

Chapter 42

The Spaces Between Us

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ABSTRACT

Despite having one of the highest per-capita incomes of the world, social and political changes in Qatar have not kept pace with the country's economic development. The expatriate and national population of the small emirate have access to luxury brands and a variety of Western goods including food as well as hotels. The high level of commercialization, however, does not mean that cultural differences between the various nationalities have been erased. Online forums and social media have provided neutral public spaces where debate and dialogue about identity and values can take place in a way they do not occur in public. This chapter examines a variety of examples through comments by expats and nationals on a number of media sites as well as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

INTRODUCTION

The oil-rich Arabian Gulf states are bustling with commercial activity, which accompanies globalization. Virtually every major North American or European brand is available for consumption. From the ubiquitous McDonald's arches, to the luxury logos of Mercedes, or screening of international movies and every range of product in between, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a hotbed for the commodities of the world. The flow of material objects is mirrored by the symbolic exchange of ideas present in online spaces. Often consumption is mistaken for acquiescence to a western outlook, but examination of people's online behaviors reveals that these objects do not hold symbolic value as replacements for cultural

values (Black, 2009, p. 397). Yet, as Allan Fromherz suggests in *Qatar: A Modern History* (2012), the modernization of the Qatari economy has not been associated with an accompanying significant shift in social or political practices.

Qatar, Fromherz (2012) argues, has managed to elude the tangle of social and political change assumed to be part and parcel of a developing economy (p. 8). With modernization, he explains, comes change, often descending into chaos before entering a stable period. Unlike other parts of the developing world, including Africa, Asia, or Latin America, Qatar has managed to remain socially and politically stable while simultaneously managing the world's largest economy. One need not look far for evidence supporting Fromherz's claims; consumer behavior has not changed the

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population's acceptance of rule by a monarchy, led by an Emir. Though the malls are full of western clothing brands, and the arms of customers in line at the cashier's counter piled with jeans, shorts, or dresses, the locals are still dressed in traditional clothing to wear when traveling or inside the home. Western outfits are reserved for travel or at home. Physical appearance still dictates many assumptions people make about one another in the public spaces of the city. In such rigidly defined public spaces, where dress, gender, nationality and occupation still dictate behavior, regardless of one's background, we find evidence of Fromherz's claims that social structure in Qatar has not kept pace with the development of the country's roads, buildings or economy. Resistance to cultural change persists in the social structure, particularly as applied to the roles of women as well as interactions between expats and nationals. Despite western products and influences, the government maintains a presence in the everyday lives of all the residents of the country.

Within such a context, the possibilities for debate and dialogue between people of different communities and viewpoints are limited; therefore, the relative freedom made possible by more egalitarian spaces like online forums, news sources, and social media, become critical. As Rebecca Black (2009) explains, "deterritorialized online spaces offer multiple points of social and cultural contact with individuals from diverse backgrounds" (p. 398). The additional layer of complication, however, is that in the continued acceptance by the national population of a benevolent, yet hyper, vigilante State apparatus, which monitors all mediums of communication by all its residents. The online interactions in Qatar have an ever-present audience.

The absence of testing the limits of the constitutional monarchy's restraint of internal criticism in print newspaper or online forums is another example of Qatar's divergence from the assumed interconnectedness of socio-economic

development. The national telecom provider, Qtel, does not allow unrestricted access to technology, whether on the phones or computers. The word "Oops!" with a cartoon illustration of a man with kinky, frazzled black hair pops up if attempting to access sexual content. The continuation of traditional values and social rules—Qataris still have the obligations that governed the lives of their grandparents, including marrying within their family and socializing within their tribes—hints at a contradiction with the modern setting of the glittering capital city Doha, which is filled with five star hotels, shopping malls, and skyscrapers.

The rapid development of Qatar and the GCC has encouraged voluntary migration from expatriates across all levels of industry in order to provide the labor necessary for the ongoing building of infrastructure. Blue-collar construction workers and maids from Asia, as well as doctors, professors, and engineers from Europe and North America have been moving to the GCC to make their fortunes and contribute to infrastructure development.

At a time when few other countries in the Middle East had the resources to develop technological infrastructure, the GCC governments were investing heavily. The small nature of the countries, from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bah'rain, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as the relative affluence of their native populations, has made them technology innovators in the Middle East. The Internet and related media are not neutral concepts in the Middle East, malleable for a variety of purposes, determined by the user. Newspapers, social media and blogs are public arenas with severe political and social consequences. The contrast between the attitude of Middle Eastern governments towards the activities of residents and citizens online is carried over from their monitoring of activities in print. The region, which has been grappling with the affects of globalization against the rule of dictatorships, has recently experienced political upheaval in the

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