

From Women Empowerment to Nation Branding: A Case Study From the United Arab Emirates

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Nation branding in the Middle East is relatively new. The United Arab Emirates has been developing its nation branding for about three decades. This article discusses one of its recent nation-branding strategies: women empowerment. The research uses a semiotic analysis to examine the way narratives of women empowerment are being articulated and conveyed for nation-branding campaigns and strategies. Through the case study of Mariam Al Mansouri, the first United Arab Emirate female air striker who fired missiles toward ISIS, we argue that narratives of women empowerment became an additional device for image building and nation branding.

Keywords: semiotics, nation branding, women empowerment, Middle East, United Arab Emirates

With globalization and the increased competition between countries, it has become extremely important for countries to construct and maintain a positive national image. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), for instance, has invested heavily in cultural global icons to put itself in a world-class cultural position: Dubai's tallest building in the world Burj Khalifa, Abu Dhabi's new flagship public buildings, and the Louvre museum. At times, investments in image building go beyond media and cultural efforts to include an agenda that supports a new or revised image of a country. In the UAE, with women's empowerment, one can see a modernizing agenda that has highly publicized women's roles in society, as leaders, educators, entrepreneurs, businesswomen, or ministers. In 2016, the number of UAE female ministers rose to five and includes the Ministries for Happiness, Youth Affairs, Federal National Council Affairs, Community Development, and General Education. In 2012, the UAE made it mandatory that corporations and government agencies include women on their board of directors, and in 2014, it conveyed a message to the world about a new achievement: its first Air Force female pilot attacked ISIS; she was proudly made guardian of her nation and the world.

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Narrative about gender roles serves various purposes that include building action programs, revising justice and equity, or demonstrating local culture, values, or ideologies to the rest of the world. Such narratives have been researched in areas that include interactive communication technologies to address the gender digital divide (Maier & Nair-Reichert, 2007), health, and well-being to implement women service programs (Curie & Wiesenberg, 2003), as well as socioeconomic development to highlight women's roles in development projects (Duflo, 2012). This research is a novel contribution to the literature on nation branding as it argues that a narrative about women empowerment is an additional strategy used by governments for image-building purposes, and it could be added to the devices discussed in the nation-branding literature. We look at a specific event that was highly covered in both local and international media, when Major Mariam Al Mansouri, the first female UAE Air Force pilot contributed to a U.S.-led coalition to launch missile strikes on ISIS forces. Images of Al Mansouri in the cockpit of an F16 were globally disseminated. This research adopts a semiotic approach to analyze these images. It uses literature on nation branding and modernity to argue that these images not only depict an apparatus of modernity, but they also serve a bigger UAE project of nation branding. By using semiotics, this research also addresses the shortage of Middle Eastern-related literature adopting the semiotic approach (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2016).

Nation Branding

Nation-branding studies have examined a wide range of strategies, including the development of cultural icons such as museums, sports teams, cultural tourism, language, and urban space to explore the ways countries gain advantage over competitors and improve their economies. Anholt (2003) considers branding to be the reputation management of countries, cities, and regions. He suggests that tourism promotion, brand export, government policies, cultural heritage, and the population's reputation are some of the devices for nation branding. He introduced the concept of *competitive identity* that he describes as "the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion" (Anholt, 2007, p. 5). Competitive identity is important in the context of globalization as it enables managing the reputation of places, which could be the case, for instance, if stereotypes and clichés are attached to a place, while ensuring their differentiation from other places and strengthening their competitiveness (Bisa, 2013). Hence, people would think about a place in view of its unique attributes that frame a valuable image in the minds of a global audience that, most likely, would choose this place to visit, study, or invest in among a pool of countries. This image, designed through marketing and branding techniques in concert by the government, public institutions, people, and businesses, contributes to a given identity of a place. To understand the motivations of nation branding, Aronczyk (2008) calls for thinking about internal and external projections of a country's identity. She recommends examining both "external motivations," such as developing trade, foreign investments, or tourism, and "internal self-identification" that enables people to bond as a community and recognize or even abide by the image the country gained when branding the nation:

[Nation branding is] a particular version of national identity . . . that allows national governments to better manage and control the image they project to the world. . . . To properly understand what nation branding . . . achieves, we must take into account both

the external motivations of identity projection and the claims made for internal, collective self-identification. (pp. 42–56)

