

# SOFT POWER POLICY IN THE GULF ARAB STATES AND ARMENIA IN THAT CONTEXT

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DOI: 10.54503/1829-4618-2022.2(16)-126

## **Abstract**

States around the world employ various tactics to ensure their security, attract investments and spread their influence. Soft power is one of the tools widely applied by governments worldwide. The Arab states of the Persian Gulf region are not an exception as they widely use that tool to reach their goals. This article discusses certain features and evolution of carrying out soft power policies by those states. It also represents how soft power is used in the context of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Armenia.

**Keywords:** *Soft power, Armenia, Gulf region, construction, humanitarian aid, sports, technologies*

## **Soft power and its advantages over hard power**

Any state in the world, be it a superpower or a state with more modest capabilities, has the primary and main task of ensuring its own security. This is a process that requires constant efforts and new solutions, the failure of which leads to disorganisation of public life, deterioration of living standards, interventions by other states and other negative consequences.

States use various tools and spend huge amounts of money to ensure their security. The main components of security are the armed forces, law enforcement structures, economic capabilities, formation of alliances with other countries, etc. One of the levels that provide security is the reputation and authority of a given country. Any state strives to increase and spread its influence in the world and thereby become attractive to others. This is known as soft power policy. According to the accepted definition, it is a non-coercive means of achieving its goals in the international arena.<sup>1</sup>

If hard power policy presumes the use of material resources, more direct and coercive methods, including threats, soft power achieves the same goal through various qualities and policies that arouse sympathy among other countries and peoples.<sup>2</sup> Hard power forcibly makes other states do what they would not otherwise do, while soft power persuades them to voluntarily do what they would like to do.

Soft power is therefore less conflict-causing than coercive methods, as well as less risky and costly. One of the reasons for the growing popularity of soft power is the difficulty of achieving the goal through hard power and military operations. Currently,

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<sup>1</sup> Nye 2017: 1

<sup>2</sup> Gallarotti 2011: 28

there is a tendency that the use of hard power weakens the given country more in the international arena and may lead to undesirable consequences. For example, it can lead to the fact that it will weaken the ability of the given state to attract visitors and investments. The use of soft power can pursue different goals: improving the external security environment by providing an attractive image, gaining the support of other countries for its own foreign and security policy, influencing the preferences of other countries, maintaining unity within the country, ensuring the internal support of the country's leader or ruling power.<sup>3</sup>

Joseph Nye and other researchers point out that the concept of attractiveness of any state largely depends on the useful application of intangible resources. Culture, way of life and diplomacy are able to legitimise the power and politics of the state in the eyes of others. Although the use of hard power may contribute to the conquests, one under the influence of hard power only temporarily capitulates. In such cases, the defeated country will try to liberate itself primarily through the promotion of its own culture, or it will turn to another country that will offer more than occupation. This also means that in the long term, the policy of soft power is more preferable in terms of achieving the goals.

According to Nye, the internal source of soft power is how the given nation manifests itself within the country: it can improve his reputation and give legitimacy to actions, which in turn contributes to the achievement of foreign policy goals. Internal sources can be divided into two groups: power inherent in the culture of a given country and power inherent in political institutions

Moreover, the political system provides, for example, democracy, pluralism, constitutionalism, and the cultural system is created by raising the quality of life, the attractiveness of the lifestyle, which causes a desire to be copied among other nations.

### **Manifestations of soft power in the Arab countries of the Gulf**

The Arab countries of the Persian Gulf: Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, became independent in the 1950s-1970s. These countries are small in terms of territory and population, significantly inferior to their neighboring countries, which have always had ambitions towards them. Another feature of these countries is that, with the exception of Oman, the majority of the population is foreigners.

Thus, the mentioned countries entered the arena of international relations with small opportunities: population, territory, without traditions of independent statehood, but with rich oil and gas reserves, which became the only source of income and well-being of these countries. These countries could not solve the issue of ensuring their security without powerful allies, such as the United States. At the same time, the "void" -

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<sup>3</sup> Lee 2009: 207-208

either geographically, politically or economically - could not offer sympathy and attraction in other countries.

Meanwhile, according to the Brandfinance consulting organization's annual index, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are among the leading countries in the world in terms of soft power.<sup>4</sup> This index is formed by combining a number of components, such as ease of doing business, having a strong and stable economy, influence in international relations, neighborly relations with other countries, support from other countries, education and science, etc.

The Arab countries of the Gulf have adopted a number of strategies, visions for the next 10, 20, 30 years, established departments, the details of which I will not go into, but I will try to focus on how these countries are trying to brand themselves.

