

Nationalism Takes Flight

EMIRATI AND QATARI FLAG-CARRYING AIRLINES AS INSTRUMENTS OF NATIONALIST EXPRESSION

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mirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways connect cities as distant as Krabi, Panama City, Djibouti City, Cebu, Skopje, and Birmingham through their respective hubs. The characteristic liveries of these three airlines appear on landing strips across the world, and fill the runways of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha's international airports. Conducting long-haul flights on mammoth aircrafts such as the Boeing 777 and the Airbus A380, the flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are widely renowned for their exceptionally high-quality service; *Forbes* describes their in-flight amenities as including "Sixteen exclusive Bulgari amenity kits... [and] Dom Pérignon vintages paired with canapés of cured duck with saffron poached peach."¹ Looking beyond the reputation of luxury that is commonly attributed to the flag carriers of the Arab Gulf, these airlines function as powerful tools in



A bar onboard an Emirates Airbus. Wikimedia Commons 2008.

the expression of Emirati and Qatari nationalisms. Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways express Emirati and Qatari nationalisms in three primary ways—by incorporating national and patriotic symbols of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar into their iconographies, maintaining unprofitable policies with regard to their rapid network expansion for the sake of maintaining nationalist pride and status, and exporting their respective national “brands” through sponsorships of prestigious brands and celebrities outside of the Arab Gulf.

In its first section, this essay discusses the historical context surrounding the emergence of the flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. It also explores how the rise of nationalism in these two nation-states parallels the rise of the modern Arab Gulf airline industry. The second section examines the particularities of how the airlines’ iconographies—including their liveries, in-flight videos, and cabin crew uniforms—align them with wider nationalistic movements. The third section describes how the maintenance and fostering of certain unprofitable policies—including entry into lossmaking and saturated markets and their rejection of traditional airline alliances—serve to glorify the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Finally, the fourth section examines the relationship between nationalism and the airlines’ sponsorship of celebrities and prestigious international brands.

Background

The history of the airline industry in the Arab Gulf region in the post-colonial era began with the purchase of the British Overseas Airways Corporation’s holdings in Gulf Aviation—a small, Manama-based charter airline—by the newly independent states of Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the Emirate of Abu Dhabi (on behalf of the United Arab Emirates).² The Foundation Treaty of 1974 named Gulf Aviation, later known as Gulf Air, the joint flag carrier of Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.³ Through the 1970s and 1980s, Gulf Air functioned almost exclusively as a regional carrier, with limited service to Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indian subcontinent. By 1986, Gulf Air’s profits fell as the Arab Gulf’s oil revenues declined and it ultimately saw \$5.5 million in losses.⁴ At points in its history, Gulf Air cut back its service to Dubai and other cities in the Arab Gulf, fearing that the gradual arrival of rival non-Gulf carriers would route passengers away from Gulf Air and its network. Around the same time, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar saw noteworthy political, economic, social, and cultural growth that prompted their development into prominent international hubs. It is in this context that Emirates Airlines, followed by Qatar Airways, and, finally Etihad Airways emerged as internationally renowned and prestigious flag carriers.

The rise of Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways as flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar occurred parallel to the development of coherent forms of nationalism in the two countries. As Miriam Cooke discusses in *Tribal Modern*, in the second half of the 20th century, the nation-states of the Arab Gulf transformed from impoverished economies dominated by the fishing and pearling industries to internationally prominent economies fueled by natural gas and oil. Heritage engineering projects—such as the revamping of Souq Waqif or the construction of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha—emphasized the unique cultural heritage of Gulf Arabs serving as a key component in the development of nationalism in the region.⁵ As *Tribal*

“The rise of Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways reflects the conscious engineering of Emirati and Qatari nationalisms by the ambitious regimes leading the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.”

Modern asserts, since the decolonization of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar dress, sports, the arts, and architecture have played an important role in forging a connection between ancient tribalism and modernity, and ultimately in the fashioning of national identities in the Arab Gulf. Specifically, the promotion and celebration of the *thawb* and *abaya*, falconry, images of the desert, and modern architecture with Islamic themes have been pivotal to this development.

