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State Aspirations for Social and Cultural Transformations in Qatar

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Abstract: Qatar is on a mission to cultivate a thriving, globally competitive, knowledge-based economy, shifting away from its rentier economic model, as well as being a key international player on the world stage. This article focuses on Qatar's social and cultural sphere, exploring the Qatari state's vision for society in the midst of these grand agendas. Through a systematic analysis of six key national documents (KNDs), such as the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, it extracts the state's aspirations for its society, as well as the values or traits they are attempting to preserve or inculcate. We identify five key overarching themes in the KNDs: (1) the advancement of society; (2) the preservation of traditions and values; (3) keeping up with the Gulf, Arab and Islamic countries and the world; (4) the empowerment of women; and (5) the importance of the family. The paper concludes with an assessment of some top-down initiatives and policies that were designed to achieve these ambitious agendas, and highlights some of their pitfalls. These issues include a lack of civic participation and engagement; the need for more localisation and indigenous social innovation; and, lastly, more attention given to social dynamics, including their inter- and intra-relations, which often lead to unintended consequences.

Keywords: social transformations; modernisation; globalisation; Arab Gulf; systems thinking; civic engagement

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1. Introduction

It is difficult to overstate the speed and depth of the transformations Qatar has experienced and is continuously undergoing in almost all dimensions of life—economic, political and social. Where other countries have spent decades on them, Qatar is attempting to "leapfrog" through the stages of development, undergoing what some have called "instant urbanism", where small, disconnected towns morph into global cities similar to Dubai and Abu Dhabi (Bagaeen 2007, p. 174; Ewers and Malecki 2010; Hvidt 2015). In short, this small, fledgling country is on a mission to cultivate and nurture a thriving, globally competitive, knowledge-based economy, shifting away from its rentier economic model, as well as being a key international player on the world stage (Kamrava 2013).

This tiny peninsula currently boasts one of the highest gross domestic products (GDP) per capita in the world. Qatar discovered oil in 1939 and natural gas in 1971, and is now the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas (LNG) and the 15th largest exporter of crude oil (Adegbamigbe et al. 2022). This contributes to 70% of the country's total revenues, 85% of its export earnings and 60% of its GDP (Brannagan et al. 2023). These revenues have allowed the state to embark on ambitious, large-scale projects aiming to reform the education and health sectors and accelerate urban development equipped with modern infrastructure. This demanded a staggeringly high influx of migrants, ranging from blue-collar to white-collar workers, rendering Qatari citizens as minorities in their own country. The state also provides scholarships for young Qataris to travel and study abroad, returning with new life experiences and worldviews (MOEHE n.d.). This all contributes to a unique social and cultural tapestry that is in rapid transition.

This article focuses on Qatar's social and cultural sphere. It explores how the state plans and envisions Qatari society, culture and identity in the midst of these grand, sweeping economic and political agendas. Through a systematic analysis of six key national documents (KNDs), such as the Qatar National Vision 2030 and the National Development Strategy, it extracts the state's aspirations for its society, as well as the values and institutions they are attempting to preserve and inculcate. It then analyses these derived aspirational themes and assesses their strengths and weaknesses through recent initiatives and policies.

Hitherto, studies have explored various aspects of these KNDs but to the authors' knowledge, none have systematically analysed the overarching social and cultural dimensions in a broader sense. That being said, some have examined KNDs in relation to social and cultural transformations, yet with different frameworks and end goals, such as in the context of the FIFA World Cup (Brannagan et al. 2023) or regarding the development of neoliberal subjectivities using a postcolonial lens (Viramontes 2022). Many, however, have discussed selected aspects of KNDs in light of Qatar's commitments to the global sustainability agenda, including education for sustainable development, sustainable tourism, and urban and economic development (Al-Hammadi 2021; Charfeddine et al. 2018; Sever and Tok 2023). Others have used KNDs as a framework to examine the development of the knowledge-based economy and circular economy (Abusin et al. 2023; Al-Qahtani and Shirazi 2023).

In terms of Qatar's international branding, national identity and social transformations, many scholars have researched this topic from various angles, including top-down and bottom-up perspectives (Cochrane et al. 2024). The bulk of the studies are in the former category, which includes social and cultural identity shaping and the curation of museums (Alraouf 2016; Giusti and Lamonica 2023; Mitchell and Al-Hammadi 2020; Mitchell and Curtis 2018), regional political events (Alderman and Eggeling 2023; Mednicoff 2016; Zeineddine 2017) and sporting events such as the FIFA World Cup (Brannagan et al. 2023; Griffin 2019). There are relatively fewer grass-roots studies that use more ethnographic methods, exploring the identity formation of different migrants and citizens in Qatar (Koch 2016; Scurry et al. 2013) and the granular impact of the educational system's reforms, which have undergone many changes under the Education for a New Era (EFNE) government initiative, particularly in the medium of the language of instruction (Abou-El-Kheir 2017; Amin and Cochrane 2023; Hillman 2022; Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019). Gender and the empowerment of women is another key focus of this literature, with various studies exploring Qatari female worldviews (Liloia 2019). Yet again, none, to our knowledge, include a systematic analysis of the latest KNDs and the state's overall visions of society.