For van Ham (2001), the brand is a composite of “the outside world’s ideas about a particular country” (p. 2), and it helps wider audiences differentiate among countries and discern their competitive positioning. Dinnie (2008) argues that governments turn to branding techniques to position their brands and differentiate themselves from competing countries, “securing geopolitical influence” (Teslik, 2007, para. 1). For those countries lacking competitive places and events, or where traditions cannot be used or adapted, *invented traditions*¹ (Cooke, 2014) have been practiced and offer alternatives such as camel racing or pearl diving festivals. Cooke argues that Arab Gulf elites invent traditions to create a historical narrative and achieve three objectives: (a) establish or symbolize social cohesion or the membership of groups; (b) establish or legitimize institutions, status, or relations of authority; and (c) allow for the “inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior” (p. 68). Invented traditions create a new narrative that becomes historical and secures a perception of socionational cohesion. Cooke cites National Day (in Qatar or the UAE, for instance) as an example of an invented tradition. National Day marks the anniversary of national unification bringing all tribes together under the same state; through a ceremonial setting, tribes show publicly their loyalty to the ruling family. National Day is a holiday, now celebrated by nationals and expats alike. It contributes to developing and reinforcing a sense of national identity among both locals and expats (Mehran, 2013).

Kaneva (2011) identifies three approaches in the literature about nation branding. The first is a technical–economic approach rooted in marketing and management and suggests that nation branding serves to enhance the competitive advantage of nations in a global market environment. The second approach is political and concerned with the relationship between public diplomacy and nation branding that is considered “an augmented form of propaganda” at times and “‘post-ideological’ form of reputation management for nations” at others (Kaneva, 2011, p. 126). The third is a cultural approach that is theoretically constructed on the trifold foundation of critical theories of culture, communication, and society. Using this perspective, scholars are interested in advancing “a critique of nation branding’s discourse and practices, as they relate to national identity, culture and governance” (Kaneva, 2011, p. 127).

This research subscribes to the cultural approach. Although we critically discuss the use of Al Mansouri’s appearance as an artifact by the UAE to manage the country’s reputation in a broader strategy of modernization, we also consider this strategy as politically articulated around a country’s differentiation from competing nations. The UAE has invested in its differentiation efforts for three decades now. It has capitalized on efforts to become a regional leader and a global player in the world economy in areas that include media, finance, new technology, retail, aviation, and tourism. Both Dubai Media City as well as Dubai Internet City were built and promoted as regulation-free zones, with the aim of attracting global media and IT corporations; such initiatives were the first in the region. Dubai’s efforts in developing retail as an apparatus of differentiation also paid off. With Dubai Mall, the biggest retail space in the world, the

¹ Cooke borrows the concept of invented traditions to historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983).

UAE is set apart in the region as a shopping destination. Adopting a more liberal position toward tourism than its neighbors Saudi Arabia or Qatar enabled Dubai, more particularly, to keep an advanced edge on tourism. By 2014, Dubai entered the top 10 of the most visited cities in the world.

The UAE is not the only state capitalizing on tourism for its economic diversification strategies. Qatar also built on tourism, but for niche groups that include sports and international events and exhibition (Zeineddine, 2017). Comparing nation-branding efforts of both the UAE and Qatar, Zeineddine (2017) argues that both countries need an economic diversification and are highly involved in nation-branding efforts; they both communicate interest in developing international business and tourism. However, she adds, they share the problem of social conservatism among their small local population, inconsistent with their larger ambition of global image and modern reputation. Qatar and the UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries, are subject to perceptions of conservatism and even religious extremism that could be detrimental to their efforts given that clichés and stereotypes contribute to shaping people's behavior toward a place (Anholt, 2007). "While both the UAE and Qatar are increasingly recognized through their global reach and branding efforts" (p. 219), Zeineddine notes, "the rest of the [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries still encounter visibility problems that prejudice their chance to compete in the marketplace" (p. 219). Finally, although Saudi Arabia does not lack exposure, its reputation, which is highly tied with conservatism and where women have been denied driving until recently, makes it easier for the UAE's differentiation message to be credible.

