Transnational identity and the Gulf crisis:
changing narratives of belonging in Qatar

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On 5 June 2017, regional neighbours Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, along with Egypt, broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar and closed their land, sea and air borders, beginning a crisis that lasted until the signing of the Al-Ula reconciliation agreement on 5 January 2021. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—have experienced regional conflict before; but while regional conflict itself is not new, the scale and scope of this crisis, and its economic, political and socio-cultural consequences, are unprecedented.1

With the crisis now formally at an end, what might be the lasting consequences for transnational identity in the Gulf? This article explores, in a broad sense, the relationship between socio-political upheaval, transnational security communities and state-crafted narratives of identity. The GCC is described as a regional security complex, characterized by intense security interdependence and important transnational identities.2 In particular, the khalījī [Gulf] identity encompasses the shared backgrounds—of heritage, culture, religion and intermarriage—of the people of the region, making it the GCC’s socio-cultural ‘supranational identity narrative’.3 Yet the recent crisis forcibly separated the khalījī people, both physically and emotionally, in ways hitherto unseen. In this moment of external threat, the strategy of ‘omnibalancing’ would predict that the state of Qatar would seek to shift its identity narrative towards a reinforcement of domestic unity over transnational ties.4 Indeed, recent research suggests that the political crisis has reduced

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1 Cinzia Bianco and Gareth Stansfield, ‘The intra-GCC crisis: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011’, International Affairs 94: 3, 2018, pp. 613–35; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Qatar and the Gulf crisis (London: Hurst, 2020).
2 F. Gregory Gause III, The international relations of the Persian Gulf (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
3 Natalie Koch, ‘National Day celebrations in Doha and Abu Dhabi: cars and semiotic landscapes in the Gulf’, in Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, eds, The city as power: urban space, place, and national identity (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), p. 194.
4 Gerd Nonneman, ‘Determinants and patterns of Saudi foreign policy: “omnibalancing” and “relative auton-
the salience of *khalījī* identity,\(^5\) thereby shifting the discourse of ‘myth-making and memory-selection’ in the Gulf.\(^6\)

This article uses the case-study of the new National Museum of Qatar, which opened in March 2019, to investigate the salience of transnational *khalījī* identity in Qatar during the regional crisis. National museums tell the story of a nation, and the Qatari government’s immense financial investment in its new museum over a decade of work demonstrates the importance of getting the country’s national narrative ‘just right’.\(^7\) Yet national museums do not speak to or about a domestic audience only, but increasingly take into account regional and international audiences as well. In ‘a world in which the borders by which societies are kept apart are increasingly criss-crossed by ever-speeding flows of images, information, ideas, and people’,\(^8\) scholars have documented the gradual trend of ‘mainstream museums’ towards representing the ‘needs, values, and histories of multiple publics’.\(^9\) While the original Qatar National Museum was created in the 1970s to emphasize the state’s newly achieved independence,\(^10\) the founding of the GCC in 1981 was followed by the socio-economic and political construction of a *khalījī* culture that coexisted alongside a national identity, as evidenced by national day celebrations across the Gulf that pay tribute to both ‘the territorially defined state’ and ‘the khaleeji culture of the citizen-national’.\(^11\)

Thus, before the blockade, it would have been reasonable to expect some portrayal of *khalījī* culture and identity in Qatar’s new national museum. In the context of the ensuing crisis, how is the museum now portraying the transnational connections among the GCC countries? And how are museum-goers perceiving and responding to these transnational narratives? This article draws on original fieldwork (conducted in Doha between March and September 2018 and between March and May 2019), including 55 ethnographic interviews and several museum visits,\(^12\) to investigate Qatari and expatriate perceptions of the museum and its narratives of identity. In the text that follows, pseudonyms are used in all references to interviews to protect interlocutor privacy. The case-study’s conclusions provide insight into transnational belonging in times of socio-political flux.

\(^{5}\) Jocelyn Sage Mitchell and Ilhem Allagui, ‘Car decals, civic rituals, and changing conceptions of nationalism’, *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 13, 2019, pp. 1368–88; Jocelyn Sage Mitchell and Mariam Ibrahim Al-Hammadi, ‘Nationalism and identity in Qatar after 2017: the narrative of the new National Museum’, *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8: 2, 2018, p. 211.

\(^{6}\) John Urry, ‘How societies remember the past’, in Sharon Macdonald and Gordan Fyfe, eds, *Theorizing museums* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 46.

\(^{7}\) Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Carl Grodach, ‘Displaying and celebrating the “other”: a study of the mission, scope, and roles of ethnic museums in Los Angeles’, *Public Historian* 26: 4, 2004, p. 51.

\(^{8}\) Mariam Ibrahim Al-Hammadi, ‘Presentation of Qatari identity at National Museum of Qatar: between imagination and reality’, *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 16: 1, 2018, p. 3.

\(^{9}\) Koch, ‘National Day celebrations’, p. 194.

\(^{10}\) The author visited the National Museum on 27 March (opening night), 28 March, 4 April, 5 April, 18 April, 23 April, 29 April, 2 May and 29 May 2019.
Regional conflicts: the old and the new

Most analyses of the establishment of the GCC in 1981 focus on the common security concerns of the six Arab monarchies of the Gulf. Major events in the late 1970s and early 1980s—the Iranian Revolution, the siege of the Great Mosque of Mecca, the beginning of the Iran–Iraq War—changed the security dynamics of the Gulf region and convinced these monarchies that a communal organization would help 'maintain their grip on power through security and economic means'.

