



ARTAL OMAR

PhD dissertation

Cultural Heritage, Islam and National Identity in the Gulf States of Saudi Arabia and Qatar



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2025

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To the quiet, enduring presence of my father and mother, who left this world, yet remain ever-present in every step I have taken. Their unwavering love, quiet strength, and enduring values have shaped the foundations of my life and work. This thesis is a humble tribute to their memory—a testament to the dreams they planted in me and the resilience they unknowingly passed on.

Acknowledgment

This work marks the end of a long journey, one that I could not have completed alone. Along the way, I have been fortunate to receive the support, insight, and encouragement of many people, each of whom contributed in their way to the completion of this thesis.

I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Gábor Sonkoly, whose intellectual generosity and critical guidance have significantly shaped the trajectory of this research and enriched my comprehension. His patient engagement, transmission of knowledge, and steadfast dedication to dialogue created an environment conducive to collaborative discovery and intellectual growth. In a venture that often necessitated confronting uncertainty and scrutinizing assumptions, his mentorship functioned both as a stabilizing influence and a source of challenge.

I am also indebted to my professors at the Atelier Department of Interdisciplinary History for their support and valuable advice throughout my research period. It gives me great pleasure to thank Prof. Gábor Czoch (Head of the Atelier Department) and Prof. Zsuzsanna Varga, DSc. (Head of the doctoral school of History). Similarly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the other professors I was fortunate enough to know throughout my academic career in Budapest, who not only helped me mature personally but also nourished my academic critical thinking.

I extend my sincere appreciation to the authorities in Saudi Arabia and Qatar for their invaluable support in facilitating my research. Their cooperation, openness, and logistical assistance played a vital role in ensuring the smooth progression of my work. I am especially grateful for the access, permissions, and institutional goodwill that enabled me to carry out this research with confidence and clarity.

I would like to extend a special thought to my family, who have been a real source of support despite the distance, and to my colleagues for creating a positive and competitive atmosphere, through which we have managed to evolve and develop our scientific skills. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge the Hungarian Government, which has been very generous in providing a substantial scholarship to support my studies in Hungary.

Abstract:

This dissertation provides a critical and interdisciplinary examination of the strategic mobilization of cultural heritage as a vital instrument of nation-building in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Through a combined methodological framework that includes conceptual history, discourse analysis, and empirical fieldwork, it examines how these Gulf states selectively engage global heritage norms (e.g., UNESCO), Arabic Islamic epistemologies (Turāth, Ummah), and institutional infrastructures (national museums, Vision 2030 agendas) for curating state-sanctioned narratives of continuity, rupture, and cultural renewal. The study introduces the concept of "cultural heritage-based nationalism" to describe a unique structure in which affective, architectural, and symbolic resources are coordinated to create modern Islamic subjectivities and stabilize the current political regimes through the application of cultural heritage's soft power.

Situated at the convergence of critical heritage studies, political Islamic theory, and Gulf historiographies, this study conceptualizes cultural heritage as a static repository of the past and, at the same time, a regulated epistemological field, mobilized to balance Islamic tradition with the demands of modernization, global integration, and post-oil economic diversification. In this context, heritage serves two purposes: it acts as a means of preserving history while also promoting a controlled form of secularization, not in the liberal sense of religion retreating from public life, but rather as a reorganization of the interaction between state and religion aimed at fostering a post-traditional civic ethos. Heritage emerges as an important intermediate through which national identity is (re)constructed, increasingly founded on narratives of mutual allegiance. The Saudi and Qatari regimes employ heritage as a tool for discipline that is both unifying and exclusive, creating a carefully crafted collective memory that promotes social cohesion while also defining the individuals who are (or are not) considered part of the nation's symbolic borders.

The thesis, which draws on fieldwork, including interviews with cultural elites and systematic visitor surveys, presents a comparative examination of historic infrastructures such as the National Museum of Saudi Arabia and the Qatar National Museum. It covers emblematic case studies, such as the destruction of Ajyad Castle, the re-narration of Madā'in Šālīḥ (Saudi Arabia), and the elevation of Al-Zubarah (Qatar) as a national symbol. The latter scenario exemplifies the geopolitical utility of heritage. Despite Qatar's historical subjection to Bahraini administration in the nineteenth century, the UNESCO designation of Al-Zubarah has allowed the country to claim a monument deeply connected with Bahraini history. This international recognition effectively replies to the opposing narratives while simultaneously reshaping regional memory to align with Qatar's nation-building ambitions. In doing so, the dissertation reveals cultural heritage as a reflective surface of national identity and, at the same time, as an active matrix of political imagination, where pasts are not only remembered but also strategically assembled to authorize

present regimes and envision selective futures.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Governance, Nation-Building, Cultural Heritage-Based Nationalism, Secularization and Identity Politics, Memory and Geopolitics in the Gulf region, Post-Traditional Statecraft

Ethical Declaration

In conducting this research, I am keenly aware of the ethical responsibility associated with engaging with politically sensitive cultural sites, especially in contexts where heritage, identity, and governance intersect with issues of power and legitimacy.

As an Arabic Muslim researcher, I have a strong moral obligation to engage with the sociopolitical contexts of Saudi Arabia and Qatar while respecting their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and cultural orientation. This involves honoring the trust given to me through institutional accessibility and ensuring that my work avoids employing critical analysis for any political provocation. My responsibilities include not only the academic community but also the individuals and institutions I have had the privilege to engage with, maintaining the values of academic integrity, reciprocity, and respectful representation throughout the research process.

The research highlights the importance of grasping context instead of making judgments and aims to interpret rather than accuse. My findings and interpretations are intended only for academic purposes and do not aim to support or oppose the cultural or political directions of any state.

List of figures and tables:

Tableau 1: Cultural Heritage-Based Nationalism as a distinct paradigm.	47
Tableau 1: Some examples of the destruction of monuments.....	68
Tableau 2; List of the member states of ALECSO	79
Tableau 3: list of the subsidiary institutions of ALECSO	84
Tableau 4: the history of Al-Zubarah city.....	117
Tableau 5: the history of the conflict between Qatar and Bahrain regarding Al-Zubarah	121
Photo 6: the Map of the inscribed property	124
Tableau 7: the most important event in the Gulf region from the 1970s-2011.....	134
Tableau 8: Visions in the Gulf states.....	136
Tableau 9: Qatar's Inscribed elements in the UNESCO heritage lists.	148
Tableau 10: Inscribed cultural heritage elements in the UNESCO lists	164
Figure 1: Mind Map of the Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's Vision 2030 Pillars.....	139
Figure 10: Tourist Growth in Qatar (1995-2024) Source:	
https://www.worlddata.info/asia/qatar/tourism.php	154
Figure 1: The demographic profile of the Questioned people	194
Figure 2: Motivational Differences & Information Pathways and Media Strategies	195
Figure 3: Thematic Resonance & Interpretive Reception.....	197
Figure 4: Thematic Chart Results	199
Figure 5: Architectural Symbolism and the Construction of National Identity	201
Figure 6: Visitor experience overview: Engagement and language	203
Figure 7: Visitor experience overview: Digital features and Ratings.....	203

Table des matières

GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	10
I. Research questions and hypothesis:	12
II. Why Saudi Arabia and Qatar?	14
III. Research Methodology:	16
a) Primary Sources	17
b) Secondary Sources:	19
IV. Thesis Outline	21
Chapter 1: Concepts: Temporality, Nation-Building, Ummah and cultural Heritage	23
I. Introduction:	23
II. Temporal Architectures: Historicity, Memory, and the Politics of Time.....	24
III. Temporality in the Arabic-Muslim World:	27
IV. Nation and Nationalism: From Historical Origins to Modern Paradigms	30
V. The main paradigms of nationalism:	31
1. Primordialism: Conceptual Foundations and Contemporary Discourse	31
2. Ethnosymbolism: The Role of Symbols and Cultural Evolution in Nationalism	33
3. The modernization theory	35
VI. The concept of Ummah, a conceptual analysis	37
1 The Ummah as a Tribal Construct	38
2 The Ummah as a Moral-Religious Community	39
3 The Ummah as a Political and Administrative Entity	41
4 The Ummah in Colonial and Postcolonial period: Between Rupture, Resistance, and Fragmentation.....	43
5 The Ummah or Nation-State, the contemporary discourse:.....	45
VII. Toward a New Paradigm: Cultural Heritage-Based Nationalism in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.....	46
1. Saudi Arabia: the modern custodian of the Ummah.....	48
2. Qatar's Nationhood Paradox: Balancing Sovereign Statehood and the Ummah.....	50
3. Saudi Arabia and Qatar: The Unexpected Role Reversal in Islamic Governance	51
VIII. Cultural Heritage	55
1. The First Regime: Monumental Heritage and National Frameworks	55
2. The Second Regime: Internationalization and the Universal Value Framework	57
3. The Third Regime: Pluralization, Intangibility, and the Participation	58
IX. Conclusion.....	61
Chapter 2	62
Conceptual Analysis of the evolution of the Turāth.....	62
I. Introduction:	62
II. What is Turāth?	63
III. What does Turāth represent in Islam?	64
IV. From Turāth to cultural heritage (Turāth Thaqafi)	70
V. Conclusion	76
Chapter 3: The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)	77
I. Introduction	77
II. The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) .	78
III. The aims of the organization	80
IV. ALECSO and cultural heritage	84
V. Discussion.....	88

VI. Conclusion.....	90
Chapter 4: The paradigm shifts in cultural heritage discourse in Saudi Arabia & Qatar	92
I. Introduction	92
II. Cultural Policy Transformations in Qatar and Saudi Arabia (1970–2021).....	93
III. Religious Justifications for Cultural Heritage discourse in Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Analysis of the Demolition of Ajyad Castle and the Preservation of Madā' in Ṣālih	98
1. The Destruction of Ajyad Castle	98
2. The Nabateans Old City of Madā' in Ṣālih	103
3. Discussion	113
4. Al-Zubarah Archeological site in Qatar	115
IV. Conclusion.....	129
Chapter 5: Vision 2030: Cultural Heritage as a Foundation for Qatar's and Saudi Arabia's National Reforms.....	131
I. Introduction	131
II. Vision 2030: A historical context	133
III. Visions 2030: a regional tendency	135
IV. Visions 2030: a new form of social contract	136
V. A contextual background: why visions?	139
VI. The Role of Cultural Heritage in Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Vision 2030.....	141
1. The role of Cultural Heritage in Qatar vision 2030.	142
2. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Cultural Heritage	156
VII. Comparative synthesis	167
VIII. Conclusion.....	171
Chapter 6: Two Museums, One Project: National Identity and Cultural Strategy in Qatar and Saudi Arabia's National Museums.....	172
I. Introduction	172
II. The National Museum of Qatar: Vision, Design, and Historical Development....	173
1. A Nation in Three Acts: The Structural and Thematic Composition of NMoQ Exhibitions ...	175
2. Curating the nation: national identity discourse in the national museum of Doha	179
III. The History of the Saudi Arabian National Museum: Vision, Design, and Development	183
1. The Museum's structure	185
2. Genealogies of Power and Memory: The Saudi National Museum as a Site of Discursive Nation-Building	190
IV. Survey Results: A Comparative Analysis of Visitor Perceptions in the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) and the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ).....	192
1. Justification.....	192
2. Fieldwork Limitations:	193
3. Survey Results	194
V. Conclusion	205
General Conclusion.....	206
References:	210
ANNEX	240

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, cultural heritage has moved from the peripheries of academic and political attention to the heart of global discourses on identity, development, diplomacy, and soft power¹. Once considered the static residue of the past, cultural heritage is now a dynamic asset where nations negotiate their place in modernity, assert historical legitimacy, and perform cultural authority². Such global heritage paradigm shift, shaped by global institutions such as UNESCO and mobilized through legal, economic, and symbolic mechanisms, has redefined how the past is preserved—and more importantly, by whom and for what purposes³. Cultural heritage, in this sense, is no longer reflecting a simple passive preservation of the past, instead, it has become an active site where histories are curated, futures are envisioned, and power is exercised⁴. Such a reconceptualization of heritage inevitably invites closer scrutiny of the mechanisms and discourses through which authorized meanings of the past are constructed and maintained.

According to Gábor Sonkoly (2017), cultural heritage operates as a juridical-administrative construct influenced by institutional goals and presentist⁵ logics. Rather than reflecting an organic continuity with the past, cultural heritage is increasingly formed and regulated by international institutions like UNESCO, where selected histories are mobilized to promote political legitimacy, cultural diplomacy, and economic development⁶. He remarks that:

“We define cultural heritage as a juridical-administrative concept in its current state, which serves to create adoptable forms of identity based on chosen objects, landscapes, practices, and so on, which link all possible levels of the society... due to its international institutionalization and its standard-setting vocation.”⁷

Within this dynamic, Sonkoly conceptualizes the notion of “cultural heritage regimes” to describe the systems through which heritage is strategically instrumentalized for identity construction, governance, and symbolic capital in the global arena⁸. In this framing, cultural heritage regimes operate as a mechanism for safeguarding culture and, at the same time, as an

¹ Lähdesmäki, T., & Čeginskas, V. L. A. (2022). Conceptualisation of heritage diplomacy in scholarship. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 28(5), 635–650.

² Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage: critical approaches*. Milton Park: Routledge.

³ Meskell, L. (2018). *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace*. Oxford University Press.

⁴ Pastor Pérez, A., & Colomer, L. (2023). Dissecting authorised participation in cultural heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 30(2), 226–241.

⁵ Sonkoly employs François Hartog’s concept of the “presentist regime of historicity,” in which the past is no longer critically examined through historical distance, but instead mobilized to serve immediate identity, memory, or political needs.

⁶ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *Historical urban landscape*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

⁷ Ibid, pp 129.

⁸ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *Historical urban landscape*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

apparatus⁹ (*dispositif*) for the global circulation of symbolic capital, where states, institutions, and communities compete for recognition, legitimacy, and visibility¹⁰. The use of heritage as a governed and governing resource is further amplified when examined in relation to the broader biopolitical frameworks within which contemporary states operate. This conceptual shift regarding cultural heritage production is inextricably linked to wider governmental initiatives, in which heritage is used for both remembering, managing, constructing subjectivities¹¹. The past is now treated as a resource to be governed to benefit diverse contemporary agendas, including economic development, social cohesion, post-conflict reconciliation, and nation-branding¹².

However, this mobilization of cultural heritage as a governance technology does not unfold uniformly across different global contexts¹³. Its manifestations are historically and culturally contingent, shaped by local power, memory, and identity conditions. The recent transformations witnessed in the Gulf region, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, offer a critical illustration of how these global dynamics are locally reinterpreted and strategically operationalized¹⁴. Western powers traditionally portray these two countries as culturally conservative and religiously strict¹⁵. In response, both countries launched extensive cultural heritage projects adopting international standards while redefining their national narratives¹⁶. Through their engagement in UNESCO's heritage conventions and the development of prominent museums, they demonstrate cultural and political renewal, as evidenced by their securing of World Heritage site designations and organizing cultural events. Understanding the depth of these changes requires situating them within the specific historical and ideological frameworks that shaped the initial skepticism toward heritage in both societies.

The strategic transformation of heritage in Saudi Arabia and Qatar presents an intriguing case study for societies where religious conservatism blends with secularization and modernization efforts, and state governance. The histories of both states reflect operations under rigorous Islamic paradigms heavily shaped by conservative ideologies like Wahhabism and Salafism¹⁷. Under these ideological frameworks, cultural heritage was viewed with suspicion or hostility,

⁹ I used the term apparatus (*dispositif*) in its Foucauldian meaning to refer to a strategic collection of discourses, institutions, and practices.

¹⁰ Bendix, R. F., Eggert, A., & Peselmann, A. (2013). Introduction: Heritage Regimes and the State. In R. F. Bendix, A. Eggert, & A. Peselmann (Eds.), *Heritage Regimes and the State* (1–). Göttingen University Press.

¹¹ Harrison, R. (2020). *Heritage practices as future-making practices*. In R. Harrison (Ed.), *Cultural Heritage and the Future* (pp. 21–38). Routledge.

¹² De Saint-Laurent, C., Obradović, S. (2019). Uses of the Past: History as a Resource for the Present. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 53, 1–13.

¹³ Munteanu Florea, I., Mirea, M., & Susu, C. (2020). Public Governance and Cultural Heritage: Exploring the Links between Culture and Social Indicators with the Principal Component Analysis. *IntechOpen*.

¹⁴ Mirgani, S. (2017). Introduction: Art and Cultural Production in the GCC. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 7(sup1), 1–11.

¹⁵ Peutz, N. (2017). Heritage in (the) ruins. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 49(4), 735–740.

¹⁶ Chaudhry, M. S. H. (2024). *Reclaiming the Lost Cultural Identity via Heritagization: The Gulf States*. Eastern Mediterranean University. Gazimağusa, North Cyprus. (Thesis).

¹⁷ Lacroix, S. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Harvard University Press.

especially when associated with pre-Islamic or non-Islamic histories¹⁸. Early heritage conservation endeavors were limited and inconsistent because religious edicts denounced the protection of sites considered to enable idol worship (*shirk*)¹⁹. The last twenty years have seen a fundamental transformation in the prevailing paradigm. Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" and Qatar's "National Vision 2030" programs place culture and heritage at the forefront of economic diversification efforts, national unity building, global reputation improvements, and social reform management²⁰. Cultural heritage within these states has transformed from a vulnerable memory into a state-sponsored project that carefully shapes distinct national identities alongside cosmopolitan ambitions²¹.

Yet, this internal reconfiguration cannot be understood in isolation from the global frameworks that increasingly structure the circulation and legitimization of heritage practices. This transformation is not exclusively endogenous. Global cultural organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), and other affiliated institutions have been crucial in spreading specific heritage knowledge systems²². These guidelines function as platforms where negotiation and contestation occur alongside processes of reinvention²³. While Gulf states have not merely accepted the global heritage norms they received, they actively reshaped and sometimes altered these norms to advance their own national interests. Such interchangeability between local and global norms raises critical questions that form the core inquiries of this thesis.

I. Research questions and hypothesis:

This thesis examines heritage politics, Islamic tradition, and national identity building in the Gulf area, focusing on Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The two countries offer comparable case studies for examining how cultural heritage serves as a repository of the past and, simultaneously, as a dynamic sphere of ideological production, institutional negotiation, and geopolitical

¹⁸ Al-Rasheed, M. (2007). *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic voices from a new generation*. Cambridge Middle East Studies, 25. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁹ Ibid,

²⁰ Mishrif, A. (2018). Introduction to Economic Diversification in the GCC Region. In: Mishrif, A., Al Balushi, Y. (eds) *Economic Diversification in the Gulf Region, Volume I. The Political Economy of the Middle East*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. (pp 1-26)

²¹ Wosiński, M.M. (2022). New perspectives on World Heritage management in the GCC legislation. *Built Heritage* 6, 14.

²² Skounti, A. (2010). De la patrimonialisation. Comment et Quand les choses deviennent-elles des patrimoines ? *Hesperis-Tamuda*, Vol. XLV, (2010), pp. 19-34

²³ Labadi, S. (2013). *UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, and Outstanding Universal Value: Value-Based Analyses of the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions*. AltaMira Press.

(re)orientation. More precisely, our empirical research is guided by the following research questions:

How does heritage operate as a currency of power and legitimacy in the Gulf? How are narratives of continuity and rupture constructed? How do heritage practices mediate tensions between religious conservatism and modernizing aspirations? Moreover, how do Gulf states navigate, internalize, or resist the global scripts of heritage recognition? How have the discourses and practices of cultural heritage in Saudi Arabia and Qatar evolved within the interplay of Islamic tradition, national identity construction, and global heritage governance—and what do these transformations reveal about the shifting relationship between power, memory, and modernity in the Gulf?

While these research questions open multiple avenues for deeper exploration, additional sub-questions could be raised about the topic. These questions provide a foundation for a series of hypotheses examined through both theoretical reflection and fieldwork conducted in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The following main hypotheses are suggested to help organize the investigation and the analysis:

H1: Cultural heritage in Saudi Arabia and Qatar functions as a strategic instrument for state-led nation-building and regime legitimization, particularly in the context of the expected post-oil economic diversification and international image rebranding.

H2: Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar construct carefully curated narratives of historical continuity by selectively incorporating Islamic symbols and references. At the same time, they introduce elements of rupture, emphasizing modernity, secularization, and global engagement, in order to position themselves as future-oriented states.

H3: The balance between religious conservatism, secularization, and modernization in Saudi Arabia and Qatar is achieved through a regulated conceptual reinterpretation of key notions, such as *Turāth* and *Ummah*, allowing cultural heritage to serve as a bridge between traditions and reforms.

H4: Saudi Arabia and Qatar engage with international heritage norms, particularly those advocated by UNESCO, through selective adaptation rather than comprehensive adherence, thereby reshaping global heritage discourse to fit their national cultural, political, and religious priorities.

H5: The evolution of heritage practices in the Gulf reflects a larger transformation in the intersection between power, memory, and modernity, in which cultural heritage reflects historical identity and, at the same time, a performative instrument of future-oriented governance.

II. Why Saudi Arabia and Qatar?

As we mentioned before, historically, both countries operated within a cultural context influenced by strict Islamic principles and religious conservatism²⁴. Established conservative movements, including Wahhabism and other forms of Salafism and Islamic nationalism, generated a cultural environment filled with skepticism and distrust toward artistic and intellectual activities²⁵. These ideological structures led to diminish any sort of creative practices and limited participation in worldwide discussions about cultural heritage preservation and historical representation.

However, in the last two decades, both countries experienced radical changes, reshaping their cultural roles regionally and globally through accelerated economic expansion and strategic modernization plans. Cultural heritage becomes an active actor through which the relationship between culture, religion, and political authority is recalibrated²⁶. Historically governed by models of sovereign power—where the legitimacy of rulers was asserted through force, theological absolutism, and the suppression of pluralistic expression—these societies faced a paradigmatic rupture in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, when traditional modalities of rule revealed their fragility²⁷. In response, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have used cultural heritage as a governmentality technology, constructing selected identities, forging affective bonds between citizens and their country, and normalizing new forms of allegiance based on pride, historical continuity, and cultural belonging rather than coercive force²⁸. The extensive production of national heritage thus serves to recompose the social norms, transforming obedience into a normative cultural reaction, in which proudly identifying as a "Saudi», or a "Qatari" becomes both a method of subjectivation and a political stability mechanism²⁹.

²⁴ Lacroix, S. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Harvard University Press.

²⁵ Jong, A., & Ali, R. (2023). Political Islam as an Incomplete and Contested Category: A Post-Foundationalist Revision. *Religions*, 14(8), 980.

²⁶ Exell, K. & Rico, T. (2014). *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate.

²⁷ Sadiki, L. (2018). Towards a 'democratic knowledge' turn? Knowledge production in the age of the Arab Spring. In *Democratic Knowledge and Knowledge Production* (pp. 139–164). Routledge.

²⁸ Akçali, E. (2016). Introduction: Neoliberal Governmentality and the Future of the State in the Middle East and North Africa. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. (pp 1-14).

²⁹ Al-Malki, A. M. (2016). Public policy and identity. In *Policy-Making in a Transformative State: The Case of Qatar* (pp. 158–179). Palgrave Macmillan.

The architectural redevelopment of historical districts, the establishment of world-class museums, and the global branding of ancient heritage sites exemplify how cultural heritage today is less about safeguarding static monuments and more about producing strategic memories. These practices illustrate the ontological politics of heritage: decisions about what counts as heritage are never neutral, but deeply implicated in power relations, value regimes, and world-making projects³⁰. By selecting certain narratives, specific sites, and particular temporalities for elevation into heritage, Saudi Arabia and Qatar perform a form of temporal governance, a reordering of historical visibility that constructs particular futures by managing the available past³¹. This reordering process involves negotiations between competing historical narratives, religious discourse, local traditions, and global frameworks of recognition. The central aspect of these negotiations represents a wider cultural rebalancing process where cultural heritage integration into modernization plans navigates both long-standing religious discourses and evolving political requirements. For instance, restoring heritage sites from pre-Islamic times and non-Islamic cultures in regions that have historically enforced strict Islamic laws signifies a major symbolic change.

The rediscovery and promotion of Saudi Arabian heritage sites like Madā' in Ṣāliḥ led to the development of theological discourses that justified protecting areas previously linked to divine punishment. The Saudi regime engages official narratives to transform these sites into symbols of national pride and historical significance instead of religious threats to support its larger religious reform and cultural reorientation mission within Vision 2030³². Qatar's cultural heritage narrative highlights maritime history and urban development as identity markers but avoids religious controversies³³. By promoting Al-Zubarah, the Qatari regime underscores its historical dominance and economic strength while avoiding any religious narratives that could cause present-day religious tensions³⁴.

Building on these critical facts, our thesis positions itself within broader debates about the instrumentalization of heritage and its role in reshaping social imaginaries. It aims to conduct a critical investigation of the complex interconnections between cultural heritage, national identity building, and the political, social, and cultural transitions in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Our research also examines how heritage has become a strategic tool for redefining social imaginaries and

³⁰ Harrison, R. (2015). Beyond "Natural" and "Cultural" Heritage: Toward an Ontological Politics of Heritage in the Age of Anthropocene. *Heritage & Society*, 8(1), 24–42.

³¹ Entwistle, M. H. (2022). *Fuelling Culture: Art, Race, and Capitalism on the Arabian Peninsula* (PhD thesis). SOAS University of London.

³² Hamidaddin, A. (2020). Misconceptions and Saudi Pre-Islamic Heritage: The Case of Madain Saleh. Italian institute for international political studies. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/misconceptions-and-saudi-pre-islamic-heritage-case-madain-saleh-27355>

³³ Exell, K., & Rico, T. (2013). 'There is no heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, colonialism and other problematic histories. *World Archaeology*, 45(4), 670–685.

³⁴ Kinzel, M., Sobott, R., & Thuesen, I. (2013). Conserving Zubarah: towards a conservation strategy for A1 Zubarah Archaeological Site, Qatar (poster). *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 43, 167–175.

establishing new rules of belonging in Saudi Arabia and Qatar after regional crises revealed the weaknesses of traditional governance systems. It goes beyond documenting policy changes or institutional advancements to explore how cultural heritage has been transformed to establish a new national vision that promotes governmentality through cultivated loyalty, national pride, and historical consciousness. The thesis investigates the operation of selective memory curation within modernization and globalization dynamics while examining religious negotiation processes and revealing inherent cultural project tensions and possibilities. It reveals how these Gulf states use heritage to bridge tradition with modernity while establishing future-oriented identities built on managed historical awareness and political power that derives cultural legitimacy.

III. Research Methodology:

The methodological architecture of this thesis relies on a critical, interpretive, and conceptually informed framework that reflects the complexity of the subject matter—heritage, Islam, and national identity—and the complexity of the materials under investigation. Our research integrates a range of discursive, institutional, and experiential forms of knowledge to trace how cultural heritage operates as an ideological instrument and a field of epistemic negotiation. Our investigation is structured around a triangulated approach, allowing for cross-referencing normative state narratives, institutional performances, and public reception. Sources were not considered discursive artifacts within the broader contexts of politics, theology, and historiography. Whether official policies, museum exhibitions, media broadcasts, or survey responses, all were analyzed for their participation in the production and circulation of legitimacy, belonging, and historical consciousness.

Conceptual history serves as an analytical tool and a guiding epistemology in the methodology of our investigation. We interpreted the concepts of "ummah," "Turāth," and "nation" as inherently shifting terms, shaped by institutional and discursive interventions. The thesis examined the semantic transformations of these concepts in religious, sociological, and political contexts, rather than limiting them to theological or legal categories. It also illustrated how the conceptual evolution of these notions has been absorbed into the official discourse of both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, supporting their new ideological laws.

The second important point of our investigation focused on the cultural and political institutions that actively mobilize heritage and Islamic discourse as tools for nation-building. In this context, institutions such as Qatar Museums Authority, Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture, and intergovernmental bodies like UNESCO, The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (ISESCO) were analyzed as discursive regimes that govern cultural policies and construct legitimacy assertion. We have employed critical discourse analysis (CDA) to critically investigate Saudi and Qatari national development plans (Vision 2030), constitutional preambles, official speeches, curated museum exhibitions, and media broadcasts. This method was practical in exploring how religious continuity is aligned with territorial sovereignty, how narratives of modernization and secularization are embedded within Islamic frames, and how the concept of a transnational Islamic identity was sacrificed (replaced) by achieving a national identity.

The methodological approach also relied on extensive fieldwork, interviews, and structured surveys conducted over the four-year duration of the doctoral program. During this time, I conducted multiple research visits to both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, where I engaged in participative observation and analytical documentation of important heritage institutions. These visits deepened my critical analysis of how cultural heritage is curated, displayed, and instrumentalized in different institutional and spatial contexts. The fieldwork included semi-structured interviews with individuals occupying essential positions in the religious and cultural sectors, figures such as senior museum directors, heritage policymakers, and Islamic scholars affiliated with national institutions. These interviews were designed to gather expert insight and understand how institutional narratives are shaped and articulated from within. In parallel, I implemented a structured survey targeting visitors to the National Museum of Doha and Riyadh, with 100 participants sampled at each national museum. The survey aimed to capture public attitudes toward the representation of heritage, the perceived relationship between Islam and national identity, and the emotional and cognitive responses elicited by the exhibitions. Finally, the methodology sought to connect multiple levels of analysis—from the semantic to the institutional and from the architectural to the affective—to show how cultural heritage in Qatar and Saudi Arabia is crafted, contested, and inhabited. The following section outlines the primary and core sources used to operationalize this methodological framework.

a) Primary Sources

This thesis employs various primary sources, each providing epistemological and analytical insights into exploring cultural heritage, Islam, and national identity in the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. We classify the sources into six main categories:

First, Islamic texts and their interpretations include essential religious writings—mainly the Qur'an—along with traditional and modern explanations (tafsīr) and specific fatwas that address cultural practices and the preservation of heritage. These materials serve as essential references and tools of influence, helping to shape the accepted limits of what is considered heritage in Islamic legal and moral discussions. The analysis engages these sources to reveal how Gulf states employ and (re)interpret Islamic authority to underpin national cultural narratives.

