When it comes to nation-building strategies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the role of religion, and particularly of sectarian differences, is difficult to ignore. In the below, we explore the ways in which Bahrain and Kuwait, two states with sizable Shi'i populations and relatively active legislatures, formulate national narratives around these sectarian differences.

Bahrain is unique among its GCC neighbours in that it is a majority Shi'i state, ruled by a Sunni monarchy. As a result, discussion of sectarian divides within the country has often been at the forefront of analysis of the state’s domestic political landscape, as well as discussions about national identity and heritage. In terms of political activity, Shi'i organisations have traditionally been more outspoken in voicing opposition to the regime, while Sunni political blocs have tended to be, or have been presumed to be, primarily loyal to the regime. While these generalisations are by no means accurate, the fact that they exist, and remain widespread, has altered ways in which the Bahraini state has sought to forge national identities and has worked to contain opposition to its narrative of state formation and considerations about Bahraini nationalism.

Bahrain houses an estimated 60-70 percent Shi'i population, whose families inhabited Bahrain prior to the arrival of the al-Khalifa ruling family and other powerful Sunni families who arrived from the Arabian Peninsula.[1] While the 2011 uprisings were seen as the turning point in the state’s relationship with a politically mobilised Shi'i population, Bahrain in fact has a long history of political mobilisation and crackdown, with a suspension of the constitution in 1975, widespread arrests of members of the Shi'i population in 1981 amid claims of Iran-inspired attempts to overthrow the monarchy, another campaign of arrests in 1994 following Shi'a-led demonstrations for political reform and employment options, and the most recent crackdown on protests in 2011 with Saudi military assistance. Sectarian cleavages, then, have crossed with political divides, leading to considerable tension and making sectarianism an important strategy for the ruling family to maintain control, particularly over a Shi'i population which it deems politically problematic.
NATIONALISM AND HERITAGE IN BAHRAIN

The historical narrative of Bahrain itself is the subject of contestation, largely due to sectarian dynamics. The arrival of the al-Khalifa ruling family to Bahrain in 1783 is commonly referred to as “al-fātih”, or the opening. The same term, notably, was also used to describe the fight of seventh-century Muslim armies to effect ‘fath al Islam’, or the opening of Islam, which Gengler refers to as “a euphemism for the conversion and, upon refusal, subjugation of non-Muslim peoples.”[2] The use of this term in the Bahraini national context is therefore politically and religiously charged, implying that the al-Khalifa and their Sunni tribal allies essentially “opened” Bahrain and its indigenous Shi'i population to the “true” Islam.[3] The use of such language to describe Bahrain's history thus reinforces sectarian divisions, excluding Shi'i citizens from the national myth and from determinations about who is a “true” Bahraini.[4]

On the Shi'i side, pre-al-Khalifa history is often glorified and used as “a symbol and a legitimizing force of their contemporary struggle for a greater influence over Bahraini society in the face of continued foreign domination”. [5] Members of the indigenous Shi'i population often refer to themselves as Baharna to symbolise their status as the island's original inhabitants, rather than using the modern (and al-Khalifa-propagated) term Bahraini.[6] Such efforts to maintain the Shi'i narrative have fuelled state repression, for instance through the banning of many books about pre-independence politics that emphasise the importance of Shi'i inhabitants in building present-day Bahrain.[7] As Gengler explains, “[t]hat the authorities would expend such resources in rebranding the state away from its Shi'i roots, the Baharna reason, only goes to prove the validity of their version of the country's contested history and, by extension, the legitimacy of their attendant claims to a collective right in political decision making.”[8]

Notably, Bahrain's National Day and most important nation-wide holiday, 16 December, coincides not with independence from British protectorate rule (14 August 1971), but rather is linked to the al-Khalifa ruling family: it marks the day that the former King Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa came to power in 1961. By centring Bahrain's founding narrative on the ruling family, the national myth becomes Sunni-focussed as well. Linking national days to events involving members of the ruling family is common throughout the Gulf, perhaps because these states relatively recently became independent or because political power is largely concentrated into the hands of ruling families of these states. Either way, the message in the Bahraini context is that national identity involves recognition of the political leadership, which in this case is, notably, Sunnis.

A large part of emerging Gulf nationalism in the present day involves heightened military might, particularly the implementation of conscription, as chronicled by Diwan. [9] Perhaps because of its sectarian composition, Bahrain has not filed legislation approving conscription like its neighbours Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. At present, Shi'i Bahrainis are not allowed to join the Bahrain Defence Force.[10] And in the words of Barany, the BDF “is not a national army, but rather the army of Sunni Muslim state and the regime.”[11] The force includes foreign nationals, yet excludes citizens who are Shi'i, perhaps because it is critical to domestic protection, while guarantors of external security lie outside of Bahrain – primarily in Saudi Arabia.[12]