2. Qatar: A Brief Country Profile

Located on the western coast of the Arabian Gulf, Qatar is a small peninsula with some islands, namely Halul, Shira'wa and Alashat. In the south, it shares a land border with Saudi Arabia and a maritime border with Bahrain, the UAE and Iran. Qatar is an independent sovereign state and a founding member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—a political and economic alliance between six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Oman and Qatar. Spanning approximately 12,000 square kilometres, Qatar is the seventh smallest country in Asia, the third smallest in the Middle East and the second smallest in the GCC (The World Bank n.d.a; WorldData.info n.d.). As of 2023, the population stands at approximately 3 million (3,085,087), with around 87% expatriates, rendering Qataris in a unique position as minorities in their own country. The majority of expatriate workers are from developing countries in South Asia (Snoj 2019). In this way, Qataris are the fourth largest national group after residents from India, Bangladesh and Nepal (Snoj 2019). The official language of Qatar is Arabic, although the sheer number and mixture of migrant workers has made English the de facto second language. Islam is the official religion of the country, and Islamic law (shariah) is the principal source of legislation (Ahmed 2018). The vast majority of citizens are Sunni Muslims. Thus, their traditions and culture are rooted in Arabic and Islamic history.

Qatar has been inhabited since 4000 BC under various regimes. Until 1915, the Ottomans had ruled this land for four centuries. Although never officially colonised, Qatar became a British protectorate for approximately fifty-five years from 1916 to 1971, through which time Qatar's external and international relations and security were controlled through British power. Qataris consist of various nomadic Bedouin tribes as well as Indian and Iranian trading families. Qatar is an absolute monarchy, and the ruling family, the Al-Thanis, descend from the Al-Ma'adhid from the Banu Tamim. Originally from Najd in Saudi Arabia, the Banu Tamim settled in various places, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq (Al-Sharqawi 2013; Hamdan 2012). Tribes and their branches are spread throughout the region and are not neatly divided into nation–states. Historically, tribes have been complex and fluid and have played a critical and powerful role in the organisation and function of society. There is considerable debate amongst scholars about the relationship between the modern nation–state and the tribe. Earlier scholars predicted the decline of the tribe with the rise of the modern nation–state, perceiving tribes as primitive and primeval. However, recently, more scholars are advocating for the idea that tribes are constantly evolving and adapting, especially in the mercurial and volatile politics of the current era, and are once again playing a significant role (Al-Kuwari 2018; Cooke 2014; Tapper 2018).

Many consider Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, who ruled from 1995 to 2013, to have been the founder of modern Qatar. Educated in the United Kingdom, the Emir accelerated the country's development towards a dynamic modern economy and society, with education as his focal point. Under his reign, the Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar and the Qatar National Vision 2030 were ratified and came into effect (Hamdan 2012), as well as the launch of a comprehensive reformation of the education system entitled Education for a New Era (Amin and Cochrane 2023).

During the Emir's reign, many organisations, institutions and state initiatives were established. Qatar University, which was established in 1977 as the national institution of higher education in Qatar, embarked on an ambitious reform plan in 2003, which eventually developed into a strategy to align itself with the Qatar National Vision. Its strategy, "From Reform to Transformation 2018–2023", aims to promote excellence in education and research and reach competitive levels regionally and internationally (Qatar University 2017). The Emir and his wife, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, also established the Qatar Foundation in 1995, which is a large, private, non-profit organisational umbrella that hosts a wide range of institutions focusing on "education, research and innovation, and community development... for the benefit of Qatar, and the world" (Qatar Foundation n.d.). Many initiatives have been launched under the Qatar Foundation, such as the Qatar Science and Technology Park, which was established and designed in 2009 as an innovation incubator for science and technology to accelerate Qatar's national diversification drive (Qatar Science and Technology Park n.d.). The World Innovation Summit for Education was launched in 2009 under the leadership of Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, which is a global platform for creative solutions to the issues being faced by education today (World Innovation Summit for Education n.d.). The World Innovation Summit for Health was established in 2013 as a platform to discuss, debate and discover new ways forward for global healthcare challenges (World Innovation Summit for Health n.d.). These top-down initiatives give us a glimpse into how Qatar began to envision and position itself as a leading global player.

3. Methodology

For this study, the authors conducted a thematic content analysis using qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA 2020 (MAXQDA 2020). Thematic content analysis consists of three stages: first is the pre-analysis stage, where the research question is defined and documents are identified; second is the exploration phase, where codes are created through an iterative process; third is the treatment and interpretation, which is the final stage of data analysis and discussion (MAXQDA 2020). The first two stages are outlined below, and the remainder of the article represents the final stage.

3.1. Pre-Analysis

As discussed above, this article's area of focus is the government's vision for Qatari society, culture and identity. Related to this, the authors first identified the relevant KNDs that would be pertinent to this research. This involved gathering the official documents from government websites and reading them for any concepts related to society and culture. One of the difficulties that we encountered was that society, culture and identity are nebulous and integrated concepts that permeate almost every aspect of life. The authors discussed and agreed on what to include and exclude, such as to not include the promotion of "sports culture". Although important in the Qatari cultural landscape, it would have widened the scope too much. We had to strike a balance between breadth and depth, and agreed on the following five national documents and one important speech by the current Emir.

