The Race for Soft Power in the Gulf

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For Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, the dominant and richest among the Arab Gulf monarchies, the accumulation of soft power is central to their preparation for the expected decline in global dependence on their energy exports. While each state has its own emphases, this paper identifies the pursuit of soft power by all of them as attempts to safeguard their global importance and, thus, their national security. It offers an original and holistic examination of the soft power strategies of the three states across the media, academia, sport, culture, tourism, religious tolerance, and diplomacy. The analysis outlines how those strategies are designed to reshape the states' negative image and legitimize their values internationally, particularly within the West, thereby sidestepping external demands for changes in their internal conduct. By these means, they continually challenge Western moral superiority, which, at least in the case of Qatar, harms material Israeli interests.

Keywords: soft power, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, international relations

Introduction

Three decades after the American scholar Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power," it has transformed from a theoretical concept to a concrete policy component for players in the international system. Nye distinguished between hard power—a player's ability to influence the conduct of other players in the system by means of military force or sanctions—and soft power—embodied in a player's ability to achieve such influence through its attractiveness and persuasion. As Nye put it: "It was always important to win hearts and minds, but it's even more important in the age of global information" (Nye, 2004, p. 1).

This paper discusses the soft power strategy of the three leading and wealthiest of the six Arab monarchies in the Gulf—Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar. All three have considerable hard power in the international system, achieved since the middle of the twentieth century thanks to their status as leading exporters of fossil fuels—oil and its products and liquid natural gas. On the other hand, their military strength is negligible, while the power attached to their energy exports is declining and even faces the threat of collapse in the looming post-petroleum era, in view of the global transition to sustainable energy sources. At the same time, since the 1990s, each of these three states has increasingly allocated huge sums from their fossil fuel profits to investments and purchases across the world (inter alia by means of sovereign wealth funds or government-funded companies and agencies). While these expenditures were sometimes

perceived as an ostentatious extravagance by rulers who do not suffer from a lack of cash, a deeper examination shows that they are linked by a common denominator: the attempt to elevate the state's image and attract foreign investment and tourism—both objectives that the academic literature closely relates to soft power.

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Indeed, these objectives are also part of the internal policies of the three states, to diversify their economies away from fossil fuels. Yet, the basic assumption of this paper is that the bulk of the investments and purchases made by the Gulf states have a further, externally-oriented function in a systematic strategy to establish soft power, which has become apparent over the past decade.[1] In this paper, we claim that the soft power strategies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar serve the national security of each, above all, by securing the survival of the ruling families. Just as economic diversity is needed to preserve their internal stability in a future of declining revenues from energy exports, soft power is intended to prop up the hard power they enjoy within the global system. In particular, these three states must be sufficiently attractive and persuasive to preserve their relative ability to withstand international pressures over their conduct with respect to human rights and political freedoms.

One reason that the soft power strategy of the Gulf states deserves research attention is their rather problematic starting point in this context. According to Nye, soft power is based on three pillars: culture, political values, and foreign policy. The more these three elements in a specific country are built on universal ideas and values with which people in other countries can easily identify and accept as representative of legitimate morality, the greater that country's chances of being perceived as acceptable and attractive, thereby creating soft power. In contrast, if these three elements are based on narrow values associated with a particular society, they will probably not be attractive beyond its borders (Nye, 2004).

In the case of the Gulf states, the fossil fuel exports that shaped their societies in the twentieth century hampered their political, cultural and social development: they have preserved tribal institutions and patriarchal and hierarchical values that are unique to the Gulf and not relatable to the rest of the world; they lack a globally-recognized history or cultural contribution to the world—apart from Islam, with which their association often paints them in a negative light of conservatism, extremism, and support for terrorism. All in all, the Gulf states have assumed a reputation as backward, stagnated societies whose material success is derived simply from their fossil fuels—unpopular in their own right due to their role in the climate crisis—and the exploitation of foreign workers.

Thus, in order to establish soft power, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar must suppress this narrow and negative image as far as possible and replace it with a more attractive and inspiring one. The UAE even specified in the declaration of its soft power strategy the image it wishes to create: "Promoting the country's status as a gateway to the region, making it the regional capital of culture, art, and tourism, and establishing its reputation as a modern, tolerant country open to people from all over the world" (UAE Government, 2017). Unlike their neighbors in the Arab world, the Gulf monarchies benefit from deep pockets and relative internal stability to facilitate the long-term development and investment that can deliver the hoped-for radical change in their image.

The existing academic literature on the subject of soft power in Saudi Arabia, UAE or Qatar traditionally deals with their strategies for promoting their status in the Muslim world or

the Middle East, largely through religion (Baycar & Rakipoglu, 2022; Diwan, 2021; Mandaville, 2022; Roberts, 2019). Studies of soft power aimed at the global arena look at each of these countries separately, with most of the attention on Qatar; and those studies primarily examine the use of sporting and entertainment events as a means of creating a positive image. There is also limited reference to the use of the media, tourism, diplomacy, religious tolerance, and academic and cultural links (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023; Antwi-Boateng & Alhashmi, 2022; Bianco & Sons, 2023; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2017; Cafiero & Alexander, 2020; Dubinsky, 2024; Søyland & Moriconi, 2022).

