



Clothing the Ka‘ba, Clothing Power: The Kiswah as Devotional Soft Power from the Ottoman Empire to the Present

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Abstract

The *kiswah*—the textile covering of the Ka‘ba in Mecca—is commonly approached as a devotional object, a masterpiece of Islamic textile production, or a symbol of custodianship over Islam’s holiest sanctuary. This article argues that it should also be understood as an instrument of devotional soft power: a form of attraction and persuasion generated when materially exceptional and portable sacred culture acquires representational force. Through a qualitative historical-comparative analysis, the article traces the political work performed by the *kiswah* from the Ottoman administration of Egyptian production and Hajj logistics to the centralized Saudi regime of manufacture, display, replacement, and diplomatic gifting. It examines four linked mechanisms: the fiscal institutionalization of the textile through waqf and state finance; the visual and processional staging of authority through the *mahmal*; the material splendor and representational capacity of the textile itself; and the selective circulation of removed fragments through diplomatic and heritage networks. The comparison demonstrates both continuity and transformation. In both periods, control over the *kiswah* enabled rulers to materialize claims to service and guardianship of the Holy Places. Yet the Ottoman-Egyptian system projected authority through mobile, multi-centered imperial circuits, whereas the contemporary Saudi system concentrates production and official circulation within a national bureaucratic institution. The article concludes that devotional soft power explains how sacred objects can generate political attraction through the convergence of rarity, beauty, technical virtuosity, extraordinary material value, portability, and sacred representation, without reducing devotional practice to instrumental state strategy.

Keywords: *kiswah*, devotional soft power, material diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, religious diplomacy, representational force, Ottoman Empire, Saudi Arabia, sacred material culture, Egypt.



Introduction

Each year, the Ka'ba in Mecca is covered with a newly prepared *kiswah*: a black textile whose Qur'anic inscriptions, gold and silver embroidery, and ritual replacement make visible the relationship between sacred space and political authority. The textile does not merely surround the sanctuary. Its manufacture requires organized labor, specialized technical knowledge, raw materials, fiscal resources, and institutional administration. Its movement to Mecca has historically involved processions, caravans, officials, endowments, and public ceremonies.¹ Once removed, portions of the cloth may acquire further lives as diplomatic gifts, commemorative objects, museum holdings, and privately preserved fragments. The *kiswah* is therefore simultaneously a ritual textile, a material infrastructure, a public spectacle, and a medium through which political authorities have represented service to the Holy Places.²

This article examines that political materiality through the concept of devotional soft power. The term denotes the strategic deployment of materially exceptional and portable sacred culture to generate attraction, reverence, loyalty, reputational capital, and political association across communities and polities. Its central mechanism is representational force: the capacity of rare, beautiful, technically accomplished, and materially valuable objects to make religious and political claims perceptible. The luminous ivory and costly workmanship of a Hispano-Philippine Christ, for example, could make Christ's presence and the universal claims of Catholic authority materially compelling. In the *kiswah*'s case, silk, goldwork, Qur'anic inscription, monumental design, and controlled production represent the Ka'ba and the custodial order organized around it.³ Portability allows this force to move beyond the original setting through fragments, gifts, processions, collections, and diplomatic display.

The concept does not imply that every believer, artisan, pilgrim, or recipient experiences the *kiswah* as an instrument of diplomacy. Nor does it reduce religious meaning to political intention. Rather, it identifies a political capacity that emerges when materially exceptional sacred objects are embedded in systems of production, finance, procession, display, transport, and controlled gifting. The analysis therefore distinguishes between the lived meanings of devotion and the political possibilities generated by the organization and circulation of devotional material culture.

The article addresses a gap at the intersection of soft-power theory, religion and international relations, material culture, and heritage diplomacy. Conventional accounts of soft power emphasize culture, political values, and foreign policy,⁴ while public-diplomacy scholarship focuses primarily on communication with foreign publics.⁵ Heritage-diplomacy scholarship has illuminated

¹ Esra Atmaca, "The Cover of the Holy Building, the Symbol of Politics: The Historical Power Rivalry over the Kiswah of the Ka'ba," *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): [2–4], <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030358>; Duaa Mohammed Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah of the Kaaba: A Historical Study," *AZKA International Journal of Zakat & Social Finance* 3, no. 1 (2022): [126–32], <https://doi.org/10.51377/azjaf.vol3no1.97>; Suraiya Faruqi, *Pilgrims and Sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans, 1517–1683* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1994), 32–91, 127–73; United Nations, "Kiswa, Curtain of Holy Kaaba." *United Nations Gifts*. Accessed August 14, 2026. <https://www.un.org/ungifts/kiswa-curtain-holy-kaaba>.

² Victoria and Albert Museum, "Kiswah," accession no. T.113-1932, *V&A Explore the Collections*, accessed August 14, 2026, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/OI79205/kiswah/>; Esra Atmaca, "The Cover of the Holy Building, the Symbol of Politics: The Historical Power Rivalry over the Kiswah of the Ka'ba," *Religions* 16, no. 3 (2025): article 358, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16030358>; Bonhams, "My Bonhams," accessed August 14, 2026, https://www.bonhams.com/press_release/35143/.

³ Richard McGregor, "Hajj Materials and Rites from Egypt," *Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online*, February 9, 2021, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/topics/2021/hajj-materials-and-rites-from-egypt/>

⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 11–16.

⁵ Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Foundations for Global Engagement in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019), 1–5.



cooperation and contestation around shared pasts,⁶ and scholarship on relic diplomacy has demonstrated how bodily remains, contact-objects, and materials associated with sacred persons, events, or places can circulate through political networks.⁷ These approaches illuminate important aspects of sacred material exchange, but they do not fully explain how materially exceptional and portable sacred culture operates across the entire chain of political materiality: from endowment and workshop to procession, ritual replacement, fragment circulation, and institutional display.

The *kiswah* provides an especially revealing case because its political significance has not remained static. Under Ottoman rule, the textile was produced within Egyptian institutional and fiscal circuits and travelled through highly visible Hajj caravans.⁸ In the modern period, production and official circulation have become increasingly concentrated in Mecca under Saudi administration. The political form has consequently changed from an imperial and multi-centered system of provision and spectacle to a centralized national regime of custodianship, bureaucratic production, media visibility, and selective diplomatic distribution.⁹

The analysis is guided by two questions. First, through what material, visual, fiscal, and diplomatic mechanisms did the *kiswah* support Ottoman claims to guardianship of the Holy Places? Second, how have those mechanisms been transformed within the contemporary Saudi state? The article argues that the *kiswah* has functioned as devotional soft power when its material exceptionalism, portability, and sacred representational capacity have been organized through durable institutional and diplomatic systems. The argument is historical rather than essentialist: it does not claim that the textile possesses a fixed political meaning, but that political authorities have repeatedly organized and represented its significance through changing institutional forms.

The article proceeds in five stages. It first situates devotional soft power in relation to soft-power theory, public diplomacy, material and visual diplomacy, relic diplomacy, and heritage diplomacy. It then explains the historical-comparative method and source selection. The substantive analysis considers the *kiswah* as object and institution, the Ottoman-Egyptian system of finance and procession, and the transition to Saudi control. A subsequent section examines contemporary production, gifting, and heritage display before comparing the two periods and identifying implications for public diplomacy. The conclusion summarizes the contribution and the limits of the argument.

Literature Review and Framework

Soft power and public diplomacy

Joseph Nye defines soft power as the ability to obtain desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. The concept directs attention to the resources through which actors become appealing or legitimate to others, including culture, political values, and foreign policies.¹⁰ Yet soft power does not itself describe every practice through which attraction is communicated. Nicholas Cull's account of public diplomacy is useful here because it treats public diplomacy as a set of activities through which political actors manage their international environment

⁶ Tim Winter, "Heritage Diplomacy," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 10 (2015): 1007, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1041412>.

⁷ John Osborne, "Politics, Diplomacy and the Cult of Relics in Venice and the Northern Adriatic in the First Half of the Ninth Century," *Early Medieval Europe* 8, no. 3 (1999): 369, 375–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0254.00053>.

⁸ Faroghi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*, 32–91, 127–73.

⁹ Atmaca, "The Cover of the Holy Building," 2.

