IDENTITY-SEEKERS: NATIONHOOD AND NATIONALISM IN THE GULF MONARCHIES

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The Gulf monarchies have been experiencing deep economic, social and generational changes; at the same time, open rivalries and subtle competitions are undermining the Arab Gulf (khaleeji) identity as a shared value. National history museums, art exhibitions, traditional festivals and military symbols are increasingly adopted by the governments as top-down tools of nation-building. What are the strategies to instil national awareness, and in which direction? How are concepts like citizenship, nationhood and belonging redefined in the post-oil era? Why has the GCC crisis triggered rising nationalism among neighbouring monarchies? This ISPI Dossier analyses the cultural, symbolic and collective vectors of nation-building in the area, highlighting state-led engineering projects to explore what “nation” currently means in the Gulf monarchies.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)
The outbreak of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis on 5th June 2017 led to dramatic polarization between United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain plus Egypt and, on the other hand, Qatar, due to Doha's alternative foreign policy supporting Muslim Brothers' political ideology, especially during the Arab spring revolts. On the other side of the GCC, Kuwait tries to multiply its mediator efforts and Oman has strengthened its commercial relations with Qatar to avoid its isolation.

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The boycott against Qatar became the stage of confrontation for a new generation of GCC leaders, who publicly antagonized one the other on regional policies orientations, thus challenging the long-standing traditional caution in royal dealings and practices.[1]

Thus, this GCC crisis serves more to the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud (MBS) to shape a new assertive foreign policy tone in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, rather than being a pure nationalist narrative.

Crown prince Mohammed actually promotes a renewed national narrative in continuity with kings Fahd (1982-2005) and Abdullah’s heritage (2005-2015). Both former rulers emphasized secular identifications within the collective Saudi identity in order to strengthen domestic legitimacy, which relied only on the Islamic register that became deficient, especially after the second Gulf war. King Fahd was the one who encouraged the most the Islamic imagery related to the Wahhabi Saudi salafist uniform inside and outside the Kingdom.[2] He also started the promotion of Najdi cultural heritage after the unprecedented domestic defy led by sahwa clerics[3] in early Nineties against the US army arrival on the Saudi soil. The aim was to elevate the Najdi folklore through the establishment of the Al Janadriyya festival as a national reference, despite this is related only to the central province, Najd (the geographical origin of Al Saud family and the Wahhabi clergy).
As for King Abdullah, he was the first to promote cultural Saudi heritage through development of tourism: he rehabilitated the archeological Nabatean site of Madâ’in Sâlih classified in 2008 by Unesco. The historic city of Jeddah followed the same path on 2014, and before that, King Abdullah decided to restore the Dir‘iyyah district, historic fiefdom of the Al Saud family. Therefore, the renewed national narrative promoted by MBS follows up the rewriting of Saudi national history in turning away, although gradually, from the Wahhabi heritage. Nevertheless, under kings Fahd and Abdullah, the first intention was to enhance the Al Saud Najdi reference as a national one. For the young crown prince, the new national narrative is functional to his ambition to build a Saudi modern nation, breaking with the traditional system where the royal family as a whole was the core of the regime[4].

THE AMBITION TO BUILD A “VIBRANT” NATION[5]

Mohammad Bin Salman permanently refers to his Grandfather’s model who created the modern Saudi State: doing so, he projects himself as the one who will build the modern Saudi Nation, but with his Vision 2030 at the core[6], while his family and Islam will not serve anymore as ultimate references. The crown prince aspires to embrace youth into a future nation that will not obey to the traditional royal family as an institution stemming from tribal tradition and referring exclusively to Wahhabism. Instead, the absolute loyalty will goes to him and to his Vision 2030 as the ultimate reference to the future Nation.

MBS retook the secular narrative introduced by king Fahd and mainly developed by king Abdullah. But he went far beyond in rehabilitating pre Islamic sites (al-‘Ula with Madâ’in Sâlih and other ancient millenary sites in Hâ’il, Northern province or Al Ahsa, Eastern province), as parts of the long history of the Arabian Nation narrative. Crown prince Mohammed’s readiness to encourage public cultural events is also a clear sign of his political will to emancipate from the original Saudi-Wahhabi pact that used to regulate politics and society[7]. Boosting culture, sports, entertainment, and relegating religious police from its responsibility to regulate public social control (as occurred with the Royal decree of 13 April 2016) are major keys at stake for MBS’ empowerment. In the same way, new institutions (a royal commission, a new ministry of culture) are dedicated to regulate culture and heritage alongside with institutions devoted to sports and entertainment; all are supervised by his close-knit friends and royal peers of the same generation.

MBS does not oppose to religion and the Wahhabi clergy as a component of the Saudi identity, but he contests the monopolistic control of the religious establishment on society: he aims to control and monopolize society through his inner circle. This top-down approach intends to encouraging a youth cultural identity, with specific socialization and leisure for a generation mainly attached in communicating through social media.

The different qualitative interviews I conducted mainly in Riyadh but also in Jeddah during MBS period ascension to power (from May 2016 to December 2017) with young Saudis under 30 years old were quite illustrative to the systematic approach the prince adopted towards this young public. He promoted a new Saudi generational identity relying on shared cultural references, first with his non-profit foundation MISK, created in 2011.[8]

In this context, celebrating events such as the National Day on 23 September 2018, festivity unprecedentedly celebrated at the King Fahd Stadium and with gender mixing, emphasizes this new nationalistic credo. This secular celebration is nevertheless considering being contrary to Islam precepts by the conservative Wahhabi orthodoxy.

NATIONALISM AND HYPER NATIONALISM AFTER THE GULF CRISIS OF JUNE 2017

Crown prince Mohammed promotes patriotic and nationalistic rhetoric to foster a more secular atmosphere by encouraging broader nationalism and, at same time, reducing archaic traditions and “extremist” Islamist ideas[9] and religious control over society. MBS refers to 1979
as the main breaking point period of the contemporary history of his country, when political Islam and Wahhabism were at the climax, so deep-rooted during the Eighties in all fields of the Saudi society: his aim is to recover public social life in the Kingdom as it was before this date.