The monarchies themselves chose to emphasize the unified brotherhood of the Gulf region in the GCC charter. For example, the preamble notes ‘the ties of special relations, common characteristics and similar systems founded on the creed of Islam which bind them’, and states that the GCC is meant to facilitate ‘the path to unity of their States’. This rhetoric of brotherly unity may have been used to obscure a conflict-ridden reality. The nineteenth century witnessed frequent territorial encroachments on neighbouring states by Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, continuations of which can be seen in the modern period, from fatal skirmishes on the Qatari–Saudi border in 1992, 1993 and 1994, to the internationally mediated conflict (1991–2001) between Bahrain and Qatar over territorial borders. Tension and conflict in the Gulf have also been fuelled by nation-building narratives, including national appropriation of Gulf-wide cultural heritage such as camel racing, falconry and pearlning. The Gulf monarchies have also clashed over the proper place and roles of women in the region, and over hosting rights to prestigious sports events.

13. Abdul Khaleq Abdulla, ‘The Gulf Cooperation Council: nature, origin, and process’, in Michael C. Hudson, ed., *Middle East dilemma: the politics and economics of Arab integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 150–70; Michael Barnett and F. Gregory Gause III, ‘Caravans in opposite directions: society, state, and the development of community in the Gulf Cooperation Council’, in Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds, *Security communities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 161–97; Matteo Legrenzi, *The GCC and the international relations of the Gulf: diplomacy, security and economic coordination in a changing Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2011).

14. Legrenzi, *The GCC*, p. 3.

15. Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, ‘The charter’, 2018, http://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/AboutGCC/Pages/Primarylaw.aspx. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 3 Feb. 2021.)

16. Allen J. Fromherz, *Qatar: a modern history* (New York: Tauris, 2012); Joseph Kéchichian, *Power and succession in Arab monarchies: a reference guide* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008); Rosemarie Said Zalal, *The creation of Qatar* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Rosemarie Said Zalal, *The making of the modern Gulf states: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman* (Reading: Ithaca, 1998).

17. Richard N. Schofield, ‘Border disputes in the Gulf: past, present, and future’, in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds, *The Persian Gulf at the millennium: essays in politics, economy, security, and religion* (New York: St Martin’s, 1997), pp. 141–2; see also the International Court of Justice, ‘Maritime delimitation and territorial questions between Qatar and Bahrain (Qatar v. Bahrain)’, https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/87.

18. Victoria Hightower, ‘Purposeful ambiguity: the pearl trade and heritage construction in the United Arab Emirates’, in Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico, eds, *Cultural heritage in the Arabian peninsula: debates, discourses and practices* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 71–84; Sulayman Khalaf, ‘Poetics and politics of newly invented traditions in the Gulf: camel racing in the United Arab Emirates’, *Ethnology* 39: 3, 2000, pp. 243–61; Natalie Koch, ‘Gulf nationalism and the geopolitics of constructing falconry as a “heritage sport”’, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15: 3, 2015, pp. 522–39.

19. Sean Foley, *The Arab Gulf states: beyond oil and Islam* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2010).

20. Jocelyn Sage Mitchell, ‘#blockade: social media and the Gulf diplomatic crisis’, *Review of Middle East Studies* 53: 2, 2019, pp. 200–220.
These conflicts were rarely discussed in public or highlighted through open antagonism. Yet the recent regional conflict of June 2017 to January 2021 has upended the previous pattern of behind-the-scenes diplomacy and face-saving manoeuvres. The public severing of all ties between Qatar and its GCC neighbours came as a surprise to Qatari government officials. This stands in sharp contrast to past patterns of GCC diplomacy: even during the 2014 Gulf diplomatic crisis, in which Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE recalled their ambassadors from Qatar, lower-level political contact was sustained, along with continuation of economic ties and freedom of regional movement for citizens. The scale of the recent crisis brought a new set of challenges and changed realities to the regional scene and to the institution of the GCC in particular.

These challenges reverberated across regional economies and societies in unprecedented ways, particularly with regard to the daily social interactions between the peoples of the Gulf states. Not only were direct airline flights between Qatar and its neighbours cancelled, but Qatari citizens found it difficult to obtain entrance visas to these countries. Most importantly from a human rights perspective, because of Gulf nationality laws that prohibit dual citizenship and pass citizenship through the father but not the mother, the regional crisis resulted in long-term family separations between husbands and wives, parents and children, and extended family branches, violating ‘the right to family life’. Rashed, a 31-year-old Qatari man, recounted a Bahraini friend’s forced separation from his family in Qatar, and his own separation from his Gulf friends:

Actually, the day that happened, it was around five or six in the morning. I was driving around with my friends at the Pearl [a luxury residential and commercial island to the north of Doha]. One of my Bahraini friends who works in the military was there to visit me. When we found out the news, we went back to my house directly. He got really upset because his family is also from Qatar so he comes here a lot to visit them. Because he is in the military, he had to leave directly. He got a ticket and flew back, and ever since then, it hasn’t been the same. It’s been over a year and he hasn’t gone back to Qatar, not even to see his family. I used to go to the UAE every weekend, sometimes Bahrain, either by car or

