



H.E. Salah bin Ghanem Al Ali Minister of Culture and Sports State of Qatar

Gulf Affairs: The Ministry of Culture, Arts & Heritage has led the cultural scene for many years in the state of Qatar. What is your evaluation of the role of the Ministry of Culture and Sports that was established in 2016 after the merger of both the Ministry of Culture, Arts & Heritage and the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which was established in 2013?

Salah bin Ghanem Al Ali: The Ministry of Culture and Sports has a leading role to play in society and is keen to enhance knowledge and development in all fields. Not only does it lead the cultural scene, but it is concerned with public affairs as well as with all fields that share its noble mission like education and media.

The merging of both ministries comes as a structural reform which does not aim to change the terminology, but to change perceptions and efficiency of the work in each sector. We cannot assess the role of the ministry in a matter of months, in the sense of a scientific evaluation. Still, we can determine the nature of the steps that have been made and their impact in bringing about a shift in our perception of the role of the ministry itself in this historic stage—it makes sense to outline our vision and strategic plan in light of the historical reality witnessed by the State of Qatar. We announced the vision of the ministry just months after the initial merger and are currently working on the strategic plan. We inaugurated a number of cultural centers with a new perception of the cultural work to be performed and with the aim of giving creative individuals more independence in running their affairs, discussing their causes and expressing their

creative product. We launched the Theater's Affairs Center, the Cultural Conscience Center, the Music's Affairs Center, The Cultural and Heritage Events Center, and Diwan Al-Arab Center. These are executive structures to embrace intellectuals and to influence society by creating a cultural public opinion as well as stimulating cultural movement.

Unlike traditional cultural ministries, which limited the scope of their work to the executive role only, the ministry will develop the public strategy by providing follow-up, patronage, and governance. We live in a changing world and our society needs a qualitative transformation in the work performed by the ministry without dominating the cultural work.

The Ministry does not claim that it owns culture but rather seeks to provide the proper environment to build a national culture for intellectuals and innovators to help them push the society forward.

Gulf Affairs: How would you sum up the vision of the Ministry of Culture and Sports concerning arts and culture in Qatar?

Al Ali: In every historic stage, culture needs a vision to build society and to fulfill its intellectual, psychological and aesthetic security needs. Culture works as a safety valve, which enhances its steps towards achieving a better future and forming a character that distinguishes it from other societies. It gives society a special position in the cultural action of nations.

For that reason, the ministry chose its vision to gear "towards a conscious society with an authentic sentiment and a healthy body". This vision is based on the orientations of His Highness Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, who referred to the value system taking hold in Qatari society as follows:

"The Qatari people have always been long known for their good manners, generosity and humbleness. They work more and talk less. They have always helped the oppressed. I am afraid that we may miss the opportunity to pass on these core values: the values of work, humbleness, good manners and treating others with respect. We must make sure that the youth find a meaning to their lives in all of this and under the conditions of this consumptive civilization."

There is a convergence between these lofty ideals and the vision of Qatar 2030. Our common ambition is to build a new society. Thus, the vision of the Ministry of Culture is based on those two principles. Its pillars are awareness, consciousness, and body, which form the main foundations of building a society.

We deeply need to think about our reality, to get hold of its tools and to explore its methods to be able to use them. Awareness forms the base for both work and methodology. It preserves facts and gives great importance to ideas in order to reach mental common sense and establish a way of thinking which depends on the realization of the cultural and social environment. We are in much need of these inherent values derived from the ideals of our ancestors and entrenched in our collective consciousness to protect our personality. Not only is our consciousness filled with such values but also branches off into sensation, perception, attention and imagination which grow with experience. We can only concentrate awareness and consciousness strongly within a healthy body.

Gulf Affairs: Artistic expression takes different forms, which involve changing values. Notably, in spite of the successful use of technology in Qatari cultural production, heritage remains the main source for such production. How do you see this problematic relationship, which somehow may look contradictory?

IV. Interviews

Al Ali: It is true that creative expressions develop and take different forms according to time and place. Such forms create new visions and methods. Thus, we cannot separate expression from its form and content. Even though creative expression benefited from modern technology, this does not contradict the desire of some creative individuals to use heritage and to harness its content.

Some may consider heritage as a rigid material, nothing more than a legacy that is passed on from ancestors through generations as if a mummified object. This is not what we have in mind as a meaning of heritage. This meaning is more of a legacy than heritage. What we mean by heritage is the vibrant energy that stands the test of time and lives within us now and in the future. If we recognize the difference between heritage and legacy, we will be able to realize the intrinsic value of common ownership of what is symbolic, including firm and constant values of society and elements of its identity. They may change with time to adapt to developments and our perspective of the society we want to build.