Second, Saudi Arabi and Qatar official documents and cultural policy frameworks, including official legislation, constitutional texts, ministerial reports, laws, and national vision documents that outline the cultural policies of both states. In Qatar, it includes the Permanent Constitution, Qatar National Vision 2030, and official policy papers from national institutions such as the Qatar Museums Authority Foundation and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. In Saudi Arabia, important sources comprise the Basic Law of Governance, Vision 2030, as well as documents produced by the Ministry of Culture, the King Abdulaziz Foundation, and the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra). These materials frame the institutional logic through which heritage is positioned as a tool of social engineering, soft power, and national identity building.

Third, the museum spaces and heritage architectures represent essential sites for analysis, encompassing the physical and symbolic landscapes of museums. Our investigation analyzes the National Museum of Doha in Qatar and the National Museum of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia as curated spaces where national memory is constructed and enacted. These institutions' architectural grammar, spatial circulation, exhibit narratives, caption languages, and digital interfaces are critically observed as performative texts that render state-sanctioned imaginaries of heritage visible, affective, and embodied. Researcher field notes, photo documentation, and interpretive observations constitute the core of this source category.

Furthermore, the official discourse and state-affiliated media, including speeches, media interviews, televised addresses, and policy declarations issued by national leaders, members of ruling families, high-ranking clerics, and cultural policy-makers. These materials, gathered from official state media, government websites, and organized online collections, provide important information about how cultural heritage is presented as a valuable legacy and a tool for soft power in international relations. Many of these speeches and broadcasts were discovered through original research conducted at the national libraries in Riyadh and Doha, where historical recordings and written copies stored in their archives provided access to significant developments in how heritage is discussed.

A significant contribution of this research stems from the integration of qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with prominent religious scholars and leading figures in cultural institutions across Saudi Arabia and Qatar. For instance, our interviews with Sheikh Dr. Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Muslih, a leading Saudi scholar and head of the International Center for Research on the Scientific Miracles of the Qur'an and Sunnah, significantly contributed to deepening our understanding of Islamic epistemologies and in shaping the religious dimensions of our bibliography through his recommendations of seminal and often rare scholarly works. Equally impactful was Faisal Abdullah Al-Naimi, Director of the Department of Archaeology at

Qatar Museums, whose insights bridged the intersection between cultural heritage governance and archaeological stewardship in Qatar.

Finally, I also collected quantitative data through structured questionnaires administered to visitors at the National Museum of Saudi Arabia and the National Museum of Qatar, with 100 respondents surveyed at each site. The instrument consisted of Likert-scale items designed to measure affective engagement with the exhibitions, identification with national narratives, and perceptions of the relationship between Islam and cultural heritage. While I quantitatively processed the data to identify comparative trends, I interpreted them as forms of vernacular discourse, offering insight into how the public internalizes, reinterprets, or challenges the heritage narratives curated by state institutions. This dimension of the study thus complements the elite interviews and textual analyses by foregrounding the reception and resonance of official heritage frameworks among museum visitors.

b) Core Sources:

This thesis is inspired by the writings of Gábor Sonkoly, particularly his concept of cultural heritage regimes and their impact on nation-building, memory politics, and identity formation. Sonkoly's work provided a critical perspective on cultural heritage, demonstrating it as a constantly changing and ideologically charged process of identity building. This understanding was important in clarifying our theoretical position within contemporary academic debates and questioning how cultural heritage is institutionalized in non-Western contexts, such as the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This intellectual engagement was reinforced by the broader theoretical curriculum offered during the first two years of my doctoral training. Other main references for the construction of my approach François Hartog, with his concept of regimes of historicity; Benedict Anderson, with his crucial theory of imagined communities; Pierre Nora's concept of Realms of Memory; and the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Anthony D. Smith on nationalism and invented traditions... all provided essential ideas for understanding how group identities are formed, displayed, and organized.

The thesis also employed an extensive selection of secondary literature including conceptual history, Islamic studies, heritage politics, cultural heritage and museum studies, postcolonial theory, and Gulf studies. The conceptual methodology's foundation lies in Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history), a historical analysis approach focusing on the evolution of important concepts within specific historical contexts. His theory contributed to our investigation of significant concepts such as *Turāth*, *Ummah*, and nation; how their meanings change over time; and how these changes reflect broader societal shifts, particularly during periods of modernization.

My readings of Arab and Islamic academia have further deepened this perspective. Scholars such as Mohammed Arkoun, Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, Hassan Hanafi, and Mohamed Amara provided critical guidelines for breaking down the essentialist interpretations of Islamic tradition and understanding the ideological uses of Turāth (heritage) in modern political projects. Their writings have helped me to situate Islamic epistemologies within a broader discourse of social and cultural reforms, secularism, and postcolonial critiques.

Furthermore, I have closely examined the work of Wael Hallaq, Talal Asad, and Sherman Jackson, whose scholarship investigates how Islamic knowledge traditions are reconfigured in response to the secularizing demands of the modern nation-state. In parallel, literature from heritage studies and museology, particularly the writings of David Lowenthal, Sharon Macdonald, Tony Bennett, and Rodney Harrison, provided the theoretical basis for examining the institutionalization, curation, and politicization of national collective memory. These scholars have facilitated our understanding of museums as not merely educational or preservationist venues but as contexts in which dominant narratives are both presented and challenged.

In Gulf societies, where local cultural logics often diverge significantly from Eurocentric models, the applicability of global heritage norms has been questioned, primarily due to criticisms of universalist presumptions in UNESCO's heritage regulations. This critical reflection was further enriched by archival research conducted at the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) in Rabat, Morocco, where I consulted various institutional and academic publications regarding cultural heritage policies in the Arab-Islamic world. These included academic publication by key figures affiliated with UNESCO and regional heritage governance, such as Mounir Bouchenaki, Faisal Abdullah Al-Naimi, and Ahmed Skounti, whose writings connect international policy structures with indigenous understandings of heritage. Their contributions improved my understanding of how Arab heritage discourses are negotiated at the intersection of local, national, and international agendas.

Ultimately, the literature on Gulf studies has provided the foundation for the regional specificity of this research. The writings of Madawi Al-Rasheed, Mariam Al-Mulla, Karen Exell, and Virginia Cassola have offered a theoretical and empirical understanding of the political cultures of Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Their analyses of modern Gulf state formation, cultural diplomacy, and authoritarian governance helped in improving my understanding of how cultural heritage narratives are integrated into larger strategies of regime legitimacy, geopolitical (re)positioning, and national identity building.

IV. Thesis Outline

This thesis is organized into six substantive chapters, which work as interconnected porous zones that communicate with each other to demonstrate the intricate interconnectedness between cultural heritage, Islam, and national identity building in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical structure of the thesis by focusing on three interconnected analytical categories: temporality, nation-building, and cultural heritage. I will begin by exploring temporality as a chronological sequence and an epistemological structure for structuring historical understanding. Then, I will examine the Arabic-Islamic counterpart, "azzamania", where time is employed in theological, linguistic, and ethical contexts to shape narratives of divine history, political legitimacy, and collective memory. Through this critical examination of Islamic and Western temporal models, I will demonstrate how cyclical, eschatological, and presentist conceptions of time combine to influence state ideologies. To examine the coexistence and sometimes confrontation between the conceptions of nation and Ummah (the Arabic name for nation)³⁵ in Arab settings, we shall delineate the three main paradigms of nationalism: primordialism, modernism, and ethnosymbolism. I will also explore the conceptual evolution of the Ummah. Building on these foundations, I propose a new paradigm of nationalism that we term "cultural heritage-based nationalism" and investigate how this model operates within the institutional structures of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, influencing their unique approaches to nation-building. Finally, I will use Gábor Sonkoly's concept of "cultural heritage regimes" to examine cultural heritage as a strategic site where temporality and nationhood converge. We shall redefine it as a dynamic and political construct shaped by state narratives, institutional structures, and international organizations, such as UNESCO.

The second chapter excavates the genealogy of *Turāth* as a concept, tracing its theological, legal, and political sedimentations. *Turāth* stands as a concept that has evolved from Quranic references to become a strategic tool for Islamist reformists and modern Arab intellectuals caught between sacred reverence and historical analysis. The chapter examines ideas from Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, Hassan Hanafi, Mohammed Arkoun, and Amara to frame a critical debate between epistemological closure and interpretive rupture. *Turāth* operates as more than a cultural reference point because it serves as a discursive power tool that defines which heritage elements can be maintained, erased, or revived.

³⁵ Though often translated as "nation," the term ummah in Islamic thought refers to a transnational religious community bound by shared moral obligations, not territorial sovereignty. Its framing as a political nation is a modern reinterpretation shaped by colonial legacies and postcolonial state-building.

The third chapter investigates how ALECSO pursues pan-Arab cultural unity by using bureaucratic procedures, standardization initiatives, and rhetorical appeals to Arab-Muslim solidarity. Although ALECSO takes its organizational structure from UNESCO, it operates within the complexities of regional geopolitics while playing an important role in the Arab heritage field. The chapter demonstrates how the organization's universalizing goals conflict with the divided cultural-political landscape of the Arab region. The chapter shows how discourse and actual implementation diverge, as well as the contrast between unity and pluralism while emphasizing ongoing struggles between cultural preservation and political exploitation.

The fourth chapter examines heritage development into a *dispositif* that links institutions, discourses, and practices responsible for creating compliant historical subjects. The chapter examines the spatial politics of heritage by using two emblematic case studies of Ajyad Castle and Madā'in Šālīḥ from Saudi Arabia, along with Al-Zubarah from Qatar. The chapter demonstrates how heritage sites experience preservation or destruction and then receive new interpretations based on changing demands for national legitimacy, religious authority, and international recognition. This chapter analyzes heritage's multiple societal roles, such as spectacle, surveillance, memory, and discipline.

Chapter Five examines how national vision operates through performative political actions. The chapter analyzes Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Qatar's National Vision 2030 as future-focused scripts that mobilize heritage as a principal narrative tool. These national visions transcend basic policy designs by creating ideological constructs that transform historical narratives into predetermined destinies and cultural heritage into essential infrastructure. Through a study of official discourses and symbolic strategies, the chapter demonstrates how these visions turn past ruptures into aesthetic experiences while making reforms appear normal and using historical elements to shape political futures.

The last chapter examines museums as political institutions through a comparative analysis of the National Museum of Qatar and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia. The analysis covers both institutions regarding curatorial logic, public programming, architectural symbolism, and exhibition content. This chapter explores how visibility politics and narrative selection work together with spatial design to shape historical awareness. Considering that museums serve as venues for national self-representation rather than mere repositories for collections, the chapter argues that Gulf museums function as vital sites where state ideology is visually and emotionally manifested via historical exhibitions.

Chapter 1: Concepts: Temporality, Nation-Building, Ummah and cultural Heritage

I. Introduction:

Time, in both its metaphysical and political dimensions, has always played a central role in shaping collective identities and legitimizing authority³⁶. Temporality, far from being a neutral background to historical events, emerges as an instrument of ideological formation, cultural negotiation, and epistemic ordering³⁷. The understanding of time in Arab-Muslim societies eludes comprehension when viewed exclusively through Western paradigms³⁸. Rather, it should be perceived as a layered manuscript of sacred cyclical rhythms, legal frameworks, philosophical legacies, and the contemporary state's linear paths of development and progress³⁹.

From the eschatological vision ingrained in Islamic sacred scripture to the contemporary state's strategic use of history, temporality is both a place of preservation and reinvention⁴⁰. In modern nation-states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, temporality operates as a tool for aligning national narratives with global modernity, without cutting ties to religious heritage and collective memory. These cases demonstrate how the state's institutions operate historical time, synchronizing statehood with divine purpose, while simultaneously advancing visions of economic diversification and geopolitical relevance.

This chapter defines the theoretical structure of the thesis by examining three interrelated concepts: temporality, nationalism, and cultural heritage. I will begin by exploring Western models of temporality—linear, cyclical, eschatological, and presentist—and their Arabic-Islamic counterpart, (*Azzamania*- زمنية), where time is rooted in theological, linguistic, and ethical traditions. I then examine the paradigms of nationalism—primordialism, modernism, and ethnosymbolism—alongside the evolving discourse of the Ummah, to understand the tensions and intersections between national and Islamic imaginaries. Building on this finding, I propose a new paradigm of “cultural heritage-based nationalism,” focusing on how Saudi Arabia and Qatar use heritage to structure national identity. Finally, based on Gábor Sonkoly’s theory of “cultural heritage regimes”, I will analyze cultural heritage as a political instrument where

³⁶ Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Columbia University Press.

³⁷ Brisini, T. (2024). The presence of the past: temporality, ontology, and the prehistory of performance. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 44(4), 254–270.

³⁸ Sabry, T. Khalil, J. (2019). *Culture, Time and Publics in the Arab World: Media, Public Space and Temporality*. London I.B. Tauris.

³⁹ Ibid,

⁴⁰ Afsaruddin, A. (2008). *The First Muslims: History and Memory*. Oneworld Publications.

temporality and nationalism intersect, influenced by governmental objectives and international structures like UNESCO.

II. Temporal Architectures: Historicity, Memory, and the Politics of Time

Temporality, understood as how societies perceive, structure, and interact with time, is a fundamental concept in historiography⁴¹. It influences how societies construct historical narratives, interpret present realities, and imagine future possibilities⁴². Far from being a neutral or objective framework, temporality is a dynamic and culturally contingent process shaped by collective memory, identity, and structural forces⁴³. These forces—including political institutions, economic systems, and cultural frameworks—actively define how historical continuity and transformation are conceptualized, reinforcing temporality as a key determinant of social and historical consciousness⁴⁴.

Collective *mentalités* shape temporal experience in anthropological and historical contexts through shared beliefs and attitudes that distinguish societies across different periods⁴⁵. This viewpoint represents a departure from past universalist time concepts, such as Newton's absolute time, which treated temporality as a linear objective sequence⁴⁶. According to Bloch, temporality develops from relational interactions between synchronic simultaneous events and diachronic historical processes⁴⁷. History here functions as a stored collection of past experiences while simultaneously serving as a dynamic interpretative process that continuously redefines historical events based on present perspectives⁴⁸.

Official institutions, particularly the Catholic Church, also proved to be significant mediator between competing temporal structures, functioning as an apex body whose principles can conciliate the cyclic and traditional temporality of modernity with a linear temporality⁴⁹. The Catholic Church established a structured temporal order through the institutionalization of rituals, calendar systems, and religious observances, thereby reconciling the agrarian, nature-based cycles of pre-modern societies with the progressive, goal-oriented time of industrial and modern

⁴¹ Kratz, C. de A. (2022). *Temporality*. Manchester University Press eBooks.

⁴² Ibid,

⁴³ Olick, J.K. (2007). *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁴⁴ Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Columbia University Press.

⁴⁵ Bloch, M. (1992). *The historian's craft* (P. Putnam, Trans.). Manchester University Press. (Original work published 1949). pp. 138–164

⁴⁶ Lehmkuhl, U., & Bloch, M. (2007). *Historicizing Nature: Time and Space in German and American Environmental Historiography*. *Helmuth Journal*. 1-51.

⁴⁷ Bloch, M. (1992). *The historian's craft* (P. Putnam, Trans.). Manchester University Press. (Original work published 1949). pp. 53

⁴⁸ Ibid,

⁴⁹ Jackelén, A. (2021). *Time & Eternity: The Question of Time in Church, Science, and Theology*. Books on Demand, pp. 45-50.

eras⁵⁰. The liturgical calendar, however, preserved traditional temporalities by incorporating agrarian cycles and seasonal sensibilities, as well as introducing a temporal future by means of eschatological narratives and moral instruction⁵¹. The Church's dual role facilitated the reconciliation of a static, repetitive conception of time with the evolving, dynamic frameworks of progress and economic rationality⁵².

Pierre Nora's framework investigates how modern societies institutionalize historical awareness, so transforming organic collective memory into structured, politically mediated narratives, much as institutional frameworks like the Church helped to mediate between cyclical and linear temporalities. Nora argues that modernity transforms memory into institutionalized history, shifting societies from collective, experiential remembrance to structured, politically mediated narratives⁵³. He also describes memory as collective and selective since it emerges from lived experiences and shapes identities via rituals, oral traditions, and cultural practices⁵⁴. In contrast, history is structured, archival, and institutionalized, distancing the past from direct human experience through documentation, academic analysis, and national storytelling⁵⁵. This transformation reflects how societies transition from an embodied, memory-driven engagement with the past towards bureaucratic, state-managed historical systems⁵⁶.

Reinhart Koselleck expands the discussion by conceptualizing time as dynamic and asymmetric, demonstrating how historical experiences shape future expectations and redefine temporal continuity⁵⁷. His temporal model suggests that modern times break historical continuity because the established connection between past experiences and future expectations worsens, resulting in more unpredictable developments⁵⁸. Koselleck's scholarship identifies two distinct temporal dimensions: the "space of experience" (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the "horizon of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizont*). While the space of experience consists of collective memory and inherited traditions along with lived realities and institutional knowledge, the horizon of expectation stands as a representation of potential future scenarios influenced by historical events and sociopolitical transformations⁵⁹. Koselleck's theoretical model demonstrates how human actors shape history through dynamic interactions between recorded past experiences and projected future

⁵⁰ Amesbury, R. (2018). Secularity, Religion, and the Spatialization of Time. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 86(3), pp. 591–600.

⁵¹ Slade, K. N. (2021). *The Fullness of Time: Jesus Christ, Science, and Modernity*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 70-75.

⁵² Ibid,

⁵³ Ibid,

⁵⁴ Ibid,

⁵⁵ Ibid,

⁵⁶ Nosova, H. (2020). Memory versus history by P. Nora. Why and how? *Multiversum. Philosophical Almanac*, 2(2(172)), 3-14.

⁵⁷ Jordheim, H. (2021). Reinhart Koselleck and the Multiple Temporalities of Modernity. *History and Theory*, 60(1), pp. 11–14.

⁵⁸ Koselleck, R. (2004). *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Columbia University Press, pp. 255

⁵⁹ Ibid,

possibilities⁶⁰. While structuralist historiography analyzes historical repetitions and patterns, Koselleck's conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) investigates how key political and social terms evolved⁶¹.

Gábor Sonkoly (2017) further advances the conceptual discourse on temporality by situating it within what François Hartog describes as the “presentist regime of historicity”. Under this new paradigm, linear progress and future-oriented teleology no longer control how we think about time. Instead, temporality gets interiorized, fragmented, and experienced in a different way via the individual and collective memory⁶². Sonkoly also highlighted a critical rupture with modernist historicity, where time was organized by ideological, external, and periodized structures that were designed to narrate national progress or civilizational development⁶³. Here, temporality is also marked by a suspension of historical continuity and a focus on emotionally resonant pasts that support current identities⁶⁴. Strategic choices, often unrelated to chronological depth, determine temporality in this case, instead of historical causality. What emerges is a form of time that is affective rather than analytic, synchronically constructed rather than diachronically traced, and governed by memory’s immediacy rather than by history’s critical distance⁶⁵. Sonkoly’s intervention thus reveals how temporality in late modernity is not only culturally contingent but increasingly operationalized to serve identity-based agendas, marking a paradigm shift in the epistemology of historical time.

Beyond the confines of Western (European) epistemologies, temporality acquires distinctive ontological and cultural textures, particularly within the Arabic-Muslim intellectual tradition. How, then, have Islamic theological, philosophical, and linguistic traditions conceptualized time—not only as chronology or memory, but as a lived, ethical, and metaphysical dimension? To address this, the next section turns to the complex architecture of temporality in the Arabic-Muslim world, where notions of divine eternity, prophetic history, and linguistic temporality interact to produce an entirely different temporal consciousness.

⁶⁰ Jordheim, H. (2021). Reinhart Koselleck and the Multiple Temporalities of Modernity. *History and Theory*, 60(1), pp. 20–25.

⁶¹ Ibid,

⁶² Hartog, F. (2015). *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. Columbia University Press.

⁶³ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *History and Cultural Heritage*. In: *Historical Urban Landscape*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

⁶⁴ Ibid,

⁶⁵ Ibid,

III. Temporality in the Arabic-Muslim World:

In the Arabic world, the concept of temporality (*Azzamania*- زمانية) has developed through various theological, philosophical, sociological, and linguistic perspectives, resulting in a complex and diverse discourse⁶⁶. Early Islamic thought conceptualized time as divine judgment and eternity, juxtaposing the temporal world with an eternal divine essence⁶⁷. The dialectical theologians of the *kalam* (paroles) looked at time in tiny pieces, focusing on the unique qualities of each moment to make the ideas in the Qur'an about creation fit with God's power⁶⁸. Meanwhile, philosophers, influenced by Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic traditions, aimed to reconcile temporality with eternity, integrating time into metaphysical frameworks supporting Islamic creation and judgment doctrines⁶⁹.

The linguistic dimension of temporality reveals how Arab-Muslim societies differentially conceptualize and express time⁷⁰. The Arabic language prioritizes aspect over tense, establishing a distinct temporal logic which focuses on the quality and completeness of actions rather than their placement on a fixed chronological scale⁷¹. The integration of grammatical, lexical, and aspectual markers in Arabic illustrates the relationship between temporal and ethical dimensions, reflecting a worldview grounded in Islamic principles⁷². This linguistic configuration corresponds to a wider Islamic cultural understanding of time, where temporality transcends a simple grammatical classification and reflects an intrinsic ethical and ontological concept. Expressions of time (*Azzaman*- الزمن) in Arabic often reflect relational and event-centered sensibilities, underscoring a worldview in which the present moment is densely packed with moral and spiritual weight⁷³. This temporal awareness enhances a more comprehensive cultural understanding that is multifaceted and contextual, informed by religious, historical, and social dimensions.

In the contemporary era, temporality emerged as a significant area of negotiation between tradition and modernity, especially within postcolonial Muslim societies⁷⁴. The relational and

⁶⁶ Nasr, S. H. (2007). *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study*. World Wisdom, pp. 45–50.

⁶⁷ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1993). *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*. International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, pp. 27–30.

⁶⁸ Ibid,

⁶⁹ Gutas, D. (2001). *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works*. Brill, pp. 95–100.

⁷⁰ Suleiman, Y. (2023). *Arab Linguistics, Arabic Linguistics, and Language Ideology*. Journal of Arabic Sociolinguistics, 12(3), pp. 45–50.

⁷¹ Bardi, L. (2022). *Aspect and Tense in Arabic: Reimagining Temporal Constructs in Islamic Thought*. Oxford Linguistic Studies, pp. 30–35.

⁷² Ibid,

⁷³ Weintritt, O. (2008). Chapter 6: Interpretations of Time in Islam. In J. Rüsen (Ed.), *Time and History: The Variety of Cultures* (pp. 85–92). New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books.

⁷⁴ Rahman, F. (2020). *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 2–11.

dialectical aspects of time arose in response to the challenges presented by global modernity⁷⁵. Islamic scholars and thinkers have emphasized the relationship between local and universal temporalities, providing frameworks that are applicable across various cultural and historical contexts⁷⁶. Rather than replacing earlier conceptions of time, the encounter with modernity has produced dynamic syntheses wherein historical memory, theological ethics, and social change are held in productive tension. These changing temporal structures resist simple binary distinctions between innovation and preservation, instead reflecting a historically contextual pluralism in which progress is perceived via socially constructed moral narratives. For instance, the reinterpretation of the Hijri calendar in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 plan. In 2016, Saudi Arabia switched from the Islamic lunar calendar to the Gregorian calendar for state employee compensation and bureaucratic planning, harmonizing administrative systems with international norms⁷⁷. The Islamic temporal framework still governs religious celebrations, rituals like Hajj and Ramadan, and national commemorations. This dual-calendar system exemplifies contextualized plurality, as it accommodates industrialization, globalization, and secularization initiatives without disrupting religious temporalities⁷⁸. Rather than marking a rupture with tradition, this approach symbolizes a negotiated synthesis in which both technological efficiency and eternal spiritual foundations direct temporal innovation. The coexistence of these temporal logics demonstrates how Arab-Muslim states integrate modern structures while remaining centered in culturally established moral and ritual time, providing an alternative to the linear, secular narratives typically associated with Western models of modernization⁷⁹.

These perspectives continue to fuel intense and ongoing debates about the temporality of defining foundational concepts such as cultural heritage, national identity, and religious values, reflecting broader tensions between innovation and preservation. These tensions are not only conceptual, but they have also influenced the evolution of Arab historiographical practices, with temporality no longer interpreted as a fixed religious doctrine but rather as a multifaceted and dynamic structure. Arab historical theology, shaped by multiple religious, social, and political experiences, has produced its own grammar of time—one that challenges reduction to Western teleological theories while accommodating nonlinear, cyclical, and ethical components of historical understanding⁸⁰.

⁷⁵ Ibid,

⁷⁶ Safi, O. (2018). *The Politics of Knowledge in Premodern Islam: Negotiating Ideology and Religious Inquiry*. UNC Press, pp. 91–94.

⁷⁷ Welle, D. (2016, October 3). Saudi Arabia trims expenses and workdays. *dw.com*. <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-switches-to-western-calendar/a-35942460>

⁷⁸ Ghosh, D. (2021). *Islamic Modernities: Muslims and the Transformation of Knowledge in the 20th Century*. Routledge, pp. 210–215.

⁷⁹ Riecken, N. (2015). HISTORY, TIME, AND TEMPORALITY IN A GLOBAL FRAME: ABDALLAH LAROUT'S HISTORICAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF HISTORY†. *History and Theory*. Volume 54, Issue 4.

⁸⁰ Viersen, H. (2023). Rethinking Reform: 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ṭāhā and the Temporal Reconceptualization of the Authenticity–Modernity Paradigm. *Religions*, 14(2), 225.

Arab-Muslim temporal structures primarily stem from Quranic ethics, social norms, and communal history, offering a distinct temporal model from the secular and linear models⁸¹. Islamic historiography often eschewed linear timelines in favor of cyclical or piecemeal versions thereof, representing a variety of experiences in Muslim societies⁸². The continuing dominance of traditional temporal schemas in these cultures shows a buffering effect against the homogenizing tendencies of modernity, pointing to the temporal dimensions of time as a moral and ethical category⁸³. For instance, the Islamic concept of Hijra (migration), particularly the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, which marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar⁸⁴. Each year, this event is celebrated not only as a historical sign but also as a cycle of memory moments for Muslim communities, demonstrating how Islamic historiography intertwines cyclical temporality with the community's lived experiences and collective memory⁸⁵. Such temporal practices represent a pluralized and performative engagement with history, in which the past is not relegated to a remote archive but constantly woven into the rhythms of collective life. In this context, temporality becomes an evolving repertoire of memory, ethics, and social meaning that transcends chronological sequencing.

The complex discourse on temporality in Arab-Muslim societies serves as a crucial foundation for comprehending how historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts shape collective identity and temporal perceptions. This temporal complexity relates to more general issues of identity, power, and belonging, especially when considered in the context of developing global concepts, like nation and nationalism. We intend to explore how Arab-Muslim societies navigate the interplay between tradition and modernity, local and global, spiritual, and political. Such expanding debate raises important questions, as we move on to the topic of nation and nationalism. How has the concept of the nation evolved from early cultural formations to its modern political definition? How do Arab-Muslim societies integrate historical memory into the modern nation-state framework? To what extent do sacred and cyclical temporalities challenge or support nationalism as a modern construct? Does the Ummah paradigm offer an alternative to the Western model of the nation-state, or do the two frameworks intersect in shaping collective identities? Examining these questions will provide insight into how historical time, memory, and state ideology converge in the making of national identity in the Arab-Muslim world.

⁸¹ Ibid,

⁸² Ibid,

⁸³ Khalaf, S. (2014). *Gulf Societies in Transition: Liberalizing Autocracies in the Arabian Peninsula*. Saqi Books, pp. 88–93.

⁸⁴ Shaddel, M. (2018). “The Year According to the Reckoning of the Believers”: Papyrus Louvre inv. J. David-Weill 20 and the Origins of the *hijrī* Era. *Der Islam*, 95(2), 291–311.

⁸⁵ Zein, I., & El-Wakil, A. (2021). On the Origins of the Hijrī Calendar: A Multi-Faceted Perspective Based on the Covenants of the Prophet and Specific Date Verification. *Religions*, 12(1), 42.

IV. Nation and Nationalism: From Historical Origins to Modern Paradigms

Globally, the term "nation" was adapted to encompass a wider range of cultural and political conditions, often merging indigenous expressions with the Western model of the nation-state⁸⁶. The colonial era saw the imposition of European political structures, which redefined social organization in colonized regions and led to hybridized understandings of the nation⁸⁷. In postcolonial discourse, the term almost always refers to the merging of native identity and externally imposed [political] sovereignty, as seen in the independence movements in Africa and South Asia⁸⁸. In the Arabic contexts, the term exhibits distinct connotations. Though the Arabic term "Ummah" denotes a spiritualized frame of nationhood over a territorial one, which is characterized by over-religious bonds rather than geographic forms, contrasting the Western embedded model⁸⁹. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the emergence of nationalism, which endowed the notion of nationhood with cultural and symbolic importance, connecting it to shared myths, memories, and collective identity⁹⁰. The emergence of print capitalism and mass communication technologies, as discussed in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, solidified the concept of "nation" as an imagined political community, bringing individuals together through common narratives and aspirations⁹¹. As nationhood evolved, it took on diverse meanings across historical and cultural contexts, shaping political ideologies and identity formations. However, what defines a nation? Is it a shared political will and civic engagement or rooted in ethnic and cultural heritage?

In this section, I begin my investigation into nation-building with a critical overview of the three main theoretical paradigms that have impacted the global understanding of nationalism: primordialism, modernism, and ethno-symbolism. These models constitute essential conceptual tools for analyzing the evolution of nationhood and for identifying their limitations when applied to non-Western contexts. Following this, the analysis turns to the Arabic concept of the Ummah, tracing its historical and ideological transformations, from early theological formulations to its politicization in the modern era, in order to understand how it functions as an alternative framework to Western models of nationhood. I will conclude by contextualizing the cases of Saudi Arabia and Qatar within these overlapping discourses, demonstrating that they don't completely fit into either the nationalist or the Ummah-based view. Instead, our research

⁸⁶ Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, pp. 35–40.