22 Legrenzi, The GCC.
23 See e.g. the speech of the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani: Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Speech by His Excellency Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs at Chatham House—the crisis in the Gulf: Qatar responds', London, 5 July 2017, https://mofa.gov.qa/en/speeches/speeches-of-deputy-prime-minister-and-minister-of-foreign-affairs/speeches/45-chatham-house—the-crisis-in-the-gulf-qatar-responds.
24 Bianco and Stansfield, 'The intra-GCC crisis', pp. 620–22; Roberts, Qatar, pp. 151–3.
25 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Missed opportunities and failed integration in the GCC', in Zeina Azzam and Imad K. Harb, eds, The GCC crisis at one year: stalemate becomes new reality (Washington DC: Arab Center, 2018), pp. 49–58.
26 Tariq Panja, 'Politics looms over empty seats as Saudi Arabia faces Qatar in Asian Cup', New York Times, 17 Jan. 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/sports/qatar-saudi-arabia-asian-cup.html; Aziz El Yaakoubi, 'Qatar accuses Saudis of barring haj pilgrims, Riyadh says untrue', Reuters, 18 Aug. 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-haj-qatar/qatar-accuses-saudis-of-barring-haj-pilgrims-riyadhsays- untrue-idUSKBN1L3x6Z.
27 Neil Partrick, 'Nationalism in the Gulf states’, in David Held and Kristian Ulrichsen, eds, The transformation of the Gulf: politics, economics and the global order (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 55–6.
28 Amnesty International, Gulf dispute: six months on, individuals still bear brunt of political crisis, public statement (London, 14 Dec. 2017), https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2276042017ENGLISH.pdf.
plane. I remember once, I went to Saudi Arabia just for lunch for *bukhari* [a type of rice] and they have the best kind. I have friends in all of the three countries, and I can’t see any of them. The prices of flights also became insane. [Pause.] It affected me in so many ways.  

The *khaliṣ* people also found it difficult to communicate openly during the crisis: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE interpreted their media laws to forbid criticism of their governmental actions in the crisis and to make public expressions of support for Qatar punishable with fines and time in jail. Amnesty International quoted one Qatari woman, separated from her Emirati husband and four children, as saying: ‘When we get through, we are very careful as to what we say, only speak about how much we miss each other and hope that the crisis is resolved, nothing else.’ Despite the tensions, some families quietly planned get-togethers in one of the two neutral Gulf countries, Kuwait and Oman. Yet other individuals found that the forced separation, and the accompanying feelings of jingoism and suspicion, drove their families apart.

**(Trans)**nationalism in the Gulf

How did this public conflict affect the salience of transnational identity in the Gulf? With four of the six Gulf Arab monarchies waiting until 1971 to solidify their independence and sovereign borders, transnational identities have always been important in the region. While these cross-border identities may take many forms, including Arabism, tribalism and sectarianism, this article focuses on the salience of the *khaliṣ* identity in the context of the recent Gulf crisis.

Scholars agree that the notion of the *khaliṣ* was a political construct introduced for strategic reasons by the Gulf rulers in the early 1980s alongside the development of the GCC, but they differ on whether this identity has been internalized by the people of the Gulf. On the one hand, Partrick argues that the existing sense of a ‘Gulf personality, i.e. common cultural traits’, is not the same as a deeply felt ‘Gulf identity’. Legrenzi disagrees, arguing that ‘the notion of a “GCC” popular identity … is working its way into the political and economic landscape of the six Gulf monarchies’. For their part, Barnett and Gause emphasize the unintended societal consequences of the creation of the GCC:

While Gulf leaders constructed the GCC for statist purposes, its very existence has encouraged, however unintentionally, greater mutual identification at the societal level …

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29 Personal interview, Doha, 1 Sept. 2018.
30 Ismail Sebugwaawo, ‘Strict action against anyone showing sympathy with Qatar: UAE’, *Khaleej Times*, 8 June 2017, https://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/abu-dhabi/strict-action-against-anyone-showing-sympathy-with-qatar-uae/.
31 Amnesty International, *Gulf dispute*.
32 Rory Miller, *Desert kingdoms to global powers: the rise of the Arab Gulf* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 2.
33 Zahra R. Babar, ‘The cost of belonging: citizenship construction in the State of Qatar’, *Middle East Journal* 68: 3, 2014, pp. 408–9.
34 Gause, *The international relations of the Persian Gulf*; Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled waters: insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).
35 Partrick, *Nationalism in the Gulf states*, p. 61.
36 Legrenzi, *The GCC*, p. 2.
indications have grown that increasing numbers of citizens of these states see themselves as having common interests and a common identity as ‘khalijiin’ (literally, ‘residents of the Gulf’). 37

Regional socio-economic developments across various arenas have indeed helped to construct and solidify the ‘common interests and ... common identity’ of the khalīj. Recordings from as early as 1904 document the ‘shared musical heritage’ of the Gulf. 38 Beginning in the 1990s, regional satellite media organizations such as Al Jazeera (Qatar), Al Arabiya (Dubai) and MBC (Saudi Arabia) brought Gulf Arabs ‘together in real time and in a common language alongside intense images and a shared political discourse’. 39 With the rise of the internet, there is now a defined Gulf Arab social media scene, with regionally recognized social media influencers. 40 Scholars have tracked the development of a khalīji ‘capitalist class’, 41 khalīji literature, 42 a khalīji ‘sports culture’, 43 and even a khalīji ‘animalscape’ of cultural icons such as falcons. 44

The extant literature on the salience of the khalīji identity aligns with Koch’s argument that state-based nationalisms and khalīji transnationalism exist side by side in the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. She writes that ‘the supranational identity narrative remains important in how Gulf nationals imagine themselves as sharing a commonality with their neighbours, [even as] the governments have overseen the development of strong, state-based nationalisms since independence’. 45

Thus, irrespective of the corporate beginnings or ideological flimsiness of the concept of the khalīj, the shared sense of khalīji identity was nevertheless strong enough to create feelings of shock and betrayal at the onset of the regional crisis among our interlocutors in Qatar, whether citizens or expatriates. Khaled, a 34-year-old Qatari man, stated: ‘If you want to attack someone, attack them under sunlight, at noon, “face to face”. But to do it in the middle of the night, while people are sleeping, and do something of this atrocity, it’s utter betrayal.’ 46 Expatriates agreed. Mona, a 40-year-old Lebanese woman, said: ‘It was a shock. I felt shocked ... It is still a shock. I cannot believe that family can do this to each other.’