Six KNDs and one important speech by the Emir were finally selected to be part of the study; they were published between 2008 and 2022. Below is a list of each document, the language it was reviewed in and a short description:

1. Qatar National Vision 2030 (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008)—*English*.
   Published in 2008, the Qatar National Vision 2030 is the primary guiding document for all spheres of Qatari life, economy and society. All other documents explicitly refer back to the QNV 2030 and are aligned accordingly. According to the state, "Qatar's National Vision defines the long-term goals for the country and provides a framework in which national strategies and implementation plans can be developed" (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008).
2. Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011)—*Arabic*.
3. Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018)—*Arabic*.
   The theoretical framework provided by the Qatar National Vision 2030 was crystallized through Qatar National Development Strategies. The first Qatar National Development Strategy "was based on Qatar National Vision 2030 pillars, targeting: sustained economic prosperity, promotion of human development, integrated methodology for social development, and environmental preservation for future generations" (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. V). The second Qatar National Development Strategy builds upon the first but also includes a "new chapter on international cooperation (Global Partnerships for Development) aimed at strengthening Qatar's regional and international roles and status. . ..[as well as]. . . a new chapter on Performance Management which provides a compass for monitoring implementation paths" (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. V).
4. Qatar National Research Strategy 2014. (Qatar National Research Strategy 2014)—*English*.
   Research towards achieving the Qatar National Vision 2030 is outlined in the Qatar National Research Strategy 2014. The 2014 edition is the latest document that addresses "critical national priorities and progress towards the 2030 vision for Qatar to become a leading center for research and development excellence and innovation" (Qatar National Research Strategy 2014).
5. The Human Development Report for the State of Qatar 2015 (The Human Development Report 2015)—*Arabic*.
   The Human Development Index (HDI) is about the relationship between economic development and improving the lives of everyday people. According to the report, it "reflects a commitment to deepening the national and international consensus that development requires more than just the pursuit of economic growth. In addition to affirming national identity, culture, heritage, and Islamic values, national human development must promote, respect, and protect the rights of all individuals" (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 3).

6. General Framework for National Education 2016 (General Framework for National Education 2016)—*Arabic*
   This document is "considered the cornerstone of all decisions and procedures related to curriculum development, teaching support, and evaluation. It provides a clear direction for the development of education based on the knowledge economy, applying the best international standards, and incorporating scientific discoveries regarding how students learn across different age categories" (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 3).
7. HH The Emir speech inaugurates Shura 51 Council's Ordinary Session 2022 (The Shura Council 2022)—*Arabic*
   We reviewed a collection of the most recent speeches delivered by the Emir of Qatar on various local and international occasions. The vast majority did not directly fall under our research area, except one, which was a local speech given to the Shura Council—the consultative assembly that is the legislative body of the State of Qatar.

3.2. Exploration

Each document was then uploaded onto MAXQDA 2020. Qualitative data analysis software, such as MAXQDA, is a useful tool to effectively and systematically streamline and identify common traits in large volumes of data.

Content analysis can be divided into three categories: lexical, syntactic and thematic. This study chose thematic analysis as documents were in different languages. Therefore, conducting an analysis based on grammar, vocabulary or syntax would be challenging and problematic. We went through the three-step coding process of open, axial and selective coding based on grounded theory.[1] This is an iterative process that begins with open coding, a way of reading the texts and creating codes based on similar concepts and themes in relation to society. Axial coding is where the relationships between the initial codes in the open coding process are discussed and identified. Selective coding aims again to analyse the relationships between the axial codes to create themes and meaning (Williams and Moser 2019). All authors have some level of bilingualism (English and Arabic) but author two took the lead, especially in the open coding part, as author two is strongest in both Arabic (native Arab) and English. The open axial selective process was iterative and involved discussions between the authors to reach agreement.

Coding can be descriptive or analytical. The former is where the researcher aims to closely align and use the words and meaning in the text and the latter is where the researcher interprets the text and codes using their individual analytical interpretation. Both have their uses, yet, since the aim of the article was to capture and portray the state's vision, we opted for the descriptive method.

Coding analysis can also be qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative analysis is where the intensity, in terms of the usage of adjectives and descriptive nouns, the co-occurrence of words and themes and order are also units of analysis. Quantitative is where the frequency of the themes are the main units of analysis. This study chose quantitative analysis, again due to the differences in languages and forms of expression that would make qualitative analysis difficult.

3.3. Limitations

The aim of coding is to render a more rigorous and systematic analysis, yet it is still a subjective endeavour. Coding using data analysis software increases the rigour and depth of the analysis; it does not replace the role of the researcher in creating, deciding and giving meaning to the codes.

4. Results

As shown in Figure 1, five overarching themes were identified from the KNDs: the advancement of society (96); preservation of values and traditions (80); keeping up with

other Gulf states, Arab countries, Islamic countries, and the world (29); empowering Qatari women (27); and the importance of the Qatari family (24).

Below are detailed tables for each theme that are further divided into sub-categories with at least one example for each. If the document was analysed in Arabic, then the English text was taken from the English version where possible or translated.

