CENTRE for MEDITERRANEAN, MIDDLE EAST and ISLAMIC STUDIES

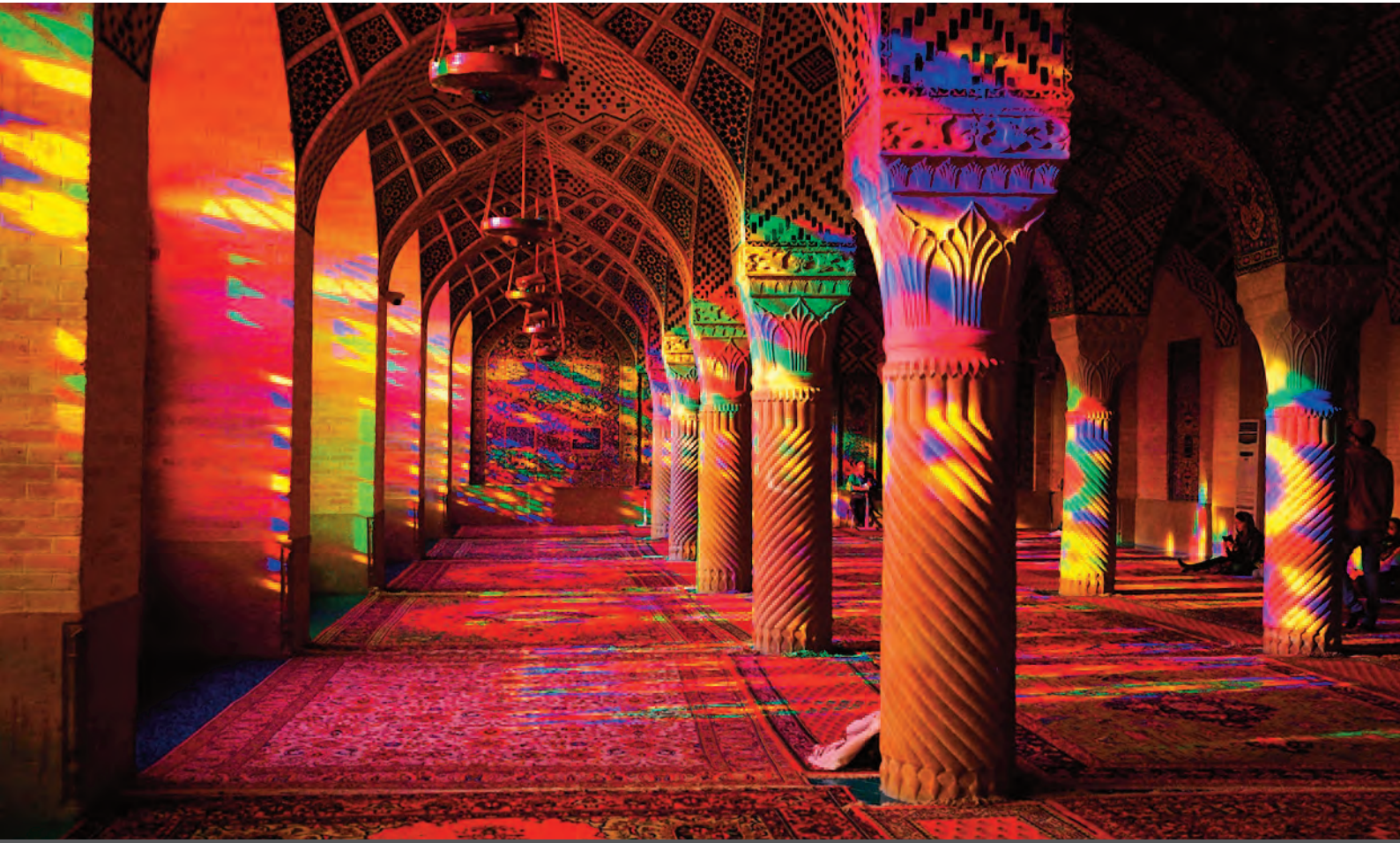
MEB #47

MiddleEastBulletin

A Greek Review of Middle Eastern Affairs

January 2026

POLITICS BEYOND POLITICS

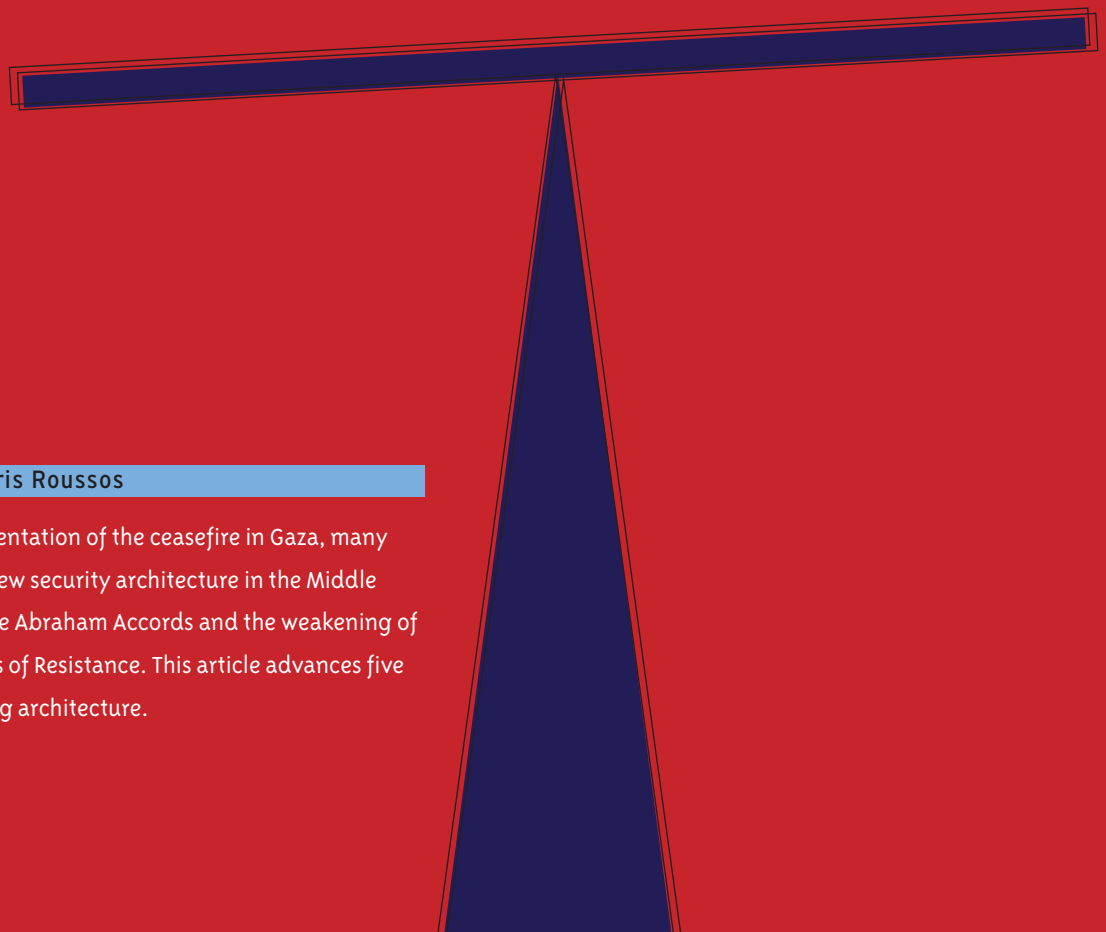


UNIVERSITY OF THE PELOPONNESE

CONTENTS

THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE GAZA CEASEFIRE

A PERMANENT INSTABILITY?



Sotiris Roussos

Following the problematic implementation of the ceasefire in Gaza, many analysts have begun to discuss a new security architecture in the Middle East, based on the framework of the Abraham Accords and the weakening of what is often referred to as the Axis of Resistance. This article advances five arguments regarding this emerging architecture.

FIRST, THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS—through which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco recognised Israel—were premised on the assumption that the Palestinian issue no longer shaped the regional balance of power. It was increasingly viewed either as an internal Israeli security matter or as a "frozen" conflict that had lost its regional momentum. The attacks of 7 October represented a radical and unexpected reversal of this perception, effectively removing the prospect of Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords. Saudi accession remains the central objective of US strategy in the Middle East.

For Israel, the belief that Palestine—and Gaza in particular—was fully manageable, and that Palestinian organisations posed no existential security threat, was shattered by the Hamas attack. This shock reinforced the Israeli right wing's conviction that the moment had arrived to implement a strategy of ethnic cleansing, culminating in genocidal violence, presented as the only viable solution. Yet the Israeli political and military elite is well aware that even the dismantling and disarmament of Hamas would not guarantee Israel's security. Hamas is part of a broader Islamist political and social movement that is likely to regenerate through new organisations and continued recruitment, particularly among young Palestinians growing up amid devastation and collective trauma. Had Israel sought to marginalise Hamas while promoting a Palestinian leadership with genuine popular legitimacy for peace negotiations, it might have released Marwan Barghouti, a highly popular Fatah figure.

Secondly, Israel has transformed the border regions of neighbouring states into buffer zones. In Lebanon and Syria, it has occupied significant areas of territory and has conducted sustained bombing campaigns. During the supposed ceasefire over the past year, Lebanon reportedly endured 669 air strikes—approximately two per day—resulting in around 4,000 deaths and tens of thousands of injuries. Notably, there were no Hezbollah attacks against Israel during this period.[1] Following the seizure of power in Damascus by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Israel has carried out more than 600 raids.[2]

In the Gaza Strip, Israeli forces are establishing permanent military installations across approximately 55 per cent of the territory, creating a physical and political barrier separating it from the remaining 45 per cent, where roughly two million Palestinians are confined under appalling conditions. Simultaneously, pressure continues to be exerted on Egypt to allow Palestinians to exit through the Rafah crossing, while Israel restricts the entry of humanitarian aid and prevents displaced Palestinians from returning to Gaza through the same crossing.[3]

Thirdly, Israel's confrontation with Iran is far from over. Israeli think tanks increasingly argue that only regime change in Tehran can eliminate the perceived Iranian threat. The strategy they consider most effective involves a foreign-supported regime-change scenario, in which external actors weaken the regime's coercive apparatus, thereby enabling opposition forces to overthrow it.[4] The Trump ad-

ministration has shown little interest in responding to Tehran's repeated invitations to negotiate an honourable framework for resolving the nuclear issue.

In Washington, the prevailing assessment is that Iran may be approaching a major domestic crisis due to its deteriorating economic conditions and intense competition over the succession of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.[5] By contrast, the Gulf states view the collapse of the Iranian regime—and the chaos likely to follow—as a profound threat to regional security. As a result, there may be renewed efforts to reach some form of accommodation among Arab states, Turkey, and possibly Iran. Israel's increasingly unpredictable behaviour is generating deep concern in Cairo, Riyadh, Doha and Abu Dhabi.

Fourth, the organisations traditionally grouped under the label "Axis of Resistance" are unlikely to disappear, but they are likely to evolve in character and strategic objectives. Hezbollah, for instance, may gradually transform into a primarily political, non-military Islamist party. Similarly, the Houthis may prioritise consolidating their state-like authority. Hamas's future will depend on internal dynamics within the Palestinian national movement and on the trajectory of Trump's proposed peace plan for Gaza.

Fifth, the market-oriented economic model that characterised the early post–Cold War era is giving way to an emerging hybrid system that combines elements of China's state-centered capitalism with Russia's authoritarian governance. Many Arab leaders—particularly in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—view Russian President Vladimir Putin as a decisive leader who enforces reform through harsh repression of opposition forces and dissenting social groups.[6] For figures such as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, this authoritarian model appears more attractive than liberal democratic alternatives.

Moscow's and Beijing's criticism of Western efforts to impose liberal governance as a universal standard resonates strongly with Middle Eastern governing elites. The growing support for anti-Western coups in several African states reflects not only the erosion of the Western-centric global model, but also the legacy of continued Western interventions in these regions. Together, these shifts are contributing to a broader questioning of the Western-dominated paradigm of global governance.

NOTES

All links accessed on 12/12/2025

1. Middle East Monitor, "Israel hits Lebanon with nearly 700 airstrikes since ceasefire: Report," November 27, 2025, https://shorturl.at/i3KPT
2. Al Mayadeen English, "Israel' bombed Syria 600 times since former regime ouster," December 10, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3x94bxxz
3. Anna Irfan, "How Trump's Gaza Plan Is Enabling Another Israeli Land Grab," *Jewish Currents*, December 8, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/9x7wmw37
4. Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, "Following the Islamic Republic's 12-Day War with Israel, There May Be a Genuine Opportunity for the Iranian People to Reclaim Their Future from the Regime's Grasp", *Middle East Forum*, July 29, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/bdf8yact
5. Asharq al-Awsat, "Nuclear talks: 'Coldness' in Washington, 'conditional readiness' in Tehran," December 10, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yeyvmwbw
6. Yuri Barmin, "Will Mohammed bin Salman be Arabia's Vladimir Putin?," *Al -Jazeera*, November 13, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/m7cjh72v

THE POLITICS OF TURKISH DRAMA SERIES

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

With Turkish TV series having risen in popularity globally, Türkiye stands currently among the lead exporters of television shows. Through a variety of genres, these productions are considered part of the country's soft power toolbox, promoting not only locations and goods, but also Türkiye's image abroad. The government's involvement with these series grew along with its authoritarian tendencies, causing their politicization, which are used for conveying political messages and shaping public opinion, but also as a space for creative opposition.