37 Barnett and Gause, ‘Caravans in opposite directions’, p. 162–3.
38 Laith Ulaby, ‘Music and mass media in the Arab Persian Gulf’, Middle East Studies Association Bulletin 40: 2, 2006, p. 213.
39 Marc Lynch, Voices of the new Arab public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East politics today (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 41; see also Emma C. Murphy, ‘Agency and space: the political impact of information technologies in the Gulf Arab states’, Third World Quarterly 27: 6, 2006, pp. 1059–83.
40 Zoe Hurley, ‘Imagined affordances of Instagram and the fantastical authenticity of female Gulf-Arab social media influencers’, Social Media + Society 5: 1, 2019, pp. 1–16.
41 Adam Hanieh, Capitalism and class in the Gulf Arab states (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 103.
42 Deborah S. Akers, ‘The short story in the Arabian Gulf region: origins and development’, in Deborah S. Akers and Abubaker A. Bagader, eds, Oranges in the sun: short stories from the Arabian Gulf (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), pp. 1–14; Rebecca L. Torstrick and Elizabeth Faier, ‘Literature and media’, in Culture and customs of the Arab Gulf states (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2009), pp. 41–57.
43 Abdulllah Baabood, ‘Sport and identity in the Gulf’, in Alanoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg, eds, Popular culture and popular identity in the Arab Gulf states (London: Saqi, 2008), p. 99.
44 Birgit Krawietz, ‘Falconnry as a cultural icon of the Arab Gulf region’, in Steffen Wippel, Katrin Bromber, Christian Steiner and Birgit Krawietz, eds, Under construction: logics of urbanism in the Gulf region (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), p. 131.
45 Koch, ‘National Day celebrations’, p. 194.
46 Personal interview, Doha, 16 Aug. 2018.
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other.” Likewise, Ameen, a 20-year-old Sudanese man who was born and raised in Qatar, explained his reaction:

I was really sad and disappointed. I mean, you know it wasn’t, ‘Egypt has cut ties with Qatar’, or Sudan, or any other country. It was the Gulf, your neighbouring countries cutting ties with you. And it was done in an instant. I say it’s sad and disappointing because the GCC is one, so it was like a brother cutting ties with a brother, and that is what I felt.

Some Qataris indicated that the extent of the crisis made them question whether the khalījī identity remains a relevant concept. Mitchell and Allagui quote Abdelkarim, a 25-year-old Qatari man, who directly criticized the transnational khalījī identity:

As khalījī we have something we call al-bayt al-khalīj [the Gulf house] because we are all related to one another, and I have a lot of relatives in the UAE, as well as some in-laws in Bahrain. It became a pain trying to communicate with them. Some of them even turned against us. Some of them don’t even care. So, where is the Gulf house now?

Mitchell and Allagui argue that this insight highlights ‘how political crisis can cause rupture as well as belonging, as the imagined khalījī community becomes less salient to the Qatari nationalist narrative’. It is within this ‘shifting space of nationalist narratives’ that this article now turns to an analysis of the new National Museum of Qatar. Within this context of regional crisis and disruption of transnational identity narratives, how does the museum portray relations between the Gulf countries? And how have museum-goers, both citizens and expatriates, responded to these narratives?

Methodology and case-study: the National Museum of Qatar

To investigate these questions, this article draws on original fieldwork conducted in Doha, including nine separate museum visits by the author; conversations with museum curators, consultants and academics; 32 ethnographic interviews with Qatari and expatriate residents on post-blockade nationalism (conducted between March and September 2018); and 23 ethnographic interviews with museum-goers (conducted between March and May 2019). The museum, developed under the auspices of Qatar Museums, can be read as a state-approved narrative of the Qatari nation. My focus here, however, is not on the intentions of the planners so much as on the responses of the museum-goers. To modify an old adage, if a national narrative appears in a museum, but no one understands it, does it make a difference? This article highlights the ways in which the museum’s narrative

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47 Personal interview, Doha, 13 June 2018.
48 Personal interview, Doha, 22 Sept. 2019.
49 Mitchell and Allagui, ‘Car decals, civic rituals’, p. 1383.
50 Mitchell and Allagui, ‘Car decals, civic rituals’, p. 1383.
51 Koch, ‘National Day celebrations’, p. 197.
52 Qatar Museums oversees the major museums and cultural heritage sites in Qatar, along with creation of educational programmes and a ‘Culture Pass’ programme of events. Headed by the Amir’s sister, H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, it is seen as part of the cultural arm of the Qatari government. For more details, see the Qatar Museums website, https://www.qm.org.qa/en.
both engages with the concept of *khali*j*ī* identity and provokes responses among its audience.

The two sets of ethnographic interviews followed Bernard’s guidelines on conducting semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted face to face or through mobile communications, in the interlocutor’s language of choice. The 55 interviewees comprised 31 citizens and 24 expatriates; 37 were male and 18 female, and their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years. To protect privacy, identifying details were removed during the translation and transcription process; and, as noted above, pseudonyms are used where interviews are cited. As some of the respondents were selected on grounds of convenience, this article’s findings do not claim to be representative but rather contextual, serving as a foundation for further exploration of the theme of transnational identity in times of crisis.

Why focus on the national museum? Museums are crucial tools of nation-building; as Levitt notes, ‘ever since France’s new leaders opened the doors of the Louvre to the public in 1793, museums have played a starring role in producing and representing the nation’. Anderson includes the museum in his ‘three institutions of power’ (along with the census and the map) that profoundly shape the way the ‘state imagined its dominion—the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry’. In this ‘formation of a new identity’, the history that is forgotten—deliberately omitted—is as important an area of focus as that which is publicly remembered. In sum, ‘museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political’.

