Qatar - Education as a Weapon

There seems to be no limit to Qatari tossing around their wealth. This tiny kingdom with 2.6 million inhabitants is full of ridiculously lavish gold-plated palaces, most of them built with terrible taste. It is overflowing with Lamborghini racing cars and Rolls Royce limousines, and now, even with ludicrously wasteful air-conditioned sidewalks (cold air blows from below, into the 35C heat).

Ruled by the House of Thani, the State of Qatar is truly a strange place: according to the latest count conducted in early 2017, its total population was 2.6 million, of which 313,000 were Qatari citizens and 2.3 million ‘expatriates’, both the low-wage migrant workers, and the lavishly remunerated Western professionals.

Foreigners are doing everything; sweeping the floors, cleaning garbage, cooking, taking care of babies, flying Qatar Airways planes, performing medical surgeries and building office towers. Manual laborers are discriminated against; beaten, cheated, humiliated. Many migrant workers have been dying under “mysterious circumstances”. But they are still coming, mainly because Qatar, with its GDP per capita of $128,702, is the richest country on earth, and because there is huge demand for hundreds of different professions. Never mind that the perks are for the ‘natives’ only, while the minimum wage for foreigners is only around $200 per month.

Locked in a bitter dispute with its neighbors, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Qatar is moving closer and closer to its best allies – the United States and United Kingdom. The Al Udeid Air Base hosts over 100 aircraft of the United States Air Force, Royal Air Force, and other Gulf War Coalition partners. It accommodates the forward headquarters of United States Central Command, No. 83 Expeditionary Air Group RAF, and the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing of the USAF. Presently, at least 11,000 U.S. servicemen are permanently located here. Al Udeid Air Base is considered the most important military airport in the region, used for operations in countries such as Syria and Afghanistan.

Qatar has been playing an extremely important role in destabilizing Syria, and other countries in the Middle East. It has been spreading fundamentalist religious dogmas, as well as extreme capitalist creeds.

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Qatar has plenty of money, and it uses some of its funds for various ‘educational programs’, which are closely linked to the Western, particularly US and British but also Wahhabi propaganda apparatus. International experts hired from the West have been promoting such extreme concepts as the privatization of schools, keeping the governments away from developing curricula, and spreading pro-Western and pro-market doctrines throughout the region and beyond.

Under the cover of ‘saving children’, Qatari foundations and programs are promoting Muslim fundamentalism, as well as the commercialization of education. And that is not just in Qatar itself, but also as far away as Somalia, South Sudan and Kenya.

While at Qatar University, I noticed that even the libraries are segregated (predictably, I was told by a UN staff member based in Qatar, that the so-called “Men’s Library” is incomparably better supplied than women’s), Qatar wants to present itself as a regional leader in higher education, by spreading around regressive philosophy and mindsets.

Naturally, the main goal is to maintain the status quo in the region.
In terms of quality education, things don’t work in Qatar itself, either. With all those huge budgets burnt, or more precisely wasted, Qatar has very little to be proud of. According to the OECD:

“In 2012, Qatar was ranked third from the bottom of the 65 OECD countries participating in the PISA test of math, reading and skills for 15- and 16-year-olds, comparable to Colombia or Albania, despite having the highest per capita income in the world.”

Since then, things have not improved much, although statistics on the subject are suddenly not too widely available.

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At the end of October 2019, I found myself attending a conference, organized by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, hosted by the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

Except one highly qualified UN expert (who had been working, for years, on the ground, in Syria and other places destroyed by the West and its Gulf allies), the panel of speakers consisted of individuals based in and pampered by Qatar.

The line that was tugged here was predictable:

Professor Frank Hardman basically explained how the states in the region “became weak”, and how the private sector should be taking and pushing for the education reforms.

But the most astonishing discourse came from Prof. Maleiha Malik, Executive Director, of the Protection of Education in Insecurity and Conflict (PEIC), Education Above All Foundation. She spoke about the importance of protecting vulnerable schools as well as children, in conflict zones, and about the international legal mechanisms “which are now in place”, designed to bring those who are destroying schools and pupils to justice.

