



## Qatar's New National Narrative

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Abdulla Al-Etaibi

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## Doha's Diversification Drive Post-Blockade

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Since the public embrace between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad at the Al-Ula Summit of January 2021 — which effectively ended the Arab blockade of Qatar — a key question that has come to mind is how fences will be mended between these Arab states beyond mere cosmetics. A related question revolves around the relevance and future of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

To circumvent the pressures of the blockade, Qatar hastened its strategic diversification efforts, from seeking new sources of food supply to increase its food security to deepening its bilateral ties with Turkey and Iran. Doha also has stepped up its efforts to carve out a bigger role in the rules-based international order. It has offered to mediate between different sets of parties: Tehran and Washington on the one hand and Washington and the Taliban on the other.

This series of *Insights* aims to uncover the various pathways to diversification that Qatar has undertaken since the blockade and following its rehabilitation by the blockading parties.

*Cover photo: Qatari children pose in traditional clothes during celebrations in Doha marking the emirate's national day, 17 December 2013. Karim Jaafar/Al-Watan Doha/AFP.*

# Qatar's New National Narrative

## The Influence of Post-Blockade Security Diversification

Abdulla Al-Etaibi\*

*The pressing need for strategic diversification in the wake of the Arab blockade of Qatar has influenced the Qatari government's national narrative. Focusing on the stories surrounding Qatar's National Day, Abdulla Al-Etaibi notes the subtle shifts and nuances in Qatar's new national narrative. He points out that a major battle against the Ottomans has been softpedalled as Qatar's security relationship with Turkey deepens while new prominence is given to a historical battle against the Saudis. He also explains why the National Day celebrations have begun de-emphasising the celebration of Qatar's tribal identity.*

Since independence in the early 1970s, the state of Qatar has projected various understandings of its national identity. The fluid nature of Qatari national identity is evident in the narratives surrounding the country's most important historical reference point — Qatar's National Day. Each year on 18 December, Qatari state leaders and the people celebrate the rise in 1878 of Sheikh Jassim bin

Mohammed Al Thani considered the founder of the nation. However, the interpretation of National Day, as well as how the history of Qatar is recounted, has been subject to revision ever since it became a focal point for collective self-definition.<sup>1</sup> A significant revision was evident following the blockade of Qatar in 2017 and Qatar's deepening security ties with Turkey.

## National Identity, Nation-Building and State Power

Yadgar defines the national narrative as “the story that a national collective tells about itself”.<sup>2</sup> Unlike collective memory,<sup>3</sup> the goal of national narratives is to unify the people around a set of stories, values, and historical experiences and bring them under the umbrella of one nation. National narratives are intended to build a national identity and are a part of the agenda of building a nation state — the nation state being a clearly defined territorial unit populated by those with a supposedly shared historical experience and ruled by a sovereign government. The narrative can also support “a constellation of ideas about the state's history and place in the world”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Koch, “Is Nationalism Just for Nationals? Civic Nationalism for Noncitizens and Celebrating National Day in Qatar and the UAE”, *Political Geography* 54 (2016): 43–53.

<sup>2</sup> Yaacov Yadgar, “From the Particularistic to the Universalistic: National Narratives in Israel's Mainstream Press, 1967–97”, *Nations and Nationalism* 8, no. 1 (2002): 58.

<sup>3</sup> James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 55–56.

<sup>4</sup> Imad Mansour, *Statecraft in the Middle East: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics and Security* (I. B. Tauris, 2016), p. 3.

The concept of national identity was developed in Europe between the 17th and 20th centuries.<sup>5</sup> It expressed the notion that a social group could be defined by some essential characteristic that was rooted in a long common heritage such as its material culture or language. Historical narratives played a major role in justifying the idea that there existed communities bound by shared historical experiences and which were tied both to particular geographies and state jurisdictions.

“Scholars have argued that the historical narratives used to depict the nation as an objective entity were always highly selective adjuncts to state power.”

