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BEYOND ANTI-GENDER AND ANTI-RIGHTS

Rebranding States and Engineering Citizens in the SWANA region



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Acronyms

ADNOC	Abu Dhabi National Oil Company
ART	Assisted Reproductive Technology
CAOA	Central Agency for Organization and Administration
COI	UN International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory
COP	United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HRC	Human Rights Council
ICC	International Criminal Court
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IE SOGI	Independent Expert on Protection against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KSRelief	King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre
PIF	Public Investment Fund
PNT	Tunisian Nationalist Party
PR	Public Relations
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
WEOG	Group of Western European and Other States
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SWANA	Southwest Asia and North Africa
UAE	United Arab Emirates

Introduction



Across the globe, "anti-rights" and "anti-gender" projects have emerged to advance authoritarian, patriarchal, and exclusionary agendas—in direct opposition to international law, democracy, and the universality of rights. Feminist and human rights researchers and activists have developed powerful analytical and political frameworks to name the nature of these threats, expose their ideological foundations, and map the increasingly sophisticated networks of non-state actors championing them in national contexts and international fora alike.[1]

Governments are institutionalizing and normalizing rights violations through old and new political technologies

As anti-rights forces gain new ground each day, the central and often underexamined role of state actors themselves demands closer attention. Governments are actively shaping, institutionalizing, and normalizing rights violations through old and new political technologies. This report focuses on two contemporary state technologies that are instrumental in this process: the **rebranding of states** as rights-respecting actors that champion innovation while safeguarding "tradition"; and connected to this, the **engineering of citizens** through gendered, moral, and securitized norms and policies. The first technology is outward-facing, aimed predominantly at an international audience, while the second is internal, aimed at its own citizens. Nevertheless, these technologies cannot be viewed in isolation: the engineered citizen sustains and fortifies the rebranding, together enabling the normalization of rights violations and the consolidation of power by the state.

The Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region offers a particularly revealing case study.[2] Despite its geopolitical significance and longstanding engagement with international human rights mechanisms, the region has remained underrepresented in international NGO and feminist analyses of anti-rights and anti-gender trends.[3] In an era increasingly shaped by free-market logics, platform economies, and branding industries, defending human rights and justice requires sharper analytical tools. **This report intends to contribute precisely that: an expanded framework for understanding how state power operates today, and practical insights to support feminist movements, human rights organizations, and policymakers** in identifying, challenging, and ultimately dismantling the technologies that enable and sustain contemporary rights violations.

More fundamentally, the SWANA case has the potential to challenge the analytical limits of prevailing "anti-rights" and "anti-gender" framings and their application to nation-states. A close examination of state practices complicates binary divisions between pro-rights and anti-rights states, or between "good" and "bad" governance. Instead, such a reading reveals how states may simultaneously champion selected rights while undermining others; how they may present themselves as progressive reformers while entrenching structural inequalities; and how rights violations are increasingly normalized not through overt repression alone, but also through carefully curated narratives, policies, and projects.

The Israeli and US military aggression raging in the SWANA region, especially in Lebanon, Iran, and Palestine, ongoing at the time of this report's writing, is a stark reminder that national case studies are always embedded in the complex global geopolitics of economic interests, imperialist ambitions, and colonial and neo-colonial violence. In the third year of the genocide in Gaza, and eight decades into the Israeli settler colonization of Palestine, the principles and systems of multilateralism have rightly been fundamentally questioned for their colossal

failure to protect human life against death and destruction. **In today's world, it is clear that "anti-rights" forces are not the exception**; they are not fringe players on the margins of an otherwise democratic liberal order that upholds human rights—not in the SWANA region or globally. It is in this context that we proceed to capture the normalization of rights violations domestically and regionally, without ever losing sight of historical and current injustice globally, and the brutal political and economic contexts within which they unfold.

Geopolitical scope

AWID's 2021 *Rights at Risk: Time for Action* report documented anti-rights actors' shift from outwardly resisting international human rights norms and institutions to coopting norms and infiltrating spaces.[4] This report illustrates the tactics of SWANA states that mirror those of anti-rights actors, shifting from explicitly resisting the human rights of women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ people, amongst others, to coopting and instrumentalizing human rights to rewrite the story of who they are. By adopting the lexicon of liberation, states engage in a form of institutional gaslighting that seeks to crowd out the space for feminist and human rights activism.

Chapter 1 of this report discusses the rebranding efforts of the three wealthiest Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)states: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar—and Egypt.[5] All four of these countries are pivotal players in the SWANA region, significantly contributing to geopolitical dynamics, economic trends, and cultural narratives.

Egypt is a cultural and political heavyweight; its strategic location and role as a leader in the region make it essential for broader regional stability and influence. Qatar, despite its small size, has positioned itself as a significant diplomatic and economic actor, utilizing its wealth and soft power to garner significant global attention. The UAE has emerged as a hub for innovation and globalization, attracting foreign investment and fostering a vibrant tourism sector while emphasizing modernization efforts. Finally, Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a leading actor in global humanitarian philanthropy, is the largest economy in the region and a major oil producer, and holds substantial sway over global energy markets, amplifying its geopolitical reach. Focusing on these four countries provides insight into the complexities of state rebranding, the interplay of economic interests and geopolitical strategies, and the ongoing social transformations that characterize the SWANA region today. These states' varying approaches to governance, diplomacy, and international engagement illustrate broader trends impacting the region and its people.

Chapter 1 presents a picture of the rebranding strategies implemented by these four countries and the purposes that they serve. The chapter starts with a comprehensive examination of a range of rebranding tools: from gender diplomacy and state feminism, pinkwashing and greenwashing, to the use of public relations firms, disinformation and online manipulation, culture and entertainment, technological investments, humanitarian aid, and engagements in multilateral spaces. The chapter examines how state-led rebranding efforts actively redraw moral and political boundaries, positioning states as benevolent donors and regional stabilizers while casting recipient countries as dependent and indebted. This framing reinforces asymmetric power relations between states and obscures the political conditions, strategic interests, and governance failures underpinning rebranding initiatives.

Despite similarities in the strategies of the states examined here, this report does not seek to paint all countries with one brush. These four countries do not act as one unit.

The report examines several examples of rivalries and tensions highlighting the different paths each take to develop their soft power and brand even if branding strategies and tools may overlap in many instances.

In Chapter 2, the report shifts from outward-facing branding to the creation of the "new citizen" domestically, focusing on issues of nationalism, the conservative agenda of preserving the traditional family, and the grand aim of creating a "new citizen" that sustains the manufactured brand of each nation-state and ensures the continuity of ruling regimes. Through this chapter the report aims to bring to life the very real effects of nationalist projects: the violence, exclusion, and persecution of many groups including migrant workers, refugees, LGBTQI+ people, certain women and feminists who do not neatly fit the mould of the ideal citizen. This chapter examines countries other than Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, transitioning to the cases of Tunisia and Sudan in order to examine the interplay between domestic authoritarian governance and imperial and sub-imperial powers, as manifest in state-led engineering of reproduction, family, morality, and belonging along gender, race, and class lines. By shifting focus to these examples, this chapter traces how regimes are shaping narratives and structures of exclusion in states undergoing profound transition, in ways deeply enmeshed with the global and regional economic and geopolitical order.

Querying the "anti-rights" framework

Both AWID and RESURJ have long engaged with the concept of anti-rights and developed extensive expertise in defining and understanding the global phenomenon of fascist and fundamentalist forces uniting to oppose and roll back human rights, often beginning with rights related to gender and sexuality.[6] As these forces have become increasingly active at the global level, employing similar strategies across a wide range of contexts, they have produced comparable impacts and are gaining ground in their efforts to undermine rights worldwide.

SWANA states have had to launch rebranding campaigns to "catch up" with states whose branding campaigns have been running for centuries

In 2023, as AWID and RESURJ embarked on a journey—in consultation with feminists from the SWANA region—to examine regional dynamics related to the projects, strategies, and tactics of anti-rights actors, it quickly became evident that the terminology of "anti-rights" and "anti-gender" commonly used by feminists in global spaces to describe the fascist and fundamentalist forces challenging rights required further nuancing and interrogation. The difficulty of applying "anti-rights" terminology to the SWANA context does not indicate a regional deficit in governance or a specific set of challenges unique to the SWANA context per se. Rather, this difficulty provides an opportunity to interrogate the structural limitations of the framework itself. While Western powers benefit from centuries of established institutional branding rooted in colonial hegemony, SWANA states operate within a different historical trajectory, lacking the tools, historical context, and ideological and cultural resources to sustain the same degree of image management. SWANA states have had to launch rebranding campaigns to "catch up" with states whose branding campaigns have been running for centuries. While many SWANA states invest in navigating the rights regime to dilute rights language, focusing only on this fails to account for the material and geopolitical interests at play for these states in

international spaces—especially for aid-recipient states or those posing as a micropower. In a region rocked by the 2011 revolutionary uprisings, states' efforts to suppress human rights do not simply stem from a hostility to an international human rights framework, but to the attempts to suppress, at all costs, a recurrence of the 2011 revolutionary movements and their radical imaginations.

Research objectives

This research project aims to contribute to filling the regional knowledge gap and build a deeper understanding of the strategies used by states in the SWANA region over approximately the last decade to maintain and consolidate their power, close avenues for dissent, and achieve regional and global economic and geopolitical objectives. This focus was refined through a series of consultations with ten feminist activists from the region on January 24 and February 24, 2024 alongside a reading of the existing literature, in order to refine what areas would be most useful for feminist organizing in the region. We hope that content contributes to a more cohesive picture of what movements in the region are up against, given the vast impacts of these trends on feminist organizing, knowledge, and the bodily autonomy of marginalized groups. The knowledge unearthed in this report is ultimately intended to support feminist and allied movements in navigating the complex contexts they organize in.

Methodology

The data used in this report was compiled by the lead authors and four research collaborators—identified for their combination of sub-regional and thematic expertise—through a synthesis of desk-based research, interviews, and observation.

Over the course of 2025, the lead researchers and collaborators conducted eight in-depth interviews with feminist activists and human rights experts exploring many of the (sub) themes laid out at the outset of the research between January–June 2025. Desk research consisted of both primary and secondary sources in Arabic, English, and French. Primary sources included materials from state bodies and representatives, official documents and contracts, materials from anti-rights organizations, campaign materials, and online fora. Secondary sources included a range of NGO and human rights reports, as well as academic journals and journalistic reporting and analysis.

Researchers also observed proceedings in multilateral spaces, such as the Human Rights Council and the Commission on the Status of Women between 2022–2025, to document the positions and lines of argumentation used by states—as well as some civil society actors and special procedures[7]—during the course of negotiating outcome documents (resolutions and concluding observations) and participating in official events.



Scope and limitations

The following criteria guided the selection of focus countries explored in this research.

Regional role and influence
We focused on states whose political, economic, and ideological weight extends beyond their own borders; whose rebranding projects, policy choices, and citizenship-engineering agendas shape regional norms and influence other contexts.

Leadership in anti-rights initiatives at the United Nations and other multilateral spaces
The selected countries play important roles in shaping the global normative environment for feminist, queer, and reproductive rights through various strategies, including blocbuilding at the Human Rights Council and the strategic deployment of arguments based on "traditional values" or "family" in negotiations to dilute rights language in resolutions and treaty processes.

Complicity in the oppressive agendas of Global North states
We selected countries that are deeply enmeshed in relationships with Global North states and institutions that produce and reproduce harm through migration deals, military cooperation, debt and trade agreements, and other security collaborations.[8] The countries analyzed here carry out rebranding efforts that cannot be examined without naming these connections. This criterion reflects our refusal to analyze SWANA authoritarianism as exceptional or as a regional pathology, rather, we address this phenomenon as an aspect of a broader global political reality.

Thematic boundaries: excluding the role of religion/religious powers
We recognize that religious institutions and sectarianism constitute a foundational part of the "ideal" citizen's identity in all focus countries and regionally. Historically and currently, religious discourse is used to codify moral conduct and social hierarchies in deeply gendered ways. Although the scope of this research highlights the specific, emerging role of secularized state branding and reputation security, we recognize that political authority and religious discourse have complex interconnections and often overlap in the region.



The role of Israel in the region

This research project was conducted between 2023–2026, during a period of rapidly shifting regional dynamics that shaped both the research process and its scope. As events unfolded, including the escalation of Israeli genocide in Gaza, subsequent US and Israeli attacks on Iran, and retaliatory actions affecting Gulf states hosting US military bases, the broader political context evolved significantly. These developments informed the report's analytical framing, particularly regarding state image making and citizen engineering. The selection of country cases in Chapter 1 on state rebranding emerged from our initial observations of multilateral spaces and was further refined through consultations with feminist organizers across the region, which also informed the country cases examined in Chapter 2 on citizen engineering.

At this political juncture, we recognized that it would not be possible to examine the region without looking at Israel's settler-colonial project, particularly given the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people and its attack on the foundations of international law.[9] Some connections can be drawn, such as normalization efforts between some GCC states and Israel, the use of the same corporate and security infrastructure, and self-branding tactics. However, we recognized that it is not possible to morally equate the states examined in this report with Israel as a settler-colonial entity, or draw simple parallels between their tactics. With objectives of never-ending settler expansion and the complete erasure of communities in the region, Israel's unfettered military aggression and expansion is its brand in itself, both locally and globally.[10]

As such, the research team did its best to straddle the specificities of the Israeli project as a settler-colonial entity whilst also drawing out relevant regional connections. Due to the political situation, we neither conducted interviews with Palestinian activists nor were we able to include them in group consultations. Therefore, our analysis of Israel was produced via desk research only. Our decision to include separate overviews concerning Israel in each chapter, as well as to incorporate it in the body of the text where appropriate, reflects both the practical and political realities of writing during this time. A deeper analysis of the Israeli state as an anti-rights actor, with regional and global consequences, remains a need—one that would require substantive engagement with Palestinian activists, civil society and scholarship.



Chapter 1—International Image Making: State Rebranding Initiatives



State rebranding initiatives represent a sophisticated evolution of modern governance in which national visions serve as both an economic engine and a strategic shield from accountability. Branding strategies aim to project an image of stability, futuristic ambition, and moderate traditionalism. This is an identity that straddles a break from a conservative past while also assuring citizens that regimes protect the "authentic" nature of the nation; a modern state that also preserve its traditional heritage.

This chapter explores the specific tools within the branding arsenal of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to uncover the narratives and strategies employed; the gender dynamics contained therein; and ways to understand the implications of state rebranding from rights, justice, and feminist perspectives. We also present an overview of Israel's strategy of pinkwashing as well as its approach to engagement with the UN human rights system.

Tools to control discourse

- Gender diplomacy and state feminism: deconstructing the empowerment narratives that celebrate the state's "granting" of rights to women while simultaneously criminalizing independent grassroots feminist activism.
- Public relations firms: investigating the role of international public relations and lobbying firms in laundering state reputations and managing crisis communications during rights-based scandals.
- Disinformation, surveillance, and state manipulation of the digital space: examining the deployment of "cyber-nationalist" bot networks, state-aligned influencers, and coordinated disinformation campaigns to harass activists, drown out marginalized voices, and manufacture an image of domestic consensus for the national brand.

Investment in culture and technology

- Culture and entertainment investment: exploring how massive investments, particularly in the realms of sports, music, arts, and entertainment, are used to create a narrative of modernity, openness, and cultural vitality to associate the state with global joy and excellence, replacing reports of human rights violations with images of world-class spectacles.
- Tech and greenwashing: exploring the use of mega and giga projects and carbon-neutral city initiatives to brand the state as a site of unfettered progress and environmental stewardship, often obscuring the surveillance technologies and social displacement occurring within.

Foreign policy and international normsetting

- Humanitarianism and aid: highlighting the use of humanitarian and development aid to build soft power and moral capital on the global stage, with a view to neutralizing international criticism through financial dependency.
- Projecting legitimacy through multilateral engagements: analyzing the tactical utilization of the UN and other international fora as theaters of normative reconstruction, where states now proactively seek to reshape the global understanding of human rights rather than merely defend their records.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy represents one of the most aggressive rebranding pushes on the world stage.[11] Vision 2030 is rooted in both the kingdom's need to diversify its economy away from reliance on oil and the ruling family's aim of positioning Saudi Arabia as a "tolerant state, representative of an economically connected and stable Middle East globally."[12] This sophisticated, multi-pronged rebrand seeks to break away from the Kingdom's chequered reputation as a closed, authoritarian regime guilty of persecuting dissidents, violating human rights, and a historic font of transnational extremism.[13]

Meanwhile, the efforts of neighbouring UAE to diversify away from oil dependence began earlier and have cemented the country's position on the global stage as a centre of capital flow and investment, known as a hub of "global innovation," "tolerance," and "multiculturalism" (particularly for wealthy expatriates).[14] The UAE has projected itself as a global nexus of trade connecting Europe and the Americas to Asia and Africa, and vice-versa.[15] The UAE's exceptional build-up of soft power is especially critical given the regional context, as the country is one of the largest development and investment partners and holds monopolies over certain sectors. Guéraiche argues that the UAE merges its soft power with nation branding, which is "the upgrading of the image of a nation projected abroad."[16] All of this must be viewed in the context of the UAE's plan, launched in 2021, to attract USD 150 billion in foreign investment in the coming decade.[17] Qatar leverages international rebranding as a primary defense mechanism against regional instability. The state projects a brand of indispensable internationalism that transcends its small geographic footprint, centred around positioning itself as a successful mediator. The influential *Al Jazeera* network helps Qatar carry political weight to the world, and global spectacles such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup work to increase the country's standing on the global stage. Following the 2017 blockade by the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, public diplomacy became a vital support for the regime's survival.[18] The objective is to cultivate a favourable international impression to ensure that Western powers, particularly the US, feel a strategic and reputational compulsion to support Qatar should its security be threatened again.

