

Soft power may be the UK government's best option to promote trade and civil liberties in the Gulf states

The UK's relationship with the Persian Gulf has undergone many changes in its over 200-year history. Now, the British government under the coalition is focused on building closer trading ties, whilst at the same time encouraging greater civil liberties in the Gulf. [Nima Khorrami Assl](#) argues that both of these objectives are best served by the UK's formal and informal networks of advisers and diplomats.



Faced with a lack of resources and public appetite for an interventionist foreign policy, economic austerity and stagnation at home, and a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, Britain's foreign policy has undergone radical changes since the election of the coalition government. Today, expansion of ties with Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, and the [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) states – “those countries whose growth rates show the greatest promise” as William Hague puts it – takes the central stage in Britain's diplomatic agenda with a special focus on commercial diplomacy, promotion of civil rights, and tackling climate change.

The UK is no stranger to the Persian Gulf sub region. It has had a presence in that part of the world since the late 18th Century, and it also played a significant role in the establishment of modern state infrastructures in the Gulf Sheikdoms over the course of the 20th Century. As Gulf cities expanded, many of the new buildings, airports, bridges, and facilities were designed by British firms like Halcrow. Equally important was the role played by the British Council in the early development of secondary education in the Gulf Sheikdoms.

Concerned with high unemployment rates, social instability, and their exposure to the global financial meltdown, the six members of the GCC have accelerated, albeit to various extent, their moves towards the establishment of knowledge-based economies, financial sector reform, modern infrastructure development, and indeed civil society building. Such initiatives, in turn, have provided Britain with a window of opportunity to secure its new foreign policy objectives with greater ease in this critical part of the globe. Although her power is in wane, Britain nonetheless possesses many of the qualities and characteristics needed to help the GCC states in realising their long-term national goals.

The ever increasing instances of official visits and trade delegation exchanges between London and the sub region are evidence of this. Notwithstanding fierce competition from rising Asian powers, the British government is optimistic that it will be able to sign lucrative deals with the Gulf Monarchies because, according to a Gulf official, the strong presence of Britons in “senior positions as old and trusted friends whose loyalties to our rulers have been proven” provides London with an advantage that no other country can wish for.

Interestingly, the British government can pursue its other foreign policy objective – promotion of civil liberties – by seeking to utilise this network of British advisors. Things do move slowly in the GCC, but support for “managed change and transition” is high on the governments' agendas evident in recent elections held in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. At the same time, public dissatisfaction, excluding Bahrain, does not seem to be at a boiling point with the majority of Gulf citizens still having high respects for their rulers. Given the conservative political culture of the subregion and a widely-held belief that “key decisions are made privately not in the open”, Britain, with its own transitional experience from a monarchical system to a parliamentary democracy, stands a better chance of achieving the normative side of her foreign policy by using ‘British advisors’ as a valuable back channel of communication on the sensitive issue of political reform.

All in all, the British government could substantially benefit from pursuing the parallel strategy of informal and formal diplomacy in the sub region of Persian Gulf. Simultaneously, London has to be prepared to “take on board” Arab foreign policy goals seeing expansion of ties as a “two-way street”. This, in turn, requires the government to take into account the “undercurrents, trends and challenges” facing the GCC states rather than “calculations about U.S. capabilities and the ‘special relationship’”.