

## The Role of Yunus Emre Institutes in the Educational and Cultural Diplomacy Acting as a Soft Power in the Turkish and GCC Relations

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### Abstract

Türkiye with its multifaceted soft power, it aspires to strengthen its influence throughout the surrounding countries of the Arabian Gulf. Türkiye is applying the maximum prominent cultural and educational diplomatic strategies for boosting knowledge and cooperation to preserve its impact inside the Gulf location. By establishing the YunusEmre Institutes (YEE), the implementation of cultural and educational activities, the ties between Türkiye and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been reinforced. As a result of the world's rapid change soft power has become essential in the international arena. This article significantly assesses Türkiye's soft power tasks in the GCC area and its implication on the Arabian Gulf regional dynamics. It examines Türkiye's public diplomacy initiatives in the GCC through cultural and educational diplomacies on domestic and regional attitudes.

**Keywords:** Yunus Emre Institute, Soft Power, GCC, Türkiye, Educational Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy.

### Introduction

Türkiye engage numerous varieties of public diplomacy as a soft power element in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. With the foundation of GCC in 1981 among the six countries Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain the member countries witnessed consistent developments throughout the fields of economics, politics and culture. The GCC has a rich cultural diversity that needs to be boosted with interaction and cultural exchange between the GCC and the outdoor world. Türkiye is considered one of the countries with an important role in the regional and international arena, and it has always been striving to enhance its relations in the middle east and specifically the GCC. Soft power as a concept is considered one of the methods that countries endorse to achieve their political, economic and cultural goals without resorting to military force. Throughout the article the educational diplomacy tools that Türkiye applies in the GCC countries will be analyzed. It is significant to note that many countries welcome Türkiye's efforts in the cultural and educational fields, but there are some countries that view such efforts with reservations and skepticism.

The head of the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) denied accusations that the institute practices cultural invasion of other peoples, stating that the institute's projects are carried out only with the approval or request of the governments of the countries in which we have branches, and that the goal of our external activities is cultural exchange and not cultural invasion.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Soft power, an idea popularized through Joseph Nye, has come to be an essential element in the international relations, emphasizing the capacity of the states to attain an impact on via attraction as opposed to coercion (Nye, 2005). Also, it can be regulated not just by state governments, but additionally by using diverse actors in the international politics, consisting of NGOs or worldwide institutions (Nye, 2011). Soft power has the potential to influence countries without resorting to economic or military pressure (Nye, 1990). It is an important concept in the field of international relations as an alternative to hard power that bases its influence and strategies on military power and economic sanctions. Soft power consists of numerous elements such as: culture, education, linguistics, economic system, tourism, and democracy having a notable effect in shaping countries images and increasing their impact globally (Rugh, 2009). It has become a structure of persuasive attraction, where a country's values, culture, and policies are appealing to others, leading to their acceptance (Rothman, 2011).

Türkiye's employment of soft power in the GCC has been conducted by projects that are reflecting its strategic efforts to influence those GCC member countries via public, cultural and educational international relations.

Türkiye is considered one of the rising nations that own a diverse and multidimensional soft power. Türkiye outstands through its strategic geopolitical place, diverse cultural life and shared history with the GCC countries enabling it to be an essential participant in the regional and global scene (Kalin, 2011). The theoretical frameworks contribute to the valuable insights into Türkiye's soft power initiatives in the GCC region, enriching our understanding of its motivations and implications for regional and international relations. (Gomart, 2016).

### **Türkiye's Soft Power: Positive and Controversial Perceptions**

Some Gulf Cooperation Council countries viewed Türkiye's soft power approach positively due to the cultural and historical ties of Türkiye in the Middle East region (Arı & Munassar, 2020). The foundation of the YEE paved the way for diversity of projects, cultural exchanges, mutual understandings and dialogue between Türkiye and the GCC countries. YEE is an institute affiliated with the Yunus Emre Foundation, and was established in accordance with the Law No. 5653 issued on 5/5/2007 with the aim of promoting Türkiye, the Turkish language, its arts, history and culture. the institute's mission is to make Türkiye more known on the international scene to improve its credibility, and its vision to establish links between Türkiye and other countries of the world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye – MFA, 2023).

On the other hand, some analysts may adopt a more neutral stance, accepting the Turkish soft power initiatives but emphasizing the need for a careful assessment of their impact on regional dynamics examining Turkish cultural and educational diplomacy within the context of regional competition and cooperation (Omidi, 2021).

### **Analyzing Türkiye's Soft Power Approach in the GCC Context Through Various Theoretical Lenses**

The utilization of soft power is consistent with a number of theories of international relations; each of which provides a unique perspective on the tactics and effects of the soft power strategies (Nye, 2004). Through the prism of public diplomacy theory, Türkiye's main objective and the use of soft power in the GCC region is best explained by the educational and cultural exchanges in shaping international relations, promoting understanding, and building relationships between the Turkish nation and the nations of the GCC countries (Martin, 2009). International relations are shaped by cultural identity, and communication among nations (Donelli, 2019). The notion of cultural diplomacy, which is generally connected to the various theories of international relations, is strongly aligned with the founding of Turkish Yunus Emre Educational Institutes in GCC nations.

