

All successful nation-states in the world “invent traditions” in order to establish group cohesion, legitimize institutions and authority, and inculcate particular values and behaviors in society (Hobsbawm 1983, 1–9). One of the most useful tools at a nation's disposal is that of the national museum (Levitt 2012), yet only recently (e.g., Erskine-Loftus 2013) has academic attention shifted toward the use of museums for nation building in the Arabian Peninsula. In this paper, I focus on Qatar's investment in its new National Museum, arguing that the state is shaping the historical, social, and cultural narrative to promote and produce a unified national citizenry. Although often overlooked by the outside observer, Qatari society—like all countries in the Arabian Peninsula—contains salient distinctions based on geographic origin, cultural traditions, religious sectarianism, and even economic class (Althani 2012, 46–50; Gardner 2012, 8; Heeg 2010, 90–93; Longva 2006, 171; Mitchell 2013, 180–82; Nagy 2006, 127–31; Partrick 2009, 20–23).

My paper focuses in particular on museum's portrayals of the interrelations between the Bedouin (desert) and merchant (coastal) storylines (e.g., Cooke 2014), and the historical narrative of tribal and territorial unity under the guidance of the Al Thani ruling family.

My research is based on interviews with project members, including at the director level, and access to official and internal documents about the still-under-construction museum. As Dr. Emin Mahir Balcioglu (the Project Director in 2013) asserted, “We are witnessing a historic moment of nation building at its best.”

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