

**“Building glass refrigerators in the desert”:  
discourses of urban sustainability and nation-building in Qatar**  
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*Abstract.* Planners around the Arab Gulf states are increasingly drawing on narratives about “urban sustainability,” despite the fact that the explosive growth of urban centers in the Arabian desert largely defies the logic of sustainability. In this paper, I consider how and with what effect these narratives have been deployed by various actors in Doha, Qatar. Eschewing a simple economic reading, I highlight political geographic context and analyze how actors mobilize and rework these discourses. Drawing on mixed-methods fieldwork in Fall 2013, I illustrate how sustainability narratives are mobilized together with nationalist tropes about modernizing Qatar and building up the country’s international prestige, while preserving local traditions and culture through the built environment. With a focus on recent efforts to green Doha, this analysis sheds light on the disciplining function of nationalist discourses in the producing and constituting what it means to label development practices “green” in contemporary Qatar. [Key words: urban sustainability; eco-city; Gulf nationalism; Qatar.]

### **Introduction**

“Urban sustainability” appears to be a new orthodoxy amongst planners in the oil-rich monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Doha promises to power its purpose-built football stadiums with renewable energy for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. “Dubai aims to go green by 2020,” headlines proclaimed, when the city was awarded the Expo-2020 hosting role. Abu Dhabi now boasts the region’s first eco-city, Masdar City, while plans for similar sustainable communities are proliferating in the region. Millions of trees have been planted and leaders are proudly “rolling back the desert.” But what makes these projects worthy of closer scrutiny is that, despite all the trees being planted, and all the technological innovations in green building and smart grids, planners are still “building glass refrigerators in the desert,” as one of my informants put it.

From an objective standpoint, it is hard to grasp how the Gulf’s explosive urban growth could be considered “green” or environmentally sustainable. The Arabian Peninsula is one of the most arid parts of the world and most of the countries rely primarily on the energy-intensive process of desalination for their water supplies. Nonetheless, planners and politicians have increasingly drawn on the language of sustainability and urban greening in designing and framing their spectacular city-building agendas (Gardner, 2014; Günel, 2012; Hertog and Luciani, 2012; Luomi, 2012a, 2012b; Ouis 2011; Reiche, 2010a-b; Sillitoe, 2014). To understand why this is, I argue that it is essential to consider how these sustainability discourses operate within and through broader state- and nation-building agendas in the GCC. Taking the case of Qatar, this article is informed by interviews, focus group interviews, and participant observation conducted in Qatar in Fall 2013. This article also employs textual analysis methods, drawing from a range of texts including newspaper articles and advertisements, governmental and private reports and policy briefs, as well as related museums and urban landscapes.

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## **Outward-looking nationalism and the Qatar brand**

“When I started studying Qatar, I realized that here is an extremely small state consistently punching above its weight and playing a larger role than is commensurate with its size, demography and, in many ways, its resources,” Professor Mehran Kamrava of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign in Qatar told the US National Public Radio (NPR) host Robert Siegel in a recent set of interviews. Kamrava’s commentary, which is echoed in Siegel’s set of reports on Qatar (NPR, 2013a; 2013b), represents a well-established cliché in coverage of this small Persian Gulf country, with Western news articles analyzing Qatar’s “outsize role in Arab politics” (Shadid, 2011) and titled, for example, “The Strange Power of Qatar” (Eakin, 2011) or “The rise of Qatar: Pygmy with the punch of a giant” (*Economist*, 2011), and schematized in Kamrava’s (2013) book, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics*. Curiously never applied to city-states like the Vatican or Singapore, this deterministic narrative assumes that population and territory size would dictate a much smaller role in international affairs to Qatar, at only 4,467 square miles and home to around 2 million residents – only 260,000 of which are Qatari citizens.

But size has been of little concern to decision-makers in Qatar, which is an absolute monarchy of the Al Thani family, currently headed by Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (who took over after his father Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani abdicated in June 2013). Since the beginning of Sheikh Hamad’s reign in 1995, Qatar’s foreign policy agenda has had the appearance of being designed by marketing strategists, rather than militarily-minded strategists of statecraft. This has entailed an aggressive “nation-branding” effort (Cooper and Momani, 2009), enacted through various institutions such as the Al-Jazeera cable news network, foreign aid, conflict mediation-centered diplomacy, and spectacular urban development in Doha.

Synecdochically representing the country as a whole, cities are often a privileged site for such nation-branding agendas. Within urban studies, most of the work on place-branding has focused on strategies to develop iconic architecture (e.g. Acuto, 2010; Adham 2008; Bagaean, 2007; Bunnell, 2004; Elsheshtawy, 2004, 2008, 2010; Kaika, 2010; Sklair, 2005, 2006), but scholars have increasingly considered the role of green initiatives as a dimension of urban boosterism schemes (e.g. Gardner, 2014; Günel, 2012; Hoffman, 2011; Johansson, 2012; McCann, 2013). In this article, I extend this literature to consider the increasing effort to use green development, or urban sustainability, discourses in the effort to brand Doha, and Qatar more generally.

Much like the greening of the UAE, which has been “designed for international audiences as part of the theatre of global prestige” (Ouis, 2002, p. 340), the recent scripting of greening Doha is an excellent example of how Qatari elites (and their foreign experts) have mobilized the global rhetoric of sustainability to promote a positive international image of the young country. Gulf cities, Andrew Gardner (2014, p. 10) has argued “are the trophy cases of a people and its leadership, and are directly intended to convey a particular message about the arrival of modernity in the region to a global audience.” But these projects are not just about impressing the international community; they are deeply infused with local nationalist narratives wherein greening the desert is “promoted as a source and symbol of national pride” (Ouis, 2002, p. 337). As I discuss below, some strands of the Qatari nationalist narratives have a particular inward orientation focused on local culture and tradition, but contemporary Qatari nationalism is largely outward-looking. That is, some national identities are more emphatically articulated through a claim to international prestige (Koch, 2013b; Schatz, 2008).

This outward-looking orientation has profoundly characterized Qatar's contemporary leadership. Elites have been eager for international attention – but not just any attention. They have developed a wide range of initiatives to demonstrate their country's newly-achieved techno-modernity, and to attract positive press – along with the presumed financial and symbolic capital that accompanies it. Yet the pursuit of a high international profile has increasingly subjected the country to outside criticism. Qatar has not been treated kindly by the Western press, which has overwhelmingly cast it as an overly zealous, young upstart, with reckless spending habits and dubious political alignments (this paralleling the Western media's pervasive dismissal of Asian urban development projects through the language of Disney and “utopia” that I have interrogated elsewhere; Koch, 2012). This is readily apparent in the recent flurry of attention given to labor practices and human rights violations in Qatar in the lead-up to the FIFA World Cup 2022 (e.g. Aziz and Hussainjan, 2014; NPR, 2013c; Patisson, 2013).