Modernity and the Nation-State's Citizen

The production, advancement, and maintenance of modernity preoccupied many scholars in the second half of the 20th century (Berman, 1983; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Featherstone, 1990; Giddens, 1991; Portes, 1973). Human conditions, liberties, and reason have been discussed on both the individual and societal levels (Møen, 2014).

Modernity has an intimate connection to globalization (Berman, 1983; Giddens, 2013). It is a "synthetic term for urbanization, literacy, a democratic polity, industrialization, and overall economic development" (Portes, 1973, p. 16) that is "inherently globalizing" (Giddens, 2013, p. 40).

Mihelj (2011) argues that the idea of progress is at the center of any project of modernity and change. He adds that culture and cultural context are key to understanding and embracing modernization; this is possible in two ways: the formation of a cultural activist sphere or the dissemination by modernizing elites of a discourse that is "shaped by the economic and political interests and structures they are embedded in" (p. 52). Mihelj argues that adopting women empowerment for nation building is uncommon in the literature. Historically, women's emancipation projects have succeeded when the emancipation "was conceived as an indigenous nation building project rather than as a part of changes enforced by Western colonizers" (p. 125). In a recent study about modern states' efforts to enforce women's rights, Alaimo (2016) concluded that government narratives are addressed to the international community for the sake of polishing and improving their reputation as well as to position themselves rather than reflecting real efforts to support women.

In the Arabian Gulf, since the inception of modernization efforts in the 19th century (Ilkharacan, 2008), locals associate modernity with some form of Westernization and consequently view it as a threat to the Arab and Muslim heritage and tradition. Both are important components of the Arab nation-state (Berman, 1983), within which the modernization efforts continued in the mid-20th century and the beginning of the 21st. In the Middle Eastern context, modernizing the "private sphere" is a challenging, debatable, and objectionable initiative, especially when it involves changes in gender roles, equality, and family power relations (Ilkharacan, 2008, p. 1).

Modernizing the Gulf States ushered in the confounding era of the 1970s marked by a return to conservatism as a result of political volatility. While the countries' elites attempted to modernize their nations, rigid state policies as well as the rise of political Islam as an alternative to Arab nationalism and an instrument in the cold war obstructed the way (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011). The currency of both tradition and religion grew in the broader context of globalization, and thus the same period witnessed a scholarly return to examining the "modernity vs. tradition dichotomy" (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2011, p. 39).

Modernity is thus an appropriate conceptual framework for this case study as it enables exploration of the top-down message the political elites want to make through the global dissemination of the photos of Al Mansouri. We argue that the dissemination of the photos of Al Mansouri by the political institution is not spontaneous but politically articulated with propositions that include association with progressivism and a new social order and uplift of women status, as well as differentiation from its conservative geographic neighbors. This message aims to better the country's economics through attracting more tourists, foreign investments, or quality labor, but also to serve its social and political agenda.

Method

In this empirical research, we used a case study approach to discuss women empowerment for the purposes of nation branding. This case is original in the context of the Middle East, as it presents an unusual situation wherein the state takes pride in its women and puts them up front to protect the country. The research question was twofold: What do the visual components tell us about the UAE nation-branding strategies? To what extent is this narrative favorable to its modernity agenda?

We used semiotics to identify visual codes and signs contained in the pictures distributed by UAE officials. As per Peirce's tradition (Short, 2007), everything is a sign, the "basic unit of language," as [de]Saussure argues. A sign is a combination of a signifier and signified. The former relates to the word as read or represented in an image. The latter refers to the meaning of such an image or sound of a word, the mental representation of a signifier. The semiotics of Peirce is "a theory of perception and a theory of knowledge (epistemology) at least as much as it is a theory of communication" (Toynbee, 2006, p. 28). The semiotics approach enables the deconstruction of the content of texts and the representations they uphold. Semiotics attempts to reveal the underlying structures under the manifestations of text or visuals. Saussure's "semiotic theory demonstrated that words do not derive their meaning from standing for things in the world; rather they derive their meaning from sets of relationships and contrasts with other signs" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 273). In this sense, there's no systematic relationship between a signifier and a