The construction of the good reputation of the state in the international arena is carried out in different spheres, depending on the financial possibilities and ambitions. There are a number of peculiarities that are worth mentioning. Based on the monarchical nature of the state system, the Arab countries of the Gulf cannot promote democracy, political diversity, pluralism, the values of the liberal world, and cannot offer a culture of mass consumption because of religious, conservative factors, and cultural peculiarities.

Instead, these countries emphasise the strength and reliability of the state, the tolerance and solidarity of cultures, and the ideas of protecting the interests of the Islamic world or the Arab world. In particular, a good indicator of the vitality of the state system was the response to the coronavirus pandemic and the quick organisation of the vaccination process.

In foreign relations, the main "trademark" of the Gulf countries is mediation for resolving conflicts. Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, Qatar have made successful attempts to demonstrate their mediation abilities. Oman, Qatar offered platforms during the US-Iran negotiations on the nuclear deal, Qatar is a mediator on the Afghan issue, Kuwait carried out a mediation mission to resolve the issues that arose in 2017 between Qatar and a number of Arab countries.

These countries are also trying to find areas where they can convert their accumulated financial resources into other types of capabilities. Below we will discuss one of the many tools aimed at increasing the country's reputation. In this sense, there is a certain evolutionary similarity in the actions of the Gulf countries. If we divide it into stages, then the first stage is the implementation of construction projects, the second stage is the projects in sports, and the third stage, which the countries of the region are just entering, is science and technology.

Among them, we can mention the implementation of large construction projects by renowned architects and construction companies. As of 2022, 19 of the world's 100

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<sup>4</sup> Global Soft Power Index 2022: USA bounces back better to top of nation brand ranking, 15.03.2022  
<https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/global-soft-power-index-2022-usa-bounces-back-better-to-top-of-nation-brand-ranking>

tallest buildings, or about 20%, are located in the Arab Gulf countries, mainly in the UAE.<sup>5</sup>

The first official use of the term *soft power* in the UAE was in 2017, when the Soft Power Council was established. It was created to develop a soft power strategy for the UAE. The UAE's soft power strategy covers the following key areas: humanitarian diplomacy, scientific and academic diplomacy, people's diplomacy, cultural and media diplomacy, economic diplomacy.<sup>6</sup>

A simple search in the online Emirati media will offer hundreds of articles about Emirati soft power narrating about astonishing successes, transforming the UAE into a soft power superpower. All this, of course, is accompanied by the use of various epithets, which aim to create an image of a solid and strong state. One such epithet is, for example, "Sparta of the Middle East". Emirati soft power propaganda is not limited to media coverage. In recent years, dozens of articles have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals and theses have been defended, in many cases by UAE nationals, devoted to the study of soft power politics.

On the other hand, it should be noted that there is also a sceptical attitude towards the promotion of soft power branding by the Gulf countries in terms of tools and results. For example, Stephen Hertog notes: "The oil monarchies of the Gulf use their oil wealth to buy attributes of 'good citizenship' and 'progressiveness' in the international arena by implementing expensive political projects. Those projects - international universities, museums, green cities, internet cities, etc. - are exclusively aimed at an outside audience."<sup>7</sup>

One of the manifestations of the soft power of the Gulf countries is humanitarian support and international aid. In 2021, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were among the top ten countries providing international aid, Qatar is also among the leaders. Kuwait also uses this tool. Through its Arab Economic Development Fund, Kuwait has provided soft loans amounting 20 billion dollars to more than 100 countries of the world.<sup>8</sup> The Kuwaiti model was also copied by other Arab countries of the Gulf.

Manifestations of soft power are vividly expressed in sports. Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain host major sports events. These countries make large investments in leading European football clubs, attract the most prestigious football players, organise major football, tennis, motorsport tournaments. Sports diplomacy is the strategic use of

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<sup>5</sup> Tallest Buildings, <https://www.skyscrapercenter.com/buildings>

<sup>6</sup> The UAE Soft Power Strategy, 23.11.2017, <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/strategies-initiatives-and-awards/federal-governments-strategies-and-plans/the-uae-soft-power-strategy#:~:text=The%20UAE%20Soft%20Power%20Strategy%20aims%20to%20increase%20the%20country's,the%20UAE%20to%20the%20world.>

<sup>7</sup> Hertog 2017: 4 A quest for significance: Gulf oil monarchies' international 'soft power' strategies and their local urban dimensions <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69883/>

<sup>8</sup> Kuwait's soft power is its biggest asset, 27.2.2018, <https://gulfnews.com/opinion/op-eds/kuwaits-soft-power-is-its-biggest-asset-1.2180201>

sports events by states to create a friendly international image, that is, it is one of the forms of continuation of politics by other means.

