



Challenges of Cultural Identity in the GCC

by Ahmad Al-Dubayan

Marrying heritage and culture with the demands of the modern world

Throughout the history of the Gulf, and until the end of the 19th century, the region was not considered an important exporter of Islamic or Arab culture in its best form, in comparison to cultural centers such as Baghdad, Cairo, Damascus, Fez, and Medina. Cultural production was mostly localized despite extensive trading relations with India, Persia, and even the Far East. The people along the Gulf coast looked to the aforementioned Arab cultural centers as models of civilized Arabic and Islamic culture, from which they imported traditions.

Historical contact

At the end of the 19th century, cultural contact with the West began as a result of a new age of global trade and colonization. This contact triggered a local questioning of culture and identity. It also encouraged the growth of local education, civil and social programs, and the expansion of political awareness—particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait. Expanding at a time of growing Arab nationalism, this contact also further enhanced political awareness and increased interest in indigenous heritage, culture, and identity.

With the dawn of the oil age, the Gulf placed itself on the global economic and political map as a group of modern nation states. The region became a platform for trade and international commerce. Globalization accelerated cultural exchanges, and modern technology and communication aroused further interest in culture and identity within the Gulf states.

The Gulf's identity challenge

Today, the Gulf faces a few key issues with regards to its identity, including the lack of a single, unified political vision, weakness of national education, changes within Islamic and Arab culture, and the creeping influence of English and the erosion of formal Arabic in everyday life.

Despite similarity and shared social, cultural, and religious fabric, Gulf states do not have a unified political vision of the future for the region as a whole. Since the Arab Spring, the Gulf has increasingly diverged along different political lines and visions, most evidently on the issues of Egypt and Syria.

While Gulf societies are largely regarded as predominantly Islamic in nature, this is seldom addressed from a cultural and identity standpoint in

national education curricula. Religious education in schools focuses mostly on practical dimensions, failing to sufficiently present religion as a structure of culture that finds its roots in Islamic civilization or regional history. This results in a local culture that stands little hope to maintain itself in the face of globalization, especially in light of phenomena such as foreign education, media, and social networking. The increasingly diversified and internationalized nature of Gulf economies and labor markets has facilitated the erosion of the Arabic language as an everyday medium for business in both the public and private sectors. Gulf states have undertaken initiatives to address such problems and support culture and identity, with national programs, events, exhibitions, and activities generally falling under national heritage authorities. However, these unfortunately mostly come outside the national curricula, addressing later stages of the cultural “identity question.”

The tribal identity

The tribal element historically presented a form of local cultural cohesion and production. In the modern Gulf, however, it fails to accommodate the increasingly diversified nature and accompanying cultural challenges present in Gulf societies. While the tribal element could be said to be slowly fading away, many phenomena report its existence, such as camel beauty pageants and local tribal poetry, reinforcing the tribe as an identity umbrella. Recent security events in the region, however, such as operation “Decisive Storm” in Yemen, have reinforced in some Gulf states elements of shared culture and identity, of Islamic and Arab elements, and notions of shared heroism and memory, ingredients of a collective identity.

Conclusion

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identities that can encompass both tribal and Islamic heritages while also meeting the needs of the modern world. Institutional and educational initiatives have not yet established a middle path for the new generation, helping them to protect the values of their own culture while also connecting with the rest of the Gulf in a manner that both accommodates a modern world and meets its challenges.

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