Many of the criticisms of the FIFA decision to award the event to Qatar have also emphasized the country's hot climate, with temperatures reaching well over 100°F in the summer (e.g. Bordenjan, 2014; Gibson, 2013). Most of this commentary focuses on the health of the athletes, but some have also noted the negative environmental impact of developing, powering, and cooling Qatar's purpose-built stadiums. This bad press has prompted a vigorous response from various actors in Qatar, as they seek to justify their development agendas, both internationally and domestically. This equally applies to the issues surrounding migrant laborers and environmental themes, but the focus of this article is on the latter. Qatar's environmental track record also came under fire during the December 2012 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP18), hosted in Doha, where many objected to having the event in a country with the world's greatest consumption of electricity and water per capita (in 2013, water use was 500 L/person/day and electric was 15,053 kWh/person).

Feeling the sting of these critiques, combined with concerns about the World Cup press coverage, the Qatari government has since ramped up its efforts to deflect this criticism – and drawing on the rhetoric of urban sustainability, environmental protection, and green building in Doha is one manifestation of this effort. But the growing amount of green rhetoric in Qatar is not always matched by green practices, just as other scholars have illustrated in various settings around the world (e.g. Bridge and McManus, 2000; Davidson, 2010, 2013; Raco, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2007; Whitehead, 2003). This study contributes to the burgeoning literature on urban sustainability or “city greening” (Birch and Wachter, 2008; Davidson, 2013; Finco and Nijkamp, 2001; Hoffman, 2011; Kahn, 2006; Lake and Hanson, 2000; Mazza and Rydin, 1997; McCann, 2013; While et al., 2004; Whitehead, 2003; Wolch, 2007), but I depart with many of these studies by approaching urban sustainability not as a “thing” or a “real” process to be understood, but rather as a *strategic discourse*.

A discursive approach eschews universals and emphasizes the political effects of rhetorical and material practices conducted *in the name of* sustainability. That is, in this analysis, I am not interested in the alleged validity of how actors deploy sustainability (i.e. whether or not the practices they seek to justify are truly green), but more in how it operates as a “regime of veridiction” (Foucault, 2008) in the country's rapidly changing political economic relations. By interrogating the discursive construction *and* reception of initiatives to green Doha, I aim to trace the conditions and consequences of mobilizing the urban sustainability narrative in contemporary Qatar. In particular, I ask, what are the political effects of strategic actors employing the discourse of sustainability in Qatar? How have different actors worked with and employed it to sustain and secure strategic ends?

A key contribution of this article is to search for the “staying power” of the inarguably nebulous concept of sustainability through treating it as a discourse that is co-constituted with other powerful discursive apparatuses and political economic systems. Critical scholars have increasingly demonstrated how sustainability discourses operate through or alongside capitalist/neoliberal discourses, or as a “mask” for the economic interests of actors who use the tropes of sustainability (e.g. Davidson, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2007). Although this is a welcome critique, I find that it subsumes political geographic difference and leaves intact problematic assumptions about neoliberalism’s global hegemony. As I have argued elsewhere, in certain political contexts, other discourses might be more salient – and this is especially true in authoritarian and other settings where market capitalism may be at work, but is not a primary mode of legitimating the authority of those acting in the name of the state (Koch, 2013d).

I am particularly interested in nation- and state-building discourses, which take on a special significance in such highly-centralized political systems as those found in the Gulf monarchies. This is especially significant in Qatar because, as Gardner (2014) has pointed out, the massive urban development agenda in Doha is an essential conduit for the transfer of petroleum wealth from the state to citizens. As Gardner implies, and as I extend in through my arguments in this article, an analysis of discourses about city-building in Qatar demands a consideration of how these projects fit into the leadership’s legitimacy projects, both in terms of its efforts to secure domestic *and* foreign approval of the country’s nondemocratic political configuration.

My analysis illustrates how the sustainability discourse has not only been employed as a way to “green-wash” Qatar’s grossly environmentally-harmful development agenda for an international audience, but that it is also central to the monarchy’s domestic nation-building agenda. Furthermore, in line with recent global and regional trends, planners have employed this discourse in their effort to brand Doha and invite investment in green technology and the construction sector. Lastly, I demonstrate how, even in Qatar’s highly-centralized political system, the sustainability discourse is mobilized and produced by a *range of actors*, rather than imposed top-down by central governmental officials. In the following section, I will briefly introduce and contextualize the theme of greening the city in the Gulf and beyond, before then considering how urban sustainability discourses operate in Doha.

### **Intertwining discourses: nationalism, techno-modernity, and being green**

“Qatar is in the Gulf and the desert environment and they’re creating a really interesting contrast between the desert and the green areas here. They’re trying to make the country more green but at the same time there are some places that they are keeping the sand because it’s a part of [...] their identity. And this contrast between the green areas and the desert is really interesting, especially for a tourist. When they see it, they are like, ‘Oh, wow, this is a desert.’ Every person who doesn’t know what Qatar is, the first image that comes in their mind is just – desert – they think camels. But when they come here [to Doha], actually, they see green areas. They see a modern city.” (G3P1)

The words of this young Qatari woman reflect a complex set of geographic imaginaries about the city, the desert, green spaces, modernity, and Qatari national identity. Consistent with other focus group discussions, this participant was well-versed in the hegemonic narrative in Qatar about local identity being associated *both* with desert landscapes and the hypermodern and green spaces of Doha. The various elements of these imaginaries are far from unique historically, but

the overall effect is unique in the way that various discourses overlap and intertwine in the overarching nationalist identity narratives in Qatar.

As noted above, the “stickiness” of the sustainability discourse need not be limited to an analysis of the workings of today’s hegemonic neoliberal order, but should also account for the nation- and state-making projects in various parts of the world. In Qatar and the GCC more generally, sustainability discourses are mobilized alongside, and buttressed by, the discursive apparatuses of nationalism and developmentalism – the two being deeply connected. Characteristic of modernist geopolitical thought, development discourses draw upon the ideologically charged terms of modernity and backwardness to map time onto space as a designation of developmental status (Agnew, 2003). In these narratives, people and places “are understood not on their own terms but only in so far as they slot into the global scheme of things,” i.e. compared to some idealized version of European modernity (Agnew, 2003, p. 35-36). This act of “converting time into space” is also seen in the way that developmental regimes are plagued by a pervasive sense of being late or “lagging behind.” This is then constructed as the problem that development seeks to solve. It is also reflected in the way that these regimes become fixated with speed: rapid development is treated as a point of national pride. Joshua Hagen (2010) explores this theme in the context of Nazi Germany, where the show of *Leistung* (meaning performance, achievement, or power) is, like any nationalist discourse, simultaneously broadcast inward to its citizens and outward to an assumed watchful international community. But what is involved in the show of *Leistung*? What is being put on display?