For a particular national narrative to become dominant, it requires power, and indeed the goal of developing national narratives is to strengthen the state's legitimacy. In the developing world, the state is more powerful than civil society and is hence the main actor that shapes narratives about the past. It achieves this by controlling educational institutions and media outlets.<sup>6</sup> Stories about a common past are mobilised by state elites and the intelligentsia to propagate the idea that

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<sup>5</sup> The idea that nations could be defined in terms of common ethnic descent had featured in European literature since the Middle Ages. However, it was not until relatively recently that the idea of objective human groups marked by a common past and shared destiny became entwined with state-building projects. See Peter Burke, “Nationalisms and Vernaculars, 1500–1800”, in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, ed., John Breuilly, (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses* (Verso Books, 2014), p. 76; Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 16.

their nation is a “unitary entity with a descent”.<sup>7</sup> Recent scholars have argued that the historical narratives used to depict the nation as an objective entity were always highly selective adjuncts to state power. John Breuilly emphasises that nationalism — a political programme formulated around distinct national identities — is fundamentally concerned with politics, defined as the acquisition and use of state power.<sup>8</sup> Major scholars of the concept like Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Terence Ranger argue that national identity rests on traditions that, despite being portrayed as the primordial essence of a people, are actually deliberately cultivated to foster a sense of belonging among otherwise disparate groups.<sup>9</sup>

“National identity and the historical narratives used to support them are subject to change, depending on contemporary political motives.”

The insights of these scholars are borne out by the fact that national identity and the historical narratives used to support them are subject to change, depending on contemporary political motives. The factors that modify the national identity and the narratives used to substantiate it can originate both from within and outside of the country in question.

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, (Duke University Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, (Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Olick, *States of Memory*, p. 2.

In this paper, the national narrative is understood to be an ongoing process that selectively highlights aspects of a nation's past in a bid to shape the state's future.

## Qatar's Evolving National Identity

Throughout the Gulf region, ruling families legitimate their power by associating themselves with tribal units as these are a major component of the social fabric. They do so by promoting certain versions of history that recount how these pre-state factions once unified around the ruling family.<sup>10</sup> The factor that drives this tendency to tie national identity to historical narratives about pacts between tribes and ruling families is the rentier state structure that characterises many Gulf countries. The rentier state form became established across the Gulf in the wake of modernisation, fuelled by oil wealth. In return for material security offered by the redistribution of oil wealth, tribal factions defer to the authority and sovereignty of the ruling family. The ruling family in turn projects itself as the beneficent overseer of tribal groupings by deploying historical accounts that celebrate their integral part in state formation. If national identity refers to the qualities of a people defined by their deep roots in history, rulers of a nation state must lay claim to a similarly primordial ancestry in order to gain legitimacy as unquestioned rulers.

Qatar's entry into the global hydrocarbon economy, which led to the country's rapid modernisation, prompted the state to promote an image of forward-thinking cosmopolitanism. This was evident in the founding of the Al Jazeera television network in 1996, the establishment

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<sup>10</sup> Courtney Freer and Alanoud al-Sharekh, *Tribalism and Political Power in the Gulf: State-Building and National Identity in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p. 9.

in 1998 of Education City, filled mostly with US universities, and the hosting of major international sports events such as tennis, golf, cycling and soon the football World Cup. These efforts were also part of a drive to project soft power internationally, given Qatar's lack of the demographic, military and other hard power assets to secure itself against larger neighbours like Saudi Arabia and Iran. But, owing to the fear that their modernisation efforts would erode the traditional markers of belonging, Qatar's rulers felt the need to construct a national identity that emphasised cultural continuity. Qatar thus used archaeological discoveries to anchor its identity as a modern nation state in a deep past. Material traces of a shared pre-modern nomadic culture were displayed in museums — museums themselves were a new institution with Western origins — and preserved through an emphasis on national dress.<sup>11</sup> Qatar highlighted these elements of its history to provide citizens with familiar markers of identity during a time of rapid change. These dual aspects of Qatar's identity constituted a balance between its new role within the global economy and a self-understanding that harked back to a distinct Arab past, defined above all through tribal formations.