In this paper, we wish to present a unified picture of the soft power strategy of the three countries in the global arena, particularly with respect to the Western world. We first propose a comprehensive view that examines their soft power strategies as a whole. Indeed, the three Gulf monarchies do not act as one unit—in fact, their soft power is a material part of the rivalry between them—and this paper refers to the differences in the route each of them has chosen as a way of developing their soft power, differences linked partly to their opening positions and the cards they hold. However, we argue that the objectives of each of their soft power strategies are the same. Secondly, the paper covers a wide spectrum of their areas of activity, with reference to latent aspects that have not yet attracted serious research attention, such as challenging the moral superiority of Western values. All these make it possible to establish the link that we maintain exists between the investments and acquisitions of the three Gulf monarchies and the attempt to support their status and "immunity" in the international arena by nurturing an image that radiates universal attractiveness and legitimacy.

As much as they can be empirically measured, the soft power strategies examined in this paper are proven to be effective at present. In the rating of global soft power published in early 2024 by Brand Finance, a world-leading consultancy for brand valuation, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were placed 10th, 18th and 21st, respectively. These ratings are higher than those of their Middle Eastern neighbors—including the other three less wealthy Gulf states, as well as Israel—and higher than the ratings of many Western countries.

The Soft Power Index of the Middle East, 2024

Country	Global rating	Soft Power Index
United Emirates	10	57.7
Saudi Arabia	18	56.8
Qatar	21	54.5
Israel	32	48.7

(Brand Finance, 2024)

Theoretical Argument

In order to establish the claim that three Gulf states are seeking to acquire soft power in addition to their economic power, as a way of ensuring their security and status in the international system, the test case must focus on Nye's theory of soft power, and also point to aspects in which it extends and challenges it. Firstly, Nye's theory looks at the United States and other great powers, whose geographic and demographic size greatly exceeds that of the Gulf monarchies in question: Saudi Arabia has about twenty million citizens, the UAE about a million, and tiny Qatar has fewer than 350,000 citizens. Other literature on the subject points out that small and medium-sized countries can also have soft power, and it is even particularly advantageous for them because it compensates for their inability to compete with the military and economic resources of the great powers. So soft power allows medium and small countries to "punch above their weight"—that is, to achieve a dominant international status that they could not achieve in other ways (Jepperson et al., 1996).

Secondly, as the practical means for establishing soft power, Nye points to public

diplomacy: actions initiated by countries to communicate directly with the citizens of other countries, to improve their image in global public opinion, and thereby achieve support for their policies. Rather than simple propaganda, public diplomacy refers to the creation of deep ties with the target population and participation in international discussions of topical matters. It allows countries to adapt their messages for different audiences and present their culture and values in a positive light, while being perceived as credible rather than manipulative. Nye lists some of the important tools of public diplomacy: media campaigns, educational and cultural programs, academic collaborations, and support for international projects and initiatives (Nye, 2008). All these tools, as will be seen in the following analysis, are used by the Gulf states under discussion.

The assumption of this paper, that the three Gulf countries leverage their weight in the energy market in seeking to establish soft power, suggests a close interplay between hard and soft power. Nye defines the strategy of using soft power to supplement hard power as "smart power." He argues that the ability to know where to make use of each type of power maximizes the effectiveness of each, and thus the country's ability to achieve its goals in the international system (Nye, 2004). Evidence of the relevance of the idea of smart power in the test case under discussion can be found in a paper published in 2021 by the Doha Institute, the Qatari Government's research institute, which clearly defines the country's method of operation, which to a large extent is also used by Saudi Arabia and the UAE:

> Qatar is a successful example of the exercise of soft power that small countries can enjoy with the aim of influencing international politics. Qatar's international power can be interpreted as "combined power,'" in other words, a combination of hard and soft power, which demonstrates the country's ability to make use of many tools and resources at local, regional and international levels and exploit them to achieve the influence it seeks (Al-Qahtani & Al-Thani, 2021, p. 9-10).

It cannot be ignored that in their striving for soft power, Saudi Arabia, the United Emirates and Qatar challenge Nye's concept (Nye, 2011), which doubts that authoritarian countries would be able to use soft power effectively. Nye maintains that oppression and the lack of internal freedom in authoritarian states, together with the absence of global cultural institutions—like "Hollywood" or a leading academy—would make it difficult for them to create the universal attraction enjoyed by Western countries that stand for liberal democracy. On the other hand, the later literature undermines this assumption. For example, studies of China (Shambaugh, 2013) and Russia (Dema, 2023) indicate that these authoritarian countries have manipulatively adopted Western tools such as international media outlets, NGOs, or globally-spread cultural centers (such as China's Confucius Institute) to establish soft power. By means of these platforms, they promote their image and their cultural and political values while stressing that their success was achieved without them being subject to democratic, liberal values. Moreover, those authoritarian countries frame their policies as embodying universal values, such as stability or growth and development, in a way that challenges the dominance of liberal democracy in the global consciousness, proposing a more "diverse" world order that does not necessarily rest on liberal Western principles.

