

**“PURSUING GREATER INFLUENCE:
THE GCC STATES' USE OF SOFT POWER”
SUMMARY OF A
'GULD INTERNATIONAL FORUM' (GIF) WEBINAR**



13 DECEMBER 2022



OVERVIEW

The six Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have each affirmed the use of “soft power” as an essential part of their overarching national strategies.

Soft power, as outlined by American international relations scholar Joseph Nye, refers to the use of diplomatic and cultural tools in order to promote a country’s image abroad and improve its international relationships – usually contrasted with “hard power,” or the pursuit of foreign objectives via direct coercion and military force.

Each of the six Gulf states has sought to bolster their international reputations through soft power: each has pursued regional and international mediation efforts, made substantial investments in sports – perhaps best exemplified by Saudi Arabia’s LIV golf tournament and Qatar’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup – and highlighted domestic art and cultural programs.

This strategy has clearly had positive impacts for the GCC states’ international relations and their perceptions around the world. However, the use of soft power has also come with controversy. International human rights organizations have accused the six GCC states of using achievement in diplomacy, culture and sports to cover up domestic struggles with political freedoms and labour rights. In particular, the six states’ ambitious sports programs have led to accusations of “sports-washing,” or promoting sports development as a way of distracting from human rights concerns.

A webinar hosted by GIF and moderated by Professor David Des Roches, a panel of academics working on regional issues dealt with this subject and briefly examined the status of soft power in the six GCC states, looking both at its positive effects as well as some of its drawbacks.

KEY COMMENTS FROM THE PANELLISTS

1. **DR. KRISTIAN COATES ULRICHSEN** (*Scholar at Rice University and Persian Gulf specialist*)

- All eyes on the role of 'Soft Power' within the GCC is at this time focussed on Qatar. It will then shift to the UAE in the coming year with the planned international gathering on 'Climate Change'.
- The GCC will remain at the centre of attention with such events given the fact that in the next few years other key sporting events such as the convening of Football's Asian Cup will also be shared between Qatar and Saudi Arabia (KSA).
- It is a fact that over the course of the past two decades, Gulf states (having accumulated large reserves due to rising price of oil) have become a huge hub the implementation of 'Soft Power'.
- Dubai, for its part, had become such a hub starting in the 1990s with the intention of moving away from reliance on oil by way of diversification with the aim of building power and carving a special position for itself - something that was also subsequently followed by the other Gulf states.
- Having also consolidated its ties with the West, another key aspect of 'Soft Power' exploited by the Gulf states has been in the realm of diplomacy and mediation - something that Oman has specially been able to excel in.
- Today, Oman's lead in diplomacy and mediation is being replicated by UAE and KSA who, having opted for a neutral position in the Ukraine war (like all the other Gulf states), have now involved themselves in playing some kind of a potentially useful messaging role with the Kremlin.
- Equally important, Gulf states have also tried to employ 'Soft Power' in order to mend differences amongst themselves and essentially provide greater long-term protection for their own self-preservation (especially in light of speculation on the subject of US retrenchment from the region). The mending of ties between Qatar on the one hand and the UAE and KSA on the other that was assisted by the departure of Donald Trump from the political picture, is an example at hand.
- On a final note, while both Dubai and Abu Dhabi have tried to diversify away from the shadow of the KSA, post Vision 2030 developments might mean greater 'Soft Power' competition thereby necessitating a much more careful approach for the future.

2. **DR. DIANA GALEEVA** (*Researchist on Gulf issues at Oxford University*)

- Gulf states have been influenced by history as well as geography in their wish for the exercising of 'Soft Power' - e.g., historical experience of Iraq's attack on Kuwait and the vulnerabilities that were felt at the time by the other 5 states.
- Other motivating factors for reliance on 'Soft Power', have been influenced by the dynamics of bilateral relations between some of the Gulf countries especially in the aftermath of general milieu of power

vacuum in the MENA countries following the Arab Spring along with a general desire for wanting to overcome the stigma of such cliches as being randomly referred to as 'energy rich monarchies'.

- Over the years, implementation of 'Soft Power' for the GCC states can be seen in the following areas:
 - For Kuwait: Humanitarian aid, sports, mediation (e.g., recent GCC crisis with Qatar), culture (high in areas of entertainment, theatre, TV sitcoms, and finally education).
 - For Oman: Education and mediation (see slide below)
 - For Bahrain: The Bahrain Grand Prix plus certain cultural activities
 - For Qatar: Sports (the World Cup), mediation, culture and media (Al Jazeera)
 - For KSA: (Sports (purchase of Newcastle United). Media and religious 'soft power' - i.e., the annual Haj
 - For UAE: Humanitarian diplomacy. Scientific and academic as well as cultural and media diplomacy (Al Arabiya).
- In short, the Gulf states have tried to employ 'Soft Power' to project power at a global scale

Pursuing Greater Influence: The GCC States' Use of Soft Power

Oman's Soft Power:

Education (international students; sixteen university chairs globally; cultural centres, charity organisations, language centres);

Neutrality (diplomacy of good neighbourliness and non-interference in other's internal affairs);

Mediation (helped to start negotiations between the US and Iran in 2009 that eventually led to the JCPOA; Oman led calls to host peace talks between Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; Oman accepted almost half of the Guantanamo Bay prisoners released since the start of 2015)



3. PROFESSOR SIMON CHADWICK (Emlyon Business School, Paris)

- Focussing on the usage of sports for projecting 'Soft Power', reference can be made to Qatar and Abu Dhabi's purchase of football clubs such as PSG (Paris St. Germain) in France and Manchester City in the UK.
- Embarking in such activities that have led to the formation of a larger networks through the creation of the "City Football Group" that has managed to buy a series of other smaller clubs and players through 'talent identification' who are then sold or traded for profit, the UAE has tried to overcome the stigma usually directed towards the Gulf states of having an 'enterprise deficit'.
- Through football, both Qatar and UAE have been able to involve themselves in key economic activities in such faraway places as Mumbai and China (e.g., in Chengdu where an Etihad regional hub has

been created) and in Rwanda where Qatar Airways has taken a 60% stake in Rwanda airport.

- More such activities are expected follow.

4. DR. PAUL MICHAEL BRANNAGAN (*Manchester Metropolitan University, Business School*)

- The drawbacks resulting from 'Soft Power' as experienced recently by Qatar in the wake of FIFA's World Cup can have adverse effects and become potentially dangerous.
- While the World Cup has helped legitimize the sovereign independence of Qatar and help steer it clear of the shadows of the KSA, it has nonetheless subjected the country to a great deal of adverse publicity as well.
- Having spent billions of dollars on this mega event - i.e., FIFA's World Cup, the Qataris were subjected to a great deal of bad press and criticism because of their stance on such matters as 'LGBT' issues, the drinking of beer at the stadiums (given that one of main sponsors of the World Cup was Budweiser, a main beer producer) as well as their alleged inhuman treatment of the labour force used for the construction of the stadiums
- [This promoted the mediator to quote a famous Japanese proverb that states, "*the nail that sticks out gets hammered down!*"]

