

Roundtable Summary

Hearts, Minds, and Mega-Events: Cultural Diplomacy in the GCC

Hosted by Gulf International Forum in partnership with
QatarDebate Center

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Introduction

Cultural diplomacy, spanning sports, tourism, media, and education, has become a cornerstone of soft power for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. For Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and their neighbors, investing in cultural diplomacy is central to long-term strategy, enabling them to reshape global perceptions, build partnerships, and prepare for a post-oil future.

Sports diplomacy has emerged as one of the most visible tools, with Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup symbolizing how mega-events can transform international reputations and strengthen national unity. Similarly, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE have invested heavily in Formula One, boxing, and other events to project openness and vibrancy. Tourism and heritage further reinforce Gulf soft power. Saudi Arabia's stewardship of Islam's holiest sites provides unique religious influence, while cultural festivals, museums, and expos across the region enhance cosmopolitan appeal. Oman's emphasis on tradition and the UAE's on modernity highlight diverse strategies for attracting global visitors.

Media and popular culture amplify these messages—from Qatar's Al Jazeera shaping international discourse to Gulf film festivals and music platforms promoting regional cultural narratives. Education diplomacy adds long-term depth, with initiatives like Qatar's Education City, NYU Abu Dhabi, and regional scholarship programs cultivating enduring networks of goodwill. Rooted in education, organizations like QatarDebate are promoting cross-cultural dialogue through both their debate championships and extensive global partnerships. Beyond advancing the Arabic language, QatarDebate has established a crucial platform for idea exchange and substantive discourse.

Together, these pillars form a holistic soft power strategy. By investing in cultural diplomacy, GCC states project themselves as dynamic and globally engaged. The result is a reservoir of international goodwill that enhances their resilience, legitimacy, and influence in a rapidly changing world.

Gulf International Forum in partnership with QatarDebate Center hosted a high-level roundtable discussion on October 2, 2025. The event brought together senior experts, scholars, and practitioners from the Gulf and international institutions. The focus of the roundtable was to explore how sports, tourism, media, and education have emerged as the key pillars of GCC cultural diplomacy, and how these initiatives strengthen soft power by projecting an image of dynamic and globally engaged societies. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule.

Roundtable Discussion

Some of the key insights from the discussion include:

Sports and Soft Power

Participants observed that sports have become a major tool for international cultural diplomacy in the Gulf. Cricket's early globalization in the region, notably its move to Dubai in 2005, was highlighted as a foundational moment. Basketball is emerging as a new frontier for soft power, enabling engagement with nontraditional audiences. Participants noted that while Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup faced reputational challenges in parts of Europe, many spectators enjoyed the event, which likely enhanced Doha's image abroad. In contrast, Saudi Arabia's World Cup hosting has generally been accepted internationally without significant backlash. Beyond traditional sports, participants emphasized the role of Saudi investment in esports as a mechanism to reach younger, digitally engaged audiences, reflecting an evolution of Gulf soft power strategies beyond conventional arenas.

Promoting Effective Dialogue

Meaningful interpersonal conversations were identified as increasingly vital amid fragmented geopolitical and media landscapes. Participants highlighted the importance of youth empowerment, dismantling harmful GCC stereotypes, and bridging Arabic-English language gaps. Such efforts are seen as foundational to fostering enduring international relationships and mutual understanding.

Education as a Tool for Cross-Cultural Relations

Participants underscored the long-term impact of educational exchanges on diplomacy. Examples included the first female Bahraini ambassador to the United States, who was the sister of Bahrain's first Fulbright recipient, illustrating the ripple effects of educational soft power. Between 40 and 70 senior global leaders hold degrees from American universities, reflecting the enduring influence of U.S. educational institutions. Participants agreed that students studying abroad often undergo transformative experiences, broadening perspectives and, in some cases, inspiring diplomatic aspirations. Concerns were raised that recent U.S. policies may be undermining the country's educational soft power, potentially weakening a key instrument of cultural influence.

Emphasizing People-to-People Soft Power

Participants stressed that intra-GCC competition can undermine collective soft power capabilities. Cooperation, they argued, could allow the bloc to exert influence beyond what its population or geography might suggest. Soft power was also observed in military cooperation, where relationships formed through joint exercises and strategic collaboration create enduring bonds. Participants noted declining use of religious soft power and emphasized the need to prioritize people-to-people engagement, addressing stereotypes and Islamophobia in the United States. Meetings between Western elites and GCC clerics may inadvertently reinforce negative perceptions, highlighting the need for careful calibration of religious diplomacy.

