

## **Qatar: A First-Hand Account of Soft Power**

Written by Paul Michael Brannagan, In'utu Jacqueline Mubanga and  
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# **Qatar: A First-Hand Account of Soft Power**

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Since 1995, when the previous Emir, Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, seized power in a peaceful *coup d'état* against his father, Qatari authorities have been profoundly occupied towards transforming Qatar into an internationally recognised modern nation-state. Indeed, with the release of the 2030 National Vision, Qatar has vowed to invest its vast sums of capital wealth into a national commitment 'to enhance competitiveness and attract investment [that] will be needed in a dynamic and increasingly borderless international economy' (General Secretariat for Development and Planning, 2008: 25). The State's underlying objectives of enhancing competitiveness are perhaps most clearly observed in the form of mass construction projects, bright lights, state-of-the-art architecture and an extremely diverse population.

Consequently, Qatar's capital, Doha, has been transformed in little over a decade, now competing alongside the likes of neighbouring Abu Dhabi and Dubai in promoting, in the process, its exotic features and desire to exhibit notions related to a 'lifestyle of leisure' (Fox *et al*, 2006). Its international soft power has perhaps been endorsed to the premier degree by Qatar's acquisition of the 2022 FIFA World Cup finals, and, more recently, damaged by its controversial issues surrounding migrant workers (cf. Pattison, 2013; Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014; Brannagan and Grix, 2014). The rapid growth of Qatar Airways and Al Jazeera has also raised the international soft power of the state, and looks to feed into Qatar's desires to not only attract corporate investment, but also to promote the country as a suitable tourist destination (cf. Peterson, 2006).

### **Focus of Article**

On the ground, we would argue that Qatar's soft power is played out in the form of newly established cultural locations and activities, lavish hotels, conference venues and luxurious restaurants, which have been constructed in recent years to cater mainly for the state's Western audiences.

The focus of this short article is to provide readers with an insight into the political significance of Doha's socio-cultural environment. It seeks to bridge, on the one hand, the first-hand accounts of Qatar written on various blogs, webpages and discussion forums and, on the other, the academic accounts which have mostly been written 'from afar'. More specifically, we look to provide readers with a first-hand account of Doha's central attractions and, in doing so, critically evaluate how Qatar's soft power is perceived. Our insight emerges from field work conducted in Qatar during a ten-day stay in December 2013, where we visited Doha's many cultural attractions, stayed in two of its state-of-the-art hotels, and gained an insight into some of techniques Qatari authorities are drawing on in a bid to raise the tourist significance of the country. At the same time, the article seeks to illustrate the potential value of observational methods in providing a lived 'reading' of global cities.

### **City Life? Qatar's West Bay Area**

West Bay – or to some Qatari locals, 'New Doha' – is the area of the capital where one finds all the new, modern and impressive skyscrapers. If one were to simply type 'Doha' into Google Images, West Bay would be the most frequently viewable pictures on one's screen – shiny, bright-light buildings set against the Persian Gulf. This area, situated in between Doha Port and West Bay Beach, encapsulates Qatar's progressive desires, and is where the

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majority of construction takes place in the State.

The moment one sees West Bay (especially at night) one cannot help but associate it with the kind of places like Las Vegas, Bangkok, Times Square, or Singapore. Indeed, it is hard to take your eyes off the many neon-lit buildings that stand in stark contrast to the night sky, yet are complimented by their reflection against the bay itself – purples, oranges, blues and greens. From afar, the many vibrant colours and the sheer grandiosity of the spectacle provides one with the impression that West Bay is Doha's centre; the place where tourists wander about, locals spend their day at work, and everyone goes out to eat or take in a show in the evenings. In short, from the distance, it is this area of Doha where one would expect everything to be happening.

However, once you reach West Bay itself, you are left with somewhat of an anti-climax. Although numerous high-quality hotels, office buildings, shopping malls and ministry buildings are located here, there are very few comparisons that one can make with the aforementioned global cities. Indeed, whilst staying in one of West Bay's many hotels, one notices that, apart from the many skyscrapers that exist in close proximity to each other, there really is not that much going on in this section of Doha.

From a soft power perspective, West Bay resembles what we may call 'the city that always sleeps'. In contrast to internationally renowned, prestigious and inspiring downtown districts found in places like New York City, Doha's West Bay comes across as almost lifeless – there are hardly any restaurants, cafes or cultural attractions located in this part of Doha. Consequently, apart from those involved in the twenty-four-seven construction business here, West Bay becomes an almost derelict region from around 7pm onwards. Although from the outside it represents a major cosmopolitan scape – and therefore appears to add to Qatar's soft power by portraying a lively 'international city' – from the inside all it really is, is a collection of skyscrapers that fail to exhibit any form of life notwithstanding their changing neon exteriors. Roads, pavements and walkways are almost non-existent, people (locals and visitors) do not walk the streets, and even if they did, there would be nothing for them to see apart from the skyscrapers themselves up close. The result is one of show – West Bay is clearly designed to be highly photogenic, but, at least for now, at night, this is its only real purpose. It offers fantastic modern and impressive views, but severely lacks any real attractiveness once one gets past the bright-lit show from afar.

