

## **The Gulf Effect in the Western Balkans after the Bosnian War**

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### **Abstract**

The Bosnian War (1992-1995) and the subsequent destruction that followed in the Western Balkans provided a favorable setting and a power vacuum for external powers to impose their influence on the already politically volatile region. Infrastructure damage, lack of energy resources, and the high Muslim population present within the Western Balkans provided a favorable setting for Gulf states to further extend their influence. Major Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Iran, began offering humanitarian assistance and using political initiatives and soft power to support post-conflict reconstruction. The initial Gulf state interference, through bodies such as charitable organizations and state-backed apparatus, has since expanded, encompassing the spheres of the economy, education, culture, and even religion. This paper will examine the rising Gulf state influence within the Western Balkans, shaped by the aftermath of the Bosnian War and by the utilization of soft power, such as NGOs and state-backed apparatus, to impose Gulf state political hegemony in the post-conflict development of the Western Balkans.

*Keywords:* The Balkans, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Qatar, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), State apparatuses, Soft power

## The Gulf Effect in the Western Balkans after the Bosnian War

### Introduction

The Western Balkan countries, with their already mixed ethnic structures, add to the confusion in the region. The fragility of this ethnic structure turned the region into a sphere of influence for other powers and led to a power struggle (Mitrevska & Ruzhin, 2018). In this context, influential actors such as the European Union, Russia, and China are increasingly focusing on the region in an effort to expand their economic influence and geopolitical presence; the region's strategic location, energy resources, and trade routes intensify the competition among these major powers, while political instability and ethnic-cultural tensions contribute to deeper foreign interventions and struggles for dominance (Mitrevska & Ruzhin, 2018).

Further, in addition to the superpowers in the Western Balkans, regional actors such as Türkiye and the (Persian) Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran (Demirtas, 2013; Ekinci, 2013; Mandaville & Hamid, 2018; Progonati, 2016;) have been trying to gain influence, for religious, economic and political interests, especially since the 1990s (or the Bosnian War), they started to approach the region with soft power tactics and political techniques.

The rise of regions is noticeable in the world order that developed step by step after the Cold War and evolved into a multipolar system (Katzenstein, 2005). The countries that will be discussed as actors in the article, Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, and Qatar, are called the Persian Gulf or Gulf countries because they are located in the region called the Persian Gulf. These countries are considered as regional powers that are becoming stronger, especially due to the energy deposits they have, and because they have significant economic power, even though the UAE and Qatar are quite small in terms of geography and population (Cerioli, 2024; Miller, 2016; Saeed & Kadhim, 2025). These countries, which have developed their economies resulting from the underground wealth in their regions (and Iran's situation can be handled a little differently compared to other Gulf countries), they have, somewhat necessarily, chosen the path of becoming more prominent in the international arena as soft power due to their inability to progress in terms of population; and therefore their military and domestic labor force (Hertog, 2017).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and state instruments such as funds, institutions, state companies, official media institutions, etc. (Aljabiri, 2015; Jones & Newlee, 2022; Volný, 2023), are used especially by the (Persian) Gulf countries as soft power tactics and methods (Diwan, 2021; Soy, 2016). Although there have been studies investigating soft power in the Western Balkan countries, it can be said that studies in this field, especially through NGOs and state institutions (such as state funds, organizations, and institutes affiliated with ministries), remain extremely limited. Existing studies investigating the soft power effect in the region generally focus on the soft power studies of superpowers (Baykara, 2020; Bieber & Tzifakis, 2019; Jaćimović et al, 2023; Koppa, 2021; Oosterveld et al., 2019). Even though they focus on countries such as the Gulf countries and Iran, there are still gaps in information and data, especially regarding NGOs and state institutions.

While studies acknowledge the use of soft power by major Gulf countries and Iran in the Western Balkans (Koppa, 2021; Mandacı & Karacalarlı, 2017), there is a significant gap in research specifically analyzing the role of NGOs and state apparatuses in this process. This article seeks to fill that gap by exploring how these actors function as instruments of soft power in the region.