The rise of Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways reflects a component of the conscious engineering of Emirati and Qatari nationalisms by the ambitious regimes leading the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Since their emergence, these three airlines have removed the need for a pan-national airline such as Gulf Air, grown rapidly as flag carriers of distinct nation-states, and dominated several markets. In 1985, Emirates Airlines arose as a startup carrier in the United Arab Emirates, challenging Gulf Air's domination of the regional market and ultimately shattering Gulf Air's regional hegemony.⁶ In 1993 and 1994, Sheikh Hamad al-Thani of Qatar established Qatar Airways, furthering reducing Gulf Air's status as the undisputed flag carrier of the four aforementioned Arab Gulf states.⁷ Driven by the example of Emirates and Qatar Airways, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi withdrew support for Gulf Air and established Etihad by royal decree in 2003 as the United Arab Emirates' second national airline and Abu Dhabi's primary carrier.⁸ Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar fully withdrew support for Gulf Air as they established their own independent flag-carriers as tools of nationalist expression. This is evident in the striking growth of Emirates, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways, which began regularly serving New

York in 2004, 2006, and 2007 respectively, despite American carriers' inability to maintain profitable routes serving the Arab Gulf.⁹ By 2010, Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways had expanded rapidly into Pakistani and Indian markets, and increasingly began to capture the steady and lucrative traffic between North America and the Indian subcontinent.¹⁰ The three major flag carriers of the Arab Gulf became the largest international airlines serving Pakistan and India, with Emirates serving 21 cities in the region on nearly 300 flights per week. By 2014, all three carriers competed with traditionally leading carriers—such as Qantas, British Airways, and Cathay Pacific—on the famed “Kangaroo Route” connecting the United Kingdom and Australia.¹¹ In recent years, Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways have expanded their respective networks in Sub-Saharan Africa, and have dominated the region's international traffic (with the exception of routes connecting Western Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa).¹²

The reaction by the leadership of other airlines to the rapid growth of the Arab Gulf flag carriers sheds further light on the way these carriers function as tools of nationalist expression. The expansion of the three airlines has drawn heavy condemnation from carriers across the globe, with particularly harsh criticism from North American, European, and Australian carriers. Air France and Qantas, for example, have accused Emirates of receiving secret state subsidies that are larger than the internationally acceptable subsidies officially reported by the airline.¹³ This accusation furthers the notion that Emirates—in a manner comparable to Etihad and Qatar Airways—is a tool used by the Emirati government in a wider project of national glorification. Air Canada and Lufthansa have lobbied the governments of Canada

"The liveries and iconographies of Emirates and Etihad consistently, explicitly, and unambiguously incorporate nationalist imagery"

and Germany in attempts to halt local expansion by Emirates.¹⁴ As a result, Emirates has been denied landing rights in Canada aside from Toronto, and has failed at several points in its attempts to expand its network to Calgary and Vancouver. Similarly, the German government has barred Emirates' attempts to expand into Berlin and Stuttgart.¹⁵ Perhaps the greatest critic of the Arab Gulf flag carriers, Richard Anderson, the former CEO of Delta Airlines, even went so far as to haphazardly link the expansion of the Arab Gulf airlines to the events of September 11, 2001.¹⁶ Delta occupied a gate in Atlanta designated for Qatar Airways' inaugural flight from Doha as a form of protesting the Qatari flag carrier's "unfairly subsidized" expansion in the United States generally, and Atlanta in particular. Qatar Airways' CEO Akbar al-Baker called Delta Airlines "wicked" and pronounced that his airline's move to expand into Atlanta was indeed intended to "rub salt into Delta's wounds."¹⁷

The weakening of Gulf Air, the rise of Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways as the flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, and the challenges that these airlines represent to the norms of international aviation provide context for understanding the role these airlines play as tools of nationalist expression. Additionally, a consideration of the wider features of the types of nationalism manifested in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar provides a framework to understand Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways' use of branding (including logos, aircraft design, in-flight videos, and uniforms), network expansion, and sponsorship in developing and exporting nationalism.

The Gulf Flag Carriers' Iconographies

The role of airlines as tools of nationalist expression in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar is evident

in the incorporation of powerful and indisputably nationalistic motifs into the liveries, in-flight videos, and cabin crew uniforms of Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways. These airlines' use of nationalist imagery contributes to their role as tools of nationalist expression by visually aligning these airlines with the ambitious nationalistic projects of their nation-states of registry. Liveries and uniforms have an integral role in an airline's commercial branding as the set of emblems and insignia associated with an airline characterizes its corporate identity. Studying the liveries, in-flight recordings, and cabin crew outfits of international carriers certainly suggests that airlines have historically adopted cultural and national symbolism. However, airlines have increasingly focused on luxury and fashion rather than national symbolism as the focus of branding, and have gradually abandoned overt national symbolism.