⁸⁷ Ibid,

⁸⁸ Gelvin, J. L. (2005). *The Modern Middle East: A History*. Oxford University Press, pp. 150–155.

⁸⁹ Massad, J. (2001). *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan*. Columbia University Press, pp. 67–72.

⁹⁰ Smith, A. D. (1991). *National Identity*. University of Nevada Press, pp. 23–30.

⁹¹ Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso Books, pp. 33–37.

introduces a new conceptual model: cultural heritage-driven nationalism, as an emerging strategic approach employed by both countries to define national identity, claim political legitimacy, and establish global (re)positioning.

V. The main paradigms of nationalism

While our research focuses on Arab nationalism and its specific manifestations in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, it is essential to consider the prevailing theoretical paradigms that have influenced the ongoing debates on nationalism.

There are three main paradigms for analyzing nationalism⁹². The first is primordialism, also known as perennialism, which posits that nations have always been, and that nationalism is a natural phenomenon⁹³. The second is ethnosymbolism, a paradigm that views nationalism as a dynamic evolutionary phenomenon and emphasizes the importance of symbols, myths, and traditions in the development of nations and nationalism⁹⁴. The third paradigm is modernization theory, which proposes that nationalism is a more recent social phenomenon that has developed because of modern society's socioeconomic structures such as industrialization, urbanization, and mass education⁹⁵. These paradigms provide essential conceptual instruments for analyzing the evolution, transformation, and challenges of nationalism across diverse historical and cultural contexts. Understanding these fundamental patterns provides an essential framework for examining how Arab contexts engage with, deviate from, or adjust broader trajectories of nationhood.

1. Primordialism: Conceptual Foundations and Contemporary Discourse

In nationalism studies, primordialism is a theory that emphasizes the deep historical and often biological or genealogical roots of nations⁹⁶. This approach views national identity as arising from pre-modern and enduring elements such as shared kinship, language, culture, and territory⁹⁷. Primordialism highlights the "innate, objective character" of national identity, rooted in characteristics like biological descent, linguistic community, and territorial attachment⁹⁸. These features link nations to "fundamental social instincts" and describe national identity as linked to concepts of race, ancestry, and cultural continuity⁹⁹. This view aligns with idea that

⁹² Özkirimli, U. (2017). *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 20–25.

⁹³ Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books, pp. 255–260.

⁹⁴ Smith, A. D. (1999). *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford University Press, pp. 10–15.

⁹⁵ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–5.

⁹⁶ Smith, A. D. (1986). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Blackwell, pp. 13–20.

⁹⁷ Eriksen, T. H. (2010). *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*. Pluto Press, pp. 21–30.

⁹⁸ Suny, R. G. (2001). Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations. *The Journal of Modern History*, 73(4), 862–896.

⁹⁹ Coakley, J. (2018). 'Primordialism' in Nationalism Studies: Theory or Ideology? *Nations and Nationalism*, 24(1), 52–70.

nations and their identities are seen as natural extensions of human social structures, persisting over millennia¹⁰⁰.

The ethnic identity exists as an inherent and unchangeable trait based on familial ties, shared language, and religious beliefs. In this view, individuals feel ethnic bonds as natural, emotional connections that form the core of their identity, showing how nationalism emerges from deep-rooted social connections¹⁰¹. National identity becomes deeply rooted in shared ancestry, which creates an emotionally powerful force that fuels nationalist feelings. The attachment is commonly presented as a natural and intuitive function and a strategic political instrument for identity creation and mobilization¹⁰².

Another important aspect of primordialism is the significance of symbolic and cultural borders¹⁰³. Myths, historical narratives, and communal memories are seen as critical in preserving national identities over generations¹⁰⁴. These symbolic aspects provide a feeling of connection and continuity among national groups, ensuring coherence and resilience in the face of social change¹⁰⁵. They strengthen the emotional and cultural aspects of fundamental bonds, guaranteeing their long-term viability¹⁰⁶. Furthermore, some interpretations include a sociobiological lens, implying that nationalism is an extension of family allegiance¹⁰⁷. Such viewpoint holds that humans are inherently inclined to create cohesive communities based on common genealogy, which eventually evolve into culturally articulated national identities¹⁰⁸. This approach highlights the evolutionary and biological foundations of social cohesion, relating it to the long-lasting character of national identity.

Primordialism stresses the importance of shared historical narratives, cultural heritage, and religious bonds to foster stability and unite group members¹⁰⁹. When shared history becomes mythologized, national identity receives reinforcement through symbols and collective memory (Smith, 2000; Coakley, 2018)¹¹⁰. These connections are essential elements that allow societies to sustain their continuity and maintain foundational stability despite modern transformations and societal developments¹¹¹.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid,

¹⁰¹ Horowitz, D. L. (2003). *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. University of California Press, pp. 75–85.

¹⁰² Ibid,

¹⁰³ Siromahov, M. (2020). *The Cognitive Underpinnings of Essentialist Nationalism: Exploring the Role of Identity Fusion and Heuristic Thinking*. Royal Holloway University. (thesis)

¹⁰⁴ Vitali, E. (2023). *The Quest for the Primordial: An Inquiry into the Nationalist Rhetoric of Contemporary Japan*. University of Milan.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid,

¹⁰⁶ Smith, A. D. (1986). *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Blackwell Publishing, pp. 140.

¹⁰⁷ Laruelle, M. (2021). *Central Peripheries: Nationhood in Central Asia*. UCL Press, Library OAPEN.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid,

¹⁰⁹ Smith, A. D. (2000). *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates About Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Polity Press, pp. 50–55.

¹¹⁰ Suny, R. G. (2001). *Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations*. *The Journal of Modern History*, 73(4), 862–896.

¹¹¹ Ibid,

2. Ethnosymbolism: The Role of Symbols and Cultural Evolution in Nationalism

Ethnosymbolism provides a complex viewpoint that connects both primordialist and modernist perspectives, stressing the enduring power of myths, symbols, and historical narratives in the cultural evolution of national identities¹¹². Anthony D. Smith (1939-2016) developed this paradigm, emphasizing the significance of symbolic and historical continuity in shaping both the past and present aspects of nationalism¹¹³. At its core, ethnosymbolism lies in the idea that contemporary states have a strong relationship with pre-modern ethno-historical groups, which are commonly known as "ethnies"¹¹⁴. These communities store shared myths, memories, and values, which contemporary nationalist projects reinterpret to maintain continuity¹¹⁵.

For example, the phenomenon of "myth-symbol complexes" illustrates how collective memories and culturally embedded symbols can generate common identity, giving a veneer of legitimacy to national projects over the course of history¹¹⁶. This perspective incorporates nationalism into a long-term perspective, enabling cultural symbols to adjust over time and space to this evolving socio-political landscape without losing their historical significance¹¹⁷. Based on these considerations, reinterpreting cultural heritage becomes a crucial tool for safeguarding national identity¹¹⁸. The focus on the rehabilitation of artistic, linguistic, and historical traditions has often distinguished this process between "cultural nationalism" and "political nationalism"¹¹⁹. At times of social crisis or change, the creative elaboration on the cultural heritage of a nation enables intellectuals and elites to manipulate identity through symbol renewal¹²⁰. This way of thinking emphasizes the continued significance of national emblems but also shows how they can endure and adapt to new circumstances¹²¹.

Religion is also important in ethnosymbolism, especially in the early formation of Western national identities¹²². Religious narratives, such as the concept of a chosen people or covenantal relationships, served as foundational themes in shaping medieval European nationalism¹²³. These

¹¹² Smith, A. D. (2009). *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. Routledge, pp. 15–20.

¹¹³ Ibid,

¹¹⁴ Leoussi, A. S., & Grosby, S. (2007). *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture, and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 30–35.

¹¹⁵ Ibid,

¹¹⁶ Smith, A. D. (2001). *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Polity Press, pp. 58–65.

¹¹⁷ Leoussi, A. S. & Grosby, S. (2007). *Nationalism and Ethnosymbolism: History, Culture, and Ethnicity in the Formation of Nations*. Edinburgh University Press, pp. 120–130.

¹¹⁸ Hutchinson, J. (2013). *Nationalism and War*. Oxford University Press, pp. 44.

¹¹⁹ Ibid,

¹²⁰ Armstrong, J. A. (1982). *Nations Before Nationalism*. University of North Carolina Press, pp. 95.

¹²¹ Breuilly, J. (2011). *Nationalism and the State*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 200.

¹²² Smith, A. D. (2009). *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. Routledge.

¹²³ Ibid,

accounts demonstrate the appropriation of religious signs and practices to establish enduring identities, serving as the pre-modern foundation for numerous nationalist movements¹²⁴. Ethnosymbolism's focus on continuity across time and culture has also proved helpful in studying of non-Western nationalism. The revival and politicization of cultural symbols—such as language, shared historical narratives, and the collective experience of colonization—have played a crucial role in constructing unified national identities¹²⁵. In the Arab world, symbolic activation has occurred through Pan-Arab intellectual movements, postcolonial resistance, and state-led nation-building projects¹²⁶.

Ethnosymbolism has faced criticism for its purported culturalist nature and inadequate attention to the historically constructed nature of national identity¹²⁷. Critics of this school of thoughts hold that by focusing on historical continuity, it ignores the background of, as well as deliberately mobilizing, traditions to suit political purposes¹²⁸. In response, scholars have narrowed the theoretical scope of the school to incorporate insights from political science, sociology, and the study of memory¹²⁹. These amendments elucidate the use of symbolic capital to uphold cultural unity and achieve political objectives.

Ethnosymbolism has also served to justify wars and violence by connecting historical righteousness with political objectives¹³⁰. For instance, in the Israeli context, the ethnosymbolic emphasis on narratives such as the historical association with the historic land of Israel and the notion of the "chosen people" has also served to legitimize the state's creation and expansion, initially aimed at the expulsion or exclusion of the Palestinians¹³¹. Scholars have also observed the use of cultural practices, rooted in ideological and religious rationales, to justify the continued control and expulsion of Palestinian populations¹³². The coexistence of ethno-symbolism and identity politics in Israel reveals how collective memories and affective symbols can polarize conflicts by reinforcing group boundaries and creating an accumulation of exclusionary

¹²⁴ Sayegh, P.-Y. (2011). Religion and Nationalism in Contemporary Europe: Towards a Renewed Syncretism? Nordic Political Science Association (NoPSA)- Workshop: Religion and nationalism: meeting points, conflicts and challenges, Vaasa, Finland.

¹²⁵ Burkhart, D. (2024). *An Analysis of Cultural Icons: A Synecdochic Procedure* (pp. 85–103).

¹²⁶ Mohamedou, M. M. O. (2018). *The Rise and Fall of Pan-Arabism*. In *Routledge Handbook of South-South Relations*. Routledge.

¹²⁷ Özkirimli, U. (2003). *The Nation as an Artichoke? A Critique of Ethnosymbolist Interpretations of Nationalism*. *Nations and Nationalism*, 9(3), 339–355.

¹²⁸ Ibid,

¹²⁹ Smith, A. D. (2009). *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*. Routledge, pp. 60.

¹³⁰ Merhavy, M. (2019). *National Symbols in Modern Iran: Identity, Ethnicity, and Collective Memory*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 55.

¹³¹ Tzidkiyahu, E. (2021). From the margins to the center: religious-nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: a comparative approach. Political science. Institut d'études politiques de paris- Sciences Po.

¹³² Khalidi, R. (2020). *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017*. Metropolitan Books, pp. 200.

practices¹³³. This example illustrates how ethnosymbolism can both mobilize collective identity and serve as a catalyst for animosity and violence.

3. The modernization theory

The modernization theory claims that socio-economic changes like industrialization, urbanization, and state centralization lead to the development of national identities. Scholars, including Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1983), developed this paradigm, identifying nationalism as an outcome of modern demands instead of an age-old occurrence. Modernization theory connects national sentiment development to socio-economic changes like industrialization, urban growth, and centralized state structures while drawing from principles of structural functionalism and historical materialism¹³⁴. Structuralists, including Gellner (1983), focus on cultural standardization, but historical materialists like Hobsbawm (1990) view nationalism as the product of class relations within capitalist growth.

Industrial societies produce socio-economic conditions that enable the development of nationalist sentiments. Industrialization creates cultural homogeneity through mass communication and worker movement, while the development of nationalism depends on elite political figures and state organizations that foster national awareness¹³⁵. State institutions such as schools and media enforce a standardized cultural framework known as 'high culture,' which Gellner identifies as the mechanism through which nationalism becomes the central organizing principle of modern states¹³⁶. Modern states replace local identities with standardized language and education systems to build national belonging for efficient industrial and bureaucratic operations¹³⁷.

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (1983) extends and challenges Gellner's structuralism by emphasizing print capitalism as a direct actor in national identity building¹³⁸. Anderson argued that the expansion of print, including newspapers and novels, allowed for common imaginaries to flourish among previously separate groups¹³⁹. Achieving standardized language and the spreading of common stories enabled print capitalism to lead

¹³³ Brockhill, A., & Cordell, K. (2019). The violence of culture: the legitimization of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(5), 981–998.

¹³⁴ Delanty, G., & O'Mahony, P. (2002). *Nationalism and Social Theory: Modernity and the Recalcitrance of the Nation*. Torrossa.

¹³⁵ Gellner, E. (1983). *Nations and Nationalism*. Blackwell Publishing, pp. 47.

¹³⁶ Dikshit, V. T. (2022). Ernest Gellner's Perspectives on Nationalism in Nations and Nationalism. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 5(1), 35–40.

¹³⁷ Ibid,

¹³⁸ Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, pp. 35

¹³⁹ Breuilly, J. (2016). Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: A Symposium. *Nations and Nationalism*, 22(4), 20–25.

people to internalize the idea of their belonging to a broad, abstract community, the nation¹⁴⁰. Other modernization processes such as urbanization, literacy, and economic integration create new patterns of interaction that necessitate cohesive national identities¹⁴¹. For example, urbanization has been one of the principal factors of modernization, leading to the expansion of cities and the concentration of populations from diverse backgrounds¹⁴². Migration from rural areas to urban areas exposes people to new cultures, values and lifestyles that have the potential to compromise their traditional identity¹⁴³. This existing diversity facilitates the potential for a unified national identity. Instead of remaining isolated within distinct communities, there is the possibility of forming a new community that acknowledges and incorporates differences, thereby including members from various backgrounds¹⁴⁴. For instance, in the United States, urbanization from late 19th and early 20th century gave rise to the urban fabric that eventually served as a cauldron of multiple cultures¹⁴⁵. Yet, this diversity also gave rise to the construction of a common American national identity driven by values of freedom, equality and democracy¹⁴⁶.

Eric Hobsbawm (1990) takes this argument further by demonstrating how nations actively construct their traditions and symbols to solidify political and social cohesion, challenging the notion of nationalism as an organic historical continuity¹⁴⁷. His concept of “invented traditions”, which he defines as a set of practices governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and imbued with symbolic meaning, often designed to inculcate values and norms of behavior¹⁴⁸. According to him, these traditions are intentionally crafted by the notables to build solidarity and loyalty to the newly centralized regimes¹⁴⁹. For example, the adoption of national flags, anthems, commemorative holidays in the 19th century reflects the ways in which states fostered symbols that helped to generate a feeling of common membership in their populations¹⁵⁰. These are not organic and traditional but elaborately constructed to consolidate the unity of the nation¹⁵¹. Hobsbawm's scholarship also argues against the constituting, essentialist conceptions which associate a nation with profound historic or cultural continuity¹⁵². Hobsbawm argues that while

¹⁴⁰ Ibid,

¹⁴¹ Wimmer, A., & Schiller, N. G. (2002). *Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation–State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences*. *Global Networks*, 2(4), 301–334.

¹⁴² Goebel, M. (2016). *Immigration and National Identity in Latin America, 1870–1930*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History.

¹⁴³ Ibid,

¹⁴⁴ Castles, S. (2013). The Forces Driving Global Migration. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 34(2), 122–140.

¹⁴⁵ Huntington, S. P. (2004). *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. Simon & Schuster, pp. 45.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid,

¹⁴⁷ Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid,

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 13.

¹⁵⁰ Elgenius, G. (2011). National Flag Origins: Religion, Revolution and Rivalry. In: *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

¹⁵¹ Ibid,

¹⁵² Hobsbawm, E. J. (1990). *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge University Press,

nationalist movements tend to revive historical customs, these customs are, in fact, modern constructs designed to fulfill contemporary political objectives¹⁵³.

Modernization theory provides a significant analytical framework for examining nation-building processes in our Saudi Arabia and Qatar case studies. The Saudi regime has used nationalism to validate and advance a more liberal and contemporary national identity while countering the influence of Islamist opposition groups¹⁵⁴. In contrast, the Qatari regime has promoted a nationalist ideology that connects the nation to its Arab and Islamic past while simultaneously embracing modernity and globalization¹⁵⁵.

The exploration of nation and nationalism demonstrates their evolution from kinship-based and lineage-oriented constructs to modern ideological frameworks shaped by political sovereignty and cultural identity. As we move forward, the analysis of the *Ummah* will provide a critical lens to examine how spiritual and universal dimensions of community challenge and coexist with the political and territorial frameworks of modern nationalism in Arab-Muslim societies.

VI. The concept of Ummah, a conceptual analysis

The concept of the Ummah is one of the pivotal issues in human and social thought, as it forms the basis for understanding collective identity and how societies cohere throughout history¹⁵⁶. This concept has historically evolved in different ways. Ummah has its roots in Arabic linguistic, theological, and cultural traditions and has evolved to encompass a broad range of meanings over time¹⁵⁷. Derived from the Arabic root أمّ (*umm*), which means "mother," the word carries connotations of origin, kinship, and nurturing¹⁵⁸. At its core, the term signifies a community or group that shares a common bond, whether religious, cultural, or social¹⁵⁹. In Islamic theology, this bond is primarily rooted in the shared faith and collective identity of Muslims as followers of Islam¹⁶⁰. In the Arab and Islamic context, it has been associated with spiritual and cultural meanings that transcend geographical and political boundaries, based on shared Islamic values that promote belonging to the Islamic or spiritual nation¹⁶¹.

¹⁵³ Ibid,

¹⁵⁴ Aldossry, T. M. (2024). Saudi National Day: Conservatism Versus Modernity in the Light of Saudi Vision 2030. *Changing Societies & Personalities*, 8(4), 901.

¹⁵⁵ Cochrane, L., Amin, H., & Al-kaabi, N. (2024). National Identity in Qatar: A Systematic Literature Review. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

¹⁵⁶ Hassan, R. (2006). *Globalisation's challenge to the Islamic Ummah*. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 34(2), 311–323. Brill.

¹⁵⁷ Abdelmadjid, B. (1997). *The concept of nation (Ummah) in Islam: A comparative study (Islamic Civilization Journal)*, 3(3), 89–102.

¹⁵⁸ Dastagir, G., & Ramzy, I. (2018). Ummah. In Z. R. Kassam, Y. K. Greenberg, & J. Bagli (Eds.), *Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*. Springer, Dordrecht.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid,

¹⁶¹ Abubakar, F. (2020). *Concept of Ummah in the Al-Qur'an: Analysis semantics of Toshihiko Izutsu*. *Jurnal Hunafa: Studia Islamika*, 17(2), 147–166.

However, the concept of Ummah is not a static entity; rather, it has evolved in response to shifting historical circumstances and socio-political forces¹⁶². The concept of Ummah has evolved from its initial pre-Islamic structure as a kinship-based tribal order, through its redefinition as a religiously oriented moral and legal community under Islamic revelation, and subsequently into an imperial framework within the Caliphate system, reflecting ongoing adaptations to historical and political contexts¹⁶³. A pivotal rupture in the early 20th century plunged the concept of Ummah into a divided postcolonial context characterized by competing ideologies—secular nationalism, pan-Islamism, and Islamist revivalism—each aiming to reshape its political and ideological relevance¹⁶⁴. Globalization, digitalization, and transnational Islamic networks have reconfigured the Ummah, rendering it a hybrid concept that operates within both religious imagination and as a practical instrument for political and ideological mobilization¹⁶⁵.

1- The Ummah as a Tribal Construct

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the term Ummah functioned as a neutral descriptor to classify groups based on kinship, geography, and shared material interests rather than a theological or ideological framework¹⁶⁶. In that time, tribes formed the basis of Arabian society, with a person's identity closely linked to their *asabiyyah* (tribal solidarity)¹⁶⁷. Arabian society consisted of tribal, decentralized confederacies, and no centralized power controlling all the groups¹⁶⁸. The Authority was distributed based on family relations, and leadership in an Ummah was usually an inheritance, based on the prestige of clan leaders and tribal chiefs¹⁶⁹. This sociopolitical structure, in turn, led to fluid intertribal relations, rivalry, and open conflict over the use of water, grazing, and trade routes¹⁷⁰. Pre-Islamic Arabia, particularly the Hijaz region¹⁷¹, also saw an emerging economic interdependence that reinforced tribal distinctions rather than dissolving them¹⁷². The tribes that controlled major trade hubs, such as the Quraysh in Mecca, wielded substantial

¹⁶² Aḥsan, A. (1992). *Ummah or nation? identity crisis in contemporary Muslim society*. Islamic

¹⁶³ Ibid,

¹⁶⁴ Hasan, M. (2020). Beyond Clash of Civilizations and Post-Islamism: *Ummah(s)* and the Muslim World. In: *Islam and Politics in Bangladesh*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

¹⁶⁵ Noormansyah, R., Nabiha, K., Fany, A., Ulhasanah, N., & Hanifah, A. (2024). From Gaza to Unity of The Ummah: Uncovering Potential of The Geopolitics of Ummah. *Islamic Research*, 7(2), 178-203.

¹⁶⁶ Türkoğlu, T. (2018). *Formation of the social bond among Muslims in early Islam*. thesis, *Ibn Haldun University, Turkey*.

¹⁶⁷ Nasr, A. M. (2024). The Structure of Society in Pre-Islamic Arabia and the Impact of the Hijra: a Traditional Archaeology. In Routledge eBooks (pp. 3–10).

¹⁶⁸ Ibid,

¹⁶⁹ Ghadermarzi, M., & Mohamadi, R. (2022). Prejudice in the tribal structure of the Arabs and its role in Islam. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*. (9): 114-119

¹⁷⁰ Ibid,

¹⁷¹ Hejaz is a region in western Saudi Arabia, situated along the hilly Red Sea coastline of the Arabian Peninsula, extending from Jordan in the north to the Asir area in the south.

¹⁷² Kirazli, H.S. (2024). Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Arabian Society Before the Advent of Islam. In: *Conflict Resolution and Peacemaking in Islam*. Palgrave Series in Islamic Theology, Law, and History. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

economic power, influencing pre-Islamic Arabian politics¹⁷³. In this context, the Ummah was linked to economic ties, lending credibility to the notion of a community with boundaries, on which its existence depended on collective internal cohesion and the external alliances.

Each of the tribes was, in fact, socio-politically a discrete, autonomous community; the Ummah was, by necessity, a closed one, distinguishing in-group membership while it differentiated members from nonmembers¹⁷⁴. Tribes commonly employed the term *Ummah* (the plural of *Ummah*) to enhance in common their group identity through an attentional history of genealogy and ancestral memory¹⁷⁵. All the *Ummah* believed themselves to be superior to their neighbors, often engaging in raids or ghazws to seize control and expand their territory¹⁷⁶. The Arab historian Ibn Khaldun described the Ummah as a localized and exclusive form of community, shaped by lineage, customary traditions, and territorial belonging¹⁷⁷. It is a community that shares specific blood bond or cultural affiliation¹⁷⁸.

Religion was secondary in defining group belonging, as Arabian tribal society did not operate under a unifying theological framework. Islam finally transformed this small, fragmented, and isolated version of Ummah, extending it further to its followers and cutting across tribal communities¹⁷⁹. The transition from a tribal Ummah to an Islamic Ummah signifies an important change in the fabric of Arab social and political systems in which religious affiliation superseded dynastic ties as the organizing principle of communal affiliation¹⁸⁰.

2 The Ummah as a Moral-Religious Community

The rise of Islam in the 7th century CE radically changed the Ummah's ontological and epistemological nature¹⁸¹. Pre-Islamic Arabian society conceptualized time patterns that were deeply connected to tribal genealogies and oral traditions, which highlighted ancestral legacy and lineage prestige¹⁸². Under Islam, human history unfolded along a path leading to the Day of Judgment as part of a divine plan¹⁸³. The teleological concept of time that presented the present

¹⁷³ Ibid,

¹⁷⁴ Parolin, G. P. (2009). *Citizenship in the Arab World: Kin, Religion, and Nation-State*. IMISCOE Research. Amsterdam University Press.

¹⁷⁵ Widhiyoga, G. (2017). *Understanding the Umma as an Islamic "Global" Society*. Durham theses, Durham University.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid,

¹⁷⁷ Cheddadi, A. (2024). *The World Until 1400 According to Ibn Khaldun: A Global History of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid,

¹⁷⁹ Hassan, R. (2018). *Religion, modernization, and the Islamic Ummah*. *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, 13(2), 145-161.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid,

¹⁸¹ Widhiyoga, G. (2017). *Understanding the Umma as an Islamic "Global" Society*. Durham theses, Durham University.

¹⁸² Karic, E. (2023). *Time in the Qur'an: An Introductory Overview*. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 40(1), 45-67.

¹⁸³ Ibid,

as a moral battleground between divine direction and human error resulted in developing an Ummah that served as both a historical force and eschatological entity¹⁸⁴.

The Constitution of Medina created in 622 CE stands as the key institutional representation of the new historicity regime established by Prophet Muhammad¹⁸⁵. The Constitution of Medina established the first Islamic state model, which united Muslims and Jews with different groups into a socio-political body that went beyond tribal divisions¹⁸⁶. Rather than being a single ethnic or national group, the Medinan Ummah was a covenantal society whose members were bound together by moral and legal obligations and commitments to each other¹⁸⁷. The Medinan Ummah established its unity based on divine law (Sharia) and devotion to God and His Messenger, which overrode pre-Islamic tribal bonds based on power dynamics¹⁸⁸. A normative temporal framework emerged to connect historical events with divinely determined future outcomes through a unified timeline¹⁸⁹. Historical recordkeeping in pre-Islamic times centered around ancestral achievements until a scriptural system emerged that used past prophet narratives as ethical models for contemporary behavior and future guidance¹⁹⁰. Narratives from the Qur'an used to show how societies in the past (Ummah) behaved badly and how the new Islamic Ummah should take over helped to strengthen the change¹⁹¹.

The Qur'an lists the term "Ummah" in 64 different forms, demonstrating how its meaning changed and developed throughout Islamic theology¹⁹². One of its most fundamental meanings is that of a group or community sharing a common identity¹⁹³, a definition exemplified in Surah Al-Qasas 28: *At the well of Madyan, he encountered a group of people known as Ummah who were attending to their livestock.* And in Surah Al-Imran (The Family of Imran) 3:110, " *YOU Are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for [the good of] mankind(...).*" Islam transformed the Ummah into a historical force and an eschatological vision that carried the divine duty to build social and religious unity while maintaining moral standards by promoting righteousness and wrongdoing¹⁹⁴. The Ummah transitioned into a historical reality and a future-

¹⁸⁴ Ruhullah, M.E., & Ushama, T. (2024). Time and Society in the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali's Integration of Ancient Wisdom into Islamic Epistemology. *Islam Realitas: Journal of Islamic and Social Studies*.

¹⁸⁵ Anello, G. (2021). The Concept of 'Contractual Citizenship' in the Charter of Medina (622 C.e.): A Contemporary Interpretation. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid,

¹⁸⁷ Ibid,

¹⁸⁸ Ali, T., Sultan, H., Ali, T., & Batool, U. (2024). Muslim Ummah of 7th century to the OIC; the Evolution of OIC in the History of Islam. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*.

¹⁸⁹ Karic, E. (2023). *Time in the Qur'an: An Introductory Overview*. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 40(1), 45-67.

¹⁹⁰ Ali, K., Huang, M., & Smith, A. (2024). Muslim Ummah and its Disintegration in the Past: A Critical Analysis of the Tablighi Jamaat Perspective. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*.

¹⁹¹ Ibid,

¹⁹² Denny, F.M. (1975), "The Meaning of "Ummah" in the Qur'an", *History of Religions*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. p 34-70.

¹⁹³ Ibid,

¹⁹⁴ Islam, M. (2017). Umma and the Dilemma of Muslim Belonging in Modern South Asia. *St Antony's International Review*, 12(2), 26-43.

focused ideal that impacts current communities while guiding their ultimate spiritual goals¹⁹⁵. In contrast to pre-Islamic societies, which based identity around kinship and economic interests, the Islamic Ummah developed as a moral-religious community that derived its legitimacy from shared beliefs and divine principles instead of familial ties or tribal connections¹⁹⁶. The change represented an epistemic rupture and social reorganization that reshaped historical awareness in the Arab-Islamic world by substituting kinship-based systems with a comprehensive religious and moral framework¹⁹⁷.

Islam positioned the Ummah as an active historical agent tasked with the divine responsibility of fostering social and religious cohesion alongside the moral obligation to advocate for change and avert evil¹⁹⁸. This conceptual repositioning established a distinctive historical framework in which the Ummah serves as a concrete historical entity and an eschatological vision, reflecting both present and future communities¹⁹⁹. Consequently, Ummah emerged as a moral-religious community whose legitimacy rested on shared faith and divine ordinance instead of kinship bonds or material interests²⁰⁰. This transformation represented more than social restructuring because it was an epistemic rupture that fundamentally changed the historical framework in the Arab-Islamic world²⁰¹.

3 The Ummah as a Political and Administrative Entity

The evolution of the Ummah as a political and administrative structure in the imperial period reflects a continuous negotiation between historical memory, political legitimacy, and religious authority.