The crisis with Qatar gives to the crown prince the opportunity to spread on its firm belief in order to tackle and silence Islamist “extremism”: thus following his Emirati mentor, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), who targets mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. MBZ is actually the one who runs the confrontational action against the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional offshoots, considering them the roots of Islamic radicalism and extremism, with Qatar as the main financial and state supporter. In the same footpath, crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman considers this ideology as the worst enemy of the Saudi nation and the Muslim world, although the King and his advisers in the Royal palace do not share entirely the same belief.

Therefore, on the domestic agenda, any activist or sympathizer of Muslim Brotherhood’s ideas is nowadays charged of being a traitor and accused of collusion with the enemy (that is to say Qatar). This situation is unprecedented in the Kingdom: authorities use a nationalist narrative to label any person supposed to infringe red lines. Anyone criticizing or from the guidelines fixed by the crown prince on domestic or foreign policy issues becomes a traitor to the nation, as demonstrated by the arrests of tens of pacific activists, intellectuals and clerics on September 2017 and with the feminist activists arrested on May and June 2018.

Therefore, the crisis with Qatar added to the process of radical transformation of the former dynastical monarchy into a vertical and reinforced authoritarian power: this has been paving the way to hyper nationalism and to disruptive temptations towards despotism, as illustrated with the dramatic episode of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi on 2nd October 2018. The hostile narrative against the Iranian regime also serves the enflaming nationalist reaction in the Kingdom, since Iran is widely perceived by the Saudis as an existential threat to Kingdom’s national security through its support to the Houthis in Yemen.

As a result, the new Saudi leadership promotes patriotic and nationalist rhetoric to build a strong nation through two main dimensions. First, it uses the rewriting of a national narrative based on secularism and long history, for instance promoting archaeological sites: therefore, Islamic identity is still prominent but is no more the unique reference. Now, the nation is associated with long and millenary history and no more just the cradle of Islam. Second, a foreign policy marked by crises (Qatar, the Yemen war and Iran being the worst regional threat) serves as a tool to exacerbate the other face of nationalism, inflaming the rhetoric on regional crises.


8. “MISK Foundation objective is to captivate best skilled young’s from 18 to 35 in new creative digital media, technology, art and culture, empowering Saudi youth to become participants in the future economy”, interview with Shima Hamiduddin (executive CEO at MISK), March 2017, Riyadh.
9. See this interview with MBS: “We will not wait 30 more years of archaism to reform….”, The Economist, 6 January 2016.
In their efforts to prepare for a post-petroleum era, Gulf monarchies are scrambling to update their strategies of citizen and nation-building. The challenge is significant. In the past, such strategies emphasized the distribution of resource wealth. Rulers built cradle-to-grave welfare states, often in previously impoverished societies, for which citizens were generally very grateful. While the provision of material security and benefits was not the only driver of citizen loyalty — and ruling families certainly drew from other sources of legitimacy — it was a powerful and very concrete way of binding citizens to their new state in the decades after independence. It also built profitably on earlier traditions. "The perception of the ruler as a provider was not novel in the Arabian context," Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed explains, "Oil only consolidated what had already been the foundation of rule, namely ‘generosity’." [1]

Now well into the 21st century, however, the distributional approach to citizen and nation-building is coming under growing strain. First, dwindling oil and gas resources along with the volatility of global markets mean that Gulf regimes may not be able to sustain their generous welfare systems, which are far more extensive than those outside of the Gulf often realize. Beyond education, healthcare, and other basic services, for example, many citizens expect a well-paid government job upon graduating from college, or even high school. Second, the early approach was not democratic in nature, and thus at odds with worldwide demands for greater political inclusiveness. As in many resource-rich states, the implicit social contract in Gulf monarchies is a rent-based one, with governments providing for citizens in exchange for their acquiescence to a generally authoritarian status quo.

In response to these looming challenges, Gulf rulers have sought to adapt their strategies of citizen and nation-building. How can they maintain citizen loyalty when citizens expect economic benefits that may not be sustainable? Or when citizens demand political rights that rulers long accustomed to top-down governance are unwilling to offer?

One of the most enthusiastic reformers has been the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Governing elites there have engaged in an unprecedented social engineering cam-
Campaign aimed at reshaping citizenship norms, particularly in favor of greater economic self-reliance. The new citizenship ideal combines economic, civic, and cultural activism with continued political quiescence. It is essentially a vision of the citizen as loyal entrepreneurial bourgeois, melding elements of liberalism, neoliberalism, globalism, and authoritarianism. Citizens are expected to contribute more actively to their country’s economic development, to start businesses and stop expecting government jobs, to support their local communities, and to embrace a more open and cosmopolitan cultural milieu, without demanding any changes to the political system.

As in other cases of authoritarian social engineering, the vehicles for it have included substantial education reform, changes in public symbolism, and state-sponsored spectacles that teach and valorize the new citizenship ideal. Public schooling, for example, now pushes critical thinking, English, and market skills with lessened emphasis on religion and the humanities. Education reformers say they do not want students to passively memorize material, but to learn actively, prepare for more demanding careers outside of the government sector, and contribute to problem-solving in their communities. New civics programs emphasize values of responsibility and tolerance.

Public symbolism aims to imbue concepts such as work and citizenship with new meaning. In Vision 2021, the national strategy document, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the country’s president, explains in the introduction: “Work is a true criterion of citizenship. It is evidence of sincerity and loyalty. We all share the responsibility of building this country, protecting its sovereignty, and safeguarding the gains.” The strong implication is that being a good citizen requires working hard and contributing. At the same time, little mention is made of the “rights” side of the citizenship equation — that is, what citizens should expect in return.

Work in the private sector, in particular, is being recast not only as potentially patriotic, but also an activity that is uniquely personally fulfilling, in the Weberian sense. Young people are being told that government jobs are dull and uninspiring, and that to find fulfillment, they should start their own businesses or seek to prove themselves in private sector careers. For example, Dubai introduced the Young Entrepreneurs Competition in 2005, where a common slogan that can be found in large colorful letters on banners and other paraphernalia seeking to encourage entrepreneurialism is: “Don’t look for a job. Start your own.”