signified as the signifier could have several meanings depending on the context of the occurrence of the sign. Looking at signs and identifying codes in an image is the first step to the semiotic approach complemented by an analysis of its meaning in relation to the inherent context of its occurring. In the Saussurien tradition, "meanings are determined by the place, time and purpose of communication, and by the specificity of both senders and receivers" (Toynbee, 2006, p. 18). Barthes (1977) built on Saussure's work and developed the difference between connotation and denotation in media texts. Connotational codes relate images to their realities outside the abstract represented in the images. Reading visual texts requires exploring their connotative meanings in relation to their sociocultural, political, or historical contexts. The semiotic approach is useful in this case study as it informs about the connotation of Al Mansouri's image in her cockpit in relation to the geographic, political, and sociocultural environments. It is also useful as it enables the appreciation of the environment within which the images were distributed to their intended audiences. The distribution of Al Mansouri's news package tells about a strategic communication plan that aims to achieve a nation-branding goal.

We acknowledge that this work has the limitation of non generalizability. With this case, we do not aim for generalization; rather, our goal is to make sense of and bring insight into state communication strategies in a non-Western environment, known for its allegiance to tradition and religion and that, additionally, frequently portrays itself as modern and cosmopolitan.

Case Study: The Case of Mariam Al Mansouri

Context

Women's roles in the UAE have greatly evolved over time thanks in part to the 1971 newly formed government that pushed to change their status. The government committed to help women counter social resistance and enforce women education as well as their insertion in the labor force. To urge women education, the government maintained a narrative that suggests that educated women instill development and modernizing values in their descendants and can help the overall state project of national progress. Pinto (2012) argues that the UAE's stance toward women has been a "state project" and a "state strategy," one that serves the country's "unity, identity building and internal stability" (p. xvii). However, the sociocultural structure of the society made this state project challenging. Resistance from families that objected to sending their girls to school, for instance, led the government to take responsibility for women and care for them: "It was essential that women be cared for by the federal state. This way, not only would their support be secured, but their early involvement would also permit a more effective mainstreaming of national identity" (Pinto, 2012, p. 101).

Women education turned out to be a successful project; nonetheless, the Emirati population is still expressing concern and anxiety about women taking more active roles in the society through employment and public activities. Stronger resistance was expressed toward women decision makers and organizational leaders. Some found in this a threat to cultural-religious values and to the UAE identity. The state continued countering such resistance with a gender-framing narrative:

When genderframe was first created almost forty years earlier, the focus had been solely on the general right of female participation in the labour force, not on their leadership skills, as these were not an issue at that point. Given that the focus was now on training and presenting women as decision-makers, it was thus necessary to strategically alter the genderframe. Such strategic modification was performed by keeping ideas such as working as a national duty, in addition to the religious permissibility of female employment, unaltered, while magnifying an existing component and including a new one. (Pinto, 2012, pp. 81–82)

Joining the political sphere was both a claim by women for their rights and also a continuation of a societal project that the state leaders believed in and pushed for, although with caution to not offend the most conservative members of the society. It is also the result of international pressure, particularly from the United States, and exposure to regional experiences. Elections to the Federal National Council opened to women in 2005 and female ministers were and continue to be nominated. Pinto (2012) points that the election project has been “unsuccessful” because of the lack of a genuine desire to enact a change and “the limited resonance and credibility of the ‘language of rights’” (p. 94). Erogul and McCrohan (2008) speak about the challenges women face in exercising their rights and pursuing their business ambitions. Al-Muttawa (2005) pinpoints the blurred conceptualization of women’s equality to men; in practice, the legal system in the UAE until today includes gender-biased provisions. For example, it is considered legal disobedience if the wife works without the permission of her husband. In addition, women cannot make autonomous decisions about their personal relationships, as they need their male guardians to conclude a marriage (Begum, 2015). Although there are no restrictions on women studying or owning businesses, and despite the laws protecting Emirati women in the workforce, other hurdles prevent women from gaining their independence, for example, the fact that Emirati women cannot travel abroad alone or without guardian permission.

The First Female Air Fighter

In 2014, the UAE government joined the international coalition against ISIS. The government issued a press release with pictures announcing the first operation against ISIS under the command of a female major, Mariam Al Mansouri, a fighter in an F16 who dropped missiles on ISIS. This news appeared in global media outlets, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, as well as on most social networks.