Investments are made in popular sports that are watched by hundreds of millions of people around the world. During sports events, advertisements of companies of those countries, particularly state funds, airlines are shown, naturally in a positive light. First of all, this policy ensures worldwide recognition for the Arab countries of the Gulf region. In addition, hosting sports events is primarily related to logistical and organisational issues. Conducting such events is proof of the state's ability to address complex problems.

Qatar uses sports to promote a number of narratives, including health despite the country's serious obesity problem, modernization and progress aimed at neutralising negative stereotypes about Gulf Arabs, and reputation and attractiveness aimed at promoting tourism.<sup>9</sup>

Qatar has made sports a key component of national branding and development. Although other Gulf countries started hosting international sports events much earlier, in this field Qatar has overtaken them all. Part of their long-term strategy is the 2022 FIFA World Cup: according to estimates, Qatar spent US\$220 billion on lobbying, construction of sports and other infrastructure affiliated with it, meanwhile the expected revenue is about 10 fold less compared to expenses.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Brazil spent around 12 billion dollars for hosting the World Cup 2014, the largest amount until WC 2022.<sup>11</sup> On the way to building a brand through sports, the Qataris bought PSG, a football club from Paris. They attracted high-profile football players, who also participate in the promotion of the Qatari brand within the framework of the contract.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this policy, despite its successes, could not avoid a number of problems. Qatar's quest to do great things for a small state is often overshadowed by gross violations of workers' rights on construction sites that have resulted in dozens of lives lost. The investigations are spread by the world media and human rights organisations, which to some extent overshadows the efforts to create an appropriate image. In such cases, even the "Al Jazeera" television company with global coverage is not enough to provide an appropriate media environment. The same applies to tournaments organised in Saudi Arabia, when prestigious athletes visiting the country often speak about the rights of women and minorities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Brannagan and Giulianotti 2014: 703-719 Brannagan, P. M., & Giulianotti, R. (2014). Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals. *Leisure Studies*, 34(6), 703-719. doi:10.1080/02614367.2014.964291

<sup>10</sup> The Most Expensive World Cup in History, 10.4.2022, <https://frontofficesports.com/the-most-expensive-world-cup-in-history/>

<sup>11</sup> Total costs of the FIFA World Cup 2014 in Brazil, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/296493/total-costs-fifa-world-cup-2014-brazil/>

<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabia to allow women into sports stadiums, 29.10.2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41798481>

In terms of sports soft power, the Gulf countries have become pioneers for the whole world, because in recent years other small countries are trying to host major sports events. The tool to ensure legitimacy and reputation through sports events is widely used by Azerbaijan, whose oil money allows them to regularly organise major international events, such as the European Games, Formula 1 racing.

One level up from sports events is the investments in the educational, cultural and technological spheres. In particular, taking into account the growth and reputation of such fields as artificial intelligence, bioengineering, and the growth of interest in space exploration in recent years, countries that are not the leaders in the field are also trying to get integrated into this new environment and trends. The UAE is the leader among the Gulf countries in this matter. The Emirati authorities are investing in the technology sector, building so-called technopark cities - Masdar City, Internet cities, and sending a space device to Mars. The UAE became the 5th country to send a device to Mars. Moreover, it was highlighted that most of the members of the scientific team of the Mars mission are Emiratis. These investments are made, because they are associated with the future of humanity. Countries try to present themselves as one of the creators of that future.<sup>13</sup>

Significant steps have been done in education and arts, for instance, the opening of a branch of the Louvre and the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi, the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, branches of a number of famous universities and inviting top professors and scholars to teach - branches of Georgetown, Texas, Carnegie Mellon universities, London University College were opened in Qatar, New York University, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology operate in the UAE.<sup>14</sup>

Gulf countries are increasing their spending on research and development. The UAE spent 0.7 percent of GDP 20 years ago, meanwhile, in 2020 it was around 1.5 percent.<sup>15</sup> The Saudis increased their spending on science from 0.06 percent in 2003 to 0.82 percent in 2013, but it decreased to 0.5 percent in subsequent years. Oman increased its spending from 0.14 percent of GDP to 0.4 percent.

In contrast to sports, in terms of reputation, the scientific, cultural, and technological spheres contain fewer risks, and first of all, related to human rights.