Instead, international flag carriers have chosen fashionable and culturally generic designs, or have maintained iconography only vaguely and distantly associated with nationalist imagery. Additionally, flag carrier mergers—such as the emergence of Scandinavian Airlines or the more recent rise of LATAM from Chile's LAN Airlines and Brazil's TAM Airlines—have contributed to the elimination of nationalist symbolism altogether.¹⁸ Lufthansa's stylized blue and yellow crane, Brussels Airlines' arranged pattern of dots, Singapore Airlines' golden bird, Delta Airlines' red and white triangle, and United



The Qatar Airways logo featuring their signature oryx. Wikimedia Commons 2011.

Airlines' blue globe reveal absolutely no relationship whatsoever with nationalist imagery.¹⁹ China Eastern Airlines' red and blue swallow, Aerolineas Argentinas' condor, Air New Zealand's unfolding fern, and Japan Airlines' crane, only ambiguously and unclearly invoke cultural symbols of their respective nation-states of registry.²⁰ Even British Airways, Air France, Iberia, and KLM—which continue to use stylized versions of the symbols of the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and the Netherlands respectively—have altered these symbols in an impressionistic manner to make the nationalist imagery less explicit.²¹ Meanwhile, typical in-flight videos, almost never incorporate genuinely nationalist tropes and nearly always focus on presenting the airline as esteemed and perhaps lavish, and are characterized by universal air travel imagery. Similarly, cabin crew uniforms rarely reflect nationalist symbolism. With the exceptions of Thai Airways' and Singapore Airlines' incorporation of elements of Southeast Asian attire in cabin crew uniform design, airlines generally sustain contemporary, sterile, and simple forms of cabin crew uniform design rather than emulating the nation's traditional costume or natural landscapes.

In contrast, the liveries and iconographies of Emirates Airlines and Etihad Airways consistently, explicitly, and unambiguously incorporate Emirati nationalist imagery, while those of Qatar Airways show similarly strong evidence of inspiration by Qatari nationalist symbolism. The red, white, green, and black of the national flag of the United Arab Emirates, presented without any other imagery, dominate the tailfins of Emirates Airlines' airplanes. The Emirati government officially adopted these colors as its national flag on December 2, 1971, and the colors have grown significantly more prominent in the airline's livery since its founding. Emirates Airlines' logo features the Arabic words for "the Emirates" in a highly stylized form of traditional Arabic calligraphy, clearly reminiscent of the literary and cultural heritage of the Arabian Peninsula, specifically Quranic calligraphy. Complementing the displays of nationalism on their aircrafts, Emirates lounges and check-in desks feature the logo of the airline decorated in gold paint, a clear invocation of nationalist tropes of Emirati prosperity and opulence. Similarly, Etihad's most recently

redesigned livery reflects nationalist symbolism through the large, unembellished representation of the national emblem of the United Arab Emirates and the Emirati national flag alongside references to the natural and the manmade features of the Emirati landscape. An Etihad press release on December 18, 2014 describes the role of nationalist symbols airline's livery:

"Created by leading brand consultants Landor Associates in partnership with Etihad Airways, the new livery is inspired by traditional Emirati design patterns, the landscapes of the desert and the geometric shapes found in the modern architecture of Abu Dhabi. The result is a striking and unique livery design which will present Etihad Airways as the airline of a progressive and innovative cultural hub, firmly rooted in its rich history."²²

Etihad's livery incorporates motifs of the nation's historical connection to the desert as well as images of contemporary Emirati architecture, a common feature of Emirati nationalism. Like Emirates Airline, Etihad's logo includes the airline's name in traditional Arabic calligraphic style, alongside Etihad's name in English and a bold presentation of the name of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. In a similar manner, purple and white—the national colors of Qatar—overwhelm the tailfins of Qatar Airways. The logo of Qatar Airways, the oryx, is widely recognized as the national animal of Qatar (and serves as the logo of various other initiatives by the Qatari government with nationalist character, such as the 2006 Asian Games in Doha). Strikingly, this particular image of the oryx references the serrated purple and white of the flag of Qatar. By explicitly incorporating and invoking the national symbols, natural landscapes, and artistic and cultural heritage of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar into their liveries, the three airlines have served as an outlet for nationalist expression.

