



From Exchange to Strategy:

MAKING CULTURE A PILLAR OF EU-GCC RELATIONS

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Executive Summary

Cultural diplomacy is emerging as a strategic pillar in relations between the European Union (EU) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), driven by the rapid expansion of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) across the Gulf as tools for diversification and global engagement. This evolution aligns with a broader global recognition of culture as an instrument of international cooperation, soft power, and sustainable development.

Despite growing activity, cultural cooperation between the EU and the GCC remains fragmented, predominantly bilateral, and insufficiently embedded in long-term institutional mechanisms. The report argues that establishing a structured EU-GCC cultural cooperation framework would consolidate existing initiatives, enhance policy coherence, and position culture as a strategic component of the broader partnership.



Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is increasingly recognised as a strategic dimension of foreign policy, which provides governments and societies with practical tools to build and sustain international partnerships. Often referred to as art diplomacy, it relies on cultural exchange in fields such as art, music, language, and heritage to foster mutual understanding, build trust, and promote cooperation through soft power and people-to-people connections. The growing policy attention to cultural diplomacy reflects the broader ‘cultural turn’ in international relations, which has re-emphasised the role of culture in shaping political behaviour, identity formation, and cross-regional perceptions. Within this context, the EU and the GCC have an opportunity to complement their longstanding economic and political ties with deeper cultural and educational collaboration. The rapid development of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCIs) across the Gulf, which are central to diversification strategies and nation-branding, creates particularly promising avenues for partnership.

This report draws on targeted desk research, including analysis of EU and GCC policy frameworks, national cultural and creative industry strategies, and documented cultural diplomacy initiatives. These findings are corroborated by academic literature, institutional reports, and recent EU–GCC joint statements to provide a comprehensive assessment of the role and potential of cultural diplomacy in EU–GCC relations.



Culture as a Strategic Axis in EU–GCC Engagement

At MONDIACULT 2025, the World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development, held on 29 September in Barcelona, the 194 UNESCO Member States gathered to shape the future of global cultural policy. The event marked a milestone with the launch of the UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies, Culture – The Missing SDG, which called for the inclusion of a stand-alone Sustainable Development Goal on culture within the UN 2030 Agenda. The report reaffirmed that participation in cultural life is a fundamental human right and emphasized the need to strengthen cultural institutions, policies, and CCIs. This renewed global consensus highlights culture’s essential role not only as a driver of sustainable development and heritage protection, but also as a pillar of the global economy and a foundation for peaceful international cooperation.

As a key partner of the United Nations as a whole and UNESCO in particular, the European Union has long championed culture as a strategic dimension of its external action. The EU’s engagement with the GCC increasingly reflects this global momentum. Recent initiatives, such as the EU–GCC Dialogue on Economic Diversification and expanding investments in creative sectors across the Gulf, demonstrate the growing recognition of culture as a bridge between the two regions. Efforts by the EU National Institutes for Culture cluster (EUNIC) in Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, along with academic and educational programmes like the Jean Monnet initiative, showcase the potential of cultural cooperation to deepen people-to-people ties.





Nizwa Fort, Oman

Image source: Canva

Historian Sean Foley (2022) observes that prevailing Western perceptions of popular culture in Southwest Asia and North Africa are often shaped by outdated and oversimplified assumptions, particularly the notion that cultural expression in the region is either “Western” or inherently incompatible with religious or customary values. Such stereotypes overlook the complex realities in which secular and religious influences coexist. In this context, cultural diplomacy can serve as a powerful tool to challenge misconceptions, foster a more nuanced understanding, and enable more informed and balanced engagement between the EU and the Gulf.

Yet, despite this progress, EU-GCC cultural relations remain largely bilateral and project-based, with limited coordination under a broader framework. The absence of long-term mechanisms and sustainable funding structures constrains the continuity and impact of these initiatives. Strengthening cultural diplomacy between the EU and the GCC – aligned with the MONDIACULT 2025 vision – offers a timely opportunity to consolidate these efforts and move beyond fragmented exchanges. By positioning culture as a strategic pillar of regional and global cooperation, both sides can transform shared commitments into a durable framework for dialogue, innovation, and mutual understanding.