¹⁰ Nye, *Soft Power*, 11–16.



by engaging foreign publics. Public diplomacy is consequently a mode of deployment, whereas soft power is the underlying resource or capacity that such activities seek to mobilize.¹¹

The *kiswah* complicates a communication-centered understanding of diplomacy. It communicates through its inscriptions, embroidery, ceremonial presentation, official narratives, and diplomatic contexts. Yet its political force does not derive from verbal communication alone. The textile makes authority perceptible through the convergence of sacred representation and material splendor. Its black silk, goldwork, Qur'anic calligraphy, technical refinement, monumental design, and institutional provenance communicate expense, competence, reverence, and custodial capacity. The textile is therefore not merely a message about authority; its material form is one of the means through which authority becomes visible and persuasive.¹²

Janice Bially Mattern's critique of the supposedly non-coercive character of soft power is important for this analysis. Attraction can involve representational force: the production of meanings and identities that make political relationships appear natural, legitimate, or desirable.¹³ The *kiswah*'s political use should therefore not be described as purely benign. Its splendor can generate reverence, but its controlled circulation can also establish hierarchies of guardianship and privilege. Devotional soft power is "soft" in its principal mode of attraction, not necessarily in all its political effects.

Material, visual, relic, and heritage diplomacy

The article also draws on scholarship that treats objects as participants in diplomatic relations. Global-gift studies show that gifts are not simply transferred commodities. Their value is shaped by provenance, obligation, ceremony, asymmetry, and the relationships that their circulation creates or renews.¹⁴ A sacred textile intensifies these dynamics because its value cannot be reduced to workmanship or market price. Its material characteristics, institutional provenance, restricted availability, and sacred significance jointly shape the relationship created by its circulation.

Visual diplomacy provides a second relevant perspective. Diplomatic spectacle is produced through images, objects, ceremonies, and settings that make political relationships perceptible.¹⁵ The *mahmal* exemplified such spectacle by transforming the transport of the *kiswah* into a public performance across cities and pilgrimage routes. Its richly decorated form made sultanic authority visible to audiences who encountered the caravan, while the caravan's movement extended that representation across imperial space.¹⁶

Relic diplomacy is a related but distinct field concerned with the strategic circulation of bodily remains and other sacred materials. In early medieval Europe, corporeal relics could confer status on their possessors and serve as prestigious diplomatic gifts that fostered political affiliations between

¹¹ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 1–5.

¹² McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 86–118

¹³ Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 595, 602–3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031601>.

¹⁴ Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello, eds., *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1.

¹⁵ Costas M. Constantinou, "Visual Diplomacy: Reflections on Diplomatic Spectacle and Cinematic Thinking," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 391–92, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-13030014>.

¹⁶ Richard J. A. McGregor, "Objects over Distance," in *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing Religion in Egypt and Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 18–53; Richard J. A. McGregor, "Processions, Banners, and the Religious Spectacle," in *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing Religion in Egypt and Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 86–118; Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013)



donors and recipients.¹⁷ More broadly, material objects associated with sacred persons, events, or places may acquire devotional significance through the beliefs and practices that accumulate around them.¹⁸ Removed *kiswah* sections may likewise acquire a derivative devotional status through their history as portions of the Ka‘ba’s covering. This possibility is relevant to the *kiswah*’s afterlives, but it does not exhaust the object’s political force. Devotional soft power is concerned more broadly with the representational capacity generated when sacred meaning converges with rarity, beauty, technical virtuosity, extraordinary material value, and portability.¹⁹ A *kiswah* fragment may therefore participate in relic-like or sacred-place material cultures while also functioning as a diplomatic representation of the Ka‘ba and the authority that controls the textile’s production and circulation.

Heritage diplomacy helps explain how *kiswah* fragments and historic belts enter broader regimes of cross-border cultural interpretation. Tim Winter defines heritage diplomacy as a set of processes through which cultural and natural pasts shared across nations become subjects of exchange, collaboration, and cooperative governance.²⁰ When *kiswah* material is curated as heritage, its meaning shifts from ritual covering to a narrated history of pilgrimage, craftsmanship, patronage, custodianship, and inter-state connection.²¹ Heritage diplomacy therefore describes the transnational framing of the object’s historical significance, while devotional soft power explains the attraction generated by its sacred representation, rarity, beauty, and material value.

Museum diplomacy also provides a separate framework for understanding the *kiswah*’s institutional display. Museums do not merely preserve objects received through diplomacy; they actively mediate relations among states, communities, curators, and publics through acquisition, exhibition, interpretation, and conservation.²² A *kiswah* fragment displayed in a museum therefore operates on two levels. Its material and devotional qualities continue to generate representational force, while the museum’s curatorial practices determine how that force is narrated and made available to audiences.²³ Museum diplomacy is thus the institutional process through which the object’s diplomatic and heritage meanings are organized, whereas devotional soft power identifies the attraction generated by the sacred object itself.²⁴

Devotional soft power

This article proposes **devotional soft power** as an analytical concept for examining how materially exceptional and portable sacred objects generate attraction, recognition, legitimacy, and political influence. The concept extends Nye’s account of soft power as attraction while drawing on scholarship on religious soft power and devotional materiality. It does not claim that “devotional soft power” is an established category in the literature. Rather, it identifies a specific relationship between sacred material form and political influence: materially rare, technically accomplished, aesthetically

¹⁷ Osborne, “Politics, Diplomacy and the Cult of Relics,” 369.

¹⁸ Alexandra Walsham, “Introduction: Relics and Remains,” *Past & Present*, no. 206 (2010): 11.

¹⁹ Mattern, “Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft,” 595, 602–3.

²⁰ Winter, “Heritage Diplomacy,” 1007.

²¹ Winter, “Heritage Diplomacy,” 1007, 1009–11.

²² Sarah E. K. Smith and Sascha Priewe, “Introduction: The Global Work of Museum Diplomacy,” in *Museum Diplomacy: How Cultural Institutions Shape Global Engagement*, ed. Sarah E. K. Smith and Sascha Priewe (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 1–20.

²³ Mattern, “Why ‘Soft Power’ Isn’t So Soft,” 595, 602–3.

²⁴ Smith and Priewe, “The Global Work of Museum Diplomacy,” 1–20.



compelling, and mobile sacred objects can make claims to legitimacy, guardianship, generosity, competence, and religious authority visible across social and political distance.²⁵

Contemporary reports describe the *kiswah* as requiring hundreds of kilograms of silk and substantial quantities of gold- and silver-thread embroidery, with an estimated annual production cost of approximately SAR 25 million. They also identify about 150–200 skilled artisans, technicians, and craftspeople involved in its production, although the reported figures vary according to whether they refer to the entire complex, the annual production team, or the installation process. These figures are therefore treated as approximate indicators rather than fixed technical measurements. Even so, they demonstrate how costly materials, specialized labor, technical expertise, institutional organization, and sacred representation converge in a single devotional object.²⁶

Four analytical dimensions organize the concept. **First, devotional soft power depends on the convergence of material exceptionalism, representational force, and portability.** Sacred objects attract and persuade through the interaction of rarity, beauty, technical virtuosity, material value, and what they represent. Their materiality gives religious and political claims a visible, tactile, and transportable form. This constitutes the object's representational force: its capacity to make claims to sacred status, legitimacy, guardianship, generosity, or authority perceptible through material form, provenance, inscription, and presentation. Representational force, however, does not guarantee political influence. Its effects remain relational and depend on how particular audiences recognize, accept, contest, reinterpret, or ignore those claims.²⁷ This article adapts Mattern's concept of representational force from its original sociolinguistic context to describe how sacred objects make political and religious claims perceptible through material form. The adaptation is deliberate: unlike Mattern's language-centered account, the present framework examines inscription, textile, craftsmanship, provenance, scale, and ritual display.

The *kiswah*'s silk, goldwork, Qur'anic inscriptions, monumental scale, and specialized craftsmanship do not mechanically compel acceptance, but they can make the Ka'ba's sanctity and the custodial authority associated with it visible, credible, and affectively compelling. Its removable sections further allow that material representation to travel through gifting, display, and diplomatic circulation.