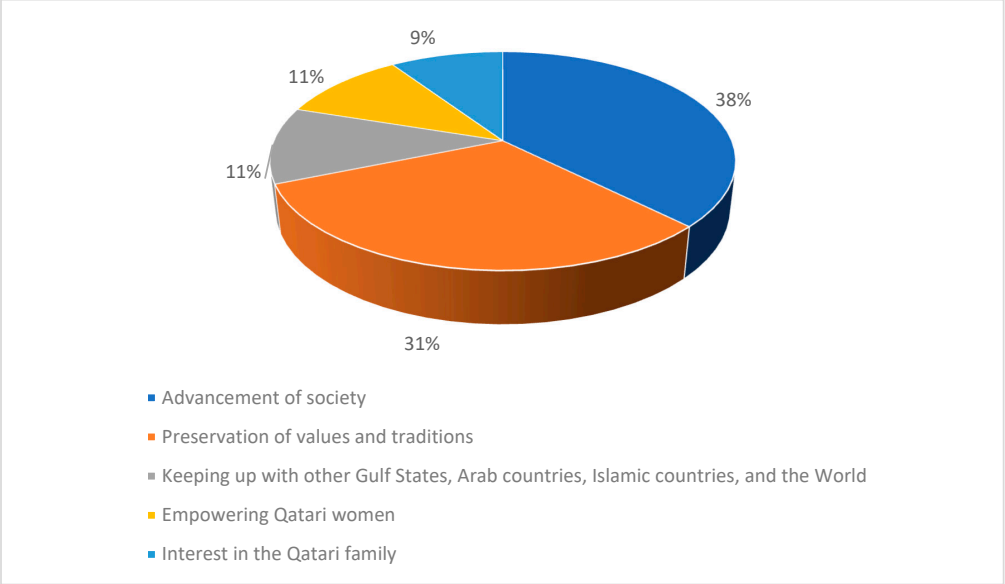


Figure 1. The percentage distribution of the five categories representing societal priorities in Qatar.

Table 1 shows the results for the first theme, the advancement of society. This is a broad category that includes four overarching sub-themes. The first is rights and social protection for citizens and residents, including the social and economic integration of vulnerable groups such as the elderly and people with disabilities. The second is the development of a just and caring society that actively participates in national and global development, especially regarding the role of the youth and volunteering. The third is strategic human-power planning that includes high-quality education and training to respond to 21st-century challenges. The fourth is efficient government services, such as the justice and healthcare system. Within each of these sub-themes are multiple sub-categories.

Table 1. Theme 1.

Theme 1: Advancement of Society			
Sub-Theme	**Sub-Categories**	**Frequency**	**Examples**
Rights and social protection for citizens and residents (n = 47)	The workforce in the State of Qatar is composed of Qataris and residents with guaranteed rights and a social protection system that encompasses all segments of society.	33	The country's labor market is strong, multidisciplinary and multifaceted between the public and private sectors, between citizens and arrivals, among highly skilled, low-skilled, male and female Qataris (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. 193). QNV 2030 takes a holistic approach to development, foreseeing that sustainable development will embody an effective social safety net for all. Qataris. In providing a medium-term framework, the National Development Strategy will make a firm commitment to establishing a social protection system that preserves the civil rights of all citizens, values their contribution to society and ensures an adequate income for them to maintain a healthy and dignified life (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 30).

Table 1. *Cont.*

Theme 1: Advancement of Society			
Sub-Theme	**Sub-Categories**	**Frequency**	**Examples**
Rights and social protection for citizens and residents (n = 47)	The situation of the elderly and people with disabilities in Qatari society.	8	Developing and applying a comprehensive socio-economic development approach a rights-based platform that helps to integrate persons with disabilities into society, whereby this approach recognizes the rights of persons with disabilities and removes the constraints and barriers imposed on them by the social, economic and physical environment (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 84). The social model for dealing with disability began to gradually develop to replace the medical model, and achieve the aspirations of Qatar's National Vision 2030 for Social Justice and Inclusion (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 5).
	Qatari citizens are the nucleus of advancement in society.	6	The State of Qatar aspires to advance and develop the social dimensions of its society by nurturing Qatari citizens capable of dealing effectively and flexibly with the requirements of the age they live in (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 19) An effective social protection system for all Qataris that ensures their civil rights, values their contribution in developing their society, and ensures an adequate income to maintain a healthy and dignified life (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 22).
Moral society that actively participates (n = 26)	The presence of an active role for youth and students in society, especially through community service and volunteering.	16	The strategy will develop young people's development and skills with a view to operationalizing their role and contributions to society (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. 255). Increase community participation in sport and physical activity of young people, while improving and integrating public and private sports facilities, and upgrading sport in the State of Qatar to the extent of excellence (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. 33).
	The development of society and its global role.	5	Development of a just and caring society based on high moral standards, and capable of playing a significant role in the global partnership for development (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 11).
	The importance of joint efforts of the government and the people for national development and cultural participation.	5	Participation in development is seen as an element of development. In this context, a participatory approach to development must be accompanied by a culture that views development as not the Government's responsibility alone is the result of a joint effort at the community level. The progressive development of such a culture requires concerted action to promote young people's training in participatory values, human rights and awareness of their role in national development (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 8).
Strategic human-power planning, education and training (n = 12)	The roles of research, training, learning and monitoring in the renaissance of society.	10	Comprehensive education database Training and evaluation evidence Various guidance indicators (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 21). Qualitative learning and high-quality learning outcomes through a more precise focus on the competencies that all students need, so that they can successfully respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by the twenty-first century (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 5).