Scholarships and Grants in International Relations

Participants recognized the strategic value of scholarships and grants as tools for cultural diplomacy. Saudi Arabia's early-2000s initiative to send students abroad was cited as a successful effort to foster long-term goodwill and networking with Western societies. Study abroad programs humanize individuals from GCC states, reduce stereotypes, transfer knowledge, and create shifting narratives that complement traditional institutional diplomacy. These programs were described as essential mechanisms for building personal relationships, which are critical to winning hearts and minds.

Intercultural Intelligence and Fluency

Participants highlighted the importance of developing intercultural intelligence to enhance communication across diverse cultural contexts. Effective connections require familiarity with both low- and high-context cultures and attention to preferred communication styles. Building such cultural fluency strengthens collaboration and underpins successful soft power initiatives.

Promotion of Art and Cultural Events

Cultural initiatives, including commercial events (e.g., Art Dubai), nonprofits (e.g., Sharjah Art Foundation), and ephemeral spaces (e.g., festivals), were highlighted as pivotal for promoting GCC culture internationally. Participants noted that these events facilitate South-South cultural exchange, provide platforms for local artists, and expose foreign audiences to regional perspectives. Curators and cultural institutions were described as essential intermediaries, translating national visions into accessible, globally resonant forms.

Cultural Diplomacy as a Strategy

Participants stressed that culture can both divide and unite. Cultural diplomacy was framed not merely as a tool of influence but as a strategic avenue for generating soft power. GCC states were encouraged to promote a “modern, yet rooted” global cultural identity. Festivals and art events were noted for their role in humanizing the Gulf, fostering connections, and demonstrating that soft power can complement hard-power regional dynamics.

Interfaith Engagement and Khaleeji History

The importance of interfaith events and education on diverse Khaleeji histories was underscored. Participants highlighted limitations in existing interreligious initiatives, stressing that engagement should extend beyond Western elites to broader public audiences. Grassroots approaches were favored over government-led programs to ensure cultural competence permeates society. Educating Western audiences on the ancient Jewish and Christian communities of the GCC was proposed as a potential pathway for building bridges.

Exporting Religious Figures and Speakers

Participants discussed the historical role of GCC states in shaping religious production and influence. While UAE and Qatar import religious personnel, participants suggested a strategic pivot toward training domestic religious officials for export, aligning with national interests. This approach could modernize traditional religious soft power while supporting nation-building and international cultural influence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The roundtable concluded by underscoring the need for sustained investment in GCC soft power initiatives and cultural diplomacy as essential tools for regional and global engagement.

The main recommendations for the roundtable were:

- 1. Diversify the clerical and religious voices that are chosen to promote interfaith dialogue.**
 - Instead of relying upon the highest echelon of religious hierarchies as a source of socio-cultural ambassadors, GCC nations ought to prioritize local religious leaders. These individuals have more intimate, and therefore more influential, relationships with everyday citizens.
- 2. Promote and embrace Khaleeji history and culture instead of relying on imports.**
 - Expand the breadth of Western audiences' understanding of GCC's historical context. For example there was an influential community of early Christians in the UAE and an ancient Jewish presence in southeastern Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

3. Court the American public by increasing attempts at connection.

- The more often that Americans are exposed to international and cultural events hosted by GCC nations, the less unusual it will be for notable Americans and celebrities to participate in them.
- The Riyadh Comedy Festival was noted as a first-step in this effort. It is assumed that preliminary points of connection, while controversial, pave the way for tolerance and acceptance of future events.
- Qatar Debates has exemplified this strategy through its involvement with Mormon students from Brigham Young University. The creation of long-lasting cultural connections with young professionals, particularly through the instruction of the Arabic language and Khaleeji dialects, is a surefire way to gradually increase American understanding of GCC states.

4. Target smaller and more rural communities.

- Instead of focusing predominantly on urban, often globally connected, communities and institutions, the GCC should shift its focus toward demographics with less exposure to Khaleeji society.
- Empower embassies and local cultural outputs with the funding necessary to expand their influence outside of cosmopolitan hubs.

5. Intentionally and significantly increase cultural exports.

- The GCC states can improve its cultural saturation among American and other Western audiences through the dissemination of cultural outputs.
- Other non-Western nations, like South Korea and Japan, have demonstrated the effectiveness of this strategy through the global popularity of Korean pop music, beauty tourism, and Japanese film—which are particularly popular among American audiences. The rise of these once-foreign exports was accomplished through intentional promotion by governments, not mere chance.