As many scholars have illustrated, development discourses are frequently bound up with a fetish for science and technology (e.g. Bunnell, 2004; Jones, 2010; Li, 2007; Mitchell, 2002; Scott, 1998). In such cases, technical prowess and scientific advances are treated as markers of progress. These achievements become privileged sites of articulating the state’s modernity, resulting in what Toby Craig Jones (2010) has called in his study of Saudi Arabia a “technostate,” i.e. “one in which science and expertise, scientific services, and technical capacity [...] define the relationship between rulers and ruled” (Jones, 2010, p. 14; see also Hecht, 2011; Tatsuno, 1988). In this respect, the other GCC states are similar to Saudi Arabia, where the leadership has “promoted science, technology and development as key markers of the Saudi nation, along with being part of the contract that bound ruled and ruler” (Jones, 2010, p. 15). In the GCC, this technological expertise has increasingly taken the shape of transforming the Arabian desert landscapes into modern sites of productivity and greenness (Günel, 2012; Jones, 2010; Ouis, 2002, 2011; Rizzo, 2013).

Most often unfolding in their capital cities, the Gulf countries’ environmental interventions stand apart from many of the high modernist projects of the early-twentieth century in that their discursive referent is *not* Ebenezer Howard’s famed “garden city” model, which influenced planning of cities as diverse as Ankara, Canberra, Mexico City, and Tel-Aviv. The Gulf countries missed the peak of this trend in the 1920s and 30s, as their developmental agendas formed later, once large-scale exploitation of oil wealth became a reality (in Saudi Arabia from the 1960s and slightly later in the other Gulf countries that received independence from the United Kingdom in 1971). Instead, their city greening projects have emphasized pushing scientific frontiers and technological interventions rather than livability – but they are of course still part of the same global grammar of high modernist thinking that celebrates human conquest of nature (Josephson, 2002; Scott, 1998).

And yet, as the focus group participant above suggests, it is precisely the contrast between the desert and the green spaces of the city that endow these urban development projects

with much of their power to impress. As I have explored in the context of Central Asia (Koch, 2013c), narratives about extreme climate conditions are consistently used in the GCC to emphasize the nation's ability to prevail in the face of objective hardship, while the technological projects to do so are treated as iconic markers of the nation's modernity. Furthermore, they have been part and parcel of the region's state-making practices, becoming, "visible manifestations of [central] authority, material markers of the state and its presence" (Jones, 2010, p. 89).

Pernilla Ouis (2002, 2011) has also explored this theme in the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where she argues that the country's "greening project is closely linked to the legitimization of power for the ruling sheikhs and the political system of paternalism that has come to be termed Zayedism," given the late Sheikh Zayed's professed love of nature and personal devotion to the greening of the desert (Ouis, 2002, p. 338). The UAE leadership in Abu Dhabi has extended the founding father's vision through continuing these projects to green the desert and, more recently, through establishing Masdar Eco-City near the capital city's airport. Gokce Günel (2012) jointly situates Masdar as part of the nationalist agenda to modernize and prepare the UAE for its "post-oil future," as well as part of an internationalist agenda to entice foreign capital and investment in the country's green technology sector (all of course being possible only through the country's vast oil wealth). In the Gulf, this concern with economic diversification away from resource-dependence has overwhelmingly taken the shape of a focus on promoting a "knowledge economy," confirming and extending the techno-modernist shape of the countries' developmental agendas.

While all these narratives about greening the Gulf are easily located in the elite rhetoric, it is important not to lose sight of how they are (or are not) mobilized by ordinary citizens and other actors *not* acting in the name of the state. What is their role in constituting, interpreting, and/or reworking the projects of techno-modernity? In the study of illiberal settings worldwide, nondemocratic polities are frequently studied in terms of their leadership alone, without looking to the ways in which ordinary people support them actively or simply through their ambivalence. Such an approach, however, would miss the strategic ways in which sustainability scripts are popularly received and mobilized through everyday actions, aspirations, and modes of identification (Koch, 2013a). As I argue here, the curious stickiness of such a nebulous conceptual frame as sustainability cannot be traced to elite machinations alone, but also to the way in which non-elites actively embrace the various opportunities afforded by its sprawling discursive repertoire.

### **Discursive disciplining: greening the Qatar brand**

In this section I consider state-based discourses, i.e. those emanating from state-owned institutions, as well as their connection with the more clearly "private" discourses of various firms, consultancies, and other experts at work in Qatar. This line is often blurry in the GCC for two reasons. First, Qatar's economy is dominated by a series of state-owned enterprises and other para-statal entities, and the governmental elite are more or less equivalent with the economic elite (Fromherz 2011). Second, the relationship between state-scale actors and private consultancies is, at risk of understatement, intimate. Many development policies in the Gulf – urban and otherwise – are the direct product of foreign consultant work (Nagy 2000; Khirfan et al. 2013; Rizzo 2014). There is a tremendous amount of work that remains to be done on the Gulf's pervasive "consultant culture," but an serious treatment of these connections is unfortunately outside the scope of this paper.

The Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV), introduced in 2008, is the main reference for nearly all policy justifications in the country, including the recent focus on urban sustainability. The connection between narratives of sustainability and nationalism is readily apparent in this document (Luomi, 2012a). Similar to many national development plans around the world, the QNV promises contemporary and future prosperity – it is said to build “a bridge between the present and the future. It envisages a vibrant and prosperous country in which there is economic and social justice for all, and in which nature and man are in harmony” (GSDP, 2008, p. i). The Vision is designed around four “pillars” of development – human, social, economic, and environmental (GSDP, 2008, p. 11). The Environmental Development pillar is introduced in the QNV as follows:

The State of Qatar seeks to preserve and protect its unique environment and nurture the abundance of nature granted by God. Accordingly, development will be carried out with responsibility and respect, balancing the needs of economic growth and social development with the conditions for environmental protection. (GSDP, 2008, p. 30)

It then outlines the key strategies of achieving environmental protection, which include, firstly, “an environmentally aware population that values the preservation of the natural heritage of Qatar and its neighboring states,” in addition to legal mechanism, environmental research, sustainable urban development and population distribution, regional cooperation, and climate change mitigation efforts within the Gulf and internationally (GSDP, 2008, p. 32-33).

As a policy guide, the Qatar National Vision functions as a disciplinary technology that brings all ranges of actors in line with the government’s priorities. It disciplines political discourse in that nearly all projects and decisions in the country are necessarily validated by some reference to the QNV. In truly disciplinary fashion, it shuts down certain discursive forms. But in so doing, it also opens up a wide range of opportunities for those willing (and creative enough) to tap into the rhetorical repertoire it proffers. One example of how this works is found in the “Tarsheed National Campaign for the Conservation and Efficient Use of Water and Electricity” (*Tarsheed*), developed by the state water and electric body, “Kahramaa.”