### **Constructivism**

The main theme of constructivism is the influence of norms, ideas, and identities on the conduct of states and international relations (Checkel, 1998). Based on shared cultural and historical heritage, Türkiye's soft power initiatives in the GCC aim to influence and shape opinions among other nations (Aras, 2018). For example, the establishment of YEE in the GCC countries is promoting Turkish educational and cultural ambitions and fostering common identity and understanding among the peoples of the Gulf. Such initiatives in the region contribute to the cultural ties and mutual recognitions between Türkiye and the Gulf states by providing opportunities for individuals to learn about the Turkish cultures, language, art, and history, contributing positively to Türkiye's image among the Gulf populations (Lukyanov, 2019).

These institutes work as a concrete demonstration of Türkiye's efforts to build cultural bridges with Gulf countries through cultural exchange and educational activities. Türkiye's promotion of its cultural heritage, through film festivals and YEE educational and cultural centers in the GCC countries, has been a reflection of Türkiye's power to initiate shared cultural understanding and strengthen cooperation (Keyman et al., 2014).

On the contrary, some scholars argue about the YEE educational centers, stressing that rather than them fostering cooperation and understanding in the GCC, Türkiye's initiatives may aggravate existing tensions and divisions among these countries. Their claims and highlights are Türkiye's political ambitions in the Gulf region and the fact that such perceptions could hamper the effectiveness of Turkish cultural diplomacy in the GCC.

In the massively changed and still-changing global situation, coupled with its own uncertainties, public diplomacy has to maintain a balance between transparency and flexibility, and this can only be possible when it comes out of its stereotypes and outmoded paradigms and takes recourse to new initiatives like public diplomacy with a considerable understanding of social constructivism (Adler & Pouliot, 2011).

### **Realism**

Realists suggest that a state's foreign policy is influenced by systemic pressures, domestic political dynamics and leadership perceptions (Rose, 1998). Realists emphasized that Türkiye's soft power approach in the GCC comes through the lens of political, economic and military ambitions and strategic competition aimed at pursuing national interests and regional aspiration. According to Walt (1998), soft power initiatives may enhance a country's influence in the region, as they are ultimately driven by power and security considerations. Studies on the

effectiveness of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy initiatives and economic partnerships in the Gulf are best described by the unique Qatar and Turkish strategic relations.

Türkiye's soft power initiatives in the GCC are driven by strategic calculations and geopolitical ambitions rather than genuine cultural exchange or mutual understanding (Oryzly, 2007). Also, they point to instances of resistance against Turkish influence as well as potential negative consequences for bilateral relations and regional stability (Altunışık, 2008).

### **Liberalism**

Liberal institutional norms put emphasis on the role of institutions and norms in shaping a state's behavior (Keohane, 1984). Thus, Türkiye's economic partnerships and cultural exchanges with many countries contributed to the development of institutionalized cooperation mechanisms, fostered a sense of interdependence and promoted regional stability and a model of cooperation through economic exchanges (Ülgen et al., 2012).

### **Origins and History of Yunus Emre Institutes**

The YEE are named after the late Turkish philosopher and scientist Yunus Emre, the Anatolian Sufi who was born in 1238 and died in 1320 (Siddiqui, 2019). The most important feature of this name is that it is a symbol of human values, love of man, and social peace, and why this great personality contribution to the development of the Turkish language with its poetry and poems that dealt with love of God and man, and the values of justice and human virtues (Smith, 1993). YEE held an important position in the Turkish government as an advisor on foreign affairs and policy. Due to a decision taken by the Turkish government, the Institute was established as an independent research institution concerned with international political studies. From its foundation until now, the YEE have built a strong reputation as a center for research and analysis in the fields of international affairs witnessing significant expansions in the scope of its activities and research becoming one of the most prominent research institutes in Türkiye and worldwide.

The reason for naming the institute after Yunus Emre is due to his ideas that had global dimensions that transcended the boundaries of geography and time. His principles still represent a reference for many schools of thought in the current era, Yunus Emre wrote his poems and recorded his ideas in the Turkish language, despite the dominance of the Arabic and Persian languages in his time.

### **The Concept and Objectives of Yunus Emre Institutes**

YEE are educational and cultural institutions founded on the approach of mutual understanding and cultural exchange between different cultures. Working for world peace, and for the world's understanding of each other by introducing the world to Turkish culture (Yıldırım & Kaplan, 2023). Giving meaningful messages about the peaceful coexistence of the human race within the framework of common values without taking into account their affiliation to any religion, sect or race, through the principles of philosophy based on human and universal values. These institutes are distinguished with their objectives by the fact that they rely on the principles of interactive learning and cultural cooperation to achieve their goals. Promoting communication and understanding between different cultures to encourage mutual learning, scientific exchange, leadership skills, thereby promoting global awareness and global citizenship (Yunus Emre Foundation, 2024).