IN THE LAST TWO DECADES, Türkiye transitioned from being from a non-producing country and an importer of TV shows to a producer and a mass exporter of soap operas, or *diziler*. With a wide variety of genres, Türkiye has become the second-largest exporter of television series after the United States, with more than 150 series sold to nearly 170 countries since 2002; This global phenomenon can also be viewed as part of the rising "cultural multipolarity," with new forms of mass culture from the East challenging the dominance of Western pop culture.[1]

The *diziler* are acting as cultural ambassadors, promoting Turkish language and culture, but also advertising Turkish products, cultural heritage, and natural attractions. Therefore, they are paving the way for trade relations among countries, while effectively contributing to the national economy through tourism, real estate and industry, with very little cost to the state.[2] Television dramas showcase an idealized version of Turkish society, which contributes to its national branding; the so-called "Turkish model" of a modern, religious-conservative Muslim state with a booming economy is represented at its best in the *diziler*, which appeal to viewers who feel cultural or political disenfranchisement in the Christian and Western-centric media. Yet, these TV series remain largely national in content, and are thus susceptible to government regulation and being affected by the political landscape.

The state's intervention in the media grew as AKP gradually consolidated power in the 2000s; the Turkish dramas' growth in popularity cultivated the government's need for narrative control.[3] The *diziler* has often been a topic of discussion among politicians, sometimes openly criticizing them and other times praising them. Storylines drifting away from the governmental line are characterized as threats to national security or misrepresenting Islamic values, while fees and bans are imposed to deter their production. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan often publicly criticized the hit TV series 'Muhteşem Yüzyıl' (2011-2014), due to its representation of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, claiming the series was at odds with Islamic values and distorting the Ottoman past; AKP representatives even drafted a bill allowing the ban of TV series and films wherein historical reality and figures could be humiliated.[4] More recently, the successful show 'Kizil Concalar' (2023-2025) was heavily criticized by pro-government groups and organizations for misrepresenting traditional values, and faced fines and filming disruptions for alleged promotion of islamophobia. People working in those productions also must comply with the governmental line, as exemplified by the cancellation of the popular show 'Leyla ile Mecnun' (2011-2024) in 2014, officially due to low ratings, but truly because actors and producers sided with the Gezi park's protests, with the show resuming in online platforms in 2021.[5]

It is worth mentioning that although the *diziler* are produced and exported primarily by private, non-governmental companies, they have received great state support when governmental actors are heavily involved in the process.

Private TV stations are happily complying with this, as they are also, as a result, benefiting from the government.[6] Türkiye's national public broadcaster TRT is also heavily invested in its own productions, commissioning various dramas that promote the history and values of the Turkish nation from the conservative Islamic perspective promoted by the AKP.

The politicization of Turkish TV series is evident in various ways, ranging from dealing with contemporary political issues to promoting neo-Ottomanism or the governments' Islamic worldview.[7] Each genre promotes a specific image of Türkiye, albeit compatible with AKP's political agenda.

Firstly, romantic melodramas showcase an idealized version of Turkish life, with traditional family structures and Islamic values at its core, without violence or heavy language. These idealized love stories present an alternative modernity, with neither cultural alienation nor traditionalism, challenging social norms within a familiar setting. A prime example of this is the dizi 'Gümüş' (2005-2007), which sparked worldwide demand for Turkish dramas, wherein the protagonist personifies the ideal of a Muslim woman, perfectly balancing business and household responsibilities. It is of note that the headscarf was excluded from mainstream Turkish television, as it was regarded as an indicator of Islamism, while the first veiled main character appeared only in 2012 (in the dizi 'Huzur Sokağı').[8]

On the other hand, historical series appeal to the nationalistic sentiment of the audience. These shows remind viewers of the "glorious" Ottoman past, the historic ties of Türkiye with the Middle East and North Africa and the current absence of credible leadership in the rest of the Middle East. Government officials openly supported the TV series 'Diriliş: Ertuğrul' (2014-2019), a TRT production based on the life of the father of the founder of the Ottoman empire, Ertuğrul Gazi; Erdoğan himself visited the set multiple times. Another important instalment of TRT is 'Payitaht Abdülhamid' (2017-2021), representing an idealized version of a powerful empire under the leadership of the last Sultan, Abdülhamid II, which was heavily criticized for inaccuracies.[9]

The last important dizi genre is political thriller and action; these series usually explore corruption, state power and real-world tensions through drama and violence. Their aim is to present Türkiye as an assertive leader, capable of standing up against Western imperialism. This is exemplified by 'Kurtlar Vadısı' (2003-2005), where a Turkish agent is sent to the Palestinian territories to defend Palestinians against Israelis.[10]

All series, regardless of genre, are being politicized by making the audience draw parallels between the characters and reality. Real-life quotes and speeches have been used in different series to convey the government's message; for example, in 'Diriliş: Ertuğrul', the titular character refers to the "poisonous water of Aleppo" as a threat to the Islamic world, using the same phrase that Erdoğan did when he announced the Euphrates Shield military operation in Syria during 2016. The characters of the shows also mirror political figures; for example, viewers draw parallels between Erdoğan and Ertuğrul, and identify the character who betrays the latter as the first's public enemy, Fethullah Gülen. Similarly, the *dizi* 'Akici' (2021), about a superhero whose adversaries are called "The Fivers" and control the US deep state, is believed to be a reference to Erdoğan's quote "the world is bigger than five".[11] Therefore, the AKP instrumentalizes lines and setups of the *diziler*, as a platform for influencing public opinion and spreading its ideological values.

Nevertheless, it is difficult for the government to use the TV series directly. Political pressure has led producers to find creative strategies to deal with this silencing and, in doing so, has intensified the interaction between audience and producers in the form of solidarity against censorship. In the last three years, new *diziler* describing the societal division between secular and traditional-conservative families, fueled by the AKP narrative, has pushed to the forefront a public debate about representation of both lifestyles on TV.[12]

In conclusion, the global rise of the Turkish TV series phenomenon is not only remarkable due to its success abroad, but also due to the rampant politicization of this cultural medium. TV series in Türkiye have become a platform for expressing political ideas and opinions, and a way to influence public opinion. Yet, despite the efforts of pro-governmental groups, there is still room for creative opposition within the TV sphere. It seems that the *diziler* will continue to play an important role in Turkish politics, domestically and internationally, for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

All links accessed 19/12/2025

1. Jana Jabbour, "Turkish Soap Operas: Soft Power at the Service of a Rising Power's Political Ambitions," *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2023* (2023), https://tinyurl.com/yc3ypzsj

2. R. H. Melkonyan, N. H. Poghosyan and T. V. Hakobyan, "Politics in TV Series and TV Series in Politics. Case Study of Turkish Historical TV Shows," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University, Asian and African Studies* 16, no. 4 (2024): 801; see also Zehra Korkmaz Kökdere, "Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy: Impacts of Turkish TV Series," *Necmettin Erbakan University, Journal of the Faculty of Political Science (NEUSBF)* 4, no.1 (2024): 43-45, https://tinyurl.com/mv7uu743

3. Ece Algan, "Tactics of the Industry Against the Strategies of The Government: The Transnationalization of Turkey's Television Industry," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*, ed. Shawn Shimpach (New York: Routledge, 2020), 445, 449.

4. R. H. Melkonyan, N. H. Poghosyan and T. V. Hakobyan, op.cit.: 800.

5. Elmas Topcu and Pelin Ünker, "Popular Turkish TV series a mix of commentary, propaganda," *Deutche Welle*, (January 26, 2025) https://tinyurl.com/3cf3648u ; see also Kumru Berfin Emre Cetin, "The "Politicization" of Turkish Television Dramas," *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014):2466.

6. Hikmet Kocamaner, "Strengthening the Family through Television: Islamic Broadcasting, Secularism, and the Politics of Responsibility in Turkey," *Anthropological Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (2017): 678–679.

7. Kumru Berfin Emre Cetin, op.cit.:2467.

8. Jana Jabbour, op.cit.; see also Nehir Ağırseven and Armağan Örki, "Evaluating Turkish TV Series as Soft Power Instruments," *OPUS* 7, no. 13 (2017) https://tinyurl.com/bp7r25bs

9. Jana Jabbour, op.cit.

10. Ibid.

11. R. H. Melkonyan, N. H. Poghosyan and T. V. Hakobyan, op.cit.: 802; see also Jere Hokkanen, "Political control of television in Turkey," *Journal Media Research*, March 20, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/3j79dym9

12. Zeynep Serinkaya Winter and Cüneyt Çakırlar, "Families in constant crisis: Ömer's nostalgia, critical affordances of TV genres, and shifting politics of intimacy in 'New Türkiye'," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 63 (Summer 2025) https://tinyurl.com/2hsbwz6s ; see also Elmas Topcu and Pelin Ünker, op.cit.

Television Drama and the Cultural Politics of the "MUSALSAL"

Sarra Ajroud

Arabic television drama, or Musalsalat, serve as powerful political tools in the Arab world, promoting cultural soft power. Beyond traditional politics, states and media actors use these narratives, particularly Ramadan blockbusters, to subtly shape public attitudes, political identities, and social norms. By re-contextualizing sociopolitical events, such productions convey the state's preferred visions of citizenship, national identity, and social order without resorting to overt political messaging.

AS POSTMAN HAS STATED, "television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself." In an era where politics extend beyond military force and electoral competition, Nye's notion of soft power captures how states increasingly rely on attraction and cultural persuasion to shape political outcomes.[1] Media and entertainment have thus become key hubs where political influence is constructed, normalized, and contested. Arabic television blockbusters (*musalsalat*) operate as mechanisms of cultural soft power by reframing sociopolitical events through emotionally resonant narratives. While Arab TV drama had existed earlier, *musalsalat* began to emerge as tools of soft power with the rise of satellite television in the 1990s, when Egyptian and Syrian series, such as *Bab al-Hara*, became regional phenomena, and states recognized their ability to shape cultural narratives across borders.[2] Ever since, and across the entirety of the Arab world, television continues to serve as a shared cultural medium.

Structural features of the Arab media system further enhance this influence. State-owned or state-aligned media dominate the region, granting governments substantial control over content and production, allowing them to intervene in productions and censor non-aligned messaging. In Lebanon, private broadcasters require ministerial licenses reflecting political group interests. One example that illustrates direct intervention is Qatar's *musalsal Tariq ila Kabul* in 2004 (Road to Kabul). Commissioned by the state, the series was halted after eight episodes by Qatar TV, officially due to a terrorist threat, but later revealed that the Qatari government was pressured by the US due to some 'inappropriate' depictions of CIA agents within the show.[3] A more recent example of interventionism is the Saudi-produced historical drama *Muawiya*, aired during Ramadan 2025 on the MBC network. The series, depicting the early Islamic ruler Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, generated significant regional controversy and was banned in Iraq and Iran. *The Muawiya* controversy stemmed not simply from government caution but from deeply contested historical and religious sensitivities: regulators in Iraq banned the series on the grounds that its portrayal of the early Islamic era risked inflaming sectarian tensions and threatening social peace, while Iran's media authority prohibited its dubbing and distribution, criticizing the narrative for attempting to reframe the legacy of Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan in ways seen as provocative to Shia audiences. This recent case illustrates how state-aligned productions remain under political oversight and censorship beyond national borders.[4]

The second characteristic of the Arab media landscape is the pan-Arabism narrative. Promoted by regional conglomerates such as MBC, Abu Dhabi TV, and Qatar's beIN network, it amplifies a vision of cultural unity across national borders. While earlier iterations of pan-Arabism were politically charged, contemporary pan-Arab media operates as a market-driven model of cultural integration rather than a unified political project. This form prioritizes themes such as stability, national unity, anti-extremism, and loyalty to state institutions.[5] This is included in streaming platforms such as *Shahid*, operated by MBC Group to distribute television drama to a regional audience, curated content for a region-wide audience while embedding state-aligned narratives. The result is a depoliticized pan-Arab media space that promotes cultural familiarity without fostering meaningful political pluralism, effectively transforming pan-Arabism from an emancipatory discourse into a managerial tool of soft power. In addition, this newly depoliticized media space often betrays the socio-economic and political contestation within Arab societies presenting an idealized narrative of stability and cohesion. Series such as *Al-Thaman* (a pan-Arab adaptation of a Turkish drama), as well as Saudi-produced historical epics, exemplify

this shift: they circulate regionally, promoting localized visions of order, security, and modernization, rather than a shared Arab political project. Many of these channels, including Lebanon's LBC, rely on recycled Western formats rather than locally produced intellectual frameworks, contributing to a depoliticized pan-Arab media space that circulates shared aesthetics without fostering meaningful political pluralism.[6]