The problem in dealing with heritage is the excessive use of old forms in creative fields such as music. We encourage creative people to deal with traditional molds in a creative and innovative way to renovate the social spirit. This way music will keep abreast with the times without betraying its essence. I do not think there is any contradiction between heritage and available technology. The big problem lies with those who are incapable of making this pairing possible. I think that creative expressions of whatever form should reflect the reality of their society and time, and they should contain a new vision and a new project for the society in a creative and artistic form, as this is the real purpose of creativity.

Gulf Affairs: For decades, the educated Arab elite have been a significant cultural stream for artistic production in Qatar and have helped to establish it. Can we talk today about an educated elite among the rising generation capable of carrying the artistic and cultural load?

Al Ali: It is undeniable that the Arab elite played a role in enhancing the Qatari cultural experience. For decades, our society embraced the Arab cultural momentum. However, we cannot overlook the role of the youth and the new generation in our cultural perception. We do not tend to classify society into new and old elites, but we classify it according to methodology, believing that the movement of culture depends mainly on communication between Arab cultural generations in general. Exchanging and transferring experiences among generations creates diversity, which invigorates the general cultural movement. Conflict or discontinuity between generations may be the reason behind the rupture we see in culture today.

Intra-culture discontinuity is a necessary thing for development, but it is based on both separation and communication at the same time. The new generation should not ignore the feats of the previous elite who should not behave in a tutelary or authoritarian manner. We believe in the Qatari youth's ability to create a paradigm shift when they take in the experience of the Arab elite and understand the challenges faced by Qatari society to achieve the desired response.

Gulf Affairs: Qatar played a prominent role in the Arab uprising that took a different turn in the last three years. What is the impact of these events on culture and arts in Qatar and in the region as a whole?

Al Ali: Qatar believes in the self-determination right of all peoples. Thus, it spared no effort in helping those peoples who seek freedom and a better future. Qatar welcomed the Arab uprising out of respect for the will of the peoples and considered it a paradigm shift that has a positive impact on the entire region.

Undoubtedly, this uprising will affect culture and arts. Consequently, innovators will find a new environment of freedom and their creative expressions will take new forms. Cultural momentum needs freedom, which is inseparable from creativity. The intellectuals will be able to discuss the causes of their country with boldness and in full communication with society. Thus, political transformations change the perception of society.

Though none of this has yet been achieved, it shows the huge responsibility that must be shouldered by the intellectuals and innovators at this historic stage in particular. They have a social role to play. They have to deliberate the problems of their peoples and contribute to the change of beliefs, opinions, and mentalities. It is a huge choice that will have consequences not only for the countries which witnessed the uprising, but also for the entire region.

The Qatari cultural scene interacted with the aspirations of the Arab intellectuals in the countries which witnessed the uprising by opening the fields of expression and participation in the events. This contact of Qatari intellectuals and innovators with this new “wave” will undoubtedly create additional enthusiasm to believe in the role of culture in building the future vision of Qatar.

Gulf Affairs: Are you concerned about the fact that the attention given to sports by youth and supported by the state within the GCC states notably exceeds that of culture?

Al Ali: The attention given to sports is a result of the larger media coverage despite the priority given to the youth culture. In addition, scoring goals is much clearer and faster in sports than in culture. This is due to the different nature of each field, without creating a predominance of one over the other. Both culture and sports share roles in society while each field has its own particularity and choices while being integrated. Our vision expressed such integration, bearing in mind that awareness and consciousness should be built within a healthy body. I am not concerned about measurements of attention to each field as it is not a matter of quantity but of degree and quality. Changing and enlightening mentalities through cultural expression takes more time. It is not an automatic thing to do and is not related to a particular period. The more we realize what we aspire from culture and sports at our particular moment in civilization, the better we will be able to give enough attention to each one of them.

Gulf Affairs: Finally, the previous Doha Cultural Festival successfully became a significant cultural forum in the Arab region. Why did it stop? Are there any plans to bring it back?

Al Ali: Qatar went through many cultural experiences, including the Doha Cultural Festival, which kicked off its first round in 2002. Still, each historic stage requires forms and means to present the artistic product or accomplish cultural projects. Thanks to the forums and festivals held by several cultural bodies, Doha became a cultural beacon. However, merging all these events into only one festival does not reflect the vitality of culture that extends all year long. At this point, holding festivals is not our main concern, but empowering intellectuals and innovators to reach creativity is.

Supporting all events with a vision that advances Qatari society, as well as serious thinking about our cultural priorities, are more important than cultural show off. The question is what did all these festivals and forums change in our way of thinking, conduct, and preferences? I think this is the core question, which will guide our plans for the future.