Alongside the liveries of Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways, the in-flight advertisements and recordings of these airlines extensively feature nationalist imagery, portraying architecture of the Arab Gulf, traditional costumes, and elements of cultural heritage rather than

addressing in-flight safety or other flight features. In particular, Qatar Airways makes especially conspicuous use of Qatari nationalist iconography in such recordings. “The Art of Qatari Hospitality”²³—an in-flight video—opens with Qatar Airways CEO Akbar al-Baker stating:

“Qatar and Qatar Airways are synonymous because we carry the name of our country and you can see that it is spelled in the boldest way on the fuselage of our airplanes... Whatever I achieve for the State of Qatar, for my country, is always too little to me. I will always endeavor to reach higher in the kind of services that we offer on Qatar Airways to our passengers and to our countrymen... Qatar Airways is the world’s most hospitable airline, the best and the most sophisticated airline. This is the trademark and the hallmark of Qatar Airways.”²⁴

The in-flight video intersperses images of the Doha skyline, Qatari desert, Qatari handicrafts in Doha’s Souq Waqif, Qatari football, and Hamad International Airport with patriotic statements by His Excellence Sheikh Saoud bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani, the Secretary General of the Qatar Olympic Committee, who proclaims:

“We have so many things to be proud of here in

Qatar. If you look at twenty years ago, through the wise decisions that our government has made, we are investing in the right things... I always feel proud that this is our national carrier and I always feel proud when I hear people speak about Qatar Airways as the first-class airline of the world.”²⁵

“The Art of Flying Redefined” opens with an image of the skyline of Doha—perhaps the most iconic representation of Qatar—and portrays a man in a *thawb* and a woman in an *abaya* traveling the world with Qatar’s flag carrier, and ultimately returning to Doha.²⁶ “How We Welcome Our New Cabin Crew,” meanwhile, portrays a cabin crew of diverse cultural origins waving Qatari flags. In a similar manner, Etihad released “You Are At Home” on its flights, portraying images of a massive Emirati flag flying over the modern architecture of the Abu Dhabi skyline, a traditionally dressed Emirati man playing an *oud* in the desert, and falconry juxtaposed with an Etihad aircraft, and a group of Etihad passengers drinking Arabic coffee. The video plays to the sound of a song by Mehad Hamad, a renowned Emirati artist who is known for his celebration of Emirati heritage through music.²⁷ Emirates and Etihad have both released videos celebrating the United Arab Emirates’ National Day (December 2), with nationalist displays of flag waving by the airline staff alongside Emirati citizens. The Arab Gulf carriers’ take advantage of their in-flight videos to disseminate nationalist imagery through their airline’s iconography.

The flight staff uniforms of these airlines also serve as a form of iconography, exhibiting strong nationalist motifs in a manner unparalleled by other major international flag carriers. While British Airways, Air France, Lufthansa, and Qantas opt for sophisticated but simple outfits created by prominent designers, Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways have chosen more extravagant designs highlighting



Flight attendants wearing the Emirates cabin crew uniform. Wikimedia Commons 2014.

“Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways have chosen more extravagant designs highlighting nationalist imagery”

nationalist imagery. Most notably, Emirates requires female members of its cabin crew—many of whom are neither Emirati nor Muslim—to don the airline’s signature veil hanging from a red hat.²⁸ The veil is clearly evocative of the traditional Arab Gulf form of the Islamic *hijab*. The khaki outfits that both male and female members of the cabin crew wear represent the sand of the United Arab Emirates’ physical landscape, according to *Smithsonian*.²⁹ Etihad’s uniforms—which underwent rebranding as part of the airline’s wider “Facets of Abu Dhabi” initiative—use a color palate the airline has formally described as reflecting the varying shades of the natural landscape of the United Arab Emirates, “from the darker sands of Liwa to the lighter colours seen in the Northern Emirates.”³⁰

Advertisements on Etihad’s website display women wearing the latest uniforms while walking over sand dunes, as well as men dressed in the outfits inspired by nationalist tropes of landscape while participating in another common expression of Emirati nationalism—falconry.³¹ In a distinct manner, though no less explicitly nationalist, Qatar Airways has modeled its uniforms on the deep purple of the Qatari national flag, and is the only airline to incorporate this bold hue into its patterns.³² Overtly echoing traditional costume and images of the Arab Gulf’s natural landscape, the cabin crew uniforms on Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways complement the airlines’ other displays of nationalism. The iconography—primarily in the form of liveries, in-flight videos, and cabin crew outfits—of these airlines reflects and emulates the cultural practices and values of their nation-states of registry, and suggests their significance in promoting nationalism. Through the utilization of national symbolism, cultural heritage, and imagery of landscapes, Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways use their iconographies as elements in

their broader expressions of nationalism.