How is this social engineering faring? Is it working as leaders intend? In the UAE, research suggests mixed results.[2] A comparison of students in regular government schools versus government schools in which the social engineering reforms were fully implemented found evidence that the reforms are boosting nationalism and love of country, while inspiring stronger ideals of tolerance and community responsibility. Such results are aligned with social engineering goals as described above. But the research also found evidence of unintended consequences in the form of an increase in political and economic demands, including perceptions of a right to a government job.

What can we learn from the UAE’s efforts to update strategies of citizen and nation-building for a post-oil era? Perhaps the most important lesson is that existing citizenship attitudes are neither as rigid as theorists of the rentier state suggest nor as malleable as optimistic social engineers expect. Through their social engineering efforts, Gulf reformers may be able to encourage some changes in rentier citizenship norms. The evidence suggests that UAE social engineers were able to foster greater citizen engagement from a social and civic perspective. Yet the economic core of the rentier citizenship model appears to be more rigidly ingrained, even inclined to ossify further. Norms of civic engagement, in short, may be easier to inculcate than norms of economic engagement. The latter may be less amenable to social engineering alone, and will likely require a broader and more inclusive political process to fundamentally alter.

OMAN: A STATE ELABORATING A NATION

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Oman in the not-too-distant past could be described as a nation searching for a viable state, whereas now it is more a state seeking to deepen the nation. Among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Oman stands alone in enjoying an ancient feeling of nation. The national identity of the smaller states is in large part a creation of the last few decades while Saudi Arabia is a collection of disparate regional identities cobbled together over the course of less than a century. Oman, on the other hand, has existed as a recognized geographical and cultural entity encompassing eastern Arabia for several millennia.

The idea of Oman is not the same thing as the present nation-state of Oman. Until very recently, Oman as a geographical and cultural entity included the Oman Coast, later known as the Pirate Coast, then the Trucial Coast, and now the United Arab Emirates. But traditionally it did not include the southern region of Dhufar (with its historic links to the eastern regions of what is now Yemen), now part of the sultanate. The present nation-state is a much more recent phenomenon and not only owes much to the creation of the Al Bu Sa’id state in the 18th century but, more directly, it also correlates with the accession of Sultan Qaboos and the nahdah or “renaissance” he set in motion. This process was comparable to the emergence of the independent emirates of the Gulf around 1971. Thus, the creation of a modern national identity coterminous with the Sultanate of Oman has been only a recent development.

The core of Omani identity through the ages has revolved around several themes. One of these is its Arabness, perhaps ever since immigrating Arab tribes toppled Persian suzerainty during the Islamization of Oman. Another is the Ibadi sect, predominant in Oman since the early Islamic period and given political, as well as religious, representation through the Ibadi imamate. The Ibadi distinctiveness of Oman and the legitimacy of the imamate prevailed even though Ibadis constitute only about half of the population; doctrinal and practical differences between Ibadis and Sunnis are not substantial. A third theme is that of tribes, which constituted the constellation of constituencies that formed the backbone of the Ibadi imamate. These three themes supported broad proto-national responses to in-
vations by the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries, by the Persians in the 18th century, and by the Wahhabis in the 19th century. These strands of Omani history are indelibly woven into the education and consciousness of all Omanis today.

The present sultanate (as the state of the Al Bu Sa'id dynasty) has sought to encompass this proto-national identity from its beginning. But its inherent difficulty in doing so was due to its loss of Ibadi legitimacy (accompanied by persistent attempts to restore the imamate in Oman) and its dependence on outside backing. Even though the present Oman was physically unified during the reign of Sa'id b. Taymur (r. 1932-1970), it was not unified in a coherent national identity until the post-1970 period. In this sense, the reign of Sa'id's son Qaboos marks the beginnings (even as it inherits some earlier stirrings) of a true primary national identity, building on and transforming existing tribal and regional identities.

The formation of the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF) and its role and presence in both northern Oman and Dhufar in the 1960s and 1970s was one of the first instruments forging national identity. While obviously this involved military action in both northern Oman and Dhufar, its deeper and longer-lasting impact centered on recruitment of soldiers (and civilian support) throughout the country and from all communities. During this period, recruits were socialized by interaction with Omanis from other tribes and regions and most received their first education – including writing and technical skills – from the SAF. Nearly simultaneously, Petroleum Development Oman served a similar role in socialization and education for its employees. The creation of a nascent bureaucracy in the 1970s continued this formative process while the emergence of government institutions providing services and regulation deepened the national process. The end of the Dhufar War in 1975 and Dhufar's true integration into Oman for the first time eroded distinctions between Omanis and Dhufaris and sealed the bond of national identity as Omanis.

The new Qaboos government consciously chose to enhance the burgeoning sense of national identity through a cult of personality. Certainly, Omanis were sincerely grateful to Sultan Qaboos for the changes sweeping the country: in the early years of his reign, Omanis universally and spontaneously remarked that before Qaboos there was nothing and that everything happened after his accession to the throne. An important difference between Oman and its monarchical neighbors is that the latter centered their personality cults upon their ruling families. Thus, streets, airports, hospitals, universities bore the names of various senior figures in each family. In Oman, there was only one personality thus lionized and so there are Port Sultan Qaboos, Madinat Sultan Qaboos, Sultan Qaboos Highway, Sultan Qaboos Mosque (and their iteration in principal towns throughout the sultanate), and other examples with his name.

The projection of the sultan as the sole father figure of the country was coupled with his full control over the apparatus of state, and thus his personal role (either directive or adjudicative) in the political and socioeconomic development of the country. The single regular attempt to connect on a personal level with his people was the “meet the people” tour, once a year for a few weeks in a selected region of the country: the exercise was abandoned only in the last few years due to the sultan’s health. Tellingly, the protests starting in Suhar in 2011 and prompted by the “Arab Spring” evinced demands for more employment and the removal of certain government officials. At the same time, however, demonstrators emphasized their loyalty to the sultan. How much this constituted allegiance to the sultan as a specific figure and how much to the symbol of the “new” Omani nation-state he represents is impossible to ascertain.