The concept of soft power, which has entered the international relations literature since the 1990s, was first used in Joseph S. Nye's work *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of*

*American Power*. In this work, Nye argues that the American nation, which was perceived to be in decline throughout the 1980s, did not lose much of its power and maintained its hegemony. According to Nye, the strongest evidence of continued US hegemony is its reliance on what he terms "soft power" (Nye, 1990). Soft power is a concept that is far from the realist perspective, despite its use of "power" in an adjective clause; it is more constructivist or neo-liberalist, rather than hard power, as the concept of power advocated by the realist perspective (Gallarotti, 2011).

It is also important to highlight and analyze in depth other non-brute manifestations of soft power, such as structural features, cultural influences, ideological frameworks, and institutional mechanisms, rather than focusing only on its more obvious powerful expressions, such as war, armed conflicts, and military domination. The soft power dimensions mentioned are conceptualized as "soft power" in international relations. It especially strengthens the hand of the country using soft power compared to the country on which it is used, turning it into an advantage in the diplomatic field. Neoliberal and constructivist approaches in international relations emphasize that soft power is an active point. It is thought that persuasive ability, cultural attractiveness, and institutional cooperation lead to meeting and cooperation on common interests, and that soft power elements are effective in their formation (Özel, 2018). As Özel emphasizes, culture, structure, ideologies, organizations, or non-governmental organizations can create dependency, intellectual or ideological transformation in the target country. The reasons mentioned cause the target country to become politically dependent on the country through soft power.

As conflicts took place in smaller areas compared to the past and hot conflicts between superpowers decreased, especially after the Cold War, the importance of soft power increased considerably. Although there is no clear consensus on the concept of "soft power", it has been used since the post-World War II period (Akhundova, 2015).

Yugoslavia, which had multinational, complementary, and cross-cutting social structures, ruled the Western Balkans for part of the 20th century. However, with its disintegration, the region's political structure became riddled with important conflicts. After the Tito Era and the 1980s, the region witnessed violence and brutality resulting from ethnic and religious conflicts. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the violence in the region, many countries emerged seeking political and economic stability and development (Ramet, 2018).

Newly formed states in the region, some of which still face recognition problems in the international arena, are working to complete their state institutionalization and to achieve stable economic development. These problems have left the region relatively vulnerable to other international powers and entities and open to intervention and negotiations by the European Union. Despite international efforts, the development levels of some of these countries remain lower than expected, and, due to this and similar issues, they have faced challenges, including integration with the European Union. Problems such as weak and fragile governments, economic instability, and ethnic tensions that have not been fully resolved continue in the region, and the region is still remembered with the legacy of violent events in recent history (Elbasani, 2013).

## Methodology

This study focuses on the soft power tactics used by the major Gulf countries in the Western Balkans with a qualitative approach, especially the soft power tactics used by Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, and Qatar in their relations with the countries in the region. The research is based on an analysis of academic literature, official reports, government sources, etc., to assess how these external actors influence the region politically, economically, and culturally.

Although the Gulf Cooperation countries come to mind according to some definitions in the literature, in this article, Iran will be added in addition to Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, which are the major Arab countries of the Persian Gulf that will be mentioned in the article because it is possible to find academic studies in other branches that support the definition to be used in the article and mention Iran by adding it to the mentioned Gulf (Ehteshami, 2013; Potter, 2009). In this article, we will call these 4 countries "the Gulf countries", arguing that it is a holistic and partly more specific definition of the 3 main GCC countries and Iran.

In addition, the countries the article mentions as the Western Balkans are mainly Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia (and, to a lesser extent, Croatia). Countries with a significant Muslim population, such as North Macedonia and Kosovo, have remained in a position that attracts less attention from the mentioned Gulf countries due to the development of the new state system (Oğultürk, 2014). The current political situation being dominated by other dominant elements, such as the EU (Bojadzievska Danevska & Lokce, 2025). Therefore, the article will not focus too much on these two countries and will continue with a method that examines other Western Balkan countries via the Gulf countries, which predominantly employ soft power.