Route Selection and Maintenance

Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways have used their flight networks as an additional instrument in their attempt to promote nationalism. In particular, their maintenance of unprofitable routes, their expansion into lossmaking and saturated markets, and their rejection of traditional airline alliances indicates a clear prioritization of nationalistic expression over profitability. These flag carriers’ rapid and unprofitable expansion in the aforementioned manners strongly suggests that nationalist expression plays a role in their decision making.

The flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar have greatly expanded their networks since their establishment. Both Emirates and Qatar Airways serve every inhabited continent, operating as hub-and-spoke networks with their nuclei in the Arab Gulf functioning as the sole hubs. The expansion of these three airlines, however, has proven highly unprofitable. A study by GRA Incorporated Aviation and Air Transport Economics Consultants found that of the twenty-three routes operated by Emirates Airlines, Etihad Airways, and Qatar Airways between Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Doha and the United States in 2015, nineteen have proven unprofitable. The three flag carriers combined for an overall loss margin of negative 14.4 percent, according to the GRA study.³³ Despite the few profitable routes that these carriers serve in the United States, no individual Gulf carrier has generated profits on more than 30 percent of the markets that it serves. Since the release of this report in 2015, these airlines have only continued to expand their services to the United States. Emirates has introduced services between Dubai and Fort Lauderdale, Newark, and Orlando, and has stated its intent to begin serving Atlanta;³⁴ Etihad has introduced services between Abu Dhabi and Los

Angeles;³⁵ and Qatar Airways has initiated services between Doha and Atlanta, Boston, and Los Angeles, and will begin service to Las Vegas in 2018.³⁶

In yet another unprofitable expansion, Emirates has commenced operations in lossmaking routes connecting European and North American cities. Although Malév Hungarian Airlines cancelled its route connecting New York from Budapest in 2008—collapsing shortly thereafter—and both American Airlines and Delta Airlines failed in their attempts to operate the route by 2011, Emirates has taken steps toward opening this connection. Emirates' choice to pursue the inauguration of this unprofitable route can only be explained by the airlines' ties to the exportation of Emirati nationalism. Similarly, Emirates inaugurated a flight connecting Newark and Athens (with Dubai as the ultimate destination), a route that United Airlines has struggled financially to sustain and has ultimately decided to only fly seasonally. Scott Kirby, the president of United Airlines, claims that Emirates will lose between \$25 and \$30 million annually on its route connecting Newark and Athens the route.³⁷ An identical phenomenon exists in the markets of the Indian subcontinent, where Emirates—which, according to reports, only generates profits on its routes servicing Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore—has expanded to ten cities, indirectly causing the reduction of services to India by once leading carriers such as Singapore Airlines, and has announced plans to continue its expansion.³⁸ It is obvious that the generation of profits does not motivate the continued expansion of networks and introduction of the aforementioned routes. Unmistakably, these routes serve to disseminate grandiose Emirati and Qatari nationalist images and ultimately glorify these airlines' countries of registry by placing them at the center of international travel, business, and cultural exchange.



The engine of an Emirates airplane adorned with their logo in Arabic calligraphy. Wikimedia Commons 2010.

Furthermore, Emirates and Etihad do not belong to any of the three major airline alliances—Star Alliance, Oneworld, or Sky Team. In snubbing these associations, Emirates and Etihad pose a unique challenge to every other major flag carrier and set themselves apart and, in a sense, above other airlines. Historically, most passengers traveling between, for example, the United States and sub-Saharan Africa or India would use Star Alliance's major hubs in Chicago, Frankfurt, and Istanbul, Oneworld's major hubs in Dallas, London, and Hong Kong, or Sky Team's major hubs in Atlanta, Paris, and Amsterdam.³⁹ Along the way, passengers would change airlines, and the involved airlines would, according to convention, be partners. The Gulf carriers' policy of avoiding involvement in airline alliances has no coherent commercial benefit, but rather has rested on the Gulf carriers' identification with Emirati and Qatari nationalisms. By rejecting airline alliances, these carriers direct significant traffic away from established European and Asian hubs, and route traffic through Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha. Etihad has even established its own airline partnership—known as Etihad Airways Partners—that includes all of the airlines in which the Abu Dhabi-based carrier has