### **A Taste of Qatar's Historic Ways? 'Souq Waqif'**

Whilst spending time in Doha, one cannot help but be attracted to arguably its most popular tourist destination: Souq Waqif. Literally translated into 'the standing market', Souq Waqif dates back to a time when Doha was merely a large village. Back then, this was where its relatively few citizens would gather daily to buy and sell goods. During this time, the Souq – like so many across the Arabic peninsula – functioned as the centre Doha's daily rituals.

Today, Souq Waqif provides travellers with a sense of old Qatari and Arab life. Indeed, down the many little alleyways one finds here, there are a number of small stalls and shops, providing the Souq with its greatest level of 'authenticity'. A perfume shop, for example, selling hand-made aftershave and perfume provides travellers with a distinctive and rare smell due to the fact that such perfumes are only made and sold here in the Souq. The same can be said for some of the spices one finds here. Local produce that was once sold here daily – in fact, before the growth of shops and supermarkets, one would only be able to buy the majority of one's groceries here. There are also a few local cafes, selling Arabic food, coffee, and shisha for all customers who like to sit back and enjoy the sight of the hustling markets further down the road.

Yet whilst sitting down in Souq Waqif, one cannot help but feel modernity closing in. It is not just that the area offers various standards of international cuisine beyond the local offerings – Lebanese, American, Turkish, French, Italian, Iranian – but rather that the signs of Qatar's rapid development manifestly encroach this space which otherwise feigns and nurtures a connection to the past. Looking beyond the narrow, lively traditional streets is the unmistakable sight of huge tower cranes offering the gentle reminder that this area, too, will soon be surrounded by a very different kind of urban architecture.

Consequently, the Souq acts as somewhat of a hybrid. The perfume shop mentioned previously, for example, although

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selling a great deal of local flavours, also sells the more popular global brands of Amani, Prada and Gucci. The same can arguably be said for the buildings themselves; although the products being sold are indeed local, the exterior of the Souq itself has been updated and somewhat modernized under a tourist gaze. Although looking to provide tourists with a true experience of old Arabic life, the Souq has, ironically, been refurbished and made cleaner for the tourists themselves, taking a little something away from the authenticity of once historic market. Perhaps the best example of this is the many souvenir shops one finds at the Souq – designed and focused towards, we would assume, travelling tourists. That is, as one walks around the Souq, popping in and out of its many shops and stalls, one finds a great deal of both 'authentic' Arab/Qatar goods – such as the famous Arabic jugs, shisha pips, perfumes, colourful boxes, praying rugs, and terracotta and china vases – one cannot help avoid the more 'tourist-focused' goods – such as mugs, ashtrays, and t-shirts that read 'I love Qatar'.

Consequently, the Souq is caught between Qatar's indigenous culture and heritage on the one hand, and catering for the needs of many western tourists on the other. In each case, we would argue that Qatar's soft power is both heightened and diminished. In the case of the former, Qatar's ability to maintain its indigenous culture adds to its soft power by providing visitors with a taste of the State's rich and prestigious past, providing travellers alike with the kind of cultural experience found in few other locales; the State's ability to incorporate forms of modernity into this historical significance both adds to Qatar's attractiveness by providing tourists with pleasurable and familiar tastes, yet also severely diminishes the authenticity and consequently, charm of the complex. The result is that the Souq provides us with an example of a soft-power tug-of-war between forms of cultural authenticity and modernity.

From a more macro perspective, the Souq, we would argue, does little for Doha's international prestige compared with other nation-states. Where perhaps other locales get-away with such forms of hybridity between the authentic and the modern, leaving visitors with a true sense of a place's heritage – Rome, Beijing, Paris, Moscow, etc. – the Souq, at least for now, acts as a reminder that Doha is some way away from having the cultural significance of being a world-leading tourist destination. Arguably its greatest cultural asset in terms of Qatar and the Persian Gulf's heritage, the Souq fails to provide tourists with a greater sense of the socio-historical assets of its capital city. Presently Doha acts as more of a short-term business destination for many visitors, and for this to change, and for the city to attract long-term holiday-makers, Qatari authorities need to flaunt arguably their greatest asset to a higher degree: the Souq. While offering potential tourists modern choices in authentic sites works perhaps for significant international attractions such as the Coliseum in Rome or the London Dungeons, it does not work for the Souq, not for an attraction with such limited appeal.

### **The Pearl and the Logic of Junkspace: A Taste of Qatar's New Attractions**

The Pearl is a real-estate development that was started in 2004. Specifically, the Pearl is a \$2.5 billion man-made island covering 400 hectares of reclaimed land off the Doha waterfront. Unlike other places in Qatar, the Pearl oozes a serene sense of finality. Going there is to experience a certain sense of completion, whereas much of Qatar appears to be under construction, coming into being.