The following overview provides concrete examples of cultural initiatives across GCC countries, including collaborations with European partners. They illustrate the breadth and diversity of existing engagement.

Bahrain

Bahrain's engagement with the European Union is deepening, underpinned by a national focus on culture, identity, and economic diversification. The 2021 Cooperation Arrangement between the European External Action Service and Bahrain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a formal platform for structured dialogue, which complements national efforts to strengthen the cultural and creative sectors.

Although more modest in scale than in some neighbouring GCC states, Bahrain's CCIIs are gaining strategic importance within the Economic Vision 2030, supported by institutions such as development agency Tamkeen and the Bahrain Economic Development Board, which promote entrepreneurship, skills development, and investment across emerging creative fields. The Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities further anchor this agenda through heritage renewal, cultural exchange initiatives, and the advancement of a national social culture programme, while tourism strategies increasingly position cultural and media industries as drivers of future growth.

Bahrain's sustained commitment to interfaith dialogue – exemplified by the Bahrain-EU Conferences on Religious Freedom in 2022, 2023, and 2025 – adds a distinct diplomatic dimension, reinforcing the Kingdom's role as a connector between cultures and expanding the scope for people-to-people engagement with European partners.



Image source: Canva, Bahrain Pearling Path, Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities

Kuwait

Kuwait has sharpened its profile within EU-GCC cultural diplomacy. By hosting the 29th GCC-EU Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting in October 2025, Kuwait played a central role in advancing commitments to structured dialogue on cultural cooperation. Its designation as the 2025 Arab Capital of Culture and Media further signalled an ambition to position the country as a regional intellectual and creative hub, with a year-long calendar of cultural and youth-oriented programmes.

Flagship initiatives, such as the EU-Kuwait Culture Forum (2025) and the long-standing Kuwaiti-Italian archaeological mission on Failaka Island, underscore how heritage collaboration can deepen mutual understanding. While Kuwait remains the only Gulf state without a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Failaka's renewed inclusion on the UNESCO Tentative List reflects ongoing efforts to conserve and promote national heritage.

This cultural momentum aligns with the New Kuwait vision, which emphasises creative human capital. Within this agenda, the Kuwait Creative Industries Complex has reportedly achieved around 60% of its development targets, signalling policy traction in the creative economy. In higher education, partnerships such as the LSE Kuwait Programme and previous cooperation with Sciences Po Paris have sustained academic exchange with Europe, reinforcing Kuwait's role in broader EU-GCC people-to-people and knowledge diplomacy.



Image source: KUNA, Pexels

Oman

Oman's Vision 2040 elevates culture, heritage, and identity as core pillars of national development: drivers of social cohesion at home and assets for enhancing the Sultanate's international profile. Under the pillar "Citizenship, Identity and National Heritage and Culture," Oman is advancing museum modernisation, archaeological restoration, and comprehensive heritage documentation, backed by substantial allocations in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025). Ongoing initiatives include upgrading museum infrastructure, preserving archaeological sites and historic landmarks, and expanding the registration and study of national antiquities. This commitment is reinforced by major forthcoming initiatives, notably the First International Conference on the Archaeology of the Oman Peninsula (1–3 February 2026), organised with Sultan Qaboos University, which aims to consolidate Oman's role as a hub for archaeological research in the region.

A growing programme of cultural events, exhibitions, and workshops is designed to deepen public engagement with Omani heritage, while international achievements, most notably Jokha Al-Harhi's 2019 International Booker Prize, have elevated Oman's cultural visibility. Tourism development through expanded routes, accommodation, and heritage-based attractions further links culture to economic diversification.

In the European context, Oman's maritime-heritage collaboration with the Netherlands and academic partnerships, including the German University of Technology in Oman established with RWTH Aachen University, provide a practical foundation for expanded EU-Oman cultural cooperation across heritage, research, and skills development.