Notwithstanding Nye's skepticism over the use of soft power by authoritarian states, he himself establishes a link between a state's ability to persuade others of the legitimacy of its values and its ability to withstand external pressures to change its conduct. Nye (2004)

shows how the "Asian economic miracle" (economic growth in East Asia in the second half of the twentieth century) gave the authoritarian regimes in Singapore and Malaysia the ability to withstand internal and external calls for improvements to democracy and human rights. This was helped by a narrative that the economic power and political stability of these two states allegedly rested on their local cultural identity, which should therefore not be replaced with the foreign values of the West.

This paper assumes that it is possible to apply this paradigm to the Gulf monarchies. It rests on existing research on Qatar (Al-Tamimi et al., 2023; Peterson, 2006) and Saudi Arabia (Berni, 2023) that links their international image and efforts, to their survival in the international system. It argues that Qatar, as a small state, and Saudi Arabia, as a state identified with religious conservatism and extremism, needed to prove both their ability and their credibility in order to establish their legitimacy and ensure that "they'd be taken seriously" in international affairs. The creation of a credible brand allows the countries to build the system of contacts essential for their defense in the long run—as shown, for example, by Doha when it managed to preserve its international standing during the Gulf blockade from 2017 to 2021. This paper assumes that these considerations guide all three of the Gulf states discussed.

Sources of Soft Power

The Media

The soft power pioneer in the Gulf was the Qatari television network Al-Jazeera, which shortly after its launch in 1996 became the most popular media outlet among the world's 200 million Arabic speakers, thanks to its engagement with controversial issues and its tendency to criticize the Middle East's rulers. Al-Jazeera, which is entirely funded by Qatar's energy revenues (it features barely any advertisements), serves to broadcast Doha's desired image. Over the years, it has proven its ability to control the narrative in the Arab world, and thereby enhance the power of tiny Qatar at the expense of the traditional dominant forces in the region (particularly during the Arab Spring and throughout the 2017-2021 crisis between Qatar and its neighbors).[2] In 2006, a decade after the network opened, Doha extended the success of Al-Jazeera to the global arena by launching an English-language channel, which gives it the highly valuable ability to determine the way in which the Middle East and the Muslim world are presented to dozens of millions of viewers, and thereby challenge the way they are covered by the western media (Antwi-Boateng, 2013).

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Quickly understanding the power of social media, the next step for Qatar at the start of the previous decade was to introduce AJ+, Al-Jazeera's social media platform in English, French and Spanish. AJ+ engages in public discourse in the West, dealing with topics that concern Gen Y and Gen Z, such as socio-economic gaps, human rights and the climate crisis, with a particular emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and racial tensions in the United States (Fipp, 2017). It is an epitome of Qatari manipulation that also finds expression in academia: fanning the flames and pointing the spotlight at issues that stir controversy, sentiments and historical resentments over injustice, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression; it champions human rights and equality—which Qatar itself does not observe—while exploiting freedom of speech in the West, which does not exist in Qatar.

Similarly, Qatar funds (though it is not officially identified with) the London-based

English media platforms Middle East Eye and Middle East Monitor, which cover human rights issues in the Middle East with an agenda emphasizing the moral weakness of the West and its historical and ongoing crimes against the region's peoples (Cherkaoui, 2018). With its intensive focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Qatari Western-oriented media praises the morality of Muslim support for the Palestinians compared to the injustice of Western support for Israel. These narratives promoted by Doha among the young, intellectual target audience highlight the hypocrisy of Western countries in lecturing Muslim countries, including Qatar, on equality and human rights. As a by-product, they cast Israel in a particularly negative light, endangering its legitimacy among younger Western audiences.

In this practice, Qatar is seemingly unique among the Gulf states since Saudi Arabia and the UAE focus their efforts in the media on the Arab discourse. Yet, noteworthy is the Dubai Media City, an Emirati venture that offers international media companies cutting-edge facilities, tax breaks and exemption from local restrictions on freedom of speech. Since its launch in 2000, a whole string of global media and technology giants have opened offices in the complex, including Reuters, CNN, the BBC, and Google. By this means, the UAE ensures that corporations with the power to disseminate information worldwide receive a positive, open and polished impression of the authoritarian state (Al-Ghoul & Esmail, 2024; Hilotin, 2020). Ultimately, both Qatar and the UAE are harnessing the power of the media and new media in particular to improve their place in international discourse, not by means of simple propaganda but by using sophisticated manipulations to bring about a deep change in the way their policies and cultures are presented and perceived in the world.