Table 1. *Cont.*

Theme 1: Advancement of Society			
Sub-Theme	**Sub-Categories**	**Frequency**	**Examples**
Strategic human-power planning, education and training (n = 12)	Strategic human-power planning.	2	As Qatar's economy aspires to diversify from its dependence on gas and oil, success in this endeavor will increasingly depend on the ability to compete in a global knowledge economy. Educating and training Qataris to achieve their full potential will be essential for continued progress (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 6).
Efficient government services (n = 11)	The focus on developing governmental entities and institutions to enhance society and keep pace with the requirements of the era.	7	Institutional processes and the upgrading of the efficiency of government services. The government sector has achieved significant developments in the delivery of services through unified service outlets, facilitating access to a broad package of government services in one place and in a short period of time (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 48). Developing justice systems is at the top of our priorities, to achieve complete and indispensable justice to stabilize transactions and ensure rights, slow justice, as I mentioned previously in this council distinguished, it is a kind of injustice (The Shura Council 2022, p. 4).
	Development of the health system.	4	Progress of a comprehensive and integrated health care system (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. 7).
Total:		**96**	

Table 2 shows the results for the second theme, the preservation of values and traditions. This theme includes the preservation of heritage, culture and national identity grounded in Islamic and Arab traditions whilst concomitantly modernising society.

Table 2. Theme 2.

Theme 2: Preservation of Values and Traditions		
Sub-Categories	**Frequency**	**Example**
Preserving Qatari heritage and culture	33	Despite the many changes, Qatari society has maintained the essence of its culture and a considerable degree of continuity from the past. This continuity includes observing the fundamental principles of Islam, maintaining the inherited status and prestige of the leading families and preserving the connectedness of family affinities. The primary, persistent challenge is to maintain this balance between modern life and the country's cultural and traditional values (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 34). Finally, let us pursue the work, each from his position, to raise the name of the nation high, and let us open our arms to welcome everyone so that the world may witness the Qataris' warm hospitality and generosity (The Shura Council 2022, p. 10).
Preservation of national identity	10	The national strategy of the State of Qatar includes a number of elements, including: placing the State of Qatar in a leading center for Arab culture through a distinct national identity, a strongly cohesive society and a dynamic and creative cultural sector (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. 28). The competencies that the curriculum seeks to achieve over their school years: civil awareness of national identity (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 22).

Table 2. *Cont.*

Theme 2: Preservation of Values and Traditions		
Sub-Categories	**Frequency**	**Example**
Preservation of values and traditions with emphasis on the study of the Islamic religion, the Arabic language and general values in the Qatari curriculum	32	Learning must be embedded in the context of all Islamic values, Arab and Qatari cultural heritage, Arabic language, history and tradition, while appreciating students' culture and traditions (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 15). Education provides a foundation ethics, national identity, traditions, and cultural heritage. In schools graduating qualified citizens possessing knowledge, skills and abilities (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 20).
Connecting and balancing the old with the new	5	Other societies have successfully molded modernization around local cultures and traditions. Qatar's National Vision responds to this challenge and seeks to connect and balance the old and the new (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 4).
Total	**80**	

Table 3 shows the results for the third theme, keeping up with other Gulf countries, Arab and Islamic countries and the world. This theme is about relatively maintaining high standards increasing Qatar's regional and global role on the world's stage.

Table 3. Theme 3.

Theme 3: Keeping Up with Other Gulf Countries, Arab and Islamic Countries and the World		
Sub-Categories	**Frequency**	**Examples**
Keeping up with other Gulf countries, Arab and Islamic countries and the world	11	The second strategy included a new chapter on international cooperation to be called working partnerships for the development of a new society. Development aimed at strengthening the role of Qatar at all regional and international levels and at raising the level of international partnerships the status of the State of Qatar is strengthened regionally and internationally and is actively engaged in peace-building and regional and international peace-building (Qatar National Development Strategy 2018–2022 2018, p. VII). Our approach, which we have always pursued in our foreign policy, and which is based on complying with the international law, protecting our national achievements and adopting preventive diplomacy in defusing crises before they escalate, and the positive results we have achieved in this regard, makes it incumbent on us to have an active and responsible role in our region, and the world at large (The Shura Council 2022, p. 6).
Strengthening Qatar's global role	9	In short, it is an occasion in which we portray "who we are", not only in terms of the strength of our economy and institutions, but also in terms of our civilizational identity (The Shura Council 2022, p. 7). Future economic success will increasingly depend on the ability of the Qatari people to deal with a new international order that is knowledge-based and extremely competitive (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 13).
A world-class curriculum that achieves global quality standards	5	Keeping up with recent developments, especially in the fields of science, culture and technology (General Framework for National Education 2016, p. 20). We accepted this challenge out of our faith in our potential, we the Qataris, to tackle the mission and make it a success, and due to our awareness of the importance of hosting a major event such as the World Cup in the Arab world (The Shura Council 2022, p. 7).
Increase Qatar's regional role	4	. . .within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 24). Develop a spirit of tolerance, constructive dialogue and openness towards others at the national and international levels (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 23).
Total	**29**	

Table 4 shows the results for the fourth theme, empowering Qatari women. This theme includes enhancing the role, capacity and agency of women in social, political and economic spheres of society and improving Qatar's low ranking on the Gender Inequality Index (GII). At the same time, it contains aspirations for "traditional Qatari family life", namely marriage and children.

