

# Employing nation branding in the Middle East - United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar

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**Abstract.** *Branding represents the instrument through which an entity communicates and identifies itself in the consumer's perception. National branding is a similar mean employed at country level. Nation branding is crucial in order to attract investment, boost exports and attract tourists and talented workforce. Nation branding stands between public diplomacy and economic benefits. An adequate policy of Nation Branding- based on a positive, credible and economically reliable image- can be able to extend the range of potential customers and of potential investors. With the aim of better understanding the new challenges, opportunities and threats existent in a globalized economy, the paper evaluates nation branding in the context of UAE and Qatar. The paper examines nation-branding as a driver for boosting the economy, taking into account that clichés and stereotypes (especially in the context of the Middle East) can influence our perception towards one country or another. The analysis explores the strategy adopted in order that Dubai becomes the flagship-brand of the UAE. Abu Dhabi complements this strategy, driving UAE to the position of the most valuable brand in the Middle East. The paper further enquires the case of Qatar and compares it with the branding process of the UAE. Qatar has established various branding resources such as the Al Jazeera news network, international sport events and several cultural and educational exchange programs with international profile. The UAE strives to become an influencer in the global economy, overriding its dependence on hydrocarbon reserves. Qatar is richer in hydrocarbon reserves than the UAE; nevertheless, it shares the interest of detaching itself from the rentier economy. The study explores the fact that from 2014-onwards the global oil economy was hit hard, as the price of the oil barrel is at an historic low, thus it has become stringent for the Persian Gulf countries to diversify the revenue sources. As a result, their branding strategy has become even more salient. The processes employed for establishing nation-brands in the Gulf are noteworthy and constitute the focal point of the paper.*

**Keywords:** nation branding, place branding, strategy, growth, Middle East.

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## Introduction

UNITED Arab Emirates and Qatar alike - the countries that are object of the comparison- are positioned between the shores of Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula region in Western Asia- one of the richest regions in hydrocarbon reserves in the world. The region also represents a transit hub between the West, India, Africa and the Far East. For many decades, the cities of the Persian Gulf have been ports of call for boats heading to and from Persia, India, China and East Africa.

This advantage is seized in the pursuit of building a branding strategy that would boost even the nation building process.

UAE and Qatar's decision-makers acknowledged the growing importance of the nation branding, as soon as they realized that the natural reserves are not long lasting, thus it is becoming significant to explore the potential of other economic sectors and accepted the importance of nation branding as a stimulus for the economy. In addition, the oil barrel price reached historic lows in the past two years, pushing for new economic diversification schemes. These countries with limited natural attractions need to focus on marketing attractions or promote popular events for investment and further economic growth. Such attractions and events must be supported by corresponding infrastructure and services; while taking into account financial incentives for putting them in place (Kotler and Gertner, 2002).

It is a laborious task to take decisions to build attractions with a view brand a country, along with conveying a unitary message. It may be one of the greatest challenges for decision makers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Simon Anholt, 2006). Despite the difficulties to form a coherent branding strategy, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries - UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman - are developing an emphatic branding strategy focused on tourism development, aviation, real estate and international events and exhibitions/conferences, meant to place their countries and capitals (Abu Dhabi and Doha being the capitals considered for the study) on the map of the world economy.

Branding encompasses a more detailed approach (see literature review section and scholarly approach, especially Anholt's six-layer one) than stating ambitions, as it the case with the most successful product of branding from the Persian Gulf region, namely the UAE. For reaching this level of success and good results, UAE has followed closely the specialists view and tried avoiding mistakes, reputational risks and negative implications that can intertwine with the branding process. UAE's nation branding process is compared to Qatar's particularities in nation branding, analyzing their most striking initiatives and results and the timeframe associated with the processes. Ultimately the paper draws the conclusions on the branding processes in the region, noting both its limits and its success. The study acknowledges the individuality of the region from a nation branding perspective and evaluates future prospects of its evolution.

## **Literature review**

### **Upholding the importance of *nation branding***

Currently, nation branding and, subsequently, place branding have emerged as rapidly growing research fields. Nation branding has become a competitive factor in modern economies and an individualizing element in the relations between the various exponents in the international system. A strong national brand can contrive significant global competitive advantages; attract skills and investments, together with endorsement of economic value and increasing revenues from selling products associated with the country.

Management and marketing brands for nations, regions and cities is currently a widely accepted practice and it is given more recognition worldwide.