> "The UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have emerged as dominant powers in the Middle East, exerting structural influence over neighbours through economic leverage rooted in energy production, financial markets, and infrastructure investments. These states foster dependencies and control regional dynamics, consolidating their sub-imperial status. ... Their sub-imperial practices adapt to shifting geopolitical realities while projecting solidarity through carefully framed humanitarian gestures. These actions obscure the asymmetrical power relations underlying GCC dominance, solidifying their status as contemporary imperial actors."[19]

Occupying a different position in regional dynamics, Egypt's state rebranding had two main phases. First, the early period immediately following 2013, which sought to help the world politically reconcile with Egypt by framing President Al-Sisi's seizure of power as a necessity rather than a coup; and second, the more recent project to construct and promote a "new republic", which goes beyond the state's initial self-defensive needs. The state hired public relations firms to run extensive pushes on Egypt as an investment and tourism destination and directed significant energy

and funds toward the preservation and revitalized showcasing of ancient sites and artefacts in the context of a new nationalist vision, which has lately centred on neo-pharaonic identity (as explored in more detail in Chapter 2). All this comes in the context of changing regional geopolitical leadership, with the rising dominance of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as compared to the situation before the 2011 revolution, when Egypt was the leading US ally in the region.

Gender diplomacy and state feminism

Nascent scholarship has conceptualized the strategic deployment of women in public diplomacy as "gender diplomacy:" "the visible, strategic use of women as a tool for public diplomacy and reputational security, with the ultimate goal of enhancing international perceptions among foreign governments and publics."[20] Elsewhere, scholars have argued that women's representation enhances perceived diversity and legitimacy and signals states' adherence to international norms.[21] This phenomenon is certainly not confined to the Gulf or SWANA, but it is emerging as a significant strand of national rebranding efforts in the region.[22] State-affiliated media play a strong role in publicizing gender-related reforms to domestic and international audiences, covering news such as the training of female construction workers.[23] Female employment has indeed risen from 17% to around a third in Saudi Arabia.[24] However, commentators have pointed out that while the state touts its creation of jobs for women, the latter are being put into low skilled-jobs to replace migrants.[25] Furthermore, women are given little protection when they enter male-dominated fields, where they are frequently subject to sexual and gender-based harassment.[26]

Gender equality is also a pillar of the UAE's strategy for economic prosperity, with the country investing "substantial resources in national and public diplomacy initiatives aimed at fostering prosperity by attracting foreign visitors, residents, capital, and security alliances"[27] Minister of State Zaki Nusseibeh has stated that Emirati culture is "rooted in...a commitment to women's empowerment...to provide an open, economically attractive and culturally rich environment for expatriates and visitors."[28] In 2019, just over a decade since the start of parliamentary elections in the country, the UAE enacted a quota reserving half of the Federal National Council seats for women.[29] This accompanied a surge in gender-related legal reforms from 2017 onwards, including amendments to laws on domestic violence, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the workplace in 2019, as well as amendments to the Personal Status Law.[30] Continued gender reform calls are outlined under the aegis of the UAE's Gender Balance Strategy (2022—2026), which has the self-described goal of improving the country's position in global gender equality rankings in order to promote the UAE as a destination for expat professionals and investors.[31] The swift reforms have been successful in that regard, as the UAE rose to seventh in the UNDP Gender Inequality Index in 2024.[32] Nevertheless, a number of significant discriminatory laws remain on the books, such as the lack of legal recognition of marital rape, laws against extramarital sex, and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services without a husband's permission.[33]

Such an approach has been dubbed "genderwashing" by various scholars.[34] Studies suggest women's increased representation can improve international perceptions of democracy.[35] Political gender quotas are an especially easy way for patriarchal ruling establishments to give the appearance of valuing equality without truly interrogating gendered power dynamics—not least in the UAE, where the Federal National Council remains an advisory body to an absolute monarchy, half of whose seats are government

appointed. More generally, as feminists continue to point out, legalistic reforms (which are themselves still incomplete) obscure ongoing systemic inequality and oppression.[36]

Feminists and rights advocates have followed with interest the question of whether public diplomacy efforts around gender equality would be matched by tangible changes to systemic gender inequality and gendered power relations, particularly as states began enacting some legal reforms. In 2018, the Saudi state ended its notorious ban on women driving and lifted some restrictions of the male guardianship system, including allowing women to apply for passports and granting them more control over family matters, such as divorce and child custody.[37] The state has also relaxed strict gender segregation in public spaces and curbed the power of the religious police.[38] However, changes to the Personal Status Law have been criticized and a vast range of deep and systemic legal inequalities remain, not least the guardianship system which continues to treat women as legal minors.[39] While the state has introduced legal and policy changes, repression of dissent has continued, or arguably worsened.[40] Indeed, the very activists who called for reforms, such as Loujain al-Hathloul, have been persecuted and imprisoned, reflecting a clear position that the state retains the sole authority to represent women and determine law and policy changes.[41] A Saudi feminist living in exile shared that women's rights reforms are "top-down, selective, and instrumental, used to legitimize authoritarian regimes and deflect attention from repression of dissent."[42]

Similarly, Egypt has a long history of state feminism, wherein the state becomes the primary platform for the expression and articulation of ideas related to women's rights.[43] A hallmark of state feminism is that the government dictates its version of feminism while restricting feminist activists and NGOs from advocating for their issues and causes independently. The practice has deep roots in Egypt, where the state has sought to govern gender politics and introduce laws favourable to securing women's rights since the 1950s. Some outcomes of this include the establishment of the National Council for Women and a series of family law reforms.[44] Even though the state-led push for advancing women's rights laid a critical foundation for improving the lives of women and girls, these efforts have been characterized by some as an attempt by an authoritarian regime that suppresses freedom and social justice to use women's rights to brand itself as progressive and modern, gaining acceptance from Western partners.[45]

While the state has introduced these legal and policy changes, repression of dissent has continued, or arguably worsened

The state-led women's rights agenda advanced further with President Al-Sisi's designation of 2017 as the "Year of Egyptian Women." In this year, the regime introduced amendments to the 1943 Inheritance Law 77, granting women increased access to inheritance rights and enacting hefty punishments on those who block women's access to their inheritance.[46] Meanwhile, the function, operation, and funding of NGOs became strictly controlled under the controversial Law 70 for Regulating the Work of Associations and Other Institutions Working in the Field of Civil Work. Passed in 2017, the law ensures that civil society organizations are closely overseen by a national board with members from the security and intelligence agencies. Women's rights and human rights organizations are increasingly targeted, subjected to asset freezes and closure, and their staff and leaders face travel bans and interrogation.[47] The state's attempt to curtail feminist

mobilizations and organizing, while simultaneously advocating publicly for women's rights and gender equality, demonstrates Egypt's consistent policy of positioning the state as the sole authority over how women are represented and what rights they should have.

In state feminism and gender diplomacy, human rights reforms can act as image-making tools on the stage of global capitalism, and at the same time, be domestically bestowed as gifts, solidifying a paternalistic relationship of loyalty rather than that of intrinsic human rights. The tension between feminist movements and state feminism exposes the economic logic underwriting the latter: women's rights are often advanced as an instrument of economic diversification and global competitiveness. Gender reform, in this configuration, functions as economic policy wearing the language of liberation. This is precisely why the only acceptable route to advancing women's rights in this context becomes a "grant" or "gift" from the state, rather than a claim won through the advocacy of independent civil society or a critical citizenry: **reforms are calibrated to serve the state's economic and reputational interests, not to cede ground to an autonomous rights-bearing constituency that could make further claims on its own terms.**[48] Independent feminist movements are structurally threatening to this arrangement because they assert that rights are owed rather than gifted; a claim that, if accepted, dissolves the economic logic that made such reforms legible to the state in the first place.

Use of public relations firms

Across the world, authoritarian governments are contracting European and US public relations (PR) firms to whitewash human rights violations, smear opponents, and lobby for lucrative investment, trade deals, and political support from the EU and US. PR firms are valuable partners because they possess knowledge of the legislative and communicative mechanics in countries that autocratic regimes seek to influence. In addition to employing marketing specialists and journalists, PR firms also typically recruit former politicians and lawyers to ensure compliance with complex legal frameworks, enabling these firms to tailor messages to target-country politicians and the general public, knowledge and skills with which autocratic regimes and their propagandists may struggle.[49] Importantly, the use of PR firms allows authoritarian governments to relay their messages while obscuring the origins of those messages. This obfuscation is important to audiences in target countries, who may be more receptive when narratives are conveyed by Western intermediaries.

These companies enable the region's regimes to polish their international image, thereby reducing the reputational costs

As events have unfolded in the SWANA region over the last two decades, from revolutions to coups and wars, the role played by US and British PR firms in states' international rebranding campaigns has steadily grown.[50] These companies enable the region's regimes to polish their international image, thereby reducing the reputational costs that might otherwise constrain more "democratic" governments. The objectives of hiring PR firms are twofold: on the one hand, as a crisis management tool to replenish a state's reputation after specific events or exposés that are likely to negatively impact the state's image globally and/or regionally; and on the other, to project and consolidate a broader image of openness, tolerance, and modernity.

In Egypt, PR and lobbying firms helped recast the state's image after the 2013

military coup and the mass repression that followed. Shortly after Trump's inauguration in January 2017, Egypt secured the services of the US PR firm Weber Shandwick and the lobbying firm Cassidy & Co.[51] Trump represented a dramatic opportunity for Al-Sisi to repair Egypt's relationship with Washington, which had become strained during the Obama administration's freezing and conditioning of military aid following Morsi's ousting in 2013 and the related human rights crackdown.[52] The two firms were engaged to promote Egypt's "strategic partnership with the United States" and highlight its "leading role in managing regional risks."[53] Weber Shandwick orchestrated a comprehensive campaign targeting US policymakers and public opinion beginning with the "Egypt Forward" campaign, which involved launching a website and social media accounts to broadcast content portraying the country as stable, vibrant, and, importantly, on a path to democracy. Alongside this public diplomacy ran a parallel effort to engage influential Washington think tanks and policy circles, through firms such as the Glover Park Group aiming to influence the US government, think tanks, research centres and media organisations in order to affect US policy.[54] Concurrently, through the lobbying firm Cassidy & Co., a campaign of direct legislative and policy outreach was launched on Capitol Hill, which involved distributing prepared talking points, arranging meetings with US lawmakers, and preparing Egyptian parliamentary delegations for different engagements.[55] These initiatives were all strategically designed to influence critical discussions around US aid for the Al-Sisi regime, positioning Egypt as a stable and indispensable regional partner.



> It is important to note that, in the case of Egypt, the use of PR to promote Egypt as ripe for foreign partnership and investment had significant material consequences. Branding was intrinsically tied to policies—such as aggressive reductions in capital gains taxes, severe cuts to government spending on health, and essential services, and the floating of national currency— that directly contribute to the rapid and tangible deterioration of daily living conditions for the population.[56]

For the UAE, PR firms have played a dual role: attacking rival political narratives while consolidating the country's image as a model of openness and authoritarian stability. After the Arab Spring, a highly sophisticated Emirati political lobby emerged to engage with the "threat of democracy" in the SWANA region. One of the PR firms contracted to support the Emirati lobby was Quiller Consultants, a British PR firm that reported to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 2010 and August 2015.[57] Quiller led a lobbying campaign with journalists, MPs, academics, and ministers, sharing talking points on ways to attack Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood.[58] In the US, the UAE has spent millions engaging different lobbying companies over the years. One firm is the Harbour Group, which signed a deal worth USD 10 million in 2018 to "sustain and enhance public awareness and understanding of the UAE among US policymakers and opinion leaders."[59] The Harbour Group was the UAE's main lobbying firm in Washington throughout the Arab Spring and the Qatar blockade.[60] The country's efforts against Qatar entailed hiring several PR companies to run a campaign in the US and UK to link senior Qataris, including royal family members, to terrorism.[61]

Concurrent with painting Qatar as a state sponsor of terrorism, PR firms have helped brand the UAE as the regional capital of religious coexistence, pivoting away from its record of domestic surveillance and suppression of dissent. PR firms highlight the building of the Abrahamic Family House, for example, which is a church, a synagogue, and a mosque in the same complex in Abu Dhabi and operates as a powerful symbol of the UAE's image as the regional hub of "interfaith harmony."[62] PR firms also highlight the UAE's philanthropic roles by focusing on the International Humanitarian City, which facilitates the transfer of global aid for the UN and other international NGOs.[63] The UAE invites international media to film aid being loaded onto planes in Dubai, projecting an image of pure benevolence.[64]

Qatar's use of PR firms can be understood partly as a response to the UAE-led reputational campaign portraying Qatar as a state sponsor of terrorism. The country hired one firm, Stonington Strategies, in the summer of 2017 for a reported sum of UD 50,000 a month.[65] The firm contracted journalists to write favourable op-eds defending Qatar against claims that it promoted extremism in the region.[66] Diplomatically, there were signs that Doha's investment might have paid off, with Trump meeting the Qatari Emir Tamim Al-Thani in April 2017 and praising him for fighting terrorism, just a year after the US president had branded the country a "funder of terror."[67]

PR firms were also critical to Qatar's branding as a tourism destination in the lead-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Several firms were contracted between 2015-2022, including the New York-based advertising and marketing firm Ogilvy, Portland Communications, and Levick Strategic Communications.[68] With their expertise and access to critical media and political circles, these firms constituted an essential tool for the Qatari regime to utilize the World Cup to brand the country as modern and open for business, diverting attention from accusations of violating the rights of migrant workers involved in building the World Cup infrastructure.[69]

Following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, Saudi Arabia intensified its PR strategy to isolate the crisis and rehabilitate its broader image.[70] For example, the Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) hired several PR firms, including Karv Communications, Edelman, and Qorvis, to separate the fund's economic mission from the country's political leadership, focusing on promoting the kingdom as a business-friendly destination despite international backlash.[71] According to filings with the US Department of Justice, the PIF signed a USD 120,000/month contract with New York firm Karv Communications in 2019s to "enhance the reputation and image" of the PIF and its senior executives, while "underscoring the business-only purpose and focus of the fund."[72]

In their managing of state reputation and bolstering the image of regimes, PR companies have adopted tactics such as identifying influential voices in social media spaces who can either be co-opted or targeted and harassed if they did not adopt desired messages. One such example is the compilation of a list of potential dissidents by the global consultancy firm McKinsey for Saudi Arabia. One of the activists featured on the list, Omar Abdulaziz (a prominent critic of the regime) filed a lawsuit against McKinsey. Abdulaziz accused the firm of including his name in a report that documented those driving negative coverage of Saudi Arabia's economic policies. McKinsey attempted to defend its position by claiming the report was internal and Abdulaziz had already been targeted by the Saudi government three years prior to the report.[73]

Beyond helping states protect their reputation and public image, these examples illustrate how the **PR industry can become entangled in surveillance, the targeting of dissidents, and the suppression**

of colonized peoples and other intentionally marginalized groups. In this way, PR firms are not only managing perception and reputation — they have the potential to help empower authoritarian regimes in the region.

By profiting from rights violations, corporations play a central role in normalizing state violence. In many cases, states cannot produce or sustain these narratives without corporate support. The July 2025 report of the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese documented how "legal, consulting, media and advertising" corporations accepted contracts to present misleading narratives about the genocide in Gaza in exchange for millions of dollars.[74] Working in tandem are technology platforms that further facilitate whitewashing and rebranding initiatives within the information ecosystem. Google received a USD 45 million contract to run Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs-created propaganda videos on YouTube created by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs claiming food was available in Gaza in times of starvation, and X (formerly Twitter), received USD 3 million for a pro-Israel advertising campaign.[75] The Gulf state PR machine and the Israeli hasbara machine are not competing projects —they are different mandates handled by firms that share ownership structures, talent pools, clients, and financial interests.

Disinformation, surveillance, and state manipulation of the digital space

While greater access to technology has created opportunities for political mobilization and free expression, these tools have also become potent instruments of state surveillance, repression, propaganda, and disinformation.[76] Alongside carrying out direct repression and surveillance, authoritarian states are also pursuing long-term strategies that aim to influence people's behaviour and feed discourses that align with regime priorities.