Table 4. Theme 4.

Theme 4: Empowering Qatari Women		
Sub-Categories	**Frequency**	**Examples**
Women's participation in the workforce and the social and political spheres	12	The impressive progress achieved in the area of gender equality in education and health has not been matched by adequate progress in employment and political empowerment. Women's strong gains in education and health outcomes are expected to lead to their higher participation in the labor force (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 70). Enhance women's capacities and empower them to participate fully in the political and economic spheres, especially in decision-making roles (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 22).
Women's civil status code	6	Although there are some measures to ensure that children of Qatari women married to foreigners receive the same treatment as children of Qatari citizens, except that does not apply to all privileges (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 4).
Empowering Qatari women in the family setting	2	There needs to be measures to help women balance work and family responsibilities (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 35).
Qatar's accession to the CEDAW agreement and gender equality	4	Qatar acceded to the CEDAW in March 2009. Its accession to CEDAW attests to the country's commitment to build the capacities of women and enable them to participate actively in economic, political and public life, as well as to ensure that they have access to decision-making positions. The state has pledged that it will work diligently to achieve its vision of improving the social status of women and ensuring that they, working side by side with men, can contribute more to the development of society. The state is monitoring implementation of the provisions of CEDAW, raising awareness of its contents and training law enforcement personnel, lawyers, and journalists about its provisions. By those means it aims to create more opportunities for the realization of gender equality and the further advancement of Qatari women (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 3).
Qatar's global ranking affected by gender inequality	3	While Qatar ranks high internationally on human development, it scores low on gender equality. Thus, Qatar was the highest ranked Gulf country (31) on UNDP's Human Development Index, yet it had a very low international ranking at 114 out of 152 countries in the GII [Gender inequality index]. In comparison with other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Qatar fairs unfavorably on this index. The GII can be interpreted as the loss in human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in the three GII dimensions. One key factor in Qatar's low GII ranking is the absence of females in the national Shura Council, that is a lack of political empowerment (The Human Development Report 2015, p. 4).
Total	**27**	

Table 5 shows the results for the fifth and final theme, the importance of the Qatari family. This theme encapsulates the significance of the family unit, child well-being and equality between households.

Table 5. Theme 5.

Theme 5: Importance of the Qatari Family		
Sub-Categories	**Frequency**	**Examples**
Focusing on the Qatari family and its unity.	11	Despite rapid economic and social gains, as well as political change, Qatar has maintained its cultural and traditional values as an Arab and Islamic nation that considers the family to be the main pillar of society (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 2). Qatar will preserve a strong and coherent family that enjoys support, care and social protection. Women will assume a significant role in all spheres of life, especially through participating in economic and political decision making (Qatar National Vision 2030 2008, p. 23).
Attention to children	9	The National Development Strategy 2011–2016 advocates for the adoption of a holistic approach to child well-being. This approach will enable Qatar to interweave important policies to create a coherent spectrum of programs for children of different ages to increase child well-being, leading to better human capital outcomes (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 29). The Qatari government will: - Strengthen the Qatari family as a pillar of society. - Strengthen parental responsibility and reduce dependence on domestic helpers. - Reduce family violence and establish a protection and support system for victims. - Increase child well-being, child welfare and child protection. (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 165).
Significant disparities in the social and economic reaches of some Qatari families	4	Disaggregated data from a study of spatial differentials in social prosperity among Qatari households shows that there is a significant divide in social prosperity between Qatar's most urbanised zones and the non-urbanised ones. There are gaps in a wide range of social, demographic and economic variables—including education, health and community facilities, employment and other public services—which have implications for policies and programmes (Qatar National Development Strategy 2011–2016 2011, p. 2).
Total	**24**	

5. Discussion

To thoroughly assess every state aspiration for society is out of the scope of this paper. Below are remarks on some major state initiatives towards these visions, placing them in regional and global contexts. The theme "keeping up with the world" runs throughout the discussion as these initiatives are designed with this goal in mind.

5.1. Advancement of Society, Education and Preservation of Traditions

As seen above, education is one of the key cornerstones of the KNDs. Moving towards a knowledge-based society that is globally competitive is not only the aim of Qatar but many developing countries seeking their place on the world stage (Roberts and Peters 2008). Globalisation, as Tsui and Tollefson (2007) argue, by and large depends on technology and a strong command of the English language. This has led to governments throughout Asia, Africa and the Arabian Gulf pushing neoliberal Western educational concepts, products, services, pedagogy and privatization strategies as well as the English-language medium of instruction (Rizvi and Lingard 2009). In the MENA region as a whole, and the Arabian Gulf in particular, there are "new desires for Western-inspired forms of education, internationalization and transnational education; new ethos of English-medium formal education policies, curricula and classroom pedagogical practices; and new strong desire to purchase western higher education products, goods and services" (Ibrahim and Barnawi 2022, p. 1). The demand for the English language stems from it being synonymous with

academic advancement, excellence and success, as well as heightened professional mobility (Kirkpatrick and Barnawi 2017, p. 3).[2]

In Qatar, this has resulted in the government employing the American think tank, RAND, in 2001 to assess the Qatari education system and to suggest methods of improvement (Brewer et al. 2007). Of course, their suggestions were based on neoliberal ideas of decentralization and privatization to foster innovation, competition and promote efficiency within schools. The Qatari government enacted their suggestions in 2002, and this new phase was dubbed "Education for a New Era". By 2011, all government schools were converted to "independent" schools, which were designed to have more autonomy but with national, standardized assessments, as well as switching from an Arabic to English medium of instruction. Although there were some positive results, by and large, Education for a New Era did not yield the desired results and was not considered a success (Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019). RAND's contract was not renewed, and many of the reforms were reversed, such as the switch back to an Arabic medium of instruction.