It does seem clear, however, that the enormous strides taken over the last five decades have created a clear-cut sense of both national identity and nationalism. The Omani ethos has coalesced around Arab, Muslim, Ibadi/Sunni, and tribal themes. Smaller variant communities are not excluded but are enfolded into the ethos by extension: other ethnic groups are incorporated into the matrix of tribal classification; religious differences are subsumed by policy and tolerance, as shown by the designation of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, not Islamic Affairs. Oman traditionally looked to the Indian Ocean more than it did to the Arab
world and its role as a melting pot is enshrined in its polyglot society with its overseas connections. Undoubtedly, this orientation strongly shapes Oman’s relationship to the Arab world today and its interactions with fellow GCC members.

To a certain extent, Oman has copied the branding strategies of its GCC neighbors. Glitzy hotel and resort projects have mushroomed while attempts have been made to emulate Dubai’s Palm and World developments. A lavish new National Museum seems intended to emulate Qatar’s museum schemes. Muscat boasts its own winter festival in counterpoint to the Dubai Shopping Festival. A major push for tourism seems meant to call the Gulf and the world’s attention to Oman’s attractions, in addition to economic diversification and a means of employment. These actions not only boost Oman’s competitiveness with the other Gulf states but they also help redress a lingering resentment by Omanis of how they perceive that other Gulf nationals view them. This bonding in national pride is a nation-building exercise too.

The danger in any cult of personality lies in the mortality of the leader. The other Gulf monarchies have robust families to keep their cults alive. Will Sultan Qaboos’ stature outlive him? More importantly, has the process of planting national identity and a profound sense of Omani nationalism in the post-1970 sultanate proceeded far enough to withstand any future challenges? That question will demand a definite answer in the near future.
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.
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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.”

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. 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.

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”. 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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. And in the words of Barany, the BDF “is not a national army, but rather the army of Sunni Muslim state and the regime.” 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.

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.” 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 emphasis 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 jinsiyah 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
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. Ivi, p. 39.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ivi, p. 40.
6. Ibid.
7. Ivi, p. 41.
8. Ivi, p. 42.
11. Ivi, 4.
12. Ivi, 9.
15 Ivi, 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.
24. Ibid.
In recent years, the display of military symbols, through parades, public speeches and clothing, has become a salient feature of National Day celebrations in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This dimension of national holidays tells much about social and cultural transformations in these countries: through these displays, rulers are promoting some sort of militarized nationalism among citizens to enhance social cohesion, thus intertwining military strength with shared identity and patriotism.

However, the emphasis on military symbols in nation-building, as in the case of other top-down initiatives (for instance, the introduction of compulsory military service in Qatar and the UAE in 2013 and 2014, and its re-introduction in Kuwait in 2017), can’t be generalized for all the Gulf monarchies. As a matter of fact, it does not pertain to Kuwait, the most institutionally-structured state in the Peninsula, while Oman followed a vanguard, although different, path: the military feature is here a direct attribute of Sultan Qaboos’ image, thus indirectly turning into a national identity component.

In this perspective, analysing the display of military symbols in National Day celebrations highlights the rise of militarized nationalism in Qatar and the UAE, allowing us to frame different trajectories for contemporary nation-building in the Gulf monarchies.

The blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE on Qatar has sparked nationalist feelings in the tiny emirate. Qatar’s 2018 National Day celebrations (December 18) featured a huge military parade, longer and three times larger than in 2017, with images of Tamim Al-Majd (Tamim the glorious in Arabic), as the Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani was first portrayed by the Qatari artist Ahmed Al-Maadheed, decorating buildings and cars. In Doha, Qatari soldiers marched along the Corniche chanting patriotic songs and the slogan “As long as it was proven by our deeds, Qatar will remain free”. The first part is taken from a poem by the state founder Shaykh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, the second is a line from the national anthem: together, they send a clear message of internal unity, national consciousness and strength to neighbouring countries.
In the UAE, the National Day (December 2) is locally celebrated by all seven of the federation’s emirates: this is also the case of Ras Al-Khaimah (RAK), the most northern emirate, inhabited by nationals and a quite defiant one that joined the UAE only in 1972; in RAK, the Corniche Al-Qawasim (from the name of the ruling dynasty) is crowded with decorated cars, national flags and portraits of leaders during National Day. What’s interesting, here as in Abu Dhabi, is that Emirati boys dress in combat uniforms attending military parades and state-sponsored concerts, mixing a sense of belonging, duty, in-group recognition by peers and fashion.

Military garments, also for children, are at the top of the Emirate “wish list” for National Day, as well as for Commemoration Day, established in 2015 to honour soldiers who died serving the nation in Yemen: uniforms for males are mandatory at some UAE schools during these celebrations and several schools directly place mass orders from uniform tailoring companies. By wearing military garments at school, although for specific celebrations, uniforms – and the messages they convey – become the new normal in UAE society, shaping youth’s beliefs and aspirations in the long term.

As reported by The National, the Emirate’s leading newspaper, the military topic was at the centre of the Ras Al-Khaimah 2017 National Concert: telling the story of a boy willing to defend his country, one of the performances featured this fictional dialogue of a mother to his son: “With your blood you should protect the nation and when it calls upon you, you must answer with your soul before your body.”

On Oman’s National Day, military symbols are directly connected to Sultan Qaboos, viewed by most Omanis simply as ‘the Nation in himself’. As a result, the military dimension in nation-building is not something new in Muscat (as it is in Qatar and now the UAE), but rather an original, personalized trajectory begun in the 1970s with his ascendance to power. December 18 commemorates Oman’s independence from Portugal in 1650 and December 19 is the birthday of Qaboos: therefore, National Day is a two-day celebration combining, in collective memory, state formation and Qaboos’ leadership.