holdings.⁴⁰ Qatar Airways, which joined Oneworld in 2013, has at several points publically considered withdrawal from the alliance in pursuit of an alliance similar to Etihad Airways Partners.⁴¹ Through their far-reaching networks and rejection of traditional partnerships Emirates and Etihad Airways, and to a lesser extent, Qatar Airways, retain their passengers through airport connections, rather than handing them over to partners. In doing so, they encourage passengers to visit the heritage-engineered cultural attractions of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha during layovers. Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways broadcast their nationalistically inspired brands through their rejection of traditional airline alliances.

In addition to commencing services in unprofitable markets and snubbing airline alliances, Emirati and Qatari flag carriers have entered saturated markets as a form of nationalist expression. The route connecting New York's various international airports with Milan, for example, is highly saturated—American Airlines, Delta Airlines, United Airlines, and Alitalia all successfully maintain it. Emirates—which directly connects New York and Dubai three times daily, and clearly does not need to make a refueling layover—began flying from New York to Milan (with Dubai as the ultimate destination) in 2013. According to James Patrick Hanion in *Global Airlines: Competition in a Transnational Industry*, which addresses Emirates' routes servicing well-connected markets in Australia and New Zealand, Emirates dumps capacity⁴² in saturated markets in an attempt to cover its marginal costs and drive prices below a profitable level for its competitors.⁴³ The incredibly high subsidies that the flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar receive from their governments allow them to enter these markets, drive out competitors, and function as hegemonies in these markets. In doing so, these flag-carrying airlines connect international destinations through

Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha, and thus further serve as instruments in the expression of Emirati and Qatari nationalism.

Network expansion by Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways—specifically with regard to entering saturated or lossmaking markets and rejecting airline alliances—promote the idea that the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are at the heart of international commerce and travel and place the flag carriers of these nation-states above all other carriers. Without a doubt, these commercial practices by Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways operate as elements of the wider role of the airlines as expressions of nationalism in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

Celebrities, Sponsorship, and the Exportation of Arab Gulf States' Nationalisms

By aligning themselves with well-known celebrities and brands (particularly soccer teams), Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways present themselves as top-tier airlines and support the attempt to associate their countries with affluence, splendor, and excellence. Their use of celebrities as brand ambassadors contributes to Emirati and Qatari nationalistic pursuits as it presents these personalities alongside the nationalist imagery and policies that are central to these airlines' corporate identities. For example, an Emirates advertisement depicts American actress Jenifer Aniston experiencing a nightmare during which she asks the cabin crew where the showers and lounges are, to which a group of disrespectful American flight attendants responds, "There are no showers here, ma'am" and "There's no lounge here ma'am, but we do have hot towels and a bag of peanuts." A member of the cabin crew then states, "This isn't an Emirates plane," and the group begins to mock Aniston.⁴⁴ She ultimately wakes up in a luxurious, gold-colored first class cabin, visits the airplane's bar, and asks a member of the cabin crew,

"No individual Gulf carrier has generated profits on more than 30 percent of the markets that it serves."



An Etihad airplane painted in Manchester City FC's blue. Wikimedia Commons, 2011.

"Is there someone that we can talk to about maybe flying this around a little bit longer before we land?"⁴⁵ In another advertisement, Aniston comes across a child playing with a model Emirates airplane in her first-class cabin. After taking a tour of the aircraft, the child points at the model and says, "This is the best plane Jen, so I only want to fly this plane."⁴⁶

In similar manner, an Etihad commercial, known as "Flying Reimagined," stars Australian actress Nicole Kidman, who enjoys the luxurious features of an Etihad flight to the music of a rebab. Kidman marvels at Abu Dhabi's contemporary architecture, Etihad's food and drink menus, and her cabin's plush bed.⁴⁷ The commercial closes with a voice stating, "Their goal isn't to improve on what has been done before, but to totally reimagine it," as an Etihad aircraft with its desert-inspired livery travels through the sky. Perhaps most significantly, Qatar Airways' safety video stars the FC Barcelona team demonstrating the safety features of the aircraft. The video begins with an announcer stating, "The excitement is building and it's almost time to take off! Welcome on-board this Qatar Airways flight," as the team members display the features of the aircraft.⁴⁸ Gerard Pique causes a crowd to erupt and a woman to nearly faint as oxygen masks drop, Lionel Messi demonstrates the locations of the aircraft's emergency exits, and Javier Mascherano demonstrates the break position. The

safety video closes with, "Oh, Neymar, fantastic finish! The whistle is about to blow for full time... Thank you for your attention, and enjoy your flight with Qatar Airways."⁴⁹ Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways have actively and broadly associated themselves with prominent and established celebrities, bolstering their nations' prestige by association.