Academia and Research

Higher education is at the heart of the theory of soft power. Joseph Nye attributes the success of the United States in spreading liberal democracy over the globe to the dominance of the American academy: Exchanges of students and knowledge between the United States and its colleagues in the world exposed the latter to the prosperity, superiority and justice of the American way; the fact that the world's political, economic and cultural elites acquire their education in American universities brought the values and policies taught in those universities to a position of dominance in their countries of origin (Nye, 2004). Paradoxically, the American academy in recent years has found itself serving the soft power of Gulf states that challenge the superiority and justice of the West.

The subject of Gulf funding for Western universities, mainly in the United States but also to a lesser extent in Europe, has attracted special attention following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, given Qatar's funding of Hamas and the pro-Palestinian demonstrations on campuses against the war in Gaza. But this is far from a new phenomenon: data from the US Department of Education show that the rate of donations from government sources in the Gulf monarchies to academic institutions in the United States have increased hugely since the start of this century, beginning soon after the previous event that stained their reputation, the attack of September 11, 2001. Qatar heads the list with a donation of some 4.7 billion dollars to American universities over this period; in the years 2012-2018, almost a quarter of all foreign donations to American universities came from the six Gulf states (more than all the European Union countries and six times the Chinese contribution), in addition to amounts funneled through channels that are difficult to track, such as research grants awarded directly to students and scholars. In Britain, where there is less transparency over donations, it is known that in the period 2000-2018, Saudi Arabia donated almost forty million dollars to Oxford University alone, with half of that amount going to establish a center for Islamic studies (Arnold, 2022; England & Kerr, 2018).

While both the Gulf states and the universities insist that their cooperation is for the sole purpose of academic excellence, it is safe to assume that the sums come with conditions or at least hidden motives. Firstly, the ruling elites of the Gulf wish to be associated with the global intellectual elite as a means of normalizing their countries in high places. Secondly, they want to influence the way their countries and the Arab and Muslim world in general are presented in studies: in some institutions, the Gulf's funding has led to the introduction of Gulf studies into the curriculum for the first time (as this area has traditionally been sidelined on the grounds of a lack of cultural and historical depth), and individual study grants are often contingent on a link between the research subject and the donor country. It can be assumed that the economic dependency of institutions and schools on funding from the Gulf states limits the criticisms they can voice regarding those states and affects how the Arab and Muslim world is presented in the curriculum.

The flagship of Gulf investment in Western academies is the establishment of branches of some of the most prestigious universities, such as Georgetown, New York University and the Sorbonne, in the UAE and Qatar, in return for their donations. The parent universities manage student exchange programs and joint degrees with the Gulf campuses, and students come from all over the world for a semester or degree studies. The universities justify their operation in authoritarian countries—which have no freedom of expression beyond the campus—by asserting that the Western academic spirit will strengthen liberal values in the Gulf (Arnold, 2022; England & Kerr, 2018). However, it is clear that the Qatari and the Emirate rulers seek influence in the opposite direction: the hosting of international students in their countries is made with the hope that when these students eventually take their place in the ranks of influential positions in their home countries, their attitude to the Gulf states will be tolerant and sympathetic (Antwi-Boateng, 2013). The UAE even explicitly mentions "scientific and academic diplomacy" in its soft power strategy, as part of the measures intended to create a positive global image for the country (UAE Government, 2017).

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Further, the Gulf states' funding of academic causes in the West might have a far wider effect. Its critics commonly allege—particularly in the context of Qatar—that it leads to the promotion of anti-western and anti-Israeli ideas in the syllabuses, as well as a conciliatory attitude to radical Islam and terrorism, eventually contributing to the evident growth of antisemitism on campuses (Fenton-Harvey, 2019; Rosen, 2023). While such a causal link is not proven, it cannot be denied that progressive approaches such as post-colonialism, which challenge Western hegemony, have risen to dominance in faculties of social science and humanities in elite universities in tandem with the funding they receive from the Gulf. It is not inconceivable that the decision by institutions, departments and scholars to receive this generous funding has contributed to the reinforcement of this scholarly trend, which places the Arab and Muslim world on the "good" side in the dichotomization between oppressor and oppressed, against the white West which is blamed for all the ills of the Global South (Nair, 2017). The stormy 2023-2024 pro-Palestinian encampments on the campuses in the United States and Europe are evidently inspired by these approaches, where the leading groups frame the war in Gaza as part of global, colonialist oppression and injustice that is allegedly inherent in the Western culture (and even in curriculum studied in the universities themselves); the Qatari media empire covers these demonstrations in an intensive and particularly sympathetic way, backing up their anti-western approach and

denouncing their alleged stifling by the local governments and institutions. Here, too, the narrative indirectly plays into the hands of the Gulf states by undermining the West's ethical and moral superiority (Berrien, 2024; Shareef, 2024; Ullah, 2024).