Nations and cities are branding their culture, society, heritage and businesses to acquire notability on the global map. One can outline that the identity of the nation significantly contributes to national branding if we accept the scholarly view of the nation as a projection of the community and a sum of the main elements of its national identity (Dinnie, 2008).

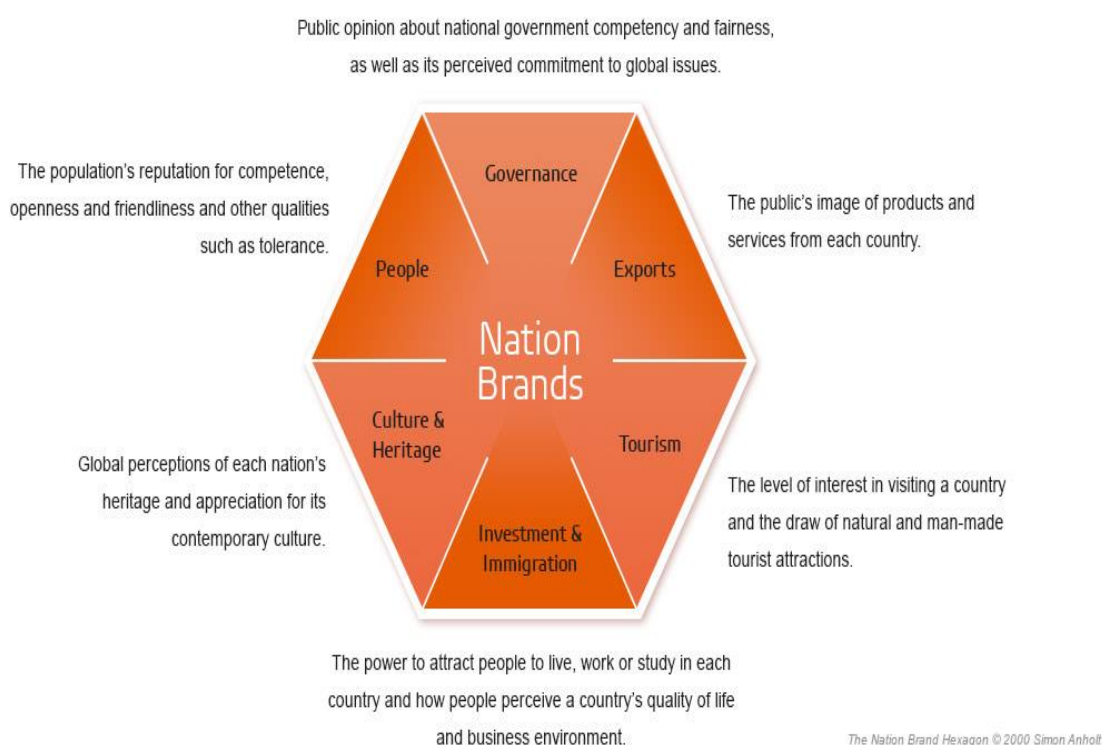
Simon Anholt, one of the most prominent authors in matters of nation branding encompassed the whole concept in a six-layer explanation, see *figure 1*. Therefore, the nation brand is the sum of people's perceptions of a country across six areas of national competence. According to this author, the cumulative effect of each element of the six-layer figure creates the nation brand.

Simon Anholt proposed few channels through which you can enhance a country's reputation: tourist promotion; exporting brands; government policies (domestic or aimed at the foreign sector); the population's reputation; cultural heritage; the power to attract investment and skilled workforce. In 2007, he added the importance of the performance the country's leaders express on the international arena (Anholt, 2007). In sum, nation branding is crucial in order to attract investments, boost exports and attract tourists and talented workforce. Simon Anholt considers a nation brand as *"the most valuable asset: it is national identity made robust, tangible, communicable, and – at its best – made useful"* (Anholt, [www.superbrands.com](http://www.superbrands.com)). Simon Anholt described competitive identity as: "(...) the synthesis among brand management, public diplomacy, trade, investments, tourism and export" (Anholt, 2006). Anholt ranked competitive identity among competitive factors displayed by countries in a globalized world.

Striking competitive identity, means accomplishment of a successful branding strategy. It shall be made possible with the cooperation of the decision makers, private sector and of the local population. A country's international reputation can be managed and changed to better as long as there is a clear strategy for doing so, leadership, and proper coordination between government, the public and private sector, and the population in general (Anholt, 2011).