As well as neutralizing threats and rivals, social media is used to rebrand regimes as productive, modern, global powers. Research has documented states' deployment of trolls and human "digital militias" to further online manipulation campaigns disguised as organic content.[77] Fake accounts controlled by bots, together with organized groups of individuals called "digital militias, cyber warriors, cyber militias, or electronic armies", engage in hashtag "hijacking," creating mass conversations targeting specific hashtags to undermine opposing narratives and harass activists.[78] The blockade of Qatar, for example, did not just consist of policies implemented by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, it was also heavily supported by the manipulation of public opinion, both domestically and also regionally, through the ridiculing and trolling of Qatar.[79] Research is beginning to show that in many cases, the people behind the scenes of coordinated attacks are employees of "troll farms," generating income within named media agencies and executing narratives that come from the top.[80]

In addition to government-affiliated groups working on controlling cyberspace, these regimes also rely on volunteers and other individuals considered pro-regime to

disseminate messages online. In Saudi Arabia, a common tactic for manipulating online content is "hashtag poisoning," when volunteers flood trending hashtags with unrelated material to prevent criticism of government policy or unwanted conversations from gaining momentum and developing into impactful debates.[81] Another strategy to manipulate online content is employing "loyal citizens" to manually monitor online spaces, report suspicious content, and engage in divisive interactions aimed at disrupting debates. Unpaid volunteers patrol chat rooms, YouTube, X, blogs, and other social media platforms, in search of "offensive content," defined by Article 6 of the Saudi Cyber Crime Law as the "production, preparation, transmission, or storage of material impinging on public order, religious values, public morals, and privacy, through the information network or computers."[82] These tactics have been used to target dissenting Saudi voices online, such as women's rights activist Manahel al-Otaibi, whom the country's counterterrorism court sentenced to an 11-year term in 2024 for her choice of clothing and expressing her views online, including calling for an end to Saudi Arabia's male guardianship system.[83]

In Egypt, the regime seeks to prevent anything resembling the 2011 revolution, driven by a strong belief that social media played a key role in mobilizing protesters. The Egyptian regime prominently employs *lijan electroniyya*, which literally translates to "electronic committees," as part of its online manipulation strategies; these play a very similar role to the "loyal citizens" employed by the Saudi regime.[84] Egypt relies on provisions such as "spreading false news," "joining a banned group," and the "misuse of social media" to detain citizens for digital expression—charges found in the Penal Code, the Counterterrorism Law, and the Cybercrime Law. In 2020, the Egyptian Public Prosecution created a unit to flag online activity potentially leading people to mobilize and take to the streets. The unit has been answering moralistic calls for the arrest of content creators "violating family values."[85]



Online spaces are vital to state rebranding efforts.[86] The UAE's branding initiatives emphasize an image of a country with a progressive stance on global issues and an innovative, though not democratic, approach to political challenges. Given regional geopolitical tensions and the UAE's militarized, counterrevolutionary role in the region, there is a perceived need to reassure international investors about the country's ambitious diversification projects and attain the status of "global hub." Influencers play a crucial role in this effort.[87] For example, Khalid al-Ameri, a young Emirati British Youtuber creates professionally curated lifestyle videos exploring Emirati heritage. Al-Ameri works to reframe public perception of the UAE's increasingly widespread and advanced surveillance system as a positive aspect of public safety. Visiting the world's first fully automated "smart police station", al-Ameri confidently states: "technology bring[s] security, safety and happiness even closer to you."[88] This represents a deliberate digital diplomacy effort aimed at indoctrinating viewers, both within the UAE and internationally, through regime-friendly though seemingly neutral social media content.

The current shift in the region is not just about the intensity of surveillance, but its fundamental architecture

Alongside the use of bots, trolls, loyal citizen brigades, and influencers, the states in question also use website blocking to set the stage for other branding efforts. For example, the United Arab Emirates blocks websites based on various categories, including those that "violate religious or cultural rules."[89] By blocking independent news outlets, regimes create a vacuum and effectively funnel the public toward state-approved resources and narratives. This turns the internet into an echo chamber in which regime propaganda is amplified by algorithms and bots.

Another critical tool of online manipulation is the acquisition of surveillance technologies, in which the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have heavily invested.[90] The current shift in the region is not just about the intensity of surveillance, but its fundamental architecture. While high-profile tools such as Pegasus (targeted spyware) have dominated headlines, the new era of state branding is defined by a transition toward "infrastructural" mass surveillance.[91] **Infrastructural monitoring allows regimes to move away from reactive policing and toward a model of social control, where the constant collection of biometric and behavioural data from the general population ensures that non-conformity is flagged automatically before it can evolve into political action.** In 2017, it was revealed that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar had acquired the Evident surveillance system from UK defense company BAE Systems.[92] This system enabled countries to "conduct mass surveillance of users' online activities, decrypt encrypted communications and determine the location of users based on data emitted by their mobile devices."[93] The governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt have also acquired Pegasus from the Israeli NSO group, which has been used to target thousands of individuals by exploiting vulnerabilities in their smartphones.[94]

As this section makes clear, the focus countries have evolved in their approach to the digital space. SWANA regimes now compete with online dissent, advancing counternarratives with the aim of rebranding themselves as progressive powers seeking to bring stability to the region by fighting terrorism and serving as "stabilizing forces" in a context of regional uncertainty. In order for these rebranding efforts to succeed, all four countries have realized the importance of focusing on the character of their citizens, investing in shaping their citizens' mindsets

to advance and implement state narratives and further economic and political projects. **These more covert narrative strategies work in tandem with the blunter tactics of blocking access to independent media and employing surveillance technology, two sides of the same coin in states' shaping of the digital space.**

Culture and entertainment investment

Although taking different forms, a common thread across state rebranding efforts in the focus countries has been heavy investment in culture, entertainment, and sports, which helps to manufacture the image of progression, modernity, and openness. This is especially visible in Saudi Arabia, where culture has become central to the country's Vision 2030 project.[95] Since cinemas reopened in 2018, Saudi Arabia has worked quickly to build institutions, financing tools, and locations needed to present itself as a regional production hub.[96] The Film Commission incentive program offers rebates on eligible Saudi production expenses, requires minimum local spend and at least five filming days with the main unit, and excludes most expenses incurred outside the kingdom.[97] Productions are therefore pushed to spend, shoot, hire, and source inside Saudi Arabia, making the film itself a vehicle for branding.

The Red Sea Fund backs film projects across development, production, and post-production for the Red Sea International Film Festival, Saudi Arabia's leading film festival. Supported production projects must enter into a Red Sea Fund agreement, credit the fund as "co-producer," credit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a country of production, and give the festival first right of refusal over the film's world premiere.[98] Films such as *Norah, Kandahar,* and *Desert Warrior* use Saudi landscapes, crew, incentives and festival circuits to position the kingdom as a production hub, backed by celebrity endorsements, including Hollywood actor Johnny Depp's praise of a Saudi "cultural revolution."[99]

Similar to Saudi Arabia, the UAE has prioritized cultural investments as a part of its international branding efforts, and for a longer period, with Dubai Production City and Dubai Studio City providing free-zone infrastructure for media, television, and film production. Art Dubai, the region's largest contemporary art fair founded in 2007, aims to position Dubai as a commercial meeting point for galleries and collectors, becoming a global cultural capital.[100] In Sharjah, the Sharjah Art Foundation (founded by Sharjah's ruling Al Qasimi family), has directed the Sharjah Biennial (established in 1993 by the Sharjah Department of Culture and Information) since 2009, and has reoriented it from a more regional exhibition hub to an institution of global standing. It is worth noting, however, that investment in UAE cultural branding efforts is not determined solely by a national project, but rather through competition between the emirates. As such, Dubai and Sharjah have each adopted distinct cultural identities, with the former focused on commercial arts and production and the latter on the UAE's cultural heritage, heavily emphasizing localized Arab traditions.

In Egypt, cultural rebranding under Al-Sisi is built on a foundational claim that Egypt's 7,000-year civilizational inheritance legitimizes the current regime. The most theatrical expression of this claim was The Pharaohs' Golden Parade of April 3, 2021, a spectacle in which 22 ancient royal mummies were transported five kilometres through central Cairo from the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square to the newly opened National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Fustat. The parade began in Tahrir Square (the site of the 2011 uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak), a setting whose symbolism was not incidental. Al-Sisi's efforts to efface the revolutionary associations of Tahrir has been ongoing since his rise to power, visible in the government's annual celebration of January 25th (the day the 2011 revolution

erupted) as National Police Day with no mention of the revolution. The mummies were greeted at the new museum by a 21-gun salute from the Republican Guard and received by Al-Sisi on a red carpet, in a staging that positioned him as the living inheritor of a 3,000-year-old royal line. As Hussein Omar wrote in the *London Review of Books*, Al-Sisi's spectacle of "military futurism in pharaonic drag" is the most recent iteration of an old propaganda stratagem "aimed at foreign audiences" and deployed at moments of political need.[101]

Egypt's cultural rebranding also operates through contemporary art, specifically by using the country's extraordinary heritage sites as backdrops for international cultural events. Art D'Égypte, founded by French Egyptian curator Nadine Abdel Ghaffar, has staged its annual "Forever Is Now" contemporary art exhibition at the Pyramids of Giza since 2021, drawing over 700,000 visitors in a single edition and attracting global celebrities, soft power that its founder describes as "such a strong tool and such a fast tool."[102] The exhibition is held under the auspices of Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities and Tourism and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, making the state's sponsoring hand visible while the curatorial language of contemporary art and international collaboration provides the cultural prestige. The result is a layered rebranding strategy in which the pyramids serve simultaneously as evidence of ancient civilizational greatness and as a state-sanctioned contemporary arts venue.

Investment in sports has emerged as a key arena for state rebranding, particularly for Gulf states. Sports have, perhaps most notably, been an integral pillar of Saudi's international image overhaul. The Saudi acquisition of English Premier League football club Newcastle United in 2021 was a step in the Kingdom's global investment in football. Since then, Saudi Arabia has attracted an increasing number of high-profile international players. Women's football has also emerged as a powerful symbol of the nation's transformation. While women have only been allowed to attend football matches since 2018, 2019 saw the establishment of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, Women's Football Department, and 2021 saw the launch of the women's national team and regional training centres. In 2022 the Saudi Women's Premier League made its debut.[103]The kingdom has also recently hosted boxing, wrestling, and cricket events. Saudi Arabia's investment in boxing, particularly through the Riyadh Season and a new boxing league, is estimated to be worth billions.[104] Riyadh also hosted the Women's Tennis Association finals for the first time in 2024 and has been awarded the hosting rights for the 2029 Asian Winter Games (set to take place in the man-made ski village at Trojena, part of NEOM) and the 2034 FIFA World Cup.[105]

Saudi Arabia is not alone in using sports as a vehicle for national rebranding and economic diversification. Qatar Sports Investments, a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority, the country's sovereign wealth fund, is heavily invested in the international sports market, such as through the acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain and hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup, which marked the first time the tournament was hosted in the region.[106] The event was an opportunity for Qatar to highlight its "competence, professionalism, technological sophistication and international benevolence through sport."[107] Despite efforts to enhance its international image by hosting the World Cup, Qatar faced scrutiny and criticism, particularly regarding corruption in the selection process and labour rights abuses. In response to mounting pressure, Qatar introduced reforms including: the introduction of the Wage Protection System to ensure the timely payment of wages, the establishment of the Workers' Support and Insurance Fund to provide compensation for unpaid wages and end-of-service benefits; and the enhancement of workplace safety.[108] Despite these reforms, concerns persist regarding the execution of these policies.[109]

Pinkwashing: Brand Israel's Weaponization of LGBTQI+ rights

Pinkwashing is a strategy employed by several states, including the Israeli regime, and one which has been extensively documented in both academic research and civil society resources.[110] Branding itself as liberal, pro-LGBTQI+, and a desirable tourism destination, Israel implicitly and explicitly juxtaposes itself against SWANA states, which are constructed as inherently "backward" and homophobic.[111] In doing so, not only does Israel divert attention from its colonization to present a façade of progressiveness, it intentionally dehumanizes Palestinians as deserving of violence, occupation, and genocide, and demonizes and delegitimizes Palestinian resistance to foreign military rule.[112]

Pinkwashing came to the fore as a strategy in the early 2000s, when it was initiated by the Israeli foreign ministry —with the help of US marketing executives—as part of the Brand Israel campaign. Such initiatives are promoted and funded by other government ministries, municipal authorities, and civil society, such as the Tel Aviv Gay Vibe campaign, a "collaboration between Israel's Ministry of Tourism, the Tel Aviv Tourism Board and Israel's preeminent LGBT institution, the Agudah."[113]

Scholar Jasbir Puar highlights how, by the late 1990s, the Israeli identity had been "pinkwashed" in part by "tapping into the discursive and structural circuits produced by U.S. and European crusades against the spectral threat of 'radical Islam', but also in relation to the global capitalist economy."[114] As Western countries continued to fund and support Israel's settler expansion and killing of Palestinians over the past two decades, while also waging their own imperial wars in the SWANA region, Western cities such as London, Toronto, and New York became targets of Brand Israel. Tel Aviv began being promoted as a "gay haven," with funded trips for influential gay celebrities, writers and bloggers in exchange for publicity in Europe and the US.[115] Israeli embassies in Europe began actively participating in local LGBTQI+ events and Pride festivals in major capitals, while using entertainment shows such as the *Eurovision Song Contest* to platform LGBTQI+ artists from Israel.[116] As is explored later, Israel also adopts its pinkwashing strategy in UN human rights spaces.

After October 7, 2023, Israel became more brazen in its display of homonationalism.[117] In November, a photo went viral of an IDF soldier holding up a pride flag with the handwritten words "in the name of love" as he stood in front of the apocalyptic landscape of ravaged urban life caused by Israel's bombardment of Gaza.[118] This image circulated as Israel bombed schools, hospitals, mosques, ambulances, shelters, and residential areas in Gaza.[119] The following month, Israel's official social media accounts, run by its foreign ministry, shared an image of a marriage proposal between two gay men, one of whom was an IDF soldier.[120] In stark contrast, Israel has systematically weaponized queer Palestinians' sexual or gender identities against them, with queer Palestinians being blackmailed, abducted, and threatened with outing if they do not become informants.[121]

While Israel's pinkwashing strategy is aimed at diverting attention, it is important to understand pinkwashing beyond only a global marketing strategy.[122] As highlighted by Palestinian human rights defender Omar al-Khatib, the question is not whether LGBTQI+ Palestinians would be "safe in Israel" or whether Israel is indeed a "gay haven."[123] The main point is that the settler state of Israel exists as a product of the ethnic cleansing, erasure, and genocide of the Palestinian. Al Qaws highlights pinkwashing as an expression of Israel's deeper gender and sexual politics and the ideological foundations of Zionism. [124]

> "Recognizing pinkwashing as colonial violence can help us understand how Israel divides, oppresses, and erases Palestinians on the basis of gender and sexuality. Israeli settler-colonialism works by breaking apart and eliminating Palestinian communities, whether through the military violence of occupation and siege, the legal regimes of apartheid, or the denial of refugees' right of return."[125]

Tech and greenwashing

In recent years, notions of "sustainability" and the "green economy" have become more ubiquitous globally. As part of their overall rebranding efforts, GCC countries are eager to portray themselves as active participants in environmental change and stake their claim in the global "green" economy. This is most evident in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, all of whom have promoted investments in renewable energy and publicized programs of environmental modernization, including plans for "decarbonized oil and gas," a circular economy, vertical farming, and a variety of technology-based solutions. Discussions on ecological consciousness also underpin major developments, such as NEOM, the futuristic project planned for Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast. According to promotional materials, NEOM will be a "blueprint for tomorrow in which humanity progresses without compromise to the health of the planet." In Qatar, the organizers of the 2022 World Cup claimed it was the first carbon-neutral tournament in history, an assertion debunked by journalists and activists.[126]

Greenwashing serves an important purpose of supporting Gulf states' image of modernity while also allowing them to remain central actors in debates over energy politics. GCC states can retain control over energy markets, as reflected in the leading roles of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), while at the same time, also ensuring that they are significant stakeholders in renewable energy markets and a lower-carbon future through hosting and leading in processes such as the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (known as COP).[127] These global climate summits aim to reach an international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and combat climate change. The 2023 summit, COP28, was held in Dubai and presided over by Sultan Al-Jaber, the head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), in a move that one activist described as "putting the fox in charge of the henhouse."[128] A document leaked to The Guardian contained a list of "touchy and sensitive issues" for the UAE, alongside "strategic messages" used by UAE officials in response to media requests on issues pertaining to the climate, including "war crimes in Yemen, surveillance and spying, LGBTQIA+ community, freedom of expression, women's rights and people trafficking."[129] *The Guardian* further reported that Al-Jaber attempted to greenwash his image by having members of his team edit Wikipedia pages that highlighted his role as CEO of ADNOC.[130] *The Guardian* reported that Al-Jaber's team added a quote from an editorial highlighting that Al-Jaber was "precisely the kind of ally the climate movement needs" and suggested that editors remove reference to a multibillion-dollar oil pipeline deal he signed in 2019.[131]