The Gulf states are, therefore, using the existing framework of Western academia to question the latter's own conventions. Their obsessive preoccupation with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the goal itself but an effective means to gently bend the views of future elites in their favor. The framing given to the Palestinian issue—in which Qatar is the focus because of its links to Hamas, although it is quite likely that the other Gulf states also support it—poses a significant challenge to Israel's legitimacy in the eyes of future Western elites.

The influence of the Gulf states on the Western research discourse does not end in the universities but has also entered, over the past decade, the realm of think tanks. First, they established their own ones: Qatar founded the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE jointly founded the Arab Gulf states Institute in Washington (AGSIW); both based in Washington DC, the global hub of think tanks, and bring together Arab and Western researchers to publish analyses in Arabic and English on the Middle East and its relations with the United States. These institutions imbue the global research discourse with a positive attitude toward the policies of Qatar or of Saudi Arabia and the UAE (the differences were marked, for example, during the Blockade on Qatar or the matter of the Abraham Accords). But this is just a secondary move in the efforts by the Gulf states to establish an influence "inside the Beltway," that is, the inner circle of policymakers in the American capital: the main thrust is their donation of millions of dollars to established research and lobbying institutes with a reputation for influence on policymakers in the United States and worldwide, inter alia, over issues relating to policy in the Middle East. Almost all of the leading institutes have received donations from at least one of the three states, including the Brookings Institute, the Rand Corporation, the International Crisis Group, the Atlantic Council, the Middle East Institute (MEI), Foreign Policy magazine, and others. Some have opened offices in Doha, and many of their researchers take part every year in the Doha Forum, which hosts political and security figures to discuss topical issues (Grim, 2017; Khatri, 2013; Lipton et al., 2014; Pecquet, 2015; Rosen, 2023).

While the said institutions deny that their ties to the Gulf states are contingent upon granting the donor countries special treatment in their publication (and some have even ended those following such criticism), whatever the case, the sponsorship of such prestigious institutions aims to identify the Gulf states, in the eyes of policymakers and in the intellectual circles influenced by these institutions, with their values and agendas: the promotion of peace, stability, economic development and—paradoxically—liberalism and democracy. Here, too, the interests of the Gulf states may clash with those of Israel and pose a risk to its security and regional interests.

Sport

While higher education and research appeal to the intellectual elites, sport is the way for the Gulf states to reach the hearts of the masses. The name Qatar became famous globally when the tiny principality hosted the football World Cup in 2022 (Saudi Arabia is expected to follow suit and host this event in 2034). The World Cup is just one of a whole series of prestigious international sporting events held in the Gulf in recent years—in return for generous payment from the local governments—in popular branches such as racing, golf and wrestling. The ultimate prize will be the 2036 Olympic Games, which both the Qataris and the Saudis are vying to host (Corruzzi, 2013; Goddard, 2022; Morse & Lewis, 2022; Sean, 2022). But the focus is on football—a highly popular sport in the Gulf and in the whole world. The Gulf rulers have

identified the appeal of football and they are prepared to invest a fortune exploiting it for their own benefit: over the past two decades, the three countries discussed here have spent huge amounts on the acquisition of major clubs in England, France and Spain; on signing agreements with prestigious teams and leagues in Europe, such as providing sponsorship and hosting the clubs' games and football academies; and on importing leading players to play in the fairly unknown local football leagues, or to publicize their tourism and sport (Carosella, 2022; Kessous, 2011; Quinn, 2021; Romano, 2022).

The Gulf investments in football involve record-breaking sums that attract sensational attention, such as featuring the logo of the Qatari national airline on the shirts of the Spanish club Barcelona (which has historically avoided advertising sponsors on its uniform) for the record amount of 30 million euros annually, or a move that astounded the world of football—the 2022-2023 signings of Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema and Neymar by Saudi Arabian teams for hundreds of millions of dollars per season (Romano, 2022; Weinberg, 2017). These actions have aroused huge excitement among football fans in the Gulf and the entire Middle East, and naturally stimulated global interest in the three Gulf states.

"Football serves a similar function to Hollywood. Sport, like movies, is very popular at all levels of society. Just like the world learned to love America through Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe, so the world will learn about Qatar through Paris Saint Germain" (Corruzzi, 2013). The investment in sport provides the Gulf monarchies with "bread and circuses" for the local population, by bolstering national pride and the legitimacy of the ruling family at home, but also helps to improve their image and presence in the international arena and among new audiences worldwide. The picture of footballer Lionel Messi draped in a traditional Qatari robe (Bisht) while brandishing the world cup symbolizes the strive of the Gulf states to identify themselves with sports culture—an exclusive stature that is reserved for very few countries.