Museums and heritage festivals are also becoming increasingly important – and expensive – components of national narratives, with large state-funded national museums increasingly popular throughout the Gulf. As Gengler observes, Bahrain's sprawling National Museum “gives a prominent place to the Sunni-dominated activity of pearl fishing while neglecting the quintessentially Shi'i agricultural sector, most obviously the widespread cultivation of date palms, which was the basis of the Baharna's existence for the centuries preceding the discovery of oil. Even Bahrain's prehistoric stone burial mounds, which some prominent Salafi politicians have suggested should be destroyed for their pre-Islamic origins, are represented quite extensively, with an entire full-sized mound and pieces of others having been reconstructed inside a large exhibit.”[13] The exclusion of Bahrain's Shi'i past in the national museum, as well as in national historical narratives mentioned above, appears to be very carefully managed in order to shore up a national identity that preserves the primacy of the Sunni ruling family and its allies.
KUWAIT: THE PROMINENCE OF THE BEDOUIN-SETTLED DIVIDE

Kuwait provides an interesting comparison with Bahrain. Indeed, Kuwait also has a relatively large Shi'i community, yet that community is often presented as successfully integrated into broader Kuwaiti society, with rhetoric from the Amir Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah after the bombing of a Shi'i mosque in 2015 claimed by the so-called Islamic State (26 people killed) indicative of the level of integration in that state. Interestingly, these two states are also those in the GCC with the strongest legislative authorities, making sectarian divisions and the size of sectarian populations politically charged. Hafidh and Fibiger have highlighted that both states, despite housing legislative authorities, also contain informal networks, which are often used due to general discontent or disillusionment with the institutionalised tools of the state.

With Bahrain's crackdown on opposition political blocs having worsened since 2011 to the point of excluding opposition groups in the present legislature, this informal network is even more important. Kuwait's legislature houses two major Shi'i Islamist political blocs, which are integrated into the political system formally, in the way that Bahrain's Shi'i groups were in the past. These political blocs have a reputation for being politically loyal to the government and have tended to eschew coalitions with opposition movements, particularly since 2008; Shi'i blocs actually held more seats than any others during a widespread opposition boycott between 2012 and 2016. The fact that Shi'i groups contest elections in both Bahrain and Kuwait makes it more difficult to demonise them, especially since they often form coalitions with other ideological political blocs, meaning that their participation can be a powerful means of breaking down sectarian barriers.

In terms of social barriers, Kuwaiti heritage sites tend to emphasize the cosmopolitan history of Kuwait, particularly Kuwait City as a central port and, as a result, something of a melting pot of people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. As Hafidh and Fibiger put it, “[a] popular myth of state origin in Kuwait is that all Kuwaitis are originally from elsewhere and have formed Kuwait together.”

Despite this diversity, the majority of the Kuwaiti population is of Sunni and Arab origin, making the major division in Kuwait exists not between Sunni and Shi'i, but rather between fully urbanised long-time citizens (hadar) and more recently naturalised tribal figures (badū, or bedouin), many of whom received Kuwaiti nationality only in the 1960s. A hadar is defined as a Kuwaiti “whose forefathers lived in Kuwait before the launch of the oil era (1946) and worked as traders, sailors, fishermen, and pearl divers.” Badū, in contrast, are (or are widely perceived as) “immigrants, mostly from Saudi Arabia, who used to live on animal pastoralism” and relocated to Kuwait between 1960 and 1980. Kuwaiti citizenship policies have sharpened the badū-hadar division, perhaps more than any other Gulf state. Kuwaiti nationality was initially defined in 1948 as those residents whose family had been in Kuwait since 1899, as well as people born in the state and Arabs or Muslims who had lived in the state for up to ten years. Following the state's first census in 1957, it was revealed that 45 percent of the population was expatriate; as a result, the 1959 nationality law did not grant citizenship to people who had been born in Kuwait or to long-term residents (thus generating the bidūn jinsiyya issue), but only to those settled in the state by 1920.

In addition to legislation on citizenship, state housing policies between the 1950s and 1980s led to a physical segregation highlighting the existing divisions between badū and other Kuwaiti citizens. Bedouins were housed in areas that were “self-contained,” obviating the need for them to enter the city and thus isolating them socially from the hadar population. Because they generally lived in less developed, outlying areas, the badū received state services of lower quality than did city dwellers, as well as smaller housing plots; they also lacked access to healthcare and education until the end of the 1980s, though some new housing projects followed the Iraqi invasion in the late 1990s. Spatial separation has therefore strengthened the cleavage between these two populations, while the same geographical separation does not exist for Kuwaiti Sunnis and Shi'as.

When it comes to the construction of heritage and national myths in states of the GCC, sectarian divisions are difficult...
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to ignore. Oftentimes the contestation between so-called ‘original’ and more recently arrived citizens is salient, as illustrated by both the Bahraini and Kuwaiti cases. The desire to claim national cultural authenticity is particularly important as new heritage projects and efforts to spur nationalist discourse are surfacing throughout the Arabian Peninsula. These projects also have considerable political consequences, as illustrated above, and thus can affect policymaking more broadly.

2. Ibid., p. 39.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 40.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 41.
8. Ibid., p. 42.
11. Ibid., 4.
12. Ibid., 9.
15. Ibid., pp. 116-117.
17. Courtney Freer, “Kuwait’s Post-Arab Spring Islamist Landscape: The End of Ideology?” Issue Brief, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, 8 August 2018.
20. Ibid., p. 172.
23. Ibid., p. 21.
24. Ibid.

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