Units of the Royal Army, Navy, Air Force, Royal Guard, Sultan’s Special Forces, Police and Royal Court Affairs take part in the National Day military parade presided over by the sultan, as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces: for the parade, Qaboos personally chooses a different geographical venue each year, thus sending a message of unity throughout the country. During the parade, troops chant the military anthem, pledge allegiance to the sultan and send him traditional good wishes. Every five years a military exhibition drill is scheduled.

Inspired by Qaboos’ role as military commander, loyalty marches are also local performances held during Omani National Day. Officially organized, loyalty marches are popular performances where Omanis all over the sultanate parade with portraits of the sultan, chanting folk songs and anthems for him “to continue the modern Omani Renaissance march”, with the intent of “marching behind his [Qaboos’] wise leadership.”

The scene is different in Kuwait: the National Day celebration has evolved through the decades and it currently does not leave much space for military symbols. On the contrary, the emirate has gradually distanced itself from huge military displays and rhetoric. But this was not the case in the 1960s: after independence (1961), local newspapers reported on hundreds of soldiers and policemen marching to celebrate National Day. This spectacle of proud sovereignty and modernization included demonstrations of armed men jumping through flaming hoops on motorcycles and the participation of school children. In the 1980s, the Kuwait National Day lost this martial aspect, instead taking on a culturally-centred connotation based on heritage (also Bedouin), aiming to tighten the country’s fabric to better cope with local indications of the Islamic awakening spreading in the Arab world.

The shock of the invasion by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 1990 completely changed the way Kuwaitis live their National Day (February 25) and the following Liberation Day (February 26): but differently from what one might image, this did not result in a “militarization” of the public holiday. As a
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matter of fact, silent parades were organized in post-1991 Kuwait to express mourning for victims and their families; the first national concert was organized only in 1994 and in 2001, ten years after liberation, cultural identity festivals and international guests among those who helped the country to regain its sovereignty (like the former US president George W. Bush senior) took the stage, with no military parades occurring.12 In recent years, the celebration is mostly related to fun, with fireworks and young people playing with water guns, balloons and spraying foam on each other. Comparing Arab Gulf’s National Days experiences, why have Qatar and the UAE now started to recurrently evoke military symbols, also in public holidays, thus entering a cultural nationalism phase of “propagandist proclamation”?13

Surely, both Doha and Abu Dhabi aim to boost national feelings and consciousness among nationals, for demographic, social and geopolitical reasons. First of all, they have tiny native communities: Qataris and Emiratis are minorities in their own countries14, fearing identity dilution because of globalization effects and a growing number of expatriates (especially in Abu Dhabi). Secondly, recent cuts on spending and welfare due to the blockade (Qatar) and low oil prices (UAE) need cultural counter-measures to strengthen domestic cohesion.

Thirdly, both countries’ leaderships are devoted to the construction of “strong states”. Their military backgrounds also play a role: the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, graduated from the UK’s Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst (respectively in 1998 and 1979) and held military positions, as did Sultan Qaboos, unlike the current Emir of Kuwait, Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

For Doha, the purpose of militarized nationalism is to cope better with the sense of regional encirclement provoked by the Saudi and Emirati-led boycott, thus betting on pride and self-reliance; for Abu Dhabi, such a stance supports a regionally driven by projection and ambitious engagement abroad. In this context, the military and its symbols can be an effective vector of nation-building and nationalism for young but savvy states like Qatar and the UAE.

9. Ibid.
11. Kuwait’s Day of Independence is June 19, but since 1963 celebrations were held on February 25, the anniversary of coronation of Emir Abdullah Al-Salim Al-Sabah.
In the current moment it is not possible to consider trajectories of museums and nation-building in the Arabian Gulf without taking into account the ongoing diplomatic crisis, or blockade[1] that began on 5th June 2017. On this date, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt abruptly closed their borders and cut diplomatic ties with Qatar amidst accusations that the small Gulf state supported terrorism, had become too close to Iran and was meddling with their own internal affairs. During the subsequent two years, two major museums have opened, one on either side of the dispute: the Louvre Abu Dhabi in November 2017, and the National Museum of Qatar in March 2019. The Louvre Abu Dhabi is a global art history museum aiming to position the UAE as an actor within established universal (art) histories. The National Museum of Qatar shares the same architect, Jean Nouvel, and a similar desire to be a significant global player: the museum positions Qatar, through its narrative of long-standing global connections, method of local and international co-production, and high-octane opening ceremony, within a network of international relationships and alliances. Both museums celebrate and promote a cosmopolitanism within their citizenry and residents as a legacy of past relationships and activities and a desired future direction. While the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened within months of the start of the blockade, has not been overtly associated with it, Qatar, on the other side of the dispute, had almost two years to consider how to open a national museum in a reconfigured regional political world. Since I have been based in Qatar for eight years and worked on the National Museum of Qatar project for the last four years, this short piece intends to analyse Qatar’s strategic exploitation of its new national museum in this fraught context.

On the evening of 27th March 2019, Naomi Campbell admired Qatar’s historic Gulf pearl jewelry collection, while Victoria Beckham posed in front of Jean Nouvel’s eye-catching architecture at the opening of the National Museum of Qatar, thus ensuring extensive global media coverage of the event. While the international media reporting focused on the famous architect and the celebrities, regional and local media emphasized the museum’s historical content and the regional representatives accom-
panying the Qatari Emir, HH Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani on his inaugural tour: Kuwait’s first Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, HE Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah, the Minister of Heritage and Culture of the Sultanate of Oman, HE Sayyid Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, and the Vice-President of the Republic of Turkey, HE Fuat Oktay, countries that have remained neutral or supported Qatar during the blockade. This was also the second time that National Museum had been front and centre in Qatar’s public response to the blockade: on 20th June 2017, HH Sheikh Tamim made his first public appearance since the start of blockade at the museum, before the museum’s opening.