It offers a comparative analysis of the influence methods used by the Gulf countries in the Western Balkans. Additionally, this analysis includes examination of religious, cultural, media, and institutional interactions and highlights their common strategies and unique approaches. The study also uses secondary sources such as academic articles, books, and policy documents, as well as primary sources, official reports of regional and international organizations, to obtain data. But it should be acknowledged that the four Gulf countries that the article mainly focuses on are authoritarian states dominated by either kingdoms or religious hegemony, and this has the potential to bring about some problems in the transparency and collection of state-centered data characters.

This study uses a case study approach of soft power to explain the soft power influence of certain Gulf countries in the region, given the complex struggle for foreign influence in the Western Balkans. Important examples such as religious institutions financed by Saudi Arabia, Iranian cultural centers, UAE-led infrastructure projects, and the influence of Qatari media through Al Jazeera Balkans will be the focal point in understanding the soft power effects used by the Gulf countries in the Balkans.

In an attempt to remain objective and also delve deeper into the subject, the research critiques the literature pertaining to the geopolitical significance of the Balkans and the geopolitical criticality of soft power in the region, beginning with the theory of soft power coined by Joseph Nye. The research encompasses the aforementioned viewpoints to present an overall analysis of the level at which the Gulf states play/operate within the geopolitical context of the Western Balkans.

This study acknowledges the limitations inherent in qualitative research, particularly in terms of data availability and potential biases in source materials. Since Gulf influence in the Western Balkans is often achieved through informal networks and non-state actors, some data may not be publicly published. Future research can be further enriched with quantitative official data of direct or indirect work of state apparatuses in the region, interviews with policy makers or representatives of NGOs affiliated with the mentioned Gulf countries in the region, etc., in order to understand the issue in more detail. In addition, it should be clearly stated that although the word NGO contains the word "non-governmental", since the four Gulf countries that the article covers and focuses on are authoritarian in character (either a kingdom, a set of emirates, or a dominant religious authority), the state-centered NGOs in question often show a "governmental" feature, and this should not be denied for the reason stated. By synthesizing historical and cultural context, policy analysis, and geopolitical perspectives, this methodology makes it possible to systematically examine how soft power is used by the Gulf countries in

the Western Balkans and its effects on the geopolitical context, regional stability, and power dynamics.

### **Gulf Influence in the Western Balkans**

With the legacy of recent political instability, the Western Balkans have remained open to the influence of extra-regional actors, making it attractive for global powers to gain influence in the region. Some of these extra-regional actors are Gulf countries. Over the years, states that can be called "middle powers" in the Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, have worked to expand their regional spheres of influence and gain power in non-regional areas. They tried to create a sphere of influence by effectively using soft power during the "reconstruction" process that occurred after the Bosnian War in the Western Balkans. Their approaches differ significantly according to economic priorities, ideological goals, and strategic objectives. Table 1 below summarizes the key policy priority indicators and methods for each key Gulf country.

Saudi Arabia gave priority to religious ideology, considering the Muslim population in the region, and aimed to spread Salafi-Wahhabi ideas, which were the official state ideology until recently. Through mosques, religious schools, restoration of religious buildings, scholarship programs, and financing of NGOs, Saudi-backed institutions have sought to shape the religious and ideological landscape of the Balkans. In addition to religious outreach, the country has also engaged in economic investments, particularly in education and infrastructure, reinforcing its presence through a combination of financial aid and cultural diplomacy.

Although Iran is not an Arab country and a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, it has played a role, especially through the promotion of Shia ideology with soft power in the Western Balkans. Unlike Saudi Arabia, which focuses on Sunni religious expansion (Of course, a separate parenthesis is opened about Wahhabi ideology within Sunni Islam), Iran, which adopts the Shiite/mullah regime ideology, establishes connections with intellectual and political elites using cultural institutions, academic collaborations, and religious networks. Although it has limited economic influence, Iran attempts to operate through cultural centers, publications, and Shiite-focused educational initiatives.