### **Yunus Emre Institutes Provide Multiple Opportunities Enhancing Turkish - GCC Relations**

YEE is enhancing cultural and academic exchanges; by organizing conferences, seminars and workshops. Also, Turkish language courses; offering courses in the Turkish language contribute to enhancing understanding and strengthening ties between peoples and cultures. Moreover, youth events provide opportunities for youth to participate in the cultural and educational activities, that enhance interaction between the youth in Türkiye and the GCC countries, enabling common future prospects. YEE act as centers for research and analysis; in the fields of foreign policy and international relations, assisting to understand current international issues and better guide Turkish foreign policies. It works to provide cultural and artistic activities for the purpose of introducing Türkiye, in addition to providing the necessary support for various scientific research.

### **Public Diplomacy Theory**

Public diplomacy theory focuses on how states communicate with foreign publics to influence perceptions and attitudes (Nye, 2008). Türkiye's soft power efforts in the GCC involved communication strategies aiming at building positive perceptions of Türkiye and its culture. Since 2002, the Turkish government under the ruling of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) has transformed public diplomacy into institutional organisations, focusing on the transformation of Türkiye into a model for the Middle East and the entire world countries (Ekşi & Erol, 2018).

The Turkish government has built new institutions to create a positive image of Türkiye at the global level and thus the institutions have become effective in shaping the Turkish foreign policy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs have become more effective in building its diplomatic system not only aiming to build relations with governments, but has been oriented to develop relations with the peoples of different nations. The changes and transformations needed to be done rapidly due to the challenges in the global system (Yılmaz, G. (2016). For example, to reinforce the transformations the Turkish governments establishment the Media and the Cultural Diplomatic Relations departments to reinforce Türkiye's soft power goals in various regions and thus in 2010 a new law was issued to establish the Public Diplomacy Office in 2010. Türkiye employs various public diplomacy tools, such as media outreach, cultural events and educational initiatives to enhance its image and influence in the GCC region. For instance, Turkish TV series and films broadcasted in GCC countries contribute to shaping perceptions of Turkish culture and values among Gulf audiences. Türkiye seeks to enhance its influence in the GCC region by using its cultural heritage connections engaging in effective public diplomacy leading to discourse and cooperation between Türkiye and the members.

With public diplomacy the governments developed a vision that links communication and public diplomacy with all types of communication, such as meetings, conferences, seminars and summits as means of building its image as a country conducting a global civilizational and humanitarian function (Melissen, 2005). Therefore, public diplomacy enabled governmental and non-governmental institutions to carry out various activities to win the minds and hearts of the people (Snow & Cull, 2020).

Academic activities are considered one of the most important foundations on which the Turkish public diplomacy strategy is based. With the foundation of YEE worldwide the educational and cultural gap was resolved by planning and organizing meetings for experts, academicians, researchers, renowned figures and research centers in the world and such gatherings formed the basis for regular contact building relationships between Turkish and foreign researchers.

Many contributions happened to public diplomacy by carrying out many activities in the field of cultural diplomacy in various continents in Africa, the Balkans, and the Middle East to spread the Turkish culture and teach the Turkish language (Sawahel, 2017). After the establishment of the first YEE institute in Bosnia in 2009, it expanded rapidly in many countries. The Turkish public diplomacy experience in the Balkans is considered one of the most significant projects implemented by the Yunus Emre Institute. It proved to us how public diplomacy can be utilized to build relationships with peoples using cultural and historical heritages (Livingston & Walter, 2019).

Although the Turkish diplomatic strategy aims to influence the entire global community from eastern to the western continents and to the northern and southern parts of the world, it is evident that in general the Islamic world and the Middle-east occupy an important place in the Turkish strategy.

### **Cultural Diplomacy**

In the era of accelerated global communication and bilateral relations, cultural cooperation between countries have become essential to enhance mutual understanding and promote peace and sustainable development (Güleç, 2015). The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs considers cultural diplomacy to be one of the most important components of its cross cultural foreign policies. One of the most important things that illustrates the Turkish interest in the cultural diplomacy were concluding cooperation and cultural exchange agreements with many countries during the past decade, and these agreements aimed to strengthen bilateral ties between Türkiye and many countries of the world (Köselerli, 2017). Cultural diplomacy contributes to the states by attracting people using media, culture, arts, sports, trade, and science activities through on-governmental organizations working in coordination with the foreign ministries and embassies abroad.

The GCC is a council that had been working as a framework for cooperation between the GCC member states to achieve common interests and maintain stability in the Gulf region (Ulrichsen, 2013). Based on this, the YEE served as hubs for promoting Turkish language, culture, and values through various educational and cultural activities. According to the head of the Institute, the projects implemented by the YEE have led to an increase in the number of visitors to Türkiye, and an increase in the number of people who have business relations with Türkiye.