In Saudi Arabia, NEOM is a project that was developed to actualize the Vision 2030 plan by focusing on social, economic and

environmental sustainability. Launched in 2017 by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, NEOM is a futuristic development region in northwest Saudi Arabia that is intended to be powered by renewable energy and promoted as prioritizing "people and nature."[132] Reports that the project's ambitions are proving difficult to realize notwithstanding, NEOM's marketing boasts a range of innovative technologies, including green hydrogen plants, solar-powered desalination plants, urban air mobility systems and the world's first region with zero carbon emissions.[133] Behind the image lies the reality that the state forcibly displaced the indigenous Huwaitat Tribe and other local residents to make way for the development, with authorities permitting the use of lethal force.[134] Furthermore, the "environmentally-friendly" nature of such high-tech cities masks the fact that they are also spaces designed to be continuously policed and monitored—the promise of a smart urban experience is predicated on the total datafication of inhabitants' movements.[135]

The environmentally-friendly nature of high-tech cities masks the fact that they are spaces designed to be continuously policed and monitored

Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai have also concentrated on greenwashing their brands, as their substantial wealth has contributed to them attaining the world's highest per capita carbon footprint. Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai have adopted comprehensive visions: the "Qatar National Vision 2030," the "Abu Dhabi Policy Agenda 2030," and the "Dubai Plan 2021."[136] All the plans pay ample attention to promoting economic diversification beyond the oil and gas industries and creating smart, sustainable cities and neighbourhoods. Abu Dhabi boasts the smart city project Masdar City, a USD 20 billion state-funded project consisting of the construction of a new city that its developers, the Masdar Initiative, claim as "the world's most sustainable eco-city."[137]

According to local policymakers in Abu Dhabi "the protection of the environment is being given the utmost importance alongside economic growth," a line of thought expected to be realized through the production of new clean technologies meant to simultaneously regenerate the Emirati economy and decrease its carbon footprint.[138] Masdar City is described as a "business" by several of its representatives—the city is a commercial enterprise designed to generate profit through technological and urban development.[139] The revenues produced by the new city flow directly to the royal family and indirectly to Emirati citizens through a broad welfare system. In contrast, the majority migrant population is largely excluded from both the financial gains and the physical spaces of Masdar City.[140]

Greenwashing is a powerful tool for the rebranding of Gulf countries as sustainable, forward-thinking states that are attractive hubs for investment as well as a tool of great influence regionally and internationally. The weight of Gulf influence within the regional political economy therefore poses a key structural factor for activists and other stakeholders to consider as they advocate for a just transition in SWANA countries.[141]

Humanitarianism and aid

Gulf countries have become significant actors in overseas development assistance and humanitarian aid over the past two decades, providing support through both state-led and non-governmental means.[142] Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia were among the top ten non-Development Assistance Committee donors from 2000 to 2010 and by 2014, Saudi Arabia

and the UAE ranked within the top ten and top twenty most generous humanitarian donors, respectively.[143]

Aid has been embraced, especially by Dubai, as an innovative practice in order to capitalize on the increasing privatization and commercialization of humanitarianism.[144] This follows the well-trodden footsteps of Western states, who have positioned themselves as indispensable rescuers of populations in the Global South. This is evident in the establishment of the Dubai Humanitarian City, later merged to form the International Humanitarian City, which has grown to be the world's largest humanitarian hub and free zone, hosting several UN organizations, non-profits, NGOs, and commercial companies. Through these developments, Dubai has leveraged its role as a financial, commercial, and transit hub to become a major humanitarian logistics centre with a multifaceted role in the humanitarian system.

In addition to investing in becoming a physical hub for national, regional, and international NGOs, the UAE has also established UAE AID, a new arm of the government that aims to consolidate the country's aid efforts through seasoned policymakers. Established in 2024, UAE AID is said to "implement foreign aid programs designed to address urgent global needs, including disaster relief, recovery, post-conflict stabilization, development, and capacity-building initiatives."[145] On its website, the agency boasts the provision of "over $600 million in aid to Sudan, standing as one of the top responders in the region."[146] The support provided by UAE AID is controversial given the UAE's destabilizing influence in the region, particularly in Sudan, as a result of its role in destabilizing civilian rule after the fall of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and support for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).[147] Nevertheless, the UAE has positioned itself as one of the leading contributors of humanitarian assistance to Sudan.[148] In 2024, the UAE pledged USD 70 million to UN agencies and humanitarian organizations in "support of efforts dedicated to alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Sudan." This assistance was later used by the UAE at the UN Security Council to defend itself against the call, from the Permanent Representative of Sudan, for the council to take action against the UAE for supporting the RSF and fuelling Sudan's war through weapons, logistics, and political backing.[149]



The UAE has also established the USD 500 million Beginnings Fund, which focuses on improving maternal and newborn health in Africa. The fund is a coalition of global philanthropic foundations that includes the Mohamed Bin Zayed Foundation for Humanity, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, Delta Philanthropies, The ELMA Foundation, Gates Foundation, Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, Patchwork Collective, and others.[150]

Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE, emphasized humanitarianism as a foreign policy priority; this has been formalized as "humanitarian diplomacy" within UAE foreign policy ever since. In 2017, the government convened the first Soft Power Council to develop the country's "Soft Power Strategy," which aimed to enhance the UAE's "modern and tolerant" global reputation, with "humanitarian diplomacy" listed as the first of the "six main pillars that together form the framework for the UAE's public diplomacy."[151]

Saudi Arabia has become one of the world's largest non-DAC humanitarian aid donors.[152] In 2015, the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief) was established, marking a significant development in the humanitarian sector in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf. Between 2015–2022, KSRelief provided over USD 6 billion in humanitarian aid to ninety countries and has been the only body in Saudi Arabia authorized to deliver aid abroad. In addition to providing humanitarian aid, KSRelief hosts pledging events and conferences, such as the biannual Riyadh International Humanitarian Forum, which aims to "promote dialogue on legislative, informational, and logistical mechanisms for delivering humanitarian aid."[153] The forum is one of the largest humanitarian conferences globally, drawing many humanitarian leaders, donors, practitioners, researchers, and others to participate.

The use of humanitarian aid for rebranding efforts is complex, often hindered by intra-Gulf rivalries and conflicts. Of course, the Gulf countries under study here do not act as a single entity—indeed, their soft power is a key part of their rivalry. This is particularly evident in Yemen. Since the start of the Yemen war in 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided more humanitarian aid to Yemen than to any other country. However, this aid is strategically channelled to their respective allies in order to influence the course of the conflict, with the Saudis backing the late President Hadi and the Emiratis supporting various factions and militias in southern Yemen that reject Hadi's leadership. The UAE's significant financial contributions, amounting to around USD 5.9 billion between 2015–2019, have shifted power dynamics, further fragmenting the Yemeni landscape.[154] The deep politicization of humanitarian aid in Yemen is recognized as one of the main macro-level drivers of violence.[155] The death toll and humanitarian crisis in Yemen, one of the world's worst crises, and the significant role of the Saudi-led coalition in the population's suffering,[156] pose another challenge to Emirati and Saudi efforts to be perceived as benevolent actors supporting their Yemeni "brothers and sisters."[157]

Furthermore, humanitarian funding is deeply intertwined with attempts by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to brand themselves as supporters of a brand of Islam that conveys peace, tolerance, and freedom.[158] The three countries' propagation of moderate versions of Islam aids their interventionist policies in the region,[159] from military interventions in contexts such as Yemen—framed as attempts to curb the spread of Iran-supported Shia Houthis and Sunni Al-Qaeda—to interventions in Arab Spring countries (especially Egypt) to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from power[160] or curb its attempt to entrench its power (in the case of Qatar).[161]

The response of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE to Israel's genocide in Gaza has itself become a case study in the rebranding logic this report analyzes. Each of these states has deployed the language of humanitarian concern, while simultaneously maintaining, deepening, or actively pursuing normalization with Israel.[162] **This is not a contradiction, but the brand working exactly as designed. The performance of humanitarian solidarity with Palestinians serves the same function as the appointment of women to ministerial positions or the hosting of international sporting events: it occupies the normative space, creates the appearance of principled engagement, and generates enough international goodwill to insulate these regimes from accountability for their actual conduct.** Meanwhile, UAE investment in Israeli tech and infrastructure has not been fundamentally disrupted and Egyptian security coordination with Israel at the Gaza border has continued. Ultimately, the adoption of a humanitarian approach to the genocide rather than a political one has meant that none of these states have taken any measures— diplomatic, economic, or otherwise— that impose a real cost on Israel for its genocidal actions.[163]

As the examples show, **humanitarianism provides a sphere through which regimes can project an image of being altruistic donors deeply invested in humanitarian causes, while simultaneously destabilizing neighbouring countries and fuelling internal conflicts.** Humanitarian support becomes yet another tool in the rebranding toolbox. Of course, the use of humanitarian aid as soft power is not unique to Gulf countries; it has long been a key instrument for Western states to launder empire, secure influence, "open markets," and justify military intervention—presenting themselves as "good actors" while sustaining military, economic, and border violence elsewhere.[164] **What is shifting is the global order in which SWANA countries, Gulf states in particular, are stepping more into "humanitarian leadership" in the context of Western powers continuing to drastically reduce their overseas aid spending and, particularly in the case of the US, withdraw from multilateral cooperation.**

Projecting legitimacy through multilateral engagements

The currents and contradictions of state rebranding drives outlined in this chapter have been playing out in states' engagement with multilateral human rights and development spaces, with a similar shift toward less blatant opposition to rights and creating a softer image vis-a-vis gender equality, empowerment, and inclusion.

The foci of Gulf states' official events at recent Human Rights Council (HRC) sessions also speak to the themes of state rebranding. For example, at the 58th HRC session in February 2025, the Permanent Mission of Qatar, alongside the Qatar Olympic Committee, the Qatar Foundation and the International Centre for Sport Security held a high-level side event on "Empowering Women and Girls in and through Sport," which promoted mega events such as the

Qatar World Cup as vehicles for empowerment.[165] At the same HRC session, the Permanent Mission of Saudi Arabia, alongside Morocco and the World Health Organization held an event on "Tolerance and Inclusivity in Sports: A Catalyst For Promoting Human Rights" which featured a young female rally driver and a video message from footballer Sadio Mane. Content focused on upcoming football World Cup hosting and the Saudi representative tied this together with their commitment to development goals and promoting the updated Personal Status Law, laws on disability and anti-harassment, and grassroots and recreational sports as part of a "healthy life."[166]

Disability rights has also been an area of focus for Qatar and the UAE at the HRC. At the 58th session, the UAE organized a side event titled "Promoting and Protecting the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Access to Technology and Artificial Intelligence." As well as highlighting national laws and policies on education, healthcare, and social security, the event framed the UAE as a leader in using AI and technology for disability inclusion.[167] Qatar has been persistently active in high-level HRC panels and interactive dialogues on the rights of persons with disabilities, using this position to promote its various international initiatives, such as efforts to ensure the 2022 World Cup was friendly for people with disabilities and hosting the Fourth World Summit on Disability in 2028.[168] Such efforts obscure a continued lack of attention to structural ableism, with language and policy often leaning more toward charity or benevolence models, and perpetuating "inspiration" stereotypes that have long been critiqued by disability movements. Furthermore, the focus on sports and the rights of people with disabilities sits in stark contrast to the documented human rights abuses suffered by migrant workers responsible for building Gulf cities and infrastructure, including for mega sporting events. These workers face disproportionate disablement through workplace injury and lack of recourse to medical and financial support thereafter.[169]

Saudi Arabia has also been working to take up a global leadership role in cyber security. In an event at the 59th HRC session, a Saudi representative discussed the establishment of the Global Cyber Security Forum and presented the kingdom as a "global leader" in this area, with a focus on a safe and enabling cyber space for all children.[170] Given the Saudi state's documented use of cybersecurity as a guise of repression and surveillance, a push for global leadership in this area could be interpreted as not only incongruous but rather strategic.[171] Indeed, the Saudi state appears to have engaged in censorship of civil society voices at the Internet Governance Forum in Riyadh only the year before, in December 2024. Human Rights Watch reported that significant portions of Saudi Arabian activist Lina Hathloul's comments about imprisoned rights defenders and the use of Saudi Arabia's anti-cybercrime and counterterrorism laws to target peaceful activism and online speech were edited out of the event recording and official transcript for her panel.[172]

Such efforts obscure a continued lack of attention to structural ableism, with language and policy often leaning more toward charity or benevolence models

Longstanding collaboration with anti-rights blocs and NGOs at the UN

Pushing a conservative agenda focused on preserving a heteronormative understanding of the family is an ongoing anti-rights initiative that this report's focus countries participate in at the national and international levels.[173] Internationally, they play prominent roles at the UN in different ways. In 2015, several countries—including Saudi Arabia and Egypt—joined a coalition supported by the US-based conservative group Center for Family and Human Rights at the UN.[174] The coalition, dubbed the Group of Friends of the Family, has become a powerful voice at the UN, pushing the family agenda, promoting a specific, "natural" definition of the family as a unit based solely on heterosexual marriage between a man and a woman, alongside their children.[175] Qatar is active in pushing the family agenda through the Doha International Family Institute, which "focuses on strengthening families in the Arab world through research, advocacy, and policy, emphasizing strong family units as crucial for social development."[176] The collaboration between Gulf states and right-wing Christian organizations such as the US-based Alliance Defending Freedom and Family Watch International have also been observed.[177]

Furthermore, Gulf and other SWANA states, despite reorientation toward a more progressive image, have continued their historic role as part of blocs and alliances working to block rights related to gender and sexuality.[178] At the same time as pushing the reform and empowerment narrative in UN spaces, the states in question continue to block progress on rights in resolution negotiations, aligning with the agendas of Global North anti-rights groups. The pushback by Gulf states on language related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), using arguments of cultural relativism and state sovereignty, is well documented by feminists.[179] While these arguments are far from new, and reflect the same polarized dynamic around gender and sexuality language seen across negotiations for years, it is interesting to see the continuation of the anti-rights leadership in certain spheres while the appearance of human rights leadership happens simultaneously in others.

The regimes of focus in this report increasingly realize that diplomacy is a critical tool for advancing economic and security interests. Engagement in multilateral spaces is critical to state branding efforts, allowing countries to project an image of global relevance and leadership while enhancing diplomatic relations. **By actively participating in international spaces, fora, and coalitions, these countries can showcase their commitment to global issues—such as climate change, security, and economic development—while also pushing conservative agendas and influencing global narratives in ways that align with their national interests.** While all the focus countries are invested in branding themselves as progressive actors aiming to neutralize conservative forces at home, their engagement in multilateral spaces quickly uncovers this veneer to expose the contradictions, highlighting deep opposition to gender rights, personal freedoms or approaches (to climate and disability justice, for example) that tackle systemic causes of injustice and inequality.

Israel and impunity at the UN

The branding strategies examined in this report have not emerged in a vacuum. They operate within an international system in which Israel has, for decades, demonstrated that genocidal state violence can be reconciled with multilateral legitimacy through the management of language, image, and partnership. Failing to name this historical context risks treating the SWANA region as exceptional rather than as participants in a much older, global colonial world order.

UN engagement is part of Israel's long-term strategy to manufacture legitimacy as a settler-colonial project. Human rights spaces in particular serve Israel's objectives of whitewashing its human rights abuses and violations of international law, which amount to apartheid and ultimately, genocide.[180]

UN engagement is part of Israel's long-term strategy to manufacture legitimacy for itself as a settler colonial project

Since the establishment of the HRC, Israel has persistently worked to discredit the mandates and processes that focus on Israeli accountability for human rights violations, and has at times questioned the legitimacy of the HRC as a whole.[181] The council's standing agenda Item 7 on the Human Rights Situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories remains a central focus for Israel (and its allies, including the US) when questioning the legitimacy of the HRC.[182] Indeed, Item 7 was cited as a reason for the Israeli and US "withdrawal" from the council in 2025.[183]

Much like the web of anti-rights organizations working in the UN to undermine rights related to gender and sexuality, Israeli and US-funded organizations work systematically to counter calls for Israeli accountability within the council and other UN fora.[184] With Economic and Social Council status, organizations such as UN Watch, the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, the World Jewish Congress, the European Union of Jewish Students and B'nai B'rith International persistently take up speaking slots related to the council's Item 7 agenda, claiming "bias" and "disproportionate scrutiny over Israel."[185]

On the other hand, Israel recognizes the strategic importance of the council as a forum to improve its image and whitewash its human rights record; in an extension of its branding strategy, Israel portrays itself as a "champion" of LGBTQI+ and women's rights within the council. Israel is part of the Group of Western European and Others States (WEOG), a bloc representing the interests of the Global North across the UN system. In the HRC, the WEOG states often position themselves as "norm entrepreneurs," especially on rights related to gender and sexuality, and present themselves as "gender champions" and feminist allies.

As part of its pinkwashing and genderwashing strategies, Israel has often strategically supported "progressive" positions on gender and sexuality in line with the WEOG bloc. For example, Israel persistently advocates to include language on SRHR and intersectionality—common battlegrounds in the negotiating rooms. Before its withdrawal from the council, Israel and other WEOG states worked to include references to SRHR in a resolution on Ending and Preventing Forced Marriage. On the other side, countries such as Egypt and Pakistan opposed

such inclusions, demanding a broader framing on access to healthcare services.[186] As the attack on trans rights around the world has intensified, "sex-based rights" have been pushed more to the fore of conversation at the council, as a concept used to essentialize gender and curtail the rights of trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people. Israel has again positioned itself as a "progressive" voice on the matter, countering anti-trans arguments for single-sex facilities and barriers to legal gender recognition.