This significant episode in the country's history illustrates two key points that are relevant to this paper. First, as has been documented by most studies, the reforms failed largely due to inadequate stakeholder consultations, such as with principles, school teachers and parents (Mustafawi and Shaaban 2019). Rapid, top-down requirements led to schools being ill-prepared for the changes, leading to highly frustrated teachers, students and parents (Romanowski et al. 2013). Looking at the KNDs, as part of the "advancement of society" (Table 1), the state wants to promote a participatory culture, where different segments of society play an active role in the development of the nation in all spheres. Taking a wider bottom-up view, many global trends are indicating that citizens are now also demanding and expecting more consultations in important societal affairs (Pereira and Völker 2020). This episode suggests that this is true even in autocratic societies such as Qatar. For ambitious reforms, a key learning point is that the state must take the time and care to thoroughly consult relevant stakeholders in society and take their opinions and suggestions seriously regarding the issue at hand. This should generate not only higher chances of acceptance and success but more impactful reforms as it is designed *with* the people, rather than *for* the people.

The second learning point from this episode is the need for deeper reflection when it comes to the balance between advancing and modernising society on the one hand and preserving values and identity on the other. The sudden switch to the English medium of instruction was perceived by many parents as a direct threat to their identity and values (Nolan 2012). All languages carry with them history, culture and values; this is particularly true for the Arabic language, which also holds a sacred status due to its inextricable connection with the Islamic tradition. The dilution and weakening of the Arabic language, a trend in the Arabian Gulf as a whole, is, of course, an unintended consequence of English-medium instruction policies, the privatization of education, as well as the large number of English-speaking expatriates in the countries (Kirkpatrick 2017). The switch back to an Arabic medium in government schools, as well as a greater push in private schools to include higher standards and respect for the Arabic language, was a direct result of this backlash. This illustrates that reforms and strategies require more foresight and innovative and concrete strategies to mitigate possible unintended consequences.

5.2. Gender and Family

In line with the global trends and objectives, women's empowerment and education is high on the agenda. In the Arabian Gulf, Kuwait and Bahrain were the first countries to establish women's organisations, with the Young Ladies Association in Bahrain in 1955 and the Women's Cultural and Social Society in 1963 (Bu Hejji 2019). Qatar was the last Gulf country to embark on this social change. In 1982, it established its first women's organisation, and Qatar was also the last to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2009 relative to other Gulf countries,

such as Kuwait, which did so in 1994, and Saudi Arabia, which did so in 2000 (United Nations Treaty Collection n.d.).

Despite this, Qatar has not only "caught up" but, in some areas, is leading the way, not just in the Gulf but in the world. Taking a snapshot of the latest data from the World Bank, Qatar had a lower maternal mortality ratio (8 per 100,000) than high-income countries (12 per 100,000) in 2020 (The World Bank n.d.b). Both men and women in Qatar have very high literacy rates, with the rate for women being slightly higher, at 94.7%, relative to men, at 93.1%. Although 90% of girls in Qatar complete secondary education, compared to 95% of girls in higher-income countries, there was a 60.5% female labour force participation rate compared to 53.3% in higher-income countries as of 2022. In other words, women in Qatar are far more economically active relative not only to other countries in the Gulf, but also to the world. By way of comparison, the United States had 56.5% female labour force participation, and the United Arab Emirates had 54.9% in 2022 (The World Bank n.d.b). Women in Qatar are also highly educated, with far more females enrolling and graduating from higher education institutes. In the academic year 2020/2021 alone, of all university graduates, Qatari females were the highest (45%) relative to Qatari males (17%) and even non-Qatari females (23%) (Planning and Statistics Authority 2022). In 2020/2021 alone, Qatari women received more than three times the number of state scholarships than men, that is, 77% compared to 23%. Looking at data from PISA, which charts academic performance, girls in Qatar outperform boys in reading, maths and science by a higher margin than in other Gulf states and in the OECD countries (Amin and Cochrane 2023). There is also a higher number of Qatari girls entering the private school system relative to Qatari boys, who are choosing the government school system, which has lower achievement rates (Amin and Cochrane 2023). In the above-cited reports where we have historical data, they illustrate that these trends—of women far outnumbering men in terms of higher education enrolment, scholarships and graduates—have persisted at least for the last five to ten years rather than being aberrations of the last few years. In short, females in Qatar are far more educated relative to males, and have high rates of labour force participation relative to the world, and these rates are set on an upward trajectory. Therefore, taken from the angle of education and labour force participation, the state's visions and strategies of empowering women are successful.