With this narrative, the UAE is attempting to create an iconic picture of social change and of a political agenda. This image articulates a memorable state discourse inherent in the reputation of modernity that the UAE aims to gain. The UAE has been working to spearhead the political, economic, and business connection between the Middle East and North Africa region and the rest of the world, particularly the United States and Europe, while itself going through many social, political, and economic transformations since the birth of its federal government in the 1970s.

The UAE has declared itself an opponent to ISIS and, along with the coalition of other Arab countries, has contributed to the U.S.-led campaign against the extremist group. The pictures in Figures 1 and 2 were sent with news packages and were picked up by local and global media.



Figure 1. Major Al Mansouri F16 fighter.
Source: The New York Times.



Figure 2. Major Al Mansouri in an F16 Desert Eagle.

Source: The New York Times.

In 2014, the UAE Air Force released images of Al Mansouri onboard an F16 fighter that she flew during attacks against ISIS. Described as a publicity stunt by some (Black, 2014) or to show off both its military capabilities and its moderate nonconservative identity, the story of the first female air striker made a buzz on social media and in headlines of the national and international press.

The Guardian lead reads,

Major Mariam, a female pilot with the UAE Air Force, played the starring role in a publicity stunt last month when she was photographed in the cockpit of the F16 fighter she had flown in the first wave of U.S.-led attacks on targets of the Islamic State in Syria (Isis). (Black, 2014, para. 1)

The media package on Al Mansouri was followed by news of a brand-new UAE federal award called the Pride of the UAE. The first award was given to Al Mansouri, who was awarded a medal bearing the name of the UAE Prime Minister, Governor of Dubai Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum (Al Ittihad, 2014). Al Mansouri was also invited to meet Shikha Fatima Bint Mubarak, the mother of Head of State Shaikh Khalifa, known as the Mother of Emirates. Both moves indicate an aim to bring more publicity to Al Mansouri's status as a representative of UAE women and to confirm the endorsement of women's position, status, and role as heroes and sources of pride for the country.

A Visual Analysis of the Operation's Images

The photos in Figures 1 and 2, released by the Emirates News Agency WAM, are loaded with powerful meaning. The first image shows a big smile on the major's face and is the dominant element of the visual. She is not looking at the camera but straight ahead. The large smile on her face and her forward gaze suggest a more peaceful future, as well as the joy and pride of winning. She occupies the center of that image, with a close-up on her face from the shoulders up. She is wearing the necessary military gear and shows confidence, patriotism, and pride, similar to how Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashed Al Maktoum, Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE, Ruler of Dubai, describes his nation: "The UAE is a nation whose citizens enjoy high degrees of national pride, patriotism, unity and a sense of shared belonging and connectedness" (Cooke, 2014, p. 66).

In the center of the picture, one sees the colors of the UAE flag, denoting patriotism and reinforcing the message that this woman protects her country. The UAE flag comprises four colors known as the colors of Pan-Arabism, or Arabian unity: red represents bravery, strength, and courage; green represents hope and optimism; white is for peace, purity, and honesty; and black represents the "defeat of [the] enemy and strength of mind" (Fullard, 2015, para. 4). This fighter is an Emirati and her allegiance to the UAE is displayed on her forehead. This flag is an intentional addition to the helmet, as its purpose is clearly to highlight the nation: Typical UAE Air Force gear does not include a flag on the helmet. Adding the flag on Al Mansouri's helmet is a message about the nation's image and a reinforcement of the branding operation.

In Figure 2, Al Mansouri is looking down, which suggests that she is in the air. She uses a thumbs-up sign as a symbol of victory and of the operation's success: She successfully bombed ISIS! In Figure 1, she is smiling, patriotic, and prominently wearing the UAE flag, but in Figure 2, her military might is shown only in a small UAE flag and its colors. Rather than dramatic (as in Figure 1), her gear is now subtle, and she displays a only small logo on her upper arm. This is the same gear that her male counterparts wear. It is as if the first picture was meant to distinguish Al Mansouri from her peers, indicating a new chapter of women contributing to military operations; the second picture marks the equality of roles and positions among all female—represented by Al Mansouri—and male military personnel through the unification and similarity of the uniform and the lack of the distinguishing signs that are prominent in the first picture. One can also see in this second picture not only gender equality serving in the military, but also Al Mansouri's leadership role in this operation. Looking down from an upper position at her team, thumbs up, she congratulates the team. This female is the decision maker, the leader in this military operation.