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the Islamic community entered a new era, commonly referred to as the imperial period, during which the Ummah evolved into a political and administrative structure²⁰². This transformation was marked by a continuous negotiation between historical memory, political legitimacy, and religious authority, as emerging Islamic polities sought to consolidate governance while maintaining their connection to the Prophet's legacy²⁰³. Across different Islamic empires, rulers sought to reconcile temporal governance with spiritual continuity, drawing on the idealized past of the Prophet Muhammad and the Rashidun

¹⁹⁵ Ibid,

¹⁹⁶ Macdonald, M.C. (2024). : Pre-Islamic Arabia: Societies, Politics, Cults and Identities during Late Antiquity. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid,

¹⁹⁸ Shaddel, M. (2022). Apocalypse, Empire, and Universal Mission at the End of Antiquity. *World Religions at the Crossroads*. 21-34.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid,

²⁰⁰ Paul L Heck, (2022). Ummah: A New Paradigm for a Global World. By Katrin A. Jomaa, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Volume 33, Issue 3, Pages 437–441.

²⁰¹ Ibid,

²⁰² Daniel, E.L. (1998). The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate. *Middle East Journal*, 52, 471.

²⁰³ Basri, M., Manullang, A.Z., Siregar, R.A., & Suseno, R.N. (2024). Analysis of the Beginning of Political Dynamics in the Era After the Death of the Prophet Muhammad. *EDUCTUM: Journal Research*.

Caliphate to consolidate power²⁰⁴. This phenomenon became particularly pronounced during the Abbasid (750–1258) and Ottoman (1299–1924) Empires, where the Caliphate was legitimized through historical narratives that emphasized continuity with the prophetic model while simultaneously reinforcing imperial authority²⁰⁵.

During the early Caliphate period (7th–13th centuries CE), the organization of time and history was perceived as cyclical return to the Rashidun model, albeit imbued with imperial overtones²⁰⁶. The Abbasid rulers institutionalized this historical consciousness by presenting their empire as the rightful successor to the Rashidun era, embedding Islamic governance within state mechanisms²⁰⁷. The judicial system, dominated by Sharia courts and ulama, was integrated into governance structures to reinforce the moral authority of the Caliphate, ensuring that political rule was perceived as an extension of the Prophet's mission²⁰⁸.

Because of the strengthening of imperial administration, the Ummah came to be identified with the government, and the Ummah evolved into a disciplined political entity with clearly delimited territorial jurisdiction and legal delimitations²⁰⁹. For instance, the doctrine of Dar al-Islam (Abode of Islam) formalized this conception, defining the Ummah not only as a religious community but also as a geopolitical entity that distinguished itself from Dar al-Harb (Abode of War) or non-Muslim territories²¹⁰. This delimitation highlighted the imperial ambitions of the Caliphate by placing the Caliph as absolute political authority and religious shepherd of the Ummah²¹¹. As a result, the Ummah was no longer just a spiritual fraternity but a politically administered, centralized entity governed by the Ottoman imperial framework.

19th and early 20th centuries witnessed new threats to the Ottoman Caliphate when the European colonial powers advanced into Muslim lands²¹². To this, the Ottomans tried to revive the Ummah as a unifying entity against colonial expansion, idealizing the Caliph as the last legitimate authority in the Muslim world²¹³. However, this revitalization effort faced opposition as

²⁰⁴ Lapidus, I. M. (2014). Introduction: Empires and societies. In *A History of Islamic Societies* chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (pp. 329–330).

²⁰⁵ Arsita, W., Roza, E., & Nopel, P. (2024). Absolutism of The Caliphate During the Abbasid Dynasty. *Education Achievement: Journal of Science and Research*.

²⁰⁶ Karic, E. (2023). *Time in the Qur'an: An Introductory Overview*. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 40(1), 45-67.

²⁰⁷ Agustono, I., Armayanto, H., & Zain, N. S. S. (2024). Reviving Islamic Civilization in the Late Period of Abbasid: A Historical Analysis of the Madrasa al-Mustanşiriyya. *Tasfiyah: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam*, 8(2), 179–202.

²⁰⁸ al-Nahee, O.A. (2017). The religious structure of Najrān in late pre-Islamic and early Islamic history: from the end of the Ḥimyarite Kingdom until the end of the Rashidun Caliphate (525-661 CE).

²⁰⁹ Ibid,

²¹⁰ Rizzo, A. (2023). Beyond the Dār al-Islām/Dār al-ḥarb Paradigm. *Eurasian Studies*.

²¹¹ Arsita, W., Roza, E., & Nopel, P. (2024). Absolutism of The Caliphate During the Abbasid Dynasty. *Education Achievement: Journal of Science and Research*.

²¹² Imber, C. (2023). Review of The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*.143 (1):267-238

²¹³ Ibid,

nationalist movements emerging across the Arab world rejected the imperial control of the Caliphate²¹⁴. The growing atomization of the Muslim world showed the boundaries of historical continuity and how the change in political circumstances challenged the survival of the Ummah as a political entity of imperial power. The eventual abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 marked a decisive rupture in the political conceptualization of the Ummah²¹⁵. Nation-state paradigms began to be adopted more widely by post-colonial Arab and Islamic states. However, these states still found it necessary to use the language of the Ummah in their formal pronouncements to create a religious authority base²¹⁶.

4 The Ummah in Colonial and Postcolonial period: Between Rupture, Resistance, and Fragmentation

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, European colonial rule significantly altered the concept of Ummah, which was essential to Islamic political and religious identity²¹⁷. The Ummah concept denoted a cohesive transregional political entity under the Caliphate system before colonial intervention, which upheld the integration of religious legitimacy and political authority²¹⁸. Colonial occupation broke this historical link as it imposed secular nation-states over Islamic governance systems by force²¹⁹. The disruption experienced by Muslim societies because of colonial influence affected their political structures, understanding of historical time, identity, and sovereignty²²⁰.

With the Ottoman Caliphate abolished in 1924, the historical link between political power and Islamic leadership ended, causing division and dispute throughout the Ummah²²¹. The emergence of colonial rule combined with the rise of nation-states prompted intellectual and political movements to reshape the Ummah concept to face these new challenges²²². The intellectual transformation included key contributions from individuals like Rashid Rida²²³ (1865-1935) and

²¹⁴ KAUSAR, A. MINXING, H. & KHAN, H.U. (2024). The fall of the Muslim Ummah and the rise of Islamic revival movements in the subcontinent: a study of the ideologies of the Tablighi Jamaat and the Jamaat-i-Islami. *International Journal of Islamic Thought*. Vol. 26. 83-94.

²¹⁵ Evered, E., & Evered, K. (2010). *Decolonization through Secularization: A Geopolitical Reframing of Turkey's 1924 Abolition of the Caliphate*. *The Arab World Geographer*, 13(1), 1-17.

²¹⁶ Paul L Heck, (2022). Ummah: A New Paradigm for a Global World. By Katrin A. Jomaa, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Volume 33, Issue 3, Pages 437–441.

²¹⁷ Shamsul, A. B., & Aziz, A. (2011). *Colonial knowledge and the reshaping of Islam: The case of Malaysia*. *Islamic Studies and Islamic Education*, 12(4), 143–158.

²¹⁸ Sule, B. (2020). The State of the Muslim Ummah in Contemporary World. *Randwick International of Social Science Journal*, 1(2), 152-164.

²¹⁹ Şevket, T. & Hakan, K. (2023). "The Comprehensiveness of Ummah as a Nation-Building Concept". *Rize İlahiyat Dergisi* 25, 89-102.

²²⁰ Ghani, U. (2013). [Review of *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality and Modernity*, by S. Haj]. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 40(2), 222–224.

²²¹ Aydin, C. (2017). *The idea of the Muslim world: A global intellectual history*. Harvard University Press.

²²² Demichelis, M. (2019). Was Egyptian Islamic Revivalism Really Counter-Hegemonic? Sayyid Qutb and the Problem of Islamic Occidentalism. *ReOrient*, 5(1), 47–72.

²²³ Rashīd Riḍā was **an Islamic scholar** who formulated an intellectual response to the pressures of the modern Western world on traditional Islam.

Hassan al-Banna²²⁴ (1906-1949)²²⁵. Rida reimagined the Ummah as a basis for contemporary Islamic governance while stressing the need to restore Islamic rule through enhanced religious and political awareness²²⁶. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, al-Banna, worked to re-energize the Ummah by organizing movements at the community level while dismissing Western secularism and obsolete traditionalist systems²²⁷. The Ummah became an active political force that could fight European imperialism and reclaim Islamic sovereignty instead of seeing it as a historical artifact²²⁸.

Emerging postcolonial nationalist movements opposed this vision as they worked to establish modern nation-states as the foundation for political identity²²⁹. The contemporary political structure was built on Arab unity by leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser and Ba'athist supporters who replaced Islamic solidarity with this concept as the basis for governance, which led to the Ummah's decline as an operational political entity²³⁰.

Islamist movements maintained their commitment to the Ummah as a political framework even as secular nationalism became the dominant approach in postcolonial state governance. The Muslim Brotherhood²³¹ (created by Hassan al-Banna in 1928), together with Hizb ut-Tahrir²³², developed as antagonistic forces to the secular nation-state system by calling for a restoration of Islamic administration²³³. Islamist movements considered history in a cyclical temporal model, looking upon the colonial break, a rupture from an ideal pre-colonial Islamic regime, to be resolved by a re-establishment of Sharia-led government²³⁴. Within this experience of historicity, the Ummah became a lost but retrievable political ideal, with present conflicts being seen as a passage of a historical totality rather than a purely linear evolution. By contrast, secular modernists embraced an event narrative of progress, in harmony with the nation-state paradigms that favored territorial sovereignty, institutional secularization, and modernist reform, rather than

²²⁴ Hassan al-Banna was an Egyptian political and religious figure who founded the Muslim Brotherhood and significantly influenced the Egyptian and Arabic political and social matters.

²²⁵ Weiss, H. (2020). *Muslim scholars and the imposition of the European colonial order*. In *Locating the Global: Spaces, Networks, and Muslim Connections* (pp. 245–258).

²²⁶ Arikewuyo, A. N. (2019). *A comparative analysis of the theological polemics of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafīyyah*. *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, 15(1), 17–26.

²²⁷ Ibid,

²²⁸ Volpi, F. (2019). Islam, political Islam, and the state system. in S Akbarzadeh (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of International Relations in the Middle East*. 1 edn, Routledge.

²²⁹ Fox, J. (2004) The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Conflict: Ethnic Conflict and Revolutionary Wars 1945–2001. *Journal of Peace Research*. 41 (6), 715–31.

²³⁰ Folmar, R. (2020). *The Revolutionary Classroom: Education and State Building in Nasserist Egypt, 1952-1967*. *University of Texas Digital Repository*.

²³¹ In 1928, Hassan al-Banna, an Islamic scholar and educator, established the Muslim Brotherhood, a transnational Sunni Islamist organization, in Egypt.

²³² The stated objective of Hizb ut-Tahrir, an international political organization that is both pan-Islamist and Islamic fundamentalist, is to reestablish the Islamic caliphate to unify the Muslim community and enforce sharia on a global scale.

²³³ Olsson, S. (2021). Hizb ut-Tahrir's Caliphal Counter-Narrative. *Religions*, 12(7), 486.

²³⁴ Şentürk, R. (2020). The decline of the decline paradigm: Revisiting the periodization of Islamic history. *Niedergangsthesen auf dem Prüfstand/Narratives of Decline*. (1). 214-247.

religious unification²³⁵. Such postcolonial ideological split between nationalists and Islamists, however, is one of the longest lasting legacies of colonial instability, which has been instrumental both in the composition of postcolonial state structures and the persistent discussion about the involvement of the Islamic law in any form of governance, legitimacy, and political power²³⁶. This contested temporality still underpins the different versions of history in the modern Muslim world, where historical awareness is both a tool for power and resistance.

5 The Ummah or Nation-State, the contemporary discourse

The postcolonial nation-building process and the notion of Ummah temporality evolved due to the ideological division between Islamist groups and secular nationalists²³⁷. Islamists presented the Ummah as a political system that needed to be restored, while secular nationalists based their legitimacy on progressive, modernist stories of territorial control²³⁸. As the world order changed, the concept of Ummah experienced a transnational transformation, allowing it to transcend traditional state borders²³⁹. The Ummah transformed from merely being a counter-narrative to nationalism into a globalized historical regime that expressed itself through international organizations, digital platforms, and cross-border movements, which redefined its political and cultural significance²⁴⁰. This shift raises the question: In today's interconnected world, how have states, along with transnational actors and digital networks, redefined the Ummah through their competing interpretations?

The emergence of Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), pan-Islamic groups and international religious institutions such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) illustrate that today's Ummah is a dynamic transnational paradigm that multiple state and non-state actors influence instead of a uniform and stable concept²⁴¹. For instance, the (ISESCO) and the Arab League explicitly embrace this hybrid model of nationhood, recognizing their member states as sovereign, independent entities while simultaneously framing them as part of a broader Arabic

²³⁵ Raji, A. A., & Fadeyi, T. J. (2021). *Ideology and the quest for Islamic resurgence in the Middle East*. Academia.edu.

²³⁶ Brahimi, M. A., & Lazreg, H. B. (2021). *Post-Islamism and intellectual production: A bibliometric analysis of the evolution of contemporary Islamic thought*. *Religions*, 12(1), 49.

²³⁷ Al-Salimi, A. (2014). The Future of the Nation State in the Arab World: The Role of Historical and Social Factors. *Hemispheres*. Vol. 29, No. 3.

²³⁸ Ibid,

²³⁹ Beaujouan, J. (2021). Investigating the Influence of Islamic State's Discourse in Jordan. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46(12), 2478–2500.

²⁴⁰ Salih, M. A. (2023). The Islamic State's Visions of Political Community and Statehood and Their Articulation Vis-à-Vis Nationalism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–23.

²⁴¹ Pal, L.A., Tok, M.E. (2019). Global Governance and Muslim Organizations: Introduction. In: Pal, L.A., Tok, M.E. (eds) *Global Governance and Muslim Organizations*. International Political Economy Series. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham pp: 1-43

Muslim Ummah²⁴². The mission of the ISESCO charter is to bring Islamic countries closer together in the field of education, science, and culture, while promoting the notion that nation-states exist (and interact) within a common civilizational, but religious, framework, and not in isolation²⁴³. Similarly, the Charter of the Arab League (1945) recognizes member states' territorial sovereignty and affirms their collective identities as one component of the Arab world, which is historically and culturally associated with the idea of the Ummah²⁴⁴.

As this hybrid model evolved beyond territorial constraints, states such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar faced a unique challenge: how to navigate the complex task of aligning their national governance with the Islamic legitimacy that comes from the Ummah? These two countries have developed a nationhood model that blends religious continuity with state-centric governance by allowing the concept of the Ummah to exist alongside territorial sovereignty²⁴⁵. However, their nation-state status remains controversial since they seem to operate as extensions of the Islamic Ummah inside a state-centered structure. The convergence of time, political legitimacy, and historical knowledge is crucial in assessing nation-building processes demonstrating distinct mixes of Islamic identity and state institutions²⁴⁶. Saudi Arabia and Qatar's national institutional structures combine temporal aspects with religious leadership to generate legitimacy that bridges the gap between Islamic Ummah values and modern state institutions²⁴⁷. The historical tension between traditional Islamic values and modern state structures is reflected in their constitutional documents, official governmental discourse, and modernization initiatives, which show an ongoing struggle between continuity and rupture.

VII. Toward a New Paradigm: Cultural Heritage-Based Nationalism in Saudi Arabia and Qatar

the nation-building paradigms that we discussed, including primordialist, modernist, and ethnosymbolist perspectives, offer valuable interpretive tools for scholars to understand how nation-building has changed over time. However, these models demonstrate notable limitations when applied to the current orientations of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Both states dispose of nation-building components, such as centralized governance, territorial sovereignty, and institutional coherence; however, they are lacking in a civic contract, shared ethnolinguistic heritage, or

²⁴² Ibid,

²⁴³ Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO). (1979). Constitution of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO). Fez, Morocco. <https://icesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Constitution-ICESCO-EN.pdf>

²⁴⁴ League of Arab States. (1945). Charter of the Arab League. Cairo, Egypt. Direct Link: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3ab18.html>

²⁴⁵ Townshend, E. J. (2020). *Religion and Political Survival: The Regional Strategies of Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar*. Doctoral thesis. University of Waikato.

²⁴⁶ Salih, M. A. (2023). The Islamic State's Visions of Political Community and Statehood and Their Articulation Vis-à-Vis Nationalism. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–23

²⁴⁷ Diwan, K. (2021). Clerical associations in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates: soft power competition in Islamic politics, *International Affairs*, Volume 97, Issue 4, Pages 945–963,

popular sovereignty. Their increasing separation from pan-Islamic unity—mainly through the idea of the Ummah—after significant events like the September 9/11 attacks, the Arab Spring, and the launch of large-scale development initiatives (such as Saudi Vision 2030 and Qatar National Vision 2030), along with the ongoing threat from Iran, indicates a significant rupture from religious universalism as a basis of political legitimacy. Consequently, a deliberate nationalism emerges through state-controlled heritage practices.

To capture this transformation, we propose an alternative framework that we term “*cultural heritage-based nationalism*”. This paradigm reflects a form of nation-building in which national identity is not an inherited characteristic, but a constructed narrative crafted by the state through a selective mobilization of cultural heritage. This approach reframes cultural heritage from a passive repository of the past to a politically active resource, enabling states to foster unity, claim legitimacy, and enhance both domestic cohesion and global visibility.

Dimension	Nationalism	Ummah Discourse	Cultural Heritage-Based Nationalism
Foundational Legitimacy	Civic or ethnic	Religious community (transnational)	Institutional authority derived from custodianship and curation of national heritage
Temporal logic	Progressive modernity and future-oriented development	Eschatological time, sacred origin, and ultimate destiny	Presentist curation of the past as symbolic capital for political relevance
Institutional Tools	Media, education, bureaucracy	Mosques, scholars, networks	Official institutional bodies (cultural ministries, heritage foundations, UNESCO recognitions...)
Narrative Function	Historical continuity & unity	Spiritual mission & unity	Selective memory, cultural diplomacy
Subject of Belonging	Individual citizen or ethnic group	The global Muslim Ummah	National public (internal cohesion) and global audience (external recognition)

Tableau 1: *Cultural Heritage-Based Nationalism as a distinct paradigm.*

we propose cultural heritage-based nationalism as a model in which the state acts as a curator, organizing and promoting selected cultural heritage elements—such as invented traditions and, archaeological sites, national museums, and UNESCO-designated heritage sites (as we will deeply explain in chapter 4, 5 and 6)—as key components of what it means to be a nation. In this paradigm, official institutions, such as the Saudi Arabia Heritage Commission²⁴⁸ and the Qatar

²⁴⁸ The Saudi Heritage Commission is a government entity established to oversee, preserve, regulate, and promote Saudi Arabia’s tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Museum Authority²⁴⁹ in Qatar, are deployed as technologies of governance responsible for narrating collective memory and organizing national belonging. Furthermore, this model functions under a temporal regime that constructs the past not as a fixed legacy but as a curated resource for present identity formation and future projection. Following Gábor Sonkoly's insight into heritage regimes²⁵⁰, temporality here is mobilized as a political tool: not to conserve a neutral history, but to synchronize selected pasts with the ideological imperatives of the present. This model neither depends on religious ontologies nor ethnic exclusivity; instead, it constructs a vision of nationhood through the symbolic power of curated pasts. Cultural heritage, therefore, becomes a language of legitimacy, affirming continuity, authenticity, and contemporary statehood without depending on conventional doctrines.

While cultural heritage is a vital element of this nation-building approach, it is important to recognize that this priority does not imply a uniform method or function. Despite the common extensive use of cultural heritage, the ways in which Saudi Arabia and Qatar mobilize, institutionalize, and showcase it are shaped by different political logics, historical trajectories, and strategic ambitions. Therefore, cultural heritage-based nationalism should be seen as a flexible (hybrid) structure capable of embracing various configurations rather than a fixed paradigm.

In the following sections, I will first conduct a comparative analysis of the institutional configurations that support the official nation-building discourses of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The investigation, which appears in the present part, will explain how different official discourses influence the articulation of national identity. Building on this basis, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will provide a more detailed analysis of the cultural heritage apparatus via a series of case studies. These will enable us to track the ways in which heritage is used as an active tool for nation-building in both national settings.

1. Saudi Arabia: the modern custodian of the Ummah

Saudi Arabia's constitution is a paradoxical construct that combines the principles of statehood with the idea of a transnational Ummah. This hybrid construction reflects historical tensions between nationalism and religious legitimacy, where the Saudi state navigates competing imperatives of territorial governance and Islamic leadership²⁵¹.

²⁴⁹ The Qatar Museums Authority (QMA), now commonly known as Qatar Museums (QM), is the central government body responsible for overseeing the development, management, and promotion of museums, cultural institutions, and heritage initiatives in Qatar.

²⁵⁰ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *History and Cultural Heritage*. In: *Historical Urban Landscape*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

²⁵¹ Ramaoli, F.L. (2024). *The Saudi Model and Sharī'a as Constitution*. In: *Shari'a and the Constitution in Contemporary Legal Models*. Global Issues. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. pp 123–155.

In its simplest form, Saudi Arabia is a nation-state with vertical governance and territorial sovereignty²⁵², a structure directly re-affirmed in Articles 39 and 55 of the Basic Law. Article 39 governs media and public debate, limiting publications to those that promote national unity and outlawing those that foster division or pose national security threats²⁵³. This article constrains the Kingdom's role in state cohesion, territorial integrity, and national stability, echoing nation-state policies in other contemporary monarchies. Similarly, Article 55 establishes the King as the head of state, emphasizing his role in overseeing governance, enforcing Sharia, and maintaining national policies within the confines of Saudi territory²⁵⁴.

The Saudi constitution positioned the country within the modern-day nation-state, with political legitimacy founded upon state sovereignty and not transnational religious power²⁵⁵. The emphasis on media control, political centralization, and national unity reflects modernist nationalism, in which the state's primary obligation is to its citizens and defined borders²⁵⁶. However, despite this country-state structure, Saudi Arabia views itself also as the spiritual and political leader of the Islamic world, as outlined in Article 25, which expresses the Kingdom's commitment to realize the aspirations of the Arab and Islamic nation (al-Ummah) for brotherhood and oneness of expression²⁵⁷. Unlike articles 39 and 55, which define the country geographically, article 25 sees the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as part of a transnational, religiously conceived institution with geopolitical control and intellectual leadership in the Muslim community²⁵⁸. This assumption of Ummah leadership in Saudi Arabia has a historical grounding since it holds the custodianship of Islam's two holiest sites, Mecca and Medina, offering the state unique religious authority²⁵⁹. The Kingdom's sovereignty over the Hajj pilgrimage, which is required of all Muslims worldwide, strengthens the Kingdom's status as a major actor in Islamic affairs²⁶⁰.

Although Saudi Arabia has domains of influence that promote Islamic unity, its sovereign policies are founded on national interests, economic autonomy, and political centralization. In Saudi Arabia, a hybrid nation-building approach is used to reconcile two contradictory ideas of

²⁵² Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (1992). Basic Law of Governance. Royal Order No. A/90.

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance>

²⁵³ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (1992). Article 39: Basic Law of Governance. Royal Order No. A/90.

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance>

²⁵⁴ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (1992). Article 55: Basic Law of Governance. Royal Order No. A/90.

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance>

²⁵⁵ Ramaioli, F.L. (2024). The Saudi Model and Sharī'a as Constitution. In: Shari'a and the Constitution in Contemporary Legal Models. Global Issues. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. pp 123–155.

²⁵⁶ Anderson, G. L. (2006). THE IDEA OF THE NATION-STATE IS AN OBSTACLE TO PEACE. *International Journal on World Peace*, 23(1), 75–85.

²⁵⁷ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (1992). Article 25: Basic Law of Governance. Royal Order No. A/90.

<https://www.saudiembassy.net/basic-law-governance>

²⁵⁸ Ibid,

²⁵⁹ Dorsey, J.M. (2024). The Saudi Sultan's Scholar. In: The Battle for the Soul of Islam. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. pp 63–95.

²⁶⁰ Ibid,

nationhood: territorial sovereignty and global Islam. While Saudi Arabia does not necessarily adhere to a regular contemporary nation-state system or a pan-Islamic transnational polity, it may model and use both.

2. Qatar's Nationhood Paradox: Balancing Sovereign Statehood and the Ummah

Similarly, Qatar's nation-building process shows a structural paradox since its constitutional structure upholds contemporary nation-state foundations while still embracing the transnational concept of the Ummah. While Saudi Arabia's legitimacy is based on its protection of Islam's most precious sites²⁶¹, Qatar develops its national identity via soft power initiatives, international diplomatic endeavors, and religious discourse²⁶². The 2004 Qatari Constitution exemplifies a dual approach to nationhood, combining geographical sovereignty with pan-Islamic unity, allowing the state to claim nationalist and Ummah-derived legitimacy²⁶³.

The first article of Qatar's 2004 Constitution officially declares the country as an independent Arab nation-state following the Westphalian political power system based on territorial control and centralized administration with national citizenship²⁶⁴. The Emir holds the position of head of state, maintaining a monarchical system that centralizes authority within a defined territory²⁶⁵. The constitution also identifies Sharia as a principal legislative source yet avoids creating a purely Islamic governance system²⁶⁶. Qatar operates a blended legal system that integrates Islamic law with civil and international legal principles to demonstrate its approach to practical governance instead of strict religious legal structures²⁶⁷.

The state imposes rigorous media regulations, including public communication channels, to safeguard political stability, national unity, and national identity rather than broader Islamic ideological principles²⁶⁸. Qatar uses its media network, Al Jazeera, to extend its influence worldwide by shaping global Islamic discourse²⁶⁹. Through its broadcasting reach, Al Jazeera

²⁶¹ Ramaioli, F.L. (2024). The Saudi Model and Sharī'a as Constitution. In: Shari'a and the Constitution in Contemporary Legal Models. Global Issues. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. pp 123–155.

²⁶² Al-Tamimi, N., Amin, A., & Zarrinabadi, N. (2023). Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power: Exploring the Effects on National Identity and International Stance. Library OAPEN. pp 49-80.

²⁶³ State of Qatar. (2004). The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar.

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Qatar_2004.pdf

²⁶⁴ State of Qatar. (2004). Article 1: The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar.

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Qatar_2004.pdf

²⁶⁵ State of Qatar. (2004). Article 8: The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar.

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Qatar_2004.pdf

²⁶⁶ Ibid, pp:

²⁶⁷ Bantekas, I., & Al-Ahmed, A. (2023). Contract Law of Qatar. Exploring the Effects on National Identity and International Stance. Cambridge University Press. pp:16

²⁶⁸ Al-Jaber, K. (2021). Media in Qatar: Origins, Evolution & Challenges. Gulf International Forum. Pp: 11

²⁶⁹ Tkabladze, Z. (2024). Al-Jazeera as one of the Important Components of Qatar's Soft Power. *Šromebi - Sak'art'velos Tek'nikuri Universiteti*, 3(533), 260–285.

has been essential in advancing pan-Islamic stories while giving Islamist experts a voice and strengthening resistance against secular regimes in the Arab world²⁷⁰.

Qatar's foreign policy is evidence of its active involvement with the Ummah discourse²⁷¹. The country supports Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, acting as a defender of political Islam when confronted by secular Arab governments²⁷². Qatar builds connections with international religious networks to advance Islamic activism as an element of its regional strategy²⁷³. Such support for radical Islamist groups has led to significant diplomatic fallout with its neighboring Arab states (the pariah of 2017), who accused Qatar of destabilizing regional security by providing financial, political, and media support to groups they classify as threats to national stability²⁷⁴.

3. Saudi Arabia and Qatar: The Unexpected Role Reversal in Islamic Governance

The nation-building efforts of Saudi Arabia and Qatar demonstrate a remarkable paradox, as these two countries have swapped their traditional positions in Islamic leadership and political partnerships.

Saudi Arabia historically maintained its national identity through strict adherence to Wahhabism, which dictated its legal frameworks and social norms while establishing the Kingdom as a center for conservative Islamic leadership²⁷⁵. The Saudi state developed its ideological foundation from the Wahhabi doctrine, which Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab formalized by allying with the Al Saud family during the eighteenth century, establishing their authority and governance based on religious exclusivism and doctrinal rigidity²⁷⁶. The ascension of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the Vision 2030 agenda has led Saudi Arabia to pursue modernization by decreasing Wahhabist influence through economic and social reforms and adopting a realistic foreign policy approach²⁷⁷.

²⁷⁰ Ibid,

²⁷¹ Guido, S. (2023): Qatar's foreign policy: Decision-making processes, baselines, and strategies, SWP Research Paper, No. 4/2023, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin.

²⁷² Ibid,

²⁷³ Lynch, M., Gunning, J., & Valbjørn, M. (2024). Changing Warscapes, Changing Islamists? Religion, Organization, Strategic Context and New Approaches to Armed Islamist Insurgencies. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 1–24.

²⁷⁴ Sargsyan, K. (2024). Between Blocs And Blockades: Qatar's Diplomatic Dilemma And Strategic Maneuvers. *Contemporary Eurasia*, 44–63.

²⁷⁵ Al-Rasheed, M. (2021). *The Son King: Reform and Repression in Saudi Arabia*. Oxford University Press.

²⁷⁶ Farooq, U. (2024). Saudi State and the Crisis of Legitimacy. In Alam, M. Ashwarya, S. (ed). *Arab Spring and Its Legacies*. Routledge.

²⁷⁷ Özev, M. H. (2024). Nation Building in Saudi Arabia: From Rentierism to Territorial Nationalism. *İnsan ve Toplum*. 14(2): 164-188.