Due to the extraordinary popularity of sport, its use by the Gulf states to improve their image has attracted more international criticism than other fields and is contemptuously referred to as "sportswashing." In some cases, it has even become a double-edged sword by drawing unwanted public attention to negative aspects of these countries, such as the questions that were asked about the Qatari treatment of foreign workers following the World Cup, or Saudi conduct of the war in Yemen, issues that made headlines in England as part of the public's opposition to the acquisition of local football clubs by Saudi Arabia (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2017; Dorsey, 2024).

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Religious Tolerance

In a sense, Islam is the oldest source of soft power in the Gulf. The Saudi Royal House has always based its legitimacy on its status as "the custodian of the two holy sites of Islam" by funding a widespread network of religious scholars and colleges ("madrassas") throughout the Muslim world to preach the strict religious doctrine— Wahhabism—until recently espoused by the monarchy as the Islamic ideal. Qatar, by contrast, provides hosting and financial and media support for elements of political Islam—from the Muslim Brotherhood, which is popular and represented all over the region and the world, to extremist Jihadi elements—as a source of a more public-level support across the Muslim world (Mandaville, 2022; Salman, 2021). The effect of these practices is therefore limited to a Muslim audience; moreover, they

arouse antagonism in the rest of the world because they associate the Gulf states with extreme Islam and terrorism (particularly since the September 11, 2001 attacks, whose perpetrators were educated in Saudi religious networks) and in general with violence and instability in the region. In particular, the global resonance of the atrocities committed by the Islamic State (ISIS) in the previous decade once again, rightly or wrongly, tarnished the Gulf states as the parties responsible for promoting extreme Islam. To a large extent, this was the catalyst for the obvious efforts by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar to convey to the world at large a completely different image of the Islam they espouse.

The message conveyed by the new narrative is that the accepted identification of the Gulf states with extreme Islam derives from a mistaken stereotype, or at most an outdated historical anomaly.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have promoted high-profile ventures of religious tolerance. For the Saudis, this is an aspect of the far-reaching reforms introduced by the Crown Prince and acting ruler Mohammed bin Salman since 2017, with the purpose of renouncing Wahhabism in favor of moderate Islam and Saudi nationalism; as much as these reforms are principally internal, they also include projecting to the world the "other Saudi Arabia" in religious terms. For example, one of the major Saudi-run preaching networks, the World Muslim League, was rebranded as promoting interfaith dialogue: in 2020, its Secretary-General, Sheikh Muhammed al-Issa, paid a widely covered visit to Auschwitz alongside rabbis; in 2022, it organized the Riyadh Forum for World Religious Leaders, a historical gathering of Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist clerics.

The image of the UAE is less problematic in this context: its strategy plays on the existence of a large population of non-Muslim foreign residents within the state so that it can describe itself as a beacon of tolerance and cultural-religious pluralism in the region. A Government Ministry dedicated to tolerance, which was set up in 2016, arranges a range of activities that are said to promote harmony, understanding and knowledge between the various religious communities, accompanied by media campaigns; the historic visit of Pope Francis in 2016, the first papal visit to the Gulf, was exploited to show the world the peaceful lives of the Christian foreign workers in the country—something quite extraordinary in the contemporary Muslim world; a year later, normalization with Israel was marketed to the world as Jewish-Muslim reconciliation under the name the Abraham Accords, accompanied by formal recognition of the Jewish community in the UAE and the establishment in Abu Dhabi of the House of the Family of Abraham—a complex containing a mosque, a synagogue and a church. A magnificent Hindu temple was also constructed in the Emirates capital for the large community of Indian expats and inaugurated with the participation of the president of the world's largest country (Winter & Guzansky, 2020; Monier, 2024; Hoffman, 2023).

Qatar, on the other hand, uses its media power in the Western world (as specified above) to change the narrative regarding the political Islamic groups it supports: Qatari media platforms portray the Muslim Brotherhood as representatives of moderate Islam who are fighting for democracy against oppressive regimes—a claim that appeals to liberals in the West; other organizations supported by Qatar, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan and of course Hamas, are also shown in a positive, conciliatory light (Cherkaoui, 2014; Quitaz, 2024).

Thus, the Gulf states are not renouncing their image as promoters of Islam but rather seeking to turn this into virtue through a narrative claiming that "'their"' Islam supports peace, tolerance, multi-culturalism, and freedom. The new narrative, in effect, maintains that these values are not the sole preserve of Western liberalism, but are also an important component

of Islam and the national identity of the Gulf monarchies. The message conveyed by the new narrative is that the accepted identification of the Gulf states with extreme Islam derives from a mistaken stereotype, or at most an outdated historical anomaly. This manipulation supports the image that the Gulf rulers seek to acquire for themselves as respecting the values of equality, peace and prosperity for all.