Appeals to Ethos and Pathos

The message of the UAE is constructed around the idea of the UAE being progressive enough to send one of its women to drop bombs on the most extremist religious jihadist group—a group that believes that women are meant to stay home, reproduce, and serve and please men. It is a demonstration of defiance of the ISIS ethos. One should note that ISIS is not the only target audience in this operation. The “West” is probably the most important target. A prejudice has accompanied ISIS actions in that some Western audiences consider all Muslims to be potential terrorists and all women in the Muslim world to be repressed and abused. The UAE Air Force pictures send a message to the Western world that Muslims, including Muslim women, fight ISIS. It is the channel of distribution selected for the news release that leads to the belief that the audience also includes the West. The news was picked up by major news channels including CNN, Fox News, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, NPR, and MSNBC. The media found relevance in the news release, and whether it was a stunt or not, it worked. Headlines in newspapers and magazines were about the female pilot, and TV news rolled out videos and interviews with Al Mansouri. The Muslim female fighter was on the agenda, challenging Westerners' perceptions about Arab and Muslim women. The public relation campaign was effective, as it captured the agenda of major media groups.

A semiotic enquiry, along with the case details, can provide an analysis of the use of women's success stories to promote a positive global image of the UAE as represented in this particular event. There were several contextual signs within the UAE's message about Al Mansouri, as the country tapped several popular themes that guaranteed a certain level of global attention, coverage, and identification. Sending a visualized story about an Arab/Muslim female major who was fighting ISIS, a group that reportedly enslaves women, is indicative of the UAE's aim of distinguishing its religious ideology from that of ISIS. Islam is presented and visually signified using a female rather than a male figure because of the role of clothing in facilitating easier recognition. Benhabib (2002) argues that

the complex semiotic of dress codes [among Muslim women in Western societies] is reduced to one or two items of clothing that then assume the function of crucial symbols

of complex negotiations between Muslim religious and cultural identities and Western cultures. (p. 95)

By presenting a UAE woman fighting ISIS who retains a headscarf and dresses in full military uniform, the state was also communicating the country's proximity or commitment to religion (Islam) and distance from traditional women's roles by tapping into the roles of modern women and highlighting the social transformation being experienced by UAE women. This picture is an attempt to maintain a good balance between modernity (represented by the military post and gear of the female fighter) and religiosity (represented by her appearance and hair covering during media interviews).

Studying global signage in the UAE, Page (2015) analyzes images of women in Abu Dhabi (the UAE's capital city and the home of Al Mansouri) Souk and argues in favor of a constructed message that preserves the traditionalism of Emirati women's image. She writes,

The overall proposition of the image reinforces the dominant culture of female suppression. The Emirati woman is honored for her femininity, beauty, respect for tradition, and staying "in place." It is stylish to be traditional. Modernity must be tempered by tradition. (p. 325)

Al Mansouri's appearance is decent in her gear and confirms such tradition; however, her professional role does not conform with the social role Page discusses when suggesting that "in Emirati society . . . women will dishonor their families if they uncover in public or socially interact with men outside their family" (p. 326). Al Mansouri leads a troop of men on an air raid, and the constructed message is against this "stereotype" or the old conception of women who do not interact with men; quite the opposite: The decoded message is that not only does a UAE woman lead a troop of male soldiers, she also bombs ISIS, the most violent group in the region.

A Discourse on Modernity and Nation Branding

The images of Al Mansouri in her F16 cockpit present a narrative designed to counter stereotypes in the West. They are also a message from the nation-state to its citizens about the desired identity to project to the West. It is a discourse about how we should project ourselves to the West to protect ourselves. The hegemonic position inferred by this discourse suggests a new positioning those citizens should accept, if not reproduce, for unity and patriotism, even though they may not agree with it. In her analysis of invented traditions, Cooke (2014) explains that the motivations of inventing traditions include establishing or symbolizing social cohesion, but also affirming status of authority and inculcating values and conventions of behavior. The case of Al Mansouri could be an additional example of invented tradition, through which clearly the state wants to establish a precedent. The celebration of Al Mansouri's operation success was made an important event that deserves media headlines; the awards and recognitions given to her by the state leaders themselves leave no space for contestation. This is an act of power used by the government to persuade of the country's change: Now women protect the country and now the state supports these women. This is an act of nation branding.