Image source: Canva

Qatar

Qatar has emerged as a key cultural actor in the Gulf, with Qatar Museums and National Vision 2030 positioning the country as a regional hub for heritage preservation, creative expression, and international cultural engagement. Institutions such as the National Museum of Qatar reinforce this commitment by safeguarding national history, while the Qatar Foundation, through its focus on education, research, innovation, and community development, expands the country's soft-power reach. Its flagship project, Education City, hosts branch campuses of leading global universities, including HEC Paris in Qatar, and benefits from the leadership of Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, whose international roles and co-founding of Fashion Trust Arabia have elevated regional creative talent on the global stage.

Qatar's cultural diplomacy is further advanced through initiatives such as the annual Years of Culture, which foster bilateral cultural exchange with rotating partner countries, including France (2020) and Germany (2017). Events such as the Doha Film Festival and Geekdom, a pop-culture gathering under the Doha Film Institute, attract visitors and promote cultural production and exchange. Mega-events, most notably the 2022 FIFA World Cup, have amplified Qatar's international visibility. Meanwhile, educational and research partnerships, including the memorandum of understanding between the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies and the European University Institute in Florence, reflect Qatar's growing engagement with European institutions.



Image source: Canva

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has rapidly expanded its cultural and creative industries under Vision 2030, which positions CCIs as a core pillar of economic diversification, which targets a 3% contribution to GDP (\approx USD 20 billion) and the creation of 100,000 jobs. This transformation forms part of a broader national rebranding strategy, moving beyond an image rooted solely in oil wealth and religious heritage. Policy openness is reflected in online visa applications for EU citizens and the announced “Visa by Profile” system (2026) aimed at facilitating mobility.

Cultural production has accelerated: the Saudi arts movement is evolving quickly, with initiatives such as the Red Sea International Film Festival elevating the Kingdom’s cultural visibility and nurturing emerging talent. Heritage and academic collaboration also feature strongly: most notably the partnership between the Royal Commission for AlUla and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, advancing archaeology, education, and preservation at one of the region’s most significant cultural sites.

European engagement is facilitated by the EU Delegation, which promotes exchange in film, music, art, and education, and supports the EUNIC cluster in the country, which brings together several European cultural institutes to strengthen bilateral cultural ties. Complementing these efforts, Saudi Arabia’s growing role in global sports, including high-profile football signings, has further reinforced its international profile and employment appeal. Collectively, these developments signal a broader cultural opening and a new outward-facing posture reshaping the Kingdom’s place in regional and international cultural cooperation.



Image source: Red Sea International Film Festival; Canva, Pexels

United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) plays an increasingly prominent role in EU-GCC cultural diplomacy, guided by its Cultural and Creative Industries Strategy 2021–2031, which identifies CCIs as a key driver of economic diversification and reports that the sector accounted for 2.9% of GDP in 2018. Cooperation with Europe spans heritage, education, and cultural exchange, exemplified by institutions such as Louvre Abu Dhabi and Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, the establishment of the country's first Jean Monnet Chair, and the UAE's partnership with France and UNESCO through ALIPH (the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Zones).

The UAE also hosts a vibrant literary and publishing landscape, illustrated by internationally recognised events such as the Sharjah International Book Fair, the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature, and the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. Meanwhile, the Sheikh Zayed Book Award has strengthened the global visibility of Arabic literature, particularly through translation. At the same time, cultural collaboration is expanding beyond France, highlighted by the opening of the first Arabic Cultural Institute in Milan in 2024, led by Sharjah, which reinforces the UAE's linguistic and cultural presence in Europe.

This cultural engagement intersects with a wider deepening of EU-UAE relations. In April 2025, both sides agreed to launch negotiations on an ambitious free trade agreement (FTA), aligned with the EU's 2022 Strategic Partnership with the Gulf and the outcomes of the 2024 EU-GCC Summit. The envisaged FTA is expected to serve as a cornerstone for broader regional cooperation, underscoring the strategic value of linking cultural relations with political and economic partnership.