Second, devotional soft power requires institutional mediation. Workshops, endowments, state offices, custodians, religious authorities, museums, and diplomatic protocols determine how sacred

²⁵ Nye, *Soft Power*, 5–11; For the material, institutional, circulatory, and relational dimensions of devotional objects, see Richard J. A. McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object: Seeing Religion in Egypt and Syria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 18–53, 86–118; Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Religious Soft Power: Definition(s), Limits and Usage," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (2023): article 135, 2–4, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020135>. The four-part formulation used here is proposed by the present article. The term "devotional soft power" and the four-dimensional framework proposed here are the author's analytical formulation.

²⁶ For reported contemporary production figures, see Saudi Press Agency, "Holy Kaaba Kiswah Complex: Precision Craftsmanship and Living Islamic Heritage," January 2, 2026, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/N2480566>; Bernama, "Inside the Kiswah Factory: A Rare Glimpse for Global Media," June 4, 2025, <https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2430681>; Siasat, "1,415 kg of Sacred Artistry: Kaaba's New Kiswah Ready for Installation," June 25, 2025, <https://www.siasat.com/1415-kg-of-sacred-artistry-kaabas-new-kiswah-ready-for-installation-3238429/>; Iraqi News Agency, "INA Documents the Stages of Making the Kaaba's Covering," June 13, 2024, <https://ina.iq/eng/33202-ina-documents-the-stages-of-making-the-kaabas-covering-the-kiswah-by-the-hands-of-the-most-skilled-tailors.html>. Reported quantities and complex personnel vary among sources and are therefore used here as approximate indicators of material scale rather than as fixed technical data.

²⁷ Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 583, 585–87, 595, 602–3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031601>; Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 5–11. Mattern's concept concerns representational force exercised through language; its application here to sacred textiles and material forms is this article's theoretical extension.



objects are produced, authenticated, displayed, transported, transferred, and interpreted. Material exceptionalism becomes politically durable only when institutions can sustain production, authorize provenance, regulate circulation, and frame interpretation.

Third, devotional soft power operates through controlled visibility and controlled circulation.

Public processions, exhibitions, official ceremonies, media coverage, and diplomatic presentation make sacred authority visible. Restricted gifting and selective access differentiate recipients and create prestige. Visibility and scarcity therefore work together: the object must be recognized as exceptional, while access to it remains selective.

Fourth, devotional soft power is relational rather than automatic. It can generate attraction, goodwill, recognition, or affiliation only where recipients recognize—or can be persuaded to recognize—the object’s material and representational significance. The framework therefore allows for contestation, indifference, alternative interpretations, and the possibility that devotional practice may not be consciously diplomatic.

The concept differs from **relic diplomacy**, which focuses more specifically on the strategic exchange of bodily remains, contact-objects, and materials associated with sacred persons, events, or places.²⁸ Devotional soft power does not require corporeal presence, physical contact, or the transmission of sanctity. It concerns the political attraction that may arise when materially distinctive sacred culture makes religious and political claims perceptible through visual form, craftsmanship, provenance, institutional authorization, and mobility. It also differs from **heritage diplomacy** and **museum diplomacy**, which focus on institutional and cross-border engagements involving cultural heritage and museum practice.²⁹ Devotional soft power is broader in temporal scope but narrower in analytical focus: it identifies the potential political attraction generated by sacred material forms, while treating production, spectacle, gifting, transportation, exhibition, and conservation as distinct practices through which that attraction may be organized.

Methodology and Sources

This study employs a qualitative historical-comparative case-study design. It compares two configurations of *kiswah* politics: the Ottoman-Egyptian system of production, financing, and Hajj logistics, examined from the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 through the late imperial period;³⁰ and the contemporary Saudi system of production, replacement, display, and diplomatic circulation.³¹ The comparison is organized around four analytical dimensions: institutional control, fiscal infrastructure, public spectacle, and diplomatic circulation. These dimensions make it possible to trace how similar political functions—claims to guardianship, the public performance of generosity, and the organization of sacred authority—were materialized through different institutional arrangements.

The study does not treat the Ottoman and Saudi periods as identical cases or presume a direct institutional continuity between them. Rather, it uses a structured comparison to examine how the *kiswah*’s political capacities were reorganized across changing regimes.³² The Ottoman-Egyptian case is reconstructed through scholarship on the Hajj, Ottoman-Mamluk relations, Cairo’s textile

²⁸ Osborne, “Politics, Diplomacy and the Cult of Relics,” 369; Alexandra Walsham, “Introduction: Relics and Remains,” *Past & Present*, no. 206 (2010): 11.

²⁹ Winter, “Heritage Diplomacy,” 1007, 1009–11; Smith and Priewe, “The Global Work of Museum Diplomacy,” 1–20.

³⁰ Faruqi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*, 32–91, 127–73.

³¹ Atmaca, “The Cover of the Holy Building,” 3, 7, 9, 12.

³² Atmaca, “The Cover of the Holy Building,” 1–22.



institutions, waqf, and the *mahmal*.³³ The contemporary Saudi case is examined through official descriptions of the King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba Kiswa,³⁴ institutional documentation concerning *kiswah* displays and gifts, United Nations material concerning the Ka'ba curtain presented to its headquarters and established journalistic reports concerning more recent diplomatic transfers.³⁵

Data selection

The contemporary examples were selected purposively rather than statistically. Each case satisfies three criteria: the event or recipient is publicly identifiable; the transfer or display is documented by an official, intergovernmental, institutional, or established journalistic source; and the case illustrates a distinct mode of circulation. The selected examples include the presentation of a Ka'ba curtain at United Nations headquarters,³⁶ the transfer of a *kiswah* piece to Egypt's New Administrative Capital Museum,³⁷ and the reported presentation of a fragment to Uzbekistan's Center of Islamic Civilization.³⁸ These cases are used to illuminate institutional patterns in contemporary gifting and display; they are not presented as an exhaustive inventory of Saudi *kiswah* distribution.

The source base is heterogeneous and is treated accordingly. Historical interpretations rely primarily on modern scholarship concerning Hajj institutions, Ottoman and Mamluk political history, devotional objects, textile arts, material diplomacy, and waqf. Contemporary evidence includes official Saudi materials, United Nations documentation, institutional museum narratives, and news reports. Official and institutional sources are particularly valuable for reconstructing administrative practices and state self-presentation, but they should not automatically be treated as neutral evidence of diplomatic intention. News reports may document a transfer while reproducing the language of officials or recipients. The analysis therefore distinguishes among observable practices—such as manufacture, presentation, display, transport, and institutional framing—and interpretations concerning their diplomatic significance.

The study also distinguishes between the object's devotional meaning and the political capacity generated by its institutional circulation. It does not assume that artisans, pilgrims, museum professionals, officials, or recipients consciously understand their activities as diplomacy. Nor does it infer private intention from a public ceremony. Devotional soft power is used as an interpretive framework for identifying how materially exceptional and portable sacred culture can acquire representational and diplomatic force when embedded in systems of production, finance, spectacle, transport, and controlled gifting.

³³ Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*, 32–91, 127–73; Cihan Yüksel Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks: Imperial Diplomacy and Warfare in the Islamic World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 98–100; Venetia Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," in Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 195–205; Nahla Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa: Administration and Production," in Porter and Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 195–205.

³⁴ Saudi Press Agency, "Holy Kaaba Kiswa Complex: Precision Craftsmanship and Living Islamic Heritage," January 2, 2026, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/N2480566>; Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques, "Deputy Governor of Makkah Region Hands Over Holy Kaaba's Kiswa to Chief Guardian," June 8, 2025, <https://pep.gov.sa/en/news/714>; Visit Saudi, "King Abdulaziz Complex for the Holy Kaaba Kiswa," accessed August 14, 2026, <https://www.visitsaudi.com/en/makkah/attractions/the-kiswa-factory-of-the-holy-kaaba-in-makkah>.

³⁵ United Nations, "Kiswa, Curtain of Holy Kaaba," United Nations Gifts, accessed August 14, 2026, <https://www.un.org/ungifts/kiswa-curtain-holy-kaaba>; Office of the President of Uzbekistan, "President of Uzbekistan Underscores the Importance of Close Cooperation with Saudi Arabia on Comfortable Stay of Our Pilgrims," February 19, 2025, <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/7891>; Arab News, "Piece of Kaaba's Kiswah Gifted to Uzbekistan's Center of Islamic Civilization," February 19, 2025, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2590896/saudi-arabia>.

³⁶ United Nations, "Kiswa, Curtain of Holy Kaaba."

³⁷ State Information Service, "Egypt Receives Part of Kabaa Kiswah to Be Displayed at NAC's Museum."