The National Museum has been ten years in the making, years that have seen dramatic changes in Qatar’s economic and geopolitical situation. The project was conceptualised during the reign of the Father Emir, HH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, whose entrepreneurial leadership saw Qatar invest in and profit from Liquified Natural Gas (LNG), diverting some of these profits to cultural projects such as the Museum of Islamic Art (opened in 2008) and exhibitions of the work of artists such as Damien Hirst, Richard Serra and Takeshi Murakami. With falling oil prices since 2014, cultural projects of such magnitude have become less frequent, but the development of the National Museum has been maintained throughout this downturn and the second major challenge, the blockade.

Qatar responded to the blockade with a widely-reported display of unity, robust autonomy and creative self-sufficiency. The blockade has also been a game-changer in Qatar’s rhetoric of self-definition, with the National Museum as a platform for the re-conceptualisation of what it means to belong to the nation, a particularly sensitive topic in countries such as Qatar and the UAE, where around 90% of people have resident status only and many have limited rights. In the lead up to the National Museum’s opening, HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, sister of the Emir and Chairperson of Qatar Museums, the authority that oversaw the museum’s development, expressed a message of inclusivity in her public statements. For example, in late 2017 she stated: “Ours is a country made-up of diverse populations, over one hundred different nationalities live in Qatar. In such a place where many cultures intersect and people cohabit peacefully and in harmony the value of cultivating an open mind is paramount […] The museum – she continued – is the physical manifestation of Qatar’s proud identity, connecting the country’s history with its diverse and cosmopolitan present.” This same message was symbolised at the opening event by the singing of the Qatari national anthem by children wearing the national dress of the multiple nations resident in the country. Qatar’s emphasis on openness and inclusivity has also been expressed in other actions, such as the lifting of entry visa requirements for 80 countries in August 2017.

The messaging of the National Museum opening was not overlooked. Local, regional and international media connected the opening with the blockade, some overtly with headlines such as “Qatar museum welcomes ‘all’ amidst Gulf dispute” (Jordan Times, 27th March 2019), quoting Sheikha Al Mayassa as saying that the blockade had no affect on the development of the museum and all people were welcome to visit. Elizabeth Paton’s article in The New York Times Business Section (9th April 2019) was headlined “Qatar Fights Back With an Arsenal of Fashion and Art.” The piece commented on Qatar’s strategy of investment in luxury, sports and the arts to forge alliances with outside players and give them a greater stake in the country’s ability to remain independent (the stellar guests at the museum opening are an example of the utilisation of these relationships at a critical moment), with the blockade described as the most serious threat in Qatar’s four-decade history. As these small Gulf nations embed themselves within global soft-power networks and re-conceptualise themselves on the world stage, it remains to be seen how the rhetoric of inclusion in the nation, central to liberal cosmopolitan ideologies, will be implemented within domestic policies.
1. ‘Blockade’ is the term used in Qatar and in international reporting but is not widely accepted in the opposing countries. The term ‘blockade’ will be used in this piece in line with international use.

2. Some actions of the Louvre Abu Dhabi have been interpreted as influenced by the blockade, for example, the omission of Qatar from a map of the Gulf, argued by the UAE to have been an error and since rectified.


4. In the Qatar Museums press release on the occasion of the visit of the Emir to the National Museum on 20th June 2017, quoted on, for example, the local information website Marhaba, ‘HH The Emir of Qatar visits the National Museum site’ https://www.marhaba.qa/hh-the-emir-of-qatar-visits-the-national-museum-of-qatar-site/


Architecture and urbanism are definitely taking the centre stage in Saudi Arabia’s effort to increase its international outreach and visibility, as exemplified by the Kingdom’s decision to participate, for the first time, to the 2018 Venice Biennale of Architecture. The Saudi pavilion was commissioned by the MiSK Art Institute, the cultural arm of the MiSK foundation, a non-profit organization set up by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman: proof of the strong interconnection between Saudi Arabia’s appearance in the global architecture exhibition and the fulfilment of Mohammad bin Salman’s reform agenda. Though refraining from making overt political statements or engaging with ongoing architectural debates, the Saudi pavilion, named “Spaces in between”, was aimed at exploring the social potential of liminal spaces in Saudi cities. In the words of Abdulrahman Gazzaz, one of the two young Jeddah-based architects tasked with the design of the pavilion, “A lot of changes are happening. We have this space in between what it was and what it is and what is becoming. It’s a fascinating point in the history of Saudi Arabia.”

Change is thus the word of the day in Saudi Arabia’s architectural panorama. A change driven by politics, which is trying to formulate an answer to the problems linked to the country’s rapid urbanization sparked by the oil boom in the 1970s, as well as to implement a new development agenda for the post-oil era; an agenda which is all about integrating modernity and tradition in Saudi urban fabric.

The Saudi urban panorama is actually undergoing a deep transformation, presenting both points in common and differences vis-à-vis the broader trend in the Gulf region – spectacularisation. Dubai offers maybe the greatest example of this urban development paradigm, a model focusing on spectacular aspects such as high-rise buildings and landmark towers transforming the skyline of aspiring global cities, relying on real estate speculation to generate income. As the photographer Michele Nastasi puts it, “In contrast to places like Manhattan and Hong Kong, where skylines result from social and economic density driving architecture upward, skylines in Gulf cities such as Dubai or Doha are essentially misleading, since they correspond to socially sparse cities, with buildings conceived in isolation from one another, creating alienating stretches in between.” An urban trend that can be summarized by...
Jean Baudrillard’s definition of the “Beaubourg effect”\(^5\). The French philosopher uses the Centre George Pompidou in Paris (also known as Beaubourg from the name of the neighbourhood in which it is located) as an example of disconnection and betrayal of the urban texture of what came before: buildings derived from top-down decision making, separated physically and socially from the surrounding neighbourhood. Spectacular city symbols substituting contents and ignoring the needs and the lives of people who actually use them, “starchitects” replicating similar designs across distant countries neglecting local peculiarities: these are common features of contemporary cities. In the Gulf, these urban models tending to spectacularisation are ways to establish, represent, and strengthen social and power relationships, both domestically and internationally. On the domestic level, these buildings, whose construction exploits the labour of an unskilled and underpaid workforce, stand as reminders of the wealth and power of the small elite to which they are available. Internationally, they “put the city on the map”, clearly establishing a sort of “brand identity” aimed at making the city recognizable and noteworthy of attention.