### **Educational Diplomacy**

Countries that want to create cross-community interaction and long-term relationships focus on educational diplomacy. The successful attempts by countries in implementing educational elements by teaching their own language to other nations will transmit their cultural values to other communities by the use of attraction rather than imposition. Since their foundation in 2007, the YEE have grown to become a crucial tool for Türkiye's soft

power strategy among the GCC countries with the aim of teaching the Turkish language and promote the Turkish culture internationally (VIAF, 2012). The Institutes are acting as cultural ambassadors playing an important role in promoting Turkish educational diplomacy in the GCC region and representing Türkiye through various cultural and educational programs and events that showcase Türkiye's rich heritage, its dedication to intercultural dialogue, and its desire for peaceful cooperation with the GCC countries. YEE provide a forum for intercultural dialogue through a variety of events such as educational exchanges, language courses, art exhibitions, music performances and film screenings, therefore highlighting the depth and breadth of Turkish culture (Eren, 2020). The effective implementation of the educational diplomacy by Türkiye in the region is helping to facilitate educational exchanges and enhance Türkiye's image and influence in the region.

### **Türkiye's Soft Power and its Activities Implemented by Educational Diplomacy in the GCC**

YEE institutes offer Turkish language courses in the GCC, with the aim to enhance the understanding of the Turkish culture and facilitate communication between peoples. Türkiye offers opportunities for students from the Gulf countries to study in the Turkish universities and obtain high-quality certificates in various specializations. Türkiye has been establishing Turkish schools and educational institutes in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, to provide educational opportunities for the Gulf students and transmitting Turkish culture. As an example would be the establishment of the Turkish Maarif Foundation (Karahan, 2022).

On the other hand, scholarships are offered to international students, to obtain higher education in the Turkish universities in various educational levels such as associate, bachelor's, graduate and postgraduate studies in various specializations (Aras & Mohammed, 2018). Türkiye organizes student exchange programs with Gulf countries, giving students the opportunity to study at Turkish universities and experience the cultural life of the country. These scholarships cover tuition, accommodation, and living expenses for undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees. The Turkish Institute offers completely free scholarships targeting young people, including: The "Yunus Emre" scholarship online which includes all levels of the Turkish language for free, whether from inside or outside Türkiye (Mohammed, 2017).

Türkiye is strengthening academic cooperation with the GCC countries by signing agreements and memorandums of understandings with universities and educational institutions to enable cooperation in various projects such as the exchange of students, academics and scientific research. Also, Türkiye offers training programs and workshops in various scientific, technical and cultural fields for students and academics from the Gulf countries. Providing the necessary support to departments of the Turkish language and teaching the Turkish language through cooperation concluded with various educational institutions in many countries. Such as, Turkish language teaching, Turkish language proficiency tests, publishing books and magazines about the Turkish culture. Also, conducting activities such as painting, sculpture, and archery. Moreover, organizing exhibitions and events to introduce and study in Türkiye and showing cultural films and plays to introduce Turkish history and culture. Coordinating educational and cultural scholarships to send them to Türkiye and organising cultural field trips and summer schools in Türkiye.

One of the most prominent activities and services provided by YEE in Türkiye is teaching the Turkish language, as the institute follows innovative teaching methods that make it easier for those coming to the institute to learn the Turkish language in the easiest ways possible. The institute offers the possibility of learning the Turkish language online, by attending the institute in one of its branches spread around the world.

Türkiye utilizes its media outlets to disseminate information about its policies, culture, and achievements in the GCC countries by broadcasting Turkish television shows, news programs, and promoting Turkish films and music (Ağırseven & Örki, 2017). For example, Turkish TV series, such as "Resurrection: Ertuğrul" and "The Protector," gain popularity in the GCC countries through distribution on platforms like TRT and Netflix television channels (Navani, 2022). By launching cultural and educational projects on various continents of the world, the YEE was able during the current year to carry Turkish culture to all parts of the world. In addition, the institute organized the "Turkish Film Week" programs, where it was able to present a package of Turkish works in the field of film industry to fans of this art in several African countries and countries in the Balkan region.

Türkiye participating in sports events in the GCC countries, fosters goodwill and promotes sports as a means of cultural exchange and cooperation. For example, Turkish football clubs participate in friendly matches and tournaments in GCC countries, fostering sports diplomacy and cultural exchange between Türkiye and the Gulf region.

Türkiye engages with its diaspora communities in the GCC countries, fostering a sense of connection and belonging among Turkish expatriates. This can also serve as a bridge for promoting Turkish culture and values.

Turkish Embassies and YEE all around the world organize community events and gatherings for Turkish expatriates to celebrate Turkish national holidays and foster a sense of unity and connection with their homeland (Wackenhut, 2022).

High-level diplomatic visits and exchanges between Türkiye and the GCC countries help strengthen political ties and provide opportunities for dialogue on various issues of mutual interest ( Hürsoy, 2013).

### Yunus Emre International Spread

In parallel with Türkiye's international and regional rise, the Yunus Emre Institutes conducted international activities to introduce Turkish culture and language in various countries of the world. Hundreds of thousands of people have benefited from the services and courses offered by the institute's centers spread around the world, while it has also established partnerships and collaborations with more than 100 universities worldwide within the framework of its project aimed at increasing interest in the Turkish language and its literature (GPD Net-Global Public Diplomacy Network, 2014).