## The Qatari National Narrative Through National Day

Qatar has used several channels to transmit its national narrative and build a national identity, including museums and television series. But one of the key elements in developing its national narratives revolves around National Day. As Qatar seeks to redefine its national identity, it is important to consider the significance of past events in building a

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<sup>11</sup> Karen Exell, "Locating Qatar on the World Stage: Museums, Foreign Expertise and the Construction of Qatar's Contemporary Identity", in *Representing the Nation Heritage, Museums, National Narratives, and Identity in the Arab Gulf States*, ed. Mariam Ibrahim Al-Mulla, Pamela Erskine-Loftus, and Victoria Hightower, (Taylor & Francis, 2016), p. 28.



national narrative capable of fostering unity around a single ruler and a sovereign entity.

In 2007, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad, Qatar's current ruler who was then crown prince, issued a law to change the country's National Day from 3 September, the day Qatar gained independence from the British, to 18 December, the day in 1878 when Sheikh Jassim bin Mohamed Al Thani assumed power and led the Qatari tribes to unity.<sup>12</sup> The law was aimed at equating national independence with a unified Qatari community loyal to one ruler. To inculcate this sense of cultural unity in the minds of the populace, the state must establish a set of shared characteristics, such as language and history, which can define the nationals as a distinct group.<sup>13</sup> As part of Qatar's 2030 vision, adopted in 2008, the government has invested in language preservation projects to protect Arabic and increase its use in public services and education.<sup>14</sup>

**“Qatar’s strategic use of National Day supports George Mead’s idea that the state interacts with its history to bring the past into the present.”**

The introduction of National Day was the gateway to a version of Qatar's history that could shape a cohesive national narrative. “National Day is a live event, and it is our responsibility to improve people's

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<sup>12</sup> Office of the Crown Prince, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani, “Law no. 11 of June 21, 2007, Considering the Power Assumption Day of Sheikh Jassim Bin Mohamed Bin Thani as a National Day of the State”.

<sup>13</sup> Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering*, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Culture consultant. Interview by author, Doha, 2021.

knowledge about their country's history", explained the former assistant activities director of the National Day Committee in an interview with the author.<sup>15</sup> Qatar's strategic use of National Day supports Mead's idea that the state interacts with its history to bring the past into the present.<sup>16</sup>

“Benedict Anderson’s argument that nations need to be *imagined* because most members of the community will never meet is borne out by the Qatari case.”

The first task of the national narrative is to draw the boundaries of the community and clarify its collective goals.<sup>17</sup> Benedict Anderson's argument that nations need to be *imagined* because most members of the community will never meet is borne out by the Qatari case.<sup>18</sup> In Qatar, the boundaries of the national community are defined in terms of social groups (including the elite *Hadar* tribe, the *Humela*, i.e., the Arabs who had returned from Persia, and the nomadic *Bedi*), ethnic groups (the Sunni and

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<sup>15</sup> Assistant activities director, National Day Committee. Interview by author, Doha, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> George Mead, "Relative Space-Time and Simultaneity", *The Review of Metaphysics* 17, no. 4 (1964): 514–535.

<sup>17</sup> Laurie Brand, *Official Stories: Politics and National Narrative in Egypt and Algeria* (Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 14; Rachel Brooks, "Asserting the Nation: The Dominance of National Narratives in Policy Influencers' Constructions of Higher Education Students", *Sociological Research Online* 25, no. 2 (2020): 277.

<sup>18</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso books, 2006).