Israel's pinkwashing strategy is also visible in its position as a member of the LGBTI Core Group in New York and the Equal Rights Council Coalition.[187] Israel is also a part of the "Group of Friends" of the Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (IE SOGI) mandate. Created in 2021, the group's main objective is to support the IE SOGI mandate and its renewal, which is mainly supported by countries of the Global North, such as the US, UK, and Germany. From the outset, the mandate was highly contested and polarizing.[188] Along with WEOG states, Israel has used its position in these coalitions and support for the IE SOGI mandate to posture as "pro-LGBTQI+" and a "champion" of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) rights, directly in opposition to "anti-gender" or "conservative" states such as Pakistan, Egypt, and other OIC member states, who opposed the creation of and continue not to recognize the mandate. The coalition has also been used as a vehicle to portray openness to working with civil society, especially women's rights and LGBTQI+ organizations, and thus naturalize this position in the council.

How far international women's rights organizations have subscribed to this binary view of "progressive champions and regressive opposition" is an important consideration. For example, some feminists have compared responses to Saudi Arabia chairing the Commission on the Status of Women in 2023 with Israel's position as a member of the Bureau of the Commission on Population and Development in 2024.[189] While the former met with public and private protest due to Saudi Arabia's human rights records, the latter met with almost no scrutiny, despite Israel's ongoing genocide in Gaza and escalation of killing, surveillance, and persecution of Palestinians elsewhere. Such a binary approach to states has acted as a divisive base for any feminist transnational organizing that accounts for feminists in the Global South in general, and SWANA in particular.[190]

Gender and sexuality are not the only areas in which Israel adopts progressive language. Israel regularly highlights the need to improve access to council spaces for people with disabilities and the inclusion of their rights in resolution negotiations, while simultaneously causing catastrophic disablement amongst the Palestinian population.[191] Seen in its most extreme in the genocide in Gaza, disablement also occurs as a result of the structural violence of settler colonialism. From denial of access to healthcare to control over Palestinians' food and water, alongside settler violence carried out with impunity, Israel's settler-colonial infrastructure is set up to produce worse health outcomes for the Palestinian population, which can be understood as systematic disablement.[192]

Israel has also insisted on mainstreaming gender in discussions on civil and political rights. In a 2022 resolution on the rights of human rights defenders in conflict and post-conflict situations, Israeli diplomats at the HRC insisted on adding language on the protection of female journalists—this was just a few weeks after the Israeli army killed Palestinian journalist Shereen Abu Akleh while she reported on a raid of the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank. A wealth of evidence has shown the targeting of journalists and media workers to be a deliberate strategy of the Israeli military.[193]

After October 7, 2023, Israel's strategy at the UN pivoted heavily toward outwardly discrediting UN institutions, isolating and undermining Palestinian institutions, movements, and resistance, and delegitimizing any state or organization calling for accountability. Aside from political statements at the council and voting against resolutions at the UN General Assembly, Israel and its allies have relentlessly attempted to paralyze measures calling out and attempting to halt Israeli crimes. Israel's strategies at the council very much parallel its strategies to delegitimize the South Africa genocide case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC), with the US (and other allies) retaliating against states and institutions calling for Israel to be held accountable via financial aid cuts or sanctions.[194]

In July 2025, the US imposed sanctions on Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories, claiming abuse of her mandate, antisemitism, and anti-Israel bias following her report on companies aiding Israel's genocide and apartheid.[195] The previous Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, Dr. Tlaleng Mofokeng, who used her mandate to demand accountability and an end to the genocide, was targeted by the South African Zionist Federation, which lodged a complaint with the Health Professions Council of South Africa claiming that she had violated medical ethics for social media posts condemning Benjamin Netanyahu.[196]

In September 2025, three Palestinian civil society organizations active at the HRC, Al-Haq, Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights, and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, had sanctions imposed on them by the US treasury department.[197] The sanctions were based on accusations that the organizations had been "directly engaging in efforts by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate, arrest, detain, or prosecute Israeli nationals, without Israel's consent."[198]

While Israel and the US announced their "withdrawal" from the HRC in February 2025, the US continued to pressure and intimidate states demanding accountability for Israel's genocide in the council. Just a few months after their withdrawal, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee sent a letter to states regarding Pakistan's proposal to create an International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism (IIIM).[199] As the mechanism proposed a more rigorous and robust investigation into Israel's actions in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the letter warned states not to support the IIIM, or risk facing "the same consequences as the ICC faced."[200]

The genocide in Gaza has most blatantly exposed the complicity of the same Global North states, especially the US, Germany, and the UK, in actively shielding Israel from accountability and decimating the UN's humanitarian mechanisms.[201] These states have not only fueled the genocide by benefitting from the Israeli regime and providing it with military arms and intelligence, but also by granting political legitimacy and diplomatic protection to the settler-colonial state.[202]

While actively aiming to discredit any attempts at accountability, Israel and its allies weaponize sexual and gender-based violence at the HRC and other UN spaces to justify the ongoing genocide and delegitimize Palestinian resistance as inherently immoral. Israel's hasbara machine has put significant focus on alleging a systemic pattern of sexual violence against Israeli women on October 7, using highly sensationalized imagery and racist and dehumanizing tropes against Palestinians. Until now, there has been little to no concrete evidence that sexual violence was systemic, as claimed by most Israeli sources.[203]

For instance, the UN Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict's report in 2024 concluded that, while it did not have the mandate to investigate claims of systematic sexual violence by Hamas, it did not find a "pattern" of sexual violence on

October 7.[204] However, prominent international media outlets followed the lead of the Israeli government, framing the report as a vindication of Israel's narrative that Hamas committed systematic sexual violence on October 7, but ignoring Israel's blanket refusal to cooperate with the official UN investigation into these claims.[205] Longstanding dehumanization of Palestinians, rooted in ingrained racism and anti-Muslim sentiment, enabled this Israeli narrative to go unchecked and land easily with prominent international media outlets—tying in to a long history of colonial fears portraying Black and Brown men as a danger to White women.[206]

In reality, prior to October 7, Israeli sexual violence had become embedded in Palestinian daily life under occupation.[207] Sexual violence has been used as a systematic tool of control, subjugation, and dispossession, and is well documented across contexts, including in detention, at checkpoints, during house raids, and in interactions with both Israeli occupation forces and settlers.[208] As highlighted by Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Ihmoud, and Dahir-Nashif: "Rape and other forms of sexual violence against Palestinian women have always been an element of the settler colonial state's attempts to destroy and eliminate indigenous Palestinians."[209] The Israeli military has developed a formal practice of using the threat of sexual violence to blackmail Palestinians and break organized resistance.[210]

When the UN Special Representative's report was being released, widespread violence against Palestinian detainees was intensifying, with severe physical violence and torture—including sexual assault and rape—documented.[211] By December 2025, around 55,000 pregnant women in Gaza were left without food, water, medical assistance, or a safe place to give birth, while around 38,000 women and girls had already been killed by Israel.[212]

In March 2025, the UN International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory (COI) released its investigative report, *"More than a human can bear": Israel's systematic use of sexual, reproductive and other forms of gender-based violence since 7 October 2023*.[213] The report challenged the systematic nature alleged by Israel of sexual violence perpetrated by Hamas and instead emphasized the historic and systematic nature of sexual violence against both Palestinian men and women by the Israeli army, settlers, and authorities. Israel denied the COI's evidence of Israeli sexual violence as anti-Israeli bias, and shifted focus back to the unfounded claim, with the support of Germany, France, and the EU.[214] Several months later, a report was released by a new organization, Project Dinah, arguing for a lower evidentiary threshold for prosecution and introducing a new "doctrinal framework" to establish Hamas's criminal responsibility as motivated by "genocidal intent."[215] The report was circulated widely by Western media and used extensively as a reference by Israeli representatives at the UN and in diplomatic channels.[216]

By May 2026, as testimonies and reports documenting the grave and systematic use of sexual violence, rape, and torture against Palestinian men and women increasingly came to light, an "independent Israeli investigative commission" released a report on sexual violence by Hamas on October 7.[217] Once again capturing Western media headlines, the report was endorsed by high-profile US figures such as Hilary Clinton and Sheryl Sandberg.

Israel's engagement at the UN reveals that, on one level, Israel sees UN spaces as an extension of its hasbara machine, where it can use pinkwashing, disability washing, and the weaponization of women's rights to obscure or distract from its human rights violations. This ultimately serves to justify and legitimize Israel's genocide and settler-colonial project by dehumanizing Palestinians in all spheres, alongside delegitimizing and eliminating Palestinian resistance to foreign military rule and the colonization of their land.

It is important to understand Israel's impunity at the UN within the broader "hollowing out" or "credibility crisis" of international law and multilateralism, which itself cannot be decoupled from the inequitable global economic and imperial order.

Much like any international governance institution, UN accountability mechanisms, including human rights bodies, are bound by the political will of (mostly powerful) states. While normative standards, such as decisions and resolutions at the ICJ and ICC, indicating Israel is committing a genocide are plenty, Global North and allied high-income countries continue to hold these processes hostage. This same dynamic of double standards plays out beyond the question of Israeli impunity alone: in international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), voting powers are tied to countries' financial contributions and, as such, are dominated by G-7 countries. As Chapter 2 explores, these decisions are not toothless or symbolic; they are coercive neo-colonial tools with concrete consequences on the policies, budgets, and access to resources of Global South countries.

This economic reality is reflected in UN human rights negotiations, with SWANA states often prioritizing development justice, calling for sovereign debt cancellation, and pressing for accessible intellectual property. These demands are conveniently sidelined by Global North states, who all the while position themselves as "progressive" actors championing sexual and reproductive health and rights. Many SWANA states do indeed adopt regressive positions on SRHR in multilateral spaces and at the domestic level. Nevertheless, by undermining demands for development justice, Global North states divorce SRHR from material conditions and whitewash their own complicity in grave human rights violations in the SWANA region.

This double standard is at the heart of multilateralism's credibility crisis: Global North states have historically set the standard for what counts as modern, rights respecting, and progressive, while exempting themselves and their allies. This raises the question: as trust in the UN and other multilateral institutions declines, and Global North states increasingly lose their legitimacy to set these standards, who will fill the vacuum and through what institutions, markets, or political narratives?

Conclusion

The rebranding efforts discussed in this chapter have the overarching aim of fostering economic growth by creating an image of stable, progressive countries that are safe for foreign trade and investment. Ensuring the security of regimes and curbing memories and opportunities for a repetition of the Arab Spring uprisings is another critical objective. The great focus on regime security explains the push to invest heavily in integrating surveillance into "cities of the future," while masking that surveillance infrastructure behind the "futuristic," "responsive," "secure," and "innovative" cities brand.

All of the focus countries aim to increase their soft power by employing the globalized languages of sports, sustainability, and women's empowerment. This goal is intertwined with the pursuit of enhancing the nations' image globally while consolidating absolute power. The primary objective here is to shape a political agenda wherein other entities are influenced to emulate a nation's soft-power resources, encompassing an appealing culture, coveted ideologies, and institutions and policies marked by "innovation" and "forward thinking."[218] While these initiatives are marketed as portals to a futuristic or revived glorious past (or a blend of both), they function primarily as mechanisms of exclusionary nationalism and power augmentation that secure regimes and ensure their appeal to global neoliberal capitalism, all while marginalizing already vulnerable groups.

Online spaces are central to this project: through influencers, state-aligned accounts, cyber-nationalist networks, disinformation campaigns, surveillance, and website blocking, regimes seek to both silence dissent and manufacture consensus around the national brand. Public relations firms extend this work beyond national borders, translating authoritarian narratives into language legible to Western governments, investors, media, and policy circles. PR work launders reputations, manages crisis communications, and recasts repression as reform, investment, and stability. Humanitarian aid, development funding, and relief logistics allow states to present themselves as altruistic donors and moral leaders, while their foreign policies fuel conflict and regional fragmentation. Multilateral spaces such as the HRC function as stages for states to project an image of "human rights compliance" through the language of empowerment, sports, and disability washing.

Many of these strategies will be familiar to international audiences from public debates and academic research into Israel's rebranding strategies. Such strategies include, for example, rebranding Israel as a vibrant "start-up nation," linking directly to its extensive export of military (and military-adjacent), security, and surveillance technologies, often "tested" on Palestinians by inflicting death and destruction. As highlighted above, Israeli rebranding often comes up in multilateral engagements, particularly drawing on state-sponsored feminism and representation of women in the military.[219] Indeed, the extreme opposition between the pro-women branding and the material realities of the annihilation of Palestinian women's lives, particularly targeting their reproductive health and rights, demonstrates the dangers of branding as a strategy that distorts reality, invisibilizes brutal violence and rights violations, and ultimately serves and enables the continuation of the status quo.[220]

As the analysis of Israel's positioning in multilateral spaces has shown, the same architecture of strategic image management, progressive vocabulary, coalition building, and the careful insulation of state violence from international accountability has been operating in the Israeli case. The Gulf states and Egypt are participating in a political technology that Israel has demonstrated, normalized, and made internationally acceptable over decades, and the effectiveness of which has

been confirmed by the international system's tolerance of genocide. Reading the rebranding strategies of SWANA states alongside Israel's provides an analysis of how authoritarian governance secures international legitimacy in the contemporary moment, rather than being the preserve of any one region or geopolitical bloc.

The Gulf states and Egypt are participating in a political technology whose use Israel has demonstrated, normalised, and made internationally acceptable over decades, and whose effectiveness has been confirmed by the international system's tolerance of genocide

State branding and rebranding are political technologies that are in no way unique to Gulf countries or the SWANA region. With this in mind, the purpose here is to examine the unique manifestation of such technologies in these specific national contexts while also recognizing the broader globalized dynamics of normalized violence and violations of rights. Such analysis seeks to inform feminist and critical analysis beyond the framework of "anti-rights," which may advertently or inadvertently obscure violence when it recruits the brand of modernity and perceived alignment with causes constructed as "tolerant," "liberal," and "progressive."



Chapter 2—Nationalism, Family, and Citizen Engineering



Chapter 1 examined how SWANA states manage crisis and instability by curating an outward-facing image: a brand calibrated to reassure investors and capital that the state remains a stable, modern, and legitimate actor. Chapter 2 turns inward, to the question of state technologies used to consolidate power domestically in contexts where state legitimacy remains fragile due to spiralling economic crises or prolonged war.

Where branding manages how power appears to the outside world, this chapter examines citizen engineering as a tool of authoritarian control at home. Like many places around the world, citizenship in the SWANA region can be understood as a site of constant construction through which states engineer, and re-engineer, who belongs and on what terms.[221] This chapter traces emerging notions of citizenship across the SWANA region as they are reshaped in the current moment by shifting geopolitical dynamics, sovereign debt, and nationalist border regimes.

Similar to many other countries in the region, COVID-19 led to a surge in impoverishment in Egypt and Tunisia, with a growing portion of the population living in poverty as currencies were devalued and soaring food, fuel, and housing costs outpaced wages and ate through savings. In both countries, debt and austerity measures have played a crucial role in entrenching inequalities and paving the way for authoritarian rule. In Sudan, the ongoing war and struggle for power between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has led to a genocide that has killed an estimated 150,000 people and displaced over 12 million.[222]

Having hollowed out welfare functions and social provision, and abandoned viable economic models for their people, the states examined here find their legitimacy eroded. **tt v**[223] Within this, gendered, racialized, and class hierarchies play a crucial role in entrenching power: control over reproduction, family, and morality decides who belongs and who is cast as a threat or outsider.[224] In the context of war, this "othering" further shapes citizenship as an instrument of political and military legitimacy and gain.

The following sections highlight how population and reproductive policies and anti-human rights mobilizations undermine bodily rights and self-determination in the SWANA region. The examples shared here indicate who is systematically dispossessed through this process by failing to meet the constructed ideal. The chapter goes on to examine how "family values" and moralistic frameworks function as state technologies that discipline citizens through gendered, classed, and moral norms, and how these norms are reinforced within cultural production and social media.

This chapter finally turns to the exclusionary logic of this moral order, focusing on migrants, refugees, and Black people in North Africa, and situates these dynamics within a migration regime shaped by European externalization of border control that intersects with longstanding racism and anti-Black sentiments and practices in the region.[225] The chapter then shows how demographic panic and anti-Blackness are mobilized to justify state violence in Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan. The chapter concludes by highlighting how moral governance, racial nationalism, and migration control converge to normalize human rights violations and constrain reproductive autonomy, underscoring the need for feminist and anti-racist frameworks in confronting these trends.

Chapter 2 once again interrogates a binary division between states that are "pro human rights" or "anti human rights." The engineering of citizens through gendered, classed, and racialized norms and policies cannot be understood without interrogating the inequitable global economic and imperial order, underpinned by decades of neoliberal globalization and ongoing imperialism and colonialism.