In subsidiary, it has become necessary to brand places as well, a phenomenon mainly inspired by globalization processes where products, services, assets merge with the markets and culture in a global community (Anholt, 2005). If we think that branding reduces the image of a country or a place to a simple image, it might sound unfair. But it has become increasingly difficult for a country to convince people in other parts of the world to go beyond these simple images. Combining place branding and economic development notions within a strategic marketing perspective were first introduced by Kotler et al. (1993). Even when a country does not deliberately manage its name as a brand, people retain images of countries that can be activated simply by a name (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Brands emerge as a product of the mind trying to identify the essential information from a wide variety of data available (Kotler et al., 1993). As a result, places and not only countries engage with the outside world in a clear and coordinated manner in order to have an impact on the public opinion (Anholt, 2008). Simon Anholt had already explained that a positive and strong city brand creates competition with other cities in the candidacy for trust and respect of potential consumers, investors, tourists, immigrants, the media and governments of other nations, and only a strong image

confers a crucial *competitive advantage* (Anholt, 2003), what he called subsequently competitive identity.



**Figure 1. The nation brand hexagon**

Source: nation-brands.gfk.com

*Exports* – reflection of the products and services image in the minds of the consumers, influencing the willingness to buy the product or intention to avoid the product.

*Tourism* – expresses the wish to visit or not that country and what are different man-made or natural attractions stirring attention of potential tourists.

*Investment and immigration* – implies the attractiveness of a country in the eyes of the investors and the potential to draw qualified professionals and businessmen for making a living in that country.

*Culture and heritage* – features the global image of the country's heritage and its contemporary culture in its various forms.

*People* – an assesment element of the global reputation of the citizens of the country for their skills, friendliness and openness. The level of hostility and discrimination among the population also counts.

*Governance* - this measures the opinion of the general public about their government and level of trust in the public policies, achievements and involment in the international affairs.

The concepts laid down by Anholt and other branding specialists have started to be given adequate consideration, since a country's brand can genuinely determine its economic, cultural and political destiny, as well as international competitiveness

(Nicolescu et al., 2008). The better the strategy, the bigger the gains. Strategic place marketing engages enrichment of a country's position in the global marketplace (Nicolescu et al., 2008). However, one should pay attention to avoid reducing a country image to over-simplistic creations that can be counter-productive. Overall, the significance of nation branding has become more visible in the last decades. The paper has chosen to assess the nation branding processes in the specific case of UAE and Qatar. UAE and Qatar certainly acknowledged the significance of nation branding and received consultancy from international branding specialists, as the demands of the global economy imply adopting new marketing strategies and tactics with competitive gains.

## **Nation branding in the UAE and Qatar**

### ***WHY nation branding particularly relevant to the UAE and Qatar?***

The GCC region has known a rapid economic growth that has prompted adopting bolder branding strategies. The decision makers and the population alike wish that the national image mirrors the high incomes and prosperity. The region needs to communicate with the outside world and transmit a set of coherent messages for the global community. Anholt (2005) explained that when you tackle branding, it should be done in a harmonized and consistent manner. Therefore, it should communicate the value of all the products, brands, and sub-brands and should govern all the activities which are designated for the same purpose. Not only the GCC needed a communication strategy, but also the constraints and problems of the small states could be answered with a justified response- a strategy of branding the state for endurance and development. It is obvious that certain characteristics of small states cannot be altered: the physical size, population (especially when the national population is the minority as it is in UAE and Qatar), or the geopolitical situation. All these aspects are equally valid for the UAE and Qatar. In connection with the rapid economic growth in the GCC development, we can note that nation branding is of critical importance to developing nations, which do not have the time to wait for the national image to align to the rapid pace of development (Anholt, 2006). Once the economy started growing at a high rate, the GCC needed to promote an image that mirrors its wealth and resources. An adequate branding response is relevant because there appears a predilection in people's behavior when they make their choices: "The clichés and stereotypes- positive or negative, true or untrue- (and stereotyping is frequent in the case of the Middle East) fundamentally affect our behavior towards other places and their people and products" (Anholt, 2007).

In addition, both the UAE and Qatar have to rely strongly on soft power, given the circumstances we named- geopolitics, economy, social challenges and demographics. This is why national branding is becoming vital in their national vision for the decades to come. The branding process is surrounded by the specifics of soft power. Joseph Nye has defined *soft power* as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. Soft power arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals and policies" (Nye, 2004).