Dr. Mohammed Bin Saleh Al-Sada, Minister of Energy and Industry, states in the campaign’s promotional literature that *Tarsheed*’s agenda is to promote sustainable resource use and he highlights the significance of green policies in Qatar’s overall development agenda: “Qatar is assuming a leading economic, financial and political position on the global arena. The country is joining leading nations in adopting environmental best practices that lead to a green economy capable of achieving sustainable development” (Kahramaa, 2011, p. 3). In this framing, the success of Qatar’s internationalist agenda depends on the effective development and implementation of conservation policies. This is because, Minister Al-Sada argues, “no socio-economic growth can be sustained without a comprehensive vision that seeks to protect the environment for the generations to come – the same principle that guides the environmental objectives of Qatar Vision 2030” (Kahramaa, 2011, p. 3).

In their formulaic manner, the Minister’s statements are representative of broader trends in Qatar’s discursive environment; deference to the QNV and the Sheikh’s “visionary” policy agenda are standard, if not obligatory. In all the *Tarsheed* materials, it is routinely emphasized that the program was initiated by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (on 4 October 2011 under Emiri Decree 42), and that it accords with the country’s 2030 development agenda. Kahramaa President, H.E. Eng. Essa Bin Hilal Al-Kuwari, for example, also writes:

The vision of His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar stresses that all established projects must care for environment to the maximum extent. Based on Qatar National Vision 2030, launched by His Highness the Heir Apparent in July 2008, the need to achieve sustainable development of the State of Qatar is to be pursued through four key pillars among which environmental development is a key. (Kahramaa, 2011, p. 4)

In this usual set of acknowledgements, the authors of *Tarsheed's* literature seek legitimation of the program itself, but in so doing, they also contribute to the legitimacy of the Sheikh and the QNV. Both are actively constructed as modern, forward-looking, and in line with the prevailing global environmental discourse of the day – that of sustainability and state-based stewardship of the natural resources falling in the country's territorially-defined borders. "*Tarsheed*," writes Eng. Ali Mohammed Al-Ali, Manager, Conservation and Energy Efficiency Department, "is a strategic initiative on behalf of Qatar to formalize our national responsibility to protect the resources that we have." In this language, key political geographic concepts are naturalized: the territorial state itself, as well as the Qatari "ownership" of the land.

Most of *Tarsheed's* initiatives are accordingly state-based. Three-pronged, they focus on (1) promoting the use of energy- and water-efficient technologies and conservation projects; (2) awareness and community development strategies (see, e.g., the ad campaign available online at [www.facebook.com/TarsheedQatar](http://www.facebook.com/TarsheedQatar)); and (3) strengthening law enforcement and introducing new regulatory frameworks. However, the program is also consistently framed as being about more than just promoting national conservation, but as part of the effort to raise the country's profile as a *regional* leader. Both *Tarsheed's* vision and mission statements reference the need to "make Qatar the region leader in terms of electricity and water consumption reduction per capita." Of course, there is a strong nationalist undercurrent in this regionalist rhetoric, as "urban development has taken on a fetishistic quality that pits Qatar against the neighboring Gulf states in a competition for superlative standing" (Gardner, 2014, p. 11). National pride here is often derived from superiority to regional neighbors, who are then cast as "followers" of the exemplary path carved out by Qatar's visionary leadership. At its core, *Tarsheed* is informed by Qatar's broader nation-building project, which has a markedly outward-looking character.

The *Tarsheed* program is about more than creating a sense of a unified polity, joined in its imagined stewardship of Qatar's natural resources. The promotional literature also adopts the language of "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) in promoting its agenda. This is manifested, for example, in Kahramaa's new "entertainment educational" Awareness Park, which opened in Spring 2014. The idea is to demonstrate for the public the processes of electricity generation and water desalination "so they can understand the socio-economic and environmental cost of electricity and water they consume in their daily lives" (*The Peninsula*, 2013b). In the words of Ali Mohammad Al Ali, Manager of Kahramaa's Conservation and Energy Efficiency Department: "The park symbolizes our commitment to social responsibility towards the Qatari community. It aims at becoming a model centre for disseminating awareness about water, power, health, safety and the environment" (*The Peninsula*, 2013b). In the same way that Qatar more generally is framed as being a model for its regional neighbors, we see that each individual project, in a sort of nesting hierarchy, is equally to serve as a model for others to follow. Though state-owned, the Kahramaa's social responsibility to Qatar's populace is supposedly manifested by raising awareness about their use of the very services they provide. What is of course absent from the whole *Tarsheed* agenda – and the Qatari state policies in general – is a recognition of the fact that citizens pay little to nothing for their water and electric use. At a multi-day conference on "Qatar Energy and Water Efficiency," which I attended in December 2013, this



was the elephant in the room. Qataris had nothing to say on the matter, which they consider as an essential social welfare entitlement of citizens, while the few foreigners who were willing to mention it were quickly silenced by a brusque moderator. And yet, as most experts have argued – and as the tragic environmental legacies of the Soviet Union attest to – until users actually experience a cost (however applied), they generally have no incentive to cut down on excessive consumption habits (for corroboration, see Luomi 2012a).