As part of the Institutes efforts to expand internationally network of activities, it was able to open representation offices globally, especially in Asia, Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, and Africa (Daily Sabah, 2023). The Institute continuously work to increase the number of its representations in various countries of the world, and to strengthen the status of the Turkish language in the fields of culture and at the international level, coinciding with the entry of the Turkish Republic into its second century vision. In 2023, the increasing demand for Turkish language courses was met by increasing the number of educational activities and courses at the Institute's centers and through the digital online portals (YEE, 2024). In order to meet the interest and conduct the Turkish lessons with no boundaries, learnTurkish.com was launched by the YEE. While different options are available to those who enter the site, students can enter the “Teach Yourself Turkish” section and learn the Turkish language interactively via the computer without the need for a private teacher. Currently, more than three hundred thousand students registered from 194 countries in the world are learning the Turkish language through this system, which the institute put into service in 2017 (Basar & Çangal, 2021).

According to the latest YEE (2022) events report, there are 84 YEE branches in 63 countries around the world. Reference to expansion goals it was aimed to reach 100 branches around the world by the year 2023. Although the YEE was very close to reach their goal, however it couldn't be achieved due to the fluctuations of geopolitical reasons in different continents of the world.

### GCC States Perception About Turkish Soft Power in the Region

**Table (YEE-GCC )- Yunus Emre Institute Center Status in the GCC \***

No	Countries	Yunus Emre Institute Center Status	Universities signing the YEE Turchology Project Protocols
1	State of Qatar	İndependent Center established in Doha city (2015)	Qatar University
2	Kingdom of Bahrain	Center established within Kingdom of Bahrain University (2018)	University of Bahain
3	Sultanate of Oman	Under process of establishing YEE in Muscat (MOU signed in 2022)	Turkish language courses offered within the faculties of Sultan Qabos University (2019)
4	State of Kuwait	legal basis to open YEE in Kuwait is almost complete	Not Yet
5	United Arab Emirates (UAE)	No Center	Distance Turkish teaching portals learnTurkish.com Not Yet
6	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	No Center	Jeddah İffet University (2014) Distance Turkish teaching portals learnTurkish.com

\*Authors compilation

Reference to the table YEE-GCC, it demonstrates that Saudi Arabia government was in the forefront in initiating academic exchange programs with the Turkish government. However, Qatar was very quick in establishing YEE center in its country followed by Kingdom of Bahrain with a very strong establishment of YEE in one of its strong universities. Moreover, Sultanate of Oman initiated the Turchology Project in one of its universities and still the legal basis to open YEE center in Kuwait is under process. The below detailed analysis will provide further clarification for the YEE status in the GCC.

### **Qatar**

Through joint investment projects Türkiye and Qatar have strengthened economic and military cooperation agreements in recent years. Such ties became closer with Türkiye, particularly following the blockade imposed by the neighbouring Gulf states in 2017. In 2015 the YEE launched a center in the capital of Qatar Doha playing a vital role in bridging the cultural gap between Türkiye and Qatar by promoting Turkish language, culture and traditions (YEE, 2015). Qatar may view the establishment of Turkish educational institutions positively as a means of furthering bilateral cooperation providing Qatari students with the opportunity to learn the language and interact with Turkish culture (Pact boosts Qatar-Türkiye cultural exchange, 2018).

Moreover, the educational partnerships established by the institutes create opportunities for Qatari students and academicians to study and conduct research in Türkiye, thus further enriching their academic and cultural experiences. These collaborations develop academic exchange and cooperation for long-term ties and friendships between individuals from both countries. The YEE educational centers work to provide a variety of educational and cultural events including Turkish language lessons, artistic workshops, lectures, cinematic and musical performances, and art exhibitions. (Doha-YEE, 2023).

### **Bahrain**

The basis of Turkish-Bahraini relations lies in the existence of a common denominator between the two peoples and the two governments, which is the bond of the true common historical and cultural ties, and this bond is what paved the way for further adaptation and maturity in ideas that layed the first building blocks for establishing distinguished relations that are necessary and crucial for the two countries in service of the common interests of both of them.

The visit of the Bahraini King King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to the Turkish capital shortly after the failure of the coup against the constitutional legitimacy, was described as a solidarity visit and its refusal to undermine constitutional legitimacy under the leadership of the Turkish President and his elected government, and it declared its support for all measures taken by the Republic of Türkiye to enhance its stability and protect its institutions. Many agreements were signed such as: Cultural Cooperation Implementation Program, cooperation protocol between Yunus Emre Turkish Institute and the University of Bahrain, as well as a 'Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation in the Field of Youth and Sports Affairs'. Last but not least instructions were given to form the Bahraini-Turkish Friendship Association.

The Turkish language courses that are offered in the YEE center at the University of Bahrain received great interest from university students, and the university of Bahrain administration have provided all required facilities to ensure the smooth functioning of the institute, which is the second of its kind in the Arabian Gulf region (YEE, 2018).

### **Oman**

Oman is known for its non-confrontational approach to regional affairs, preferring diplomacy to resolve conflicts (Elhousseini, 2016). The Sultanate of Oman has traditionally maintained friendly relations with Türkiye and pursued a balanced foreign policy with a wide range of countries. Given Oman's neutral stance and emphasis on diplomacy, it is likely that the establishment of the Turkish educational institutions in the country would be evaluated based on its potential contributions to bilateral cooperation and cultural exchange, rather than being viewed through a lens of geopolitical rivalry or alignment with the other Gulf states.