A third defining feature of Arab TV drama is the enduring 'star system,' through which cultural authority is conveyed not only via narrative content but also through the actors who embody it. Arab audiences have historically followed specific actors across productions, genres, and even national industries, granting these figures a symbolic legitimacy that extends beyond the screen. Many high-profile performers sign exclusive deals with networks aligning talent with the narratives being promoted, including modernization, national unity, and security. For example, the appearance of major actors in long-running Ramadan serials, including Dina Al-Sherbiny and Egyptian actor Sherif Salama in *Kamel El-Addad+1* illustrates how performers anchor emotionally resonant stories that reinforce social norms and political messaging during the peak viewing period.[7]

Taken together, these elements create an environment where entertainment and political communication are deeply intertwined. Audiences' parasocial ties with actors enhance narrative credibility: when stars portray police officers, reformist social figures, or proponents of state-led development, their pre-existing rapport lends emotional weight to political signalling, particularly during Ramadan. For instance, in the Egyptian Ramadan series *Al-Ikhtiyar* (The Choice), actor Ahmed Ezz portrays a counter-terrorism officer whose moral integrity, sacrifice, and loyalty to state institutions are foregrounded, allowing audiences' prior familiarity with the star to reinforce the legitimacy of security-centred narratives during peak Ramadan viewership.[8]

Ramadan and TV

Television dominates daily life around iftar, with programming structured to reflect the month's ethical and social weight, allowing dramas to present political narratives within a legitimizing framework of ethical reflection, historical memory, and social solidarity. Pre-iftar slots typically feature religious and culinary programs, while post-iftar 'chat shows' lead up to the highly anticipated blockbuster series of the season, which airs later in the evening during the so-called "Ramadan prime time". Each state curates thematic mixes, from historical dramas to political thrillers, framing the month as a legitimizing context for political storytelling.[9]

The Ramadan blockbuster series emphasizes virtue, sacrifice, family connections, and communal responsibilities, aligning with the broader pan-Arab cultural project. In addition, they often convey deference to authority, encouraging audiences to obey national institutions and avoid questioning the state. Through emotional at-

tachment to morally complex characters, audiences are encouraged to identify with state-aligned narratives. For example, post-Arab Spring, productions such as *Al-Ikhtiyar* dramatize the heroism of security forces, framing the 2013 events as necessary for national order, while Syrian and pan-Arab historical dramas recast early Islamic or regional history to comment on contemporary governance. The 2025 Syrian Ramadan series *Taht Al Ardh* demonstrates the strategic recontextualization of history. The story, set in 1900s Damascus, portrays local powers' struggles and shifting dynamics by using the protagonists' journey to comment on current governmental issues, social cohesion, and authority.[10] The concentrated viewership and cultural significance of Ramadan gives Arab states a unique opportunity to reshape and reinterpret public memory, while reinforcing state-defined visions of stability. In Egypt, for example, it was clear that the state's agenda post-2011 was set to counter this emerging revolutionary narrative, and the best way to do it was to use its most powerful tool: TV series. Thus, the constant portrayal of the security apparatus as the guardian of national stability.

In conclusion, Arab television drama, especially Ramadan series, has long functioned as a tool of cultural soft power, embedding political narratives within emotionally resonant stories. While the dominance of *musalsalat* is increasingly threatened by streaming platforms, Turkish TV series, and global digital media, TV dramas in the Arab world still hold a cardinal place for state-aligned messaging. In fact, instead of becoming obsolete, Arabic dramas are adapting to this fragmented media environment. Whether TV serials will reclaim their centrality in the political narrative and if states and media productions will recalibrate content and platforms in the years ahead, remains an important empirical question.

NOTES

All links accessed on 14/12/2025

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985): 92 https://tinyurl.com/3k72zec9 ; see also Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), https://tinyurl.com/5xkm8pfw

2. The National, "How Arab TV dramas became a staple in Ramadan," May 25, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/5aas47e5

3. Khalil, op.cit 445., see also N. Sakr, *Arab Television Today* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 128.

4. Maryam Sinaiee, "Why did Iran ban the Saudi Ramadan TV series?," *Iran International*, March 9, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ew4xwjdz ; see also Financial Times, "Big Budget Saudi TV Series Stirs Controversy in Middle East," March 13, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/42hfhjw8

5. M. M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 112–116.

6. Ibid, 1-109.

7. Arab News, "Keeping up with Ramadan TV tradition," April 2, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/492bn5c5

8. *Al-Ikhtiyar* (The Choice), Egyptian television drama series and widely broadcast during Ramadan, portrays security forces as heroic defenders of national stability; critics note its patriotic framing and its use of security protagonists to embed state narratives within widely watched Ramadan drama. Al Bawaba, "Ramadan Action Drama Al-Ikhtiyar Gets Top Billing," April 20, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/3mumfyum

9. Christa Salamandra, "Moustache Hairs Lost: Ramadan Television Serials and the Construction of Identity in Damascus, Syria," *Visual Anthropology* 10, no. 2–4 (1998) 228-229; see also Sakr, op.cit., 102–106.

10. The National, "Ramadan 2025 TV line-up: Top dramas, documentaries and spiritual shows from Abu Dhabi Media Network," February 17, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/yb5x2d36

GROWTH IN A DESERT OF CENCORSHIP

CINEMA IN SAUDI ARABIA, THE UAE, AND IRAN

Artemi Papadaki

Although differing in ideology and governance, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are commonly classified as states with authoritarian or non-liberal political systems, characterized by restricted political participation and limited freedom of expression. In the realm of cinema, these states operate film industries as instruments for identity construction and control, engines of economic growth, and soft power projection. Cultural promotion emerges as a strategy, in which ambiguous codes, blurred limits on artistic expression foster an environment wherein self-censorship thrives.

WHILE THE UAE AND SAUDI ARABIA are emerging as important players in regional cinema, longstanding censorship continues to shape content and audiences. Action films seem more likely to be approved than productions from companies such as Disney; meanwhile the list of banned films remains extensive. Geopolitics, sex, religion, and LGBTQIA+ issues are among the main reasons films stay in limbo, required to undergo revisions, or ultimately barred from screening. In early 2022, Pixar's Lightyear was prohibited from release in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and several other West Asian markets due to a same-sex kiss.[1] On the other hand, Iran's traditionally strong financial and artistic film industry continues to grow within an ecosystem of hundreds of film schools across the country and major festivals such as the Fajr International Film Festival (FIFF). However, films and directors remain tightly controlled by state censorship, while filmmakers like Jafar Panahi, Mohammad Rasulof, and Tahmineh Milani face imprisonment and interrogations.[2]

In the UAE, the updated Federal Decree-Law 55/2023 sets standards for all cultural activities, including television, cinema, and creative productions. These rules encompass respect for state sovereignty, symbols, and institutions, as well as for broader norms, such as respect for Islamic beliefs, restrictions related to violence, addiction, and similar content.[3] This extensive set of guidelines has created a secondary "permits" market, through which fixers handle the bureaucratic process on behalf of foreign producers. These constraints appear to favour non-controversial, apolitical, tourism-focused films, often centred on romance, action or travel, hence limiting more artistically-free art.

As a stronghold of Video-On-Demand platforms, the UAE hosts both Shahid and StarzPlay Arabia, which regionally outperform Netflix.[4] It is noteworthy that Shahid is part of the MBC Group, owned by Saudi interests. Dubai offers a well-established media infrastructure, a business-friendly regulatory environment, and free-zone company benefits, which simplify licensing, tax obligations, and cross-border operations. This strategy has made the UAE a prime filming location, with Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Star Trek Beyond* (2016) choosing the Emirates for significant portions of their scenery. The central role of Burj Khalifa in Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol as a symbol of architecture and state-of-the-art technology aimed at repositioning the Emirates as a global hub, while simultaneously promoting tourism.

When building their domestic media industries, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have simultaneously sought to expand their international influence. Recently, both countries joined Qatar to back Paramount's bid for Warner Bros, demonstrating their aspiring role in the global media sector.[5] For Saudi Arabia, this strategy coincides with domestic reforms in entertainment, including movie screen openings and theme park development. Following the 35-year ban lifted on movie theatres in 2018 under the Vision 2030 plan, the Kingdom now hosts over 600 screens, with more cinemas under construction.[6] Targeting its young population (over 60% under 30), as well as families and aspiring filmmakers, Saudi Arabia initially set optimistic box-office forecasts, going as far as $1 billion annually by 2025, however these early projections were not met.[7]

Films are submitted to Gmedia, an authority under the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM), responsible to review and report on anything that conflicts with the Kingdom's authority or its religious, political, and societal values. In a move appearing

progressive, the Kingdom slightly revised its regulations in 2023, introducing an age-based classification with the categories G, PG, PG12, PG15, R15, and R18, each indicating the suitability of content for different age groups.[8] It is noteworthy, however, that films can still be banned or heavily edited for the Saudi market, something not reflected in this classification. Most of the bans concern sexual scenes or LGBTQIA+ characters, such as *West Side Story* (2021) that was banned in 2022 over a transgender character, or political issues like the recent ban on *Dhurandhar* (2025) and other Indian films regarding anti-Pakistani sentiment; foreign film censorship reinforces consistent othering narratives, sustaining official geopolitical alignments and ideological boundaries, while setting standards for what is deemed acceptable for an Islamic audience. Nonetheless, in this restrictive environment, Norah's Cannes Film Festival selection as the first Saudi film is particularly striking. The film follows a young woman unable to express herself within an arranged marriage, highlighting themes that stand in contrast to the Kingdom's tightly controlled cultural framework.[9]

For Iranian cinema, Cannes has long served as a key site for recognition and visibility, demonstrating that, despite the constraints of a heavily sanctioned industry, the country sustains a remarkably high level of film production that attracts global attention. Iranian filmmakers continue creating critical-to-the-state narratives that achieve recognition at prestigious international film festivals. In 2025, Panahi's *A Simple Accident* won the Cannes Palme d'Or; the film addresses the traumas of interrogation and jail time in current Iran. In 2024, Rasoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* premiered at Cannes, despite the director facing significant restrictions at home, as the film centred around the demonstrations after Mahsa Amini's killing. Meanwhile, *My Favourite Cake's* (2024) creators endured interrogations, bans from living in the country and imprisonment on charges of producing an "obscene film that offends public morality," reflecting on the ongoing tensions between artistic expression and state censorship in contemporary Iran.[10] Thus, domestic censorship enables ideological and political containment, as the state responds to highly socially and politically active people by regulating cinema's capacity to mobilize dissent.

What is striking in this increasingly tightly regulated cinematic space, is the rising number of films produced annually, through legal or other channels. In the first half of 2025 alone, 353 works, including feature films, shorts, and documentaries, were released for screening, while double that number were produced. To make a film in Iran, a permit must be secured. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), together with its sub-organization, the Cinema Organization are the primary body overseeing film screenplays. Additionally, permissions from the police and intelligence services, along with any potential required changes, must be implemented, in order to secure a filming permit. After completion, the final version is reviewed again and adjusted as necessary to obtain a screening permit.[11] Even following approval, a film may still be censored, restricted, or banned if deemed inappropriate or un-Islamic.

Hosting and selectively screening foreign productions in Iran,

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, serves as a soft power tool abroad, which simultaneously shapes national identity domestically. At the same time, major film festivals place Iran and Saudi Arabia in the international spotlight as emerging cultural hubs, all the while formal, informal or anticipatory censorship stands firm. Despite growing investment in cinema as a tool for economic diversification and nation-branding, censorship continues to shape creative expression, leaving cinema a contested space between control and resistance.

NOTES

All links accessed on 14/12/2025

1. Patrick Frater, "Pixar's 'Lightyear' Banned in Saudi Arabia, U.A.E. and Malaysia Over Same-Sex Kiss," *Variety*, June 13, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/46cz7t62

2. Mansour Jahani, "Iran: Overview," *ACFM Annual Report*, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/bdet3ktj

3. Government of the United Arab Emirates, "Media Regulation," UAE Official Portal, https://tinyurl.com/2vy38nnd

4. Broadcastpro Middle East, "MENA streaming revenues set to reach $1.2bn in 2024: Omdia," June 2, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/4a6je2cf

5. Federico Maccioni and Rachna Uppal, "Hollywood-hungry Gulf states bankroll Paramount's Warner Bros bid," *Reuters*, December 10, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/399z6w7s

6. France24, "First Saudi cinema opens with popcorn and 'Black Panther'," April 19, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/y4xh8rtw

7. Miguel Hadchity, "Kingdom's film revenue hits $225m, Riyadh takes biggest share," *Arab News*, November 22, 2025, https://arab.news/nhxh3

8. General Media Authority of Saudi Arabia, "Age Classification,", https://gmedia.gov.sa/en/age-classification

9. Al Arabiya English, "'Norah': Saudi Arabia's First Cannes Film Festival Entry Makes International Debut," May 24, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/wb2k5ht3

10. David Mouriquand, "'My Favourite Cake' directors given suspended prison sentence in Iran for showing unveiled woman," *Euronews*, April 14, 2025, https://bit.ly/45iHudB

11. Hamid Taheri, "Compliance and Resistance in Iranian Cinema's Censorship Landscape: A New Approach to Analyzing Iranian Films," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 42, no. 6 (2025): 1437–38, https://bit.ly/3MX8Yz4

The Practice of Soft Power through Music

Panagiota Bouka

In the Middle East, music extends far beyond entertainment, functioning as a strategic soft power instrument. States, such as Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, promote festivals, orchestras, and entertainment industries to project modernity and stability, while regulating acceptable genres, lyrics, and performances through broad legal frameworks and censorship. Meanwhile, Palestinian musicians face censorship but use digital platforms to express resistance and preserve collective memory. Across the region, music becomes political through its role in shaping identity, belonging, and public imagination.