The Kingdom's new national plan includes targeting Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood for suppression after they transitioned from tolerated groups to perceived political dangers²⁷⁸. The Saudi government has acted against Islamist leaders by either imprisoning or expelling them like *Salman al-Ouda*²⁷⁹ and abolishing the religious police as part of their strategy to position themselves against political Islam in the region²⁸⁰. Saudi Arabia's diplomatic confrontations with Qatar demonstrates this shift. Saudi Arabia accuses Qatar of backing radical Islamist movements while threatening regional security. The blockade against Qatar in 2017 from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt primarily stemmed from deep-rooted ideological differences²⁸¹.

Despite the Saudi regime's efforts to minimize Islamic scholars' political power, but elements of Wahhabi teachings remain embedded in the Kingdom's administrative framework. By maintaining titles like *Khadim al-Haramayn al-Sharifayn* (Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques) Saudi Arabia secures religious legitimacy for its monarchy which connects its governance to Islamic history despite its movement toward modern state practices²⁸². The doctrine of *ṭā'at al-malik* (ruler obedience) continues to function as an essential ideological pillar which maintains political stability through the integration of monarchical power into Islamic principles²⁸³. The combination of religious authority and state sovereignty allows Saudi Arabia to strategically reshape its national identity, presenting itself as a modernizing force dedicated to economic development and regional stability, while preserving selective religious symbols to maintain its legitimacy within the broader Islamic community.

Despite its historical connection to the tolerant Hanbali interpretation of Islam, Qatar now stands as one of the prominent supporters of political Islam, forming strategic partnerships with Islamist groups throughout the Middle East²⁸⁴. As an important historical center in Qatar's religious and economic development, the town of Al-Zubarah stood out for its intellectual openness, allowing scholars from different Islamic traditions to meet and share ideas²⁸⁵. The Hanbali doctrine that

²⁷⁸ Ibid,

²⁷⁹ Salman bin Fahd bin Abdullah al-Ouda, often referred to as Salman al-Ouda and known by his nickname Abu Mu'ad, is a Saudi Islamic scholar. Al-Ouda is a trustee of the International Union for Muslim Scholars.

²⁸⁰ Ric Neo, R. (2020). Religious securitisation and institutionalised sectarianism in Saudi Arabia, *Critical Studies on Security*, 8:3, 203-222.

²⁸¹ Al-Rasheed, M. (2018). "King Salman and his son: Winning the USA, Losing the Rest." In *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, edited by Madawi AlRasheed, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 235-250.

²⁸² Al-Otaibi, M. K. S. (2022). The historical development of the titles of rulers of the Saudi State. *Prince Sattam Bin Abdul-Aziz University*. N 11-1. Pages: 242-253.

²⁸³ Özyakar, A. F. (2025). The Struggle for Supremacy in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia and Iran; Iran and Saudi Arabia: Taming a Chaotic Conflict; Iranian-Saudi Rivalry Since 1979: In the Words of Kings and Clerics. *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 0(0), 1–9.

²⁸⁴ Speckhard, A., & Shajkovci, A. (2018). Qatar and the terrorist blame game. *international center for the study of violent extremism*. 2-12.

²⁸⁵ Power, T. (2020). *The Red Sea and the Gulf: Two Maritime Alternative Routes in Qatar's Pre-Modern History*. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 10(1), 50-72.

influenced Qatar's religious framework maintained more flexibility than the dominant Wahhabi interpretation in Saudi Arabia and supported the coexistence of multiple sectarian traditions²⁸⁶. However, the national orientation of Qatar in the last two decades stands in opposition to its traditional openness through active support for Islamist groups and protection of those blamed for radical political beliefs²⁸⁷. Through financial aid and political backing, Qatar supports the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, along with several Islamist groups in Syria and Libya, while claiming to promote democratic values and political representation throughout the Arab world²⁸⁸. The diplomatic consequences of this alignment include its extended conflict with Gulf states. The Qatari state has provided sanctuary to Islamist figures like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who represents the Muslim Brotherhood ideology and employs Al Jazeera, among other media outlets, to advocate for an Islamic governance model that opposes secular and authoritarian governments in the Arab world²⁸⁹. Qatar's ideological stance estranged it from neighboring Gulf states while simultaneously establishing it as a destabilizing entity according to regional powers. The fact that Qatar hosted the Taliban's political office in Doha, which enabled discussions between the United States and the Taliban, demonstrates Qatar's intricate global involvement with Islamist entities²⁹⁰.



²⁸⁶ Al-Matroudi, A. (2006). *The Hanbali school of law and Ibn Taymiyyah: Conflict or conciliation*. Routledge. pp:13

²⁸⁷ Guido, S. (2023). *Qatar's foreign policy: Decision-making processes, baselines, and strategies*, SWP Research Paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin. No. 4: 2-39.

²⁸⁸ Kostiner, J. (2019). *The 2017 Qatar Crisis and the Future of Gulf Relations*. *Middle East Journal*, 73(3), 405-428.

²⁸⁹ Jamestown Foundation, Muslim Brothers' Spiritual Leader Yusuf al-Qaradawi Condemns Hezbollah, 14 June 2013, *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 11 Issue: 12. Available at:

<https://web.archive.org/20230520223048/https://www.refworld.org/docid/51bef5f74.html>

²⁹⁰ Miller, R. (2021). *Qatar's Mediation in the Taliban Peace Process*. *Foreign Affairs Review*, 32(4), 78-94.

Photo 1: Riyadh Season concerts: a model resembling the Kaaba burning and dancers floating around it, revitalizing the pagan era..

Source: <https://www.akhbarona.com/culture/395862.html> .

Saudi Arabia and Qatar's changing roles in nation-building may be seen not only in their political and ideological paths but also in their cultural policies, which reflect their opposing views on national identity and historical representation. Qatar has established itself as an Islamic heritage guardian by focusing on Islamic history and civilization contributions²⁹¹. At the same time, Saudi Arabia has chosen a trajectory of cultural openness and nationalistic entertainment initiatives²⁹². The opening of Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art and the National Museum of Qatar, which display Islamic historical artifacts and contributions from Muslim civilizations²⁹³, demonstrates the nation's dedication to the Ummah discourse. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 cultural strategy now emphasizes entertainment and tourism as core elements of its modernization plan, representing a substantial shift from its conservative past policies²⁹⁴. For instance, the Riyadh Season Festival (photo 1) includes international stars, Western-style entertainment options, and different music festivals, marking a rupture from its limitations on music entertainment and mixed-gender activities²⁹⁵.

The shifting paradigms of nation-building in Saudi Arabia and Qatar exemplify a broader ideological and geopolitical transformation within the Gulf region. While Saudi Arabia has strategically distanced itself from Wahhabi exclusivism, adopting a modernizing, state-centered nationalism, Qatar has embraced political Islam as a key component of its foreign policy and soft power strategy.

After examining the conceptual foundations of temporality and nation-building and situating them within their respective historical and political trajectories, we are now ready to tackle the third and most important concept in our analytical framework: cultural heritage. This shift is not only thematic, but also methodological, as it enables us to observe how the temporal regimes and nation-building paradigms previously explored have profoundly shaped the evolution, instrumentalization, and institutional life of cultural heritage. As we move forward, we must therefore ask: to what extent has cultural heritage become the site where time and nation coalesce—curated, performed, and reinvented to serve the imperatives of statehood?

²⁹¹ Cochrane, L., Amin, H., & Al-kaabi, N. (2024). National Identity in Qatar: A Systematic Literature Review. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*.

²⁹² Aldossry, T. M. (2024). Saudi National Day: Conservatism Versus Modernity in the Light of Saudi Vision 2030. *Changing Societies & Personalities*, 8(4), 901.

²⁹³ Giusti, S., & Lamonica, A. G. (2023). The Geopolitics of Culture: Museum Proliferation in Qatar and Abu Dhabi. *The International Spectator*, 58(2), 123–139.

²⁹⁴ Maqbool, I., Hina, K., Malik, W., & Arslan, M. (2024). Tourism, identity, and Vision 2030: A neonationalist analysis of Red Sea Global's impact on Saudi Arabia's future. *Migration Letters*, 21(S14), 257-271.

²⁹⁵ Alhebshi, S. (2024). Riyadh Season Effect on Riyadh Visitor's Number. *IJNRD - International Journal of Novel Research and Development*. Vol.9, Issue 10, 593-597.

VIII. Cultural Heritage

In the contemporary discourse, the notion of "cultural heritage" does not previously signify the expansive, institutionalized, and multidimensional phenomenon it represents today²⁹⁶. Historically, the term referred primarily to material objects of historical, architectural, or aesthetic value, preserved under national legislation or through academic inquiry²⁹⁷. However, over the last several decades, cultural heritage has undergone a profound semantic and institutional transformation, evolving into a global structure for identity construction, political negotiation, and socio-economic development, and operating at the crossroads of global governance, local agency, and cultural representation²⁹⁸. This conceptual evolution is systematically interpreted by Gábor Sonkoly (2017, 2024) through the concept of cultural heritage regimes²⁹⁹. A regime, in this context, refers to a coherent but temporally bounded configuration of ideas, institutions, actors, and practices that define what counts as heritage, who has the authority to safeguard it, and for what purposes it is mobilized.

1. The First Regime: Monumental Heritage and National Frameworks

The first regime of cultural Heritage (1800s to the 1960s) was structured by the principles of monumentalism and had a strong basis within the ideological architecture of the nation-state³⁰⁰. Consolidating during the 19th century and maturing through the early to mid-20th century, this heritage paradigm privileged tangible cultural expressions—monuments, archaeological sites, and monumental architecture—as the primary signifiers of national identity, historical continuity, and civilizational legitimacy³⁰¹. These artifacts were redefined not simply as remnants of the past, but as moral and civic instruments for national instruction. Although international structures had not yet emerged, transnational heritage dynamics were already present. During this time, the concept of "cultural heritage" was not commonly used across most European languages to describe what we now consider heritage assets³⁰².

Institutional terms such as Denkmalschutz (Germany), patrimoine (France), and Heimatschutz (Switzerland) encapsulate early 19th- and 20th-century efforts to codify cultural preservation as

²⁹⁶ Lähdesmäki, T., Kaasik-Krogerus, S., & Čeginskas, V. L. A. (2020). *Creating and governing cultural heritage in the European Union: The European Heritage Label*. Routledge.

²⁹⁷ Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*, London: Routledge. pp. 11.

²⁹⁸ Silva, K. D. (2016). *Paradigm shifts in global heritage discourse*. In *Mekan ve iletişim*.

²⁹⁹ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *History and Cultural Heritage*. In: *Historical Urban Landscape*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

³⁰⁰ Sonkoly, G & Tanja, V. (2018). *Innovation in cultural heritage research: For an integrated European research policy*. Publications Office of the European Union. pp 11

³⁰¹ Choay, F. (2001). *The Invention of the Historic Monument*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁰² Sonkoly, G & Tanja, V. (2018). *Innovation in cultural heritage research: For an integrated European research policy*. Publications Office of the European Union. pp 11

a core state function—a civilizational project serving to naturalize the nation’s historical and spatial claims³⁰³.

In France, the modern understanding of the concept of *Patrimoine* emerged during the radical social transformations of the French Revolution³⁰⁴. The collapse of the monarchy and the taking of church and aristocratic property led to the idea of biens nationaux (national property), which claimed that collections that had once belonged to the royal family or the church now belonged to the people³⁰⁵. The revolutionary government undertook preservation efforts to both shield these objects from destruction and reframe them as symbols of the new republican order³⁰⁶. In contrast, during the 19th century, the British approach to preserving heritage was driven by a desire to reaffirm aristocratic identity and values in response to rapid industrialization and democratic reform³⁰⁷. The elites often pushed for preservation efforts because they sought to maintain the social order as it existed before the Industrial Revolution, thereby strengthening social hierarchies³⁰⁸. The National Trust³⁰⁹, established in 1895, exemplifies this aristocratic and conservative view of heritage as elite property and a means of moral improvement.

In Germany, the 19th-century heritage discourse drew from a range of overlapping terms—*Denkmalschutz* (monument protection), *Kulturgut* (cultural property), and *Heimat* (homeland)—which reflected a deeply rooted concern with identity, memory, and regional belonging³¹⁰. The heritage regime was infused with both romantic nationalism and ethnographic interest, constructing a vision of culture that opposed the perceived alienation of modernity. Unlike the French republican universalism or British aristocratic nostalgia, the German model, on the other hand, often took a naturalistic and holistic view of Heritage that stressed continuity with ancestral landscapes and vernacular traditions³¹¹.

Most importantly, the operation of the first cultural heritage regime was marked by the dominance of professional experts—particularly architects, archaeologists, and historians—who

³⁰³ Swenson, A. (2013). *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789–1914*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁰⁴ De Wever, P., & Rouget, I. (2023). Historical Overview of Geoheritage in France. *Geosciences*, 13(3), 69.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid*,

³⁰⁶ Greenhalgh, M. (2015). "Preliminary Material". In *Destruction of Cultural Heritage in 19th-century France*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.

³⁰⁷ Delafons, J., & Delafons, J. (1998). *Politics and Preservation: A policy history of the built heritage 1882-1996* (1st ed.). Routledge.

³⁰⁸ Swenson, A. (2013). *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789–1914*. Cambridge University Press.

³⁰⁹ The National Trust primarily preserved aristocratic estates, reflecting a vision of heritage rooted in elite values and social hierarchy. It served to reinforce traditional order amid industrial and political change.

³¹⁰ Koshar, R. (2000). *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870-1990*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

³¹¹ Swenson, A. (2013). *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789–1914*. Cambridge University Press.

administered Heritage under rationalist and scientific preservation methods³¹². Local communities, by contrast, were mainly excluded or made passive; their role was minimal, symbolic, or constrained by state-led narratives³¹³. This regime can be criticized for fostering restrictive cultural hierarchies, prioritizing dominant, often elite historical narratives and monumental heritage, while marginalizing minority cultures, vernacular expressions, and intangible or ephemeral practices.

2. The Second Regime: Internationalization and the Universal Value Framework

The second cultural heritage regime reflects a significant conceptual and institutional reconfiguration of cultural heritage in the late 20th century³¹⁴. It is marked by the expansion of heritage agencies, which means that heritage is not a fixed entity to be preserved but rather a changing area co-constructed by different social actors, including professionals (Architects, Museologists), local actors (Villagers, Artisans), political figures (Municipal leaders)³¹⁵.

The first global institutionalization of heritage standards, primarily through UNESCO's 1972 Convention: the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, adopted at the 17th session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris on 16 November 1972, and ratified by the first twenty states in 1975, defines this regime by codifying tangible, natural, and mixed heritage and modifying the meanings, agents, and objectives of heritage itself³¹⁶. This Convention defines cultural heritage as monuments, groups of buildings, and sites of outstanding universal value (OUV) from historical, artistic, or scientific perspectives³¹⁷. for eligibility, this heritage must fulfill the criteria of authenticity and integrity, guaranteeing that its cultural significance is authentic and properly preserved³¹⁸.

This regime works as a holistic structure influenced by supranational institutions, legal-administrative norms, and models of participatory identity construction that redefine heritage and its legitimate stakeholders³¹⁹. Here, the primary actors are international bodies such as UNESCO

³¹² Sonkoly, G. (2019). From tangible to intangible heritage: Hollókő, the “world-protected village”. *Ethnologies*, 41(2), 3–20.

³¹³ Waterton, E., & Smith, L. (2010). The recognition and misrecognition of community heritage. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16(1–2), 4–15.

³¹⁴ Sonkoly, G & Tanja, V. (2019). Innovation in cultural heritage research: For an integrated European research policy. Publications Office of the European Union. pp 11

³¹⁵ Sonkoly, G. (2023). Regimes of Urban Heritage in Europe. In *Urban Heritage in Europe* (Ed.): Economic and Social Revival (1st ed.). Routledge. pp 1-23.

³¹⁶ UNESCO. (1972). *Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage*. Adopted on 16 November 1972 by the General Conference at its 17th session, Paris. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/convention-en.pdf>

³¹⁷ Ibid, Article: 1. pp 2

³¹⁸ Ibid,

³¹⁹ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *Historical Urban Landscape*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

and national heritage agencies, which collectively develop categories like "cultural heritage," "natural heritage," and "mixed heritage" while imposing procedural norms—Authenticity, Integrity, and Outstanding Universal Value—onto local contexts. However, the second regime does not simply replace earlier regimes; it layers over them, integrating older national frameworks with new international ones and creating hybrid governance structures that rely on multilevel heritage agencies³²⁰.

In contrast to the first regime's monumentalism and national configuration, the second regime introduces a globally standardized but locally modulated apparatus for safeguarding heritage. Moreover, if the first regime operated within a linear historical framework—progress, nation-building, civilizational continuity—the second regime is presentist and performative³²¹. Cultural heritage no longer aims to instruct the future through the past but to stabilize identity in an unstable present³²².

The main debates at the heart of this regime are those concerning outstanding universal value (OUV) and authenticity, the two being inseparable. These discussions led to the establishment of ten criteria to be met to obtain OUV, six for cultural heritage and four for natural sites, as published in the first version of the 1977 Operational Guidelines³²³. However, it soon became clear that these criteria, and especially the notion of authenticity, were defined in a very Western (Eurocentric) way and did not correspond to the realities of the rest of the world³²⁴. This led, firstly, to the introduction of the new category of cultural landscapes in 1992, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Convention, and secondly, all these discussions culminated in the drafting of the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994, which admits the relativity of this notion, and that its definition must emanate from local populations³²⁵. While this regime expanded the geographic and conceptual scope of heritage, it also imposed bureaucratic and aesthetic norms that sometimes clashed with local interpretations.

3. The Third Regime: Pluralization, Intangibility, and the Participation

The third cultural heritage regime, emerging from the 1990s onward, represents a critical

³²⁰ Ibid,

³²¹ Sonkoly, G. (2023). Regimes of Urban Heritage in Europe. In *Urban Heritage in Europe* (Ed.): Economic and Social Revival (1st ed.). Routledge. pp 1-23.

³²² Ibid,

³²³ UNESCO, Operational Guidelines for the World Heritage Committee, Paris, 1977. available via this link: <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/out/opgu77.htm>

³²⁴ LABADI, S. (2013). "Chapter 1: Theoretical Perspectives on Outstanding Universal Value", in UNESCO, Cultural Heritage, and Outstanding Universal Value. Value-Based Analysis of the World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage Conventions, AltaMira Press, Lanham – Plymouth.

³²⁵ Winter, T. (2012). Beyond Eurocentrism? Heritage conservation and the politics of difference. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 20(2), 123–137.

diversification of heritage paradigms³²⁶. If the first regime prioritized monumental objects for national identity, the second codified universal value through international standards. In that case, the third regime shifts toward pluralization, subjectivity, and performativity, where intangible heritage, with individuals, groups, communities, and cultural diversity, is at the heart of reflections³²⁷. In this regime, cultural heritage broadens its definition—from tangible to intangible aspects— while being recognized as a contested, negotiated, and lived process rather than an unchanging legacy³²⁸. It expands upon the infrastructures of the second regime while explicitly contesting its universalist assumptions, especially its Eurocentric focus on materiality, formal authenticity, and expert authority³²⁹.

This regime was institutionalized through the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted at the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference in Paris on October 17, 2003, defining heritage as including oral traditions, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and skills, and the spaces in which these are enacted³³⁰. Here, cultural heritage is not stored in monuments but performed and remembered by communities, groups, and individuals, with continuity defined by transmission rather than preservation³³¹. Recognizing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) alters the heritage ontology: from object to practice, from monument to performance, and from expert evaluation to community consent. Other important instruments complement this document: the 2005 Vienna Memorandum introducing the notion of Historic Urban Landscape (HUL)³³²; the 2007 5th C, Community, completing the 4 Cs defined in 2002 by the Budapest Declaration, namely Credibility, Conservation, Capacity, and Communication³³³.

Temporality in the third regime deepens the presentist orientation observed in the second regime³³⁴. Rather than simply stabilizing identity in a crisis, the third regime actively manages identity through curated memory³³⁵. Three leading actors that animate the process of heritagization are the professional expert, the local community, and the broader public. However, the third regime gives prominence to the heritage bearer, whether an individual or group, as a

³²⁶ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *Historical Urban Landscape*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

³²⁷ Sonkoly, G. (2019). From tangible to intangible heritage: Hollókő, the “world-protected village”. *Ethnologies*, 41(2), 3–20.

³²⁸ *Ibid*,

³²⁹ *Ibid*,

³³⁰ UNESCO. (2003). Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. Adopted by the General Conference at its 32nd session, Paris, 17 October 2003. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

³³¹ *Ibid*,

³³² UNESCO, (2005). Vienna Memorandum on “World Heritage and Contemporary Architecture - Managing the Historic Urban Landscape” and Decision 29 COM 5D. Adopted on the 15th General Assembly of States Parties to the 1972 Convention. <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/documents/5965/>

³³³ UNESCO, The Budapest Declaration on World Heritage, 2002. Adopted at the 26th session of the World Heritage Committee. <https://whc.unesco.org/fr/documents/1334/>

³³⁴ Sonkoly, G. (2017). *History and Cultural Heritage*. In: *Historical Urban Landscape*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

³³⁵ *Ibid*,

legitimate authority in defining and safeguarding heritage. If we take the Gulf region, for instance, many intangible heritage elements (such as Majlis, Coffee, and Bisht), once seen as relics of ethnographic interest, have become performative practices produced for both internal celebration and external tourism. Such practices are reframed as living heritage—reflexive, adaptable, and community-managed. This reconceptualization has an enormous effect on disciplinary boundaries: heritage is no longer the exclusive domain of experts, historians, and archaeologists but also community actors, artists, educators, and tourism entrepreneurs³³⁶.

While the second regime was firmly based on a top-down interaction—flowing from UNESCO to the nation-state and then to the site—the third introduced a bottom-up and participative decision-making network. National institutions may still play an important role in UNESCO nominations. However, local communities now have a legal and ethical recognition claim to define, present, and manage their heritage expressions³³⁷. This emphasis on community participation is formally embedded in the requirement for free, prior, and informed consent of communities in all Intangible Cultural Heritage List nominations³³⁸. In practice, this has led to a proliferation of bottom-up heritage initiatives that seek to reverse decades of expert-led management and instead promote co-curation, co-creation, and community resilience³³⁹.

The conceptual evolution of cultural heritage throughout the three regimes indicates the institutional expansion and the fundamental change in the temporality with which heritage is understood and deployed. Sonkoly's framework ultimately reveals that cultural heritage definition is constantly negotiated across local, national, and global scales. His theory highlights the conflicts, overlaps, and tensions between institutional authority, community agency, and ideological purpose. It enables us to see how each regime reflects changing goals, such as the transition from monument to memory, from expert control to community engagement, and from consolidation to standardization to pluralization.

³³⁶ Sonkoly, G. (2019). From tangible to intangible heritage: Hollókő, the “world-protected village”. *Ethnologies*, 41(2), 3–20.

³³⁷ Skounti, A. (2010). De la patrimonialisation : comment et quand les choses deviennent-elles des patrimoines ? (About heritagization: How and when do things become heritage?), *Hesperis-Tamuda* 45, 19–34.

³³⁸ Bortolotto, C., & Skounti, A. (Eds.). (2023). *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development: Inside a UNESCO Convention* (1st ed.). Routledge.

³³⁹ *Ibid*,

IX. Conclusion

The first chapter has aimed to establish the conceptual basis necessary for analyzing the transformation of nationhood in Saudi Arabia and Qatar through temporality, nation-building, and cultural heritage. Our exploration of temporality, as a culturally and politically constituted regime rather than a neutral chronological backdrop, has shed light on how time is employed to either preserve or change national imaginaries. By tracing the intellectual trajectories of primordialist, modernist, and ethno-symbolist paradigms, and by critically engaging with the Islamic notion of the Ummah, we have demonstrated how conventional models of nationalism do not adequately represent the distinct modalities of the Saudi and Qatari models.

Based on this dual arrangement of time and nation, I have proposed the concept of cultural heritage-based nationalism as an alternative interpretative paradigm. Unlike classical civic or religious structures, this paradigm is defined by the state's curatorial role in mobilizing heritage not as a passive vestige of the past but as an active apparatus for legitimizing authority, producing collective memory, and projecting identity both on the national and international level. Cultural heritage, especially as redefined through the heritage regimes outlined by Sonkoly, emerges as the site where temporal imaginaries and political identities converge, curated not only to preserve the past but to authorize the present. This transition demonstrates how Gulf states have progressively aligned themselves with the presentist regime of historicity, in which selected pasts are strategically incorporated in current governance and future projections. Yet, the category of cultural heritage-based nationalism remains inherently open-ended and context-dependent. The chapters that follow (4,5,6) will not only question its internal logic but will also test its applicability through empirical case studies. Ultimately, we are left with a pressing question: can heritage, once perceived as a repository of historical authenticity, maintain its integrity as a cultural and political resource when subjected to the strategic imperatives of nationhood?

Having articulated the three main concepts—temporality, nation-building, and cultural heritage—that defines our investigation, I turn to a more specific inquiry into the evolving meaning of Turāth (التراث), the Arabic term for heritage. Specifically, I will examine how Turāth, once rooted in an Islamic epistemology, Arabic linguistics, and postcolonial negotiation, has been conceptually reframed under the influence of global heritage institutions such as UNESCO and ICOMOS. The next chapter will address the epistemological shift from Turāth as a sacred and identity-bound concept to "cultural heritage" as a secular, bureaucratic, and internationally governed category. What are the consequences of this transformation? How has the contemporary framing of heritage altered its meaning, its custodians, and its political function in the Arab-Islamic world?

Chapter 2

Conceptual Analysis of the evolution of the *Turāth*.

I. Introduction:

In modern Arab thought, *Turāth* is a politically and epistemologically charged symbol of tradition, crystallizing an endless intellectual debate between inherited authority and the need for criticism³⁴⁰. Far from being a fixed oeuvre of conventional knowledge, *Turāth* is an ideological formation constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through competing theological, nationalist, and institutional discourses³⁴¹. This chapter aims to reveal *Turāth* as an ontological and historically situated concept whose meaning has been mobilized in different and often conflicting ways, particularly in the postcolonial Arab context.

Our investigation begins by tracing the etymology of *Turāth* through its Quranic employment and Islamic jurisprudence, revealing an initial ambivalence between material inheritance and spiritual legacy. It then situates the emergence of reformist and revivalist Islamic movements—most notably the *Sahwa* movement³⁴² and Salafi currents³⁴³—as ideological instruments that sought to monopolize and filter *Turāth* through selective textualism, eschewing historical plurality in favor of essentialist continuity³⁴⁴. Against this theological absolutism, modern scholars such as Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, Mohamed Arkoun, Hassan Hanafi, and Mohamed Amara call for an epistemological rupture (*Qati'aa*) with the ossified intellectual foundations that have reduced the meaning of *Turāth* to a religious relic. Their critique unveils *Turāth* not as a monolithic legacy but as a multiform concept, evolving field of signification that demands reinterpretation within the demands of modernity, plurality, and reason.

This chapter thus pursues a double inquiry: first, into the internal semantic evolution of *Turāth*, and second, into its institutional translation under the sign of "cultural heritage" *Turāth* Attaqafi, a term imported, adapted, and institutionalized through UNESCO and its affiliated Arab organizations. The conjunction of the global heritage discourse and the local and regional meanings of *Turāth* illuminates how global epistemes reshape indigenous categories, sometimes preserving them and often displacing them. A dichotomy arises between tradition and modernity,

³⁴⁰ Dallal, A. (2010). *Islam, Science, and the Challenge of History*. Yale University Press.

³⁴¹ Arkoun, M. (2003). *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* Saqi Books.

³⁴² *Sahwa* movement (Awakening movement) or was a movement in Saudi Arabia from 1970–1995 which advocated for incorporating more reliance on Wahhabi principles into Saudi society.

³⁴³ The Salafi current refers to a reformist Islamic movement that advocates a return to the practices of the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ* (the "pious ancestors"), specifically the first three generations of Muslims.

³⁴⁴ Amghar, S. (2007). "Salafism and Radicalisation of Young European Muslims" in Samir Amghar, S; Boubekeur, A; Emerson, M (eds) *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society*, Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 38–51.

characterized by an argumentative dialogue where Arab intellectuals, religious leaders, and global organizations debate the definition, role, and future of cultural memory.

II. What is Turāth?

Starting from the 1980s, *Turāth* rose to prominence as one of the most important notions that Arab researchers have given considerable thought to, and it has since become one of the most complex concepts to be defined³⁴⁵. It is essential to start by comprehending the meaning of *Turāth* in the Arabic language before exploring the concept. Then, it would be crucial to investigate how Islam, which is of utmost importance in the everyday lives of Arab Muslims, shaped and interacted with this notion³⁴⁶.

In the Arabic language, the concept of *Turāth* has its origins in the word -wirth- (و.ر.ث) which means the science of inheritance, but morphologically the "W" turns into a "T", which designates everything that a person leaves to those who come after him/her, tangible and intangible.³⁴⁷ Inheritance refers to what a man leaves for his heirs: he inherited the thing means that he got it from his parents³⁴⁸. Additionally, inheritance is mentioned in the dictionary of Al-Waseet as the one of the attributes of God who is the Eternal One that will inherit the earth and all that is in it.³⁴⁹ Moreover, The *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* follows a similar path in defining "*Turāth* " as "heritage" and connects its etymology to the Arabic root word "i-r-th," which means to inherit or receive as an inheritance³⁵⁰. According to *Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics*, the term is frequently used to allude to the Arab world's cultural heritage³⁵¹.

For Hasan Hanafi, the Arabic language associates the notion of *Turāth* with the term of "inheritance" particularly because of its connection to the Quran.³⁵² Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri emphasized that the earliest mentions of *Turāth* were found in the texts of Quran and the genuine teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah)³⁵³. Consequently, he highlighted the importance

³⁴⁵ Wattar. M.R. (2002). *Employing Heritage in the Contemporary Novel*. Library of scientific path. p.: 22. (translated from Arabic)

³⁴⁶ Al-Khatib. M. (2015). *transformations of awareness of heritage as a concept and history, the future of heritage*. "Zawat" magazine, issued by the Mouminoum Without Borders Foundation for Studies and Research. (Translated from Arabic).