In brief, a typical mainstream “development” and NGO talk.

Qatar is far from being a place where one could be free to speak up his or her mind.

But I had no patience left. I have worked in countless war and conflict zones, all over the world. And what I was witnessing at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies was nothing short of an indoctrination process of both the participants of the conference, as well as the students.

I demanded they let me speak. When the microphone was passed on to me, I said that I needed an exact answer:

“Professor Malik, I have a question for you. I have been covering dozens, perhaps hundreds of conflicts and wars, all over the world. I saw hundreds of schools burning. I saw hundreds of children dead. Most of these atrocities were triggered by the United States, by Europe, or both. It all began long before I was born, of course, it is going on until now”.

I saw the horror on the faces of the organizers. They were devouring me with their eyes, they were begging me to stop. Most likely, this has never happened here, before. Everything was being filmed, recorded. But I was not ready to stop.

The students in aula did not react. They were clearly conditioned not to get excited by speeches delivered by ‘elements’ hostile to the regime.

I continued:

“Professor Malik, I am asking you, I demand to know, whether there was one single case when the United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia or any other Western country, was put on trial and condemned, by those international mechanisms that you mentioned earlier… Condemned for murdering millions of children, or for carpet-bombing thousands of schools in such places like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and later in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria? For, right now, trying to starve children in Venezuela? For keeping people, including children, from having access to medicine…”

Then I turned to Frank Hardman:
“Professor Hardman, aren’t those states that you mention and defined as ‘weak’, in such a situation, because they are being antagonized, attacked and terrorized by the West; by historically imperialist countries?”

Total silence.

Then, I concluded:

“Wouldn’t it be the most effective way to protect schools and children, if we’d make sure that the West and its allies, would finally stop destroying dozens of countries all over the world?”

The Chair of the conference, Prof. Sultan Barakat, went to work, immediately, trying to contain the damage:

“Professor Malik, obviously, the question is about what is happening in Palestine...”

But Professor Malik was a tough warrior, like myself, only from the opposite side. She knew precisely that it was all beyond Israel and Palestine. Israel and Palestine were part of it, but they were not the only issue here. She brushed off Sultan Barakat and went straight after my throat:

“It is not about the West! It is not about one group of countries. All members of the UN Security Council are responsible! Look at Russia, committing atrocities in Syria...”

And the shouting match began. Our personal “Doha debate”.

“Which atrocities?” I shouted at her. “Prove it.”

“We have proof.”

“You?” I wondered. “You went to Syria? Or is it that you were given so-called proof by your handlers? You put Russia, a country which is saving Syria and Venezuela, on the same level as the countries that are murdering hundreds of millions of people in all corners of the world?”

I recalled, how many times during this ‘conference’, USAID was mentioned. All references were Western. Here, people from the Arab countries were speaking and thinking like the IMF, or The Economist.

I sat down. I had nothing else to add.

The controlled discussion somehow resumed. The faces of the students remained unmoved.

At night, I met for dinner a comrade with whom I used to work with in Afghanistan. Doha is a strange place. A place of unexpected encounters.

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Qatar is doing to the arts what it is doing to education.

The next day I tried to visit several museums which the country is bragging about online and through its advertisements. All were closed, except the Museum of Islamic Art, which used to be free to the public, but is now charging a $15 entry fee.

The monstrously fragmented state and its individuals are now investing billions of dollars, purchasing artworks from all over the world. Bragging about it. Manipulating content. As it is manipulating, what is being produced in its ‘international’ film studios.

Departing from Doha to Beirut on Qatar Airways, I realized that there was not one Qatari citizen working onboard. The pilots were from the UK and Australia, while the flight attendants were recruited in the Philippines, India and Africa.

A few minutes after take-off, an aggressive advertisement began promoting Educate a Child (EAC), which is a program of the Education Above All Foundation.
In Qatar, everything seems to be inter-connected. Deadly US military bases, ‘foreign policy’, the arts, and yes, even education and charity.

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