MANY MIDDLE EASTERN STATES have increasingly invested in music as a soft power tool, appropriating its emotional and symbolic capital to construct controlled narratives of identity, legitimacy, and progress, transforming cultural expression into means for governance and social regulation.[1] Major festivals like the Gnaoua and World Music Festival in Morocco or MDLBEAST Soundstorm in Saudi Arabia, concert halls, orchestras, and televised competitions present an image of modernity, stability, and cultural appreciation. Governments use them to encourage and promote domestic pride and international legitimacy, transforming music into a branding strategy for cultural diplomacy. Regulations governing concerts, gender mixing, or lyrical content form a subtle yet powerful political pipeline through which authorities ban certain genres, censor lyrics, and restrict performances with the sole goal of enforcing social boundaries.[2] Religion often sits at the forefront of these restrictions, with authorities invoking Qur'anic recitations or selective religious interpretations; notably, Ayats 31:6 and 23:1–3 frame music as morally suspect or sinful.[3] By framing cultural regulation within the language of faith, authorities can naturalize censorship, portraying it as a defense weapon of collective morality to consolidate control, while avoiding overtly political justifications.[4]

Although Iran remains the most well-known example of musical restrictions in the Middle East, the significance of these policies extends beyond censorship itself. Since the 1979 revolution, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has used music permits and content controls to set the boundaries of acceptable citizenship and cultural identity.[5] Restrictions on Western styles, female voices, or certain instruments are therefore less about the music and more about asserting and reinforcing ideological authority. Broad legal categories—such as "propaganda against the state" or violations of "Islamic principles"—allow the state to discipline artistic expression, while simultaneously presenting such control as moral protection.[6] A similar logic operates in Egypt, where the Syndicate and state censorship regulates who may perform and which genres may circulate.[7] The banning of Mahraganat, along with the requirement for membership and permits, institutionalizes a hierarchy of "acceptable" culture.[8]

Following the same path, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have their own regulatory frameworks. In 2025, Saudi authorities shut down more than 20 music lounges in cities such as Riyadh and Jeddah, claiming "hygiene violations", "immorality" rhetoric, and breaches of public-health code.[9] While these closures were justified as regulatory enforcement, they can also be understood as a response to pressure from conservative religious and social forces, revealing tension between the state's recent entertainment opening and conservative backlash. This highlights that cultural progress remains fragile, even within Vision 2030's push for music and entertainment; cultural openness is not guaranteed. Simultaneously, the UAE's Ministry of Economy issued a second collective music rights license, to Music Nation, authorizing it to manage and distribute music rights on behalf of creators and performers

across the country.[10] Hence, for musicians, producers, and platforms, the legal/regulatory environment is now being standardized through licensing.

Within the discourse of music control in the Middle East, Palestinian artists should also be included. Over the past 2 years, musicians in Gaza and Palestinian citizens of Israel have faced cancellations, public backlash, and logistical or border denials that prevented performances; though there are also Palestinian musicians from Gaza who remain active despite the conditions. Many Palestinian and Arab artists, inside and outside of Gaza, are releasing solidarity songs after October 7, transforming music into a medium of expression, memory, protest, solidarity, and resilience. What makes the difference in their case is the power of digital platforms, which has created space for those artists.[11] These platforms have enabled artists to amplify their voices, reach global audiences, and share their stories, while at the same time, the same platforms have also censored pro-Palestinian content. A significant shift occurred with the launch of the "No Music for Genocide" movement, in which more than 400 artists and labels pledged to remove their music from Israeli streaming platforms, in protest at Israel's military actions in Gaza.[12] Taken together, these developments highlight how music operates as part of a political and cultural struggle.

Music in the Middle East today does not need explicitly political lyrics to be political. From the songs of resistance in Gaza, to tightly regulated performances in Iran and Saudi Arabia, to the institutionalized music industries of the UAE, every note carries meaning beyond the sound or word. Music inevitably interacts with identity, nationalism, class dynamics, technology, religion, and global cultural norms. Due to its nature, political actors often use it or control it to influence the public by managing emotions, consolidating legitimacy, or in general, projecting soft power.

NOTES

All links accessed on 22/12/2025

1. Gholipour Behnam, "New Study Details 40 Years of Music Licensing Trends in Iran," *Iran Wire*, January 24, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/3syphcfp ; see also Cahaya A. P. Diponegoro, "The Politics of Music Tourism: How Morocco's Branding of Gnaoua Music Reinforces Cultural Inequality," *Modern Diplomacy*, August 1, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/54vy6sbr

2. Beatriz Valero de Urquia, "The Sound Business: How Live Music Events Are Boosting GCC Economies," *Finance Middle East*, October 21, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/2zbs257c

3. "And of the people there is he who buys a 'vain talk' so that he may lead others astray from the path of Allah without (real) knowledge and takes it (the revelation of Allah) for a mockery for these shall be a disgracing chastisement (punishment)." (31:6) and "Indeed successful are the believers those who in their prayer are humble and those who keep themselves aloof from Vain (words and deeds)." (23:1-3). In the first Ayat 'Lahw' (Vain talk): means anything which diverts the mind from serious thinking, and it has been interpreted as some talk, sound, or thing which diverts the attention of

man from the ultimate aim of his creation. In the second one, 'Laghv' (Vain words and actions): means all useless entertainment, wasteful of times among which music has been specifically mentioned.

4. Fitzroy Morrissey, "The Status of Music in Islamic Law: Ibn Ḥajar Al-Haytamī's (d. 974/1567) Treatise against Recreation in Its Polemical Context," *Islamic Law and Society* 31, no.3: 194–234, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685195-bja10053 ; see also Ubabuddin Ubabuddin, Mohd. Faeez Bin Ilias and Herwani Herwani, "Analysis of Music in Islamic Law Perspective," *Realism: Law Review* 3, no.2: 1–11, https://doi.org/10.71250/rlr.v3i2.70

5. Pasqualina Eckerström, "Extreme Heavy Metal and Blasphemy in Iran: The Case of Confess," *Contemporary Islam* 16, no. 2–3: 120–21, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00493-7

6. Matt Lavietes, "Singer in Tehran Arrested during Live Performance," *NBC News*, March 2, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/5n753daz

7. Sophie Frankford, "Between Welfare and Exclusion: A History of Egypt's Musicians' Syndicate," *Égypte Soudan Mondes Arabes*, (2024): 73–96, https://doi.org/10.4000/134al

8. Hossam Rabie, "How Egypt Silences Popular and Dissident Music," *Equal Times*, June 9, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/etauf5j5 ; see also Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Campaign to Crush Artistic Freedom," October 28, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/3s7fu34s

9. Omran Al. Ahmed, "Saudi Arabia Cracks down on Music 'lounges' after Conservative Backlash," *Financial Times*, September 17, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2e43kmmz

10. Music Nation was founded amid UAE government initiatives to formalize music licensing and rights management; see also "Ministry of Economy Licenses Emirati Musicians' Association to Safeguard the Rights of Creators and Musicians Enhancing Competitiveness of UAE's Creative Economy." April 10, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4574ev63

11. Tamara Kharroub, "Systematic Digital Repression: Social Media Censoring of Palestinian Voices," *Arab Center Washington DC*, June 11, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/aanc2t6d

12. Aneeza Pervez, "Witnessing Silence: The Palestinian Genocide, Institutional Complicity, and the Politics of Knowledge," *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, (June 2025): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2025.2513637 ; see also Middle East Monitor, "Over 400 Artists Join Cultural Boycott of Israel over Gaza War," September 19, 2025, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250919

Book fairs and soft power in the Middle East: A cultural journey

Ihab Shabana

This article examines Arab book fairs as metapolitical arenas where culture, power, and ideology intersect. Focusing on Egypt and the Gulf, it shows how fairs function as state-managed public spheres that shape intellectual discourse, cultural diplomacy, and political legitimacy. From secular–Islamist debates in Cairo to Gulf-sponsored literary prizes, book fairs reflect shifting regional power, censorship practices, and strategies to hegemonize cultural and religious narratives.

IN JANUARY 1992, a public debate took place at the Cairo Book Fair. In front of an approximately 30,000 people audience, some of the most prominent Egyptian thinkers contested the notion of secularism and its compatibility with Islam as a religion and an ethical frame: Farag Fuda and a Tagammu' member, Muhammad Khalaf Allah, on the one hand, and Muhammad al-Ghazali, Ma'mun al-Hudaybi and Muhammad 'Imara on the other.[1] A few years later, in 2003, the celebrated Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim, was invited at the closing ceremony for the awards of the Arab Novel Award. In an unexpected political maneuver, Ibrahim refused the Naguib Mahfuz prize – a prominent literary reward – as it was a "one-way street", for it was awarded by a government that, in Ibrahim's opinion, "lacks the credibility to bestow it."[2]

Power, politics, ideology, and culture are closely intermingled and vividly portrayed in institutionally organized literary book fairs across the Arab-Muslim world. The anguish to reclaim the terrain of literary production and ideas is not limited in the pursuit of cultural decolonization and national-religious identity, as experienced during the 1950's and 1960's. It is, also, a pathway to hegemonize social norms and export national and cultural narratives. As Roger Griffin explains, the term metapolitics refers to the set of ideas, cultural practices, and intellectual strategies aimed at shaping the deeper cultural, moral, and ideological frameworks within which formal politics takes place. Instead of focusing on policies, elections, or parties, metapolitics targets the sphere of values, worldviews, social norms, and cultural discourses[3]

National book policies are a key factor in designing cultural diplomacy and a useful prism for examining developments within each society. Book fairs constitute historically "field configuring events". In this sense, book fairs are a dynamic arena where political meanings are produced, contested, and transformed, reshaping the political and diplomatic landscape. For example, the Cairo International Book Fair (one of the largest in the region), became a key arena for negotiating Egypt's major political tensions—from debates over relations with Israel in the 1980s to clashes between Islamists and liberals in the 1990s. While regimes used the fair as a controlled venue to manage dissent, it remained a dynamic space where power relations and informal political understandings were continually reworked.[4] By the late 2000s, it both reflected and intensified the regime's legitimacy crisis ahead of the 2011 revolution. Under Sisi's regime, censorship and exclusions have become a gloomy norm. The Egyptian General Authority for Books bans political dissent,[5] as well as Islamic or opposition publishing houses,[6] in an attempt to preserve authoritarian control over knowledge production and political discourse.

The decline of traditional cultural and intellectual centers such as Egypt and Lebanon, contrasted with the rise of well-funded fairs in the Gulf and the Maghreb, mirrors broader transformations in the Arab world's geopolitical landscape. Algiers, Doha, and the Gulf, operate not only as hubs for publishers and readers, but also as stages where governments articulate national, ideological and diplomatic messages. Cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power in the Arab Gulf is channeled, inter alia, through international book fairs. These venues are closely aligned with state-led projects of modernization, global visibility, and political legitimacy.[7] Leading fairs include the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair, the Sharjah International Book Fair, the Doha International Book Fair, and, to a lesser extent, the Riyadh and Kuwait fairs. Unlike older fairs in Cairo or Beirut, the sternly state-monitored Gulf fairs emphasize pro-

fessionalism, international participation, translation initiatives, and cultural diplomacy, often positioning themselves as global rather than strictly Arab or regional platforms.

Politically, Gulf book fairs function as curated public spheres in which regimes carefully promote notions of openness, tolerance, and intellectual engagement, while maintaining firm limits on dissent. At the same time, these fairs reflect regional power dynamics and geopolitical alignments: the UAE's fairs project an image of liberal cosmopolitanism and cultural leadership; Qatar's fair has served as a site for asserting autonomy and alternative alliances, especially during periods of regional crisis; Saudi Arabia's recent cultural initiatives signal controlled social liberalization under state supervision. Concomitantly, regional competition, particularly between Abu Dhabi and Doha, is revealed.[8] Abu Dhabi's growing dominance over major Arabic literary prizes, including the Arabic Booker, reflects a broader state-led cultural strategy, rather than a retreat from critical or politically engaged literature. Despite the progressive, socially critical orientation of many prize-winning works, Emirati patronage of literature remains embedded in a political agenda aimed at reshaping the intellectual and religious discourse, especially directed toward tackling radical religious interpretations.[9]

At the same time, economic pressure, censorship, and bans on politically sensitive or religiously controversial works reveal the boundaries of cultural freedom. Shi'a religious works are mostly banned from Sunni-majority countries' book fairs, such as Algeria and Morocco. By and large, the publishing industry focuses on sponsored translations. One example is the Bloomsbury–Qatar Foundation Publishing (BQFP), which exemplifies Qatar's dynamic cultural policy by combining international publishing standards with local literary development. Through bilingual publications, translation initiatives, training programs, and public reading initiatives, it promotes Arab culture while positioning Qatar as an emerging hub for regional and global knowledge production.[10] Additionally, in 2021, the Sheikh Zayed Prize was awarded to Jurgen Habermas, whose social theory is held in very high regard in the Arab world. Also, in the last decade many fairs have increasingly emphasized children's and young adult literature, often in partnership with schools and educational institutions.[11]

Taken together, Gulf book fairs exemplify how culture is mobilized as a tool of governance, diplomacy, and ideological management, making them key sites for analyzing contemporary state – society relations and regional competition in the Arab world. In tandem, book fairs generate a political arena where tensions between cultural liberalization and authoritarian governance are showcased.