In Saudi Arabia this phenomenon is visible in terms of creation of enclaves operating in parallel to the rest of state and local society. It’s the case for example of King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (K.A. CARE), the “sustainable city” near Riyadh created in parallel to existing government agencies in charge of domestic energy matters. The city, established in 2010 by Royal decree, is planned to produce a third of total Saudi electricity by solar capacity by 2032. Another example is the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), not a city in itself but a de facto enclave university developed by Saudi Aramco. Though located outside the Aramco compounds in the Eastern province, KAUST is the only institution where the “Aramco rules” have been applied, i.e. women can unveil and mix with men. While enjoying the favour of the royals, KAUST was met with some criticism in Saudi society for catering to foreign elites rather than Saudis.

More in line with the “Dubai model” are NEOM, on the Red Sea, and King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) near Jeddah. The two cities provide the two foremost examples of how the Saudi vision applies to architecture, and how infrastructure is created to convey the message that a city is open for business. KAEC is the first of Saudi Arabia’s new economic master-planned cities, i.e. new cities “that can transition economies away from agriculture, manufacturing, or resource extraction toward a knowledge economy”\(^7\). Built by Emirati’s real estate company Emaar Properties, KAEC is a member of the Paris-based NGO New Cities Foundation (NCF), founded by John Rossant, the former executive chairman of PublicisLive, the communications holding company that produces the World Economic Forum in Davos. Together, KAEC and NCF organize the Cityquest-KAEC Forum, “the first ever global leadership exchange among key visionaries, partners and builders of the world’s largest and most innovative new city projects”\(^8\), an elite-meeting held annually in Saudi Arabia, where “urban megaprojects that are fundamentally undemocratic are presented as prescient, modern, and socially responsible investments”\(^9\). By organizing and hosting the Forum, Saudi Arabia appears aimed at positioning itself as a mentor of a new kind of urbanism, in which international architects, planners, and consultants apply state-driven “visions” of economic development to cities. Another example in this sense is NEOM, the $500 billion “Sci-Fi city” which will be built from scratch along the Red Sea, across the border between Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. The city, whose name is a combination of “neo”, new, and a derivation from the Arabic word “mustaqbal”, future, will extend upon 25,900 square kilometres and will combine smart cities technologies with a vast entertainment park and a tourist retreat, totally powered by renewable energy sources. However, the project, which was set to be the most visible manifestation of Mohammad bin Salman’s vision, suffered a severe setback after the assassination in October 2018 of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. As the link between the murder of the journalist and the Saudi government grew stronger, architects and designers on the advisory board of NEOM withdrew their name from the project. Among them starchitects such as Norman Foster and Carlo Ratti, thus depriving NEOM’s project of the very same material it was actually looking for: international legitimacy.

In Riyadh too we can find those symbols of progress and belonging to the global world which are high-rise
towers: for example the AlRahji tower, designed by W.S. Atkins&Partners Overseas (who also designed the Burj Al-Arab in Dubai), the AlFaysaliyyah Tower, designed by Foster&Partners, and the AlMamlka Tower, designed by Omrania in association with the American firm Ellerbe Becket. However, Riyadh’s quest for a global dimension seems to have proceeded with caution. While there is no opposition to globalization, the city is in itself very conservative – “a very conservative global city”10 – thus requiring a different architectural approach to culture and identity. Against this backdrop, an interesting development model is offered by the project of transformation of Riyadh according to the so-called programme of “beautification” of the city11. Pursued with both public ($23 billion) and private ($15 billion) capital, the beautification project of Saudi Arabia’s capital city will include green spaces (King Salman Park, set to become one of the largest city parks in the world, as well as a 16-fold increase of green space per capita), a sports boulevard, aimed at encouraging leisure activities and at making the city a friendlier space for pedestrians, and arts complexes for displaying the work of local and international artists. The project, which will be developed by the Riyadh-based architecture firm Omrania and will be overseen directly by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, aims at transforming Riyadh into “one of the world’s most liveable cities”12. As the architect and urbanist Yasser Elsheshtawy points out, “the focus on issues pertaining to quality of life represents a shift in the Gulf region’s urban development paradigm speculative trends in the region”13. Once again, the emphasis on sustainability and green spaces and the attention devoted to leisure activities and entertainment, part of the Saudi Vision, is in line with the country’s search for a status in the post-oil era.

In conclusion, as the Saudi pavilion at the 2018 Venice Biennale pointed out, the Kingdom is now “a space in between”. Saudi Arabia’s new urbanism echoes for certain verses the Dubai model, with the spectacular projects of NEOM and KAEC, yet somehow it is looking for its own dimension, trying to reconcile modernity and tradition. Transforming cities and transforming societies should be a two-way process: as new attention devoted to public places in Riyadh shows, it is by providing the people with spaces and opportunities that social change happens. As the Kingdom’s new urbanism is deeply tied to the country’s reform agenda, the evolution of Saudi cities in the future will tell whether this new urbanism, as well as MBS’ Vision, is only a narrative used to convey an image of modernity aimed at gaining international prestige and soft power, or a deeper, actual transformation. While it could be tempting to see architecture and urbanism as mere instruments of soft power, it is worth remembering that cities are actually the places where people live in: they can be places of inclusion as well as exclusion, they can become places of self-fulfilment and success, as well as epicentres of discontent and disorder. Redesigning them according to the people’s true needs should be imperative. As Italo Calvino writes in his Invisible Cities, “You take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours.”