Contrary to Saudi Arabia and Iran, the UAE and Qatar have a less religiously integrated approach and rather opt for influence that has immediate tangible interests, such as the economy and media influence. The UAE actively promotes infrastructure development and investment through state mechanisms and has large-scale investment projects that strengthen economic ties with the states within the Balkan region. Although Qatar invests in the financial sector, it also focuses highly on media influence through its powerful tool, Al Jazeera Balkans.

Through the analysis of these different approaches, this framework provides a comparison of the approaches used by each Gulf state to harness religious, economic, cultural, media, and institutional tools to enhance the presence or power of that Gulf state within the Western Balkan states. While the approaches of both the Saudi and Iranian states in the Gulf are geared towards the formation of a sphere of influence within the Balkans through the utilization of ideology-based approaches, the UAE and the state of Qatar demonstrate the soft power that both of these states embody through the use of economic and media influence. The following table offers a comparison of these approaches to soft power that are being utilized in the Gulf states.

**Table 1: Gulf Influence Comparative Framework**

Country	Religious Influence	Economic Influence	Cultural Influence
Saudi Arabia	Strong Salafi-Wahhabi promotion through mosques, schools, and NGOs	Investments in education, infrastructure, and business projects	Spreads Saudi-style Islam via educational and cultural programs
Iran	Shiite ideological expansion through cultural centers and Islamic institutions	Limited economic investments; focuses on ideological expansion	Promotes Persian and Shiite traditions in Balkan intellectual circles
UAE	Minimal religious involvement, economic diplomacy is prioritized	Heavy investment in infrastructure, tourism, and trade agreements	Promotes modern development projects to align with Gulf branding
Qatar	Limited religious influence; funds Islamic institutions selectively	Significant investment in media, tourism, and real estate projects	Cultural diplomacy through sponsorship of events and institutions

Source: the author(s)

### Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, which embraces the ideology of the Salafi Wahhabi state (Blanchard, 2008; Koç, 2019; Seyedi Asl, 2022; Türk, 2022), has also adopted Sunni Islam and its ideology of a theocratic monarchical regime as its core governing principles (Mneimneh, 2011; Mouline, 2014). This set of principles has had a major influence on its foreign policy, which uses the principles of Salafi-Wahhabi activist ideology as soft power, especially in areas where Muslims live (Athanasoulia, 2020; Simbar & Karami, 2021). It has thus utilized religious outreach, funding for Islamic institutions, and cultural diplomacy to spread its influence throughout the world.

The Arabian Peninsula, which has made both an economic and ideological expansion in foreign policy since the 1980s, and one of the most important and successful actors in this peninsula, which is very assertive and successful in this foreign expansion, is undoubtedly Saudi Arabia; carries out effective activities in Caucasian geography (such as Dagestan and Chechnya) (Hahn, 2011), countries with a Central Asian Muslim population (Khodayar et al., 2022), countries in Southeastern Asia with Muslim population (such as Indonesia) (Ravi, 2019), and Western Balkans (Babić, 2014; Hesová, 2021).

Approaching the citizens of Muslim countries with soft power instruments for certain social, economic and political purposes has an important place in the official foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, and it attaches particular importance to this situation, especially in its relations with the Western Balkan countries, because after the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995, it peaked with the increase in religion-based discrimination in the period, and the oil-rich Gulf countries in the region, new political support and the already economically bad situation of the 2008 financial crisis, as the Balkan countries became more economically depressed, they began to emerge as an attractive partner in the region (Peneva, 2019).