Shi'a), and descendants of enslaved Africans.<sup>19</sup> On the first National Day in 2008, discussion around the historical construction of Qatari national unity centred on the role of Sheikh Jassim in uniting the Hadar and Bedu tribes to fight the Ottomans in the Battle of Wajbah.<sup>20</sup>

### “Constructing a coherent national identity requires simplifying the realities of the past.”

Interestingly, while these groups are clearly defined in the newly refurbished National Museum of Qatar that was reopened on 28 March 2019, some groups are missing from the national narrative and National Day celebrations. Constructing a coherent national identity requires simplifying the realities of the past. This depends on marginalising the histories of certain groups, thereby excluding them from the essence of what the nation stands for.<sup>21</sup> An example of this is how neither the National Day celebrations nor Qatar's Bin Jelmood House (a museum dedicated to slavery abolition) have chosen to narrate the story of how former slaves were integrated into Qatari society after 1952, the date when slavery became illegal in Qatar.<sup>22</sup> This fits in with the Qatari state's

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<sup>19</sup> Mariam Al-Hammadi, “Presentation of Qatari Identity at National Museum of Qatar: Between Imagination and Reality”, *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 16, no. 1 (2018): p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> For more details see, for example, Ahmed Alshelek, “The Relations of Jassim bin Mohamed bin Thani with External Powers”, National Day Activities, Doha, 17 December 2008; other lectures are also available via National Day website, [www.qatar.qa](http://www.qatar.qa).

<sup>21</sup> Brand, *Official Stories*, p. 13; Islam Hassan, “The Ruling Family's Hegemony: Inclusion and Exclusion in Qatari Society”, in *Sites of Pluralism*, ed. Firat Oruc (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Hassan, “The Ruling Family's Hegemony”, p. 74.

self-image as a state where tribes have long been united under the leadership of one ruling family.

“Although Qatar’s history is replete with regional battles with its close neighbours, building national unity around these [other] military engagements would have undermined Qatari relations with the other Gulf states.”

The second element of a national narrative is the founding story of the community in question. Every year, the National Day Organising Committee chooses a slogan for National Day activities. The slogans are usually connected with contemporary issues that Qatar faces, mainly in its foreign policy. Most of the slogans are taken from poems written by the founding ruler. Qatar’s minister of sports and youth, Salah Al-Ali, confirmed that National Day aims at focusing on certain events that strengthen national identity and the traditions to which it is tied.<sup>23</sup> In 2008, when National Day was first celebrated on 18 December, the celebrations tied national unity to Sheikh Jassim’s success in bringing the tribes under his leadership to defend the peninsula against Ottoman troops.<sup>24</sup> The battle’s symbolic importance lies in the way it was introduced as a conflict where tribes rallied around the ruler. Although Qatar’s history is replete with regional battles with its close neighbours,<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “Abshro belayz wa al-khair”, interview by Adel Al-Mullah, *Al-Sharq*, 29 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/3Cl4YhZ>.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmed Alshelek, “The Personality of Jassim bin Mohamed bin Thani and his Relations with Surrounding Powers”, National Day Activities, Doha, 17 December 2008.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Mohammed Alaydroos, *Zayd Emir of Bani Yas: His Relations with Neighbouring Powers* (That Al Salasil, Kuwait, 1990); Ahmed Alshelek, Mustafa Aqel, and

building national unity around these other military engagements would have undermined Qatari relations with the other Gulf states — at the time Qatar had good relations with the UAE and had just improved relations with Saudi Arabia, which had soured in 2002, when the Saudis withdrew their ambassador from Doha owing to Al Jazeera's interviews with the Saudi opposition. Therefore, it was more appropriate to emphasise national unity against the Ottomans.<sup>26</sup>

## The Changing Foreign Policy Landscape

While the national identity is about developing domestic legitimacy, its contours can be shaped by external considerations. When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties and imposed an air and sea blockade on the small Gulf nation, Qatar was forced to acquire new allies, notably Turkey, for both security and economic purposes. This shift in the foreign policy landscape prompted Doha to re-evaluate the national identity it had constructed and generate new narratives.