Reproductive and population control: gender, sexuality, and the nation

Historically, states have seen populations as either having the potential for economic development or being an economic burden.[226] In the context of the SWANA region, coercive population policies and measures have become instruments to engineer the "new citizen" to serve the national project. States use population size as a focal point for the economic and social anxieties that stem from real or perceived demographic shifts; austerity measures and cuts to public spending are justified on the grounds that there are either "too many" or "too few" people. Looking at Tunisia and Egypt, this section explores the eugenicist nature of population control policies, with the former's demographic panic working in tandem with the state's racist policies, and the latter's antinatalist policies targeting poor families. Following on, the section explores another realm: the emergence of new assisted reproductive technology (ART) and the rapid response of different SWANA states in using it to bolster medical tourism and generate revenue. Finally, the section ends with an examination of citizen engineering in the context of Israel, where pronatalist policies are designed to support the settler-colonial project while, at the same time, an ongoing genocide and systematic suppression of Palestinian reproduction is carried out—with the main objective to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people and replace them with a Jewish nationalist state.

Debt and citizen engineering

IMF debt does not merely coincide with authoritarianism or citizen engineering, it keeps states in the debt-austerity trap that produces both.[227] Research by global debt justice movements has shown how debt fuels authoritarianism across the Global South.[228] Often, with the political closure of alternatives to debt repayment, the economic crisis created by the debt-austerity trap becomes a resource that regimes exploit to erode democratic freedoms and dismantle rights.

In Egypt, successive IMF loan agreements have positioned the country among the fund's largest borrowers, with external debt nearly tripling between 2015 - 2023 and debt servicing now consuming close to half of public revenue.[229] This borrowing has helped finance military-run infrastructure and megaprojects that entrenches the regime's economic and political dominance.[230] In Tunisia, decades of debt and IMF-imposed austerity left post-revolution governments unable to improve living conditions, fuelling disillusionment that paved the way for Kais Saied's 2021 power grab, after which democratic institutions have been dismantled and repression has intensified.[231]

As with IMF arrangements worldwide, conditions in Egypt have included phasing out universal subsidies and targeted programs, deepening impoverishment and insecurity. Feminist organizations from the region document how the resulting cuts to health, education, and social protection intensify women's reproductive labour, shutting them out of education, employment, and political participation.[232] In Tunisia, subsidies and public sector cuts have similarly compounded women's economic precarity under austerity.[233] Amid this deepening inequality and precarity, ruling powers' legitimacy remains unstable. States respond not only with surveillance and repression, but by shifting economic obligations onto individuals and popularizing narratives that deflect accountability by targeting those already marginalized.

Tunisia: demographic panic, pronatalism and anti-Black racism

Tunisia offers a stark illustration of how economic crisis and demographic anxiety combine to produce a politics of reproductive nationalism.[234] The country's fertility rate has dropped significantly from 7.1 children per woman in 1977 to 1.8 children per woman in 2024.[235] This is accompanied by a significant ageing of the population, with a 400% increase in people over sixty years of age over the past five decades, and a steep decline in children under five.[236]

In addition to rising public anxieties concerning marriage and family making, the economic implications of these demographic developments also sowed seeds of nationalist panic over economic growth and sustainability.[237] The root causes of economic hardship lay in IMF structural adjustment programs, subsequent austerity measures that gutted public services, and food shortages that between 2021-2024 pushed households into acute insecurity.[238] However, rather than addressing the root causes, the national response focused on pronatalist population measures, incentivizing births and marriages, and thus framing reproduction as essential for Tunisians to save the country from its ongoing economic challenges.[239]

In June 2025, the Tunisian Minister of Health called for a national joint strategy and "new vision" to encourage birth rates and reform demographic growth.[240] At the end of 2025, the Ministry of Family, Women, Children, and the Elderly announced the 2025-2035 Action Plan for the Cohesion of the Family, positioning "family cohesion" as a key response to the falling fertility rate and the family as a "strategic driver of overall development."[241] One pillar of the policy addresses the fall in rates of marriage and the rise in the age of marriage through awareness-raising, mentoring, and guidance to "equip young people for marriage and family life." Another pillar concerns "developing legislation by reviewing and updating laws related to the family, ensuring a balance between rights and responsibilities."[242]

The panic around demography and falling birth rates has also led to increasing public attention to abortion, leading to concerns among feminists about the reproductive rights implications of the pronatalist shift, particularly regarding the historic 1973 legalization of abortion.[243] The increasing criminalization and punishment of dissent, as seen in the new wave of terrorism charges handed to Tunisian human rights defenders and activists, adds another layer of concern around the ability to defend reproductive rights.[244]

On the other hand, discourse around demographic change in Tunisia has also been weaponized to target Black migrants and refugees. Like elsewhere in the world, as economic anxieties rise, migrants and refugees become a scapegoat to quell an angry public and redirect blame away from the ruling class. Since taking power, President Saied and his supporters have portrayed migration as a threat posed by conspirators whose objective is to "change Tunisia's demographic composition" and "its Arab-Muslim identity."[245] As is explored more later in this chapter, these racist narratives have been used to justify increasingly ruthless campaigns targeting Black Tunisians, migrants and asylum seekers passing through or settling in the country in the context of the EU Migration Act, which effectively extends EU borders to the southern Mediterranean.[246] In contrast to the pronatalist approach to those the state considers "biologically pure" Tunisians, the reproduction of Black Tunisians and migrants is framed as a demographic and economic threat, thus justifying dehumanizing measures.

Egypt: antinatalism and the engineering of the "new citizen"

As a substantial portion of Egypt's public expenditure is earmarked to service loan interest, resources for public services,

including health, education, and social protection, are severely reduced.[247] In contrast to the pronatalist focus in Tunisia, the Egyptian state has instead seen the increasing population as a problem to be solved. 2016 marked a shift toward a state discourse framing population numbers as a direct threat to national security, on equal footing with terrorism.[248] The former head of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics stated that "overpopulation is more dangerous to Egypt than terrorism," a position that was shared by the president, who cast population size as the nation's main destabilizing factor and hurdle to national development.

In 2018, a series of presidential initiatives began significantly stressing the importance of "improving" population characteristics in the interest of economic development.[249] Central to this has been the state's rhetoric justifying antinatalist population measures as part of the new national strategy to build "the new Egyptian citizen."[250] The same year saw a shift in family planning awareness messaging encouraging couples to have fewer children through the Two is Enough presidential program.[251] Subsequently, subsidies gradually came to be tied to family size.[252] In the same vein, the parliament introduced a draft bill (unfinalized at the time of writing) in 2019, that includes incentives for married couples to have no more than two children.[253] The draft Family Planning Act also envisions a requirement for premarital testing as a determinant for marriageability, to detect "undesirable characteristics," including: genetic disease, mental illness, and non-communicable diseases.[254] This approach is not exclusive to Egypt; in the name of ensuring family wellness and security, the Bahraini parliament reviewed a bill to enact premarital testing to screen for ailments linked to genetics or behaviours assumed to be associated with drug use.[255]

To operationalize the president's vision of building the "new Egyptian citizen," the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development published a series of policy papers framing population control as a policy solution. Population control measures were mapped in China, India, and Indonesia, drawing out lessons learnt, along with effective incentives and disincentives.[256] "Authoritarianism," for example, came first in the list of factors successfully enabling the control of population growth in China.[257] Such measures were not scrutinized but instead promoted as a route for economic progress, one that births new citizens through antinatal population policies. In his opening remarks at the Population, Health, and Development Conference, commemorating thirty years of the International Conference on Population and Development, the Egyptian president said emphatically, "Look at China, they retracted their one-child policy after successfully pushing their economy forward," underlining the direction of policy to control population numbers.[258]

State discourse frames population numbers as a direct threat to national security, on equal footing with terrorism

The recurring tendency to shift responsibility from the state onto poor families, and particularly onto women, has quickly and powerfully infiltrated public discourse. Blaming the poor for their poverty while ignoring the systemic violence they face has become commonplace, circulating easily through casual tweets and public commentary. Eugenicist takes, often framed as humor, promote controlling the reproduction of poor people, turning such ideas into everyday social media content as well as the basis for policy-making.

While the Egyptian government has been busy constructing the "new Egyptian citizen," it is also actively expelling those deemed unfit. In 2023, the Egyptian presidency launched an initiative to recruit 150,000

teachers to fill the large human resources gap in the education sector. Examinations held to determine physical and mental fitness, under the supervision of the Central Agency for Organization and Administration (CAOA), yielded results that excluded thousands of candidates for being unfit (pregnant or overweight) or failing any other part of the exam.[259] The CAOA exams have become mandatory for a wide range of public sector professions.[260] Seemingly, the new Egyptian citizen looks something like this: slim and fit, mentally healthy, free from chronic diseases, and part of a nuclear family with no more than two children.

The recurring tendency to shift responsibility from the state onto poor families, and particularly onto women, has quickly and powerfully infiltrated public discourse

Enforcing population policies and modelling new citizens, as seen in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, is only one of the ways states in the SWANA region regulate the bodies and reproduction of their subjects and inhabitants. **Whether population policies are pronatalist or antinatalist, responses to economic insecurity and solutions to sustain the economy are focused on numbers and the characteristics of citizens rather than responding to the actual needs of people**.

Assisted reproductive technologies: reproduction as market and engineering

Beyond antinatalist and pronatalist policymaking and control, there is a growing infrastructure for assisted reproductive technologies in the SWANA region. Assisted reproductive technologies reveal the ways in which reproduction can be of service to profit-generating industries in the region while maintaining patriarchal and gendered norms and meeting nationalist goals.[261]

Over the past decade, assisted reproduction has played a major role in transforming the medical tourism sector in the SWANA region. Rapid advancements in reproductive technology have turned this field into a reliable source of investment, revenue, and a secure way for hard currencies to flow, aided by relaxed medical protocols. Regional "reprohubs" have emerged in the UAE, Egypt, and Lebanon, catering to clients seeking budget IVF arrangements that come packaged with sightseeing itineraries.[262] Sex selection is explicitly embedded in medical protocols in the UAE, targeting heterosexual couples unable to access the service legally elsewhere, and is also widely practiced in Egypt, where it is occasionally justified on the basis of religion.[263] Promotional material on billboards and official clinic websites rationalize a manufactured need for "gender-balanced families."[264]

Several aspects of the industry are shaped by patriarchal religious restrictions that govern women's access to their own reproduction. While IVF regulations in Egypt and the UAE break certain ethical boundaries by permitting sex selection, a woman cannot access her frozen eggs if her husband has died or she has never been married.[265] These restrictions are tied to concerns about paternal lineage, which directly affects inheritance and the distribution of assets within a family. Surrogacy is not officially available in the region's reprohubs for similar reasons related to paternal lineage, a stance that is reflected in the fact that many figures from the SWANA region have played a role in promoting the Casablanca Declaration for the Universal Abolition of Surrogacy.[266] As ART has expanded in both countries, it has become a marketable industry contributing to the tourism sector, given the restrictions in other settings, thereby generating revenue while also advancing efforts to shape population characteristics in line with national rebranding goals.[267]



Israel: pronatalist policies alongside ethnic cleansing

By April 2026, more than 38,000 women and girls and at least 20,000 children had been killed in Gaza by Israeli bombardment.[268] The toll is likely higher because many bodies remain trapped under rubble. The killing of women and children is a central and deliberate tactic of Israel's genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people.[269] In its 2026 report, the COI found that by targeting children, Israel is directly attacking the Palestinian people's capacity to exist and determine their future.[270] Palestinian feminists have highlighted how Palestinian women are constructed as biological producers of future generations, and thus targeted by Israel as a demographic threat.[271]

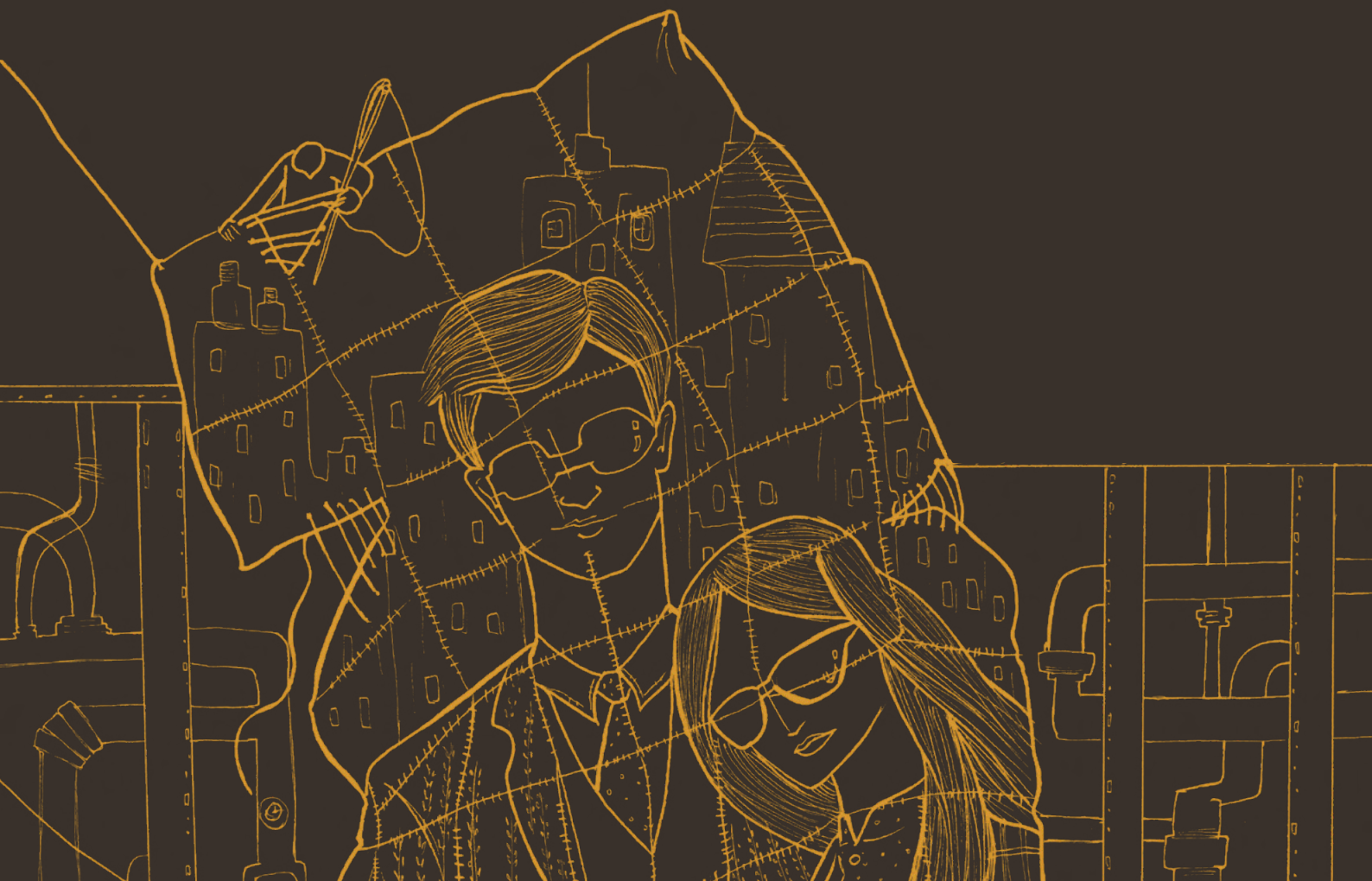
In stark contrast, Israel positions itself as strongly pronatalist in its laws and policies, which encourage high birth rates by offering financial incentives for large families and welfare benefits for (working) mothers.[272] Israel boasts the highest per capita rate of IVF procedures worldwide, as the government fully subsidizes unlimited IVF cycles for Israeli women up to the age of 45, until they have two living children.[273] However, these policies are designed to benefit the country's Jewish Israeli citizens, while excluding Palestinians.[274] Further, it was also revealed that, in 2013, Ethiopian Jewish women were coerced into accepting Depo Provera contraceptive shots in transit camps and upon arrival to Israel.[275]

While Israel promotes reproduction among the settler population, it obstructs and suppresses reproductive rights and freedoms among the Palestinians, which it frames as both a security and demographic threat.[276] The colonized Palestinian population is subjected to violence, surveillance, displacement, and reproductive control, in order to sustain demographic engineering with the aim of replacing the Palestinian population.[277] In the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem, women must navigate IDF roadblocks, checkpoints, curfews, and constant delays and obstructions to access essential services, which can be life-threatening for pregnant women and newborns.[278] The systematic underdevelopment of healthcare infrastructure has led to limited access to specialized medical care for health in general and sexual and reproductive health services in particular.[279] In Gaza, over a decade of blockades has created a chronic shortage of medical supplies, and specialized equipment and personnel, limiting the capacity to provide adequate obstetric and fertility care.[280] Ecocidal chemicals from military ordnance as well as aerial-sprayed pesticides have also been documented as having detrimental effects on fertility, higher rates of miscarriage, and disruptions to fetal development for Palestinians in Gaza.[281]

The scale and systematic nature of Israel's antinatalist policies against Palestinians only became more blatant after Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza began following October 7. The destruction and systematic decimation of Gaza's healthcare infrastructure and facilities is well documented, including the destruction of reproductive and maternal healthcare services, alongside the targeted bombing of Gaza's maternity wards, neonatal intensive care units, and IVF clinics.[282] According to the World Health Organization, by December 2025, almost 60% of all health service points were non-functional, placing immense pressure on the few that remain operational and the fewer that provide emergency obstetric care.[283] Furthermore, Israel's deliberate starvation of the Palestinian population has led to malnutrition, dehydration, contaminated water, unsanitary conditions, and constant displacement, contributing to increasing rates of miscarriage and stillbirth.[284]

With the ongoing genocide in Gaza, women endure extreme shortages of food, medicine, and nutritional supplements during their pregnancies and post-partum.[285] Even if they make it to hospital to deliver, many suffer from anaemia due to malnutrition and from waterborne diseases, vaginitis, and other infections due to polluted water and unsanitary conditions. In addition, the systematic killing of doctors, including obstetricians, midwives and other reproductive health workers, along with the obstruction of international humanitarian organizations, have together produced what UN bodies and civil society organizations have characterized as systematic reproductive violence and the Palestinian Feminist Collective has labelled "reproductive genocide."[286]

Taken together, it is clear how Israel's pronatalist policies for its settler population and its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians are two sides of the same coin: reproduction is weaponized along colonial and patriarchal lines for the same demographic goal of expanding the numbers of Israeli settlers and replacing the indigenous Palestinian population.