The Arab monarchies of the Gulf have long been aware of the political usefulness of national identity, and for decades have invested heavily in museums and other heritage projects to reshape their cultural, historical and religious narratives in ways that promote their preferred social and political goals. Qatar is no exception; as Crystal notes, despite the multiple and pressing needs of the newly independent and rapidly modernizing state, Qatar opened its national museum within five years of its formal independence. Yet over the following years, Qatar’s original national museum came to be overshadowed by the rising Doha skyline and the opening of prestigious showcase museums such as the Museum...
of Islamic Art, designed by I. M. Pei. Beginning in 2007, Qatar’s leadership, through Qatar Museums, commenced the reconstruction of its national museum and, concurrently, the reimagining of its national identity. After more than a decade of construction, the new National Museum of Qatar finally opened on 27 March 2019.

The new museum has received much attention for Jean Nouvel’s innovative ‘desert rose’ architectural design, a sprawling complex of interlocking discs intended to resemble the crystalline formations of calcium sulphate that can be found just beneath the surface of inland salt flats in Qatar. My focus in this article, however, is on the interior of the museum, specifically its intentional choices of content and narration.

The museum interior guides its visitors on a 1.5-kilometre walk-through of eleven permanent gallery spaces and one temporary exhibition space. The building itself curves around an open-air courtyard, and the exit connects back to the entrance after the visitor wanders through the renovated palace grounds of Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani (r. 1913–49), part of the original National Museum complex. The eleven permanent galleries are organized around three themes, referred to by the museum as ‘chapters’: beginnings; life in Qatar; and the modern history of Qatar. All of these galleries contain intriguing messages about Qatar’s modern nation-building narrative, supported by beautifully displayed artefacts and dioramas, subtitled oral history videos, electronic podiums with interactive information and archival materials, dedicated children’s spaces, and clearly written captions in Arabic and English. Among the unique aspects of the museum are the commissioned ‘art films’: floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall moving images that are meant to immerse museum-goers visually in a cinematic experience in each gallery. Figure 1 (overleaf) gives a sense of how the gallery’s walls are used for visual effect.

This article explores the ‘Modern history of Qatar’ chapter, which introduces the political history and socio-economic growth of Qatar from the 1500s to the present day, with a particular focus on the textual depiction of Qatar’s political history from 1848 to 1868.

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61 Jocelyn Sage Mitchell, ‘We’re all Qataris here: the nation-building narrative of the National Museum of Qatar’, in Erskine-Loftus et al., eds, Representing the nation, pp. 59–72.

62 Alexandra Bounia, ‘The desert rose as a new symbol for the nation: materiality, heritage and the architecture of the new National Museum of Qatar’, Heritage and Society 11: 3, 2018, pp. 219–22; Suzi Mirgani, ‘Consumer citizenship: national identity and museum merchandise in Qatar’, Middle East Journal 73: 4, 2019, pp. 593–4.

63 While most of our interlocutors expressed enthusiasm for the architecture of the new museum, Layla, a 36-year-old Qatari woman who has fond memories of the original National Museum, questioned the authenticity of the desert rose design: ‘The fact is that I, as a Qatari, I’ve never—and I’ve lived here all my life—I’ve never heard of this desert rose until it was announced as the design of the new museum, and I asked everyone around me about this desert rose, and they’re Qataris and they’ve lived in the desert, and they have no clue what it is [laughs].’ Personal interview, Doha, 6 May 2019.

64 Three of the four galleries in this chapter were open at the time of writing; the final gallery, ‘Qatar today’, which covers the reign of the current amir, including the blockade, opened in December 2019. The shutdown of the museum in March 2020 owing to COVID-19 has delayed further research on the general public’s perceptions of this gallery. Accordingly, this article focuses on the museum’s presentation of the political history of Qatar from 1848 to 1868, and public reactions to this presentation, leaving the analysis of the presentation of modern events for future work.
Textual analysis: building the nation and uniting Qatar

The museum divides Qatar’s early political history into four sections, corresponding to four time periods. The first section covers 1507–1700, detailing Qatar’s (and the region’s) ‘interactions with foreign powers’: Portuguese, Ottomans, British, French and Dutch. The museum-goer then moves to ‘the emergence of regional and local powers’ (1700–1847), which includes the flourishing of towns on the Qatari coast, along with the rise and fall of two prominent leaders—Rahmah bin Jaber and Isa bin Tarif—both of whom sought to assert independence for Qatar in the face of regional conflict and external encroachment. The third section, entitled ‘Uniting the tribes of the Qatar peninsula’ (1848–68), details the rise of the first Al Thani leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani, who succeeded in ensuring the sovereignty of Qatar and the rights of its people, despite continuous attempts by the rulers of Bahrain and the Second Saudi State to impose control over the region … won the support of the Qatari tribes and secured British recognition that Qatar was an independent entity.\footnote{Caption text, ‘1848–1868: uniting the tribes of the Qatar peninsula’ panel, National Museum of Qatar, 23 April 2019.}

The final section, described as ‘guarding the sheikhdom’ (1871–1913), details the leadership of Sheikh Mohammed’s son, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, who resisted encroachment from the Ottomans and the British, and dealt with increasing conflict with Bahrain and Abu Dhabi (UAE).

While the second section describes in detail the territorial occupation of Qatar by the First Saudi State (1797–1818) and the first destruction of Doha by Bahraini forces in 1847, it is the third section that narrates conflicts in the region with eerie similarities to the recent crisis in the Gulf. In 1851, the Battle of Mesaimeer is described as follows:

\textit{The forces of the Second Saudi State, led by Imam Faisal bin Turki, invaded Qatar.} The rulers of Bahrain collected tribute from these areas but did not send it on to the Second Saudi State. After the Battle of Mesaimeer between Qatari forces and the troops of Imam Faisal, the...
two sides agreed to a peace treaty, forming an alliance to end Al Khalifa interference. This provoked the rulers of Bahrain, who allied with Abu Dhabi and blockaded Qatar. However, they feared the Qatar–Saudi alliance and backed down, agreeing to allow Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani to collect the tribute of Qatar. 66

This panel’s concise summary of the 1851 conflict conveys several powerful points to its audience. Museum-goers come away with the idea that Qatar has been beset by its regional neighbours for nearly 200 years—making the recent conflict less of a surprise in this context. This text also makes it clear that Bahrain and the UAE (through its capital, Abu Dhabi) have long had an alliance in the Gulf and have used their alliance as a basis for aggression against Qatar.

