Iran has had impacts on the regional balance of power. In this context, the modes of communications of Turkey and Iran, which can be called as public diplomacy, is quite significant for their soft power at both regional and international levels. Therefore, this paper primarily aims to examine Turkey's and Iran's public diplomacy, specifically regarding their different stances on the Syrian case between 2010 and 2016. The reason for choosing the Syrian case in analyzing Turkey's and Iran's public diplomacy lies in the importance of Syria for determining the future of regional power of Turkey and Iran. Therefore, the attempts and ways of Turkey and Iran in creating favorable political environment in the region for their foreign policy preferences could give a clue for projecting Turkish-Iranian bilateral relations and their position in the new regional order. Within this framework, firstly, the changes in the meaning and the tools of public diplomacy will be analyzed. Then, Turkey's and Iran's public diplomacy will briefly be introduced. Lastly, the role of Turkish and Iranian media on their public diplomacy over the Syrian case will be discussed.

2. Old Concept in a New Bottle: *Public Diplomacy*

Although the concept of "public diplomacy" is not new, its meaning has changed from the international information and propaganda to the new means of diplomacy, which is more correlated with soft power and tools of foreign policy. Edmund Gullion firstly used the concept of "public diplomacy" in 1965 in its modern meaning, stating that:

> *"Public diplomacy... deals with 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, 18 April 2006)

Regarding the changes in the meaning of public diplomacy, it now means the tools of governments in order to influence other country's public opinion. The concept of public opinion goes back to the ancient Greece, however, its role in foreign policy is a new concern of decision-makers. The role of public opinion in foreign policy has been one of the debates between liberal democrats and realists on foreign policy behavior of countries. According to the opponents of democratic peace theory, democracies are more peaceful because the public plays more constructive role in preventing decision-makers to take a war decision. Key, for instance, stated, "Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense." (Cited in Shapiro, 2011: 982). On the other hand, realists are more critical about the public role in foreign policy, since decisions on foreign affairs require secrecy and other qualities. (Holsti, 2004:8). Furthermore, realists find public opinion as volatile and emotional. Lipmann argues that "The public can elect the government and can remove it, they can remove it, approve or disapprove its performance, but the public cannot administer the government… A mass cannot govern."(cited in Rossiter & Lare, 1982: 241) In fact, two different approaches emerge; "bottom-up" and "top-down" approaches. In

accordance with the pluralist theory of democracy, a "bottom-up" approach assumes that the general public has a measurable and distinct impact on the foreign policy-making process, because the leaders follow masses. (Risse-Kappen, 1991:480) The second approach, representing the conventional wisdom in the literature, suggests a "top-down" process, according to which popular consensus is a function of the elite consensus and elite cleavages trickle down to mass public opinion. This viewpoint is also consistent with either a "power elite" of Mills or a state-centered realist approach to foreign policy, which perceive the public could easily be manipulated by political leaders because of "(1) the low salience or significance of foreign and security policy issues as compared with economic policies, (2) the low degree of knowledge about the issues involved, and (3) the volatility of public opinion." (Risse-Kappen, 1991: 481)

Since the debate on whether the public should play role in foreign policy decision-making process or in which form it ought to be is out of the scope of this paper, it would be enough to mention here that constructing public opinion in a certain favored-way of a country is quite important for its public diplomacy in order to shape its image and credibility in the mind and heart of the target communities. Despite the debate between the realists and liberals on the outline of the importance of public opinion on foreign policy decision-making process and, as the result, on the government's public diplomacy approaches in the target society, this issue becomes the major part of countries' foreign policy agenda. Some argue that public opinion can shape policy decisions, therefore it is argued "organizations frequently engage in advocacy campaigns designed to influence publics' opinions in order to affect the behavior of some government body." (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 139). This assumption takes public opinion as one of the influential determinants of public diplomacy, contributing to consolidate the soft power of a country. It is also observable that target groups in our contemporary public diplomacy had also changed from the closed sphere of governments and diplomats towards new actors, namely individuals, groups and institutions that are participating to international and intercultural communication activities and have influence on the political relations between countries. Therefore, "the actors in public diplomacy can no longer be confined to the profession of diplomats but include various individuals, groups and institutions who engage in international and intercultural communication activities which do have a bearing on the political relationships between two countries" (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 139) In fact, the public diplomacy was defined by them as "the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinion which bear directly another government's foreign policy decisions" (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992: 138).