Tourism, Culture and Art

Tourism is a sector on which the Gulf states pin great hopes as a tool for diversifying their economies, and it also plays an essential role in their soft power strategies. Large-scale events such as festivals, concerts and sporting competitions, or the World Expo (held in Dubai in 2022 and planned for Saudi Arabia in 2030) join iconic monuments and grandiose attractions—all designed to make the Gulf monarchies attractive destinations for shopping, business and even residence for people from all over the world, and more than that—to tell "success stories" about the countries and transform their image in the eyes of visitors.

First and foremost is the city of Dubai, which has undergone rapid development since the begining of this century, and whose skyline with the world's tallest tower, the Burj Khalifa, has become the hallmark of the UAE, if not of the whole Gulf. What was a desert oasis until just a few decades ago is now the fourth most popular tourist destination in the world, with almost 17 million visitors every year (just behind Paris and London), with the world's busiest international airport (First Group, n.d.). Leveraging the flow of visitors that is attracted by the country's modernity and innovation, the UAE incorporated in the tourist route elements of the values and heritage to which the Emirates supposedly owe their success. The most prominent example is the Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi: although it was actually built in the 1990s, it appears to have emerged from the pages of *One Thousand and One Nights* and is an icon on Instagram—based on visitor ratings on Tripadvisor, it is more popular than the Taj Mahal (Abu Dhabi Media Office, 2024). This splendid building links the UAE to the flourishing Muslim culture of the Middle Ages, and the signs adorning the complex explain to the crowds that the UAE is guided by its universal values of tolerance and wisdom. Nor should visitors to the Emirati capital miss the magnificent People's Palace (Qasr al Watan), which is free to enter and displays exhibits celebrating the legacy and wisdom of the ruling family, or the structure of the National Museum that is currently being built—in the shape of falcon's wings (the bird that accompanied the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula in their wanderings)—both designed to show that the country had a rich history prior to the discovery of oil.

So far, the Emirates is the only one to record a significant achievement in the field of tourism, although Saudi Arabia (which until 2019 was closed to tourists, apart from Muslim pilgrims) is seeking to catch up via several ventures: first, numerous theatrical performances, parties, exhibitions and festivals are organized in Saudi cities, some with international artists of the first rank (such as Ed Sheeran, Ariana Grande, David Guetta and Eminem); their initial purpose is to serve as bread and circuses for young Saudis, but they are also a means of rebranding the image of this conservative country and "normalizing" it as a legitimate destination on the global cultural map. Second, the Red Sea Project sprawling over the Kingdom's unspoiled beaches and islands will offer, by the end of this decade, dozens of pastoral vacation resorts on an area larger than the State of Israel (without the conservative restrictions on alcohol and revealing bathing costumes); third, the renovation and marketing of the ancient Nabatean city of Al-Ula in the heart of the Saudi desert are based on the hope that its preserved stone monuments will attract tourists just like its counterpart Petra in Jordan (Arab News, 2024; Denisyuk, 2024; Hodgetts, 2024).

Another feature of the development of tourism is the surge in the construction of

museums in the three Gulf states and their investment in art. In 2017 Abu Dhabi became home to a branch of the famous Parisian museum, the Louvre, which sent some of its artworks to the Gulf in return for a generous Emirati investment; an extension of the Guggenheim Museum, larger than the original in New York, is currently under construction nearby. The millions of tourists who came to Qatar for the World Cup were also invited to visit the Doha Biennial being held at that time—an exhibition of contemporary art rivaling its counterparts in the West. Further, the Gulf states exploit their contacts with art institutions to promote their own art and heritage: next to its famous Museum of Islam, Doha has opened the Wusum Museum—named for tribal symbols that were in use throughout the history of the Arabian peninsula—displaying art from the Gulf region, with the focus on its desert and tribal environment. On the other hand, as part of the collaboration between Saudi Arabia and the Louvre, the museum in Paris featured an exhibition titled "Saudi Heritage," which displayed—in a way that must certainly have surprised visitors—the remains of pagan statues discovered in the Saudi desert (Ammagui, 2024; Gronlund, 2024; Proctor, 2024, The Star, 2022).

The change in image sought by the Gulf states is therefore directed also to tourists. In the eyes of the growing crowds of visitors, the rulers wish to replace the picture of a barren desert and conservative societies with skyscrapers, coral reefs and museums. Further, they want to show that their countries had a thriving local cultural heritage way before the arrival of oil wealth, with ancient historical remains that are reminiscent of those in other areas of the world, and that their governments are open to culture and art, and invest in their enrichment (while, in practice, they considerably restrict their subjects' freedom of expression).