Finally, the presence of the word ‘blockade’ is not accidental. The term ‘blockade’—in Arabic, ḥiṣār—is Qatar’s preferred word for the recent Gulf crisis, as seen in the prevalence of the term in Al Jazeera media articles, Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements and even the ‘blockade’ library guide at the Qatar National Library. 67 There are other Arabic words that could be used to characterize this conflict, and indeed, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE preferred to describe it in their official communications as a ‘boycott’, a ‘cutting of ties’ or ‘the Qatar crisis’. 68 The word ‘blockade’ in the museum (both in English on the left side of the panel and in Arabic on the right) avoids the use of synonyms or euphemisms that would soften the bluntness of the term, and instead intentionally evokes a connection to the recent conflict.

As discussed in the previous section on transnationalism in the Gulf, feelings of shock and betrayal have been an important part of the Qatari narrative of the recent Gulf crisis. It is interesting to note, in the concise summaries of the historical events between 1848 and 1868, whose feelings of betrayal are recognized and whose are not. Mariam Al-Hammadi, professor of history at Qatar University, notes that the panel on the 1851 Battle of Mesaimeer omits the background that explains why Bahrain was so ‘provoked’ by the Qatar–Saudi peace treaty. Before this treaty, Qatar and Bahrain were allied against the Second Saudi State and working together to prevent Saudi territorial encroachment. Thus, Qatar’s abrupt decision to ally with the Saudi State, against ‘Al Khalifa interference’, was perceived by Bahrain as a surprising act of betrayal. 69 Yet while Bahrain’s feelings of betrayal are not acknowledged in the museum’s summary of the 1851 conflict, Qatar’s feelings of betrayal are certainly

66 Caption text, ‘1851: Battle of Mesaimeer’ panel, National Museum of Qatar, 23 April 2019 (emphasis added). Please note that the Arabic and English captions are close to identical in meaning, with the Arabic caption including slightly more detail on the specifics of the tribute.

67 See e.g. Al Jazeera’s articles about the ‘blockade of Qatar’: https://www.aljazeera.net/search/%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B1%26%2D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B1; statement by the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs, ‘There is no solution to the Gulf crisis except by lifting the blockade and then dialogue’, 19 June 2017, https://tinyurl.com/mofa-6-19-17; Qatar National Library’s library guide on the ‘Qatar blockade’, n.d., https://libguides.qnl.qa/Qatarblockade/z/en.

68 Banu Akdenizli, ‘Blockade diplomacy: the first 100 days of the GCC crisis on Twitter and how foreign ministers voiced themselves online’, paper presented at meeting of the International Communication Association, Prague, Czech Republic, 24–8 May 2018; Tarfa Al-Mansouri, Haya Al-Mohannadi and Mariam Feroun, ‘Digital diplomacy during the first 100 days: how GCC ministries of foreign affairs and ministers tweeted the blockade’, QScience Connect 2021: 2, 2021, pp. 1–15.

69 Personal conversation, Doha, 29 May 2019.
acknowledged in a subsequent series of captions that describe a serious conflict between Bahrain and Qatar in 1867 and 1868.

The first three panels describe the deterioration of relations between Bahrain and Qatar in 1867, capped by a betrayal of trust that leads to the capture of Sheikh Jassim and the destruction of both Doha and Al Wakrah, as follows:

1867: Al Wakrah incidents
Tensions between Qatar and the rulers of Bahrain continued for many years as Bahrain continued to try and control Qatar. In 1867, the people of Al Wakrah, supported by Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, attacked the deputy governor of Bahrain and forced him out of Al Wakrah.

1867: Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani captured
The ruler of Bahrain sent an invitation to Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, urging him to continue his yearly visits to Bahrain despite the ongoing conflict. When Sheikh Jassim went to Bahrain, he was captured and imprisoned. This incident was documented in poetry written by Sheikh Jassim.

1867: The second destruction of Doha
After Bahrain captured Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, they wanted to demonstrate their strength in Qatar. The ruler of Bahrain, supported by the ruler of Abu Dhabi, destroyed Doha and Al Wakrah in 1867.

While the Qatari people are portrayed as ousting the Bahraini presence in Al Wakrah in a justified act of independence against foreign interference, Bahrain’s ruler is portrayed as a wicked and untrustworthy entity who lured Sheikh Jassim to his territory only to capture and imprison him. The Bahraini ruler’s subsequent decision to ally himself with Abu Dhabi’s ruler and ‘demonstrate their strength’ by destroying two towns is further proof of the misguided leadership of these two neighbours. Here, the museum is telling history in such a way as to evoke feelings of shock and betrayal among visitors.

In addition, these three panels emphasize the differences between the actions of the various states, depending on who is acting on behalf of each political entity. In the three 1867 panels, the captions ascribe agency to the rulers of Bahrain and Abu Dhabi, a pattern also seen in the 1851 panel, in which specific leaders of the Second Saudi State and Bahrain chose aggression against Qatar. In contrast to the agency of the ‘rulers’ in neighbouring states, the first 1867 caption makes it clear that the Qatari rebellion against Bahrain was a bottom-up effort by ‘the people of Al Wakrah’, and that Sheikh Jassim ‘supported’ the people in their efforts but was not the primary instigator of conflict. So while in 1867 Bahrain’s and Abu Dhabi’s actions are ascribed to their rulers, Qatar’s actions are described as a unified, grassroots effort, led by the people with support from their leadership. This theme continues in the panels that conclude the account of hostilities between Qatar and Bahrain from 1867 to 1868:

1867: Battle of Damsah
All the Qatari tribes rallied in a campaign to liberate Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin
Thani. A bloody battle took place against the Bahraini forces. The Qataris were defeated, and many were killed.