The aforementioned changes in the concept of public diplomacy led to the emergence of culture as one of the key components of new diplomacy. Culture is the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but may be different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next. Matsumoto, for instance, defines the culture as "a dynamic system of rules-explicit and implicit-established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors, shared by a group but harbored differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time."(Matsumoto, 1999: 2) Thus, any policies, which are conducted by a country to target another country's public opinion, leads to the emergence of a new concept, namely cultural diplomacy, as a means of soft power in a globalized world. As Joseph Nye argues, "(…) there are several ways to affect the behavior of others. You can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments; or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want (…)" (Nye, 2004: 2). One of these ways is certainly using soft power, which grows out of culture, domestic

values and policies, and also foreign policy. On the other hand, the impact of culture as a source of soft power depends on the context that this power is being applied, as Joseph Nye puts it in this way, "Whether power resources produce a favorable outcome depends upon the context; having a larger tank army may produce military victory if a battle is fought in the desert, but not if it is fought in swampy jungles such as Vietnam. (Nye, 23.02.2006) Hence, the culture and cultural diplomacy, which became as a tool of soft power, based on the contextual dynamics, have significant roles for the success of public diplomacy. Within this framework, the media appeared as an effective tool of public diplomacy to shape the image of a country in the target public.

The tools of public diplomacy have also broadened, including now multi-track diplomatic activities and issues related with low politics. Traditionally publications, pamphlets, documentaries, networks of NGO partnership, providing support for favorable groups and factions, educational and cultural exchanges, libraries and multi-media centers, exhibitions, language/literature teaching and training, computer–mediated games and aid projects were all included as the possible tools of public diplomacy. Among these, printed and visual media, which quickly transfers the messages of leaders to others and change the perceptions of people, appeared as one of the most influential components of a successful public diplomacy. In our increasingly interconnected world in which media has the power to shape and influence the status of states in the foreign target communities. This particular nature has actually resulted in a new interconnectivity between media and public diplomacy.

The views on the role of media in foreign policy decision-making process have been changing from the arguments on the minimal role of media, which sees the media as one of the informative channels for leaders, to the opinions on the complex role of media, which makes the media itself as a (f)actor in decision-making process. Naveh, for instance, suggests an analytical framework, which describes the media "as an input for decisions as well as a sounding board for the output-the policy." (Naveh, 2002: 4). By the new role of media, which constructs the reality for decision-makers and public opinion, states market themselves to others as friends or enemies at the regional and international levels.

As a result, the concept of public diplomacy is a new phenomenon with its changing means and tools. Since the importance of public diplomacy have been in increase for the success of foreign policy, Turkish and Iranian decision-makers are now more interested in an effective public diplomacy. Therefore, the following part will attempt to demonstrate recent efforts of Turkish and Iranian leaders to consolidate public diplomacy in their own countries.

3. Understanding Turkey's and Iran's Public Diplomacy

Concerning the origin of public diplomacy in Turkey, it is commonly believed that the concept of public diplomacy first entered into the language of policy makers in Turkey with an initiative by the Turkish National Security Council by adding this notion to the syllabus of short term training courses for public officials, who serve in the police, judiciary and administrative bodies; although, there is no clear information in this regard. This initiative later on has been taken over and maintained by the Turkish and Middle East Public Administration Institute.

Since 2002 Turkey started to increase its engagement in regional and international affairs aimed at seeking for a new image through the mediation and facilitator diplomacy. (Ekşi, 2014) To this aim, designing new structure for already existing public diplomacy was necessary. So the Justice and Development Party first discovered the deficits through the

evaluation of the three main categories social - cultural, economic and politics. Hence, Turkey started to re-construct its public diplomacy since 2003. The new structure became officially operated with the cooperation of Yunus Emre Foundation in 2009. Subsequently, the institutionalization process started in 2010 with the establishment of Public Diplomacy Department at the Prime Ministry followed by the Department of Public Diplomacy and the Department of Public Relations in 2011 and 2012 respectively at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In fact, the institutionalization of Turkey's public diplomacy was finalized by the end of 2011 and became operative in foreign policy.