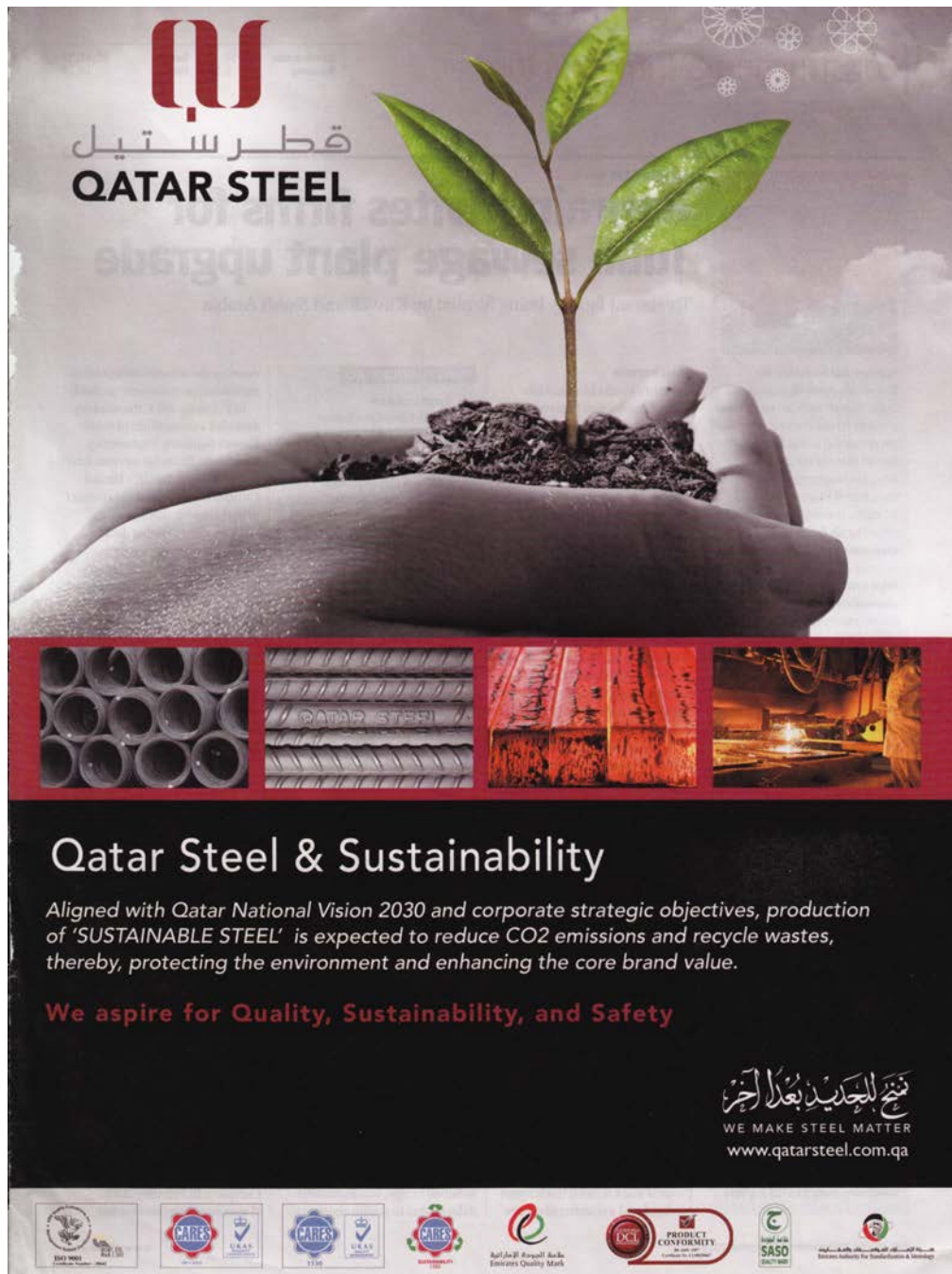


Figure 1. Advertisement for Qatar Steel Company QSC. Photograph by the author.



**Figure 2.** Doha Bank Al Dana Green Run advertisement, with green leaves used to render the Doha skyline. Source: The Peninsula newspaper. Photograph by the author.

And yet, the Qatari advertising landscape suggests that there is a financial incentive for corporations to advertise their products as green, and thus to express their commitment to the QNV’s sustainability agenda. For example, Figure 1 shows an advertisement from Qatar Steel, which announces: “Aligned with Qatar’s National Vision 2030 and corporate strategic objectives, production of ‘SUSTAINABLE STEEL’ is expected to reduce CO2 emissions and recycle wastes, thereby, protecting the environment and enhancing the core brand value.” Selling a company’s image through the language of greening Doha is also readily apparent from the various activities of Doha Bank, which more overtly uses the language of CSR. Ranging from their sponsorship of the annual “Al Dana Green Run” to tree planting activities, the company proudly claims to be “taking the lead through various green initiatives in making Qatar clean and green” (see Figure 2). Dr. R. Seetharaman, the Chief Executive Officer of the Doha Bank Group elaborates:

Corporate social responsibility is about creating long term shareholder value by embracing opportunities and managing risks derived from environment, social, governance issues and economic factors. Corporate social responsibility should promote Green economies and result in social sustainability. The impact of Global warming is getting worse with each passing day. Hence it is necessary that we contribute to the development of Green Economy. Green economy is mainly based on sectors such as renewable energy, green buildings, clean transportation, water management, waste management and land management. Green economies are the growth models for global sustainability. (Doha Bank, 2013)

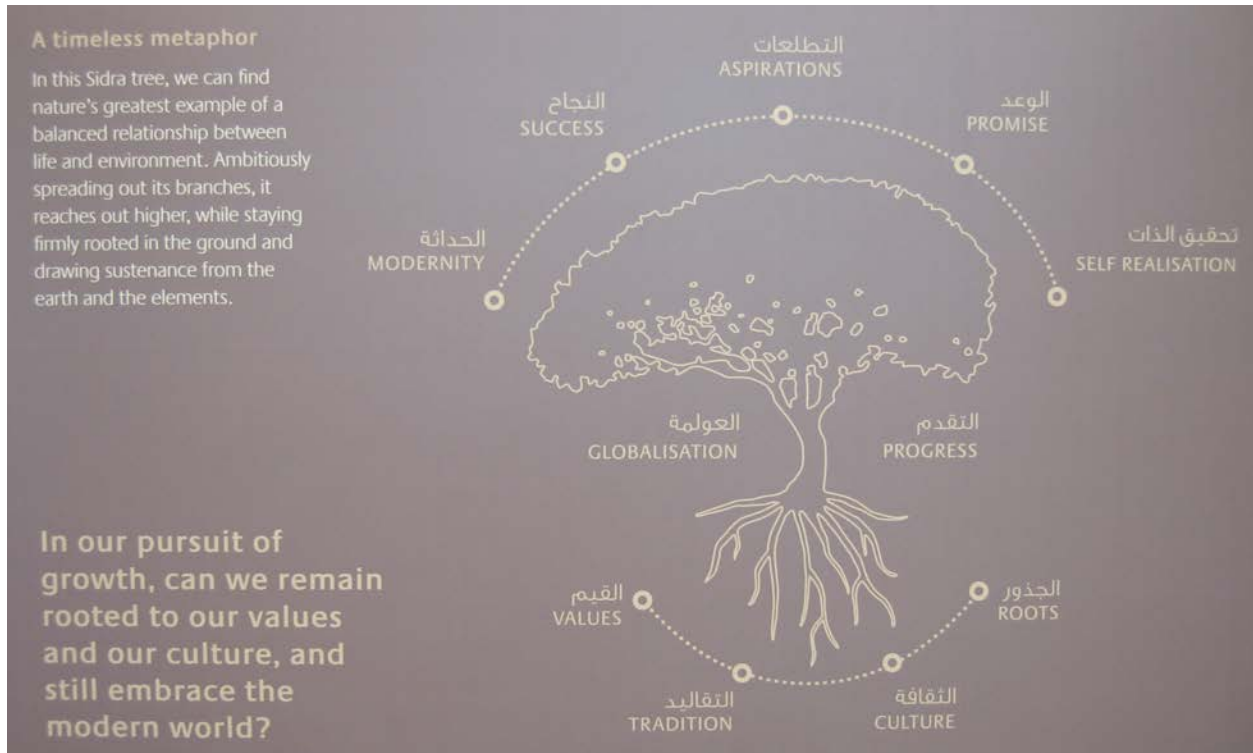
This convoluted explanation can be understood as an affirmation of the merits of green-washing development. In a world where there must be growth (companies must create “long term shareholder value”) – but a *warming* world – it is necessary to promote green sectors of the economy. From the perspective of Dr. Seetharaman and many others, Doha’s new greening efforts should serve as the model for developing this economic future. These various campaigns parallel what Gardner (2014, p. 26) has called the “compartmentalization of sustainability” in the Gulf. But whereas he is concerned with their spatial compartmentalization in the Gulf’s various eco-city projects, the campaigns compartmentalize green practices of the overwhelmingly non-green practices and policies of various agencies and companies, such as Kahramaa and Qatar Steel. In both cases, the strategy is the same: that of synecdoche. This mental trick of imagining the part to stand for the whole entails fixating on certain icons or exemplars (in this case, of sustainability), while strategically overlooking the broader situation. Of course, Doha does have its own examples of the spatial compartmentalization of sustainability: the Msheireb downtown redevelopment and the Lusail City projects.