The Turkish Republic and the Sultanate of Oman share a common vision of approaching crises from a peaceful perspective and figuring out the problems in the region through dialogue. Both countries maintain strong political and diplomatic relations working hard on developing economic, commercial and defense sector cooperation through their committees established in all respective fields. The Joint Economic Committee formed by the two nations, the Turkish-Omani Business Council, and MOUs signed between our ministries and the mutual high level political visits were the essential tools for progressing bilateral relations.

In the recent years more focus was put on cultural and educational cooperation between Türkiye and Oman. Accordingly, elective Turkish language courses began at the prestigious Sultan Qaboos University in 2019 as a

(SQU) result of the MOU signed between the Turkish Maarif Foundation and SQU in April 2019 (Anwaar news website, 2019).

In 2022, a memorandum of understanding was signed regarding the establishment of the YEE center for Teaching Turkish Language in Muscat. However, although the procedures are still continuing for the establishment of the YEE, it is significant to note that there have been some events that were carried out in collaboration with the Turkish Embassy in Oman and YEE Headquarters conducted cultural programs including, literature and arts, exchange of artistic performances, exhibitions, workshops and other cultural events that reflect the diversity and cultural richness of Oman and Türkiye (Times News Service, 2023).

Moreover, prestigious Turkish universities that are among the top 500 of the global international ranking offer high quality undergraduate and graduate education in a variety of fields for Omani students. Apart from providing educational opportunities of an international calibre and imparting a wealth of knowledge and experience, Türkiye also offers scholarships known as ‘Türkiye Scholarships’ to outstanding international students from all over the world to study in the most prestigious universities in Türkiye.

### **Kuwait**

Türkiye and Kuwait share common values and cultural heritages that are important factors for their sustained political relations. Generally, Kuwait maintains balanced relations with Türkiye and its stance on the establishment of the YEE would likely to be influenced by its broader diplomatic considerations and interests in the region. In 2022, the legal procedures for the YEE establishment in Kuwait was initiated. However, even without the physical presence of the YEE by a branch many events are organized by the Turkish Embassy in Kuwait, such as art exhibitions, lectures, workshops and film screenings, provide a platform for cultural exchange and enhanced understanding between the two peoples. (Republic of Türkiye-Turkish Embassy in Kuwait, 2022).

In 2023, the Turkish culture was introduced from different perspectives at the “Turkish Village” event held in Kuwait and the YEE participated in the Turkish Village under the sponsorship of the Turkish Embassy in Kuwait. Many activities were conducted such as folk dances, traditional sports show such as archery, horse riding, sword games, handicrafts and Turkish cuisine were showcased to the Kuwaiti guests. (YEE, 2023).

### **Saudi Arabia**

The fluctuations that appeared in the region in 2021 created a new path in the Turkish-Arab relations after nearly a decade of intense competition to reshape the regional situation. In 2021, Türkiye pursued a strategy of fragmenting and resolving differences with its regional opponents, which helped it prepare the ground for the reconciliation phase with Saudi Arabia. Regional trade agendas with the Gulf states constituted an incentive for the crisis to end. New trade routes and global energy supplies, as well as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye being a promising market for investments, constituted a gateway to the Turkish- Saudi Arabia reconciliation.

In 2016, the mutual meetings between the Turkish and Saudi Arabia governments culminated the announcement of the establishment of the Saudi-Turkish Coordination Council with the aim of enhancing joint cooperation in the fields of politics and diplomacy, economy and trade, banking and finance, industry, energy, agriculture, culture, education, technology, military fields, military industries, security, and media.

In the cultural field, the common desire of the two countries for cultural cooperation and exchange of visits was confirmed. the opening of the Saudi cultural days in the Turkish capital, Ankara, which was showcased through exhibitions, lectures, evenings, parties and artistic performances. The Saudi cultural days in Türkiye gave a good impression of Saudi culture and arts, and left a positive image of the common features of two Muslim peoples who meet in several elements, including: Religion, history, and common destiny, and this was another starting point; to enhance, activate and deepen cultural exchange between the two countries.

As part of the Turcology Project, faculty members from the Turkish Language and Literature Education Departments from various Turkish universities, were assigned and commissioned in different foreign universities that had signed the Turcology protocols with YEE and offered the Turkish courses within their foreign languages departments. Also, within the framework of the Turcology Project and the protocols signed all required materials from source books, periodicals and educational tools were supported. In 2014, Saudi Arabia was one of the frontiers among the GCC countries in participating in this project that lead to a bilateral agreement between YEE and Jeddah İffet University (YEE, 2014). YEE’s Turcology Project aims to improve Turkey’s friendship with other countries, to further cultural exchange, to provide services abroad for those who strive to study in Turkish language, history, literature, culture and arts fields.



### **United Arab Emirates**

The year 2021 represents the beginning of a new start for the partnership between the UAE and the Republic of Türkiye, as bilateral relations witnessed a qualitative boom at all levels and levels, and Emirati-Turkish cooperation has become a new engine of development and change, and an important indicator of the strategic transformations that the Middle East region and the world are witnessing. The relations between the two countries are characterized by a strong strategic partnership and fruitful cooperation that serves the interests of both countries and contributes to development and stability in the region (Dalay, 2022).