³⁴⁷ Ibn Manzoor, *Lisan Al-Arab*, Dar Beyrouth pour l'imprimerie et l'édition, (1375 AH / 1955 AD), 2/200. (Translated. From Arabic)

³⁴⁸ Saleh Al-Ali Al-Saleh, Amina Sheikh Suleiman Al-Ahmad: *The Net Dictionary of the Arabic Language*, Riyadh, 1421 AH, p.: 042.

³⁴⁹ Ibrahim Mustafa & others: *Al-Mujam Al-Waseet*, The Arabic Language Academy, Part 1, Part 2, Part 2, Cairo. p.: 1201.

³⁵⁰ Wehr.H. *A dictionary of modern written arabic*, Edited by J.Milton Cowan. Spoken Language Services, Inc.

³⁵¹ Jonathan Owens (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Arabic linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp.

³⁵² Hanafi, H. (1992) *التراث والتجديد* Heritage and Renewal, University Institute for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, 4th edition. Beirut, Lebanon. pp: 34

³⁵³ Al-Jabri, M.A. (1991). *Turāth and Modernity* التراث والحداثة, Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies. pp 16

of examining and analyzing the concept of *Turāth* in Islam, emphasizing that the Quran is the primary source to concentrate on³⁵⁴.

III. What does *Turāth* represent in Islam?

Understanding the perspective of Islamic religion regarding *Turāth* (heritage) holds important significance since religion has often been exploited as a pretext to target cultural heritage sites and elements. Nevertheless, structures that are labeled as idols or heathenish are actually rooted in alternative religious ideologies, signifying a conflict of differing religious convictions.³⁵⁵ The conflict, nonetheless, exposes a purposeful effort by one religious group to erase any traces of another.

In the Quran, the notion of *Turāth* appears on many occasions, such as the following verses:

وَتَأْكُلُونَ التُّرَاثَ أَكْلًا لَمًّا وَتُحِبُّونَ الْمَالَ حُبًّا جَمًّا

*"And you devour the inheritance in a greedy way, and you love wealth in an abusive way"*³⁵⁶

In this particular verse, *Turāth* was associated with the concept of devouring that conveyed how humans have a strong inclination towards money and richness³⁵⁷. This inclination is particularly evident in the total amount of property and wealth that individuals inherit from their parents³⁵⁸. As per the Grand Imam of the Al-Azhar Mosque³⁵⁹, the intended interpretation in this context refers to the tangible aspect of *Turāth*, denoting the inherited possessions and assets that individuals utilize without discerning between what is lawful and what is forbidden³⁶⁰.

Furthermore, in another passage of the Quran, God addresses his Prophet Muhammad as follows:

ثُمَّ أَوْرَثْنَا الْكِتَابَ الَّذِينَ اصْطَفَيْنَا مِنْ عِبَادِنَا

*" Then we passed the Book to those of our servants whom we chose "*³⁶¹

³⁵⁴ Al-Jabri, M.A. (2006). Introduction to the definition of the Quran. Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies. pp 245

³⁵⁵ Olaniyan, A., Bello, A.O. (2022). Countering the Narratives of Destruction: Textual Evidence and the Tradition of Heritage Preservation in Islam. In: Albert, MT., Bernecker, R., Cave, C., Prodan, A.C., Ripp, M. (eds) 50 Years World Heritage Convention: Shared Responsibility – Conflict & Reconciliation. Heritage Studies. Springer, Cham.

³⁵⁶ Verses number 19, 20. Surat Al Fajr. The Holy Quran. version translated into English, available on the site: <https://www.quranful.com/>

³⁵⁷ Tafsir (explanation) Ibn Outhaymine — Ibn Outhaymine (1421 AH). available only in Arabic language. Link for online consultation:

<https://tafsir.app/ibn-uthaymeen/3>

³⁵⁸ Ibid

³⁵⁹ Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, based in Egypt and considered as one of the biggest and oldest Islamic institutions in the world that served as a hub for Sunni philosophy.

³⁶⁰ Al-Tayeb. A, Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar. (2016). *Turāth and Renewal* التراث والتجديد. Publishing house: Dar Al-Quds Al-Arabi, Cairo. pp: 21

³⁶¹ Verses number 32. Surat Faatir. The Holy Quran. version translated into English, available on the site: <https://www.quranful.com/>

This verset contains two elements that require attention. On the one hand, the verb "Awratna" (to inherit), is extracted from the etymology of the word wirt, *Turāth* (inherit), which reveals that the transmission of the divining teaching is not limited to the state of a communication process, but furthermore qualified as an order of inheritance, a legacy from God³⁶². On the other hand, the verse specifies that this religious inheritance is addressed only to those who are chosen by consideration of their readiness to receive the Holy scripture.³⁶³ Thus, the hypothesis concluded so far is that the Quran is in itself the inheritance that the chosen Muslims receive, which implies that it constitutes not only the religious duty but also the cultural, moral and spiritual matrix from which they should derive the laws and principles of their everyday life.

It was mentioned also in the following verse:

يَرِثُنِي وَيَرِثْ مِنْ آلِ يَعْقُوبَ

" To inherit me and inherit from the House of Jacob."³⁶⁴

According to Ibn Outhaymine's interpretation of this verse, he suggests that the term inherits encompasses inheriting both, wealth, and the prophecy from the family of Jacob³⁶⁵.

After analyzing the interpretation of the three verses, the term *Turāth* mentioned in the Quran did not pertain to culture. However, it encompasses both the wealth and the inheritance of spiritual wisdom, moral principles, and ethical ideals that have been passed down through a series of Prophets and their companions.³⁶⁶ Many socio-religious movements that emerged in the Gulf region have adopted what Arkoun named "a narrow interpretation of the Quran"³⁶⁷. He highlighted that these movements only adhere to the explanation of the Quran that is based on unchanging beliefs and principles, completely disregarding historical events, rejecting any efforts to go beyond or challenge the ideas presented in the text or to diverge from its established identity.³⁶⁸

³⁶² Muhammad Al-Amin Al-Shanqeeti, Al-Shanqeeti's interpretation: the lights of the statement in clarifying the Qur'an by the Qur'an. Edition of Waqif Al-Rajhi. pp: 434-439

³⁶³ Ibid

³⁶⁴ Verses number 32. Surat Faatir. The Holy Quran. version translated into English, available on the site: <https://www.quranful.com/>

³⁶⁵ Tafsir (explanation) Ibn Outhaymine — Ibn Outhaymine (1421 AH). available only in Arabic language. Link for online consultation: <https://tafsir.app/ibn-uthaymeen>

³⁶⁶ Belkaziz, A. (2014). نقد التراث. Heritage Critique, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st edition.

³⁶⁷ Arkoun, M. (2000). Issues in the Criticism of the Religious Mind (How do we understand Islam today). Edited by Dar Al-Tali'ah. pp 7

³⁶⁸ Ibid

The Awakening³⁶⁹ (*Sahwa*) movement in Saudi Arabia is an example of those movements that have had a profound impact on an entire generation of young Arabs³⁷⁰. It emerged in the 1970s³⁷¹, as a reformist intellectual movement thanks to the combination of two separate ideologies - the teachings of the Wahhabi School³⁷² and the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood School³⁷³. The main objective of this movement was to faithfully follow the guidance provided in the Quran and Sunna. Additionally, it aimed to resist Western imperialism, criticize the "non-believer governments" in the Middle East, and oppose any conversion from the faith practiced by the devout early generations³⁷⁴. The significance of delving into this movement cannot be overstated, as it has profoundly influenced the cultural discourse and, according to Stephane Lacroix, the Awakening movement played a crucial role in the widespread adoption of religious conservatism throughout the entire region³⁷⁵.

The Salafi current is another stream that reappeared and gained power within the *Sahwa* movement, exploiting the extremist rhetoric of the movement. It is regarded as one of the most closed-up social movements concerning cultural practices and everyday routines. The term Salafi is used to describe individuals who admire the early generations of Islam, particularly the first three generations known for their virtuous qualities (the Salaf).³⁷⁶ They encouraged all Muslims to embrace their exemplary approach to understanding and applying the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah. The Sect adheres steadfastly to the faith of monotheism, thus refuting the idea of God having any partners (*shirk*) and refusing to accept any unconventional practices that lack foundation in the teachings of the Prophet.³⁷⁷

Both movements³⁷⁸ expressed a forceful discourse, emphasizing that Islam, along with its cultural and spatial aspects, should not be controlled or influenced by the West, just as the Muslim community should not be ruled by non-Muslims.³⁷⁹ Protecting any type of cultural

³⁶⁹ Sahwa movement (Awakening movement) or was a movement in Saudi Arabia from 1970–1995 which advocated for incorporating more reliance on Wahhabi principles into Saudi society.

³⁷⁰ Lacroix, S. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Translated by George Holoch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

³⁷¹ their first meeting in 1973 to reconstitute the Shura Council was established in 1973 in the city of Makkah, in Saudi Arabia. It was formally declared as a regional organization in 1982.

³⁷² Wahhabism is an Islamic movement that arose in the Arabian Peninsula by Muhammad Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab (1703-1792) in order to purify the beliefs of Muslims and get rid of the customs and devotional practices that spread in Islamic countries.

³⁷³ The Muslim Brotherhood is a group that describes itself as a comprehensive reformist group, founded in Egypt by the preacher and teacher Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) in 1928.

³⁷⁴ Lacroix, S. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Translated by George Holoch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp: 18

³⁷⁵ Ibid

³⁷⁶ Lauzier, H. (2015) *New and Old Perspectives in the Study of Salafism: A Review of the Book Making of Salafism*. Columbia University. pp 43

³⁷⁷ Ibid

³⁷⁸ The rise of the Salafi and Sahwa movements was enabled by the ideological groundwork laid by Wahhabism, which had long reinforced a purist Islamic framework and endowed these later movements with symbolic authority and religious legitimacy.

³⁷⁹ Boumaza, Z. (1996). "Une autre manière de penser le patrimoine : la médina de Constantine", *Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques*. pp : 3

heritage, regardless of whether it is a mosque or not, is considered meaningless and might even be seen as blasphemy, as they believe that only the Islamic religion should be preserved³⁸⁰.

Anwar Al-Jundy expressed a similar view by proposing that Muslims should oppose the contemporary understanding of cultural heritage. His book titled *"Revival of pre-Islamic and pagan heritage through folklore and popular heritage"* sparked a significant amount of controversy, resulting in widespread criticism. In his book, Al-Jundy strongly declares that the Muslim community is not inclined towards revitalizing cultural heritage, conveying that safeguarding cultural heritage is not only threatening but also stems from a Western perspective aimed at exerting control over other cultures³⁸¹. In order to support his viewpoint, he bases his argument on the ban specified in Sharia law³⁸², taking inspiration from the teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), a revered scholar in the Arab-Muslim community. Ibn Taymiyyah's book called *The Straight Path* discusses the matter of imitating (*tashabuh*) the Jews and Christians, including their celebrations. It serves as an elucidation of the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which states:

*"Anyone who imitates a certain group becomes part of that group."*³⁸³

In the prime period of Qatar's Pariah³⁸⁴ (2017-2021), the Qatari national newspaper "Al-Jazeera" published an article titled: *"Why did Saudi Arabia destroy the monuments of Islam while restoring the monuments of its kings?"*³⁸⁵ The purpose, as it was written in the article, was to shed light on Saudi Arabia's extremist stance towards preserving heritage over the past thirty years. They mentioned that Kingdom of Saudi Arabia released a booklet stating that it is permissible to remove the graves of the Prophet, as well as his companions Abu Bakr and Omar, since it contradicts the Islamic legal understanding of burial grounds. They emphasized that the booklet, which drew inspiration from the religious rulings of the esteemed Grand Mufti Abd al-Aziz al-Sheikh³⁸⁶, served as an effective tool in eradicating various revered historical sites in Makkah and Medina believed to promote unusual practices, idolatry, and the veneration of graves.

³⁸⁰ Ibid

³⁸¹ Al-Jundi, A. (1980). إحياء التراث الجاهلي والوثني تحت اسم الفلكلور Reviving the pre-Islamic and pagan heritage under the name of folklore, popular heritage. "Preachers and Thinkers" Ain al-Jamea Library. pp :5

³⁸² Sharia or 'Shariat' is a body of religious law that forms a part of the Islamic tradition. It is derived from the religious precepts of Islam and is based on the sacred scriptures of Islam, particularly the Quran and the Hadith.

³⁸³ Patel. (2018). "Whoever Imitates a People Becomes One of Them": A Hadith and its Interpreters. Islamic Law and Society, 25(4).

³⁸⁴ Diplomatic crisis (rejection) that Qatar faced with most of the gulf state because lot of reasons (the important one is that Saudi Arabia claimed that Qatar was supporting terroristic groups with national funds)

³⁸⁵ Abdel-Raouf, A. (2017). Why did Saudi Arabia destroy "the monuments of Islam" while restoring the monuments of its kings? Aljazeera. it can be consulted only in Arabic Language via this link: <https://www.aljazeera.net>

³⁸⁶ Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh, born in 1943, is the Saudi Arabia's current Grand Mufti. He is the leader of Permanent Committee for Islamic Research and Issuing Fatwas and of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars.

The widespread circulation of this fatwa³⁸⁷ has given extremists a solid justification for their acts of vandalism against cultural heritage.³⁸⁸

The date	The destruction event
2001	the 1500-year-old Bamiyan Buddhas statues in Afghanistan were destroyed by Taliban militants.
2009	Many of Pakistan's remaining Buddhist artifacts from the Buddhist Gandhara civilization were targeted and destroyed by a Taliban militant group.
2012	Buddhist artifacts were destroyed when ISIS seized control of the Maldives' national museum.
2012	Al Qaida destroyed Timbuktu's legendary 333 saints and a part of the iconic Djinguereber mosque in Timbuktu.
2014	a Saudi graduate vandalized the statues of Buddha at Sensoji Temple student, thinking that he was practicing the teachings of Islam in Tokyo, Japan.
2015	ISIS destroyed the Sufi shrines situated near Tripoli.
2016	ISIS terrorists destroyed part of the Roman amphitheater in the ancient city of Palmyra, Syria.

*Tableau 2: Some examples of the destruction of monuments*³⁸⁹

In order to stop the misinterpretation surrounding the destruction of the Buddha statue in Bamiyan and clarify the relationship between Islamic law and cultural heritage, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in cooperation with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) prepared and organized a conference that took place in Doha from December 29 to 31, 2001. This conference coincided with the third gathering of Culture Ministers from Islamic countries.³⁹⁰

The purpose of hosting the conference was to absolve Muslims from the shameful acts of destruction carried out by extremists, who falsely associate it with Islam, towards cultural heritage.³⁹¹ In order to oppose the destruction of cultural heritage in the name of Islam, the organization committee sought assistance from renowned Sunni Muslim scholars such as Shaykh

³⁸⁷ The Arabic word fatwa can mean “explanation” or “clarification.”

³⁸⁸ Olaniyan, A., Bello, A.O. (2022). Countering the Narratives of Destruction: Textual Evidence and the Tradition of Heritage Preservation in Islam. In: Albert, MT., Bernecker, R., Cave, C., Prodan, A.C., Ripp, M. (eds) 50 Years World Heritage Convention: Shared Responsibility – Conflict & Reconciliation. Heritage Studies. Springer, Cham. pp:179

³⁸⁹ Ibid,

³⁹⁰ Bouchenaki, M. (2017). « Patrimoines mutilés. Ces trésors de l’Humanité défigurés par la folie des hommes » préface d’Irina Bokova, directrice générale de l’Unesco, éditions Erick Bonnier, coll. Encre d’Orient. pp 31.

³⁹¹ Ibid,

Yusuf Al-Qaradawi³⁹² and Grand Imam of al-Azhar³⁹³, who strongly denied any involvement in such acts³⁹⁴ stating that:

*“Islam arrived with the intent to construct rather than destroy, to contribute rather than eradicate, and to establish a Muslim civilization that encompasses divine, humane, moral values and is applicable universally. As Muslim we must benefit from the accomplishments of previous civilizations, assimilate their strengths, and rectify their weaknesses. The purpose is to create an environment on earth where we can gain insights from the actions of our predecessors, comprehend their experiences, and understand the consequences of deviating from God's laws.”*³⁹⁵

The outcome of the conference led to the release of the document known as the "Doha Announcement." In this statement, the religious scholars and legal experts of the Islamic community, also referred to as the “‘Ulamâ & Fuqahâ”³⁹⁶, expressed:

*the position of Islam with regard to the preservation of the human cultural heritage derives from its appreciation of innate human values and from respect for peoples’ beliefs. They explained that the position of Islam regarding the preservation of the cultural heritage is a firm position of principle which expresses the very essence of the Islamic religion. Any individual or collective behavior which is at variance with that position in no way reflects the Islamic position...*³⁹⁷

Finally, in the part of their recommendations written in the document, the “‘Ulamâ & Fuqahâ” urged for a rupture with the limited interpretation and comprehension of cultural heritage, expressing their intention to cooperate with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) in order to preserve and promote cultural heritage in the Arab region³⁹⁸. This

³⁹² Sheykh Al-Qaradawi Youssef. (1926-2022) an Egyptian-born Muslim scholar who headed the International Union of Muslim Scholars.

³⁹³ Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, based in Egypt and considered as one of the biggest and oldest Islamic institutions in the world that served as a hub for Sunni philosophy.

³⁹⁴ Bouchenaki, M. (2017). « Patrimoines mutilés. Ces trésors de l’Humanité défigurés par la folie des hommes » préface d’Irina Bokova, directrice générale de l’Unesco, éditions Erick Bonnier, coll. Encre d’Orient. pp 31.

³⁹⁵ Sheikh Al-Qaradawi, Y. (2015). "Contemporary Fatwas," Part 7, pp. 615-617, a chapter translated and published in "Havre de savoir".

³⁹⁶ The 'Ulama (sing. 'alim) is the body of Muslim religious scholars and chief religious' authorities, members of which often serve as teachers, judges, jurists, preachers, urban and rural imams, market inspectors, and advisers in various capacities

³⁹⁷ PROCEEDINGS OF THE DOHA CONFERENCE OF ‘ULAMÂON ISLAM AND CULTURAL HERITAGE DOHA, QATAR 30-31 DECEMBER 2001. consulted online:

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf00000140834?fbclid=IwAR1dNiFKMk0IIIGg8EGcxRwTcK4YDrHgbG68jN41GxTYwPzuo7xCgRlqP_A

³⁹⁸ Ibid, pp: 8.

collaboration, according to Mounir Bouchenaki (2017), would mark the initiation of a paradigm shift in the history of cultural heritage within the Arab world.³⁹⁹

IV. From Turāth to cultural heritage (Turāth Thaqafi)

The Arab world's understanding of *Turāth* went through significant change until it became overshadowed by the Western perspective on cultural heritage⁴⁰⁰. In the heading of this section, I used the expression "from-to" to illustrate how Arab scholars' perspective on the concept of *Turāth* has evolved from the 1970s. Consequently, it is crucial to consider two primary phases: First, there was a significant change in the intellectual field that acted as a trigger for a group of scholars who aimed to promote modernization in the Arab-Islamic worlds during the 1970s, advocating for what Al-Jabri referred to as "the Epistemological liberation of *Turāth*."⁴⁰¹ Then, the considerable impact exerted by international organizations, particularly UNESCO, who played a crucial role in the development of official regulations and institutions aimed at comprehending, safeguarding, and implementing cultural strategies related to this issue.⁴⁰²

Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri emphasized that, in the past, the terms *i-r-th* or *mirath* were exclusively associated with wealth and/or spiritual wisdom that Muslim's ancestors left and held no other meanings⁴⁰³. He strongly criticized this traditional interpretation of *Turāth*, which involves accepting the words and actions of our ancestors at face value, whether those are their personal viewpoints or their interpretations of previous intellectuals. According to him, this particular approach is defined by the lack of critical analysis and the disregard for historical perspective.⁴⁰⁴ For this reason, he pointed out that *Turāth* needs an "Epistemological liberation" by which he refers to the intellectual endeavor of freeing this concept from its historical burden, which restricted its association solely with religious matters, and thus, enable it to embrace various facets of life and ultimately attain modernity⁴⁰⁵.

³⁹⁹ Bouchenaki, M. (2017). « Patrimoines mutilés. Ces trésors de l'Humanité défigurés par la folie des hommes » préface d'Irina Bokova, directrice générale de l'Unesco, éditions Erick Bonnier, coll. Encre d'Orient. pp 31.

⁴⁰⁰ Dupret, B., & Gutron, C. (2021). The concept of heritage and the grammar of Islamic fundamentalism. *Memory Studies*, 14(2), pp: 484.

⁴⁰¹ Nabhan, A. (2009). *Turāth; the concept and the positions of thinkers*. Research presented to the eighth conference with the Arabic language in Damascus.

⁴⁰² Bedirina, D. (2022). Protection of cultural heritage under international laws. *The Arabic journal of human and social sciences*. Volume 14. pp: 663.

⁴⁰³ Al-Jabri, M.A. (1982). *الخطاب العربي المعاصر* Contemporary Arab Discourse, The Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Dar Al-Talee'a, Beirut, Lebanon. pp: 39.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Al-Jabri, M.A. (1986). "التراث ومشكلة المنهج" Heritage and the Problem of the Curriculum. *The Arab Future Magazine*, Issue 83, Beirut.

In his perspective, to establish a genuine Arab culture for the next generation, it is necessary to approach the *Turāth* using innovative methods and a modern mindset⁴⁰⁶, Al-Jabri enriches the significance of this concept and redefines it, bringing it into alignment with the concepts of culture and knowledge, he affirmed that:

*“Turāth encompasses cultural, social, and material aspects derived from both ancient and recent eras. This includes legacies such as written and oral traditions, formal and popular expressions, as well as linguistic and non-linguistic elements”.*⁴⁰⁷

Similarly, Mohammed Arkoun emphasized that the Arab-Islamic intellectual need to deconstruct the narrow religious interpretation associated with their Heritage. He quoted that:

*“I am a voice that rises from within Islam to say that there is another way to approach the religious phenomenon today. I am a voice among other voices trying to express itself and occupy its place in society, and among practical researchers, through a discussion that wants to be democratic in the intellectual sense. and mental to the word”*⁴⁰⁸.

Arkoun also argues that modernity could be accomplished by comprehending *Turāth* in all its diverse manifestations.⁴⁰⁹ He also insists on interpreting *Turāth* in its different meanings, suggesting that it no longer possesses a permanent or unchanging definition⁴¹⁰. In addition, he urged for a rupture with the significant impact of religious texts like the Quran and the teachings of Muhammad, commonly known as the Sunnah⁴¹¹. However, Arkoun does not deny that the Quran and the Sunnah form the fundamental principles and standards of the Islamic faith. Yet, he strongly criticized the governing body associated with these sources, aiming to restrict the interpretation of *Turāth* solely from a religious perspective. He states that:

*" The authorities in Islam for the fatwas⁴¹² of jurists and clerics since the Umayyads, and until the present day, through the Abbasids, the Seljuks, the Ottomans, and the current regimes, have not yet departed from the traditional legitimacy in order to enter into the modern democratic legitimacy.”*⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁶ Al-Jabri, M.A(1991) التراث والحداثة Heritage and Modernity: Studies and Discussions. Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, pp:30

⁴⁰⁸ Arkoun, M. (1996). Secularization and Religion, Islam - Christianity - the West. Dar Al Saqi for printing and publishing.

⁴⁰⁹ Arkoun, M. (1989). "الإسلام والحداثة" Islam and Modernity. Mawaqif Magazine, Beirut, Issue 59/60. pp. 24

⁴¹⁰ Ibid,

⁴¹¹ Ibid,

⁴¹² The Arabic word fatwa can mean “explanation” or “clarification.”

⁴¹³ Arkoun, M. (1997). نزعة الأنسنة في الفكر العربي جيل مسكويه والتوحيدي Humanization in Arab Thought, Generation Miskawayh and Tawhidi, traduit par Hashem Salih, Beyrouth, Dar Al-Saqi, 1ère édition, pp: 23.

He pointed out that the Arab scholar's mission is to liberate the *Turāth* from a limited viewpoint that marginalized different facets and perspectives, as he believed that there is not only one singular *Turāth*, but rather a multitude of diverse *Turāths*⁴¹⁴.

Mohammed Amara, an Islamic scholar advocated for intellectual evolution in the context of *Turāth*⁴¹⁵. Aligned with and supported the arguments put forth by Al-Jabri and Arkoun. Amara made it clear that there would be no negative outcomes, specifically regarding Islamic traditions⁴¹⁶. As he provided illustrations where he mentioned cases wherein Muslims embraced the Indian civilization and incorporated Indian contributions to astronomy and arithmetic, while not adopting their religions and cultures. Likewise, Muslims, in their acceptance of Greek culture, prioritized practical and empirical sciences over Greek mythological figures and literature⁴¹⁷. Additionally, he highlighted that comprehending the concept of *Turāth* in its entirety could lead us directly towards a more promising future.

*the awareness of Turāth can make the concept become the science of the future in which we can see the roots of our future that we want to be brighter and less restrictive! and we see in it our Islamic specificity in: "rationality, Arabism and enlightenment" so that we do not dissolve in dependence on the other nor fall into captivity, stagnation and imitation!*⁴¹⁸

In his book *Turāth & renewal*, Hassan Hanafi perceived *Turāth* as the initial step towards fulfilling both cultural and national obligations. Nevertheless, Renewal aims to reinterpret *Turāth* to align with the demands of the current era. He highlighted that *Turāth* is the means, and renewal is the goal, aiming to actively participate in the progress of the Arab world, address its issues, remove the factors causing obstacles, and unlock any barriers hindering its advancement⁴¹⁹. Additionally, he emphasized that *Turāth* should not be regarded as a museum of ideas that we proudly admire and showcase to the world in the form of intellectual tourism. Rather, it is a theory of action, a framework for conduct and a national ammunition that can be discovered, exploited, and invested in order to rebuild the human being⁴²⁰.

According to him, *Turāth* turns into a matter of national concern that directly influences the well-being and quality of life experienced by individuals, either enhancing or detracting from their

⁴¹⁴ Arkoun, Muhammad. (1989). "الإسلام والحداثة" Islam and Modernity. Mawaqif Magazine, Beirut, Issue 59/60. pp: 79

⁴¹⁵ Amara, M. (1997). صراع القيم بين الغرب والإسلام. The conflict of values between the West and Islam

⁴¹⁶ Ibid,

⁴¹⁷ Ibid,

⁴¹⁸ Amara, M. (1997). التراث والمستقبل Heritage and the future. Assalam for printing, publishing, distribution and translation. Abstract.

⁴¹⁹ Hanafi, H. (1992). Heritage and Renewal: Our Position on Ancient Heritage, University Foundation for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Beirut, 4th edition p. 1

⁴²⁰ Ibid, pp: 19

happiness and suffering. He emphasized that the reason for seeking renewal in the interpretation of *Turāth* is not merely a feeling of disrespect towards religious traditions, but instead it is the sense of connection that the individuals have with their homeland and their identification with a particular group of people. He quoted:

*“The issue of Turāth and renewal is a national issue because it is part of our reality. We are responsible for it as we are responsible for the people, land and wealth, and we are also responsible for ancient monuments and popular traditions. That is why we preferred the term “Turāth” and not “religion.”*⁴²¹

The scholars who discussed *Turāth* tried to provide a new perspective for understanding the concept, their efforts have resulted in a shift in mindset, indicating that the *Turāth* has become more receptive to the idea of being linked with Culture, *Turāth-Thaqafi* (cultural heritage). However, *Turāth* cannot be the simple Arabic equivalent of the word heritage because it is based on very specific cultural and religious referents.⁴²² To illustrate, the term *Turāth* in Arabic differs significantly from the broader definition employed in UNESCO's convention. In terms of Cultural heritage, the focal point was primarily the monument, representing a gradual and cumulative process. In contrary, within the context of *Turāth*, the physical manuscript, the book (Quran) holds immense value, symbolizing prestige, seniority, and rarity over an extended period of time⁴²³. To support this idea, Dupret & Gutron pointed out that the focus on *Turāth* is incomprehensible without an equal referencing for World Heritage. For them, both conceptions function as complementary aspects only when mentioned in conjunction with each other.⁴²⁴

UNESCO has been instrumental in changing the perception of cultural heritage in the Arab region. The concept of "cultural heritage", which is now universally recognized and familiar to everyone, originated solely from its first institutionalization in the 1970s. During that time, the concept of cultural heritage went through a worldwide expansion. This expansion involved a shift from valuing objects based on their uniqueness and exceptional qualities (unicum) to valuing them as representatives of a larger group of similar objects or buildings (typicum). For instance, a typical house from a specific region or era can be considered as part of the cultural heritage.⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ Ibid, pp: 21

⁴²² Tebbaa, O. (2010). Patrimoine, patrimonialisation et développement touristique : le cas de Marrakech. Hesperis-Tamuda, Vol. XLV, (2010), pp. 55

⁴²³ Gutron, C., & Skounti, A. (2018) “Dossier Patrimonialiser au Maghreb : Introduction”, L’Année du Maghreb, 19. pp 13.

⁴²⁴ Dupret, B., & Gutron, C. (2021). The concept of heritage and the grammar of Islamic fundamentalism. Memory Studies, 14(2), pp: 491.

⁴²⁵ Heinrich, N. (2009). La fabrique du patrimoine : « De la cathédrale à la petite cuillère » Éditions De La Maison Des Sciences De L’homme.