A quick review of Qatar's changing relations with Turkey and the GCC states will help us better understand how the Qatari government's national and historical understanding and identity construction is entwined with its international policies.<sup>27</sup> As part of its efforts to develop its soft power vis-a-vis the Arab ground, Qatar has for some years been pursuing a foreign policy that is guided by popular Arab sentiments, an approach evident in the focus of Al Jazeera. Thus, Qatar,

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Yousef Al-Abdullah, *The Political Development of Qatar: From Emergence to Independence* (Reynod, Doha, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Former Emiri Diwan adviser. Interview by author, Doha, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Zahra Babar, "The Cost of Belonging: Citizenship Construction in the State of Qatar", *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 3 (2014): 403–420.

like Turkey, played a prominent role in the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 by standing with the people's demands for dignity and freedom. This populist stance and other policies of Qatar alienated it from its Gulf neighbours, notably, differing the interpretations of political Islam and Doha's relations with Tehran.<sup>28</sup> Qatar's neighbours even associated Qatar with terrorism and withdrew their ambassadors from Doha briefly in 2014. Thus, it was no surprise that on 5 June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and imposed an air and sea blockade against it.

“When Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties and imposed a blockade, Qatar was forced to acquire new allies, notably Turkey .... This shift ... prompted Doha to re-evaluate the national identity it had constructed and generate new narratives.”

Meanwhile, common populist attitudes had drawn Turkey and Qatar closer, culminating in the 2014 establishment of the Qatar-Turkey Supreme Strategic Committee.<sup>29</sup> Against this background, Turkey supported Qatar when it was subjected to the regional boycott. Indeed, Qatar had already demonstrated that it was worthy of support when it backed Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan when he faced an abortive coup in 2016. (In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the UAE both riled

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<sup>28</sup> Sinem Cengiz, “An Assessment of Turkish and Saudi Policy towards the Gulf Crisis: Three Levels of Analysis”, *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2019): 152.

<sup>29</sup> Ali Bakir, “The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations amid a Growing Gulf Divide”, in *Divided Gulf*, ed. Andreas Krieg (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 206.

Erdogan by backing the putschists.<sup>30</sup>) To boost Qatar's security, Turkey established a military base in Qatar, which was completed in 2019. The base can house up to 5,000 Turkish soldiers and both nations have conducted joint military operations since then.<sup>31</sup> More significantly, as Qatar struggled to cope with the economic boycott, Turkey's exports to Qatar increased by 90 per cent in the first four months of the crisis, according to the Aegean Exporters' Association.<sup>32</sup>

## A Rhetorical Tipping Point

The Gulf crisis of 2017 represented a turning point in the Qatari government's national narrative. It has affected the national narrative in two ways. Firstly, the new narrative softpedals a historical battle with the Ottomans and focuses instead on what used to be a taboo subject within the *kbaleeji* context, i.e., the historical battles involving Qatar and the other Gulf states. Secondly, it puts forward a fresh vision of the Qatari nation as a collection of citizens who pay common allegiance to the ruling family rather than as a plural community of multiple tribal factions with distinct identities.

As mentioned earlier, the Battle of Wajbah against the Ottomans had been part of Qatar's narrative since the introduction of

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<sup>30</sup> Bakir, "The Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations", p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> The Economist, "A special Relationship: How Qatar and Turkey Came Together", *The Economist*, 23 January 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/01/21/how-qatar-and-turkey-came-together>.

<sup>32</sup> Hurriyet Daily News, "Turkey's Exports to Qatar up 90 Pct since Embargo", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 31 October 2017, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-exports-to-qatar-up-90-pct-since-embargo-121638>.

National Day in 2007.<sup>33</sup> The battle's importance in the national narrative lies in its outcome and the adversary: Qatari tribes led by Sheikh Jassim had successfully defeated the mighty Ottoman Empire. However, with Turkey having become Qatar's most reliable regional partner since 2017, Doha evidently became uncomfortable commemorating the Battle of Wajbah as an integral part of its identity. Thus, the Battle of Wajbah has been downplayed in the rhetoric of national unity.

“With Turkey having become Qatar's most reliable regional partner since 2017, Doha evidently became uncomfortable commemorating the Battle of Wajbah against the Ottomans as an integral part of its identity.”