The three Gulf airlines have also engaged in substantial sponsorship deals with sports teams and sporting events. Notably, the teams and events that Emirates, Etihad, and Qatar Airways sponsor are not strictly from the Arab Gulf region but are internationally relevant and visible. Emirates serves as the shirt sponsor of Arsenal, AC Milan, Real Madrid, Benfica, Paris Saint-Germain, Hamburger SV, and the New York Cosmos.⁵⁰ Emirates' name—in a bold and Arabic calligraphy-inspired font—sits on the jerseys of internationally recognized football players such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Gareth Bale, and Karim Benzema. Etihad sponsorship has landed the name of the airline on Manchester City FC, Anorthosis Famagusta FC, Melbourne City FC, and New York City FC jerseys, and Etihad has at points decorated its airplanes in Manchester City's iconic blue.⁵¹ Most prominently, Qatar Airways' logo is conspicuously displayed on FC Barcelona's jerseys (as well as the jerseys of less internationally renowned teams such as Al Ahli Saud FC).⁵² Beyond sponsorship of the teams themselves, the airlines have installed their brands in the names of massive stadiums across the world. Emirates Stadium in London and Etihad Stadium in Melbourne are two such examples.⁵³ Through sponsorship, the names of these airlines—which all explicitly reference the names of their nation-states of registry—are displayed at such illustrious venues in an internationally prominent manner. Associating with celebrities and sponsoring prestigious brands have served as indispensable tools in the exportation of Emirati and Qatari nationalisms by the Gulf states' flag carriers. By aligning themselves with internationally prominent figures and brands, Emirates,

Etihad, and Qatar further build their own images, and, as a direct result, contribute to the prestigious images of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

Conclusion

On June 1, 2016, Qatar Airways launched its route servicing Atlanta from Doha. Instead of using a Boeing 777 as planned (and which it used for later trips), Qatar Airways sent a mammoth Airbus A380.⁵⁴ The immense A380 was adorned with the purple and white of the flag of Qatar and an image of the oryx—the symbol of the Qatari government’s various state branding projects. Its dramatic entry at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport and its pompous display of its iconography at Delta Airlines’ hub emphasized the reality that the airline’s Atlanta route would serve as yet another example of an unprofitable but highly prestigious route. All the passenger on the inaugural route from Doha to Atlanta viewed Qatar Airways’ safety video in both in English and Arabic, featuring Messi, Pique, Mascherano, and Neymar, linking Qatar Airways to the respected FC Barcelona brand. Although Delta Airlines attempted to block Qatar Airways’ access to a proper gate and Delta’s leadership lambasted the network expansion, Qatar Airways maintained the route. In its display of nationalist iconography, its maintenance of this unprofitable route, and its alignment with prominent and celebrated brands, Qatar Airways exemplified its role as a tool of Qatari nationalist expression. In its inaugural route servicing Atlanta, Qatar Airways—like Emirates Airlines and Etihad Airways—embodied the manner in which Gulf airlines function as manifestations of nationalism.

By robustly integrating nationalistic themes into their liveries, in-flight videos, and cabin crew uniforms, the flag carriers of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar use iconography to advance nationalist goals. Through their maintenance of unprofitable routes, rejection of traditional airline alliances, and engagement in capacity dumping to weaken established airlines in saturated markets, these airlines expand the networks routed through their hubs in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar as form of glorifying

their nation-states. These carriers’ efforts to align themselves with internationally recognized celebrities and sponsor prestigious international brands further export Emirati and Qatari nationalism. By virtue of their international visibility—and the resources expended for its sake—it is apparent that Emirates Airlines and Etihad Airways function as essential tools in Emirati nationalist expression, while Qatar Airways serves a comparable role in promoting Qatari national identity. ♦

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