Bilateral relations between Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates have made significant progress lately in all fields with an increase in the high-level official visits between the two countries. The cultural relations between Türkiye and UAE derive their strength from the cultural history of the two countries, and have witnessed growth over the recent years, represented by the signing of memorandums of understanding and the exchange of representation in cultural demonstrations. In 2022, the UAE and Türkiye signed a memorandum of cooperation in the field of cultural cooperation, during the visit of Turkish President to UAE. The sessions and workshops covered the history of Turkish literature and the journey of presenting Turkish television series to Arab audiences, in addition to literary translations of Arabic and Turkish poetry, and Turkish culinary culture.

The depth of Turkish-Emirati relations contributes greatly to strengthening not only bilateral relations, but also economic and cultural ones at the regional level. UAE and Turkey have had continuous diplomatic and economic relations for more than 40 years, and that the two countries are linked by many common consensus and understandings, which makes both of them an important focus in terms of security and safety. With the development of international relations between UAE and Turkey, this will mainly reflect on the Arab countries and the stability of societies in the region (Ramadhanty & Syauqillah 2022).

### **Other Means of Power**

Türkiye contributes to economic development and cooperation by engaging in economic partnerships and investments in the GCC countries (Baskan, 2011). For example, Turkish companies operate in various fields in the Gulf countries, such as infrastructure, construction, energy, and heavy industries leading to increases in trade and economic exchange between them. On the one hand, Türkiye provides political and security support to some Gulf countries, especially those facing common security challenges (Pitel & England, 2018). For example, Türkiye has provided support to countries such as Qatar in the wake of the diplomatic crisis with other Gulf Cooperation Council countries. On the other hand, Türkiye is strengthening its regional and international partnerships in the Gulf region, by joining regional organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation or working within the framework of international alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

### **Challenges Facing Yunus Emre Institutes in the GCC Countries**

Due to the challenges facing the YEE in the GCC countries require comprehensive cooperation between the GCC governments and Türkiye to overcome obstacles and achieve sustained development. Some obstacles are driven by geopolitical tensions due to internal pressure or interest in securing national identity against the publicity of the Turkish culture. For example, tense political relations between Türkiye and Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of geopolitical events in the region may be one of the factors influencing the decision to establish the YEE in Saudi Arabia. Also, educational and training efforts are challenged sometimes when tailoring the programs that suit the needs of the local and regional labor market, providing the skills and specializations needed by the rapidly changing labor market. Moreover, funds are required to sustain and develop the educational institutes, modernize their infrastructure, and provide the necessary resources to achieve their goals. International educational institutes that are looking forward to maintain quality standards and achieve international accreditations are confronted with challenges, as it is not easy to gain such accreditations and maintain quality assurances that will add a value to the certificates received by the prospective students especially when they graduate. It is significant to note that institutes are confronted with technological and innovation challenges as they need to keep track of technological developments and apply and renovate their educational programs.

In light of the Turkish government expansion plans of opening the branches of the institute in other countries, and the allegations that YEE is penetrating the targeted countries to control the minds of the citizens and implement political agenda within the framework of radical ideology. The reality about these claims are not reinforced by true basis due to the fact that there are many similar institutes of western powers such as the British Council, Alliance française and Goethe Institutes which have been conducting cultural and educational diplomacies for many years all around the world and especially in the GCC region (Akilli, 2018). Claims that Türkiye is trying to spread its ideas by influencing the academic world in various regions, has been on various organisations such as the “Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency-TİKA,” the “Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), and the government’s cultural arm, the YEE.” and the “Maaref” Foundation (Açıklan, 2024).

### Conclusion and Recommendations

Türkiye has a rich cultural history spanning thousands of years, and is considered a bridge between East and West, which gives it a great soft power capability. Türkiye has great potential in enhancing soft power in the Gulf region carrying out multiple educational and cultural activities that contribute to building bridges and enhancing cooperation. The tools used by Türkiye in the GCC countries stand out as part of its strategy to enhance its influence in the region. Türkiye's cultural efforts in the GCC resulted in the establishment of YEE in the Gulf countries, such as Qatar and Bahrain, which has strengthened cultural relations and deepened cultural understanding among the countries. Therefore, it is noteworthy to state and emphasize that the future establishment of Turkish YEE in the other GCC members such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Oman will be an important step towards strengthening educational and cultural diplomacy in the region. By achieving their aims and goals, these educational institutes will contribute to enhancing understanding and building bridges between different cultures, thus promoting peace and stability in the GCC and Middle east region.

The Gulf region is witnessing mixed reactions and political competition between Türkiye and other countries that perceive the Turkish cultural and educational efforts in the region as a challenge to their sovereignty and a confrontation to their influence leading to escalating tensions and complicating relations between Türkiye and the GCC, thus leading to negative perception of these efforts. Therefore, Türkiye must take into account these challenges and work to ease tensions and build trust with some of the precautionary GCC members by enhancing bilateral cultural cooperations in various fields. A country that wants to achieve soft power for itself and invest its culture in building long-term relationships with peoples must rebuild its diplomatic system so that it is not limited to carrying out the traditional functions of diplomacy that aim to build official relations with governments. So, the YEE in the GCC countries are pivotal in Türkiye's strategic cultural outreach efforts.