***UAE's nation building throughout the time of branding Dubai***

UAE is a federal absolute monarchy (founded as a federation of seven emirates since 1971) in Western Asia, at the southeast end of the Arabian Peninsula on the Persian Gulf shores. As a country brand, UAE is known as the Middle East most valuable brand, and one of the fastest growing economies. Only ten years ago UAE was not included in the top of Global Brands, while by 2016 it is third strongest (worth more than US\$400 billion) (www.brandfinance.com, 2016). Abu Dhabi and Dubai are the main economic contributors out of the seven emirates that make up the UAE. When one analyses UAE's branding, the flagship project of branding is represented by Dubai, even though it is not the capital city (Abu Dhabi is the capital).

Dubai policy makers have been quicker than their counterparts to understand the need for diversification, detaching Dubai from dependency on the oil revenues (Reuvid, 2007). The region's oil resources were said to last only 30 years back in 1990. Thus, this fact enabled a coordinated correlation of these resources. Dinnie has advocated that for effective worldwide competition, the countries should be equipped with superior nation brand management techniques and they need to refine these strategies for excelling (Dinnie, 2009), matter handled cogently by Dubai's decision makers.

Therefore, the branding strategy has first started in the 1980s, when the UAE began to position and promote itself as a world financial gateway through the means of the Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing. According to Fan (2005), nation branding equates to applying branding and marketing strategies into a national background, instead of a different entity. Dubai applied this method, during a time when economic and social growth of the country fueled the adjacent marketing techniques. As a result, the UAE's main emirates, including Dubai carved their way through a new national image (transforming itself from a sleepy village in the desert to the glamorous metropolis of the Middle East). The rapid pace of growth in Dubai was initially bolstered by oil, while oil was reduced to a 6 percent contribution to the overall GDP today (Balakrishnan, 2008). Dubai has successfully plunged into a major economic diversification program. Industries and commercial enterprises were developed (with a special focus on services and tourism), obtaining revenues that replaced the previous main commodity in the state's economy: oil (Al-Sharabani, 2007). The advantage of Dubai is that it could brand an image from scratch. Rebuilding an altered reputation requires a lot more vitality and synergy of resources than developing one from a neutral or unknown standpoint (Kotler et al., 1993).

Dubai's branding recognition is visible in the tourism market, having become the fifth most visited city in the world in 2014 with 11.95 million visitors, while in 2015 there were 12.84 million international overnight tourists and 13.34 million in 2016. (www.visitdubai.com). The destination aims to reach 20 million tourists annually by 2020. The tourist market indicates that 86 per cent of those who visit Dubai stand in the 20-40 years age group and are practiced international travelers (Lee & Jain, 2009), proving attractiveness as a destination. In addition, the huge proportion of expats living in Dubai prove the attractiveness of the lifestyle in the emirate. Dubai has received worldwide recognition for its audacious architectural projects, such as an underwater hotel, the *Palm Islands*, and the tallest building in

the world, *Burj Khalifa* and cemented its brand of superlatives in estate and luxury tourism. The worldwide recognition is not confined to tourism, but also implies onsets in becoming a *smart city*, while maintaining its Middle Eastern nuances from a cultural point of view. The branding strategy entails an approach where Dubai is connected to the latest technology, a commercial and transportation hub that enjoys a cosmopolitan background that makes it possible to attract potential investors and inhabitants from around the world, practically rendering Simon Anholt's six-layer approach possible (adding a harmonious standing in the international arena by the virtue of public diplomacy).

### *Branding Abu Dhabi*

Abu Dhabi's leaders recognized the need to cultivate an image for the city, an attractive alternative to Dubai that complements the concrete changes laid down by the Plan 2030 (National Vision for thorough transformation, focusing on a society that rises up to the 21<sup>st</sup> challenges and implies economic diversification).