As mentioned in the previous part, changing public opinion in favor of country's interest has became one of the basic and ultimate aim in public diplomacy, which was operationalized in Turkey with the establishment an office within Prime Ministry. This office became responsible for providing the coordination between the public agencies and civil organizations for the accurate and efficient promotion and presentation of Turkey with the collaboration of relevant departments within Turkish Foreign Ministry. This adjustment broadened the areas of public diplomacy from foreign aids to countries in the Middle East and Africa to collaboration on science, technology, economy, higher education, tourism, culture and arts. Within that framework, discourses on "New Turkey" and "Turkey 2023 Vision" are not only representing the changes in domestic politics, but also in foreign policy, so in public diplomacy as well. (Barghandan, 2017:47)

Iranian leaders also started to pay more attention on public diplomacy in order to increase its soft power throughout the Middle East. Regarding the increase of importance of public diplomacy in Iran's foreign policy, two broad eras, which can be labeled as pre- 2003 and post-2003, should be taken into account more attentively. (Barghandan, 2017:13-14) Within the scope of this paper, the focus of this paper is the public diplomacy of Iran in the post-Iraqi war of 2003, which was strongly affected by its tense relations with the Western countries and by the regional conflictual issues. By the President Rouhani, who was elected in 2013; however, Iran's public diplomacy started to become more institutionalized with the new initiatives aiming to change the image of Iran in the international community. It was the most daunting hurdle for Iran's public diplomacy to revitalize its soft power and reach out to the international community through a more moderate, tolerant, and open dialogue policy. This approach was seen by some Iranian decision-makers as a way to help Iran to harmonize and reconcile inconsistencies between its foreign policy and public diplomacy.

It is seen that public diplomacies of Turkey and Iran are highly related with their soft power. Since Turkey owns Ottoman legacy in different regions, including Balkans, Middle East and North Africa, it has influential cultural soft power in a vast geography. Within that framework, cultural activities such as "Turkish Culture Days/Weeks", "Turkish Cinema Weeks", "Turkish Festivals", and "Turkish Food Weeks", various kinds of exhibitions, dance performances, concerts, conferences and seminars on Turkish culture and art, poem festivals, literature days and so on are some visible examples of this power. Iran has also very influential cultural soft power, specifically in the means of language and religion identity, not only in the Middle East, but also in the Central and South Asia. However, isolation of Iran because of both the internal and external factors has created serious barrier against its cultural soft power for several years.

Regarding the soft power of Turkey and Iran, it is certain that sharing the cultural assets with regional countries, specifically based on the identity, strengthened their own public diplomacy. On the other hand, the identity-oriented public diplomacy deepened competitive nature of their bilateral relations. On the one hand Turkey has been self-positioning itself as leading Sunnis; on the other hand Iran has been self-positioning itself as leading Shias

throughout the region. Therefore, it can be said that there is an ongoing competition between regional countries, specifically between Turkey and Iran, in order to design new regional order and balance. Within that framework, the Syrian case, since the popular uprisings turned to such a proxy war, represents a good case to test Turkey's and Iran's public diplomacy, in which the media appears as one of the influential and effective tool for both countries.

4. The Role of Media in Turkey's and Iran's Public Diplomacy over Syria

Turkey and Iran have both common and conflicting interests over Syria. Both Turkey and Iran mention the necessity to maintain the territorial integrity of Syria, however, they differ over the discussion on the establishment of federalism in Syria. While Turkey strongly opposes federalism in Syria because of its threat perception against its national security, Iran keeps its silence on that issue. In addition, Turkey has clearly declared its anti-Assad policies, whereas Iran supports Assad regime due to its national and regional security concerns. Therefore, they also differ in their perception about the nature of Syrian crisis; Turkey views the Syrian conflict as a consequence of the resistance of Assad regime to the democratization demand of Syrians, whereas Iran perceives Syrian conflict as a result of the intervening of Western powers in favor of their own interests. These different stances of Turkey and Iran deepened their competition, so both sides have made great efforts to increase their own soft power through public diplomacy, using the media.