³⁸ Arab News, "Piece of Kaaba's Kiswah Gifted to Uzbekistan's Center."



The study does not measure audience reception or diplomatic outcomes quantitatively. It cannot establish whether a particular gift produced durable goodwill, policy change, or political allegiance. Nor does it provide a complete history of *kiswah* production or circulation. Ottoman endowment registers, workshop records, court correspondence, local accounts, diplomatic archives, museum files, and interviews with contemporary practitioners could reveal additional actors, disputes, and interpretations. These limitations are not incidental to the argument: they reinforce the need to distinguish observable institutional practices from claims about reception and effect. Further research should therefore examine how recipients and publics interpret *kiswah* objects and whether official custodianship generates attraction beyond the ceremonial moment.

The Kiswah as Object and Institution

The *kiswah* is the textile covering of the Ka‘ba, traditionally made of silk and decorated with Qur’anic inscriptions in gold and silver thread. Its present appearance is the outcome of a long historical development. Earlier coverings varied in material and color across periods and regions; black silk became established as a dominant form by the Abbasid period and was subsequently elaborated under Mamluk and Ottoman rule. The ensemble has included the principal outer covering, the belt or *ḥizām*, and the curtain associated with the Ka‘ba door.³⁹

The textile’s devotional significance is inseparable from the technical and institutional conditions of its production. Silk procurement, dyeing, weaving, calligraphy, embroidery, assembly, transport, and replacement require a coordinated organization of labor and resources.⁴⁰ The *kiswah* therefore makes visible a political theology in which care for the sanctuary is enacted through material provision. To clothe the Ka‘ba is to perform service, but it is also to demonstrate the capacity to organize a transregional economy around the Holy Places.⁴¹

This institutional dimension became particularly pronounced in Egypt. From the medieval period onward, Egypt served as a principal center of *kiswah* manufacture. Specialized workshops and officials were connected to endowments and state revenues that supported materials, wages, transport, and ceremonial expenses. Under Ottoman rule, the Cairene system was incorporated into wider imperial structures. *Kiswah* production consequently linked Cairo, provincial resources, the pilgrimage routes, and the Hijaz.⁴²

The *waqf* was crucial to this continuity. An endowed asset—such as land, shops, agricultural revenue, or designated taxes—was dedicated permanently to a religious or public purpose.⁴³ Its income could support institutions beyond the lifespan of an individual ruler. In the *kiswah* context, endowments helped sustain the purchase of silk and metal thread, payment of artisans, transport of the textile, and costs associated with its ceremonial dispatch. The *kiswah* consequently became embedded in a fiscal-religious infrastructure rather than remaining a discretionary courtly gift.⁴⁴

The importance of this infrastructure is theoretical as well as historical. A sacred object can acquire durable political significance only when the institutions that produce, authenticate, and circulate it

³⁹ Nahla Nassar, “*Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa: Administration and Production*,” in Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 175–83; Duaa Mohammed Alashari, “*The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah of the Kaaba: A Historical Study*,” *AZKA International Journal of Zakat & Social Finance* 3, no. 1 (2022): 125–26, <https://doi.org/10.51377/azjaf.vol3no1.97>.

⁴⁰ Nassar, “*Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa*,” 175–83.

⁴¹ Faroqhi, 32–91 and 127–73.

⁴² Faroqhi, 32–91 and 127–73.

⁴³ Alashari, “*The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah*,” 125–26.

⁴⁴ Alashari, “*The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah*,” 125–26.



are themselves durable. Waqf and state administration gave devotional meaning an institutional form capable of organizing people, resources, and territory. They did not eliminate religious meaning; they made its material expression continuous and politically legible.⁴⁵

Ottoman-Egyptian Circuits

Provision and custodianship

The Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 brought Egypt and the Hijaz into the Ottoman imperial sphere and placed the sultan at the head of an established infrastructure of Islamic learning, pilgrimage administration, fiscal provision, and sacred-site patronage. Ottoman rulers inherited responsibility for supporting the Holy Places and used the *kiswah*, together with the title *khādim al-ḥaramayn*, to articulate a political identity grounded in service to the Two Holy Sanctuaries.⁴⁶

This distinction matters. The *kiswah* did not function as a territorial flag in a simple secular sense. Its political force emerged from service to a sanctuary whose significance exceeded any single dynasty. By financing the textile and arranging its dispatch, the ruler could present imperial power as religious responsibility. The object mediated between sovereignty and service: it demonstrated capacity while also appearing as an offering enacted in the name of custodianship.⁴⁷

The arrangement generated rivalry as well. The right to provide the *kiswah* could be claimed by competing Muslim rulers, including Mamluk, Ottoman, Egyptian, and later Saudi authorities. Control over production and dispatch therefore served as a visible index of political precedence. Such claims could coexist with local and provincial autonomy. Egyptian institutions retained important roles even when the Ottoman sultan was the ultimate imperial patron, creating a layered system in which Cairo's administrative and artisanal capacity supported Istanbul's religious-political claims.⁴⁸

Waqf and material diplomacy

The *kiswah*'s material diplomacy operated through the fiscal structures that made its production possible. Land, agricultural estates, villages, and tax revenues could be directed toward the textile's manufacture and transport. These arrangements connected apparently distant economic activities to the sanctuary in Mecca. Provincial revenues became thread, wages, caravans, and ceremonial objects. The sacred textile thus served as a material map of political obligation.⁴⁹

I use "material diplomacy" to describe the way political relationships were enacted through the financing, production, movement, and presentation of the *kiswah* because political relationships were created not only through proclamations or correspondence but also through the allocation of resources. A ruler who endowed the *kiswah* established a durable relationship between his authority and the sanctuary. Officials, artisans, religious personnel, transporters, and beneficiaries participated

⁴⁵ Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 125–26.

⁴⁶ Jane Hathaway, "Egypt and Syria under the Ottomans," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 411–35, 411–12.

⁴⁷ Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*, 74–91, 127–73; Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83; Atmaca, "The Cover of the Holy Building," 1–22.

⁴⁸ Atmaca, "The Historical Power Rivalry over the Kiswa of the Ka'ba," art. 358; Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks*, 98–100; Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83; McDougall, "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Longue Durée Struggle," 1017–39.

⁴⁹ Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 128–30, 132.



in a system whose practical operations reproduced that political claim. Devotional soft power was therefore infrastructural before it was spectacular.⁵⁰

The textile's material richness intensified this effect. Black silk and goldwork communicated expense, technical competence, and reverence. Qur'anic inscriptions made the textile legible as a devotional object, while the scale and quality of its embroidery made it legible as a product of organized power. Its beauty was not politically incidental. It was one of the means through which provision became visible as generosity and authority.⁵¹

The Mahmal and Visual Diplomacy

The political charge of the *kiswah* reached a wider public through the *mahmal*, a ceremonial palanquin or litter. The *mahmal* was not designed to carry a person; it was an empty, tent-like structure carried on a camel and associated with the pilgrimage carried in the annual Hajj caravans from Cairo and Damascus. Associated with the pilgrimage and the dispatch of the *kiswah*, the *mahmal* transformed logistics into spectacle. Its textiles, ornament, and imperial insignia made the caravan a mobile ceremony of authority.⁵²

The *mahmal*'s importance lay in its movement. A textile produced in Cairo could have remained an administrative object encountered only by officials and artisans. Through the caravan, it became a public event. Cities along the route saw the procession, and audiences could associate the Hajj, the sanctuary, imperial generosity, and the ruler's symbolic presence. The route itself became a theatre in which the political order was made visible.⁵³

This was visual diplomacy in a particularly literal sense. The spectacle addressed multiple audiences simultaneously: imperial subjects, pilgrims, local elites, foreign observers, and communities connected to the pilgrimage routes.⁵⁴ The *mahmal* communicated hierarchy, but it also promised protection and generosity. Its authority depended on a carefully balanced combination of magnificence and service.⁵⁵

The spectacle should not be romanticized. Public ritual can naturalize unequal relationships and suppress competing claims to authority. The *mahmal* made the state's role in the Hajj appear necessary and benevolent, even as the right to control the caravan and the *kiswah* remained

⁵⁰ Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello, "Introduction: Global Gifts and the Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia," in *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1–7 and 24–27; Harriet Rudolph, "Entangled Objects and Hybrid Practices? Material Culture as a New Approach to the History of Diplomacy," in Harriet Rudolph and Gregor M. Metzger, eds., *Material Culture in Modern Diplomacy from the Fifteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 1–28.