NOTES

All links accessed on 17/12/2025

1. Alexander Flores, "Secularism, Integralism and Political Islam: The Egyptian Debate," in *Political Islam: Essays from the Middle East Report*, ed. Joel Beinin & Joe Stork (University of California Press, 1997), 86.

2. Ali Gharib, "Lesson from Egypt: How to Reject A Literary Prize," *Pulse Media*, February 2, 2011, https://tinyurl.com/y2wjuxn8

3. Roger Griffin, "Interregnum or Endgame? The Radical Right in the 'post-fascist' era," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 163-178.

4. Ido Shahar, "Between books and politics: Cairo International Book Fair as a field configuring event," *History and Anthropology* 28, no. 2 (2016):1-22.

5. Farid Y. Farid, "Egypt's War on Books," *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/63xe8kkh

6. Middle East Monitor, "Exclusion of Islamic publishing houses from Cairo International Book Fair," January 25, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/hu3tr4cr

7. Ahmed Kanna, *The City as Corporation* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

8. Stefan Weidner, "Spotlight on the UAE's 30th Abu Dhabi Book Fair," *Qantara*, June 6, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/4x5f222m

9. Ibid.

10. Nawaf Al-Tamimi, Azzam Amin & Nourollah Zarrinabadi, *Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power: Exploring the Effects on National Identity and International Stance* (Springer, 2023).

11. Ayelet Levi, "Book Fairs in the Arab World: Between Culture and Politics," *The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute*, March 26, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/y2v3xhvy

MUSEUMS POLICIES AND CULTURE IN WEST ASIA AND EGYPT

Alexandra Vasilou

This article examines how museums and cultural infrastructures in West Asia and Egypt function as instruments of state policy, national identity formation, and soft power. In the Persian Gulf, flagship museums such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Qatar's National Museum network, together with cultural campaigns and Saudi Vision 2030 heritage developments, exemplify centralized and coordinated approaches to global visibility and nation-branding. In Egypt, the Grand Egyptian Museum combines heritage preservation with global engagement. Iran follows a more outward-facing strategy, shaped by geopolitical constraints, promoting its heritage through cultural centers abroad. Across the region, these initiatives demonstrate how heritage transforms culture into a tool of governance and projection.

The Persian Gulf: "Mega-museums" as Soft Power Hubs

IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, Saadiyat Island is envisioned as a meeting place for cultures and religions through cultural initiatives. The emblematic "Abrahamic Family House" - a mosque, a church and a synagogue, adjacent to each other- symbolizes Interfaith acceptance. Saadiyat also hosts an arts center, educational institutions, accommodation, and several museums, aiming to function as a global cultural hub.

Within this cultural landscape, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, exemplifies cultural soft power in the Persian Gulf. Under an intergovernmental agreement with France, Abu Dhabi paid €400 million for the use of the Louvre name until 2037 and €190 million for art loans until 2027. Its curatorial narrative spans a multicultural spectrum, including Arab manuscripts, a 14th-century Mamluk Qur'an, artefacts from Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria and Japan, as well as Renaissance works such as Bellini's *Virgin and Child*, encouraging interfaith dialogue. Contemporary art, including Giuseppe Perrone's *Propagation*, featuring the fingerprint of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, reinforces national symbolism. At its 2017 inauguration, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum described the museum as "a bridge between East and West" and "a global meeting point for art and culture".[1]

The Museum of the Future (2022), extends this vision by linking cultural prestige with innovation, signaling ambitions beyond oil dependence, an idea echoed in Ryan Koopman's *Under The Rain Of Light*, where "the oak grows not from soil but from cultural sediment".[2] This approach is reinforced through centralized governance bodies such as the UAE Soft Power Council, the Office for Public and Cultural Diplomacy, and the Cultural Development Fund, which ensure that films, exhibitions and festivals align with foreign policy objectives. The UAE's relatively short statehood, predominantly non-citizen population, and high-power distance social structure intensify the need for a coherent cultural narrative.[3]

In Qatar, the National Museum (2019) "represents Qatari architecture and strengthens our cultural identity", according to Minister Al-Ali. Exhibitions, like *Lehmesa* (the only sea turtle that nests on Qatar's shores): Return by Moonlight and *A Nation's Legacy, a People's Memory: fifty years told*, trace the nation's journey from desert life to the oil era and emphasize natural heritage and innovation, expressing Qatar's drive for global knowledge exchange.

A parallel strategy is evident in Saudi Arabia, where Vision 2030 includes the $64-billion Diriyah project. The project restores the UNESCO-listed At-Turaif district, the first capital of the early Saudi state (1727-1818) and the birthplace of House of Saud, while integrating museums, accommodation and heritage-oriented urban spaces that combine traditional Najdi architecture with modern urbanism, attracting global attention.[4]

The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM)

The Grand Egyptian Museum (2025) constitutes the flagship project of Egypt's civilizational narrative. Its opening ceremony blended Western classical and operatic music with Egyptian instruments, Nubian melodies, Coptic chants, and Sufi tunes, accompanied by visuals of churches and mosques to symbolize national unity and religious coexistence, projecting an image of a "refined civilization"

that is legible to a global – particularly Western- audience. The drone formation spelling the word PEACE above the museum symbolized the government's attempt to associate Egypt's ancient cultural heritage with a contemporary narrative of stability and reconciliation, particularly in the presence of international political leaders.

President Al-Sisi's stated: "I welcome you all in your second home, Egypt, the land of civilization and history, the land of peace and love [...] the great edifices of civilization are only built during eras of peace, and thrive through a collaborative spirit shared by all peoples".[5] A video tribute to British archeologist Howard Carter, discoverer of Tutankhamun's tomb, reframed Egypt's archeological past as one of partnership rather than colonial subjugation.

The museum's galleries present a linear civilizational trajectory from the Pre-Dynastic Period to Roman Egypt, emphasizing continuity over fragmentation. The monumental 11-metre, 83-ton statue of Ramses II at the entrance visually links ancient sovereign power with the modern state. An official announcement by the State Information Service, emphasizes GEM's superiority over other global museums, asserting Egypt's cultural authority through monumental architecture, advanced technologies, and its strategic location near the Pyramids. International collaborations with Japan and UNESCO integrate global expertise and legitimacy.

Although two of its twelve rooms a dedicated to Tutankhamun, the museums "does not restore "Pharaonism" as a rigid political symbol, but transforms it into a universal civic identity, embracing Egyptian history from the Coptic and Islamic era to modernity".[6]

The (not so) invisible Iran

Iran's cultural strategy reflects a layered and constrained approach. Despite ideological framing and geopolitical tensions, the state remains visible through the preservation of Persian and Islamic heritage, via an extensive network of museums, UNESCO sites, official cultural programs, and Iranian cinema.

Cultural diplomacy includes bilateral exchanges, such as museum delegations to China aimed at "promoting bilateral ties" through cultural cooperation. Minister Salehi-Amiri declared that "cultural diplomacy is an important strategy in securing and advancing cultural, economic, and political development [...] In Iran's cultural diplomacy, shared cultural heritage plays a special role in expanding relations between the two countries".[7]

Iran also maintains a network of cultural centers located in European capitals – including Rome, Athens, Sofia, Vienna - offering language courses, exhibitions, and academic cooperation. Persian cultural festivals across Europe further enhance visibility. Domestically, urban symbolism such as the "Kneel Before Iran", statue in Tehran, depicting Shapur I triumphing over Valerian, connects ancient imperial history to cotemporary geopolitics. Initiatives such as music performances at Persepolis, public art in-

stallations, and inclusive projects like Tehran's "Mary the Virgin" metro station, aim to bring religious minorities closer to the public.[8] At the same time, murals depicting martyrs merge religion and nationalism, framing contemporary loss through Shi'a identity and reinforcing collective loyalty.

Across West Asia and Egypt, cultural heritage operates as a strategic instrument of soft power, though states mobilizes it in distinct ways. Egypt foregrounds its Pharaonic past through institutions such as the Grand Egyptian Museum, which functions both as a monument to antiquity and as a diplomatic instrument projecting Egypt's desired image as cultured, peaceful and globally engaged. Yet, everyday social and economic inequalities continue to challenge this idealized narrative.

Persian Gulf states, by contrast, rely mostly on wealth-driven cultural spectacle: mega projects such as Louvre Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 and coordinated programs such as Qatar Museums' Nation of Evolution,[9] function as tools of nation-branding, global visibility, and technological progress.

Iran, however, follows a distinct model of cultural mobilization. In addition to drawing on its deep Persian heritage to construct soft power, it is transforming contemporary individuals into central figures of a living national epic. Through murals, posters and public monuments, these figures are activated to ignite collective pride and emotional cohesion. Across the region, these soft power tools reveal how culture is mobilized to shape identity, implement policy, and project state influence.

NOTES

All links accessed on 04/12/2025

1. Samihah Zaman, "World celebrates Louvre Abu Dhabi opening," *Gulf News*, November 01, 2018, https://bit.ly/3LwKpse

2. Anna Seaman, "Exhibition envisions UAE architecture reclaimed by nature, from Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque to Louvre Abu Dhabi," *The National*, November 11, 2025, https://bit.ly/49HPCra

3. Daniel Gołębiowski "From Europe to the Arab Peninsula? Cultural Diplomacy Practices in the United Arab Emirates," *Studia Europejskie, Studies in European Affairs* 4 (2020): 151-173.

4. Diriyah Company, official website, https://www.diriyahcompany.sa/en/diriyah

5. State Information Service, "President El-Sisi's Speech at the Opening Ceremony of The Grand Egyptian Museum," November 2, 2025, https://bit.ly/3WKXyQV

6. State Information Service, "The Grand Egyptian Museum. from a cultural heritage to a soft power hub," November 20, 2025, https://bit.ly/49X5Htp

7. Tehran times, "Iran-China joint cultural heritage plays effective role in deepening ties," October 14, 2025, https://bit.ly/4qOit3j

8. Armenian National Music, "National Philharmonic Orchestra of Armenia performs at Persepolis," September 9, 2025, https://bit.ly/4pKFYbZ

9. The Consulate General of the State of Qatar, "Qatar Museums Celebrates 50 Years of Its Cultural Journey with the Launch of the "Nation of Evolution" Campaign," September 24, 2025, https://bit.ly/49NYr2G

GLOBAL SPORTS GOVERNANCE AS A FIELD OF POWER COMPETITION

Ilias Mitrousis

Since the late 2000s, the Saudi, Emirati, and Qatari monarchies have become influential actors in the global sports industry through the acquisition of football clubs, sponsorship deals, broadcasting rights, and the hosting of mega-events. This article argues that while these investments are often described as "sportswashing," they serve broader political purposes. Internationally, they maintain global visibility; regionally, sport has become part of intra-Gulf rivalry; and domestically, sports investments aim to bolster the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes by associating national pride from sporting successes with wider economic diversification and modernisation efforts.