Organizations such as educational institutions are indeed an important move by actors using soft power tools in the region, especially Saudi Arabia; the Islamic Faculty of Zenica University and the Islamic Faculty of Bihac University, established in Bosnia and Herzegovina with funds supported by Saudi Arabia, are universities and faculties established with the support of Saudi Arabia. It is a fact that these faculties of Islamic sciences have an education system dominated by Hanbali, which is the official sect of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Salafi-Wahabi ideas, although not fully claimed with some changes (Panos, 2015). The fact that the textbooks, the number of texts translated from Arabic to Bosnian in the 20-year period between 1990 and 2010 is 513, which is approximately 5 times the number of texts translated from Turkish to Bosnian (Isanović, 2010, cited in Panos, 2015), taught in the Islamic Faculties of the Zenica and Bihac Universities are written by Salafi authors and that almost all of the lecturers were educated in Saudi Arabia adhering to the Hanbali school proves that the Salafi Wahabi thought is dominant in these faculties (Panos, 2015).

During the Bosnian War between 1992 and 1995, non-governmental organizations from the Islamic world mobilized for the destroyed infrastructure, economic and social problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Saudi Arabia was one of the leading countries in this campaign: the International Islamic Relief Organization (Saudi Arabia), The Saudi High Commission Foundations such as for Relief (Saudi Arabia), and the Muwaffaq Foundation (Saudi Arabia) were organizations that were active in the region and dominant in providing services, especially in aid activities (Sfeir, 2007). Founded by Prince Salman Ibn Abdulaziz Al Saud (Governor of Riyadh), Saudi High Commission (SHC) (1993) rebuilt mosques destroyed during the war in Bosnia; it led the revival of Bosnia's social institutions by opening schools, cultural centers and orphanages, and furthermore, by 2002 the SHC's aid to Bosnia had reached 600 million US dollars (Henderson, 2003). Some reports confirm these figures, and donations provided for relief were spent to sponsor 10,000 Bosnian war orphans and 3,300 pilgrims. Saudi Arabia built or restored 160 mosques in Sarajevo (Bilefsky, 2008).

Approximately, it is estimated that 10 percent of mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a higher percentage likely, were financed by Saudi-based funds. The funds and management of mosques built with Saudi funds, such as the King Fahd Cultural Center and Mosque in Sarajevo, are in the hands of the Saudis rather than the relevant foundations of Bosnia, and are managed in accordance with the Wahhabi-Salafi tradition; it is being built closer to the Wahhabi-Salafi mentality and Saudi influence rather than the historical texture of the region (such as the Ottoman architecture and tradition) (Panos, 2015).

According to Panos (2015) after the 1992-1995 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to the supporting news of the press, there were 17 settlements and a population of around 3000 Wahhabi individuals (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2011, cited in Panos, 2015), small village-like formations or settlements places form a community with a predominant Wahhabi population and stated that they act independently of Bosnia's Islamic official foundation institutions.

Saudi Arabia is making progress in the Western Balkans region, not only in the cultural and social fields but also in the economic field, and is trying to develop friendly relations with the countries in the region. In order to increase trade with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, a tripartite committee of Saudi Arabia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia was established. With the establishment of this committee, Saudi Arabia has announced that it will carry out high-budget investment projects in the Western Balkans. A construction tender worth approximately 100 million Euros in Serbia was decided to be held in 2017. In Sarajevo, the decision to purchase and carry out construction works was jointly made by Saudi Arabia (Lilyanova, 2017).

The Saudi-Bosnia-Herzegovina Relief High Commission, in addition to humanitarian aid, uses non-governmental organizations. In addition to publishing books dominated by Salafi

views and trying to spread this ideology, Saudi Arabia also patronizes Salafist groups close to itself in the Western Balkans (Azinović, 2017). Soft power uses its powers effectively, and it is thought that 245 Saudi Arabia-related foundations operate in the region, some of which are currently closed or inactive (Lilyanova, 2017).