⁵¹ Venetia Porter, ed., *Hajj: Journey to the House of God: Art from the Khalili Collection* (London: Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, 2012), relevant entries on the *kiswah* and *hizām*; Maria Sardi, "Weaving for the Hajj under the Mamluks," in Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 169–74; Duaa Mohammed Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah of the Kaaba: A Historical Study," *AZKA International Journal of Zakat & Social Finance* 3, no. 1 (2022): 126, 128–29.

⁵² Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," 195–205.

⁵³ Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," 195–205.

⁵⁴ Costas M. Constantinou, "Visual Diplomacy: Reflections on Diplomatic Spectacle and Cinematic Thinking," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 387–409, especially 387–92, 399–405.

⁵⁵ Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," 195–205.



contested.⁵⁶ Devotional soft power therefore includes a representational dimension: it makes a particular political order appear congruent with the protection of sacred tradition.

By the time the *kiswah* travelled within the *mahmal* caravans, it was already revered as the covering of the Ka'ba. The *mahmal* did not create the textile's devotional authority; it mobilized and publicly staged it. Through the caravan's movement, the *kiswah*'s sacred representation, material splendor, and institutional provenance became visible across cities and pilgrimage routes. Its portability allowed the authority associated with the Ka'ba to enter imperial space, while the organization of the procession linked that authority to the rulers, workshops, endowments, and officials responsible for its provision.⁵⁷ The *mahmal* therefore activated the *kiswah*'s devotional soft power by converting established reverence into mobile visual diplomacy and a public representation of custodianship.

The *kiswah*'s goldwork and calligraphy should likewise be understood as a sacralized visual grammar of custodianship rather than as a direct textual proclamation of Saudi sovereignty. Its Qur'anic inscriptions orient the textile toward divine authority. Contemporary Saudi custodianship is communicated indirectly through the state's organization of manufacture, replacement, presentation, and circulation. The inscriptions provide the devotional language; the institutional regime supplies the contemporary political authorship.⁵⁸

Fragments and Controlled Circulation

After ritual replacement, portions of the *kiswah* could be cut and distributed to selected recipients. These fragments were not equivalent to the complete covering. Their devotional significance could derive partly from their former placement upon the Ka'ba and, in contexts that recognize the transmission or signification of *baraka*, from that material association.⁵⁹ Their diplomatic and representational force arose through the convergence of their derivative sacred status with rarity, provenance, material quality, and controlled circulation. A fragment could therefore function simultaneously as a devotional trace, a prestigious gift, and a political representation of the Ka'ba and its custodial order.⁶⁰

This circulation altered the political geography of the *kiswah*.⁶¹ The full textile was monumental and site-specific; Fragments could travel to palaces, religious institutions, museums, and private collections, linking recipients far from Mecca to the sanctuary's material remains. Their movement linked the sanctuary to recipients far from Mecca and, when distribution was controlled by a ruler or official custodian, linked those recipients to the authority responsible for regulating access to the sacred textile.⁶²

⁵⁶ McDougall, "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Longue Durée Struggle," 1017–39; Joshua Teitelbaum, "Hashemites, Egyptians and Saudis: The Tripartite Struggle for the Pilgrimage in the Shadow of Ottoman Defeat," *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 1 (2020): 36–47.

⁵⁷ Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," 195–205; Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks*, 98–100; Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83.

⁵⁸ McDougall, "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Longue Durée Struggle," 1017–39; General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques, "The King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba Kiswah."

⁵⁹ Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 131–32; "Fragment of an Interior Kiswa Cover for the Ka'ba in Makkah," *Sharing History/Museum With No Frontiers*.

⁶⁰ Duaa Mohammed Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah of the Kaaba: A Historical Study," *AZKA International Journal of Zakat & Social Finance* 3, no. 1 (2022): 131–32; "Kiswah," *Victoria and Albert Museum*, object no. O.179-205.

⁶¹ Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 131–32; V&A, "Kiswah"; "Fragment of an Interior Kiswa Cover for the Ka'ba in Makkah," *Sharing History/Museum with No Frontiers*.

⁶² McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 1–17, 183–222; V&A, "Kiswah."



The resulting relationship could be experienced by the recipient as honor, prestige, memory, devotional attachment, or the seeking of *baraka*.⁶³ These are not equivalent responses: honor belongs primarily to the social and diplomatic register, whereas *baraka* refers to a perceived divine blessing or beneficial sacred efficacy. Yet their coexistence strengthened the gift's representational force.⁶⁴ The smoothness and sheen of the black silk, the glint of gold and silver embroidery, the density of the Qur'anic inscriptions, the fragment's rarity, and its association with the Ka'ba could make the donor's custodial authority appear legitimate, desirable, and beneficent. The recipient could therefore receive the object as a social honor while interpreting or treating it as a bearer or sign of *baraka*.⁶⁵ The fragment's material and devotional appeal helped normalize the asymmetry of the exchange, transforming a hierarchical act of recognition into an apparently voluntary and mutually affirming relationship.⁶⁶

From Imperial Provision to Saudi Control

Rivalry and institutional transition

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries altered the political conditions of *kiswah* provision. Ottoman–Wahhabi conflict, the changing political authority of the Hijaz, Egyptian claims, and the emergence of the Saudi state reshaped the relationship between Cairo, Istanbul, and Mecca. Egypt continued to send the *kiswah* into the twentieth century, but the political meaning of this arrangement became increasingly difficult to separate from competing claims over the Holy Places.⁶⁷

The *mahmal* was also subject to criticism. Reformist opponents regarded aspects of the procession as ostentatious or superstitious, and the caravan was eventually discontinued in the mid-twentieth century. The end of the *mahmal* did not eliminate the political significance of the *kiswah*; it changed the medium through which that significance was presented. The overland spectacle gave way to more concentrated forms of institutional, ceremonial, and later media visibility.⁶⁸

In 1927, King 'Abd al-'Azīz established a *kiswah* workshop in Mecca, producing a Saudi *kiswah* when no textile arrived from Egypt. The move gave the Saudi monarchy a local production capacity and enabled it to connect the manufacture of the textile directly to its authority in the Hijaz. The transition was therefore not merely technical: it introduced a Saudi production institution into a field previously dominated by the Cairo-based Dar al-Kiswa and its Egyptian administrative and artisanal networks.⁶⁹

The distinction between the two systems should not be overstated. Both relied on skilled labor, state support, sacred obligation, and claims to custodianship. The transformation concerned the political

⁶³ Josef W. Meri, "Aspects of Baraka (Blessings) and Ritual Devotion among Medieval Muslims and Jews," *Medieval Encounters* 5, no. 1 (1999): 46–69.

⁶⁴ Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, "Global Gifts," 1–7, 24–27; Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 3–18, 45–83.

⁶⁵ Josef W. Meri, "Aspects of Baraka (Blessings) and Ritual Devotion among Medieval Muslims and Jews," *Medieval Encounters* 5, no. 1 (1999): 46–69.

⁶⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, 3–18, 45–83; Marcel Hénaff, *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 1–21, 85–108.

⁶⁷ Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Longue Durée Struggle for Islam's Holiest Places," *The Historical Journal* 61, no. 4 (2018): 1017–39; Joshua Teitelbaum, "Hashemites, Egyptians and Saudis: The Tripartite Struggle for the Pilgrimage in the Shadow of Ottoman Defeat," *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 1 (2020): 36–47.

⁶⁸ Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the Longue Durée Struggle," 1017–39; William Ochsenwald, "Islam and Loyalty in the Saudi Hijaz, 1926–1939," *The Islamic Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2007): 7–12.

⁶⁹ "Section from the Belt of the Ka'ba," *Discover Islamic Art*, object no. EPM; uk; Mus22;40; Nahla Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa: Administration and Production," in Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 175–83.



geography and institutional concentration of those functions. Under the earlier system, production and finance were centered in Cairo, while transport and public procession connected the textile to the Egyptian state and the wider pilgrimage network. Under the Saudi system, production was progressively relocated to Mecca and increasingly placed under the direct authority of the state governing the Hijaz.⁷⁰

The contemporary production regime

The *kiswah* is now produced at the King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba Kiswah in Mecca. The complex organizes processes including dyeing, weaving, printing, embroidery, and assembly. Official descriptions emphasize the scale of the operation, the use of silk and cotton, and the incorporation of gold-plated silver and silver thread.⁷¹ Such descriptions present the *kiswah* as both living Islamic heritage and evidence of administrative and technical competence.

