

## Introduction: A Thoroughly Branded, but Little-Known Middle East

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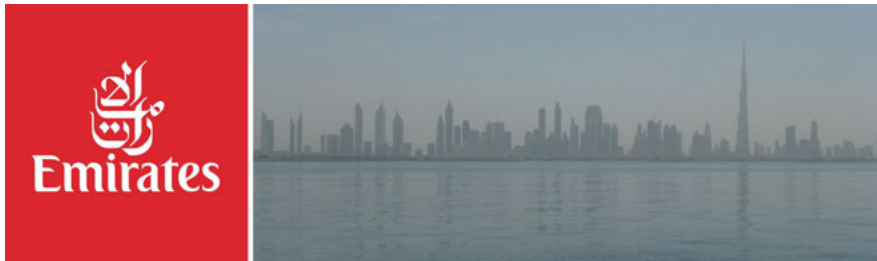
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Steffen Wippel

## Introduction: A Thoroughly Branded, but Little-Known Middle East

“Hello Tomorrow,” “The Finest in the Sky,” and “Fly Better.” Few products and places from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are probably as well-known to a global public today as are the Dubai-owned Emirates airline, which is among the companies with a high brand value worldwide, and the city-state of Dubai itself. They are less known by their changing slogans<sup>1</sup> and logos (cf. Fig. 1a) than through a positive image of high quality, unlimited hospitality, and breath-taking urban-scape (Fig. 1b).



**Fig. 1:** The current Emirates logo and the Dubai skyline

Sources: a) Wikimedia Commons, 2022, author: Emirates, public domain; b) Photo Steffen Wippel, 2012.

In the MENA region since the turn of the millennium, it has been especially Dubai, the hypercapitalistic Gulf emirate, that has become a landmark that succeeded in attracting worldwide attention and fascination. With its allure of speed and dynamics, its iconic architecture, grandiose infrastructure projects, hyperrealistic buildings, and landscaping urbanism, as well with its great shopping opportunities, its manifold festivals, and its widely advertised cosmopolitanism, it positioned itself at the forefront of place branding not only regionally, but also globally for at least a decade, before the Dubai boom came to a temporary standstill following

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<sup>1</sup> While Dubai did not excel by means of a specific slogan, Emirates has changed its tagline several times; cf. Wikipedia, 2022; Liaqat, 2016, including many of its advertising posters. Besides the written logo, Dubai very often also works with the shapes of its skyline and renowned solitary buildings like *Burj Al Arab* or *Burj Khalifa*.

the 2008/09 financial crisis.<sup>2</sup> Yet, other cities, regions, and nations in the Gulf and the MENA area also have high recognition value. In the past, some places had already acquired a well-established, widely radiating, yet meanwhile vanished reputation with certain ascribed characteristics, often linked to an Orientalising perception, such as Cairo, the “mother of the world” (*umm al-dunyā*) and the “Paris on the Nile,” or Beirut as the “Paris of the Middle East” until the Lebanese civil war broke out in the mid-1970s. Pyramids, citadels, mosques, and churches in Cairo, Jerusalem, and Istanbul were long acknowledged landmarks, also beyond the region. Many places developed national tourism logos and slogans and, more recently, have endeavoured to follow the Dubai example, not only its admired economic and urbanistic model, but also its extensive branding policies.

Likewise, products have long become established brands in the MENA region through logos and slogans, but also by communicating of inherent values, qualities, and either ubiquitous advertisement or exquisite presentation. Local products and companies try to gain prestige and reputation in national and regional markets, and more and more also beyond, in the international realm, where some brand names and logos, for example of Arab and Turkish Airlines, are also more easily recognised today. However, even if oil is perhaps the product most associated with the Middle East in previous decades, one of the world’s largest companies in the oil and gas sector, Saudi Aramco – the public Saudi Arabian Oil Company, formerly the Arabian-American Oil Company – is known only to a few specialists, rather than to a broader public. The same is true of other global brands from the region, like the Emirati telecom provider, Etisalat, with subsidiaries from South Asia to West Africa. Similarly, local brands, e.g. in the food industry, have developed, but are primarily known to the national or regional public. In contrast, international brands from the houseware, beverage, and automotive industries, were long ago introduced and massively advertised to the local consumers. Yet, sometimes they have been heavily disputed in public for their names, logos, or origin in the given cultural and political contexts;<sup>3</sup> sometimes, they have been so appealing that counterfeits and fakes are locally produced and distributed.<sup>4</sup> And finally, the region has many personalities who have become icons and who increasingly undertake explicit and effective self-branding policies, from the political area to the cultural field, including religious leaders and heads of extremist groupings, some of whom have achieved worldwide recognisability.

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2 Cf., for instance, Bromber et al., 2014.

3 Cf. Kehrer, 2005.

4 On counterfeits, cf. Ermann and Hermanik, 2018: 4.

With that, especially during the last two decades, the contemporary branding boom that has become a rapidly expanding worldwide phenomenon since the 1980s/1990s also reached the MENA region, which wants to stand up to global competition and the worldwide attention economy. But while branding in the Western world and many emerging economies has been meticulously analysed, the MENA region, except for some Gulf countries, still remains underexplored.

Therefore, this present volume investigates and presents the unfoldings, manifestations, and expressions of this global phenomenon in an encompassing and conceptually framed manner, pertaining to the branding of places, products, and people in, through, and around the Middle East and North Africa, including some studies from adjacent regions and the wider Islamic world. However, the main focus of this book is on branding cities, nations, and other places, from Qom to Casablanca. Going beyond simply presenting logos and slogans, it critically analyses processes of strategic communication and image building under the general conditions of globalisation, neoliberalisation, and postmodernisation and, from a regional perspective, of widespread, lasting authoritarian rule and increased endeavours for “worlding.” In particular, it looks at the many actors involved in branding activities, their interests, and their motives, considers the great variety of addressees, and investigates tools, channels, and forms of branding. A major interest is in the entanglements of different spatial scales and in the (in)consistencies of the messages conveyed. Attention is paid to temporal reconfigurations of certain images and to the positioning of objects of branding in time and space. Historical case studies complement the focus on contemporary branding efforts.

With about 35 longer and shorter chapters, including a few “snapshots,” the volume fills an important gap in the research on MENA countries. Its authors are of Western and Middle Eastern origin and represent a wide range of disciplines, which allows for a variety of topics and perspectives. The book consists of five parts: this introductory part; a part dealing with various aspects of branding in the fields of consumption, culture, and lifestyle, from beverages and fashion to preachers and queer brands; a part on the branding of premodern empires and modern nation states; one on the many facets of city branding; and, finally, further cases of branding specific places, such as mosques, neighbourhoods, new towns, and refugee camps, past and present, and their entanglements with political branding. The volume concludes with the biographical presentation of all the contributors.

After this brief lead, the introductory part is divided into three subsequent chapters.<sup>5</sup> The next chapter explores general theoretical and conceptual approaches to branding, which serve as the broader framework for this book. It includes a tour through the global, mostly Western, history of branding, a clarification of terminology, and a look at the global macro-contexts in which contemporary branding takes place. The second chapter presents a bird's-eye view of empirical developments and their interpretations in the MENA region, from product and personal branding to a *tour d'horizon* of place branding, starting from its hotspot along the Arab side of the Gulf, through West Asia and the Maghreb, to the region's peripheries. The final chapter provides the general outline of the present volume and explains its various parts and individual chapters.

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