1868: Battle of Jebel Wakrah

Following their defeat at the Battle of Damsah, the Qataris withdrew. The Bahrainis pursued them to Al Wakrah. Here, the Qataris made a stand, surrounding the Bahraini forces and capturing two leaders. After the battle, both sides agreed to an exchange of prisoners, and Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani returned to Doha. Despite the cruelty of these events, they brought the people of Qatar together, and paved the way for Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani’s future leadership.

In this retelling of the historical narrative, the museum appears to be deliberately emphasizing particular themes that would resonate with a Qatari audience during the recent crisis, including regional aggressors attacking the Qatari leadership, ‘all’ the Qatari people rising to defend the leadership in response, and the idea that a unified Qatar will prevail, despite the odds, in the fight against injustice and cruelty. Through a historical narrative that highlights parallels with the recent conflict, the museum evokes corresponding feelings of betrayal and empathy. In many ways, the museum’s narrative is using the museum-goers’ familiarity with the khalījī identity to create the desired response of both astonishment and an increased historical understanding that present-day events are a continuation of past patterns.

Before turning to the responses of museum-goers to these historical narratives, it is important to emphasize the relative bluntness of these panel captions when discussing sensitive historical conflicts. According to Al-Hammadi, the original National Museum did not include mention of any of these regional conflicts. 70 Some of our interlocutors expressed surprise at the way these sensitive topics were now openly discussed in the new museum, with the rulers and entities associated with various conflicts explicitly named. As Nora, a 29-year-old Qatari woman, commented: ‘The information and wording of sensitive topics … was written in a more honest tone that we did not know of before.’ 71 This newfound honesty was attributed to the recent crisis. Fatima, a 22-year-old Qatari woman, admitted:

I was surprised to see that there were some mentions of controversial historical events that took place between the monarchies in the Gulf, such as the conflicts between the Al Thanis of Qatar, Sheikh Zayed in Abu Dhabi, and Al Khalifa in Bahrain. I do not think they would have included this bit had the blockade not taken place. 72

Yet Sheikha, a 22-year-old Qatari woman, felt that the museum portrayed history in a fair and balanced way:

I feel like we were extremely diplomatic in all aspects of the museum. Like comparing it to the Louvre in Abu Dhabi, which removed Qatar from the map. We were more civilized

70 Personal conversation, Doha, 29 May 2019. See also Mariam Al-Mulla, Museums in Qatar: creating narratives of history, economics and cultural co-operation, PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2013; Mariam Al-Mulla, ‘The development of the first Qatar National Museum’, in Exell and Rico, eds, Cultural heritage in the Arabian Peninsula, pp. 117–25.
71 Personal interview, Doha, 3 April 2019.
72 Personal interview, Doha, 31 March 2019.
and educated and kept whatever was related to the history of the GCC without neglecting it. It was part of our history and, yeah, I don’t think they were biased.73

The decision of the new museum to portray these conflicts so directly, and the acknowledgement of interviewees that this choice might be justified, speaks to the changing diplomatic norms arising from the regional crisis.

The portrayal of historical conflict: museum-goers’ responses and suggestions

Given the museum’s expansive footprint of galleries, an old palace, and multiple cafés, gift shops and outdoor spaces, it is difficult, if not impossible, to see ‘everything’ the first time one visits the new National Museum of Qatar. Many of our interlocutors noted their inability to respond to the museum in full; many of them had visited only once, and owing to crowds or time constraints were often unable to look at every aspect in detail. Nevertheless, many of them noticed that the new national museum highlighted historical conflicts between Qatar and its regional neighbours. Many commented that they had learned for the first time that tensions between Qatar on the one hand and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other were part of a larger historical pattern stretching over the centuries. Oryx, a 38-year-old South African man who has lived in Qatar for eleven years, said that he had ‘absolutely’ learned something new by visiting the museum: ‘The conflict of the neighbours is very deep-seated and goes back very far. It didn’t happen overnight, you know. I already knew that, but when I started reading the timeline, I realized how far back this actually went.’74 Qataris expressed similar realizations. Nora described how the information presented by the museum on these historical conflicts had changed her perceptions of both the region and the present-day crisis:

It [the museum] showed how we, the people of Doha, faced attacks from Bahrain and Abu Dhabi, which destroyed Al Wakrah and Doha. This was new information for me, which was explained in great detail, like I had always heard of it but never really saw it in the previous museum before … The part about the bloody history of the GCC with Qatar was very interesting to see, because I did not know of it before, and I did not expect to see it so boldly displayed in our national museum. All our lives, we have been living under the impression that they were our neighbours and our brothers that we shared a history with. And that the conflict that arose only came to be in the last twenty years. But the story turned out to be much different, and the situation was bigger than we thought. The conflict is much deeper than we thought and not just between the royal families of the Gulf and that’s it. The attack was clearly aimed against Qatar and its people.75

Others commented specifically on the parallels between the ‘blockade’ of the past and the recent crisis, demonstrating that they noticed the purposeful use of this term. Sandarin, a 49-year-old French woman who has lived in Qatar for one year, noted: ‘I learned a few things, like, for instance, this gallery where you have

73 Personal interview, Doha, 14 April 2019.
74 Personal interview, Doha, 7 April 2019.
75 Personal interview, Doha, 3 April 2019.
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a bit of the history of Qatar, that there was already a blockade in Qatar, which I did not know." And Sabicha, a 20-year-old Qatari woman, explained further:

There were several things [I learned] but I think [pause] what really, really had an impact on me was truly, truly learning about how Qatar developed and how, like [pause] like learning about previous blockades and such stuff, and how we managed to create this country. I never knew that we had two like, not wars but, like, conflicts with Bahrain, and I never knew that Saudi Arabia was on our side, so this really had an impact on me to understand, like, how things are today. 77

For many museum-goers, the use of the term ‘blockade’ to discuss historical conflicts in the region helped them connect the recent experience to a pattern of behaviour between Qatar and its neighbours. As Sara, a 22-year-old Qatari woman, noted: ‘The blockade, it is part of the story.’ 78

Conclusion

This article began with the assumption—based on the development of the new National Museum of Qatar by Qatar Museums, an entity headed by the Amir’s sister and seen as part of the cultural arm of the Qatari government—that the contents of the museum, and especially its portrayals of transnational relationships between the Gulf countries between 1848 and 1868, have been carefully chosen, along with the words, examples and messages used to describe them. The panel captions discussed in this article describe themes of cruelty and aggression perpetrated by misguided external rulers, and the unity of Qataris in their attempts to secure independence and justice for themselves and their leaders, despite hardship and betrayal. These historical conflicts have obvious parallels to Qatar’s narrative of the recent Gulf crisis of June 2017 to January 2021, including the purposeful use of the word ḥiṣār [blockade], and these parallels are recognized by Qatari citizens and expatriate residents alike.

What, then, does the National Museum’s portrayal of the khalīj mean for the continued salience of this transnational identity in the aftermath of regional crisis? On the one hand, the projection of khalīji ‘unity’ is certainly questioned, if not dismissed outright, through the museum’s narrative of the conflict-ridden political history of the Gulf region. The bluntly portrayed historical facts, in and of themselves, are also indicative of a new pattern of discourse in which the national museum now includes political disputes in its displays and narratives for public discussion. The recent Gulf crisis has shifted the norms of discourse to allow for the public airing of sensitive histories and political differences in a much more open manner than previously.

Yet it is also important to recognize the distinction between ‘misguided’ rulers and ‘brotherly’ peoples that the museum has purposely created with its narratives of agency. Throughout the historical disputes, the focus is consistently on the

76 Personal interview, Doha, 20 April 2019.
77 Personal interview, Doha, 15 April 2019.
78 Personal interview, Doha, 21 April 2019.
aggressive actions of the ‘state’ or the ‘ruler’ of Bahrain, Saudi or Abu Dhabi, but never on the Bahraini, Saudi or Emirati people. The only people with agency are the Qatari people, who unify to fight against these states or rulers. The distinction between leadership and people is an important—perhaps crucial—one, as it creates the necessary space for reconciliation and renewal of khalījī ties, once the misguided leaders reconsider their actions.

The implicit message that the people are not to blame for the unwise decisions of their leaders resonates strongly with people throughout the region, especially those who were separated from their families and friends during the recent crisis. Abdullah, a 33-year-old Qatari man, recounted his experience in Saudi Arabia on the day that the crisis began:

I was in Madina El Monawara [in Saudi Arabia] at that time. That is when I got a message from one of my friends. I did not believe it at the beginning, and I was shocked and sad because of what happened between us and our neighbours in other GCC countries … They [the Saudis] were very respectful and nice to me, and, even in the airport, they said to me that ‘you are our brothers and our beloved ones’. Their reaction made me hope that the crisis would end in just a few days. 79

Stories like Abdullah’s support the conclusion reached in the extensive scholarly literature that the khalījī identity was indeed strongly felt among the peoples of the Gulf. In fact, the museum seems to be counting on its audience’s familiarity with the khalij to create feelings of shock and betrayal in response to the museum’s historical narratives, on the one hand, as well as to create the space for expressions of brotherly love to become the norm in the Gulf region once again, on the other.

The immediate reaction of the khalijī people to the Al-Ula reconciliation agreement in January 2021—as captured on social media—indicated that the reunification of families across the Gulf was cause for intense celebration. 80 Yet ‘deep skepticism among Gulf Arab citizens’ remains, owing to the ‘painful’ fraying of social ties. 81 As one Qatari citizen, Ajayan al-Hebabi, told Al Jazeera: ‘I was happy to hear [about the reconciliation] but I worry because of the trust … the trust is not there anymore.’ 82 While the Al-Ula agreement resolves diplomatic, economic and legal issues between the countries, the social consequences of the blockade will take longer to resolve. 83 In the end, despite government proclamations that the reconciliation ‘strengthens the bonds of friendship and brotherhood between peoples’, 84 this unprecedented conflict may have deeply engraved new historical captions that will change the nature of khalijī transnationalism as the region moves forward.

79 Personal interview, Doha, 26 May 2018.
80 Rawan Radwan, ‘Families rejoice as GCC summit cements the ties that bind Gulf countries’, Arab News, 5 Jan. 2021, https://arab.news/w7j3f.
81 Aya Batrawy, ‘Qatar emerges from Gulf spat resolute and largely unscathed’, Associated Press, 6 Jan. 2021, https://apnews.com/article/bahrain-turkey-dubai-boycotts-iran-977e9ef96302189900000000000006f11.
82 ‘Missing trust: Qataris give cautious welcome to GCC agreement’, Al Jazeera, 5 Jan. 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/5/qataris-give-cautious-welcome-to-gcc-agreement.
83 Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, ‘Saudi Arabia just lifted Qatar’s 43-month blockade. How did this rift end?’, Washington Post, 8 Jan. 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/08/saudi-arabia-just-lifted-qatars-43-month-blockade-how-did-this-rift-end/.
84 Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘Qatar welcomes Al-Ula declaration’, 5 Jan. 2021, https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/statements/qatar-welcomes-al-ula-declaration.

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