The material scale of contemporary production makes the *kiswah*'s representational force materially verifiable rather than merely rhetorical. A 2025 account reports that the annual *kiswah* required 825 kilograms of raw silk, 120 kilograms of gold thread, and 60 kilograms of silver thread plated in 24-karat gold. The report also identifies cotton lining and white cotton among the seven fabrics used in the textile's construction. It describes the completed *kiswah* and associated textile components as weighing 1,415 kilograms, comprising 54 gilded panels and 47 silk pieces embroidered with 68 Qur'anic verses. Produced over nearly eleven months by 154 skilled Saudi artisans, the *kiswah* reportedly cost SAR 25 million, equivalent to approximately US\$6.67 million at the riyal's fixed rate of SAR 3.75 to US\$1. These figures belong to a specific 2025 production account and should not be treated as a timeless technical specification. They nevertheless demonstrate that contemporary *kiswah* production involves substantial material inputs, skilled labor, administrative coordination, and specialized manufacture.⁷²

The process also depends on a large, specialized workforce. Depending on whether sources count skilled craftsmen alone or the wider technical and administrative staff of the complex, recent reports place the workforce between approximately 159 skilled workers and 222 total personnel, while other accounts refer to more than 200 artisans and specialists. The scale of this workforce indicates that the *kiswah*'s contemporary production depends on organized material infrastructure rather than symbolic representation alone.⁷³

The annual replacement of the textile is another important institutional moment. The replacement date was moved from the ninth of Dhū al-Hijjah, during the Hajj, to the first of Muḥarram. This administrative change separated replacement logistics from the most crowded phase of the pilgrimage and associated the event with the Islamic New Year. The change illustrates how ritual continuity can coexist with bureaucratic reorganization.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83; "Section from the Belt of the Ka'ba," *Discover Islamic Art; General Presidency for the Affairs of the Two Holy Mosques, materials on the King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba Kiswah*.

⁷¹ Saudi Press Agency, "How Many Stages Does the Production of the Holy Kaaba's Kiswah Pass Through?"; Saudi Press Agency, "Holy Kaaba Receives New Kiswah for the Year 1447 AH"; Presidency of State Properties, "Replacing the Covering of the Holy Kaaba."

⁷² Sakina Fatima, "1,415 Kg of Sacred Artistry: Kaaba's New Kiswah Ready for Installation," *The Siasat Daily*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.siasat.com/1415-kg-of-sacred-artistry-kaabas-new-kiswah-ready-for-installation-3238429/>.

⁷³ "Saudi Women Participate in Kiswah Changing Ceremony for the First Time," *Arab News*, July 7, 2024; Iraqi News Agency, "INA Documents the Stages of Making the Kaaba's Covering," June 13, 2024; Bernama, "Inside the Kiswah Factory: A Rare Glimpse for Global Media," June 4, 2025.

⁷⁴ "For First Time in History, Saudi Arabia Replaces Kaaba's Kiswah on Muharram 1," *Gulf News*, July 30, 2022; "Kaaba's Kiswah Replaced to Mark New Islamic Year 1447," *Siasat*, June 26, 2025.



The replacement process also produces the material basis of contemporary gifting. After removal, the old textile is cut into pieces and may be distributed to dignitaries, institutions, and organizations. The state therefore administers not only the workshop but also part of the textile's afterlife. Production, replacement, authentication, and circulation can be understood as connected stages in a broader chain of custodianship.⁷⁵

The Saudi system thus centralizes functions that had previously been distributed across Egyptian and imperial circuits. Devotional soft power is no longer projected primarily through a long-distance caravan traversing imperial territory. It is concentrated institutionally in Mecca and extended outward through official ceremonies, diplomatic gifting, institutional exhibitions, and media narratives. The spectacle has not disappeared; it has been spatially and technologically reorganized.⁷⁶

Contemporary Gifting and Heritage Display

Museum Diplomacy: Gifts to states and museums

Contemporary *kiswah* gifting demonstrates how sacred material can enter modern diplomatic relationships. In 2025, Saudi authorities reportedly presented a *kiswah* fragment to Uzbekistan's Center of Islamic Civilization. The transfer was framed as a gesture of religious and diplomatic friendship and was made at the direction of King Salman. The recipient was not simply an individual dignitary, but a national cultural institution associated with the public representation of Islamic civilization. The gift consequently operated at interpersonal, inter-state, and heritage-institutional levels.⁷⁷

A comparable example concerns the presentation of a *kiswah* piece to Egypt's New Administrative Capital Museum. The transfer was described in terms of the historically rooted relationship between Saudi Arabia and Egypt.⁷⁸ The museum setting is significant: the object is not only received as a devotional gift but also preserved and displayed as evidence of historical connection. Behind glass, the fragment's representational force does not disappear; it is recontextualized.⁷⁹ Museum visitors encounter the *kiswah* not as a functional covering but as a curated trace of the Ka'ba, now framed through labels, display design, conservation practice, and museum narrative. The textile thereby becomes part of a curated national story in which religious fellowship, bilateral memory, and institutional interpretation reinforce one another.⁸⁰

These cases also constitute instances of museum diplomacy. The museum is not a neutral container but an active intermediary that shapes how the *kiswah* is preserved, interpreted, and encountered by the public. Through conservation, cataloguing, exhibition, and curatorial framing, the museum transforms the fragment into a diplomatic object with a new audience. Museum diplomacy therefore describes the institutional work through which the *kiswah* enters a public heritage environment,⁸¹ while devotional soft power describes the attraction generated by the object's sacred association, rarity, beauty, provenance, and material value.

⁷⁵ Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 131–32; Victoria and Albert Museum, "Kiswah," object no. O.179-205.

⁷⁶ For the comparison of Egyptian and Saudi productions. McGregor, "Hajj Materials and Rites from Egypt"; Bernama, "Inside the Kiswa Factory"; Visit Saudi, "King Abdulaziz Complex for the Holy Kaaba Kiswa."

⁷⁷ Arab News, "Piece of Kaaba's Kiswah Gifted to Uzbekistan's Center."

⁷⁸ State Information Service, "Egypt Receives Part of Kabaa Kiswah to Be Displayed at NAC's Museum."

⁷⁹ Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft," 583, 585–87, 595, 602–3.

⁸⁰ Smith and Priewe, "The Global Work of Museum Diplomacy," 1–20

⁸¹ Smith and Priewe, "The Global Work of Museum Diplomacy," 1–20; Winter, "Heritage Diplomacy," 1007, 1009–11



These cases demonstrate an expansion of the diplomatic field. *Kiswah* fragments may be directed toward rulers and religious elites, but they can also be placed in museums and cultural institutions whose display practices extend and reinterpret the object's afterlife. The gift therefore continues to generate attraction beyond the original ceremony, even when its representational force is mediated by museum glass.⁸²

International organizations

In 1983, Saudi Arabia presented a curtain associated with the Ka'ba door to the United Nations headquarters, where it became a permanent display.⁸³ The object's placement in an international organization changed the context in which its meaning was encountered. It continued to signify the Ka'ba's sacred importance, but it also represented Saudi Arabia's participation in an international institutional order. The display linked sacred heritage, national identity, and the language of international cooperation.⁸⁴

The case illustrates the difference between devotional soft power and ordinary cultural representation. A national flag or diplomatic photograph can represent a state, but a *kiswah* curtain adds sacred association and a materially exceptional history. Within the UN setting, the object is simultaneously part of the Ka'ba's covering, a gift from Saudi Arabia, a sign of Islamic heritage, and an artifact in a global diplomatic environment.⁸⁵

Protocol, piety, and ambiguity

Reports that *kiswah* fragments are distributed to foreign Muslim dignitaries, mosque custodians, and selected organizations suggest that gifting is not an exceptional event but part of a recurring administrative protocol. This routinization is analytically important. Soft power does not require every gift to be accompanied by an explicit political bargain.⁸⁶ Repeated ceremonial practices can normalize a relationship between sacred custodianship and diplomatic recognition.