Gender holds a significant meaning in this operation, although a commander or pilot is defined by his or her role in the army regardless of gender. The association of women and culture is intentionally striking in these images and provocative. The very contestation of the modern versus the traditional and the authentic versus the stereotype is the cause of struggle. The gendered project is one of "change and transformation" (Ftouni, 2012). The UAE's politics of feminism constructed for the West is an attempt to consolidate the role of the UAE as a pioneer in modernity in the so-called "repressed" Arabia. This public relations action is thus a type of empowerment and a response to stereotypes. Stereotyping people means to

mark them indelibly with a set of projected characteristics. Muslims in particular now carry the rigid trace of an increasingly tendentious and narrow number of attributes. . . . Islam has become a term . . . to refer to a religion, a culture, a civilization, a community, a religious revival, a militant cult, an ideology, a geographical region and an historical event. (Morey & Yaqin, 2011, p. 35)

The religious and cultural stereotypes motivated the nation-state to exploit a visual gendered discourse in line with its political agenda. This practice is a postmodern sexualization of roles at the highest state institution, the military, and an objectification of women as the subject of struggle. It is a hegemonic discourse about a positive representation that is not necessarily "realistic" or commonly representative. It is a heroic action that earned awards and recognition for Al Mansouri and that was capitalized on to serve the state's discourse.

Although one could claim a lack of message truthfulness or faithfulness to the common status of women in the UAE, as an Arab and Muslim conservative society, one should also be mindful that the state is not static; it is rather "an evolving and adaptive system of power that is rooted in discursive and other practices . . . [and] can be articulated and re-articulated by various actors and in different spaces, across time" (Matar, 2012, p. 132). This dynamism legitimizes the new narrative of the state and the desired image for the West to attribute to Muslim women. "The ends justify the means" well represents the political action. Through these images, the UAE attempts to change stereotypes about UAE Muslim women and speak about their modernity; although this is may not be representative of all UAE women today, it is where the UAE, elites, and leaders show an intention to be heading. It becomes a message about the future, a message about a social change that targets Westerners and locals alike. It is also a message about differentiation and setting one's nation apart from the others—in this case, the neighboring Gulf countries. It is a message about the nation's brand, which "comprises the outside world's ideas about a particular country" (van Ham, 2001, p. 2). It is important for a state to differentiate itself, especially when it offers similar features. Although "for example in the Gulf, almost identical systems of governance" (Peterson, 2012, p. 717) prevail, in addition to similarities in tradition, social norms, and culture, the UAE attempts to set itself aside from its neighbors by opting for a progressive image of its women.

The story that the UAE attempts to tell may also lack authenticity, as it sets aside a component of the UAE identity: the duality of modernity and tribalism, modernity and tradition. Bayart argues, "There is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification. The identities we talk about . . . are made (and unmade) only through the mediation of identificatory acts, in short, by their enunciation" (as cited in

Morey & Yaqin, 2011, p. 107). Al Mansouri's story is pioneering, as it moves feminist political discourse from an analysis policy (Ftouni, 2012) to one of action.

Critical views of nation branding are divided into essentialist and constructivist views. The essentialist view criticizes the practice of nation branding "for producing distorted images of national identities, ultimately producing false consciousness" (Bolin & Stahlberg, 2015, p. 3066). State officials decide to offer a modern image to women, one that is associated with freedom and emancipation. Once again, the symbolism of the UAE brand is an association with modernism and a defiance of the West, but also, most of the time, of the Gulf region's culture, which normalizes placing women behind the scenes. This was not the case during the UAE's early formation. In her retrospective narrative about women's roles and gender framing in the UAE, Pinto (2012) narrates the story of the early days of UAE women's emancipation, when the UAE looked to its neighbors Kuwait and Bahrain, pioneers back then in women's education, and attempted to reproduce their model.