The Pearl, as most things in Qatar at this point in time, can only be reached by car. Going to the Pearl means leaving behind the construction sites, noise, and migrant workers of West Bay for something rather more peaceful. One drives across the bridge-come-highway, leaving West Bay's colorful, dynamic skyscrapers behind. Once on the manmade island, one is enveloped by designed tranquility. The Pearl can best be described as a polished, faux-renaissance experience. The design of the built environment is clearly inspired by Italy. One is essentially presented with a reimagining of the Venetian landscape: water, canals, boats. Soft Italian music plays out of the speakers as one traverses around the Pearls many deluxe shops, cafes and restaurants.

The Pearl, however, is not the only Venice-inspired megaproject in Doha. The Villaggio Mall too is quite overtly inspired by Venice, though the canals and boat trips on offer here come with the extra benefits of the interior experience, namely air-conditioning and shade from the sun. This is not so at the Pearl, yet the two places have more in common than the Italian influence. Indeed, both are best conceived as instances of what Koolhaas (2002) has termed 'junkspace'. By junkspace Koolhaas refers to modernist 'megaprojects': airports, malls, theme parks, etc. Here we are more interested in the spatial implications of junkspace than Koolhaas' normative ideas on urban

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development. What junkspace accentuates is that the Pearl consists of minor elements (shops, cafes) and a bigger framework (the Venetian walk-way), which in turn is designed as part of a much larger mega-structure, the yet-to-be-completed districts. One imagines, if the larger megaproject is ever completed, that the experience will resemble that of a theme-park, the most famous of course being Disneyland, by being arranged in thematic fiefs which flow into one another (Sorkin 1992: 215), allowing one to 'travel' to different parts of the world in almost an instant.

If one is not lucky enough to own one of the surrounding luxury apartments, the only real reason to go there – aside from enjoying the lovely scenery – is to be a consumer, for which the Pearl has plenty to offer. Though pretty and quant, the Pearl is essentially a circular shopping and dining street. It gives off the sense of freedom, of choice, but the only choice really is to stop for a coffee or inspect one shop or the next.

Though impressive, the Pearl also came across as a bit ghostly when we were there, in the sense that it could easily carry 50 the amount of visitors. Here the Pearl mirrors the rest of Doha: It is built to house and welcome many more than it currently does. At the same time the Pearl is different from the other 'new' parts of Doha by being, essentially, finished. There are no expat workers building roads, only those tending the shops for locals and tourists. In this sense the Pearl offers a vision of what Doha may become; a luxurious environment of pedestrian streets, deluxe housing, and exquisite consumer experiences.

In terms of soft power, places such as The Pearl and the Villaggio Mall do provide one with a sense of attraction. Both offer the kind of attractive experiences: beauty; tranquility; prestige; glamour. Nonetheless, although each encapsulates forms of soft power, it is arguably the attractiveness of Italian culture that really leaves a lasting impression, not Qatari culture. Consequently, although marvels in themselves, The Pearl and the Villaggio Mall do more for Italy's soft power than they do for Qatar; perhaps most significantly here, such cultural attractions simply amplify one's desires to experience 'real Italy', not the 'attempted Italy' that one finds in Qatar. In this sense, The Pearl and the Villaggio Mall are perhaps one of the greatest tourist generators for Italy across the Middle East.

From an international perspective, we would argue this leaves Qatar looking both mighty and a little desperate. On the one hand, megaprojects like The Pearl testify Qatar's economic might and ambition. On the other hand, and quite problematically, they also represent Qatar's apparent need to import foreign aesthetics and styles rather than drawing on its own cultural forms. Indeed, the plethora of Italian-style architecture in and around the capital indicates that Qatari authorities have opted against celebrating their own culture in favor of the foreign when promoting a 'lifestyle of leisure'. This forces visitors and tourists alike to question the underlying motives here, and, in doing so, arguably suggests that Qatar's own culture may indeed be unpleasing – even to its own people. Whether this is the case or not, the fact that such a desire exists for all-things Italian severely limits Qatar's ability to do what all great states do: leverage its proud culture, norms and preferences on the international scene and, in doing so, transform such assets into forms of attraction, prestige and grandiose. Building spaces like the Pearl signifies that Qatar certainly has ambition but also, perhaps, that it does not quite know where to go or how to most forcefully leverage its significant resources.

### **Closing Comment**

We have endeavoured here to provide readers alike with a first-hand account of Qatar's capital, Doha. In doing so, we have uncovered a number of observational themes. Most significantly we have shown how Qatar's soft power can be perceived on the ground. We have argued throughout, that in actually visiting Qatar and experiencing the country first-hand – which so many who comment on the State fail to achieve – certain forms of soft power (attractiveness, prestige, grandiose, etc.) do indeed exist; however, there are severe limits to just how attractive certain locales really are. Although impressive in many places, Doha severely limits its soft power capacity by either lacking the appropriate infrastructure, injecting too much modernity into its most significant historical/cultural sites, or by drawing too heavily on the attractiveness of foreign nations, most specifically Italy.

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