### **Msheireb And Lusail: two eco-icons in Doha**

The synecdochic strategy of building the “exemplar” is readily apparent in two major state-funded projects in Doha, which are framed as prototypes of high-tech building for Qatar’s ecologically-sustainable future. The first, the Msheireb downtown redevelopment, is a complete transformation of a huge swath of Doha’s core, near the Souq Waqif (see Figure 3). There is



**Figure 3.** Msheireb downtown redevelopment construction site in December 2013. Source: Author.



**Figure 4.** Placard at the Msheireb Enrichment Centre, December 2013. Source: Author.

insufficient room here to fully consider the highly political nature of this project, which has entailed the massive displacement of the city’s urban (non-citizen) poor, but the official rhetoric illustrates how sustainability and nationalist discourses are increasingly intertwining in Doha to justify such urban interventions. This is readily apparent in a visit to the “Msheireb Enrichment Centre,” which is designed like a museum, but functions more as a public relations center for the Msheireb Properties Real Estate Company, a subsidiary of the Qatar Foundation. In the Centre’s promotional brochure, it is described as “a landmark destination created by Msheireb Properties to serve as an educational portal to showcase Qatar’s glorious past and soaring ambitions for the future.”

This theme of preserving of the “glorious” national past together with a transformative modernizing agenda is also apparent in the welcome board at the Center, which is given the title, “A Blueprint for the Future.” Beneath an outline of the major exhibits (Qatar – The Past; Doha – The Evolving City; and Msheireb Downtown Development), is an image of the local sidra tree, one of the ubiquitous tropes of the Qatari nationalist discourse (Figure 4). Described as a “timeless metaphor,” the tree is said to be “nature’s greatest example of a balanced relationship between life and environment.” The tree is then used to diagram themes associated with Qatar’s future on its branches – modernity, success, aspirations, promise, and self-realization – and the past on its roots – values, tradition, culture, and roots. “Globalization” and “progress” label the trunk of the tree, ostensibly operating as the mediators of the past and the future. “In our pursuit of growth,” the placard asks, “can we remain rooted to our values and our culture, and still embrace the modern world?” The exhibition provides a definitive answer in the affirmative, as promised in the promotional brochure: “See Qatar’s ambitious plans for the future and how the country aims to be at the forefront of innovation, excellence and sustainability.” The theme of

sustainable development figures centrally in the overall effort to define Qatar's future through the Msheireb project, both in the actual exhibits and the description of the Center:

*Experience our Future:* Experience firsthand the grand plans this nation has in line with Qatar National Vision 2030. Witness the contributions being made by Msheireb Properties in the field of urban regeneration that will define the future of downtowns worldwide. Learn about the role the people of Qatar will play in contributing to the growth of this truly sustainable development and its many contributions to society and the community at large. [...] Learn about how Msheireb Properties has taken the lead towards optimizing natural resources towards contributing to the environment while preserving the country's distinct culture and unique architectural heritage. Witness how breakthroughs in research and innovation have resulted in the creation of Qatar's first truly integrated sustainable downtown environment.

Using the ostensibly progressive language of sustainability, the project is proudly broadcast as the first "brownfield" development project in the Gulf and, again, as a model for the rest of the world to follow. This discourse works through erasing the urban poor who are being displaced by instead highlighting the "inarguably" good goal of sustainable development. Structural inequalities upon which the project depends and perpetuates are thus obscured with the help of the "forward-looking" veneer of sustainability. The very elitism of the project and its role in continuing the long Qatari history of marginalizing the city's poor, illustrates here how sustainability in Doha clearly does not encompass any attention of social equality (as is sometimes the case in other parts of the world). But the supposedly objective good of protecting the environment is precisely what makes it so powerful – it is a convenient tool for deflecting criticism of a project that outside observers would easy target as retrogressive.

Qatar's state-funded real estate developers have taken heed of this lesson in another one of Doha's flagship projects, the Lusail City development. It is being developed and managed by the Lusail Real Estate Development Company (LREDC), which is a subsidiary of Qatari Diar Real Estate Investment Company – itself a property investment company controlled by the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), Qatar's sovereign wealth fund (Lusail, 2014e). Lusail City is framed as being a stand-alone city, but is more a northward extension of Doha's current land, and is to take up 38 square kilometers, including the development of four new islands (an interactive map is available at [lusail.com](http://lusail.com)). At present basically an empty construction site, the development's proposed shape, including 22 hotels and 19 multi-purpose residential, mixed use, entertainment and commercial districts, is ambitious: "Lusail, a true city of the future, accommodates 200,000 residents and 170,000 employees; it will also welcome over 80,000 visitors. The total estimated population of Lusail will eventually reach 450,000 people" (Lusail, 2014d). This astonishing final figure represents a fifth of Qatar's entire current population.

On the dedicated Lusail City website, the promotional materials are dominated by the typical nationalist rhetoric about Qatar's "greatest challenge" being the effort to preserve the country's "heritage and traditions, especially in a challenging world where globalisation and worldwide communication threaten to dominate" (Lusail, 2014a). And, as elsewhere, the authors explain that the Lusail project "reinforces every facet of Qatar's national vision" through its "wonderful modern blend" of Qatari traditions and "the highest international standards" (Lusail, 2014a). The Qatari media and advocates of the project frequently frame Lusail as the country's first sustainable city, but this theme is not emphasized on the website, where the vision statement merely mentions that "artistically exquisite plans also take the environment into consideration; Lusail City is the first green city in Qatar" (Lusail, 2014a). Renderings of the city indeed make it look to be extremely green – in the literal sense – with copious images depicting an urban

landscape absolutely overflowing with lush vegetation. This contrasts sharply with the present-day view of the city, where it is clear that someone was told to plant trees, but no one was assigned to water them (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Trees at the Lusail construction site, December 2013. Source: Author.

This situation probably reflects the fact that Lusail’s sustainable image was added as a selling point some years after the original conception of the project. Only in 2009 did the developers adopt a policy that all projects within Lusail needed to conform to the standards set by the Qatar Sustainability Assessment System (QSAS). In the press release about the mandate, LREDC Vice Chairman Mohammed bin Ali Al Hedfa said:

I am proud to announce our adoption of the QSAS, as we strive to fulfill the State of Qatar’s 2030 national vision for sectors across the board to invest in sustainable and environmentally conscious initiatives. As the developers behind the country’s largest domestic real estate project, Lusail City, we have a unique responsibility to serve as a national role model in sustainable development. We at Lusail are committed to leading the country’s real estate sector in achieving a responsible, forward-looking development community. (Lusail, 2014b)

Expectedly, the Chairman’s language is well disciplined in its reference to the QNV-2030 and the description of Lusail as a “national role model” of sustainability and forward-looking development. While it is not clear that the QSAS actually entails the “highest standards in green building,” as promised by then-Acting CEO of LREDC, Essa Kaldari (Lusail, 2014b), and while it is not clear that any large-scale development – green or otherwise – would actually be environmentally-sound in this previously-undeveloped area, the sustainability rhetoric is again instrumentally deployed to deflect criticisms of the project.