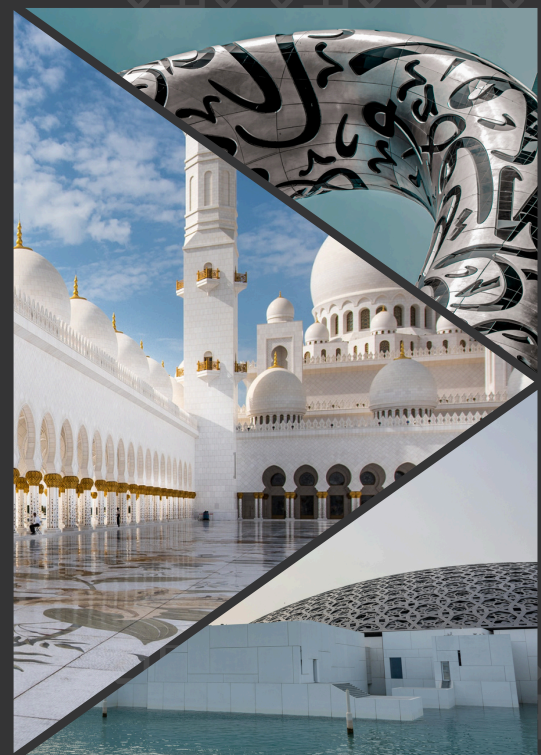


Image source: Canva

EU-GCC Cultural Diplomacy: Outlook & Opportunities

All six GCC states are investing in cultural heritage, creative industries, museums, festivals, and education as part of their national development strategies and as instruments of soft power. This shift aligns with the EU's own commitment to culture as a strategic component of external relations, creating fertile ground for a more structured and ambitious EU-GCC cultural partnership. Despite vibrant activity, cooperation remains predominantly bilateral and fragmented. The next phase offers an opportunity to move toward a more coherent and sustainable framework that pairs cultural diplomacy with broader political, economic, and social objectives.

A strengthened EU-GCC cultural agenda could build on shared interests and global momentum to establish long-term mechanisms for collaboration. The EU's experience in heritage conservation, creative-economy development, cultural governance, and academic cooperation complements GCC priorities in economic diversification, nation-branding, youth engagement, and skills development. At the same time, the GCC's growing cultural visibility and expanding global networks offer platforms through which the EU can amplify its presence and forge deeper ties with new audiences.



Joint Action Opportunities

Looking ahead, eight areas present strong opportunities for joint action.

By advancing joint efforts across these domains, the EU and GCC can elevate cultural diplomacy from promising bilateral engagements to a strategic, long-term partnership – deepening mutual understanding, fostering innovation, supporting youth empowerment, and contributing to the resilience and diversification of cooperation between both regions.



Qal'at al Bahrain (Bahrain Fort), Manama
Image source: Canva

1

Structured EU-GCC cultural cooperation framework: Move beyond ad hoc projects toward a multiannual strategy or platform for cultural and creative collaboration, with dedicated funding, regular policy dialogue, and monitorable targets.

2

Creative-economy partnerships: Co-develop programmes for entrepreneurship, cultural SMEs, digital innovation, design, gaming, and film – sectors expanding rapidly across the GCC – and include skills pipelines and intellectual property standards support.

3

Heritage and museum collaboration: Launch joint research, conservation training, and mobility schemes for heritage professionals; cooperate on UNESCO nominations where GCC states are expanding museum districts and archaeological projects.

4

Education and academic exchange: Scale Jean Monnet Chairs, joint research centres, and university partnerships to enhance mobility and build long-term knowledge bridges, especially in culture-related disciplines and creative-economy policy.



5

Youth and talent development:

Establish internships, residencies, and exchange schemes for artists, curators, writers, filmmakers, and creative entrepreneurs, tied to career pathways and industry mentoring.

6

Cultural festivals and co-productions:

Expanding EU participation in Gulf book fairs, film festivals, music events, and Years of Culture programmes, while inviting GCC partners more prominently into European cultural platforms and co-commissioning works.

7

Intercultural and interfaith dialogue:

Build on Bahrain's leadership in interreligious dialogue, Qatar's exchange programmes, and UAE's initiatives, together with EU commitments to tolerance and pluralism to support dialogue tracks alongside cultural events.

8

Sustainable cultural tourism:

Combine EU expertise in cultural tourism design with GCC efforts to diversify visitor economies through museums, heritage routes, and creative districts, incorporating sustainability standards and local-community benefits.

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