At the same time, routine does not equal manipulation. Recipients may value the fragment primarily as a devotional object. Officials may present it as an expression of religious fellowship rather than strategic influence. Museum staff may emphasize craftsmanship, calligraphy, or pilgrimage history rather than Saudi foreign policy. The analytical task is therefore to hold together several levels of meaning rather than reduce one to another.⁸⁷

The concept of devotional soft power is most persuasive when it identifies a capacity rather than asserting a uniform intention. Saudi Arabia's control over production and distribution gives it the ability to convert material exceptionalism and sacred representation into diplomatic recognition.

⁸² Smith and Priewe, "The Global Work of Museum Diplomacy," 1–20

⁸³ United Nations, "Kiswa, Curtain of Holy Kaaba."

⁸⁴ Natalia Grincheva, "Genealogy of Museum Diplomacy: From Gift to Franchise Diplomacies," in *Understanding Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations*, ed. Jonathan Vickery, Stuart MacDonald, and Nicholas J. Cull (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 138–47.

⁸⁵ Jeffrey Brison, Lynda Jessup, and Sarah E. K. Smith, "The Art of Diplomacy," in *Understanding Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations*, ed. Jonathan Vickery, Stuart MacDonald, and Nicholas J. Cull (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035312856.00013>. United Nations, "Kiswa, Curtain of Holy Kaaba."

⁸⁶ Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, "Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia," 1–7, 24–27; Duaa Mohammed Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah of the Kaaba: A Historical Study," *AZKA International Journal of Zakat & Social Finance* 3, no. 1 (2022): 131–32; Victoria and Albert Museum, "Kiswah," object no. O.179-205.

⁸⁷ Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, "Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia," 24–31; McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, 1–17, 183–222;



Whether that capacity produces durable goodwill depends on the recipient, the institutional setting, the political relationship, and the wider reception of Saudi custodianship. The distinction between devotional gifting and diplomatic protocol becomes especially important when kiswah-related material circulates outside transparent state or institutional channels.⁸⁸

A contested afterlife: the Epstein *kiswah* episode

A *Miami Herald* investigation by Shirsho Dasgupta, based on records released by the U.S. Department of Justice, reported that Jeffrey Epstein cultivated relationships with Saudi- and Emirati-linked figures and received Islamic textiles associated in the records with Mecca. The DOJ file includes photographs of the textiles and related documentation, providing primary evidence that kiswah-related material was present in Epstein's collection or intended for shipment to Little Saint James in 2017. The *Miami Herald* characterized the shipment as a Saudi gift, but that characterization should remain distinguished from proof of official Saudi authorization or authenticated provenance.⁸⁹

The episode must therefore be treated cautiously. The available documentation does not establish that the textiles were personally gifted by Saudi officials, that they were authenticated fragments of the Ka'ba's covering, or that Epstein possessed a formal relationship with the Saudi state. Reports distinguish among material described as having been used inside a mosque, an exterior covering, and a decorative textile not known to have been used at the Ka'ba. The objects' precise provenance and authenticity remain unresolved.

Nevertheless, the case is analytically significant. It illustrates a form of privately mediated sacred circulation that contrasts with the official gifting regimes discussed above. The DOJ photographs and associated records document kiswah-related textiles within Epstein's network, while the reporting indicates that the material was connected to a shipment to Little Saint James. The objects therefore appear to have moved through a network of private wealth, elite access, and personal intermediaries rather than through a transparent diplomatic or heritage protocol. If the objects' claimed provenance were authenticated, they would demonstrate that kiswah-related material could retain prestige after leaving the institutional structures that framed its original representational force. Even without resolving authenticity, the episode shows how alleged association with the Ka'ba could make a textile desirable within a transnational elite environment.⁹⁰

The episode therefore broadens the concept of devotional soft power while also exposing its limits. Sacred material may support state diplomacy when its production and circulation are institutionally controlled, but it may also be appropriated, commodified, or misrepresented by private actors. The distinction among diplomatic gift, elite patronage, commercial acquisition, and unauthorized circulation consequently requires further archival and provenance research. The available evidence supports neither a claim of direct Saudi state sponsorship nor the conclusion that Epstein's possession demonstrated official Saudi intimacy. It instead shows how kiswah-related material could be recruited

⁸⁸ Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 583, 585–87, 595, 602–3; Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, "Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia," 24–31.

⁸⁹ U.S. Department of Justice, *Epstein Files, Data Set 9, document EFTA00525525*, <https://www.justice.gov/epstein/files/DataSet%209/EFTA00525525.pdf>; Shirsho Dasgupta, "Epstein Offered to Tutor Saudi Crown Prince on Wall Street," *Miami Herald*, April 8, 2026.

⁹⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, *Epstein Files, Data Set 9, document EFTA00525525*; Dasgupta, "Epstein Offered to Tutor Saudi Crown Prince"; Biedermann, Gerritsen, and Riello, "Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia," 24–31.



into private networks whose purposes and ethical character differed fundamentally from public custodianship.⁹¹

Continuity and Transformation

The Ottoman and Saudi cases reveal a continuity in the material logic of custodianship. In both periods, rulers presented support for, production of, and responsibility for the *kiswah* as evidence of their relationship to the Holy Places. Technical textiles work thus became an embodied statement about responsibility, translating administrative capacity into religiously meaningful service.⁹²

The periods differ, however, in the organization of spectacle. Ottoman-Egyptian practice made the journey and public procession central: the *mahmal* carried the visual presence of imperial patronage across the pilgrimage landscape. Contemporary Saudi practice centers production, replacement, and official presentation in Mecca, while extending their visibility through official media, exhibitions, institutional displays, and diplomatic presentations rather than through a comparable overland caravan.⁹³

The periods also differ in the scale and documented destinations of gifting. Earlier distributions are documented in relation to religious dignitaries, custodians, and institutional networks.⁹⁴ Contemporary examples include national museums and public institutions, including the documented Saudi presentation of a *kiswah* fragment to Egypt's New Administrative Capital Museum. This does not necessarily mean that modern gifting is more political than earlier practice. It indicates that the diplomatic field has widened and that the fragment's afterlife is increasingly mediated by heritage institutions.⁹⁵

Finally, the two systems differ in their degree of centralization. Ottoman *kiswah* provision involved imperial authority, Cairo workshops, endowment and fiscal arrangements, pilgrimage routes, and multiple local actors. Contemporary Saudi production is organized through a state complex in Mecca and integrated into a national narrative of custodianship. Devotional soft power has therefore shifted from a more distributed imperial and Egyptian infrastructure toward a more centralized nation-state institution.⁹⁶

This comparison also clarifies the limits of analogy with sacred objects from other traditions. Portable *kiswah* fragments resemble other devotional objects in that they can travel through diplomatic and heritage networks. Yet the *kiswah* remains distinctive: its primary form is monumental and site-specific, while its fragments are secondary and mobile forms whose significance derives partly from

⁹¹ Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 583, 585–87, 595, 602–3; Dasgupta, "Epstein Offered to Tutor Saudi Crown Prince"; U.S. Department of Justice, Epstein Files.

⁹² Nahla Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa: Administration and Production," in Venetia Porter and Liana Saif, eds., *The Hajj: Collected Essays* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), 175–83; Saudi Press Agency, "How Many Stages Does the Production of the Holy Kaaba's Kiswah Pass Through?"; Saudi Press Agency, "Holy Kaaba Receives New Kiswah for the Year 1447 AH."

⁹³ Venetia Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," in Porter and Saif, *The Hajj: Collected Essays*, 195–205; Richard J. A. McGregor, "Hajj Materials and Rites from Egypt," *Khamseen: Islamic Art History Online*.

⁹⁴ Victoria and Albert Museum, "Kiswah," object no. O.179-205; State Information Service of Egypt, "Egypt Receives Part of Kaaba Kiswah"; Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 131–32.

⁹⁵ State Information Service of Egypt, "Egypt Receives Part of Kaaba Kiswah to Be Displayed at NAC's Museum," January 18, 2022; V&A, "Kiswah," object no. O.179-205; Alashari, "The Endowment Devoted to the Kiswah," 131–32; State Information Service of Egypt, "Egypt Receives Part of Kaaba Kiswah."