## Iran

Iran, which officially adopted the Shiite sect as its state ideology and governance model after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has strategically utilized Shiite expansionism as a significant tool of soft power, particularly in the Middle East, in order to extend its influence and consolidate its geopolitical presence in the region. Through this approach, Iran has successfully managed to establish strong ties with several key countries, including Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon, where Shiite populations are present, enabling it to exert both political and military influence (Sinkaya & Mabon, 2015).

The main and concentrated Iranian influence domain is the Middle East, given the Shiite communities in other nations such as Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq. Nonetheless, due to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Bosnian War, it sought to create friendly relations with the Muslims of the Balkans, where the majority of the population is Sunni Muslims, through Iranian soft power politics. Although the Balkans are a region that lacks Shiite communities, Iran has sought to create lasting Shiite foreign policies that will keep the country well rooted within the region, dating back to the end of the 20th century. Among the most exceptional Iranian foreign policies that can be noted would be its support for the Bosnian Muslims, specifically during the Bosnian War that occurred from 1992 to 1995. In this particular conflict, the Iranian government not only provided support in terms of ammunition, military, and logistics, but the Iranian government also played a crucial part in preparing Bosnian soldiers for battle through the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which played an essential function in designing the Bosnian military power dynamics (Progonati, 2017).

Iran's aid to Bosnia has continued since the beginning of the war in 1992, and during the war, military ammunition and Iranian Revolutionary Guard soldiers were actually involved in the war (U.S. Senate, 1997, p. 63). Additionally, it is quite possible that soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard also provided significant military training to Bosnian fighters (U.S. Senate, 1997, pp. 14-25; 27). The following example can be given as evidence of Iran's efforts to deliver weapons and people to Bosnia at that time: Croatian authorities examined a passenger plane going from Iran to Zagreb on September 10, 1992. As a result of the search operation by Croatians, authorities confirmed that the aircraft was carrying thousands of weapons and bullets. Investigations revealed that some of the individuals on board the plane were members of Iranian military units, reinforcing concerns about Iran's covert military presence and strategic ambitions in the region (Cafiero, 2022, cited in Dinçel, 2023).

Iran, just like Saudi Arabia, joined the region with the Bosnian War of 1992-1995, and despite the arms embargo imposed during the war, it helped the Muslim Bosnian people to a considerable extent; Iran planned to continue its influence during the war and after the war, and in fact, in regions such as Sarajevo, Mostar, Zenica, Bihac and Visoko, Iran aimed to maintain its ties with the region and the Bosnian Muslim population, thanks to "charity institutions," in other words, NGOs. CIA officer Robert Baer, who served in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Bosnian War, stated that Iran had a great influence and effectiveness on the Bosnian people. Again, according to Dinçel (2023), CIA reports stated that approximately 200 Iranian agents were working or active in various institutions or foundations in Bosnia in 1997.

The Iranian Cultural Center, located in Sarajevo, carries out its active activities as a soft power, especially for the purpose of introducing Iranian culture and Shiism to the region. Iran, which tries to carry out activities in academic and intellectual circles, also funds soft power

tools serving in the field of education with the Bosnian-Iranian College, which it opened outside Sarajevo. In addition, it is claimed that some American and European representatives, in their meetings with Bosnian representatives from time to time, warned them against Iran's activities in the region and made suggestions such as "The future of Bosnia is not in Tehran, but in Europe." as proofs that Iran has a significant influence on the region (Bardos, 2013).

Iran Cultural Center focuses especially on academic and intellectual circles in Bosnia, and they also publish a magazine called Beharistan, where Shiite and Iranian propaganda is made in a subtle and intelligent way. Molla Sadra Institution, established in Sarajevo in 2003, is one of the Iranian state-supported institutions within the scope of Iran's soft power tools in the region, serving similar purposes. Through institutions, such as Avicenna (Ibn-i Sina) Institute in Sarajevo (1996), World Islamic Sciences Center, and International Al-Mustafa University, Iran has the opportunity to make some political, cultural, and religious propaganda in the Western Balkans. The Avicenna Institute also operates not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also tries to carry out academic cooperation and studies in Serbia and Croatia (Berkolli, 2021, cited in Dinçel, 2023).