"Family values" and moralistic subjects

Across the SWANA region, morality has increasingly become a key site through which states exercise power, discipline dissent, and regulate social life. **Morality is used to appeal to the protection of "family values," religion, or social order, ideas that are frequently mobilized to frame feminist, queer, and gender-related knowledge as threats to national stability and cultural authenticity.** Reports by regional human rights organizations have documented how governments and conservative political actors depict gender equality, sexual rights, and academic work on gender as foreign impositions that undermine society, thereby legitimizing legal restrictions, institutional censorship, and social harassment against activists and those with "undesirable" identities.

"Family values" is a concept that does not contain a coherent set of principles; it acquires meaning primarily through what it condemns and excludes, and who it is used to discipline

Indeed, "family values" is a concept that does not contain a coherent set of principles; it acquires meaning primarily through what it condemns and excludes, and who it is used to discipline. Across the countries examined in this section, the invocation of family values operates as a political, legal, social, and cultural tool.

In Egypt, the enforcement of "family values" is visible through the waves of TikTok arrests, which initially targeted women content creators from disproportionately poor and lower-class backgrounds, whose visibility online carries specific class markers: overcrowded cardboard boxes on wardrobes, mismatched or garish makeup, vernacular considered taboo or provocative, or performing domestic chores in ways considered provocative or low quality.[287] Until now, the charges brought (violating "family principles or values in Egyptian society," "inciting debauchery," "undermining family values") are legally vague by design. They do not name specific acts so much as target specific characteristics: women who are poor, publicly visible, and insufficiently disciplined in the performance of respectable femininity. The offences cited include dancing on livestreams, lip syncing, and monetizing TikTok "challenges and battles." The enforcement of family values in Egypt is, among other things, a class project targeting the women least able to access legal protection and most vulnerable to the reputational and economic consequences of prosecution.[288] The backdrop to these arrests is that trends and market dynamics have enabled some socially and economically marginalized individuals to gain visibility and financial opportunity through social media. Their identities and experiences become highly consumable forms of content, generating attention, audience engagement, and, in some cases, income. In Egypt, the moral panic surrounding family values masks a deeper interest in regulating and taxing the poor.

This moral framing is not limited to Egypt. In Jordan, where family values are not codified in law, public fears often arise around legislation set to enhance women's rights, such as the Personal Status Law, which has been framed as threatening the traditional role of the family. Parliament member Bayan El-Mehserie, representing the Islamic Action Front bloc and serving on the Women and Family Issues Committee, argued that incorporating reproductive rights into law would safeguard the sexual rights of all individuals, implying that it would promote homosexuality and ultimately threaten society.[289] In the lead-up to parliamentary elections, El-Mehserie positioned her bloc's agenda around the protection of legislation that "empowers all family members" while

opposing laws focusing on women perceived to weaken family relationships.[290] This strategy, which collapses women's rights claims into a single feared endpoint of homosexuality and societal collapse, is not unique to the SWANA region nor solely tied to religion or Islam specifically, as similar dynamics exist within other social forces that seek to preserve traditional societal and familial norms.[291]

What is distinctive in the current moment is the cultural diffusion of "family values" and the ways in which moral citizenship has been absorbed into the content creation economy and reproduced through social media. The "family" rhetoric promoted by countries such as Egypt and Jordan at the national level and in multilateral spaces is reproduced in everyday social media content through aesthetically curated imagery and lifestyle narratives. The Jordanian social media influencer Maram AlZu'bi, who takes pride in documenting her family life as a means of "staying true to her identity," is one example of a much wider phenomenon in which content creation becomes a new medium for the performance of traditionally gendered care roles that normalizes patriarchal norms (paradoxically, as a form of paid work) in line with the broader global trend of "tradwives."[292]

The role content creators play in celebrating patriarchal norms has a transnational quality, with trending content including "reverse" migration from the Global North to the Global South, such as French Muslim converts promoting migration to the UAE or Saudi Arabia, or praising these countries based solely on the perceived benefit of being majority-Muslim societies. Some such content implies that income earned in these Gulf countries is "halal," that one would not be exposed to "deviance" there, and that one could wear luxury products, own luxury cars, pay lower taxes, and invest more.[293] In both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, media laws and regulations contain broad provisions prohibiting content that violates public morals and principles of Islam, and content creators are also vetted through licensing schemes.[294] The space for self-expression is allocated exclusively to vetted individuals whose output endorses the state-imposed national brand.

Beyond promoting a lifestyle, these content creators are producing a narrative in which moral purity and economic aspiration go hand in hand, with the authoritarian social order of Gulf state's repackaged as the freedom to "live correctly"—the moral citizen and the aspirational consumer are the same figure. This content allows the national brand to find audiences that official state communications could never reach. In this convergence, the content economy has provided an effective distribution network for moralistic values.



Exclusion and othering: the trans-Mediterranean structure of violence

This section dives deeper into the exclusionary logic traced in engineering the "new citizen" in the previous section. Underpinning population control measures and laws policing morality follow race, gender, and class hierarchies that mutually reinforce each other, determining who can and should reproduce, and what knowledge and which identities should be disciplined. This section zooms in on anti-Black, anti-migrant, and anti-refugee racism as a central feature of contemporary nationalist discourse in the SWANA region, linked to states' quest for legitimacy, justification for increased securitization, repressive laws, and crackdown on dissent.

This section explores how, in Tunisia and Egypt, histories of colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement that pre-date European and Western interference interact and intersect with European colonialism and White supremacy to construct a contemporary nationalist imagination of the "demographically pure citizen." A closer look at the current anti-refugee discourses in Sudan reveals how the colonial legacies of borders and armed conflict have positioned citizenship as a political instrument of violence and exclusion. Following on, the section turns to an examination of the neo-colonial dynamics that shape bilateral migration agreements between the EU and North African countries, alongside their role in seeding demographic panics and actively producing discrimination and violence against African migrants in SWANA states. This section underscores the trans-Mediterranean nature of these state technologies, and how their structure of violence is grounded in the same racist and exclusionary logic of the "new citizen" and moral governance.

Reproductive racism as an analytical frame

When looking at racist, anti-migrant structures from a feminist perspective, it is key to understand how gender dynamics come into play. The concept of reproductive racism, as defined by antiracist feminist researcher Sophia Siddiqi, asks us to consider who constitutes the nation, how certain women are constructed as the conduits of reproducing a national identity, and how this inevitably invokes an excluded "other," and who becomes the threat we need to protect the nation from. Sophia Siddiqi's concept explains how a context of crisis and precarity helps the resurgence of notions of the traditional family. The anxiety around economics and the destruction of welfare states makes it very easy to direct a shared sense of injustice among citizens into hate toward a minority, toward "a threat." According to Sophia Siddiqi, reproductive racism involves a key contradiction: while all people are formally entitled to the same right to form and sustain a family, migrant women's ability to exercise this right is systematically restricted.[295]

When examining the following case studies relating to xenophobia and anti-Blackness in the SWANA region, it is important to understand that constructions of Whiteness operate differently from, while nevertheless interacting with, colonial European frames.[296]

When looking at anti-Blacknes as a frame to understand racial discrimination in the SWANA region, histories of colonialism,

imperialism, and enslavement that pre-date European and Western interference must be taken into account.[297]

In Tunisia, for example, where Black Tunisians make up at least a tenth of the population and have always suffered discrimination and marginalization, anti-Blackness is shaped by local histories of racialized enslavement via the trans-Saharan slave trade. As Leila Tayeb argues in her work on anti-Black racism in Tunisia, there is a "coexistence of a superficial North African pan-Africanism and anti-blackness seen in how blackness is repeatedly constructed as non-indigenous to North Africa".[298] This construction relies on the "'naturalised' geographic division of the Sahara desert that supposedly splits 'North' and 'sub-Saharan' Africa."[299] This boundary is political, ideological, and allows North African states to deny the African presence within their own borders while invoking African solidarity in international fora when it serves them.[300] Quoting examples from Egypt and Libya, and their structural attachment to Whiteness, Tayeb highlights how even during the height of Pan-Africanism, figures who advocated for a United States of Africa, such as Libyan head of state Muammar Gaddafi, continued to use anti-Black slurs to describe other African leaders. Gaddafi was also the first (of now many) Arab leaders to ask for EU funding to prevent the so-called "threat" of Europe becoming "no longer European, and even black."[301] It is important to place the examples that follow in the context of these dynamics, shaped by both global colonial histories and long histories of racial supremacy in the region.

Great Replacement Theory and reproductive racism in Tunisia

The Great Replacement Theory has become a key ideological export from European far-right circles to authoritarian regimes in North Africa.[302] On February 21, 2023, Tunisian President Kais Saied explicitly invoked the conspiracy theory in a nationally televised speech, asserting that a criminal plot was underway to alter Tunisia's demographic composition through the mass settlement of Black Africans.[303] Saied characterized migrants as a demographic, cultural, and security threat, alleging they bring "violence and crime" and aim to detach Tunisia from its Arab Islamic identity. His statement characterized the presence of Black Africans as both criminal and socially incompatible. Saied's call for military, security, and legal crackdowns, framed as defending sovereignty, legitimized state-sanctioned racial profiling, mass arrests of migrants, public hate campaigns, and also led to the criminalization of humanitarian actors and arrest campaigns against activists.[304] The speech marked a critical moment in which far-right European ideology, racial nationalism, and state violence converged in Tunisian policy.[305]

In July 2023, Tunisian parliamentarian Manel Bdida, publicly displayed a sign reading "Africans are planning to ruin the country through Sfax," a stark illustration of how racist and xenophobic narratives have become institutionalized within Tunisia's political class.[306] This comment circulated on social media, led to Sfax being framed as both a migrant hub and a site of national "contamination," and echoed the broader demographic paranoia propagated by President Saied's speech and nationalist parties' invoking of the Great Replacement Theory to justify repression.[307] Meanwhile, Black migrants in Sfax faced life-threatening conditions, left without food, water, or shelter in extreme heat.[308] This hate campaign prompted a wave of arbitrary arrests, racial-profiling raids, and mass detentions, including of children, based on a broader state-engineered regime of racialized exclusion in which legal residency is nearly impossible to obtain and migrants are criminalized for administrative irregularities.[309]

At the time of this state-sponsored campaign, the far-right Tunisian Nationalist Party (Parti Nationaliste Tunisien, PNT) also escalated its anti-migrant propaganda, invoking great replacement rhetoric to encourage property

owners and employers to exclude Black migrants.[310] The PNT actions offer a disturbing case study in the institutionalization of anti-Black racism and xenophobic populism in Tunisia. Despite being an extremist political actor, the PNT has gained unprecedented visibility and legitimacy since 2018 due to state recognition, enabling it to publicly promote calls for the expulsion of Black migrants, the numbers of whom it exaggerates.[311] Organizations such as the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights and Mnemty have highlighted the state's failure to enforce its own anti-discrimination legislation and its complicity in platforming the PNT's agenda, reflecting a dangerous normalization of racialized state violence.[312] The fact that police syndicates and social media content echo and reinforce this discourse further entrenches systemic anti-Blackness.[313]

Gendered and anti-Black state violence in Tunisia has been documented by feminist and anti-racist activists in terms that connect directly to the reproductive racism framework. In February 2025, Member of Parliament Fatma Mseddi, openly called for a "radical solution" to what she described as the "hemorrhage of births" among Black migrant women in Tunisia.[314] Her proposal to reintroduce birth control programs specifically targeting migrant women echoed global histories of coercive population control, from Nazi practices to US eugenic sterilization policies for Black, Indigenous, and women of colour, and Peru's forced sterilizations of Indigenous women.

In early 2026, Mseddi sent written questions to the Minister of Health asking for the number of births by Black migrant women in public and private health institutions in 2023, 2024, and 2025; whether childbirth, hospitalization, intensive care, and mother-infant follow-ups were paid by the state or patients; and whether birth registration procedures prevent "eventual implantation" of migrants in Tunisia.[315] While Black migrant women are accused of producing "demographic change" and taking up public resources, in reality, they face innumerable challenges and discrimination within the Tunisian healthcare system, including high costs, lack of prenatal care, and barriers to registering and vaccinating their children.[316] The fear of being arrested or deported has forced women to give birth in makeshift shelters, without adequate hygiene, obstetric, and neonatal care or prompt treatment in case of complications.[317] In the context of the EU's border externalization, violence against pregnant women is well documented. Women are denied healthcare in camps around Sfax, left to give birth outside without any medical help, vaccinations for their newborns, or food.[318]

Migrant women's reproductive autonomy is not seen as a right but as a security risk to be controlled. This discourse is based on the racialized notion of "hyperfertility" and "hypersexuality" of Black Africans, one rooted in a long history of racist and patriarchal tropes in Tunisia and globally. By labelling migrant motherhood as a demographic "danger," remarks like those of Mseddi reveal a dangerous convergence between authoritarianism, racism, and patriarchal control of women's bodies, especially Black women's bodies.[319] Physical attacks, racist online campaigns, and workplace exclusion continue to be part of daily life for many migrants. For Black migrants and refugees in Tunisia, sexual violence is prevalent as racism intersects with policing, impoverishment, housing insecurity, and border violence. Human rights organizations have documented systematic use of sexual violence at the borders by National Guard officers against Black migrant women and refugees.[320] These events show how state discourse, structural racism, and xenophobia converge, producing a violent ecosystem of racial nationalism in Tunisia that is backed, funded, and endorsed by European border policies.

Migration deals: how European border externalization funds anti-Black violence

The violence inflicted on African migrants is actively produced by bilateral migration agreements between the EU and North African countries, the neo-colonial dynamics of which are blatant. North African migration governance is shaped by the EU's externalization agenda, whereby migration control is outsourced to non-EU countries to prevent the arrival of irregular migrants to Europe.

Tunisia's 2023 agreement with the EU is a prime example. Europe allocated an immediate EUR 105 million to border security and agreed a package of EUR 900 million in macro-financial assistance, contingent on adherence to economic reforms set by the IMF. This process enables the EU to distance itself from the human rights violations resulting from border policing, while retaining control over these borders. As a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace documents: "Europe's externalization strategy channels cash into the security apparatuses of flailing authoritarians," leveraging economic crises to push migration deals that enforce border violence, in exchange for funding lifelines.[321]

Tunisia's growing practice of relying on zones of abandonment and extrajudicial expulsion, far from being condemned, have been celebrated in parliamentary statements, revealing the extent to which racialized population control has become a normalized state project in Tunisia's migration governance.[322] It is notable that Tunisia became a transit hub following the brutal crackdown on migrants by militias in Libya, which was itself supported by Italy, who trained and equipped various armed groups.[323]

Moreover, the EUR 7.4 billion EU-Egypt migration deal announced in March 2024 mirrors the EU's agreements with Tunisia and Mauritania, marking the consolidation of a regional strategy of border externalization. Framed as a "strategic partnership," the deal provides Egypt with loans, grants, and investment in exchange for increased efforts to limit migration to Europe.

The case of Sudan is also an interesting example of European border externalization and the production of conflict in Africa. As the number of young people crossing the Mediterranean Sea went up to tens of thousands by 2014, the EU initiated a process called the EU-Horn of



Africa Migration Route Initiative, which came to be popularly known as the Khartoum Process.[324] Similar to the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the Khartoum Process can be seen as an attempt to finance and mobilize countries to become Europe's "security belt," defending its borders. This funding does not—and is not meant to—end the conflict or the inequalities that lead people to take dangerous migration routes.

The consequences for Sudan are directly connected to the ongoing war in the country. The EU was among the actors that facilitated the development and political legitimacy of the RSF, the paramilitary group now fighting Sudan's army and contributing massively to the country's disintegration, both inside and outside Sudan. Through the Khartoum Process, the RSF was funded to patrol Sudan's borders and keep refugees inside the country, using terror and violence to force migrants back from the borders, detaining and deporting them, and perpetrating widespread sexual violence.[325] By 2017, the RSF was succeeding in keeping refugees inside the country, but the cost has been the strengthening and political empowerment of a paramilitary force that has now turned its violence against the Sudanese population itself.