The UAE found in women a channel not only to carry a message about better living conditions, but also to embrace values, perceptions, and skills suitable for a modern state. In addition,

the emancipation of women was generally considered as central to the modernization of societies. As such, the realization of an ideal of national progress and emancipation in the UAE was found to be inextricably linked to the status of Emirati women. (Pinto, 2012, p. 30)

Since the 1970s, the UAE has recognized the importance of telling the outside world about the state's achievements and communicate "its readiness to be part of the modern world" (Pinto, 2012, p. 29). As Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan, the late UAE president and ruler of Abu Dhabi, is quoted saying,

Women must represent the state in international women's conferences to show others the level of prosperity attained by the state and to represent us and our society [in] a laudable manner, as well as our religion, which has given women all their rights. (Pinto, 2012, p. 29)

Thus, caring about its image abroad is not new to the UAE, nor is caring about the image of its religion, Islam, abroad. Releasing the images of Al Mansouri can be interpreted as a continuation of the UAE's strategy: sharing what women have achieved, including piloting and fighting jihadists and opponents of the "real" Islam. What the UAE is saying to the world is that Islam entitles women to work, fight, and protect its land and its people just as men do. This is the novelty in the UAE strategic messaging: It is the leap from the state caring for women to women caring for the state. The new modernity of the UAE and cultural progress in the UAE are that it entrusts its capable and ready women with the task of giving back and protecting what is theirs: the state, men, children, the elderly, and other women. It is a message about the end of gendered roles, of patriarchal society, and of the stereotypes that come along with it.

However, this is only one part of the story, as the gender issue in the UAE's nation building is dynamic. The cultural preservation or revival movement in the UAE slowed the momentum initiated by the

state in the early 1970s. More recently, the cultural revival movement, from the late 1970s until 2009, exerted pressure on the role of women and the compatibility of their public activities (Pinto, 2012). Increasingly, internal criticism about women's employment and public activities brought waves of retraditionalism and provided an opposing force to the nation branding that the state wishes to portray. This is not unique to the UAE; the critical literature in nation branding argues that it is common for states to face and even hide unwanted domestic elements that hinder the transmission of the nation-branding message and obstruct the desired image (Iwabushi, 2007; Kaneva, 2011; Valaskivi, 2013). Yet, branding efforts, to be credible, are first and foremost domestic and aim to build a stronger sense of the national self (Valaskivi, 2013). To succeed in transnational branding, countries have to battle "national low self-esteem and insufficient capability to communicate the strengths of a nation in nation branding" (Valaskivi, 2013, p. 491).

With this in mind, it is reasonable to believe that the nation-branding program using a female pilot is thus targeting the West and the rest of the world regarding the UAE's image. It is also reasonable to believe, as the UAE's gender issues are dynamic, that it is the time once again for the UAE to support women and their rights and to send a message to its population that reinforces and supports female empowerment and the role that the state expects women to play in public life and in the nation's building.

Conclusion

This article sheds light on the way the UAE used images of the first female air fighter to harness its brand building, but also to counter the negative stereotypes about gender inequality in Arabian Gulf countries that became amplified with the rise of religious extremism. Nation branding helps "counter such potentially damaging national stereotypes" (Dinnie, 2008, p. 126).

The case of Al Mansouri presents plausible evidence of the modernizing efforts of the UAE through the image of a "heroine" who represents her country's engagement and defiance in the face of apathy, cynicism, or hostility. This narrative of a success story tackles the stereotyped image of Arab women and attempts to portray one who is progressive and compatible with the country's modernization process. Emirati Major Mariam Al Mansouri represents a positive face for the young nation, one that can carry and convey messages about modernity and social change.

It is evident that the story of Al Mansouri was a successful media stunt that achieved several objectives pertaining to a desired image the UAE officials wanted to paint of the country. The story juxtaposes the position of the UAE as both modern and Muslim, where women are empowered to fight ISIS. The images of Al Mansouri challenge Western stereotypes about Arab women, but also communicate to the domestic audience that UAE women have evolved enough to go to war and defend the nation. The literature review and semiotic analysis show that Al Mansouri's story symbolizes the three-decade struggle of the country to advance its modern agenda while holding on to its culture and traditions. The story goes in line with the country's women empowerment agenda evidenced by officials' support for women leadership roles and high government positions such as ministers. As the UAE evolves with the present agenda, it can still undertake legal revisions toward gender equality and revise patriarchal provisions. For

instance, it could revise the requirement of having the guardian's permission for women who want to join the military.

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