Constructive Diplomacy

One of the first fields used by the Gulf monarchies to leverage their resources as a means of positioning their global image was diplomatic activity. Beginning in the early 1990s, they began to establish a whole range of humanitarian governmental and semi-governmental agencies to organize the provision of humanitarian aid worth billions of dollars (in the form of food distribution, search and rescue, or medical aid) to needy countries and regions, first in the Arab and Muslim world, and later in other places around the globe. The donations of these three states are defined as unconditional and on a global scale: according to data from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over the past decade, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have been listed among the world's top ten donor countries (Elkahlout & Milton, 2023). In this way, they broadcast to the world, and particularly to governmental and diplomatic circles, foreign policy and political values that are focused on development, prosperity and peace, thus setting themselves apart from the rest of the Arab and Muslim world, which is usually the recipient of aid and identified with weakness and wars. This is in line with Nye's theory, which deems foreign policy and political values that are generally perceived as legitimate and ethical to be an effective source of soft power.

As a response to any remaining skepticism, mainly in the West, about the good faith and sincerity of their ambitions for global development, the Gulf states take an active role in diplomatic action on one of the most painful issues for their image as the producers of polluting energy—the climate crisis. The UAE is home to the headquarters of the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and in 2023 hosted the annual UN Conference on Climate Change (COP28). Saudi Arabia and Qatar are founding members of the Net-Zero Producers Forum, which brings together energy producers such as the United States, Canada and Norway, to discuss the reduction of toxic gas emissions. Moreover, in 2021 at a conference in Riyadh, the Saudi King launched the Middle East Green Initiative (MGI), where countries from the region

discuss programs to mitigate climate change. In response to criticisms that these moves are cynical, when coming from countries that have become wealthy on the export of polluting fuels and are considered to be the world's biggest polluters (per head), the Gulf states claim that their arid desert environment means they are the first to be harmed by the climate crisis, and it is therefore in their interest to play a leading role in the struggle on behalf of the whole world (Shafi, 2021).

Conclusions

The assembly of high profile investments and acquisitions by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar in recent decades points to a coherent pattern of action to enhance their global visibility and to gain control over the way their countries appeared in the discourse throughout the world. In this way the three Gulf powerhouses hope to project—in public opinion and among decision makers—a positive and attractive image based on universally accepted political and cultural values, while blurring or concealing any negative aspects. In addition, the narrative promoted by the monarchies through large numbers of ventures challenges the cultural hegemony of traditional sources of power, firstly in the Arab and Muslim world, and more ambitiously, also in the global arena. Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Doha wish to remove the skepticism and scorn that generally characterize how they are perceived and prove that they are neither ethically nor culturally inferior to other countries, particularly in the Western world, whose liberal democratic values profoundly contradict their own character.

All these elements combine to form what can be seen as a preventive move by the ruling families in these three Gulf states against existing and future demands for internal changes to adapt to external ethical criteria. With the help of their fossil fuels revenues, they have become involved at the highest level in every field of interest with a global presence—sport, culture, academia. These are most likely strategic moves designed to create a global reputation that will 'protect' them: when faced with a country that serves as an economic hub and hosts branches of Georgetown University or the Louvre Museum, it is very difficult to isolate it politically, impose sanctions on it, or even attack it militarily.

The three Gulf monarchies are fostering their soft power through the strategic adoption of the values of Western liberalism, which are presented as inherent to Islam and the local culture, while at the same time, in the case of Qatar, challenging Western culture by stressing the "hypocrisy" of western demands for changes in the Arab and Muslim world. In the end, the Gulf states are promoting in the global arena values and qualities that they themselves do not practice: countries without a free press become a global media hub; countries without freedom of expression host the world's academic and cultural elite; countries with the highest per capita emissions in the world are playing a leading role in the struggle against climate change; countries with a structural social hierarchy, most of whose inhabitants do not have citizenship, take a stance against racism and discrimination; and last but not least, countries without much political freedom wave the banner of tolerance and pluralism. These contrasts are evidence of the wide-ranging ambitions of the Saudi, Qatari and Emirati leaderships, but also of the challenges they face in their desire to achieve soft power, as well as the risk that their entry into the global spotlight could achieve the opposite result of damaging their reputations and their credibility.

It is important to maintain a sense of proportion when examining the effectiveness of these soft power strategies. There is no doubt that the three Gulf states have bought themselves a place in fields affecting people all over the world. On the other hand, it is hard to make a precise assessment of the extent to which their power in the international system,

if any, derives from their attractiveness and persuasiveness, and how much from their status as suppliers of the energy on which the world still depends.

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Notes

1 In 2017, the UAE announced the launch of a governmental Soft Power Council to be responsible for national strategy on this matter (UAE Government, 2017). The existence and main points of the national soft power strategy of Qatar were mentioned in an article published in 2021 by the Qatari, state-run Doha Institute (Al Qahtani & Al-Thani, 2021). Saudi Arabia has not announced that soft power is an explicit objective, but it is embodied to a large extent in the Saudi Vision 2030 for the Kingdom's future, which was presented in 2016 and includes items that echo the soft power strategies of the UAE and Qatar (Saudi Vision 2030, n.d.).

2 On the significant influence of al-Jazeera on the political discourse in the Arab world, particularly around the events of the Arab Spring, see Abdelmoula, 2015; Cherribi, 2017.