The EU-North Africa migration deals have contributed to demographic panics and the demonization of migrants and refugees across North Africa, resulting in escalating violence against migrants and refugees, particularly Black Africans, in Tunisia, Sudan, and Libya.[326] While the EU promotes these migration agreements as means to stability and development, rights groups have denounced them as tools for outsourcing repression and criminalizing migrants and mobility. These deals do not address the root causes of migration, such as economic collapse, climate displacement, and war, but instead rely on authoritarianism to manage Europe's racial and demographic anxieties.[327] The migration deal architecture is not a separate issue from the analysis of state feminism, moral governance, and population control developed in this report. The logic that produces the "new citizen" in Egypt also produces the expelled migrant at the Tunisian border. The European partnerships that legitimize SWANA states' rebranding projects also fund the racialized violence that those projects require. Naming these connections is necessary to make visible the trans-Mediterranean structures of violence at play.



Egypt: demographic anxiety and Kemetic conspiracies

In Egypt, public discussion on refugees emphasizes the language of "demographic change," with refugees framed as part of a larger strategy to change Egypt's demography and population characteristics. Arguments used by the neo-pharaonic (aka Kemetic) movement, grounded in claims of the unbroken cultural and genetic lineage of "pure Egyptians" from pharaonic times, are gaining traction within the wider context of population control in Egypt and demographic obsession across the region.[328] The term Kemetic, referencing the ancient Egyptian word for Egypt, is increasingly mainstreamed in public discourses.[329]

In February 2024, on a popular evening television show, Samir Sabry, Rapporteur of the Private and Local Investment Committee of the National Dialogue, said "I fear that the refugee issue will affect the demographic composition of Egypt," adding that "certain areas of the country have changed and minorities have emerged in them."[330] In July of the same year, Dr. Mohamed Harbi of the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies wrote that the "refugee phenomenon impacts the culture of Egyptian society and is inevitably driving demographic change. Refugees enjoy all services available to citizens at the same cost, placing significant pressure on public services and utilities."[331] This discourse has mobilized Kemetic activists and others who believe that, as citizens, they have a role to play in driving refugees out of Egypt to save their country and boycotting refugee-owned businesses, particularly Syrian restaurants.[332] Taken together, the state benefits politically from this movement, with nationalist mobilization appearing to redirect public attention from the economic crisis that has unfolded under the regime.

The state's promotion of a neo-pharaonic national identity has been most strikingly seen in grand spatial and visual spectacles, such as The Pharaoh's Golden Parade mentioned in Chapter 1.[333] Recent years have also seen similar imagery surrounding the opening of Sphinx Avenue in Luxor, state-led initiatives to teach the ancient Egyptian language, and a new interest in pharaonic music.[334] Commentators have highlighted how the state's push for a neo-pharaonic national identity has enabled and amplified nationalist voices online.[335] Kemetic nationalists have launched extremely intimidating campaigns, with hashtags calling for the explusion of Syrian and Sudanese refugees and spreading stories about acts of violence within refugee communities.[336] These nationalist narratives also impact Nubian Egyptians, who are framed as naïve actors influenced by foreign powers, or worse, as implementers of foreign agendas such as Afrocentrism. **The symbiotic combination of state-led projects promoting pharaonic nationalism and emboldened racist movements has sparked intense conversations on identity inside Egypt**, put increased focus on Black Africans and "Afrocentrists" as national enemies, and encouraged polarization within a country in which the national identity is strongly tied to the central state's construction of it.[337]

Sudan: "deport the mercenaries" and anti-refugee dynamics

While Tunisia and Egypt reveal how demographic anxiety and anti-Blackness is used to justify violence against refugees and migrants, Sudan shows how the enforcement of colonial borders in the context of war and economic turmoil has shaped citizenship as an instrument for political and military legitimacy and gain. In this context, refugees and communities that live across these borders are easily recast as foreign infiltrators, or demographic threats.

Like many African countries, Sudan's borders were established through colonial rule and the country continues to suffer from ill-fated attempts at nation building.[338] As a result of colonial border making, many communities who primarily identify with their ethnic group found themselves divided between

Sudan and Chad; Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia; Sudan and South Sudan; and Sudan and Egypt. These communities have moved between countries and, in some instances, acquired citizenship from the Sudanese government in exchange for political loyalty and agreeing to fight rebel groups threatening the central state.[339] For example, during Sudan's involvement in the Yemen war alliance, the state granted citizenship to fighters from Sahel countries as part of the RSF recruitment policy for nomadic cross-border groups.[340]

In Sudan, the enforcement of colonial borders, war and economic turmoil has shaped citizenship as an instrument for political and military legitimacy and gain

Following the 2018 revolution, investigations exposed that citizenship documents had been provided to tens of thousands of individuals from neighbouring countries through corrupt deals with the Omar al-Bashir government.[341] The political use of citizenship encouraged a narrative that one of the objectives of the war was to change Sudan's demography and subjugate the population, as well as a discourse that the war is actually led by non-Sudanese against the indigenous people of Sudan.[342] These claims made their way into some women's rights circles, with one activist stating: "the demographic change in Sudan is due to the settlement of refugees in Khartoum through the sale of citizenship by the Rapid Support Forces militia ... this is one of the reasons why Sudanese are seeking refuge in neighbouring countries after foreigners occupied their homes."[343]

This discourse has intensified during the current war, as the RSF continued to recruit from its social bases across the border and refugees in Sudan, including South Sudanese refugees, joined its ranks as mercenaries. In 2025, the SAF military general, Yasir Al-Atta, told the press that "the majority of mercenaries fighting alongside the Sudanese paramilitary RSF are South Sudanese, representing 65% while the rest are of Libyan, Chadian, Ethiopian, Central African, Syrian and some Colombian nationalities, as well as members of Wagner affiliates."[344] With the rise of images, testimonies, and videos showing South Sudanese mercenaries fighting alongside the RSF, calls demanding their deportation and increased scrutiny of refugee camps in White Nile state have grown louder.[345]

The consequences for refugees have been significant. Refugees from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan have been targeted as criminals and RSF collaborators in state-led campaigns, describing them as "a cancer."[346] By July 2025, around 1,087 refugees had been removed from Khartoum, while 3,000 South Sudanese and 502 Ethiopians had been deported. Many were given no prior warning, even when they held residency papers or UNHCR refugee cards.[347] Some also reported arbitrary arrests, fines of up to USD 1000, or prison sentences of up to six months.[348] It was also reported that the SAF killed South Sudanese citizens following its recapture of Al-Jazeera state in central Sudan in 2025. While the SAF described the violence as "individual violations," human rights groups documented ethnically motivated attacks on people accused of supporting the RSF.[349]

Within the power struggle of a civil war backed by powerful states, "the other"—already arbitrarily constructed and marginalized because of colonial borders—has once again been weaponized. While cross-border mercenaries have indeed been recruited to the RSF, which continues to commit atrocities, this reality has been weaponized by the Sudanese state to cast all border communities, many of whom are displaced persons and refugees, as RSF infiltrators and fighters, leading those already marginalized to continue paying the price.

Conclusion

Chapter 2 traced the engineering of citizens as a tool of authoritarian control through which states attempt to regulate reproduction, morality, and "the family" via policies, laws, borders, and everyday forms of discipline. These become mutually reinforcing sites of gender, sexuality, race, and class hierarchies, used to define the desirable citizen while marking others as disposable. Through these structures, states determine who is encouraged to reproduce, who is a demographic threat, who should shoulder the responsibility for poverty, and who is cast as "immoral" and, ultimately, deserving of violence and discrimination.

The case studies from Tunisia and Egypt show that reproduction is one of the most direct sites where this disciplining takes place. Whether antinatalist or pronatalist, states attempt to engineer their demography and the characteristics of their citizens through an exclusionary logic and at the expense of the sexual and reproductive rights and bodily autonomy of the most marginalized. Far from seeing reproduction as a right that needs to be protected, states view reproduction as either as a vehicle for nation building, an obstacle to be bypassed in order to fulfil nationalist goals, or a product in a profit-generating industry. Meanwhile, the state does very little to foster the wellbeing of its people, or improve their material conditions.

In engineering the "new citizen," morality operates not merely as a cultural norm but as a political technology enforced through a combination of legislation, parliamentary inquiries, media campaigns, and informal social pressure. Broad concepts such as "morality" and "family values" are normalized to police and criminalize identities and behaviours that fail to adhere to notions of "respectability" defined by gender roles and class hierarchies. The emergence of influencers and lifestyle content creators, who create idealized images of patriarchal family life and "moralize" consumption, help make this disciplining desirable to the public.

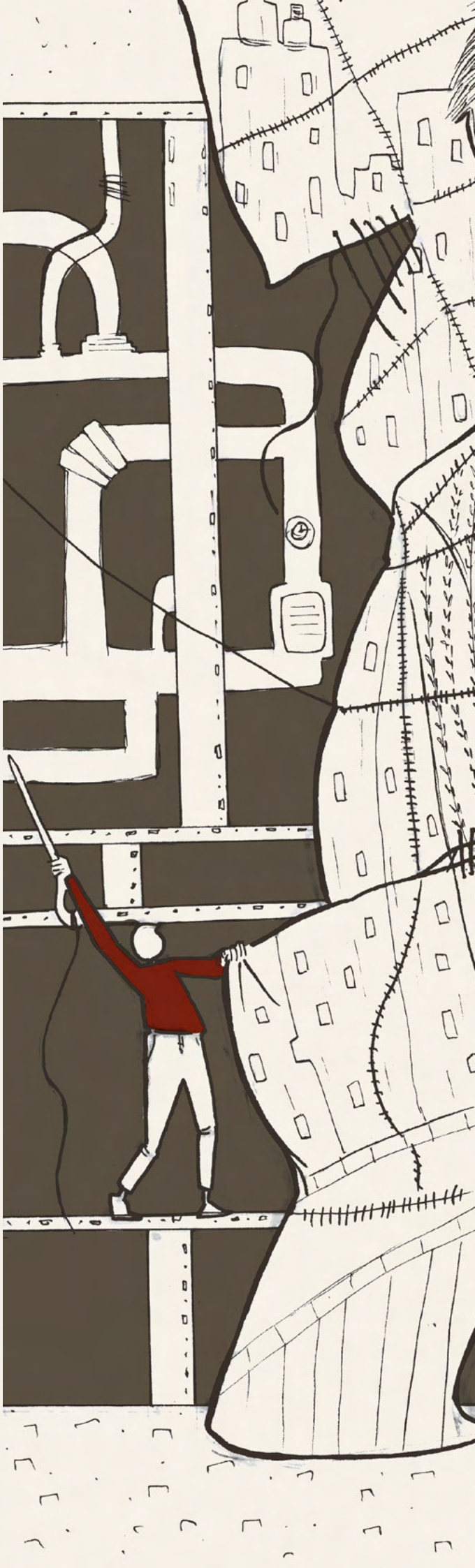
The process of engineering the "new citizen" also relies on fueling public panic over supposed demographic takeover, normalizing eugenics and the fortification of colonial borders, and thus producing "threatening outsiders": Black people, migrants, and refugees. The racist and exclusionary nature of this process needs to be understood not only through domestic authoritarianism and structures of racism and patriarchy, but also through the interaction of these with Global North powers. The same countries responsible for the demarcation of colonial borders and the military interventions that have shaped the war in Sudan and continue to fuel Israel's settler-colonial regime work with domestic regimes across the SWANA region, entrenching and reproducing racial violence as part of their own racist "nation-making" projects. The externalization of Europe's borders through migration deals exemplifies this: North African states have turned into security buffers, with their authoritarian regimes receiving funding and political legitimacy in exchange for securitizing Europe's borders.

Human rights violations in the SWANA region are not "exceptional," but deeply embedded in global systems of power

As feminists, our task is to understand gender and sexuality as part of a bigger structure: the economic dependence, militarization of borders, and geopolitical crises created by the inequitable global economic and imperial order empowers

authoritarian regimes in the region and erodes people's capacity for economic and political self-determination. When the ruling class of previously colonized countries is unable to meet the basic needs of the people, leading to discontent, state apparatuses quickly adapt to fortify repression and crackdown on dissent to maintain control. Feminists from the Global South have highlighted, time and time again, how SRHR are often among the first rights sacrificed as "Western" aspirations—regressive gender ideologies and the scapegoating of marginalized populations are also used as easy tools of control.[350]

In this moment of Israeli and US bombardment of Lebanon and Palestine, imperial domination is exposed more bluntly, with gender and sexuality used as political pawns. Pride flag over rubble—Israel's genocide captures how this violence, enabled by complete impunity and support, reveals the façade of using economic domination or coercion to impose "women's rights" or human rights compliance. A feminist understanding of how the "new citizen" is engineered must be grounded in material conditions and transnational solidarity, recognizing that human rights violations in the SWANA region are not "exceptional," but deeply embedded in global systems of power.



Conclusions



This report began with a question about rebranding, asking why Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt have invested so heavily in constructing a particular brand for international audiences. The examples examined have illustrated that the image-making and the violence of citizen engineering both constitute the same political project. While addressed to different audiences, they are both sustained by the same architecture of power and serve the same ultimate purpose: insulating authoritarian governance from accountability, perpetuating extractive economic arrangements, and suppressing the feminist and social movements that most directly threaten both.

Chapter 1 examined how this project operates outward: sports investments, cultural and gender diplomacy, state feminism, humanitarian branding, green city narratives, the use of PR firms, and influencer campaigns. These are deliberate strategies backed by sovereign wealth funds, managed by a corporate communications infrastructure, and calibrated to the specific audiences whose approval each regime seeks. The brand is not a supplement to governance, but a dimension of it, organizing how power appears to those outside its immediate reach. This branding points to a trend we are seeing globally: as states prioritize investor confidence and reputation management, it is not only that corporations take on roles once held by the state, but state governance itself takes on the form of a corporation and increasingly distances itself from accountability.

Chapter 2 examined how the same state objectives are reached internally. The engineering of the "new citizen," through population policies, moral governance, racial exclusion, and the disciplining of bodies, families, and reproductive futures, is the domestic face of this political logic. When Egypt prosecutes TikTok creators for immorality while projecting women's empowerment internationally, Tunisia's president deploys the Great Replacement Theory against Black African migrants while negotiating EU migration partnerships, and Israel subsidizes Israelis' fertility while systematically destroying the conditions for Palestinian reproduction—these are not contradictions, they are the system working as designed.

Gender is one key thread connecting these two technologies: states selectively elevate women's empowerment as a marker of modernity and progress for international audiences while simultaneously disciplining bodies, reproduction, and sexuality. Underlying both is a shared logic in which corporations and states view bodies through the lens of labour, as consumers, reproducers of future citizens, and symbols of national modernity. As such, narratives and policies related to gender and sexuality become malleable strategic tools serving economic growth, demographic goals, regime stability, or international legitimacy.

This report has highlighted that the SWANA states examined have not developed their rebranding strategies in isolation. Rather, they crafted these strategies within a global political economy that rewards image management, tolerates documented rights violations in exchange for geopolitical and neoliberal economic "stability," and provides the financial, technological, and normative infrastructure that sustains these brands. Israel has demonstrated over decades that this architecture can endure even under conditions of genocide.

As such, the report findings reaffirm the need to go beyond simplistic notions of "anti-rights" and "anti-gender," particularly as they manifest in international spaces, where states are often sorted into binary categories of "pro-" or "anti-rights." Rather than exceptionalizing the SWANA region, we hope that this report's findings contribute to the global picture of the gender dynamics of authoritarianism. We also hope, through elucidating some of the links between state oppression in SWANA and Global North states, to prompt reflections on how

feminist movements can better resist authoritarianism domestically and transnationally. Given the limits of this project, we also hope future research will examine the nuances of how global financial institutions and ongoing imperialism interact with authoritarianism in general, as well as with specific examples of state and non-state resistance to rights in the SWANA region and beyond.

Feminist knowledge production is among the most important tools available for rendering this system visible. While visibility alone is insufficient, making the system visible is a necessary precondition for cultivating the political imagination required to transform it. The struggles named in this report are not parallel struggles that can be supported in isolation. The struggles for reproductive justice, for sexual and bodily autonomy, and for racial justice and migration rights in SWANA are all interconnected. Resistance to Egypt's moral governance is linked to resistance against the global PR industry that renders authoritarian governance internationally legible as reform. Resistance to Gulf greenwashing in international negotiations is linked to support for feminists repressed by those regimes domestically. Resistance to anti-Blackness in Tunisia is linked to resisting the far right in Italy and the violence of Fortress Europe. These connections are material, financial, and institutional, and they require feminist movements to build forms of transnational solidarity are as far-reaching as the violence they resist.



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8. Throughout this report, "Global North" and "Western" describe a shared set of structural, financial, normative, and institutional relationships that shape and benefit from SWANA states' rebranding. We recognize the role of the US as distinct because of its military bases, security guarantees, arms relationships, energy interests, and the oil-dollar system. Where the analysis turns on this specific set of levers, we name the US directly rather than folding it into the broader category.

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182. Ibid.

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