Behind the Spectacle: Branding the Arab Gulf City-State

On April 25, 2012, the Center for Gulf Studies hosted a panel lecture entitled “Behind the Spectacle: Branding in the Arab Gulf City-State.” The panelists included:

- Mr. Olivier Auroy (speaker), Managing Director of Fitch Middle East,
- Dr. Farah Al-Nakib (speaker), Assistant Professor of History at AUK and Director for the Center for Gulf Studies.
- Ms. Caterina Sabbatini (speaker), a PhD candidate at Sciences Po, Paris and a visiting researcher at AUK,
- Mr. Mohammed Al Ghanim (moderator), a researcher for the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University.

During his talk, Mr. Auroy outlined what he perceived as the benefits of national branding, claiming that the marketing of specific projects such as museums, stadiums, or tall towers creates a certain world image of a particular place that makes it unique from everywhere else. He argued that it should be a priority of state governments to manage their state image in order to prevent the rise of negative perceptions, or worse still, no perception at all. According to Mr. Auroy, an integral part of state branding should include marketing the state’s local ingenuity. In the case of Kuwait, Mr. Auroy described how entrepreneurial successes such as Slider Station or the success of internationally recognized locals such as Chef Adla Al Sharhan can be used by the state to foster a positive and unique image of the country abroad.

Dr. Al-Nakib’s analysis was more critical of state branding in relation to the use of “starchitecture” and urban development as tools for projecting particular city images in the Gulf. According to Al-Nakib, city-states such as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar today (as Kuwait in the 1970s) put more focus on building a city geared towards satisfying a global audience and attracting “temporary” residents (tourists, transient businessmen, and so on) at the expense of the needs and priorities of the city’s permanent residents. She argued that this approach to city-building is unsustainable over the long-term, as evidenced by the fact that more than $100 billion worth of urban mega-projects have been either canceled or delayed in the UAE due to the global financial crisis.

Ms. Sabbatini spoke specifically about sports as a branding tool for Qatar. Initiatives such as Aspire, the hosting of the 2022 World Cup, and the bid to host the 2020 Olympics represent a comprehensive effort to create a positive image and perception of the country internationally. Sabbatini pointed to the successful precedent of marketing New Zealand’s rugby team, the All Blacks, and fostering an image of New Zealand as a proud, courageous, and rugged people. In the case of Qatar, fostering a positive image through sports can increase its soft power, seen as especially important given Qatar’s much larger neighbors. It is also seen as a means for economic diversification and decreasing the reliance on gas
exports in the long term. Lastly, sports initiatives and projects can be seen, according to Sabbatini, as motivated by power politics and feuds within Qatar’s royal family.

In all, the talk generated much discussion among the audience on the potential benefits and faults of state branding efforts, their sustainability in the long term, and what it means for local residents.

The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) at the American University of Kuwait aims to promote greater cultural understanding of and increased intellectual interest in the Gulf, by facilitating free and open academic discourse on a range of issues that both shape and challenge this critical region of the world. The goal of CGS is to enable scholars as well as political and civil society actors both within and outside the region to contribute and add value to the burgeoning field of Gulf Studies, while at the same time informing and engaging the general public. To this end, the CGS encourages, supports, and cultivates interesting and original research on the Gulf, while regularly organizing a variety of public academic events such as lectures, roundtable discussions, and conferences.