Keeping in mind that, it is hard to ignore the differences within the media and talk about it as being monolith. Disregarding the media affiliation, it seems that Iranian media has portrayed Turkey's foreign policy as the challenge against Iranian regional interests. At the beginning of Syria crisis, for instance, Alireza Arab argued that the historical ties between Iran and Turkey should not be victimized because of its policies towards Iraq and Syria, however, he also warned Iranian government to be seriously aware of Turkey's expansionist policies, using the Ottoman legacy and Turkey's possible attempts in promoting Pan-Turkism ideology in Iran's Azeri provinces. (Arab, 4.5.2012) Furthermore, it is argued in Iran media that Turkey's neo-Ottomanist oriented foreign policy leads Turkey to attempt to control Sunni countries. (Farsnews, 19.12.2016) It seems that the Iranian analysts and media have also attentively and suspiciously been following Turkey's regional foreign policy. Seyed Ali Ghaem Maghami, for instance, who is an expert of Turkey's issues, defines Turkey's bid for taking a mediation role in Iraqi and Syrian crisis as "Turkey's fallacious policy for mediation". He also added that since Turkey's support to aggressive policies of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar, put Turkey in the opposite front to Iran, it is not possible for Iran to accept Turkey as a trustworthy and honest mediator. (Ghaem Maghami, 5.4.2016) Even though Turkey has been portrayed as the competitor and dishonest neighbor of Iran, any possibility of war between Turkey and Iran is explicitly rejected. (Maleki, 7.1.2017) Most importantly, Iranian media portrays Turkey's foreign policy as interfering to Syrian domestic affairs and supporting radical groups, as Daesh, in Syria and Iraq. (Khalkhali, 2016) Furthermore, in another report, published by IUVMPress, under the title of "Turkey has the potential to become another Syria; a virus that Turkey infected itself," has reviewed Turkey's domestic and security crisis and warned that what President Erdoğan suggested and urged President Bashar Al-Assad to step down, is experiencing himself. (IUVMPress, 2017) In addition, it is certain that Iranian media perceives Turkey's foreign policy as the efforts to expand its regional influence areas in Iraq and Syria. (Kakaei, 7.11.2016) Therefore, Turkey's policy towards Iraq and Syria is perceived as a major cause of aggravation of regional crisis. The statement of Ali Akbar Velayeti, Advisor to Iran's

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, clearly demonstrates how the Iranian decision-makers perceive Turkey's policies. As a response to İbrahim Kalın, Turkey's Presidential Spokesperson, who stated that "In finding solution for any regional issues, Turkey has always supported dialogue, but this does not mean that Turkey is taking blind eyes on Iran's efforts to increase its power and influence in the region and thus we will be present in Syria and Iraq (…)" (Kalın, 22.2.2017), Velayeti expressed his dissatisfaction by saying that: "Those who entered in Syria and Iraq without any permission, should leave those lands … if not, they will be pulled out by the people of Iraq and Syria (…)" (Velayeti, 22.2.2017) Turkey's attempts to maximize its regional interests are also evaluated with its relations with non-regional countries. It seems that the Iranian media, which argues Iran has been pushed aside by Russia and Turkey on the Syrian issue, especially in the process of Syrian Peace Talks, follows the rapprochement of Turkey and Russia very attentively. (Farsnews, 12.3.2016)

Like Iranian media, Turkish media as well has perceived Iran as a competitor of Turkey over the Middle East. It seems that this perception has been influenced by different identity concerns of these two countries. It is generally argued that Iran has been using Shia ideology as a mask to take the revenge and has creating the grounds for the emergence of ISIS. (Özkan, 19.12.2016) In another article, Iran is viewed as forming new structures in Iraq and Syria by the help of Shia militia and the Quds forces. (Pekin, 25.11.2016) Furthermore, Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq and Syria were seen as the Iranian attempts to establish a brotherhood in the region, using discourses like "unification of Muslims" and "preventing Shia-Sunni conflict". (Alpay, 20.12.2016) Furthermore, Turkish media accuses Iran of triggering Shia-Sunni conflict throughout the region. (Yeni Şafak, 15.12.2016)

In fact, the media has been playing a significant role for both countries' public diplomacy and foreign policy by constructing the image of a country. So far, the contents of news in both Turkey and Iran on each other are primarily based on the description of "I" as peace-seeker and "the other"- as tension-increaser in the region. Therefore, the contents of news on each other have becoming more critical and incriminating in both countries, which consolidates these countries' othering-oriented regional foreign policy.

5. Conclusion

Public diplomacy in both Turkey and Iran has been increasingly paid more attention by their decision-makers, while attempting to maximize their own regional soft power. This makes them to be more curious and concerned about each other's foreign policies. Therefore, the media has been playing a significant role for both countries' public diplomacy and foreign policy while constructing the self and the other's image. Within that framework, the contents of news in both Turkey and Iran on each other are primarily based on the description of "I" as peace-seeker and "the other"- as tension-increaser in the region, which would inevitably lead to new challenges for these countries while attempting to create favorable environment to their own foreign policies in Syria.

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