⁹⁶ Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83; Saudipedia, "Timeline of the King Abdulaziz Complex for the Holy Kaaba Kiswa"; Saudi Press Agency, "How Many Stages Does the Production of the Holy Kaaba's Kiswah Pass Through?"



the material and representational status of the larger textile. The comparison is therefore most useful at the level of mechanism—material exceptionalism, representational force, portability, controlled circulation, and institutional mediation—not as an assertion that different sacred traditions function identically.⁹⁷

Implications for Public Diplomacy

The kiswah case has several implications for contemporary public diplomacy.⁹⁸

First, sacred material should be treated as a substantive diplomatic medium rather than as decorative cultural property. A gift's political meaning may lie in its material qualities, provenance, ritual history, and relationship to a sacred site. Diplomatic institutions that display or transfer such objects should explain those layers rather than presenting them as generic symbols of friendship.⁹⁹

Second, custodianship can be communicated through infrastructure. Workshops, conservation facilities, archives, museums, and training programs may generate diplomatic credibility because they demonstrate sustained responsibility. The political attraction associated with the kiswah is not produced only by the finished textile; it is also produced by the visible capacity to organize and maintain its production.¹⁰⁰

Third, public diplomacy should distinguish reverence from appropriation. The diplomatic use of sacred objects can generate goodwill, but it can also provoke criticism if an object is treated as a commodity or instrumentalized without attention to religious sensitivities. Transparent provenance, appropriate conservation, and consultation with relevant religious and cultural authorities are therefore essential.¹⁰¹

Fourth, museums are not passive containers. When kiswah fragments enter national or international institutions, curators shape the narratives through which audiences encounter them. Exhibitions can encourage cross-cultural understanding, but they can also reproduce simplified national claims. Collaborative interpretation involving Saudi, Egyptian, Ottoman, and broader Islamic-art expertise would help prevent the textile's history from being reduced to a single national story.¹⁰²

Fifth, policymakers should evaluate reception rather than assume influence. A prestigious sacred gift may strengthen an existing relationship, but it cannot substitute for credible policy, equitable treatment, or sustained cooperation. Devotional soft power is a resource of attraction, not a guarantee of political outcomes. Its effects should be studied through recipient responses, media reception, institutional use, and the durability of resulting relationships.¹⁰³

Limitations and Alternative Interpretations

⁹⁷ McGregor, *Islam and the Devotional Object*, relevant chapters; Meri, "Aspects of Baraka," 46–69.

⁹⁸ Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2009), 12–16.

⁹⁹ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 21–25; Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, and Giorgio Riello, "Introduction," in *Global Gifts*, 1–7, 24–31.

¹⁰⁰ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 35–40; Sascha Priewe, "Museum Diplomacy: Parsing the Global Engagement of Museums," *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy* (Los Angeles: USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2021), 5–13, 20–29; Saudi Press Agency, "How Many Stages Does the Production of the Holy Kaaba's Kiswah Pass Through?"

¹⁰¹ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 13–16, 35–40; International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*.

¹⁰² Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 21–25; Jeffrey Brison, Lynda Jessup, and Sarah E. K. Smith, "The Art of Diplomacy," in *Understanding Cultural Diplomacy and International Cultural Relations*, ed. Jonathan Vickery, Stuart MacDonald, and Nicholas J. Cull (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), 55–70; Sascha Priewe, "Museum Diplomacy," 5–13, 20–29.

¹⁰³ Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 12–16, 35–40; Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft: Representational Force and the Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 583, 585–87, 595, 602–3.



Several limitations qualify the argument. The study does not provide a complete history of kiswah production or all forms of its circulation. Ottoman waqf registers, workshop records, court correspondence, and local accounts could reveal a more complex distribution of authority than the secondary literature permits. The contemporary evidence is also uneven. Official announcements and institutional reports document state framing particularly well, but they offer less evidence about how recipients and wider publics interpret the gifts.¹⁰⁴

The article uses relic terminology only comparatively and with caution. Removed kiswah fragments may acquire devotional significance through their association with the Ka'ba and may be described as relics or relic-like objects in Islamic, museum, or collecting contexts. They should not, however, be assimilated uncritically to relics from other religious traditions. The present argument treats them primarily as materially exceptional and portable fragments whose representational force can be organized through diplomatic and heritage circulation. Further work should examine Islamic concepts of *baraka*, sacred-place materials, sanctified textiles, and material transmission on their own terms.¹⁰⁵

Most importantly, devotional soft power is an analytical perspective, not a claim about the consciousness of every participant. Artisans may understand their work as skilled devotion; pilgrims may seek blessing; museum professionals may pursue education; officials may follow protocol; and recipients may regard a fragment as an honor or sacred trust. These meanings can coexist with diplomatic effects without being reducible to them.¹⁰⁶

Finally, Saudi control over the production of the kiswah should be analyzed alongside domestic religious nationalism and state-building. The King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba Kiswah in Mecca, established as a Saudi institution for producing the covering, places the material production of a globally significant Islamic object within the administrative framework of the Saudi state. The same institution that produces an object for religious display and international gifting also presents the Saudi state to citizens and pilgrims. External public diplomacy and internal custodianship narratives are therefore intertwined. The concept is strongest when it recognizes this overlap rather than treating every act of religious administration as foreign policy.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

The *kiswah* has been politically powerful not merely because it covers the Ka'ba, but because its sacred representation has been organized through institutions, resources, ceremonies, and controlled circulation. Under Egyptian and Ottoman rule, workshop production, state-sponsored pilgrimage organization, the *mahmal*, and ceremonial distribution transformed the textile into a mobile infrastructure of imperial custodianship. The procession made the provision of the *kiswah* publicly visible, while the distribution of sections of the retired textile extended its symbolic force through elite, religious, and institutional networks.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83; Faroghi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*, 74–91; Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 12–16, 35–40.

¹⁰⁵ Mc Gregor, "Islamic Relics," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Meri, "Aspects of Baraka," 46–69.

¹⁰⁶ Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't So Soft," 583, 585–87, 595, 602–3; Cull, *Public Diplomacy*, 12–16, 35–40.

¹⁰⁷ Saudi Press Agency, "King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba Kiswah"; James Piscatori and Amin Saikal, "Saudi 'Guardianship' of the Umma," in *Islam beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 85–133, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108666589.005>.

¹⁰⁸ Porter, "The Mahmal Revisited," 195–205; Muslu, *The Ottomans and the Mamluks*, 98–100; Nassar, "Dar al-Kiswa al-Sharifa," 175–83.; H. Fathy and H. Hosny, "The Egyptian Mahmal: A Historical Study," *Journal of Association of Arab Universities for Tourism and Hospitality* 6 (2009).



The Saudi period preserves this central logic while transforming its institutional form. Production is concentrated in Mecca through the King Abdulaziz Complex for Holy Kaaba *Kiswah*, a state-managed facility with specialized departments for weaving, dyeing, sewing, printing, embroidery, and laboratory work. The complex produces the *kiswah* annually and presents its manufacture as part of Saudi administration of the Holy Places. The *mahmal*'s overland procession has disappeared as the principal vehicle of political display, but some of its functions have been reorganized through centralized ceremony, official media, institutional visitation, exhibitions, and the controlled circulation of textile fragments.¹⁰⁹

Devotional soft power provides a framework for explaining this continuity and transformation. It shows how sacred material culture can generate attraction and political association while remaining embedded in genuine practices of piety and custodianship. It also clarifies why the *kiswah* should not be treated as a passive cultural asset. Its production binds resources, skilled labor, and administrative authority to the Holy Places; its material splendor makes custodianship visible; and its portable fragments can create relationships among sanctuaries, institutions, public authorities, and recipients. These relationships should be described as potential forms of influence rather than assumed diplomatic effects.¹¹⁰

The contribution of the *kiswah* case extends beyond the history of Islamic textiles. It demonstrates that soft-power analysis must account for material exceptionalism, representational force, portability, institutional mediation, and devotional interpretation. Political influence may be carried not only by ideas, images, or policies but also by objects whose material qualities make sacred and political relationships perceptible. Such influence is neither automatic nor uncontested. It depends on recognition, interpretation, and the credibility of the institutions that claim to steward the sacred.

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¹⁰⁹ Atmaca, "The Cover of the Holy Building," 3, 7, 9, 12.

¹¹⁰ James Piscatori and Amin Saikal, "Saudi 'Guardianship' of the Umma," in *Islam beyond Borders: The Umma in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 85–133, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108666589.005>.



Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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