However, the emphasis on women has had a detrimental impact on men, and other gender imbalances have resulted. Ridge (2014), examining the Gulf broadly, cogently argues that a reverse gender divide has occurred in the region as boys are neglected by international developmental agencies, policy makers and academics. She describes a situation wherein boys receive a sub-standard education, leading to low attainment levels and high dropout rates, but have easy access to high-status employment. On the other hand, girls achieve high levels of attainment, but have relatively more cultural and social barriers in the labour market. She argues that many factors, such as the pursuit of modernisation, which is equated mainly to female education, and an aggressive nationalisation that disincentivises obtaining employment based on merit, have led to boys being largely left behind (Ridge 2014). Although the Gulf region has its own specificities, this issue of a decline in boys' educational attainment overall is a growing global trend (Farrell and Gray 2018; Sax 2016).

Of course, this has a direct impact on the family. The family still remains an important institution in Qatar. Yet, many studies and reports have highlighted the rise in divorce rates, the rise in celibacy amongst women, an increase in marital age, and a decrease in differences between the ages of spouses, which alter family dynamics (De Bel-Air et al. 2018; Kassem and Al-Muftah 2016). The point to note here is that most of these studies attribute the key drivers of these trends to female access to education and the workforce, which broadens the woman's life choices and causes them to delay their marriage, choose not to marry or choose to divorce, since they have financial independence. In other words, there is more emphasis—at times even blame—placed on the woman. In addition, new visions and models of gender relationships, well-being and life introduced through economic and social globalisation are generally cited as another factor (De Bel-Air et al. 2018). Although

there are still high levels of endogamy in Qatar, these new models also result in men and women marrying outside their ethnicity or tribe (Hassan 2018). It is important to note that the children of Qatari men who marry non-Qatari women receive all the benefits of a full Qatari citizen. However, the children of Qatari women who marry non-Qatari women do not receive the same state benefits (Abu-Ras et al. 2022).

This is a complex and rich issue, and many remarks can be made. For the purposes of this paper, one pertinent point stands out. This is that the three themes, keeping up with other countries, female empowerment and supporting the family, when seen separately and on a theoretical level, are positive goals; yet, practically on the ground, they are enacted without consideration of each other. Put differently, while everyday life is complex and interconnected, these policies, laws and visions are treated distinctly. Women's education and attainment are supported and lauded, but men's low attainment levels are ignored, creating a reverse gender imbalance. Marriage, particularly endogamous marriage, is encouraged, yet men can marry outside their group without repercussions. There are also entrenched social norms of women requesting staggeringly high dowries as well as the educational imbalance, which serve as more push factors for Qatari men to seek to marry women abroad (Hassan 2018). Children and family life are encouraged, yet flexible working, maternity and paternity leave are still a work in progress, although, recently, there have been some improvements (Qatar Foundation 2021). It is noteworthy that there are many ways that employers get out of providing these benefits, such as workers not having permanent and full-time status, but being employed under renewable, short-term contracts. Moreover, despite help for families with special needs being explicitly mentioned (see Table 1), there is little extra support for families that have children with disabilities, which occurs particularly in endogamous societies (Shaban and Amin 2023, 2024).[3]

In short, there any many unintended consequences and overlooked dynamics taking place between the state's aspirations and what is occurring in society. Qatar needs a far more comprehensive and panoramic view of society that encompasses the inter- and intra-dynamics of families, children, gender, education, employment and overall well-being. A rapid transition also requires rapid research, adaption and agility. Rather than reactionary measures when negative trends hit significant levels, closer monitoring and more agile interventions that can be adapted to the fast and changing nature of society are needed.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyse the Qatari state's aspirations and visions for society through a thematic compilation of key national documents. We uncovered five key themes: (1) advancement of society; (2) preservation of traditions and values; (3) keeping up with Gulf, Arab and Islamic countries and the world; (4) empowerment of women; (5) and the importance of the family unit. These are lofty goals for a state with many incongruous characteristics: rich in resources but with a tiny population; low local human capacity leading to an 87% expatriate population, many of whom do not share the language, history or religion with the locals; possessing a tiny land footprint yet desiring to be a prominent player on the world stage with leading global initiatives.

On the surface level, the state's vision for its society is inspiring. Yet, when put into action, the policies, initiatives and social norms that stem from these visions suffer from three inter-related shortfalls. First is the lack of participation from relevant stakeholders as well as grass-roots society. Second is the prioritisation given to global trends and interventions at the expense of local realities or space for indigenous yet innovative pathways.[4] Third is the lack of attention given to the intra- and inter-dynamics of many social goals, such as gender dynamics and educational and employment pathways. In short, creating and enacting visions through more participatory measures that are tailored to local realities and have a comprehensive, in-depth understanding of social dynamics is paramount. This research is significant as it specifically pinpoints past challenges and outlines ways forward. This research would serve policy makers and other private and government entities who are working towards making these lofty visions a reality.

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Notes

1 Grounded theory is one of the most widely and commonly used methodologies in qualitative research. The principal idea is that theories are generated through a systematic collection and analysis of data. Hence, it is "grounded" in data (Birks and Mills 2023).

2 See also Romanowski et al. (2023) for more on globalisation in Qatar's higher education sector.

3 For more on disability in Arab societies and the multiple complex issues, see Amin et al. (2024) and Badran et al. (2023).

4 For more on innovation and challenges for education in the Arabian Gulf, see Amin et al. (2023) and Al-Jayyousi et al. (2023).

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