THE ACQUISITION OF MANCHESTER CITY by Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth vehicle in 2008 inaugurated a wave of state-backed investments, particularly in European football, and significantly accelerated the Gulf monarchies' involvement in the sports sector.[1] In 2011, Qatar Investment Authority acquired Paris Saint-Germain, spending approximately 1.3 billion euros on player transfers by 2021 and transforming the club into a contender for European honours.[2] Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Musaid al Saud acquired Sheffield United in 2013, and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund followed in 2021 with the purchase of Newcastle United.[3] Between 2013 and 2017, Gulf-based airlines secured kit sponsorship deals with numerous elite European clubs: Emirates emblazoned its logo on the jerseys of Arsenal, Real Madrid, AC Milan, PSG, Hamburger SV, Olympiacos, and Benfica; Etihad Airways sponsored Manchester City; and Qatar Airways did so with Barcelona and Paris Saint-Germain. Apart from generating considerable profit, investment in high-profile European clubs serves as a nation-branding practice that ensures the Gulf monarchies' international visibility regardless of competitive outcomes. According to industry observers, by 2015, half of the world's top ten football club brands benefited from Gulf sponsorship or ownership. The Gulf's penetration of the global sports industry also expanded into broadcasting. A prime example has been Qatar's BeIN network, which, by 2022, had secured exclusive rights to broadcast major tournaments such as the EPL, La Liga, Ligue 1, the UEFA Champions League, and Europa League, across the Middle East and North Africa.[4]

Recent scholarship suggests that, although interpreting these developments through a "soft power" or sportswashing lens has explanatory value, such approaches fail to capture the full range of political objectives at stake. Both frameworks assume that the primary audience is the international public. However, Gulf sports ventures aim, firstly, to cultivate novel ideational and performance-based claims in favour of the domestic regime, and secondly, to function as a power multiplier in regional competition. In other words, Gulf monarchies invest in international sport not only to elevate their global image and influence, but also to enhance regime security and pursue a soft-balancing strategy against regional rivals.[5]

Critics have increasingly defined the global proliferation of Gulf states' sporting ventures as "sportswashing," referring to the practice of using sports to deflect attention away from human rights violations and pursue state image rebranding. Saudi Arabia, for instance, came under increased scrutiny as its aggressive investments in global football followed the 2018 assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, its military campaign in Yemen and the mass imprisonments of women's rights activists. Human rights organisations also condemned FIFA's decision to award the 2034 World Cup to the Kingdom as "a moment of great danger" accusing the body of sacrificing human rights for Saudi reputation management. A 2022 study further described Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup as a "paradigm case of sportswashing" based on the extent to which the event could divert attention from widespread migrant labour abuses and other human rights concerns. Nevertheless, there is no concrete evidence to suggest that sportswashing significantly improves a state's international standing. On the contrary, Western media coverage of Qatar before and during the 2022 tournament was predominantly negative, despite Doha's public relations efforts, and the 2022 Saudi takeover of Newcastle United provoked fan protests and sustained journalistic scrutiny.[6] Moreover, a study employing content analysis of *New York Times* articles about the Qatar World Cup, found that more than half were negative in tone, compared to only 20 per cent about the 2018 World Cup in

Russia. Such findings underscore the limits of sportswashing's effectiveness, as it depends not only on the amount of invested capital but also on factors such as geopolitical positioning and the established ideational frameworks of its intended audiences.[7]

The 2017 blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt elucidated how sports have become enmeshed with regional security politics. Historically, Qatar had harboured existential concerns regarding Saudi hegemony and its securing of the 2022 World Cup hosting rights in 2010 represented a decisive assertion of its global standing. Abu Dhabi leveraged its connections in the UK's sports industry to defame Qatar even prior to the blockade. Investigations revealed that Manchester City personnel mediated the UAE's hiring of a British public relations firm to generate negative media coverage of Qatar in the UK. Indicatively, one British outlet published thirty-four articles accusing Qatar of supporting terrorism within a period of two months, while in 2017, Dubai security chief suggested that stripping Qatar of the 2022 World Cup would constitute such a devastating hit that it could end the crisis. Within weeks of the blockade's imposition, Paris Saint-Germain finalised the €222 million record acquisition of Brazilian forward Neymar, a move intended to demonstrate Qatar's defiance of its neighbours' attempts to isolate it. Subsequently, Neymar signed a five-year contract and agreed to serve as a spokesman for the World Cup.[8] These episodes illustrate how football has become an arena for intra-Gulf proxy competition, with club ownership furnishing platforms for information warfare and diplomatic manoeuvring alike.

Domestically, sports investments serve as a strategy to reinforce the regimes' performance-based legitimacy. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have all integrated sports in their long-term national "Vision" plans. In this context, the construction of sports infrastructure, the hosting of international events, and the rapid development of professional sports leagues are strategically tied to economic diversification and societal modernisation. These investments yield measurable outputs, such as tourism revenue, job creation, athletic participation rates, and health indicators, which ruling elites can use as evidence of successful governance. In the UAE, the regular hosting of international tennis, racing, golf, and rugby events embeds sports into a broader tourism-driven growth strategy that reinforces Dubai and Abu Dhabi's position as globally competitive economic hubs, linking regime governance to the economic prosperity of citizens. In Saudi Arabia, the immense expansion of the sports sector is tellingly reflected in the increase of multisport clubs from nine in 2015 to 126 by 2024, which —combined with an aggressive policy of signing world-class football players to the Saudi Pro League, such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar, and Karim Benzema— reinforces narratives of rapid national growth and modernisation that appeal to the youth, 60% of whom are under 30 years old. Similarly, by commercially exploiting its $220 billion World Cup infrastructure, Qatar aims to establish itself as a hub for sports tourism.[9] The

national pride generated by these achievements contributes to the fostering of a national identity directly linked to the "modernising" regime, thereby increasing the political legitimacy returns from sports investments.[10]

In conclusion, Gulf sports investment reflects a convergence of distinct objectives addressing distinct audiences, namely the international public, the domestic population, and rival states. Sportswashing constitutes only one among several motivating logics, and an excessive focus on it risks obscuring how sport is deployed to bolster regime legitimacy and security vis-à-vis domestic populations and neighbouring states. The fact that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE pursue parallel competing sports investment strategies on regional and global fronts underscores that global sport governance is no longer merely a site of symbolic representation or commercial rivalry. Instead, it has evolved into a distinct field of political power competition, where soft power, regime security, and geopolitical rivalry intersect.

NOTES

All links accessed on 22/12/2025

1. Majd Abuamer, "The Rise of Gulf States' Investments in Sports: Neither Soft Power nor Sportswashing?," *The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS)*, June, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/3dzb7u9d

2. Pranav Katyal, "Top Bins: An Exploration of Qatar's Use of Sport and Capital," *Athens Journal of Sports* 8, no. 4 (2021): 272.

3. ESPN, "A timeline of Saudi's Arabia's unprecedented sports investments," February 28, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/57tw4fst

4. Craig L LaMay, "Qatar's Bein Sports and Football Broadcasting in the Middle East: International Influence and Regional Rancor," in *Football in the Middle East: State, Society, and the Beautiful Game*, ed. Abdullah Al-Arian (Oxford University Press, 2022), 306; see also Majd Abuamer, op. cit.

5. Nagapushpa Devendra, "Soft Power or Geoeconomic Contest? A Comparative Study of Gulf Sport Diplomacy," *Public Relations Inquiry*, September 25, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X251383019

6. Amnesty International, "Global: Confirmation of Saudi Arabia as 2034 FIFA World Cup host puts many lives at risk," December 11, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/yc5efr48 ; see also Fruh, Kyle, Alfred Archer, Jake Wojtowicz, "Sportswashing: Complicity and Corruption," *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 17 (1): 101–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2022.2107697

7. Mohammed el-Nawawy and Mohamad Hamas Elmasry, "World Cups Apart: Comparing New York Times Coverage of the 2018 Russia and 2022 Qatar World Cup Tournaments," *Soccer & Society* 26, no. 3 (2025): 437–454, https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2024.2446862 ; see also Paul Michael Brannagan and Joel Rookwood, "Sports Mega-Events, Soft Power and Soft Disempowerment: International Supporters' Perspectives on Qatar's Acquisition of the 2022 FIFA World Cup Finals," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 8, no. 2 (2016): 173–188, https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2016.1150868

8. Abdullah Al-Arian, "Beyond Soft Power Football as a Form of Regime Legitimation," in *Football in the Middle East: State, Society, and the Beautiful Game*, ed. Abdullah Al-Arian (Oxford University Press, 2022), 59-62.

9. Jonathan Grix, Paul Michael Brannagan, "Authoritarian States and Global Sport: The Contested Cases of Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia," *Social Sciences* 13, no. 12 (2024): 701. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13120701 ; see also Amnah Mosly, "Game Changer: Opportunities and Challenges for Saudi Arabia's Sports Diplomacy," *Gulf Research Center*, August 12, 2025, https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/294

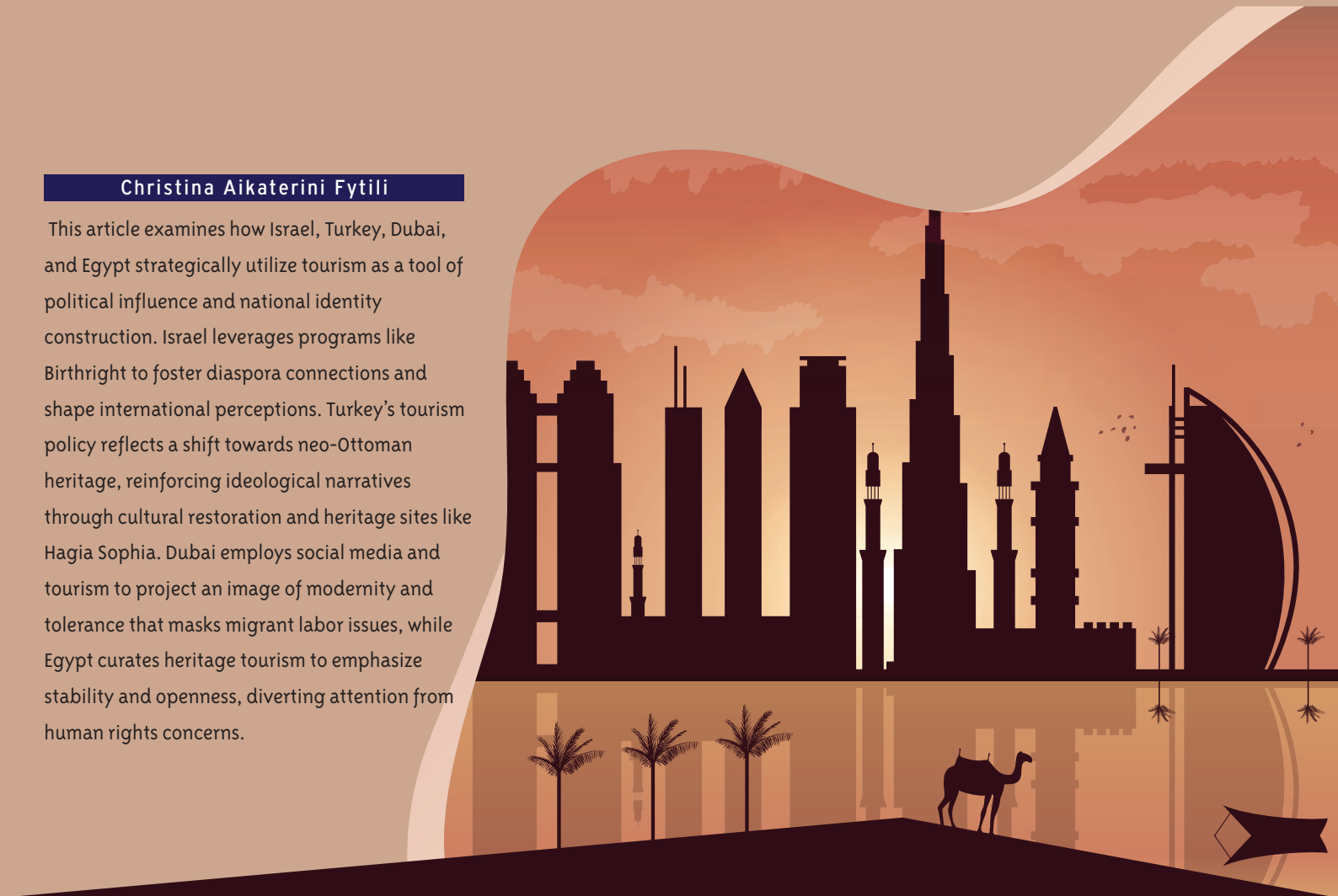
10. Jon Hoffmann, "The Arab Gulf's New Nationalism," *Foreign Policy*, August 7, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/58ycdwu5

TOURISM AS A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST

THE CASES OF ISRAEL, TURKEY, EGYPT, AND DUBAI

Christina Aikaterini Fytili

This article examines how Israel, Turkey, Dubai, and Egypt strategically utilize tourism as a tool of political influence and national identity construction. Israel leverages programs like Birthright to foster diaspora connections and shape international perceptions. Turkey's tourism policy reflects a shift towards neo-Ottoman heritage, reinforcing ideological narratives through cultural restoration and heritage sites like Hagia Sophia. Dubai employs social media and tourism to project an image of modernity and tolerance that masks migrant labor issues, while Egypt curates heritage tourism to emphasize stability and openness, diverting attention from human rights concerns.



TOURISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST is not merely an economic sector but a strategic political field in which states aim to shape identity, project narratives, and negotiate power. Tourism intersects with legitimacy, heritage, modernity, and soft-power projection, making it central to how states cultivate international reputation.

Its political value is heightened by the region's colonial histories, ideological divides, and persistent conflict. In this way, tourism becomes a way to escape conflict-centered narratives and present themselves as stable, cultured, modern, or spiritually significant. At the same time, tourism intersects with nation-building. Heritage, museums, cultural festivals, and cultural events become tools through which states decide which histories to highlight and which to silence, shaping how citizens and foreigners understand the region's past and present.

The Middle East's tourism landscape ranges from ancient civilizations to ideological nostalgia and futuristic spectacle. This article explores how Israel, Turkey, Egypt and Dubai each use tourism as a distinct political tool.