The Lusail project also reflects the modernist fetish for “cutting edge” technologies – not just tapping into the excitement of green building techniques, but also the “smart cities” agenda that has proliferated around the globe in the past decade. As explained on the Lusail City website: “The ‘smart city’ is a modern concept that has been implemented in districts in the most advanced cities in the world” (Lusail, 2014c). At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Middle East Smart Cities

Summit in Doha in December 2013, Lusail was indeed constantly hailed as the most promising exemplar of the promise of “smart cities” in the region (*The Peninsula*, 2013a, 2013d). As this conference and others demonstrate, the expansion of the sustainability rhetoric surrounding Lusail is largely connected to the fact that Doha has played host to numerous conferences on urban development, where the themes of green building and smart cities are consistently emphasized, in line with a growing global obsession with greening cities.

As such, the way these projects – from Lusail to Msheireb – are being framed is both informed by and helps to constitute this more global discourse. Project planners and the press consistently emphasize how their projects receive international recognition and awards from various institutions (obscure and otherwise, e.g. Qatari Diar winning the Excellence Award for Outstanding Contribution to Sustainable Development at the 2009 International Real Estate Financial Summit). This is then hailed as a sign of the country’s status at the cutting edge, and used not just to shore up the legitimacy of the projects but also, and perhaps more ultimately, *national pride*. Meanwhile, the various consultancies and other organizations gain legitimacy for their agendas when planners actually compete for these accolades. This is equally true of the private companies, which also stand to benefit from selling their new technologies as green. Indeed, based on my experiences at the Qatar Energy and Water Efficiency conference in December 2013, which had talks from researchers, consultants, and government employees and figureheads, it was clear that these gatherings (which, it might be noted, cost several thousand dollars per participant) serve in large part as a platform for international and domestic elites, along with their corporate partners, to unify their discourse. All in attendance were there to sell a product: either their own development strategy or an actual product with the promise of promoting an agenda or identity for the purchaser.

In a similar fashion, planners and developers are increasingly turning to partnerships with research institutes, as another means of selling their image as leaders in techno-modernist sustainable development. Regionally, this knowledge economy approach is best known in the development of Masdar City in Abu Dhabi – another iconic green city development – which has partnered with MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) to attract leading researchers in renewable resources, as well as green-tech investment funds (Günel, 2012; Reiche, 2010a-b). Notably, the Masdar Eco-City idea was first pitched to the Qatari government, which it rejected in 2004 (Günel, 2012, 23). It would appear from their about-face that the Qatari decision-makers realized they missed the boat and have since been actively trying to build up their green credentials through their own set of initiatives, including the re-framing of Lusail as an eco-city.

Another example is Msheireb Properties’ partnership with the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Initiated in May 2011, they aim to develop a permanent research facility in Qatar to “examine the potential for sustainable urban development in the Gulf and produce a shared intellectual resource, the Gulf Encyclopedia for Sustainable Urbanism, to encourage best practice” (Msheireb Properties, 2014). The involvement of these university “experts,” whether from Harvard or MIT, is similar to what Toby Craig Jones notes about the first wave of Western scientists and engineers working in Saudi Arabia, who “helped introduce a belief that achieving progress through science and technology was an apolitical act” (Jones, 2010, 54). To be fair, most scientists today are acutely aware of how political their work is, but their very involvement in projects such as these serves to consolidate particular political configurations in Qatar, that is, as “a new environmental technostate” where foreign experts work alongside a emerging technocrats to “build and broker” a modern polity (*ibid.*, p. 54). This is not to pin responsibility solely on foreign experts; rather, the point here is that the

sustainability discourse has served as an important medium for lending legitimacy to certain projects, which tend to have far more political implications than the neutralist language of environmental consciousness would suggest.

Lastly, it is important to note that the Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF), of which Msheireb Properties is a subsidiary, has been a major force in domesticating this foreign expertise and applying the global sustainability rhetoric in many of Doha's transformative projects. QF is famously chaired by Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Missned, the second wife of Sheikh Hamad, and a tremendously popular public figure and advocate of social change in Qatar. There is insufficient space to properly consider all of QF's numerous green initiatives here. In brief, they range from special entities, such as the Qatar Green Building Council, to contractual requirements that all buildings they fund meet a minimum of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum efficiency standards, to iconic projects like the newest Education City Student Housing complex, which is touted as "a testament to QF's dedication to Qatar's progressive goal of integrating green building practices wherever possible" and "a symbol of environmental consciousness, not only for today's youth but for generations to come" (*The Peninsula*, 2013c). The QF housing complex is just nearing completion, thus remains a symbol for now. Its role in raising the environmental consciousness of the youth is a story that remains to be told, but as the next section indicates, there is a great deal of work to be done in this respect.

### **Does green mean sustainable?**

I chose not to ask specifically about "sustainability" in my focus group research, which was designed to explore green discourses in the popular imagination of students at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (roughly evenly split between Qatari and non-citizen Doha residents, all mixed in three groups). I expected that the term would arise naturally, if it was effectively influencing the way participants were thinking about their city. Interestingly, the word was actually only used in one instance by a single participant (out of 15 total). Instead, most of the discussions centered on a more literal interpretation of what it meant for Doha to be "green," i.e. through the planting of green plants in the desert city. When considering the appearance of Doha, many of the interview subjects emphasized the importance of greenery in the city, as well as some preservation of the natural desert landscapes. Though there was unanimous agreement that it was "very" or "extremely" important that Doha have green spaces, the narrative about the about preservation of the desert landscapes is important because it is one explicit iteration of the nationalist narratives about the desert – which is framed as being essential to Qatari heritage and culture. For example, the participant quoted earlier in this article noted that in the efforts to physically green Doha through parks and other projects, they are keeping the sand because "it's a part of [...] their identity" (G3P1). Or in the words of another group-member:

[Doha] should have some greenery. That's, I think, necessary to any place inhabited by human beings. But in fact, it's a desert; we also can't forget that it's a desert. So it's part of the culture to also keep the desert as it is. (G3P2)

Green spaces in this student's mind are seen as an important dimension of the quality of life. This is echoed by other participants:



I think [having green spaces is] very important because it brings out the city. I mean, I feel like the weather here is kind of dull so when we have this all greenery it helps form this image of what she said—the contrast between the desert and the city. I think we should have both. We can't just have the desert. So I feel like it's important because it is kind of makes the city lively, fun. (G3P4)