The creation of the category of “world heritage” in the early 1970s, to which most of the Arab countries adhered, expanded the notion of heritage beyond national borders.⁴²⁶ After much controversy regarding their permissibility, the monuments and sites, referred to as *Athar & Maathir* in Arabic, now have a chance to be recognized and added to the esteemed UNESCO World Heritage List. This inclusion holds universal dimension, ultimately granting these monuments greater exposure. In the early 2000s, the introduction of the concept of "intangible cultural heritage" established and formalized the expansion of an ever-increasing boundary.⁴²⁷ As a result, traditions recounted by artistic performances, communal customs, ceremonial practices, joyful celebrations, and skillful craftsmanship have become prepared to be recognized as cultural heritage.⁴²⁸

The impact of UNESCO's two conventions extends beyond theoretical concepts. Instead, they offer a diverse range of principles and technical guidelines that have been internationally agreed upon, while also enforcing uniform regulations that the member countries must adhere to and endorse on a local scale⁴²⁹. Dhib Bedirina highlighted that the ratification of the conventions frequently requires modifying existing national laws or creating new ones to comply with the terms of the treaty.⁴³⁰ She also highlighted those countries that did not formally ratified the convention during that period considered it as a fundamental guideline for creating or reinforcing their own laws⁴³¹. In this context, we can mention Saudi Arabia which officially enacted the first cultural heritage national law in 1972, and then ratified the world heritage convention in 1978. Similarly, Qatar introduced the first cultural heritage national law in 1980, and then ratified the convention in 1984.

Moreover, UNESCO's influence plays a critical role in shaping the cultural policies of the organizations in the Arab-Muslim world too, such as the (ISESCO) and the (ALECSO).

Firstly, ISESCO was established in 1982 to address science, education, and cultural matters in the Islamic world.⁴³² During his visit to UNESCO in Paris in 2019, the General Director of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) emphasized that the collaboration between the two organizations has a longstanding, strong, and mutually

⁴²⁶ Cameron, C & Mechtilid, R. (2013). *Many Voices, One Vision. The Early Years of the World Heritage Convention*, Londres, Ashgate.

⁴²⁷ Gutron, C., & Skounti, A. (2018) “Dossier Patrimonialiser au Maghreb : Introduction”, *L’Année du Maghreb*, 19. pp 13.

⁴²⁸ Skounti, A & Tebbaa, O. (2011). *De l’immatérialité du patrimoine culturel*, Marrakech, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres et des sciences humaines et du Bureau de l’UNESCO à Rabat.

⁴²⁹ Slyomovics, S. (2020). Is patrimoine ‘good to think with’?. *The Journal of North African Studies*. Volume 25-Issue 5: Historic Preservation in North Africa. pp: 691

⁴³⁰ Bedirina, D. (2022). Protection of cultural heritage under international laws. *The Arabic journal of human and social sciences*. Volume 14. pp: 668.

⁴³¹ Ibid

⁴³² Krogmann, D. (2022). International Organizations and Education in the Islamic World. In the book: *Global Pathways to Education, Global Dynamics of Social Policies*

advantageous foundation. He highlighted the fact that in 1984, ICESCO and UNESCO signed a cooperation agreement, which was later renewed in 2010 and 2012 to advance their long-term collaboration and approved partnership programs which focus on areas of mutual concern and importance, including the conservation of both tangible and intangible natural heritage.⁴³³ As a result, in light of 2019 being declared the year of Islamic cultural heritage, ICESCO initiated the creation of an Islamic World Heritage list, resembling UNESCO's world heritage list, to ensure the protection, conservation, and restoration of such valuable Islamic heritage.⁴³⁴

Secondly, the (ALECSO), which was created in 1970 to deal with education, culture and scientific aspects related to Arab League member countries.

It is mentioned in the Article 28 of the Charter of Arab Cultural Unity that:

*"Member States shall co-operate to co-ordinate their efforts in the field of international cultural co-operation, in particular with UNESCO, for the exchange, organization and establishment of specialized cultural institutions in these friendly countries"*⁴³⁵

ALECSO maintains a close relationship with UNESCO as the designated representative of the Arab League at UNESCO for all matters concerning culture, science, and education. UNESCO has formally acknowledged ALECSO as a capable organization to carry out the agreement made between them and the League of Arab States in 1957. ALECSO is often referred to as the UNESCO of the Arab world, as it shares a similar vision of fostering a strong connection to cultural heritage through a comparable approach to UNESCO's methodology.⁴³⁶ Although it may not possess official recognition from organizations like UNESCO and ICESCO, the institution engages in bureaucratic activities that are directed towards member states in line with UNESCO's endeavors. A notable example of this is its collaboration with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1981 to include the city of Jerusalem on the World Heritage List. Additionally, it played a significant role in unifying Arab nations to propose the recognition of the Arabic language as a cultural heritage for humanity in 2022.

⁴³³ The report can be consulted via this link <https://icesco.org/en/2019/07/09/as-part-of-his-working-visit-to-paris-icesco-director-general-explores-with-unesco-director-general-ways-to-promote-cooperation-relations-in-areas-of-common-interest/>

⁴³⁴ Krogmann, D. (2022). International Organizations and Education in the Islamic World. In the book: Global Pathways to Education, Global Dynamics of Social Policies.

⁴³⁵ Consultable only in Arabic language via this link : <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

⁴³⁶ Jemni, M & Khtheair K. (2017). toward empowering open and online education in the Arab world through OER and MOOCs. Part of the Lecture Notes in Educational Technology book series (LNET)

V. Conclusion

To conclude, the concept of Turāth underwent a profound transformation, transitioning into the broader and more inclusive term "cultural heritage." The shift from Turāth to "cultural heritage" is not simply a semantic evolution, but an ideological displacement: what was once framed within religious and collective epistemes is now managed by institutional, often globalized, structures of visibility, classification, and preservation. The domestication of Turāth into *mawrooth thaqafi* (cultural heritage) marks not just a lexical mutation but the absorption of Arab memory into regimes of international recognition and bureaucratic validation.

In the last three decades, UNESCO's institutional efforts have established a platform for global recognition and protection, which is one of the primary objectives of this conceptual reform. The reforms aim to give a more universal character to the originally Eurocentric definition of World Heritage, thus making it more broadly applicable to national and international heritage institutions worldwide. Arab countries' total adoption of the concept of World Heritage could be interpreted as a means for those states to compete for what Harrison called "global recognition and prestige."⁴³⁷

Having first established a theoretical foundation for cultural heritage in Chapter 1, and subsequently traced the semantic and epistemological transformation of the Arabic concept of Turāth into the globally institutionalized notion of cultural heritage in Chapter 2, we are now prepared to examine the regional organization through which this heritage is governed and politicized within the Arab world. The following chapter will examine the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), which serves as the regional equivalent of UNESCO, and its articulation of its mission concerning cultural heritage and its efforts to foster "unity" within a transnational Arab context. I examine both the institutional structure of ALECSO and its symbolic function in challenging or endorsing the global heritage governance structures. Can this regional organization move beyond the persistent intellectual debates surrounding cultural heritage discourses in the Arab world, or does it simply reproduce them in a localized form?

⁴³⁷ Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage. Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge. pp: 94

Chapter 3: The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)

I. Introduction

The Arab world's institutionalization of culture, through regional organization such as the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), has always been challenging⁴³⁸. Originally conceived as an official cultural institution to foster cultural unity and intellectual development across the Arab area, ALECSO is in an ambiguous position: it is both a product of political compromise and an instrument of cultural affirmation. This chapter questions ALECSO's function as a regional official actor shaped in part on UNESCO but constrained by intra-Arab geopolitical reality challenging its autonomy, operational capability, and cultural inclusiveness.

Rooted on the concept of Arab cultural unity (*wahda thaqafiya*), ALECSO's basic vision reflects both an extensive desire for unity and a specific interpretation of heritage mostly oriented on classical Arabic language and Islamic culture pride⁴³⁹. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region), this vision has had difficulty significantly addressing internal cultural diversity, language plurality, and local heritage manifestations. Furthermore, the organization's involvement with the state-centric structure of the Arab League has made many of its heritage initiatives very symbolic, without enforcement authority and susceptible to bureaucratic stagnation.

This chapter investigates ALECSO's changing mission, its cooperation with international organizations such as UNESCO, and its actual involvement with cultural heritage, both material and intangible, across the Arab world. This investigation, based on primary research, institutional records, and direct interaction with ALECSO's activities, exposes the conflicts between rhetorical aspiration and structural constraints. The chapter challenges ALECSO's conceptual consistency as well as its ability to act: What kind of unity does it want to create?

⁴³⁸ المنظمة العربية للتربية والثقافة والعلوم . <http://www.alecso.org/nsite/ar/%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B8%D9%85%D8%A9>

⁴³⁹ ميثاق الوحدة الثقافية العربية ودستور المنظمة (ALESCO), (charte of Arab cultural unity and the constitution of the Organization). available only in arabic language. Online link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

II. The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO)

Before starting any sort of critical discussion about the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), it is important to highlight the original body from which it originated which is the League of Arab States (LAS).

Following the signing of its founding charter in the 1945, the (LAS) was established in Cairo, Egypt⁴⁴⁰. Initially, the LAS started as a purely political organization aiming to improve the cooperation among governments. However, it eventually broadened its focus to tackle other pressing issues, leading to the creation of specialized agencies that unite countries in the region on crucial matters⁴⁴¹. In emulation of international organizations, the League of Arab States (LAS) established the Arab Labor Organization (ALO) in 1965, the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF) in 1976, and, of specific relevance to this section, the (ALECSO) in 1970, which concentrate on education in the Arab region and work towards the unification and preservation of Arab culture.⁴⁴²

The occurrence of political factors frequently resulted in a deterioration and crisis of agreement within the (LAS), caused by the geopolitical complications that unfolded in the Arab world.⁴⁴³ As an example, the peace accord established between Egypt and Israel⁴⁴⁴ fostered dissent among the remaining member nations, ultimately leading to the Arab League's decision to expel Egypt and relocate its headquarters from Cairo to Tunis⁴⁴⁵. Egypt was reinstated as a member of the League and its headquarters were relocated to Cairo only in 1989.⁴⁴⁶ For this reason, achieving the goal of unity appears challenging, which led to the establishment of ALECSO as a solution to partially redirect the overall objective of unity towards, Exclusively, cultural unity.⁴⁴⁷

The origins of the organization date back to 1964 when the Council of the League of Arab States approved a cultural unity agreement and the Charter of the organization.⁴⁴⁸ The organization reported on its activities after the first General Conference on 25 July 1970 in Cairo, Egypt.

⁴⁴⁰ Arab League (1945), *Meethaq Game'at Al-Dowal Al-Arabeya* [Charter of the Arab League], Cairo.

⁴⁴¹ Ait-Chaalal, A. (2007). *Langue(s) arabe(s), monde(s) arabe(s), arabité, arabisme : éléments de réflexion et d'évaluation de dynamiques complexes*. *Revue internationale de politique comparée*. pp 51-68

⁴⁴² Ibid

⁴⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴⁴ Egypt was the first Arab country to normalize relations with Israel, signing a peace treaty in 1979(Camp David accord), more than two decades before the Abraham Accords. At the time, this move was widely condemned as a betrayal within the Arab League, leading to Egypt's temporary suspension and regional diplomatic isolation.

⁴⁴⁵ Khalifa, D. (2013). *Saving peace: The case for amending the Egypt-Israel peace treaty*. The Atkin Paper Series. ICSR Atkin Fellow. pp: 4

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Barnett, M.N. & Solingen, E. (2007) 'Designed to Fail or Failure of Design? The Sources and Institutional Effects of the Arab League', in: A.I. Johnson and A. Acharya (eds), *Crafting Cooperation: Regional Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁴⁸ Khafagi, M. T. (1989). ALECSO and Its Activities in the Field of Information. *IFLA Journal*, 15(3), 246–250.

The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO) was established under Article 3 of the Charter of Arab Cultural Unity:

*"Member States agree to develop the cultural apparatus of the League of Arab States. (Cultural Department, Institute of Arab Manuscripts and the Higher Institute of Arab Studies) to a unitary organization that includes them all in the League of Arab States and it shall be called the "Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science" according to the constitution approved by the Council of the League on the basis of the proposals of the Second Conference of Ministers of Knowledge, Education and Teaching so that this organization may organize the joint efforts undertaken by member states to realize this charter, in accordance with their constitutions.*⁴⁴⁹

the ALECSO count 22 members of the Arab states, and which are the same 22 Arabic speaking members that form the LAS located in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).⁴⁵⁰

Country	Year of joining the Alecso
Jordan, Algeria, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait Libya, Egypt and Yemen	1970
Bahrain, Palestine and Qatar	1971
United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia	1972
Oman	1973
Tunisia	1974
Mauritania	1975
Morocco, Somalia	1976
Djibouti	1978
Lebanon	1985
Comoros Islands	2002

Tableau 3; List of the member states of ALECSO⁴⁵¹

The common point in this table is that all countries officially joined the organization immediately after their full independence. Another important fact is that ALECSO does not only count countries in the MENA territories, but it also includes other states members based on the language spoken and the religion, such as Comoros and Somalia that are geographically distant

⁴⁴⁹ Article 3 of the charter of Arab cultural unity and the constitutive act of the organization, translated from Arabic: available in Arabic at the following link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

⁴⁵⁰ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO) (1972) ALECSO: What it is, What it

does, How it works. Cairo: The League of Arab States. <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/en/in-brief>

⁴⁵¹ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), El Dowal El Aadaa [Member States] [Online]. Available at: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B9%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A1>

from the MENA region, which indicates one of the core values promoted by the ALECSO that is related to the importance in monitoring the process of its extension.

Furthermore, within the Arab intellectual discourse, it is commonly referred to as the Arab equivalent of UNESCO.⁴⁵² This comparison is due to two factors: first, the resemblance in the pronunciation between "ALECSO" and "UNESCO", and secondly, the assumptions and hopes that ALECSO may conduct work and tasks that are similar to those of UNESCO in the Arab region⁴⁵³. ALECSO is expected to pursue the ambitious goals of cultural unification within the Arab world by transcending prevailing political and ideological conflicts within the Arab cultural sphere. The ultimate objective is to rejuvenate and enhance the Arab world image, ushering in a new era of cultural renaissance (*Nahda Taqafia*).

III. The aims of the organization

According to Article 1 of its constitution the principal aim of the organization is to foster intellectual unity within the constituent regions of the Arab world by means of education, culture, and science⁴⁵⁴. Additionally, it strives to promote advancements in education, instruction, culture, and science within these nations, enabling them to fulfill their responsibility of contributing to global civilization and actively participating in its positive progression. Thus, the achievement of a unified collaboration among the nations comprising the ALECSO brings to our attention, from a distinct standpoint, the larger issue prevailing in the Arab-Muslim world - specifically, the obstacle of responding collectively, which Edward Said asserts as the fundamental cause of a complex and extensive internal conflict⁴⁵⁵.

The main support of collaborative objective goes back to the Islamic religion, that spurs the value of unity, and that are supported by a verse in the Quran, the holy book of Muslims, that states:

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا -

{And hold fast to the rope of Allah altogether, and do not divide}⁴⁵⁶

[Al Imran from verse: 103]

The verse, as a parole from God, tries to convey the Muslim people to keep their unification as an "Ummah", a nation, and in a strict manner, prohibits separation. This verse has been

⁴⁵² Tlili, A., Jemni, M., Khribi, M.K. et al. (2020). Current state of open educational resources in the Arab region: an investigation in 22 countries. Smart Learn. Environ. 7, 11.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), ميثاق الوحدة الثقافية العربية ودستور المنظمة (charte of Arab cultural unity and the constitution of the Organization). available only in arabic language. Online link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

⁴⁵⁵ Said, Edward W. (1978). Orientalism. Pantheon Books.

⁴⁵⁶ Verse number 103, surah Al Imran, the holy Quran. Version translated into English, available on the site: <https://www.quranful.com/>

reinterpreted under the authority of Abdullah bin Masoud, one of the disciples of Prophet Muhammad, who said that: God's rope in this verse reflects the symbolic function of unity, i.e., according to him, Muslims, by remaining united, they remain close enough to God⁴⁵⁷.

In addition, Jamal Eddine Al-Afghani, independent of any religious authorities, highlighted the persisting disagreement between Arabs when he quoted:

*"The worst disease of the Arabs is the division of their peoples, they unite on division, and they differ on unity, they have agreed not to agree".*⁴⁵⁸

In acknowledgement of the intricate nature involved in attaining its objective, the organization was compelled to divide it into ten essential objectives to be accomplished. These objectives would facilitate the achieving of the organization's vision of cultural unity⁴⁵⁹:

1. Coordinating Arab efforts in the fields of education, culture and science, supporting the exchange of its expertise and pioneering Arab experiences, opening up to Arab and international schools of thought, identifying and publishing its latest achievements.
2. Supporting Arab cooperation to develop and modernize Arab educational systems to ensure a better quality of education and to keep pace with the needs and aspirations of the Arab reality, to develop the capacities of the people of the Arab nation and to encourage them to innovation and creativity, and to broaden their options in the face of new demands and positive participation in building a knowledge society.
3. To advance Arab thought and culture, to present Arab-Islamic culture and its tangible and intangible heritage, its achievements and contributions to the building of human civilization, to be open to the most important cultural achievements in the world, and to promote dialogue between peoples and cultures in favor of understanding, cooperation and trust between nations.

⁴⁵⁷ Tafsir (explanation) Ibn Outhaymine — Ibn Outhaymine (1421 AH), available only in Arabic language. Link for online consultation:

<https://tafsir.app/ibn-uthaymeen/3/103>

⁴⁵⁸ Cited in an article in Makkah newspaper in Arabic, N° Saturday 7 February 2015. Online consultation:

<https://makkahnewspaper.com/>

⁴⁵⁹ I will cite 10 goals that are all cited in the article 1 of the constitution of ALECSO. Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), ميثاق الوحدة الثقافية العربية ودستور المنظمة (chart of Arab cultural unity and the constitution of the Organization), available only in Arabic language. Online link:

<http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

4. To develop scientific research and support joint cooperation between Arab scientists and researchers in the fields of applied research in general and in new and challenging specialties in particular, and to support efforts to disseminate scientific culture within the Arab nation.
5. To transfer and exchange experiences, experts, information and pioneering experiences in the organization's fields of specialization and to disseminate them, so that the organization becomes an Arab guide in the fields of education, culture, science, information and communication.
6. To coordinate the efforts of Arab civil society institutions and involve them in the educational, cultural and scientific process.
7. To preserve, protect and disseminate the Arab tangible and intangible heritage, be it manuscripts, artefacts, archaeological productions, practices, skills, knowledge, arts or traditions, and to train specialists to preserve and maintain them, and to assist in the recovery of what has not been seized by legitimate means.
8. To conduct studies and research in various fields related to the issues of the Arab nation, its identity, culture and national heritage, to strengthen the spirit of Arab nationalism and to change the security of researchers and specialists in Arab civilization and what concerns the Arabs in the modern era of human thought issues.
9. To coordinate the efforts of Arab countries to develop and modernize the curricula and methods of teaching and learning the Arabic language, to promote its use in higher and university education, and to prepare specialists in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers.
10. Coordinating the efforts of Arabic language academies and publishing specialized multilingual dictionaries with the use of modern technologies in their distribution.

In the light of all these goals, the central role of ALECSO emerges around the processes of planning, co-ordination, co-operation, and training in the fields of science, education, and culture. The organization did not propose its unity plan with the intention of eliminating national unity. Contrarily, the organization's constitution explicitly promotes the idea of individuals maintaining loyalty to their respective home countries⁴⁶⁰.

⁴⁶⁰ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), ميثاق الوحدة الثقافية العربية ودستور المنظمة (chart of Arab cultural unity and the constitution of the Organization). Article 1. available only in Arabic language. Online link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

Moreover, ALECSO disseminates its recommendations to all pertinent stakeholders and authorities throughout the Arab region, accompanied by the implementation and evaluation of measures. These suggestions are reinforced by tangible, moral, advisory, and operational support frameworks, which inhibit the organization from acting autonomously as an independent entity. Instead, ALECSO focuses on organizing and cooperating with its member states, striving for collective action.

Moreover, given the scope of its work, and in order to broaden its fields of intervention, ALECSO has created and collaborated with other institutions:

Institut	Place	Year of creation	Objectives
Institute of Arab Manuscripts	Cairo, Egypt.	1946	Data processing of the Arabic manuscript heritage at its different levels; Collection and provision, maintenance and restoration, indexing and definition, study and use.
Institute for Arab Research and Studies	Cairo, Egypt.	1953	Supporting Arab culture in a way that strengthens the bonds of unity and cooperation between the peoples of the Arab nation, seeking objective and even scientific solutions to the many problems that concern the Arab reality, and developing the skills and different forms of knowledge related to the strengthening and promotion of this culture.
Arabisation Coordination Bureau in the Arab World	Rabat, Morocco.	1972	To find the most effective ways of using the Arabic language in public life, at all levels of education and in all cultural, scientific and media activities, and to follow the Arabization movement in all scientific and technical disciplines.
Khartoum International Institute for Arabic Language	Khartoum, Soudan.	1974	Preparing a generation of specialists in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, in addition to conducting research and field studies in this field.
The Arab Centre for Research in Higher Education	Damascus, Syria.	1990	Establishing various forms of cooperation with Arab universities, ministries of higher

			education and scientific research, and all other competent authorities in the Arab countries to Arabize education in these countries, as well as enriching Arab culture by Arabizing the world's masterpieces in science, literature and arts, and transmitting what has not been translated into Arabic...
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Tableau 4: list of the subsidiary institutions of ALECSO⁴⁶¹

By analyzing the data presented in the aforementioned table, it is evident that the significance of the Arabic language in ALECSO's discourse and cultural policy remains central. This observation consistently permeates the objectives set by ALECSO through its collaborations with various institutions. This necessitates us to reassess, yet again, the significance of the concept of cultural heritage and its continuous interdependence with the Arab-Muslim interpretation of *Turāth*. In this way, ALECSO persistently places emphasis on the Arabic language as an essential element; nonetheless, the organization approaches cultural heritage from a perspective influenced by Western ideals, a notion initially introduced by UNESCO, and ALECSO holds this concept in high regard as it promotes the preservation of cultural heritage in the Arab world⁴⁶².

IV. ALECSO and cultural heritage

The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization has been working on plans and strategies to play its role as a central actor in Arab culture in general, and in particular in the cultural heritage of the Arab nation (Ummah Arabia). According to the opening lines of its constitution, and as mentioned in the previous section, the goals of the organization, with the concept of cultural heritage being prominently mentioned three times: in goals number 3, 7, and 8.⁴⁶³ These specific goals, as reflected in ALECSO's vision, emphasize the significant value and importance attributed to cultural heritage within the organization.

To begin with, one of the primary objectives is to introduce, safeguard and protect the Arab-Islamic culture and its tangible and intangible cultural heritage, accomplishments, and contributions. Subsequently, aided by the support of UNESCO, efforts to be initiated to establish and enhance the expertise of professionals specializing in Arab cultural heritage. Finally, it is

⁴⁶¹ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO) (1972) ALECSO: subsidiary institutions www.Alecsso.org

⁴⁶² Elyan, J. (2005). Preserving Cultural Heritage « Towards an Arab School for the Preservation and Management of Cultural Heritage », World of Knowledge Series, Al-Seyassah Press, Kuwait.

⁴⁶³ See the previous section concerning the aim of the organization.

crucial to conduct studies and research inquiries in diverse domains concerning the matters of the Arab nation, its identity, culture, and national heritage⁴⁶⁴.

The (ALECSO), Believing in the success of UNESCO's experience, which has taken on the mission of achieving much broader objectives through cultural heritage. For instance, the example of Abu Simbel and all the cultural-political mobilization that took place there, where UNESCO achieved great success. Similarly, ALECSO considers itself closely linked to the cultural heritage of the Arab nation; to the *Turāth* of Ummah⁴⁶⁵.

This is clearly stated in the article 15 of the Charter of Arab Cultural Unity as follows:

*"The Arab countries cooperate with each other to revitalize the Arab intellectual and artistic cultural heritage, preserve it, disseminate it and facilitate access to it for students who request it in various ways, as well as to translate its masterpieces into living languages, introduce Arab and Islamic culture, and all that concerns the issues of contemporary Arab thought, and also contribute to disseminating the Arabic language and calligraphy and facilitating the learning of it abroad and especially in Islamic countries."*⁴⁶⁶

In the same vein, on the basis of Article 11/A of UNESCO's constitution:

*This Organization may cooperate with other specialized inter-governmental organizations and agencies whose interests and activities are related to its purposes. To this end the Director- General, acting under the general authority of the Executive Board, may establish effective working relationships with such organizations and agencies and establish such joint committees as may be necessary to assure effective co-operation. Any formal arrangements entered into with such organizations or agencies shall be subject to the approval of the Executive Board.*⁴⁶⁷

The two organizations were able to sign an agreement as two major organizations with a common interest. Indeed, UNESCO's cooperation with organizations such as ALECSO differs according to the categories of lists in which they have been placed. For example, relations with

⁴⁶⁴ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), ميثاق الوحدة الثقافية العربية ودستور المنظمة (chart of Arab cultural unity and the constitution of the Organization). Article 1. available only in Arabic language. Online link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

⁴⁶⁵ Nadine Doerlé / Nubian Monuments from Abu Simbel to Philae were saved from the rising waters of the Nile thanks to the International Campaign launched by UNESCO, from 1960 to 1980. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/story-abu-simbel/>

⁴⁶⁶ Consultable only in Arabic language via this link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

⁴⁶⁷ THE UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (1945). constitution. Online: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/3ddb73094.pdf>

organizations in category (C)⁴⁶⁸ are limited to the exchange of documents and publications and expand with organizations in category (B)⁴⁶⁹ to include the provision of advice and assistance in all matters related to UNESCO's surveys, studies and letters. On the other hand, the organizations included in category (A)⁴⁷⁰, of which ALECSO is one, include, in addition to all this, the full commitment of these organizations to cooperate closely with UNESCO in the development of their activities. Thus, UNESCO considers ALECSO as an active player that seek promote peace in the Arab regions.⁴⁷¹

Similarly, the ALECSO highlighted the cooperation with UNESCO declaring, based on Article 28 of the Charter of Arab Cultural Unity, that:

*"Member States shall co-operate to co-ordinate their efforts in the field of international cultural co-operation, in particular with UNESCO, for the exchange, organization and establishment of specialized cultural institutions in these friendly countries"*⁴⁷²

As the official representative of the Arab League at UNESCO, in all matters relating to culture, science and education, UNESCO has officially recognized ALECSO as a qualified body to continue the implementation of the agreement that was concluded with the League of Arab States in 1957⁴⁷³. Consequently, ALECSO is expected to have a role in the Arab world that resembles UNESCO's efforts to safeguard and protect cultural heritage on a global scale, particularly as ALECSO possesses a substantial budget, funded through annual contributions from its 22 member states. However, does ALECSO have any influence on the functioning of cultural heritage in the Arab world? And to what extent has this organization contributed to the achievement of this Arab heritage apogee?

After almost five decades since its inception, ALECSO persists in its efforts to promote collaborative cultural initiatives in the Arab world, with a steadfast commitment to the preservation and enhancement of Arab cultural heritage. This commitment remains at the core of ALECSO's various programs and projects. It manages the cultural policies related to Arab cultural heritage by conducting conferences comprising ministers responsible for cultural affairs in the Arab world, as well as overseeing series of ongoing conferences on antiquities within the

⁴⁶⁸ Which mean that it shall have a recognized legal status.

⁴⁶⁹ Which mean that the partner shall be effectively engaged in activities in a spirit of cooperation, tolerance and solidarity, in the interests of humankind and with respect for cultural identities.

⁴⁷⁰ Which means that the partner shall be engaged in activities in one or more specific fields of UNESCO's competence, and it shall be able and willing to make an effective contribution to framing UNESCO's objectives and/or to implementing its programs, in conformity with the principles proclaimed in UNESCO's Constitution.

⁴⁷¹ Tlili, A., Jemni, M., Khribi, M.K. et al. (2020). Current state of open educational resources in the Arab region: an investigation in 22 countries. Smart Learn. Environ.

⁴⁷² Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), ميثاق الوحدة الثقافية العربية ودستور المنظمة (chart of Arab cultural unity and the constitution of the Organization). Article 28. available only in Arabic language. Online link: <http://www.alecso.org/nnsite/media/pdf/001.pdf>

⁴⁷³ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO) (1972) ALECSO: What it is, what it does, how it works. Cairo: The League of Arab States.

ambit of the Arab organization since its establishment until the present time. I utilized a combination of the digital resources accessible on the ALECSO website and I have obtained valuable information during my visits to their headquarters in Rabat, Morocco, in December 2021 and July 2022. During these visits, I had the privilege of directly engaging with their knowledgeable staff, gaining exclusive insights and expert perspectives on the significant impact of ALECSO's initiatives in the realm of cultural heritage. Consequently, I have generated a comprehensive analysis that effectively encapsulates the fundamental findings of my research:

First and foremost, with respect to material heritage, the Conference of Ministers⁴⁷⁴ demonstrated utmost consideration for this aspect, drawing from the documents presented by the organization in the Conference on this matter. In this context, ALECSO holds a cooperative partnership with UNESCO, wherein the two organizations yearly establish an agreement for a work program to carry out collaborative projects. ALECSO is viewed as the regional counterpart to UNESCO and their cooperation primarily focuses on preserving and fostering cultural heritage that holds exceptional global worth. Specifically, one of the prominent areas of their collaboration lies in their participation in the annual meeting of the world heritage committee, hosted by the world heritage center at UNESCO. Ever since its inaugural gathering in Paris in 1977, the committee has been integral in fostering collaboration with Arab nations to enhance their global standing⁴⁷⁵. An illustrative instance of such cooperation is the notable partnership with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, whereby the committee facilitated the inclusion of the city of Jerusalem onto the esteemed World Heritage List in 1981.

Furthermore, the Antiquities and Cultural Heritage Conference has the objective of addressing policies related to this sector in the Arab countries, and has a long history, since it started in 1946 within the framework of the League of Arab States, one year after its establishment, and was transferred to the Arab organization immediately after its establishment. The organization eventually elaborated the "Unified Law of Antiquities" approved by the Conference of Ministers of Culture in Baghdad in November 1981 as one of its greatest achievements⁴⁷⁶. Additionally, it worked on the collection of laws on antiquities and brought them to light through documents that were distributed to the institutions that are responsible for the antiquities in its member states.