This strategy was translated into a process of branding that aims international visibility (Haider, 2008). The first step was done in the late 2000s with the creation of the *Office of the Brand of Abu Dhabi* (Al Ayedrous Bani Hashim, 2012). Its first product was a slogan and a logo for Abu Dhabi. The slogan for Abu Dhabi – “*travelers welcome*” – has been animatedly implemented in the local policy and in marketing campaigns across various platforms. As the nation branding field has been developing, it was admitted that advertisement campaigns are just one element of the overall strategy, and at best produce a short-term effect (Dinnie, 2008). Thus, Abu Dhabi has crafted more than a logo, rather an identity, trying to achieve what Anholt calls a “competitive identity” with the help of all means: including Internet, international tourism promotion and long-lasting campaigns in man-made attractions that connect with the local heritage. It resulted in Abu Dhabi's new identity being constructed poignantly different to Dubai, a city of cultural events (opening branches of world museums, such as The Louvre) and a calm sunshine destination that hosts international events, such as Formula One. This is relevant when compared to Dubai (Balakrishnan, 2009) which is known for its extravagant Guinness Book of World Records attempts – a “city of superlatives” (Beauregard, 2003). As a result, Abu Dhabi has managed to handle a cumulative branding strategy, coming second to Dubai's international reputation among the UAE's emirates.

### *Main steps in Qatar's nation branding and further plans for nation branding*

The achievements of UAE in the field of nation branding have stirred competition in the GCC bloc for sure. Qatar- the sheikdom<sup>1</sup> of the Persian Gulf developed prosperously in the last ten years, reaching the highest GDP per capita in the world (www.indexmundi.com, 2016) -has strived to catch up with the regional counterparts. Qatar is located in Western Asia, occupying the small Qatar Peninsula on the northeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula and declared independence in 1971. A strait in the Persian Gulf separates it from the nearby island of Bahrain.

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<sup>1</sup> A SOCIETY RULED BY A SHEIKH, TYPICAL TO THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Qatar is a leading member of the GCC and it is an operative member of international, Gulf and Arabic organizations. It also held a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council. As a result, Qatar received worldwide appreciation (Peterson, 2006). Qatar has risen to international exposure by hosting major international conferences/meetings, as well. For instance, the World Trade Organization ministerial meetings known as “Doha Round” contributed to Qatar’s reputation.

Just like the UAE (only that it appeared posteriorly), Qatar designated a plan for promoting itself as a high-quality leisure, business, sport, education and cultural destination in the global marketplace. Qatar, through long-term goals operated mainly through its National Vision 2030, is trying not only to place its capital city Doha in the upper tier, Doha is already on the map of political influence in the region and business arena, but is preparing for a wider global affirmation. Qatar started to brand itself based on presenting the country as an unbeaten destination, with top services rather than that of a location for mass tourism. The cumulative effect is profound, as the branding strategy adopted by Qatar is not only based on international awareness, but has overarching economic objectives. The main tools that guide the branding and the development of Qatar are based on the *Al Jazeera* Broadcasting Network, international events- related to economy or sports-such as FIFA WORLD Cup 2022 and educational and/or cultural facilities. The economic growth is reaped through exporting its oil and mostly gas (becoming a trade hub for LNG is also part of the National Vision), complemented by cultural and sport activities, while strategies in tourism cannot yet match UAE’s results. Through its National Vision 2030, Qatar practically envisages to tick all the boxes, namely exports, governance, tourism, investment and immigration, people, culture and heritage in Anholt’s proposal for nation branding.

Maybe the biggest achievement of the nation branding efforts so far is that Qatar has gained a reputation as a venue on the international sports circuit. This is the differentiating branding strategy when compared to Dubai and Abu Dhabi of the UAE that rather targeted tourism integrally, not niche events. When we assess the branding processes, one can notice what can differentiate Qatar from the UAE and the limits of using branding strategies in the region.

### **Comparison of the nation branding of UAE and Qatar**

Both UAE and Qatar see nation branding as a vector of economic diversification, even though conducted in a different manner and in different chronological steps. As Gertner asserts (Gertner, 2007) similarly to Anholt, brand images have helped many economies boost their exports and attract investments, businesses, factories, visitors, residents and talented people. UAE’s Dubai is for sure better known to the world today than it was in the 1980s and breaking record after record as a destination stands proof to its success (success that would have not been possible without a coherent strategy) that eventually stirred regional competition.

Dubai’s strategic approach in branding outlined the importance of avoiding negative impact on its image and was helped by the context of building a nation brand during a transitional time when it was emerging as a nation. As an indication for the constant and coherent strategy, Dubai allowed more time (when compared



to fellow emirates) for the nation branding strategy to come into place, starting with establishing a Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing in the 1980s. Abu Dhabi realized it is time to differentiate itself from Dubai in the late 2000s, whilst Qatar has started branding post-1996 (coinciding with launching *Al Jazeera*). This means Dubai has been in the global marketplace for almost three decades, whereas Abu Dhabi and Qatar were almost invisible for the world until around the year 2000. Dubai has already consolidated an international reputation and may be the success story of branding in the region (reflected in the number of tourists and investments it attracts annually), while Abu Dhabi is slowly following into its path. To manage image campaigns effectively, Anholt pleads for long-term nation-brand planning and strategy. Such strategies should comprise marketing concepts as continuity, simplicity, coherency and accurate information about a country (Anholt, 2003, 2005).