In the Western Balkans, Iran not only carries out its activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also seeks to have influence in other countries in the region. As a matter of fact, the Rumi Foundation, which was opened in Albania in 2007, is an example of an NGO within the scope of Iran's soft power tools in the region. This institution, which initially translated and published Islamic philosophy or more rational works, then started to translate the works of Iran's leading Shiite clerics into Albanian and started publishing these works. In addition, in similar activities in Albania, the religious Bektashi group, which is a significant minority in Albania, tried to present itself as a branch of Shiism, but in reality, Bektashism does not have a significant historical connection with Shiism (Berkolli, 2021, cited in Dinçel, 2023). The Sufi Islamic tradition, which is dominant in the Western Balkans, is being reinterpreted through the Shiite tradition through Iran's policies in the region, and the attempt to present it as the Shiite branch of Bektashism is a good example in terms of evidence.

Although Iran is not as active and prominent as other actors using active soft power in the region, the Gulf countries especially Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, it has still managed to develop ties with the political, economic, cultural and academic elites in the region and has managed to penetrate the region through intelligence; particularly sought a field for itself in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania (Koppa, 2021).

### **The UAE and Qatar**

Among the most influential states in the Gulf region, alongside Saudi Arabia, are the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar. However, unlike Saudi Arabia, which largely utilizes religious and ideological expansion as a means of exerting influence, these two Gulf countries, the UAE and Qatar, tend to approach foreign relations, particularly in the Balkans, with a strong emphasis on economic investments, trade agreements, and financial tenders. Rather than prioritizing religious outreach, the UAE and Qatar strategically engage in economic partnerships to expand their regional presence (Bartlett et al., 2017).

A good example of the aforementioned economic relationships could be the ever-growing relations between the UAE and Serbia, especially after the election of Aleksandar Vučić as the president of Serbia in 2012. The relationships between the UAE and Serbia were improved extensively when Vučić became the president of Serbia, leading to cooperation between the UAE government and Serbian institutions. These cooperation areas include the core sectors of the economy, agriculture, defense, and education, showing that the UAE is behind the growth of this region through investment (Prelec, 2024).

Further, additional proof of the increasing economic presence of the UAE within the Balkans can be identified with respect to critical transportation-infrastructure programs developed in Albania. With respect to this aspect, high-stakes schemes such as the Sheikh Zayed Airport project, the Tirana Elbasan Road construction project, and the proposed donation of 2.5 billion US dollars to the port of the city of Durres are some of the critical indicators, depicting the increasing economic cooperation between the UAE and the government of Albania (Krzymowski, 2023). In addition to this aspect, the increasing economic influence of the UAE regarding the increasing economic cooperation between the UAE and the Albanian government has also contributed significantly to the establishment of strong relations between the two countries in the field of tourism, with numerous UAE nationals and investors demonstrating increasing fascination with the Albanian tourism sector due to the critical economic cooperation established between the two nations, which can be said to be majorly structured along the lines of the economic interests of the UAE (Beshku, 2023).

Another highly promising example of the UAE's involvement in the Balkans can be drawn regarding the UAE's emerging economic involvement with the country of Montenegro. In this context, despite the emerging factor of the UAE having a low economic impact within the borders of Montenegro compared to the nations included within the Balkans, the UAE has proved to be a critical exception with the donation of a total of 320 million US dollars between the years 2013 and 2022. Moreover, this critical economic participation in the country proves the willingness of the UAE to move beyond the boundaries of economic participation in the critical targeting of sectors and to contribute greatly to generating significant economic participation even in countries in which the economic participation of the Gulf countries is considered low (Krzymowski, 2023).

It organizes the Sarajevo Business Forum (SBF), one of the important financial activities in the Western Balkans, under the leadership of the GCC countries, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The forum, attended by important business actors and government officials in the Western Balkans and officials from the GCC countries, has been creating a basis for growing economic relations between the two regions since 2010 (Sarajevo Business Forum (SBF), 2025).