Israel

Israel's tourism is woven into nation-building, diaspora politics, and diplomacy. Since 1948, the state has curated a landscape that merges archaeology with nationalist narratives, reinforcing the idea of Israel as both an ancient homeland and a modern democracy. A central component of Israel's strategy is the politicization of heritage. Heritage sites play an ideological role, foregrounding Jewish continuity, while marginalizing other historical layers. The City of David project, run by a private foundation aligned with nationalist movements, is criticized for advancing a singular historical interpretation that legitimizes Israeli claims to East Jerusalem. Similarly, Masada, as one of Israel's most symbolically loaded sites, is framed through state-supported narratives emphasizing Jewish heroism and resistance.[1]

The most explicit example of tourism-driven identity building is the Taglit-Birthright Israel program (1999-), which offers free trips to young diaspora Jews. Participants are immersed in curated narratives emphasizing Israeli innovation, military necessity, democratic values, and the historical vulnerability of the Jewish people.[2] By shaping the worldview of global Jewish youth, Israel effectively secures a sympathetic international constituency.[3] Critics highlight the trip's selective portrayal of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the exclusion of Palestinian perspectives, yet, the program strengthens alumni emotional attachment and political advocacy in favor of the state.

Israel also projects a cosmopolitan image. Tel Aviv markets itself as cosmopolitan, LGBTQ-friendly, and technologically advanced, projecting an image that counters the conflict-centered perception of the region. This strategy, sometimes described as pink-washing, uses modernity to reframe the state as progressive and Western-aligned.

Turkey

Turkey presents a different model, rooted in its shifting national identity. As a state between Europe and Asia, and heir to the Ottoman

Empire, tourism becomes a stage for negotiating these identities. Early AKP governments presented Turkey as democratic, diverse and EU-oriented. Under Erdogan, the narrative shifted toward neo-Ottoman revivalism and Islamic heritage. The Haghia Sophia's 2020 conversion into a mosque capped this ideological trajectory,[4] reinforcing Ankara's aspiration to lead the Muslim world.

Tourism can also be a way to exert economic and geopolitical pressure, demonstrated by Russia's suspension and the reinstatement of tourist flows after Turkey shot down Russian jets in 2015.[5] Domestic legitimacy also hinges tourism, as the government discourse on economic recovery and visitor growth as proof of stability and strong leadership following crises such as the 2016 coup attempt.

Culturally, tourism contributes to the rebranding of national identity,[6] by elevating Ottoman-Islamic heritage over secular republican symbols, reshaping public memory and aligning cultural production with its ideological agenda. Yet the political deployment of tourism carries contradictions. Turkey sells modernity, while promoting a conservative cultural identity. Moreover, its development projects signal global ambition, while sparking debate over heritage preservation.

Egypt

Egypt's tourism strategy centers on antiquity and monumentalism, using a controlled historical narrative to project a sanitized national image, reinforce state authority, and position the country as a regional civilizational hub.[7] Under Mubarak, tourism gradually became both an economic necessity and a strategic tool. The state's narrative emphasized stability, continuity, and controlled modernization and, by extension, tourism advertising depicted Egypt as a timeless and accessible destination.

The Arab Spring disrupted this narrative, exposing fragility and decreasing arrivals. The post-2013 government adopted a strategy of recentralizing historical symbolism under a discourse of order, national rebirth, and infrastructural transformation. Projects such as the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) encapsulate this shift. The GEM is not only an archaeological institution but also a soft-power project intended to showcase Egypt as a stable, modern, technologically capable state.

Tourism also strategically redirects attention from human rights concerns. As such, the government frames its extensive security apparatus as necessary not only for national stability but also for protecting the tourism industry.[8] Thus, the politics of tourism in Egypt intertwine with broader issues of militarization, economic restructuring, and authoritarian governance. In this way, heritage becomes a justification for strong state control.

Dubai

Dubai represents a radically different model: a future-oriented brand rather than a historical continuity. Tourism is the engine of

national image-making and economic diversification, built on spectacle. Mega-projects such as the Burj Khalifa, Palm Jumeirah, Dubai Marina, and the Dubai Mall are often framed as demonstrations of state capability and economic vision.

Dubai seeks to position itself as the exception within the Middle East: a place where politics appear to vanish beneath a surface of modernity. Nevertheless, this depoliticized image is itself political. By presenting Dubai as a hub where global citizens can live, work, and vacation without encountering conflict, the government asserts its model of governance as a regional alternative to both authoritarian stagnation and revolutionary upheaval.[9]

Heritage is incorporated through selective cosmopolitanism. The Crossroads of Civilisations Museum positions Dubai as a historical crossroad of cultures, religions, and trade, suggesting that tolerance and coexistence are longstanding traits. In doing so, cultural heritage becomes political messaging: an image of openness crafted for international consumption and embedded within the tourism economy.

Tourism also helps obscure social realities the state prefers to keep hidden- labor conditions for migrant workers, political restrictions, and minimal civility are masked by an aesthetic of luxury and seamlessness. Digital tourism enhances Dubai's geopolitical posture. During moments of regional crisis, the emirate's social-media presence continues to project stability and prosperity. This contrast increases Dubai's attractiveness as a safe haven for investment and relocation.[10]

Tourism in the Middle East is a political system of narrative power. Israel uses tourism to reinforce national identity and diaspora loyalty. Turkey uses tourism as an instrument of neo-Ottoman projection and geopolitical balancing. Egypt turns its ancient past into a political resource, legitimizing state authority, promoting order, and situating the country as a civilizational anchor in the Arab world. Dubai, perhaps the most distinctive case, transforms tourism into a post-political aesthetic project through spectacle and digital visibility.

Tourism shapes how states see themselves and how they want to be seen. It organizes memory, identity, and belonging. It allows governments to manage internal tensions, attract foreign support, and navigate complex geopolitical landscapes. Whether through ancient monuments, historical revivalism, diaspora connections, or futuristic social-media spectacle, tourism becomes a language through which Middle Eastern states articulate their visions of the present and their aspirations for the future.

NOTES

All links accessed on 20/11/2025

1. Shahar Shilo & Noga Collins-Kreiner, "Tourism, Heritage and Politics: Conflicts at the City of David, Jerusalem," *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 24, no.6 (2019): 531-532.

2. Leonard Saxe et al., "The Reach and Impact of Birthright Israel," *Contemporary Jewry* (2020): 3-4.

3. Leonard Saxe et al., "Generation Birthright Israel: The Impact of an Israel Experience on Jewish Identity and Choices," *Brandeis University* (2009): 13-18.

4. Turkish Minute, "Turkey to start charging foreign visitors to Hagia Sophia after reversion to mosque," October 31, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/22msfnxr

5. Bahadır İnanç Özkan, "A Study on the Use of Tourism as a Soft Power Instrument in International Relations," *Journal of Tourismology* 7, no.1 (2021): 79-80.

6. Travel and Tour World, "Cultural and Tourism Revival of Turkey with the New "Legacy for the Future" Project," August 9, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2aw64pac

7. Waleed Hazbun, "Globalisation, Reterritorialisation and the Political Economy of Tourism Development in the Middle East," *Journal on Tourism and Sustainability* 4 (2021): 329-330.

8. Thomas Richter, "Politics, Economics and Tourism Development in Egypt: insights into the Transformations of a neo-patrimonial rentier state," *Third World Quarterly* 29, no.5 (2008): 952.

9. Marcus L. Stephenson, "Tourism, Development and 'Destination Dubai': Cultural Dilemmas and Future Challenges," *Current Issues in Tourism* 17, no.8 (2013): 5-6.

10. Middle East Eye, "UAE: Dubai Expo 2020 workers claim forced labour practices," February 2, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/4ab8v9cu ; see also Dawit Negussie Tolossa et al, "Social Media and Tourism: A Systematic Literature Review," *A Global Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 6, no.4 (2023): 6.

The use of social media during Israel-Palestinian & Iranian-Israeli conflicts

Harry Brown

When we think about modern warfare, we often think of battles and the ways in which new developments - such as drones - have affected them. In recent conflicts, ranging from the Russia – Ukraine war to the Israel – Hamas conflict and the Iran – Israeli confrontation, new battlefields have emerged. The digital world, and more precisely social media, has been weaponised, with platforms such as Telegram, X, Reddit, YouTube, and Tik-Tok used in a plethora of ways within these conflicts. The three main objectives of these new kinds of operations include the battlefield, psychological warfare and shaping narratives to justify the legitimacy of action. This new reality creates new needs in the field of security, but also new weapons that states can utilise. New-age war is a hybrid affair.

DURING THE IRANIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT, social media platforms were flooded by images and videos of the war. Although at first glance all this information appears to be random attempts originating from multiple sources, it is in fact part of a network of deeper strategies. Weapons in this part of the war take the form of bots, AI-generated videos, articles from seemingly independent sources, and messages. Tel- Aviv and Teheran have such tools in their arsenals and have been swift to utilize them.

The first and primary objective (goal) of the aforementioned weapons is the battlefield itself. During the October 7 Hamas assault, the Israeli base at Nahal Oz was subjected to a methodical assault by Hamas forces. This was possible thanks to geotagging, i.e. the analysis of 'data' such as geographical features and troop locations via social media. The above use of social networking applications and the collection of information from public sources has become known as Open Source Intelligence (OSINT).[1] Nowadays, information is disseminated quickly by anyone who has access to it. Since information is exploitable and has become a weapon of war, states actively use it for operations and to sabotage their opponents' operations. Disinformation, or the concealment of the truth can push opponents to take actions they would not otherwise take. Israel, for example, banned journalists from filming or broadcasting live from areas that had been hit by Iran,[2] thus depriving them of the opportunity to gather open-source intelligence information about its strikes. Iran, for its part, shut down internet access to its citizens, stating explicitly that its adversary was using it for military purposes.[3] Official accounts in Iran and Israel have shared fake images, such as a downed F-35 in the case of the former and old footage of missile barrages unrelated to the current war in the case of the latter.[4] Methodically, through the use of information, the battlefield itself can be shaped. Consequently, control of what is available on the web and dissemination of information has become crucial in conflicts.

Of course, what is presented as information is not only aimed at the battlefield. Wars are not won only on the ability to win engagements, but also on the ability to subdue the soul of the enemy and create a sense of despair and defeat. Control of the narrative is crucial. Societies from antiquity to the present have gone to war and overthrown regimes because of the way information, in the form of news or ideology, was presented to them. This case is not different, and this constitutes the second objective (goal) of these weapons: psychological warfare. The target of the latter is the morale of the enemy population and forces. During the exchange of fire between Iran and Israel, videos of people fleeing squares in Tel Aviv and piling up in bunkers went viral.[5] Similar videos circulated online showing people cheering in Iran after airstrikes from Israel. Such images create the perception of an unpopular regime, thus justifying the strike and minimizing possible backlash.

Although all previously mentioned videos were proven fake or older videos of different events, one can understand how

they can affect the narrative and shape public opinion. In this war of information, psyop operations do not only target the enemy population; they also target their own. Through what is presented as military success, governments try to create unity and legitimacy by portraying the war as being conducted in a successful manner. Social media acts as a real-time barometer of public opinion.[6]

The final objective (goal) of these weapons is the rest of the world, i.e. to convince them that what they are doing is right. Since the beginning of hostilities in Gaza, all sides have tried to dominate the narrative. The latter offers legitimacy of action and creates a sense of good versus evil. Since the beginning of the Gaza conflict, both sides have used fake news and videos to demonise their adversary or to undermine the credibility of their narrative. Stories such as the beheading of 40 babies by Hamas fighters and the labelling of two Israeli siblings that lost their parents during the 7 of October attack as "crisis actors: are prime examples of shaping a story.[7] Not having control over this narrative of right or wrong can have serious repercussions.

Activism in the U.S. and Europe has applied pressure on governments leading to various results, such as the limitation on arms shipped to Israel and in many cases the recognition of the state of Palestine. An AI-generated image depicting a refugee camp with the quote "all eyes on Rafah" is the most shared image across the web regarding the conflict and brought attention to military strikes by Israel on the camp. On Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook posts that used the hashtag *freepalestine* outnumbered by far the ones with the hashtag *standwithIsreal*. Part of why the pro-Palestinian hashtags dominate the web is the use of algospeak, which refers to the altering of symbols and words by pro-Palestinian creators in order to evade demonetarization on major platforms. An example of this practise includes the use of the watermelon emoji instead of the Palestinian flag and the altering of words of such as *genocide* and *Gaza*.[8] The world was more engaged with pro-Palestinian content. In 2025, a survey by YouGov recorded the lowest public support for Israel regarding the war in Western Europe. These shifts in the Western world, are presenting Israel with an existential threat, due to its dependency on allied countries. Israel's foreign office has contracted three public relations companies in the U.S. to improve the country's plummeting image among the American public.[9] In recent research published by the Pew Research Centre, 59% of the U.S. public now holds an unfavourable opinion of the Israeli government.[10] The crisis in Gaza has also revealed the deeper structures of the modern international system. Russia and China have used state media and major social networking platforms in favour of Hamas thus showing their close ties with Iran and their opposition to Israel, a close U.S. ally, and its narrative about the war.[11]

As our societies evolve, so does the way that we engage in warfare. Acts of information gathering, psychological warfare and propaganda have always been prevalent in wars. In today's world, these operations are not carried out by leaflets or by putting boots on the ground and actively engaging in spying. This can happen instantly and in a matter of seconds through social media. The total shutdown of the internet in Iran and the partial control of information by Israel reveal how effective this form of operations is. The notion of modern warfare is hybrid.