8. "KAEC and NFC Report highlights value-creation in global greenfield cities", 22 March 2016, KAEC Media Center


11. Saudi King launches $23 billion Riyadh beautification program, Bloomberg, 19 March 2019

12. Ibid.

GULF COUNTRIES: THE STRUGGLE FOR A COMMON IDENTITY IN A DIVIDED GCC

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The concept of khaleeji identity, also referred to sometimes as Gulf identity or identity of the Eastern Arabia, is characterized by its fluidity and is by no means a univocally recognized one. While grounded on cultural, social, historical and political homogeneity of the countries of the Arabian Gulf (namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – UAE), it is a set of characteristics that can be equally well used to highlight similarities of these countries or, on the contrary, stress their particular differences depending on current circumstances. That is one of the reasons why this concept alone has not been widely used in literature as a framework for analyses. The khaleeji identity received primarily a boost with the creation of a political project, namely, the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. By projecting the concept of khaleeji identity into the scope of foreign affairs, members of the GCC strived to define this idea into a viable reality with the initiative moving forward and backward throughout the years; yet the recent split within the organization has made it clear that under the cover of similarities, there exist indeed sharp differences that can grow even deeper.

Arabian Gulf provides the backdrop and foundation for the khaleeji identity. The geographical location at the crossroads of intercontinental trade promoted since ancient times cultural exchange, gave birth to trading cities, but also exposed the region to foreign invasions. The harsh desert climate has always required adaptation to the natural environment and similar architectural solutions were found in the past to alleviate the scorching heat. The region is the birthplace of Islam and the religious practice has had an everlasting impact on its societies. Arabic and, specifically, its dialectical versions commonly known as khaleeji Arabic set the region linguistically aside. The availability of crops and animals but also the early trade with other regions has influenced the regional cuisine. In its more recent history, the discovery of oil and in some countries, also natural gas, has brought sudden riches boosting the economic growth, while creating an economic model of rentierism and a predilection for comfort and luxury among the inhabitants. It has also encouraged the flow of the foreign labor that changed the complex social fabric of the Gulf societies. The monarchical political
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systems that were cemented on the eve of independence provide another element of similarity. The societies, for most part tribal, were subsequently engaged in the process of modern nation building that continues till this day. Apart from Bahrain and Oman that have experienced a history of a statehood in the past, other countries emerged as new states and the need of creating a unifying national identity arouse. Khaleeji identity predates the creation of national identities that split peoples apart. The social bonds are, nonetheless, strong in the Gulf as many extended families are spread across countries and cross-national intermarriages are common. The cultural homogeneity is visible in popular culture, poetry, music and sports. The region is also characterized by youthful societies that are avid social media users. The Arabian Gulf shares also similar future challenges that are related to the climate change and transition from oil dependence to a knowledge-based economy. Sharing these characteristics, khaleejis (the inhabitants of the Gulf), are set apart from other Arabs.

All in all, there exists a number of characteristics that form the base of the khaleeji identity. Yet, similarly to the concept of European identity, they may not be sufficient to solidify a far-reaching regional identity. In addition, these characteristics should not underscore the differences that are not only visible between the countries but run deep within them. The tiny society of Bahrain alone comprises a number of social groups such as tribal Sunnis (Al Khalifa); rural Arab Shias (Baharna); urban Sunnis of Persian origin (Hawala); urban Sunnis of nontribal Arab origin (Najdi); urban Shias of Arab origin; and Shia Iranian migrants (Ajam). In addition, there are many variances of the dialects of Arabic spoken across this archipelago. Consequently, there exist identities other than national or khaleeji shared by people living across GCC countries that may become more salient in specific circumstances; similarly, national identities may become contested. Such differences are visible in other countries of the Arabian Gulf where local cleavages cut through the social fabrics.

It is the regional integration under the umbrella of GCC that was created in 1981 to counter the threat of Iran, which prompted the khaleeji identity into a citizenship, economic and political project providing it with a much-needed direction and dimension. The idea of integration that initially emerged because of security concerns, intends cooperation in various areas of interest (such as economy, movement of goods and people, education, tourism and health). Among its most palpable achievements was the introduction of full GCC citizenship in the 21st century. Nonetheless, cooperation within the council remains driven by national interests, and current needs, as well as by the attitude each state has individually adopted towards a particular matter. Member-states have not fundamentally compromised their sovereignty and are considered equal, which is reflected in the principle of unanimity. Moreover, GCC decision-making processes do not have mechanism for consensus building, which can easily cause obstruction as well as lack of enforcement leading to very slow implementation of its decisions. GCC economic, military and political integration has been a slow process marked by numerous hesitations, difficulties and delays. The Gulf Monetary Union is such an example: announced in 1999, it has not materialized till this day.

The political will of each government of the member states shapes the outcomes of the cooperation depending on the circumstances. While the Arab Spring encouraged unity and the joint GCC military intervention in the Kingdom of Bahrain is a notable example of a military undertaking by the Peninsula Shield Force, the subsequent announcements by Saudi Arabia of GCC turning into a union in the aftermath of the uprising did not materialize. On the contrary, GCC states, with the exception of Bahrain, are even more conscious about preserving their sovereignty fearing domination of Saudi Arabia in the alliance. The recent spat with Qatar related to foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has had even deeper ramifications with three member-states, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and UAE cutting all ties with Qatar; and two remaining members, Oman and Kuwait continuing cooperation as usual. Gulf citizenship has thus been weakened with Qataris no longer being allowed to travel to and remain in the three countries in question. The perception of a common Gulf identity is determined thus by an understanding of individual benefit by each of the member-states rather than by the need for unity. Given these profound disagreements, countries involved may stress their unique charac-
teristics, aiming to set themselves apart from the rivals. The dispute over foreign affairs has led the societies of countries affected to highlighting their differences with Qataris and vice-versa. Anecdotal evidence reports even changes to the collars of thobes (a traditional garment worn by men), to make a difference between the Qatari and Emirati styles. Yet, no one disputes their khaleeji identity.

Khaleeji identity is a concept constantly in flux. Literally meaning “of the Gulf”, its evolution over the time is the outcome of the understanding of the shared concept by the members of Gulf societies, the processes of defining their national identities by the Gulf states’ leadership, and the outcomes of the relations within the GCC.