Furthermore, another major key actor of the Gulf who has actively engaged in influencing economic and cultural development in the Balkan area with strategic investments is Qatar. One of the major ways Qatar influenced the Balkan area can be viewed through Croatia, where Qatar's government donated 8 million euros to the building of the Islamic Center in Rijeka, which was formally inaugurated in 2013 (Raos, 2023). This act of donating finances to the area clearly states Qatar's role in developing Muslim centers.

Apart from its financial investments, another method that Qatar has employed as a soft power strategy in the Balkans to increase its presence in the region is through the use of media communication. One way that this has been achieved is through Al Jazeera Balkans, which is a local office of the well-respected worldwide media organization Al Jazeera, entirely owned and controlled by the state of Qatar. Al Jazeera Balkans is based in Sarajevo, has a fully functional production center in Zagreb, and is one of the most powerful instruments that the government of Qatar uses to create a positive perception of its presence in the Balkans through media influence (Al Mughairi et al., 2019).

In addition to media and communication, Qatar's investments in the region are also evident in infrastructure works. To give an example, Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD) signed a grant agreement with the Municipality of Tirana in Tirana, the capital of Albania, for the construction of a square to be named Qatar Square. It was also stated that the value of the signed project agreement was over 11 million euros (Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD), 2024).

## Conclusion and Findings

The growing presence of Gulf countries in the Western Balkans has become a significant factor in the region's political, economic, and cultural dynamics. Their influence has taken different forms – from religious and ideological approaches to economic investments and media participation – driven largely by soft power strategies. While Saudi Arabia and Iran had been leading actors through the use of religion-based soft power, or religious ideology-based so far, both focusing on Salafi-Wahhabi and Shiite ideological expansion, the UAE and Qatar have followed a more economic- and media-focused strategy, with an emphasis on trade, infrastructure projects, and strategic partnerships.

In relation to this, the influence of Saudi Arabia has been greatly associated with Islamic institutions, mosques, and charities, thus supporting its ideological influence in the area. Iran, despite having a relatively insignificant number of Shiite followers in the Balkan countries, tried to project influence in cultural centers, research, and diplomatic efforts. If the ideological influence of these countries spreads among Muslims with a significant population in the region and develops to a serious (or actionable) level in the future, it will mean that Muslim voters in the region countries will increase their influence in the domestic policies and, partially, in the foreign policies of the Western Balkan countries.

Another country that has positioned itself in the economic field, particularly in relation to infrastructure and trade, to significantly influence the area, is the UAE and, to some extent, Qatar. The presence of Qatar in the media, particularly in Al Jazeera Balkan, has enabled this country, to some extent, to project influence in the Western Balkan area.

Whilst there are differing levels and styles of influence, there is no doubt that Gulf States, which may be middle powers, have been proactive in shaping post-war reconstruction and development within the Western Balkans. The extent to which there has been a long-term effect on such relationships is far from certain, as local administrations have to carefully navigate a delicate balance with foreign influence and those of European Integration. Based on this, it should also be said that with the mentioned soft power tactics, the Gulf can create a partial (perhaps serious in the future) sphere of influence, although not as much as other actors in the region, and become a "power" (especially economic) in the eyes of the affected states in regional politics. In other words, they can be actors who can be heard in the region. This would mean adding a new actor(s) to a "multi-influencer" politics in the region. Further, especially considering the energy infrastructure and economic powers of the Gulf countries, it is possible that a partial economic dependence in the future could be a determining factor in the Western Balkans, especially in the Balkans' politics, and could lead to "interregional interdependence".

Though this paper identifies existing soft power mechanisms utilized by Gulf States, there is a need for further research to determine their effectiveness and potential geopolitical repercussions regarding this new presence in the Western Balkans. In addition, future studies should examine how soft power strategy is linked to other efforts by Europe and the West to bring the Balkans into broader global frameworks.

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