Instead, a new rhetoric has appeared regarding the Battle of Wajbah. In its official website, the Emiri Diwan, the office of the emir, absolves the Ottoman sultan of responsibility for initiating the battle. Instead, it claims the Ottoman sultan held the ruler of Basra responsible for initiating the battle and that this stand of his resulted in the restoration of the “warm and good relations between the founder and the Ottomans”.<sup>34</sup> The National Day website emphasises that following the battle, Sheikh Jassim had even insisted on flying the Ottoman flag

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<sup>33</sup> Al Wajbah is a district 16 km west of Doha. It was the location of a battle between the Ottomans and the Qataris, in which the latter were victorious.

<sup>34</sup> Emir Diwani, “Qatar's Rulers: Sheikh Jassim Bin Mohammed Bin Thani”, [https://www.diwan.gov.qa/about-qatar/qatars-rulers/sheikh-jassim-bin-mohammed-bin-thani?sc\\_lang=en](https://www.diwan.gov.qa/about-qatar/qatars-rulers/sheikh-jassim-bin-mohammed-bin-thani?sc_lang=en).



until 1915.<sup>35</sup> This new narrative has thus changed the way the Battle of Wajbah against the Ottomans is presented. From a narrative about tribal-based national unity against a great power, it has become one that positions the Ottomans as Muslim allies and pins the blame for the battle onto the ruler of Basra.

“The post-2017 narrative was built mainly on the story of the maroon Qatari flag as a symbol of unity in resisting the invading Saudi forces during the historical Battle of Mesaimeer.”

Related to this shift is the Qatari government's new focus on the Saudi invasion in the Battle of Mesaimeer<sup>36</sup> of 1851.<sup>37</sup> The Ministry of Culture's history lectures in 2020 focused on Qatar's battles with the other GCC states and considered the year 1851 as a crucial moment of national unity between Qataris in meeting the Saudi threat.<sup>38</sup> Media coverage has also focused on other historical battles with Qatar's GCC

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<sup>35</sup> National Day Committee website, “The Founder: The battle of Wajbah”, <https://bit.ly/313wOkR>.

<sup>36</sup> Mesaimeer is a district to the southwest of Doha. It was the location of an armed conflict in 1851 between Imam Faisal bin Turki of the second Saudi state and Sheikh Jassim. The Qataris defeated the Saudis in the battle.

<sup>37</sup> See National Day website for more details about the Battle of Mesaimeer, <https://www.qatar.qa>.

<sup>38</sup> Khalid Al-Ali, “Qataris between Action and Reaction”, Ministry of Culture, Doha, 15 November 2020; Ghanim Al-Humaidi, “Before and after 1851: Events Marked the Qatari Personality”, Ministry of Culture, Doha, 29 November 2020.

allies, such as the Battle of Khanoor with Abu Dhabi and the Battle of Damsah with Bahrain.<sup>39</sup>

The post-2017 narrative was built mainly on the story of the maroon Qatari flag as a symbol of unity in resisting the invading forces during the Battle of Mesaimmer. The maroon flag is known as *aladaam*. According to the official website of the National Day Organising Committee, when Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani, the father of the Qatari state's founder, initially sought to mobilise the tribes for the battle, each tribe had its own flag, which was not conducive to unity. Therefore, the sheikh suggested that the tribes fly a single flag as a sign of unity in resisting the invaders, and this was when the tribes used a maroon flag.<sup>40</sup> The narrative depicts the colour maroon as having a long history in Qatar, starting from pre-Islamic times. The website provides the following meaning for the word *aladaam*:

The linguistic origins of the word tie it to the verb “to support”, as in to support or prop up something. Another related word is “posts”, which can prop up a house. The word *aladaam* has also been used to refer to someone who goes forward confidently, without looking back or paying attention to an opponent. The *adaam* are the central pillars of a house, which support the structure, and it can also refer to a support for the roof. The flag

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<sup>39</sup> For more details see, for example, Al-Haqiqa programme on Qatar Television, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQP03I9fS2V9kqHH5tcC59rA6yndidGk>; National Day Activities website, <https://www.qatar.qa>.