Some member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, are among the countries that place great emphasis on improving education and developing youth skills to keep pace with the contemporary demands of the times. The Yunus Emre Centers could be viewed as an opportunity to promote Turkish education and culture in the GCC, enabling cultural and educational exchange, rather than some Council Member States perceiving the Yunus Emre Centers efforts as interference in local educational and cultural affairs influencing national culture and identity leading to cautious restrictions on the activities of these centers. The cultural and educational interactions and platforms offered by the YEE fostered mutual understanding and broke down barriers and promoted peaceful coexistence with the Gulf nations.

The expansion of the YEE in the Middle East underscored Türkiye's commitment to enhancing its soft power influence in the region. The cultural diplomacies implemented by Türkiye gained the interest and curiosity from the GCC communities that lead to increased tourism, cultural exchanges, and economic collaborations between Türkiye and the GCC countries. The existence of the YEE activities positioned Türkiye effectively as a valuable partner for the Gulf countries, through educational and cultural engagements that solidified Türkiye's image as a vibrant and culturally rich country. The impact of Turkish language and culture in the Gulf, supported by the strategic efforts of the YEE has been significant and effective.

The efforts made by the Institute, during 2023, also resulted in enhancing the international standing of Turkish culture, by introducing important cultural productions in different geographical regions of the world, and presenting them to the public within various cultural fields from literature to art, and from history to cinema.

The institute was able to introduce Turkish culture in the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia as part of various sports and social activities aiming at reaching heads of foreign missions, senior officials, artists, and chefs.

The mutual visits at the highest levels of the Turkish government and other foreigner countries, created distinguished trust and paved the path to reaching strategic relations among countries. The true arrival of the Turks in their new era in establishing their relations appears clear from the fraternal outlook shown by the way Arab countries, especially those countries that are not quickly affected by political fluctuations and at the same time remain loyal to their ideas and friendships and do not rush to establish strong, established relations without taking into account national peculiarities and obligations. The global interest in the Turkish language is increasing due to the growth of the Turkish economy and trade relations between it and the countries of the world, the expansion of the activities of the institute, and introducing programs to teach the Turkish language to institutions and companies that has been very successful. Having a strong digital platform presence and offering online resources, courses for Turkish language learners allows the YEE to reach a wider audience beyond the physical locations of their branches.

At the beginning of last year, the regional polarization that the region had experienced for nearly a decade began to diminish as the countries of the region tended to reduce escalation and redirect their foreign policies. Türkiye's shift towards reducing its regional differences, in addition the end of the Gulf crisis was one of the arenas of regional proxy competitions, constituted an incentive for Türkiye and Saudi Arabia and the UAE to explore ways to end the stage of rivalry. Moreover, these parties have come to the conclusion that the competition between them in the recent years has not led to a fundamental change in the regional situation in favour of any of them, as much as it has constituted a drain on opportunities for cooperation between them to address the regional crises that have negatively affected their interests. This attrition also helped other competing powers, such as Iran to strengthen its regional role in the region. Moreover, the challenges imposed by the Corona virus on the region's economies are pushing Türkiye and the GCC countries to refocus their external priorities to recover from the repercussions of the pandemic.

Based on this, it can be predicted that the new era in Turkish – GCC relations will be driven mainly by the desire for regional cooperation which is expected to gain greater momentum. In the past 15 years, relations between Türkiye and the Arab Gulf states were not stable due to the regional and global developments, and the most prominent event in this was the “Arab Spring.” Türkiye had a political approach that pushed it towards evaluating its relations with the Gulf states, but in the end everyone agreed that the path to development in the Arab world, it was economic, cultural understandings, technical changes, and not democratic and political openness.

The governments of Türkiye and the GCC governments should promote bilateral agreements that would form the basis legal frameworks for sustainability in diplomatic relations. The development in economic relations was represented by the exchange of visits and exhibitions, the establishment of joint companies, and the increase in the level of trade exchange between the two brotherly countries.

There is a consensus between Türkiye and the GCC on the importance of turning to peaceful and diplomatic alternatives capable of resolving differences and conflicts, ensuring the preservation of security, peace and stability at the regional or international level. Türkiye and the GCC member countries have many similar positions that confirm their common desire to strengthen the foundations of peace, security, stability, development and prosperity in the region and the world. Together, they aim to create a model of cooperation and partnership based on supporting regional peace and stability efforts and building a better future for current and future generations, as well as establishing constructive cooperation mechanisms aimed at solving and addressing various problems. The difficulties and crises that the region and the world are going through are expressed through peaceful means Agreements and understandings such as the foundation of the YEE. In conclusion, we should expect that in the next stage of relations there would be greater openness between Türkiye and the GCC in the light and desire to advance relations to broader horizons, leading to progress and the development of strategic educational and cultural diplomatic relations.

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