There is something in our city's design, something that's called biophilic design. Biophilic is basically including the greenery in any design especially for buildings and spaces because the trees that, you know, it boosts your mood if you see green trees and flowers around you. It's really relaxing. Also it's important for people here in Qatar where it's an industrial country. People spend most of their time at work, so they need to relax. So the first place they think of is going to the Corniche for example. So they are including a biophilic design at the Corniche, so that's where people mostly go to relax and, at the same time, they see the greenery around them then this doubles the relaxation. (G3P6)

The Corniche is a long waterfront promenade that runs along the Doha Bay, which is a central site for socializing for both Qataris and non-Qataris alike (for more, see Nagy, 2000). But the stress placed on the centrality of green public spaces for relaxation was much stronger in the responses of the non-Qataris, whereas several Qataris emphasized that actually, when they think about places to go to relax, “most of them immediately go to the desert where there was no greenery at all” (G3P3). While this certainly exaggerates the situation of the wealthy Qatari estates in the center of the country – many of which have built up extravagant, lush gardens – it underscores the way in which these respondents have learned to code the “desert” (“not green”) as Qatari. And while the “green” is certainly not coded as antithetical to Qatari identity, such landscapes have a much less exclusive ethnic nationalist framing.

While these students all seemed to be attuned to the aesthetic and social dimension of green spaces in Doha, they were overwhelmingly unaware of the demands that providing these spaces placed on the country's water and energy supplies. As in the other Gulf states, most of Qatar's water comes from the highly energy-intensive process of desalination. The water for trees planted along roads, highways, and various other sites even within the city is then placed on large water trucks and piped out to individual plants. In some cases, recycled waste water is used, as noted by the participants of one group:

*Author:* So, in developing these green spaces around Doha, do you think that people are thinking enough about the environmental issues? For example, where the water comes from to water the trees – is that seen as a problem here?

FG3P1: I don't think it's a problem. I don't think it's a problem because the water comes from I think [...] sewage. It's basically sewage water.

This response that the water supply “is not a problem here” was echoed in all the other groups, on various premises. One participant, for example, argued that it was not a problem because Qatar is surrounded by the sea, where there is no shortage of water (G1P2). When asked about the environmental impact of desalination to get this seawater in usable form, she was unaware of any negative side effects, and was then supported by her neighbor who suggested that the trees being planted actually offset any harms because they take carbon out of the air (G1P1). Another participant offered as evidence of Qatar's sufficient water supply the fact that the country produces its own bottled spring water (G3P2). In one case, however, a participant said that she had heard the sea was getting too salty because of this process (G1P4), but none reflected any awareness of the energy resources needed for this water supply.

Although derived from a small sample, these findings echo the results of Luomi's (2012a-b) research in Qatar, as well as that of Günel (2012) and Ouis (2002) in the UAE, where

both found that there was “no profound environmental awareness among most UAE citizens,” nor any “identification of a negative relationship between material consumption and environmental protection” (Ouis, 2002, p. 342), as is frequently emphasized in Western environmental movements. This is not to say that the interview respondents were totally ignorant of the situation: there were some seeds of recognition of the challenges presented by Doha’s resource use. For example, in one group, several participants emphasized the need to plant climate-specific vegetation so that there was no water wastage – though they were much more emphatic that it was most important to ensure that plants did not die, which would make the city look shabby (G2P2, P3). The group discussion continued:

FG2P1: Yeah, we know it’s important but I don’t know if people act on that. They know that it’s important to not waste water and to take care of the environment and everything, but I don’t think they know how to do it. They don’t educate [the people about this.]

FG2P2: I don’t think they naturally think of that because it’s not really a gardening culture. You don’t really have a garden in your backyard or maybe if you do, you don’t tend to it yourself, right. You have people do that for you generally. I mean, I live in apartment, I don’t have a place to have a garden. [...] I know a lot of people who have paces for gardens and they don’t do it themselves. They have other people do it for them so they don’t really know, you know? So yes, it is about the education, I guess.

FG2P1: Yeah, they’re not aware.

Following up on this group’s inclination toward recognizing the importance of environmental education, I asked them if Doha’s greening projects were important on the international stage, to which a Qatari woman responded:

Yeah, this is important, especially because Qatar doesn’t have [many] green areas. So thinking through it and making some projects to increase the green areas in Qatar – it will show the world how it’s important actually for Qatar to consider all the country’s CO2 emissions, that it’s putting the environment at risk. (G1P1)

In this response, it is clear that the young woman, as with nearly all her peers, was well-versed in the prevailing rhetoric about the need to ensure that the country be a global leader, and to raise up Qatar’s image internationally. Additionally, the commentary of participants in all the discussions was dominated by a concern for Doha’s transformation in time for the 2022 World Cup – again reflecting the broader discursive environment in Qatar at the time. None of those I asked were familiar with the green initiatives surrounding the preparations for the event, which were a major focus of the “Qatar Energy and Water Efficiency” conference, but they were acutely aware that the world was looking on, and that it was essential that their capital city present an image of a modern place, but which has not forgotten its national roots in the desert.

## **Conclusion**

By interrogating sustainability narratives and initiatives in Doha, I have not sought to falsify them, or to argue that there is nothing green about them. The practices that are being enacted in the name of sustainability in Qatar are not just rhetoric. Siemens really is developing some impressive technology to allow the storage of solar power at the World Cup stadium sites. Qatar really does have an impressive new solid waste processing facility, unlike any other in the region. And of course the new energy-efficient buildings of the Qatar Foundation are a welcome introduction to Doha’s built environment, where large-scale development is essentially a

foregone conclusion. Instead, by treating sustainability as a strategic discourse that is buttressed by and extends the domestic and foreign legitimacy-building agendas in the country, I have sought to illustrate that it is precisely the ambiguity of the notion of sustainability that makes it so powerful. In this sense, it is truly an ideology: “a noble and vague style, apt for idealizing practices while appearing to describe them. Ideology is an ample cloak that dissimulates the crooked and dissimilar contours of real practices that succeed one another in history” (Veyne, 1997, p. 156).

To date, few have seriously considered how sustainability agendas have systematically been mobilized with the support of nationalist ideas and ideals. But if we are to better understand the continued power of the idea of sustainability around the world, we need to think more critically about the ways that its scripts become entangled with other agendas besides just economic motives. This becomes especially important in the effort to understand how these agendas get operationalized in nondemocratic settings, where the political considerations of decision-makers, as well as opportunities for non-state actors (foreign experts, companies, and ordinary citizens alike), tend to be quite different from more politically and economically liberal contexts. In making this distinction, I do not want to overstate the difference between democracies and authoritarian states, which are more accurately described as a web of practices constantly shifting on a continuum of openness and closure (Koch, 2013a). Rather, my point is simply that no discussion of sustainability can be adequate without a consideration of the broader (geo)political context in which the discourse – encompassing both material and rhetorical interventions – unfolds.

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