<sup>40</sup> Mahmoud Al-Sarraf, *Political and Social Development of Qatar in the Era of Sheikh Qassim bin Mohammed Al-Thani* (Sohag University, Egypt, 1980), p. 65.

post was one of the pillars under which people would congregate, or the place where troops would amass.<sup>41</sup>

The narrative projects the founder as emblematic of a generation that learned unity from the older generation, with the implied message that new generations need to learn from the past and from the older generations.

“The second shift in the historical narratives after 2017 downplayed the old national identity around tribal pluralism.”

The second shift in the historical narratives after 2017 downplayed the old national identity around tribal pluralism. In 2008, the Emiri Diwan had ordered the various tribes to organise their own celebrations to highlight their importance in the establishment of Qatar.<sup>42</sup> In a show of their loyalty and to display their role in Qatar's founding, tribesmen subsequently gathered yearly on both sides of one of Qatar's major roads linking the palace of Wajbah<sup>43</sup> and the Emiri Diwan. These celebrations were even a key aspect of state–society relations because members of the royal family used to attend these tribal celebrations. The tribes that the then crown prince and the elite ruling family members chose to visit during these events would depend on

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<sup>41</sup> “Aladaam”, State of Qatar, website of National Day Organizing Committee, <https://www.qatar.qa/en/qatar/al-adaam/>

<sup>42</sup> Qatari tribesmen. Interviews by author, Doha, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> The palace where the current emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, and his father, the former emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa, reside.

several factors: the size of the tribe, the closeness of the tribe to the government, marriage ties and friendship.<sup>44</sup> These visits were an indicator of the support that the ruling family enjoys domestically and the status of the tribes too. Therefore, the idea of tribal unity around the royal family was key in the Qatari national narrative that underlay their concept of national unity.

“During the early months of the 2017 Gulf crisis, external actors like Saudi Arabia leveraged transnational tribal loyalties through domestic tribal meetings to weaken the Qatari regime. Tribal loyalties, therefore, became politically suspect in the eyes of the Qatari government.”

However, during the early months of the 2017 Gulf crisis, external actors like Saudi Arabia leveraged transnational tribal loyalties through domestic tribal meetings to weaken the Qatari regime. Tribal loyalties, therefore, became politically suspect in the eyes of the Qatari government. Previously, the tribes symbolised both the origins of Qatar's sovereignty and the continuing fidelity of modern Qatar to its pre-modern Arab and tribal past. Now, tribes had become alternative power structures whose transnational character made them ideal instruments that external actors could exploit to strain their loyalty to the government and weaken the national imaginary that had strengthened Qatar as a sovereign entity. The National Day Committee therefore

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<sup>44</sup> Qatari tribesmen. Interviews by author, Doha, 2021.

decided to cancel all the celebrations of tribal pluralism and instead offer a national *arda*, the traditional Arab sword dance performed by males, in a few locations across the country.<sup>45</sup>

These shifts that Qatar made support Anagnost's argument that during crises some gaps may appear in the national narrative which require new forms of historical representations that can meet the political priorities of the present.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate that the intense pressure arising from the 2017 Gulf crisis and Qatar's growing partnership with Turkey necessitated a shift in the Qatar government's national narrative. This shift was undertaken mainly through the rhetoric around National Day. At a broader level, the paper helped to shed light on how a state's interests and policies during crises influence its national narratives during crises.

One question that is pertinent to raise in conclusion is whether the national narrative will shift once again in view of recent developments. Relations between Qatar and its GCC neighbours have begun to improve following the Al-Ula summit of January 2021. Will this change prompt Qatar to tone down references to the Battle of Mesaimmer in its narratives? In recent months, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have begun to reset relations following the depth they had plunged to in the wake of the Saudi government's implication in the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Kashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

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<sup>45</sup> "Abshro belayz wa al-khair".

<sup>46</sup> Ann Anagnost, *National Past-times* (Duke University Press, 1997), p. 2.

Relations between Turkey and the UAE also have begun to improve. How will these shifts affect Turkey's relations with Qatar, and what impact will any such change have on Qatar's national narrative? ◆

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