Dubai's image as a destination of superlatives has been constructed from the early 1980s, receiving a strong stimulus in the early 2000s that was accelerated once the economic diversification was enforced (in the perspective of drying resources and lower oil prices). Dubai is targeting a declared ambition to be a "Global Arab City" which implies a strong grounding in its heritage, although connected to the global economy and global trends. Abu Dhabi is framing an image (the *welcoming* sunshine destination) that can be an alternative to UAE's city of superlatives and that also keeps a connection to its cultural background. Both cities contribute at the moment to UAE's growth and visibility as a brand. Abu Dhabi branded itself starting with the logo "travelers welcome" which was developed in a few successful initiatives (Formula One event, branches of world-known museums). A simple and attractive logo definitely helps as if it is distilling the essence of the country image. Anholt stated that it comes natural to less well-known countries trying to establish an international profile that they will start with a signpost brand of this sort. Moreover, if they identify a sharp point in order to penetrate consumer consciousness and add their country's name to the consumer's mind, then it means the strategy is fully accomplished (Anholt, 2009). The two main contributors for UAE's nation brand, Dubai and Abu Dhabi have reached their target to come up with an international profile, associated with concise communication, comprising true elements- the city of superlatives in the Gulf and the calmer capital city of a sunshine/resource blessed region.

Motivated by UAE's accomplishments in branding, Qatar adopted a nation branding strategy with impact on its capital Doha that transformed from a desert city to the host of top universities, forums, sports and cultural events (Hazime, 2011). In the process of engaging a coherent branding strategy, Qatar faced the challenge of the UAE's embedded success. Sporting events, international universities and cultural festivals may broaden Qatar's appeal but Qatar has yet to witness a more radical economic diversification. The oil and gas sector still counts to almost 50% of the GDP (www.forbes.com, 2016), compared to 6% for Dubai. However, it can be expected that Qatar becomes a stronger contender for UAE in tourism and economic diversification if it keeps gaining ahead with the sport events in the next decade (FIFA World Cup 2022 is an important stake in this sense) and the exhibitions and conventions/conference market.

*Competing for competitive identity and limits of the branding processes*

The efforts made by Qatar have been remarkable, whereas it is difficult to compile a strategy that does not “copy” Dubai’s fashionable trends in matter of architecture, real estate, events and others. A brand requires distinctiveness, but the stunt is how to make it distinctive and to promote it as such to the consumer. The problem is that Qatar cannot grow yet out of the image of the oil and gas rich state-city and preferred some riskier bets on the political arena compared to the UAE for affirmation (i.e. capitalizing soft power through its media brand- *Al Jazeera*). The risks can intertwine with its public diplomacy and ultimately be detrimental to the economy, but such gaps reflect the challenges of branding two countries in parallel with nation building. It means that aligning the nation brand strategy with the country’s strategy is important but not sufficient condition, the brand strategy should also assimilate the character of the population and their common aspiration (Gilmore, 2002). The problem with the UAE and Qatar (Qatar probably to a larger extent) resides in a small number of local population and the social conservatism of the region that it does not match the globalist drive implied by nation branding strategies for worldwide recognition. Nevertheless, the needs for economic diversification and the openness to the global economy have contained the social opposition and enacted significant steps in adopting nation branding strategies.

Working along these lines both UAE and Qatar worked with their specific means for the nation brand and public diplomacy policy, creating a country image and identity and focused on the role of nation brand in the economic development of the country. Both countries have ambitious national plans that cannot be separated from nation branding.

A commercial brand encompasses marketing techniques, and so does the nation brand. The branding strategy should be applied on these elements in such an intelligent way which could help the nation in achieving its economic goals (Freire, 2005). Through these means, nation branding will develop a strategic and robust nation brand system and apply this system on all the related areas mentioned earlier. This is why the two countries considered for the study make a good example, as in their case it is relevant that nation branding helped connecting the nation building system and the proof lies in the National Strategies/ Visions of UAE and Qatar for the decades to come. The plans take economic diversification seriously through the means of investments, highly skilled population and good governance, with a massive focus on exports and the ensuing revenues from diverse sources, combined with a sound international image. Therefore, nation branding (in a plenary understanding) for both UAE and Qatar is a catalyst for larger goals and endurance of their state construction that otherwise can be vulnerable.