NOTES

All links accessed on 24/12/2025

1. Emerson Johnston, "From Tweets to Tactics: The Transformative Impact of Social Media on Modern Warfare Dynamics," *Stanford international policy review*, December 4, 2023, https://fsi.stanford.edu/sipr/tweets-tactics

2. Simon Speakman Cordall, "How does Israel restrict its media from reporting on the Iran conflict?," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4dah2pvn

3. Deepa Parent, "'It's like being walled in': young Iranians try to break through internet blackout," *The Guardian*, June 25, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/mv5ke32w

4. Matt Murphy, Olga Robinson & Shayan Sardarizadeh, "Israel-Iran conflict unleashes wave of AI disinformation," *BBC*, June 21, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/ycxdny3s

5. Mared Gwyn Jones, "How out-of-context videos mislead social media users on the Israel-Iran conflict", *Euronews*, June 19, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/3ft8jy84

6. Romane Armangau, "Battleground online: How social media is fueling the Israel-Iran conflict," *Euronews* , June 20, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/bd9vd8yb

7. Assma Maad, William Audureau and Samuel Forey, " '40 beheaded babies': Deconstructing the rumor at the heart of the information battle between Israel and Hamas," *Le Monde*, April, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/4227eeeb ; see also Olga Robinson & Shayan Sardarizadeh, "False claims of staged deaths surge in Israel-Gaza war," *BBC*, December 22, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/ezvba3wz

8. Nick Robins-Early and Kari Paul, "'All eyes on Rafah': how AI-generated image swept across social media," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2024, https://tinyurl.com/3a4sfz8y ; see also Naomi Nix, "Pro-Palestinian creators use secret spellings, code words to evade social media algorithms," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/2t8cuaw3

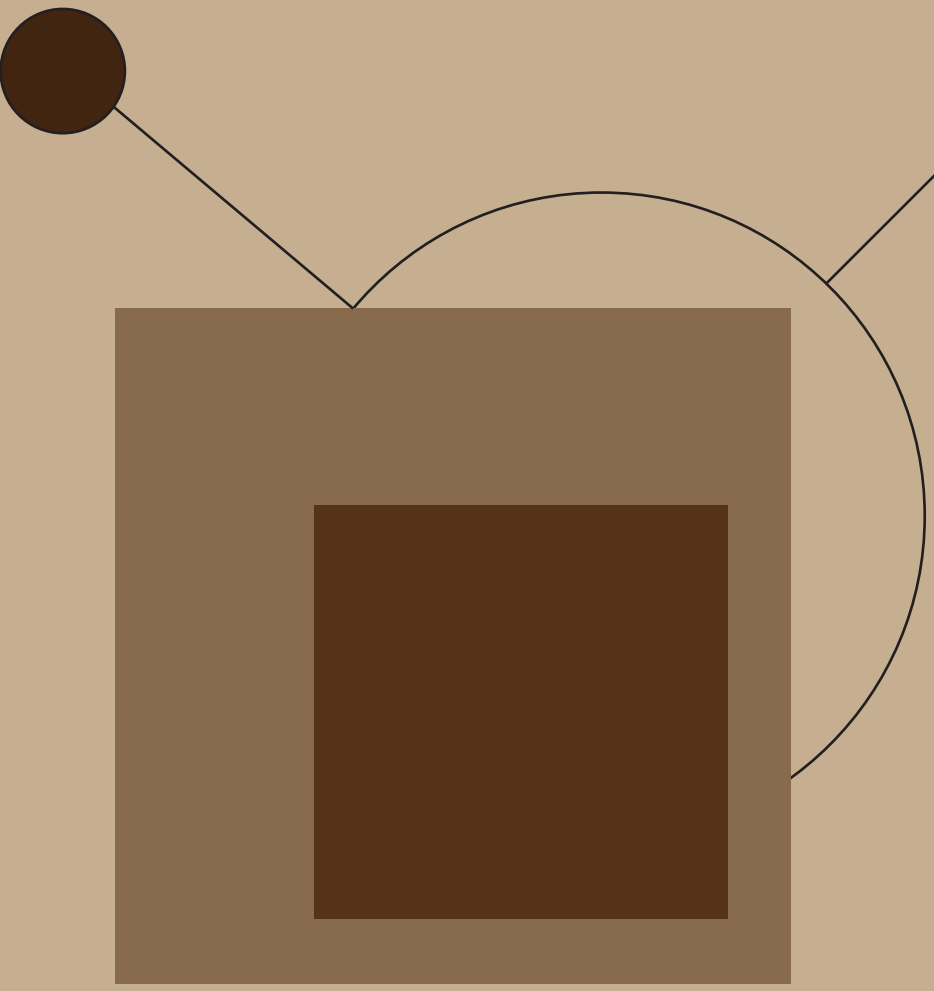
9. Jon Henley, "Public support for Israel in western Europe at lowest ever recorded by YouGov," *The Guardian*, June 3, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2htrnjzp ; see also Simon Speakman Cordall, "Spinning genocide: Why is Israel trying to reframe its war on Gaza?," *Al Jazeera*, October 31, 2025 https://tinyurl.com/47ajx6s5

10. Ted Van Green, Steven Shepard, Andy Cerda, Gabriel Borelli and Jocelyn Kiley, "How Americans View the Israel-Hamas Conflict 2 Years Into the War," *Pew Research Center*, October 3, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/2jd2u9n5

11. Steven Lee Myers and Sheera Frenkel, "In a Worldwide War of Words, Russia, China and Iran Back Hamas", *The New York Times*, November 3, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/wp7me8bb

ISRAELI UNIVERSITIES AND ACADEMIC BOYCOTT

The limits of neutrality



Elen Schirmeister

The contentious debate surrounding the academic boycott of Israeli universities, framing it as a clash between the universalist principle of academic freedom and a particularist commitment to social justice and Palestinian rights. Proponents of the boycott, most notably the BDS campaign, argue that it is predicated on Israeli academia's deep complicity in state policies of occupation, apartheid, and genocide, as evidenced by institutional ties to the military and the ongoing denial of Palestinian educational rights. The analysis presents data on the boycott's growing impact, including severed institutional ties and a decline in international research collaboration. At the same time, the article rigorously engages with the primary counter-arguments, which hold that the boycott infringes upon core academic values, punishes critical internal voices, and risks being counterproductive.

WHILE UNIVERSITIES ARE REGARDED AS BEACONS OF DEMOCRACY and human rights, they can also be seen as structures deeply entrenched within political and national structures. The academic boycott is a significant tool used in many social justice movements including the Palestinian cause, according to the website of the BDS movement, which is a nonviolent Palestinian-led movement promoting boycotts, divestments, and economic sanctions against Israel. The call for an academic boycott of Israel's academic institutions creates a complex tension between the universalist idea of academic freedom and a focused commitment to social justice and Palestinian rights, raising fundamental questions about the role of academia in political conflict. The BDS movement argues that an academic boycott of Israeli universities is necessary, as these institutions play a crucial role in planning, implementing and justifying Israel's occupation and apartheid policies, and now genocide, while maintaining a close relationship with the Israeli military. As historian and anthropologist Maya Wind explains, Israeli universities function as "settler colonial" institutions on several levels, such as direct military-research partnerships, architectural and ideological support, and training and recruitment for key military intelligence units, most notably unit 8200. This integration blurs the line between civilian scholarship and military application, forming the foundational evidence for the boycott's claim that Israeli universities are not neutral actors but participating institutions within a system of control.[1]

Lastly, Israel violently denies the right to education to Palestinian students through raid's and bombings of schools and universities.[2] In her report, Francesca Albanese, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, stated that "universities are part of the 'corporate machinery' in the occupied territories that sustain the denial of self-determination and have enabled conditions for the displacement of Palestinians". As centers of intellectual growth and power, they have sustained the political ideology underpinning the colonization of Palestinian land, developed weaponry, and overlooked or even endorsed systemic violence.[3]

In the past year, universities in Northern Europe and North America have cut ties with their Israeli counterparts, mainly due to internal pressure from the student movement and scholars. The growing success of the academic boycott is reflected in the significant decrease of jointly published articles not only in countries such as Spain and South Africa, where governments have been among the most critical of Israel's war in Gaza, but also in less outspoken countries such as the Netherlands and Canada.[4] According to David Matthew's article "Global research collaboration with Israel sharply down this year", in 2024, 9.2% of Israeli preprints had a co-author based in Spain, whereas in 2025 this number has dropped to 5.9%. The most significant drop was recorded in South Africa were the co-authored preprints with Israel went from 3.4% 2024to 1% in 2025.

It is important to note that the student body in Europe[5] and North America[6] has played an important role in the academic boycott with protests and the occupation of university-owned buildings demanding that their universities sever ties with Israeli institutions. This can be reflected in the number of student protests held in the United States. Between 7 October 2023 and 3 May 2024, more than 1,360 student protests were held, demanding that their universities sever ties with Israeli institutions.[7] This figure is striking considering that universities threatened the protesting students with disciplinary measures such as expulsion and in some cases

even arrest. Academic institutions were under immense pressure from these protests as the President of the United States, Donald Trump threatened to cut funding to universities that would allow "illegal Protests".[8] While 98% of the protests were peaceful, 3,552 protests across 81 campuses where between October the 7th 2023 until June 28th 2024. It is documented that in some instances, excessive force (such as rubber bullets) was used by Police to dismantle the protests.

Despite the growing support for the academic boycott, criticism against it has also been voiced. The opposition to the academic boycott is robust, drawing on principled commitments to academic freedom and concerns about effectiveness and unintended consequences. The main arguments are that boycotts hinder the free exchange of ideas, impede cross-border collaboration, and violate the core principles of the university as an open forum for inquiry.[9] Proponents of this view suggest that, the boycott punishes Israeli academics who are vocal against their government's policies.[10] Thirdly, Israel is singled out for an academic boycott while other countries with severe human rights violations are not subject to such widespread action, thereby creating a double standard. Finally, it is argued that a boycott may destroy channels of communication with critical-thinking individuals, who have the power to influence change from within, thus decreasing the chances for peace.[11]

The case of the Russian academic boycott could serve as a cautionary case study. According to Dmitry Dubrovsky, "an Analysis of the Russian academic boycott shows it disproportionately harmed the most internationally-oriented, liberal, and critical scholars, while strengthening state-aligned, isolationist factions", suggesting that if the boycott spreads, similar consequences could also occur for Israeli academics.[12] Some critics of the boycott have proposed alternative actions such as public reprobation, public protest campaigns, and protests against public lectures by individuals involved in violations of academic freedom.

In conclusion, while the academic boycott of Israel is still an evolving issue, it is not a simple policy debate but a vast clash between social justice and academic freedom. A key aspect of this matter can be credited to the power that moral arguments hold. On the one side there is a substantial desire to take action against injustice, and on the other hand there is concern over limiting academic freedom of expression. Science should be used for the advancement of humanity, and surely institutions that are proven to be complicit in genocide do not serve this cause. The boycott must therefore be understood as a tool to hold accountable institutions that turn a blind eye to genocide in favor of political alliances and funding. The boycott is grounded in substantial, documented evidence of the deep ties between Israeli academia and the state's military and colonial projects.

NOTES

All links accessed on 20/12/2025

1. Maya Wind, *Towers of Ivory and Steel*, (New York: Verso books, 2024), 97-117.

2. BDS movement, "Academic boycott," https://bdsmovement.net/academic-boycott

3. Francesca Albanese, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967," *United Nations*, 16 June -11 July, 2025, https://shorturl.at/TilTS

4. David Matthews, "Global research collaboration with Israel sharply down this year," *Science-business*, September 25, 2025, https://shorturl.at/PDSXZ

5. NL Times, "Pro-Palestinian activists occupy UvA building; riot police deployed," April 14, 2025, https://tinyurl.com/4dc6wb7v

6. Edward Helmore, "Pro-Palestinian protesters arrested at University of Washington occupation," *The Guardian*, May 6, 2025, https://shorturl.at/Hp1RG

7. Bianca Ho and Kieran Doyle, "US Student Pro-Palestine Demonstrations Remain Overwhelmingly Peaceful | ACLED Insight," *ACLED*, May 10, 2024, https://bit.ly/4qoc3GX ; see also Stephen Semler, "Cops Arrested Over 3,500 Pro-Gaza Campus Protesters, New Data Shows," *Forever Wars*, July 24, 2024, https://bit.ly/4papER4

8. Russell Contreras, Rebecca Falconer, "Trump admin cracks down on pro-Palestinian protests at colleges," *Axios*, May 5, 2025, https://bit.ly/4p7IgST

9. Cary Nelson, "What Is at Stake in an Academic Boycott?," *Inside higher ed*, September 6, 2024, https://bit.ly/497vgFU

10. Nicola Davis, "Universities around the world cut ties with Israeli academia over Gaza war," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2025, http://bit.ly/4atOgCD

11. The Guardian, "The pros and cons of boycotts," April 21, 2005, https://tinyurl.com/yeahk5vt

12. Dmitry Dubrovsky, "Between Repression and Boycotts," *Cisrus*, July 21,2025, https://tinyurl.com/mry5pm5a

Department of Political Science and International Relations