### **The UAE's soft power in Armenia**

As already mentioned, the countries of the Gulf regions try to create a favourable image around the world. The UAE is one of the leaders in the world in terms of soft power policy. The UAE and Armenia have developed political and economic relations

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<sup>13</sup> UAE's Mars project director among top 50 future leaders in global list, 31.8.2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/2021/08/31/uaes-mars-project-director-among-top-50-future-leaders-in-global-list/>

<sup>14</sup> International Universities in Qatar, <https://www.hziegler.com/articles/international-universities-in-qatar.html>

<sup>15</sup> Research and development expenditure (% of GDP) - United Arab Emirates, 6.2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/GB.XPD.RSDV.GD.ZS?locations=AE>

since the 1990s. The Armenia – UAE relations are not limited to only political and economic cooperation. The UAE's policy in Armenia aims at creating an image of an advanced and friendly nation by implementing projects in cultural, educational and humanitarian fields.

The restoration of the medieval Christian monastery of Haghartsin in the north of Armenia is a vivid instance of the UAE's soft power policy in Armenia. The project's funding came from Sheikh al-Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah emirate. Another example is humanitarian aid. The UAE periodically sends humanitarian goods to Armenia. For instance, 7 tons of humanitarian aid in 2020 was delivered to help battle the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

The United Arab Emirates declared 2019 as a year for tolerance. The Ambassador of the UAE to Armenia, Mohamed Al-Zaabi, in an interview to the local media explained the aim of that global project. “This initiative aims at strengthening the UAE’s status as a world centre through several major initiatives and projects for tolerance, including the research investments, social and cultural research on tolerance, and dialogue of cultures and civilizations. The main message of the initiative is to spread tolerance values across the world.<sup>17</sup>” To promote the idea of tolerance, the Emirati embassy in Yerevan organised events, the Emirati representatives delivered a number of interviews, and provided poor families with humanitarian goods. The UAE also offers educational opportunities for Armenian students. They are eligible to be enrolled in the programs of the technological and educational complex of Masdar, a highest educational facility aimed at research of solar energy, sustainability and environment.

### **Concluding remarks**

The Gulf countries have integrated a number of fields in their soft power policy: architecture, humanitarian aid, sports, science and technology. The transition from one field to another happened gradually, and this trend is noticeable in all the countries of the region. The goal of soft power is ultimately to attract investment and visitors. One of the ultimate goals of the soft power strategies of the Gulf countries is to get the economy off the needle of hydrocarbon dependence and economic diversification. Low oil prices in 2014-2021 have proved that the income from this source cannot be stable. Taking into account the existing level of well-being in those countries, the tens of billions spent on security, possible financial difficulties can become a source of internal instability. In this regard, the Gulf countries have not yet achieved much. As the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, noted, "we have developed oil

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<sup>16</sup> UAE Sends Medical Aid to Armenia in Fight against COVID-19, 27.4.2020, <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/4/27/27-04-2020-armenia>.

<sup>17</sup> Bilateral ties, Armenia’s participation at Dubai Expo 2020, Masdar City: UAE Ambassador’s interview to ARMENPRESS, 29.3.2019, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/969329/>

dependence in Saudi Arabia."<sup>18</sup>It is no coincidence that the Gulf countries are in the top ten in the world both in terms of the share of oil revenues compared to GDP and the share of oil in the volume of exports.

The soft power strategies of the Gulf countries can also be considered in the context of competition between elite, royal families. These countries often copy each other, trying to show who is more generous, elegant and superior. For example, who will build a higher building, will create an artificial island, who will have the most influential and richest football club, will buy masterpieces of art. It should be noted that this competition has taken a certain evolutionary path. The leaders of the first generation spent the first million dollars they received from oil on luxurious and expensive cars, gold smelters, and the construction of palaces. The leaders of the next generation went a step further by placing their own ambitions within the framework of the country's ambitions.

The use of soft power also aims to compensate and cover up the loss of reputation caused by the use of hard power. In the case of the Gulf countries, in the last decade, the aspiration to gain leadership in the region is noticeable, which is also carried out through the use of hard power. These states, in particular, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE conduct a more active, interventionist foreign policy. Involvement in the Syrian and Libyan conflicts, the war in Yemen also bring with them reputational risks.

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<sup>18</sup> Saudi prince unveils sweeping plans to end 'addiction' to oil, 25.4.2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-economy-idUSKCN0XMICD>

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The article was delivered on 05.12.2022, reviewed on 15.12.2022, accepted for publication on 21.12.2022.