**Conclusion**

The paper sheds light on the efforts made by two young nations in crafting an assertive international positioning. Their challenge is to satisfy both the objectives of branding and public diplomacy. These objectives are sometimes conflicting, but the countries have to send a coherent set of images and messages (Ham, 2008). The

main message transmitted by both UAE and Qatar is that they are open for international business, welcoming tourists and investors alike, ready to affirm in the global economy, as they offer competitive advantages.

A credible and reliable economic image that both the decision makers and the locals want to project is able to extend the range of potential customers and of potential investors which is highly important for UAE and Qatar in their attempts to become independent from the oil economy. Their competitive identity as Anholt put it is a success story for a developing region. Creating a new brand is difficult, a long process, and it is expensive. It requires creating or handling a particular niche that at times is hard to pinpoint. Countries are trying to maintain their national identity while promoting their distinctive features. These features should connect to a national individuality, which include place identity (Ali & Chaudhary, 2015). The brand no matter if we analyze UAE or Qatar, or their cities, must be differentiated from those of its neighbors. Using the method of “me too” is not likely to strike success (Peterson, 2006). In a resource-barren landscape and in a harsh climate with difficult geopolitics, the creativeness can encounter barriers. Anholt (2005) explained that what makes a difference in the nation branding is the novelty and the interest to invest in innovations. UAE, Qatar and all the GCC countries have limited resources except for oil (and gas); and thus they are forcefully competing in the arena of economic diversification. They are contenders in the nation-branding processes too: thus whoever comes first with a distinctive pattern (and Dubai seemed to do so) not only takes the lead but also holds an invincible advantage. Competitive Identity is the term Anholt “branded” for the synthesis of brand management and public diplomacy, as it links trade, investment, tourism and export promotion (Anholt, 2007). In such a fiercely competitive arena, countries must understand the needs and wants of specific target markets and find ways to satisfy them more efficiently. The study reveals that UAE is a top challenger in the Middle East, with Qatar as a runner-up.

All in all, the paper explores a subject that has quite limited coverage in the literature, although the sheikdoms of the Gulf region have an increasingly difficult task to prove themselves in international marketing and requires more examination. It is truly a different picture than the branding process in the Western-oriented culture that has had more time to consecrate this experience. In addition, it happens often in the Middle East that imprecise information or widespread stereotypes bolstered in the media and the entertainment industry can easily alter the image of a country associated with the region.

Against all odds, one can highlight the achievements of both UAE and Qatar that indicate the potential of growth and enhancement of the position in the world economy through *persistent* efforts of branding (Nicolescu et al., 2007). The key element in a successful branding strategy is not reflected just by the ambitious projects that UAE and Qatar are developing (and for the most of the time completing/achieving) but it is, in fact, their nation brands that started to distinguish them in the Middle East. While a few places in the Middle East have succeeded in overcoming their image problems and have enhanced the value of their brand names, others still struggle in the pursuit of economic development (Gertner, 2002). Anholt (2009) stated that certainty creates good policies, clear

behavior and a good reputation. One can highlight that UAE assumed this lesson, while Qatar has slowly postulated it for a decade or so. Many leaders in the Western world already understand the need to manage a country's name as a brand that can add to or subtract from the estimated value of a country's assets. But we should note that the tools of nation branding can be particularly beneficial for emerging, newly industrialized nations striving for success in an increasingly competitive marketplace. To accommodate the growing number of challenges nation branding faces, the concept should be analyzed in the future from an interdisciplinary standing, combining management-marketing and public diplomacy in order to offer a comprehensive picture. UAE and Qatar offer a good support for this approach, as their nation building process is almost overlapping the nation branding processes. Therefore, this study can provide with a starting point in the assessment of branding processes in the broader Middle East and offer guidance for a more in-depth eventual scrutiny of the matter. There are a number of places in the region that continue to be unfamiliar to wider audience. It happens frequently in the case of young nations such as the GCC ones, although places as UAE and Qatar are relatively known, but the rest of the countries still encounter visibility problems that prejudice their chance to compete in the market place.

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