Additionally, the field of training is of particular importance to the interests of the organization, which consists of organizing training programs on various subjects such as museology,

⁴⁷⁴ it is a conference of Ministers Responsible for Cultural Affairs in the Arab World with the aim of strengthening inter-Arab cultural cooperation with the cultures of the peoples of the world as well as unifying Arab efforts in various cultural fields.

⁴⁷⁵ Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO) (2014) 9 the Conference of the Arab Ministers of Education Report, ALECSO, Tunis.

⁴⁷⁶ Kuwait news agency (2021) A committee of Arab archaeologists sets the basic features for a union of Arab Archeologists. available in Arabic vis this link:

<https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=1168400&language=ar>

archaeology and sending the experts to member states that need orientation. Similarly, in relation to the Arabic language, ALECSO has cooperated with The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), the Rome-based International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, in organizing training programs within the framework of the monument program "*Athar*» for Arab countries, and in which the two organizations collaborate in terms of documenting and publishing. For example, the publication of books, such as Palestinian cultural heritage, in Arabic and English. They also worked on the development of a database where the organization publishes studies and research commissioned by its experts dealing with heritage issues,

Moreover, when it comes to intangible cultural heritage, particular interest has been triggered since the Conference of Ministers at its thirteenth session in Amman in 2002, during which the organization was called upon to pay special attention to folklore and its expressions, to prepare an integrated database on modern trends and its protection among Arab countries, and to coordinate with international organizations working in the field of its protection, in particular WIPO and UNESCO, to prepare an integrated Arab initiative to protect its expressions.

Finally, ALECSO and the Documentation Centre for Cultural and Natural Heritage in Egypt have established a partnership since 2005. It began with a meeting of Arab experts in Cairo, organized by the center, to discuss the importance of databases in safeguarding traditional knowledge and folklore. The objective of this collaboration is to catalogue and document folklore, thereby creating a database that will facilitate further development of an Arabic folk traditions thesaurus. However, ALECSO has been working for years on a draft "convention for the protection of folklore in the Arab countries" and a draft "law" on the same subject, two major projects that have never been revealed until now.

V. Discussion

There are ambitious expectations regarding the work of ALECSO. Nevertheless, my analysis reveals that it exerts minimal influence on Arab educational, cultural, and scientific departments and institutions when compared to the remarkable efficacy and influential status of UNESCO in these domains. Upon close examination of the accomplishments of the organization, alongside the commitments and ambitions articulated in its constitution, as well as its discourse advocating a more scientifically oriented cultural approach towards heritage, it becomes apparent that the organization begins with an inclination to undertake numerous tasks. However, it frequently falls short of implementing tangible measures, yielding minimal outcomes.

The Arabic language is given greater significance as the common cultural heritage of the Arab nation (Turāth of the Ummah), yet a noticeable concern arises regarding its limited cultural authority, preventing it from playing a vital role in the recognition and preservation of heritage across its member countries. One of the primary criticisms I have regarding the ALECSO is its disregard for the diversity, sub-languages, and dialects that exist within Arabic. By treating Arabic as a fixed language, the organization's efforts fail to encompass the various cultures impacted by language, despite the fact that language is constantly evolving and changing. Focusing solely on classical Arabic, the language of the Quran, limits the scope of the organization's work to a specific population, predominantly within the Middle East. In North Africa, Arabic is the designated official language, but the indigenous populations primarily speak various dialects and Berber languages (for instance, the Moroccan Darija, the Masri/Libi Dialect...), which exhibit considerable variations across different regions within the countries.

In relation to cultural heritage, it is doubtful for the organization to play a crucial role in the endeavor of recognition or conservation because, with all its recommendations and conferences, the member states are more attracted by UNESCO, especially by the world heritage lists and all the political and cultural prestige that it represents for them. The ALECSO's great efforts remain stagnant around the walls of the auditoriums limited to a theoretical level, represented by the holding of periodic meetings and the organization of conferences where the decisions issued are mere recommendations that are not binding and do not have mechanisms for follow-up and evaluation.

The ALECSO is also subject to political influences originating from the Arab League States (LAS). For instance, when we talk about the Palestinian cultural heritage, the organization and all its member countries, regardless of their political and cultural orientations, have mobilized a great material, moral and ethical effort so that the Palestinian cause can gather the support of all Arab countries, from a regional to an international level. Similarly, as far as the Arabic language is concerned, the organization has made a lot of efforts which were finally rewarded in 2022 with the official recognition by UNESCO of the Arabic language as a cultural heritage for all

humanity. However, the organization is unable to effectively protect endangered cultural heritage when faced with armed conflict⁴⁷⁷. To illustrate, we can examine the case of the Arab Spring where the organization encountered an inherent dilemma as it grappled with an unexpected incapacity to proactively respond, particularly within its specialized domain of culture. Numerous cultural heritage sites encountered in a devastating condition, and which necessitate the displacement of individuals from their native territories. The Syrian experience holds immense importance as it stands as a prominent testament to the historical and political significance of the region (the cham). Still, despite its pivotal position, the organization has encountered considerable inertia in terms of engagement and interaction. Consequently, the political factor continues to pose a significant challenge for ALECSO, one that it must confront in the foreseeable future.

VI. Conclusion

⁴⁷⁷ Even if it has the legal right to intervene, given that it follows the Arab League of Nations, that stated in articles 5 and 6 of its constitution, the importance of avoiding any type of military conflicts between member states.

The ALECSO has set, as we have already mentioned, intellectual and even cultural unity as its goal. However, after almost 50 years of its creation, are the Arabs culturally united? ALECSO represents an institutional paradox. On the surface, it is positioned as a central actor in safeguarding and promoting Arab cultural heritage. However, when it comes to practical actions, it often operates as a symbolic extension of state agendas and regional diplomatic posturing. Despite its ambitious declarations, the organization has limited efficacy in responding to heritage emergencies, especially in conflict zones. While its collaboration with UNESCO has resulted in frameworks for heritage management, its efforts continue to favor classical Arabic and dominant heritage narratives, while marginalizing dialects, indigenous traditions, and diverse manifestations of identity. ALECSO aligns with UNESCO's goals for the protection and advancement of culture; however, it notably differs in its ideological stance, promoting a cohesive (unified) Arab cultural identity rather than the pluralism and diversity that are fundamental to UNESCO's heritage discussions. ALECSO's influence has been constrained, frequently clashing with a divided Arab landscape where nations are increasingly pursuing the global recognition and diplomatic prominence that comes with UNESCO heritage status.

After establishing the foundational concepts of cultural heritage, examining the epistemological evolution of Turāth, and evaluating the regional institutional role of ALECSO as the Arab world's cultural interlocutor, we now turn to the empirical core of this thesis. The next chapter opens our case studies section, where I examine the paradigm shift in cultural heritage discourse in two different national contexts. I begin with Saudi Arabia, focusing on two important cases: the monumental preservation and global rebranding of Madā'in Šālīh, and the politically driven demolition of Ajyad Castle in Mecca—both of which illustrate how cultural heritage is curated, suppressed, or reinvented according to shifting ideological and geopolitical demands. I then move to Qatar, where the UNESCO-inscribed site of Al-Zubarah provides an understanding of the use of archaeological heritage as a representation of national history, territorial integrity, and cultural particularity. These case studies allow us to observe how state institutions selectively reframe heritage sites as instruments of identity, diplomacy, and national cohesion, reflecting a broader paradigm shift in the governance of the past.

Chapter 4: The paradigm shifts in cultural heritage discourse in Saudi Arabia & Qatar

I. Introduction

In the Gulf region, cultural heritage has evolved from a marginal concern into a pivotal component of statecraft and global visibility⁴⁷⁸. In the last two decades, the heritage discourse in Saudi Arabia and Qatar has undergone radical shifts, not just in the form of institutional expansion or archaeological preservation, but as an epistemic reconfiguration of how the past is known, remembered, and mobilized. The path of heritage formation in these two monarchies unfolds against a backdrop of religious rigidity, Petro-modernity, and global cultural diplomacy⁴⁷⁹. Initially shaped by conservative theological regimes, especially the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia and post-independence conservatism in Qatar, cultural policy was for decades oriented toward restriction, marginalization of non-Islamic narratives, and suspicion of pre-Islamic histories. However, key turning points—most notably the post-9/11 cultural recalibrations, the Arab Spring, and the leadership transitions in Qatar (2013) and Saudi Arabia (2017)—set the stage for a revalorization of heritage as a tool of modernization (secularization), soft power, and historical reframing⁴⁸⁰.

Withing these transformations, this chapter investigates how cultural heritage has been recontextualized, focusing on important cases: the destruction of the Ottoman Ajyad Castle in Makkah and the inscription of Madā'in Šālīḥ as Saudi Arabia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, in addition to Qatar's strategic elevation of Al-Zubarah as a national and international symbol. Through these cases, the chapter examines how heritage is produced through acts of exclusion and inclusion, religious justification and secular reinvention, and how global standards such as those of UNESCO are appropriated, translated, and sometimes contested in the service of national narratives.

Finally, the central question animating this chapter is thus: How do Saudi Arabia and Qatar strategically deploy cultural heritage to navigate the tensions between religious rigidity and modernization, between national unity and historical pluralism, and between local memory and global recognition?

⁴⁷⁸ Exell, K., & Rico, T. (2013). *Heritage and the Cultural Politics of the Past in the Arabian Peninsula: Between Statecraft and Selfcraft*. Routledge.

⁴⁷⁹ Al-Rasheed, M. (2007). *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation*. Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁸⁰ Koch, N. (2015). *The "monumental" politics of heritage: Nation-building, image maintenance and post-Arab Spring nationalism in the Gulf*. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16(6), 668–689.

II. Cultural Policy Transformations in Qatar and Saudi Arabia (1970–2021)

The recognition of cultural heritage within the Gulf states, specifically Qatar and Saudi Arabia, demonstrates a revitalized interest that is now intertwined with a global notable for major changes and challenges encompassing intellectual, political, social, financial, cultural, spatial, and environmental aspects.

In 1971, Qatar gained independence after being colonized by Britain, whereas in 1970, Saudi Arabia attained independence following British oversight of its oil industry⁴⁸¹. This happened at the same time as an increase in oil earnings, as a result, both nations began their efforts to modernize in order to compete globally with other developed countries⁴⁸². In that time, both countries developed a cultural vision, demonstrating significant emphasis on cultural actions⁴⁸³. For instance, shortly after assuming authority, Emir Ahmed Bin Ali Al Thani⁴⁸⁴ focused his initial efforts on conducting archaeological excavations and strategizing the development of the national museum⁴⁸⁵. Therefore, in 1975, the inaugural national museum was established with the purpose of elucidating the core disparities between the "Bedouin" and "Hadar"⁴⁸⁶ segments of Qatari society⁴⁸⁷. In the same vein, Saudi Arabia introduced its inaugural national law on cultural heritage in 1972, thereby exhibiting a significant influence from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notion of heritage, and in 1978, will accept (not ratify) the world heritage convention⁴⁸⁸.

Nevertheless, the Gulf region was significantly impacted by the outbreak of the Iranian revolution in 1979.⁴⁸⁹ Due to the "Nasserite"⁴⁹⁰ tide and "Khomeini's revolution"⁴⁹¹, the Awakening movement reappeared strongly out of fear. The Great Mosque of Makkah was forcibly entered by a crowd of approximately 200 to 300 young men, under the leadership of

⁴⁸¹ Niazr, A & Joinal, N. (2020). Saudi-Qatar Relations: A Study of Conflict and Cooperation. JOURNAL OF CRITICAL REVIEWS, 7(9).

⁴⁸² John W. Fox, Nada M-S & Al-Mutawa, M. (2006). Globalization and the Gulf. London, New York: Routledge, pp: 18.

⁴⁸³ Al Arabia News. (2017). 1979, the year that changed arts and culture in Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁸⁴ Sheikh Ahmad bin Ali bin Abdullah bin Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani was the Emir of Qatar who ruled from 1960 to 1972.

⁴⁸⁵ Al-Hammadi, MI. (2018). Presentation of Qatari Identity at National Museum of Qatar: Between Imagination and Reality. Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies, 16(1): 3, pp. 1–10.

⁴⁸⁶ Two distinct forms of Qatari identity connected to life on the coast (Hadar) and life in the desert (Bedouin).

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ Wosiński, M.M. (2022). New perspectives on World Heritage management in the GCC legislation. Built Heritage 6, 14. pp: 8.

⁴⁸⁹ Mirza, M.N, Abbas, H., & Qaisrani, I. H. (2021). Structural Sources of Saudi– Iran Rivalry and Competition for the Sphere of Influence. Sage Open, 11(3).

⁴⁹⁰ Nasserism is an Arab nationalist and pan-Arabist ideology, combined with a vaguely defined socialism, often distinguished from Eastern Bloc or Western thought by the label "Arab socialism."

⁴⁹¹ Known also as the Islamic Revolution or the 1979 Revolution, was the 1979 revolution that transformed Iran into an Islamic republic, overthrowing the imperial state of Iran under the Pahlavi dynasty.

Juhayman al-Otaybi⁴⁹², on November 20, 1979⁴⁹³. Consequently, the incident endured for a period of two weeks and led to the loss of numerous lives. This event marked the end of the period when Saudi Arabia, and subsequently the entire Gulf region, actively pursued modernization efforts⁴⁹⁴.

Stephane Lacroix emphasized the impact of the *Sahwa* (Awakening) movement on both Saudi society and the broader Gulf region, particularly in terms of its repercussions on religious discourse and cultural policies.⁴⁹⁵ He further categorized the movement into two distinct periods, based on chronological order:

(1) from 1970 to 1982⁴⁹⁶: a time of establishing foundations and expanding the audience. He stated that the emergence of the *Sahwa* movement was due to the presence of numerous Muslim brothers who sought refuge from Syria and Egypt after the oppressive actions imposed by Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954⁴⁹⁷. In 1979, the movement gained greater support as a result of the Iranian revolution that provoked threat along Saudi Arabia's northern borders. This situation also raised concerns of a potential conflict between Shiite and Sunni communities⁴⁹⁸.

(2) From 1982 to 1995, which was the peak period of the movement.⁴⁹⁹ In 1982 *Sahwa* movement was officially recognized as an Islamic organization that call Muslims to the path of God⁵⁰⁰. Lacroix emphasized that in 1990, following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the Saudi government's request for assistance from the United States, their presence in Saudi territories provided *Sahwa* leaders with an opportunity to construct emotional speeches against them. These speeches were propagated in universities, mosques, and TV channels, urging people to protest against the presence of non-believers on the believers' land. The *Sahwa* leaders effectively propagated the notion that Islam the only comprehensive system that should govern all aspects of life, such as clothing choices, language, and social interactions⁵⁰¹. In contrast, within the Muslim community, the sole manifestation of their cultural identity revolved around the concept of Sunnah.⁵⁰²

⁴⁹² Juhayman ibn Muhammad ibn Sayf al-Otaybi, (1936-1980) was a Saudi Arabian terrorist and soldier who in 1979 led the seizure of the Great Mosque of Makkah, Islam's holiest mosque, to protest against the Saudi monarchy.

⁴⁹³ Al Arabia News. (2017). 1979, the year that changed arts and culture in Saudi Arabia.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid

⁴⁹⁵ Lacroix, S. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Translated by George Holoch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid

⁴⁹⁷ Gamal Abdel Nasser Hussein Sultan (1918 - 1970) was an Egyptian soldier and politician. He was the President of the Republic in Egypt from 1954 until 1970 and was the biggest opposer of Muslim Brotherhood.

⁴⁹⁸ Lacroix, S. (2011). *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*. Translated by George Holoch. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid

⁵⁰¹ Ibid

⁵⁰² Al-Jundi, A. (1980). إحياء التراث الجاهلي والوثني تحت اسم الفلكلور Reviving the pre-Islamic and pagan heritage under the name of folklore, popular heritage. "Preachers and Thinkers" Ain al-Jamea Library.

Consequently, Saudi Arabia and Qatar went through a cultural inertia, predominantly ascribed to the prevalent influence of religious factions within their political frameworks. The influence of conservative beliefs and their alignment with political power systems contributed to limiting cultural diversity and artistic freedom to some extent⁵⁰³. This adherence to authentic⁵⁰⁴ Arab and Islamic customs and traditions resulted in resilience towards embracing modernity and renewal, as well as showing disdain towards Western civilizations. Consequently, restrictions were imposed on various forms of Westernization, including the prohibition of access to satellite television, music, dances, and movies. Furthermore, the conservative ideology opposed even granting women the right to drive vehicles.

Despite the predominant influence of the *Sahwa* movement, culture played a vital role in counterbalancing its overwhelming influence. As a result, two pivotal historical occurrences that have had a profound influence on the advancement of cultural emancipation were:

During the early 2000s, a series of terror attacks occurred, including the 2001 terrorist attack on the United States and the simultaneous destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statue orchestrated by the same extremist group. The series of occurrences exerted a significant impact on the perception of Islam in Western societies⁵⁰⁵. The two events were viewed as the main starting point of the cultural and political reforms in the region.⁵⁰⁶ Consequently, in 2001, the collaboration between the government of Qatar and the (UNESCO), alongside the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), led to the organization of the "Ulamâ⁵⁰⁷ on Islam and Cultural Heritage" conference in Doha, Qatar⁵⁰⁸. This conference saw active participation from all Arab countries and demonstrated their strong commitment to collaboration.⁵⁰⁹ The primary objective of the conference, as I mentioned in the previous section, was to address and alleviate the unfounded blame and condemnation unfairly attributed to Muslims because of the misguided actions of extremists who erroneously associate their acts with Islam⁵¹⁰. Yet, the outcome of the

⁵⁰³ Al-Rasheed, M. (2015). *Muted Modernists: The Struggle Over Divine Politics in Saudi Arabia*. C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.

⁵⁰⁴ Which means that it is a form of Islam that strictly follow only the Quran and the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah).

⁵⁰⁵ Mumtaz, Kashif. (2004). *Saudi Arabia after 9/11: A State in Turmoil*. Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 73

⁵⁰⁶ Alshamsi, M. J. (2012). *Islam and political reform in Saudi Arabia: The quest for political change and reform*. Routledge.

⁵⁰⁷ The 'Ulama (sing. 'alim) is the body of Muslim religious scholars and chief religious' authorities, members of which often serve as teachers, judges, jurists, preachers, urban and rural imams, market inspectors, and advisers in various capacities.

⁵⁰⁸ Bouchenaki, M. (2017). « Patrimoines mutilés. Ces trésors de l'Humanité défigurés par la folie des hommes » préface d'Irina Bokova, directrice générale de l'Unesco, éditions Erick Bonnier, coll. Encre d'Orient. pp 31

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

discussions led to the formation of the "Doha Statement,"⁵¹¹ in which all Arab-Muslim nations conveyed their deep remorse regarding the ongoing events⁵¹². They emphasized their strong opposition to acts of terrorism, underscoring that Islam as a religion does not promote or condone terrorism. Moreover, they demonstrated their commitment to engaging with UNESCO in order to foster intercultural dialogue, with a specific focus on acknowledging and safeguarding cultural heritage⁵¹³. This collaboration will undoubtedly be founded upon the recognition and preservation of cultural heritage⁵¹⁴.

Secondly, the period that followed the Arab spring (2010-2012), specifically the reform of the political regime in Qatar (2013) and later in Saudi Arabia (2017), contributed to the totalization of the cultural liberation plan.

On June 25, 2013, sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani⁵¹⁵ succeeded his father, sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Thani⁵¹⁶, as the emir of Qatar. During a televised address, sheikh Hamad declared that it was necessary to begin a new chapter in the nation's development and emphasized the importance of a new generation taking charge of the political process.⁵¹⁷ Considerable emphasis has been placed by the new Emir on nurturing both the cultural identity and the unified historical narrative of the Qatari nation.⁵¹⁸ Moreover, the preservation of Qatar's cultural heritage holds immense importance, as emphasized by Sheikh Tamim, who considers it a fundamental element in the construction of the nation's identity. Furthermore, in addition to vowing to provide financial support for numerous cultural events and festivals aimed at boosting traditional music, dance, and various artistic expressions, he also committed to making substantial investments in the revitalization of national cultural institutions such as the Qatar Museums Authority and the Qatar National Library.⁵¹⁹

"We must work together to build a world that is free from extremism, hatred, and violence. Our cultural heritage is very rich and diverse, and if we value it, and if

⁵¹¹ It is a statement made by UNESCO and the Muslim scholars in 2001 to highlight the fact that Islam is legally against the destruction of heritage sites and to clear that Islam is not a close religion as it was mediated in that time.

⁵¹² UNESCO (2001). Proceedings of the Doha Conference of Ulama on Islam and Cultural Heritage. Doha statement. pp:7

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani (born in 1980) is Emir of Qatar, reigning since 2013. Tamim is the fourth son of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani.

⁵¹⁶ Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Hamad bin Abdullah bin Jassem bin Mohammed Al Thani (born in 1952) is a member of the ruling Al Thani Qatari royal family. He was the ruling Emir of Qatar from 1995 until 2013 when he abdicated the throne.

⁵¹⁷ The full video in English is available via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVYcVM4kzAQ>

⁵¹⁸ Hammond, Andrew. (2014). QATAR'S LEADERSHIP TRANSITION: LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON. European council on foreign relations.

⁵¹⁹ Al-Hammadi, MI. (2018). Presentation of Qatari Identity at National Museum of Qatar: Between Imagination and Reality. Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies, 16(1): 3, pp. 1–10.

everybody knows who he is, where he came from, we will have the opportunity to achieve our full potential."⁵²⁰ (2014 UN General Assembly)

In a parallel trajectory, subsequent to the removal of Prince Muhammad bin Nayef⁵²¹ from his incumbent role, King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz⁵²² issued an official edict indicating Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud⁵²³ as the heir to the throne, concurrently appointing him as the deputy prime minister and retaining his position as the defense minister. In Makkah Al-Mukarramah's Al-Safa royal palace, he underwent the swearing-in ceremony conducted by the Saudis during the event of pledging loyalty⁵²⁴. In 2017, during a panel discussion held on the periphery of the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, he declared that after expressing his loyalty to the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, he has undertaken a committed effort of religious and cultural renewal⁵²⁵. He has exerted his utmost efforts to divert the societal trajectory and challenge the longstanding norms and traditions within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which have remained unaltered for an extended period. With his influential position, he has actively confronted all manifestations of religious extremism and endeavored to eradicate them.⁵²⁶ He quoted:

*"Our will is to go back to what we were before the Awakening movement, a moderate Islamic religion that tolerates all cultures, people and all religions." he added that "70% of the Saudi people are under the age of 30, and frankly we will not waste 30 years of our lives dealing with any extremist ideas. We will destroy them today, because we want to live a normal life that translates the principles of our tolerant religion and our good customs and traditions, coexist with the world and contribute to the development of our country and the world."*⁵²⁷

The two inaugurations are relatively new. However, they could be analyzed as reactions and a strive to diverge from a historical period (1970-2017) predominantly influenced by stringent religious dogmas. In the next part of this chapter, I will investigate the function of Cultural heritage in this reaction, specifically, why and how cultural heritage become a center point in their cultural opening plan? I also aim to examine the transformation of heritage discourse by analyzing the case of the destruction of "the Ottoman Ecyad Castle" near Makkah, Saudi Arabia.

⁵²⁰ The full video of the Qatari Emir discourse (with English translation) can be consulted via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMiltjERg1c&ab_channel=GovernmentCommunicationsOffice

⁵²¹ Prince Muhammad (born in 1959) is a grandson of the founding monarch, King Abdulaziz, and son of the former crown prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz.

⁵²² Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (born in 1935) is King of Saudi Arabia, reigning since 2015. He also served as Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia from 2015 to 2022.

⁵²³ Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, (born in 1985) colloquially known by his initials MBS or MbS, is Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia.

⁵²⁴ Kinninmont, J. (2017). Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's Social Contract Austerity and Transformation. Middle East and North Africa Programme. pp: 3

⁵²⁵ The full video of the event can be watched with English subtitles vis this link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_scKvgUkS8&ab_channel=AlArabiyaEnglish

⁵²⁶ Ibid

⁵²⁷ Ibid

Specifically, I will focus on how the official discourse adopted by the Saudi Arabian government downplayed the significance of this event by relying on religious justifications.⁵²⁸ However, in 2008, they inscribed the ancient archaeological sites of " Madā' in Ṣāliḥ and Al-Ula" as their first element on the UNESCO world heritage list. This site, previously overlooked and disregarded due to their association with pre-Islamic blasphemy, have now become a source of newfound national pride.⁵²⁹

III. Religious Justifications for Cultural Heritage discourse in Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Analysis of the Demolition of Ajyad Castle and the Preservation of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ

In 2023, Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the king of Saudi Arabia, authored a book that focused on the history of recognition and preservation of cultural heritage in the country⁵³⁰. Within his book, he discussed two significant occurrences: the erection of the Al-Abraj tower, which necessitated a courageous decision on his part, which is the demolition of Ajyad Castle. the second is Madā' in Ṣāliḥ which is the first site to be inscribed in the UNESCO world heritage list for Saudi Arabia⁵³¹. These two examples are crucial in illustrating how the process of nation building in Saudi Arabia is surpassing religious authority. During the destruction process, religion was invoked to argue against glorifying certain buildings. However, simultaneously, preparations were made for the preservation of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ, which is considered one of the most cursed and desolate places in Islam.

1. The Destruction of Ajyad Castle

Ajyad Castle, also known as Al-Ajyad Fortress, was an Ottoman fort situated on a hill overlooking al-Masjid al-Ḥarām (the Grand Mosque of Makkah) in the Makkah province of Saudi Arabia. The castle was originally built at the end of the 18th century during Ottoman rule of Makkah in 1780⁵³².

⁵²⁸ Maisel, S and Shoup, J. (2009). Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States Today, An Encyclopedia of Life in the Arab States. Greenwood, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group. pp 93

⁵²⁹ Al-Rasheed, M. (2006). Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation. Cambridge Middle East Studies, Series Number 25. Cambridge University Press; Cloth/dust jacket Octavo edition.

⁵³⁰ His Royal Highness Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. (2023). From extinction to prosperity: The cultural dimension of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Published by Heritage Foundation (in Arabic)

⁵³¹ Ibid

⁵³² General Authority of Endowments, (2023). Historical Endowments in Mecca, a historical documentary publication that includes examples of the endowments that were established in Mecca from the beginning of Islam until the end of the fourteenth century AH. (in Arabic).

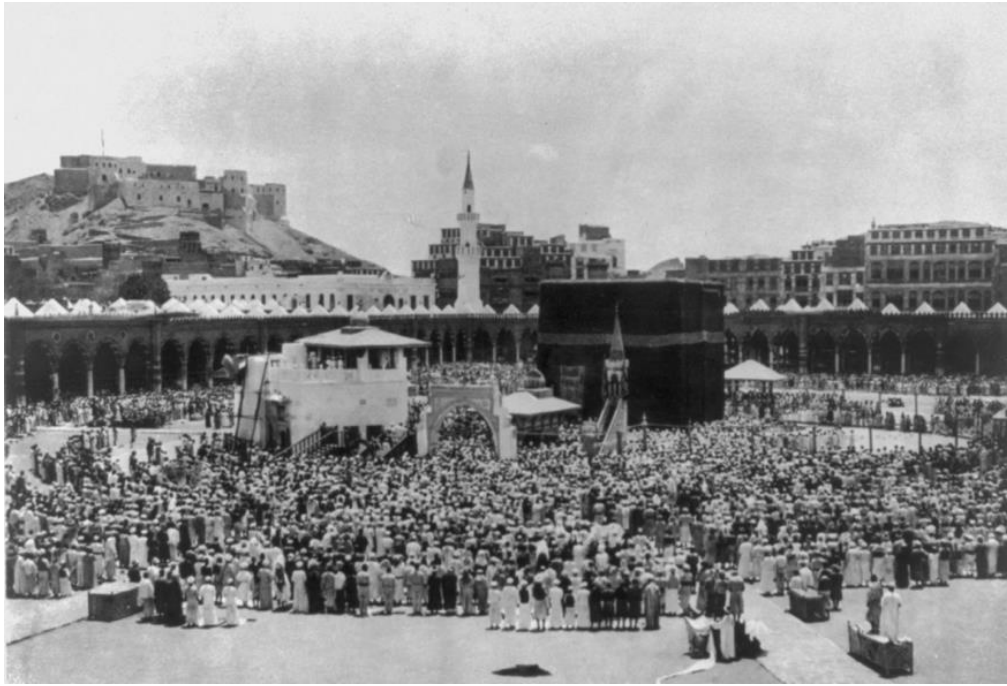


Photo 2: A historical picture of Ajjad Castle in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The picture is taken from the Saudi Arabian Councils, Durrah Forum <http://www.doraksa.com/vb/showthread.php?t=108431>

The story of the construction of Ajjad Castle goes back to the Emir of Makkah, Surur bin Musa'ed, when the security situation in Makkah was unstable in the year 1780, when he ordered the construction of the castle to protect Makkah and the Holy Mosque⁵³³. Built on top of Bulbul Mountain in the opposite the Grand Mosque from the southern side on the left side of the Ajjad neighborhood covering an area of about 23,000 square meters⁵³⁴. The main goal of this castle was to protect its most sacred sites, maintain peace and order in the region, and establish a significant presence in this crucial site for pilgrimage⁵³⁵. The fortress was also used to defend the Kaabah of Makkah and protect it from marauders and invaders since Ottomans considered Makkah as a focal point of Islamic confession, a destination for pilgrimage and a sacred and venerated place⁵³⁶.

⁵³³ Wheelan, S. (2002). Saudi government demolishes historic Ottoman castle. International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

⁵³⁴ Ibid

⁵³⁵ Low, M. C. (2015). The Mechanics of Mecca: The Technopolitics of the Late Ottoman Hijaz and the Colonial Hajj. Ph.D., Columbia University.

⁵³⁶ Ibid

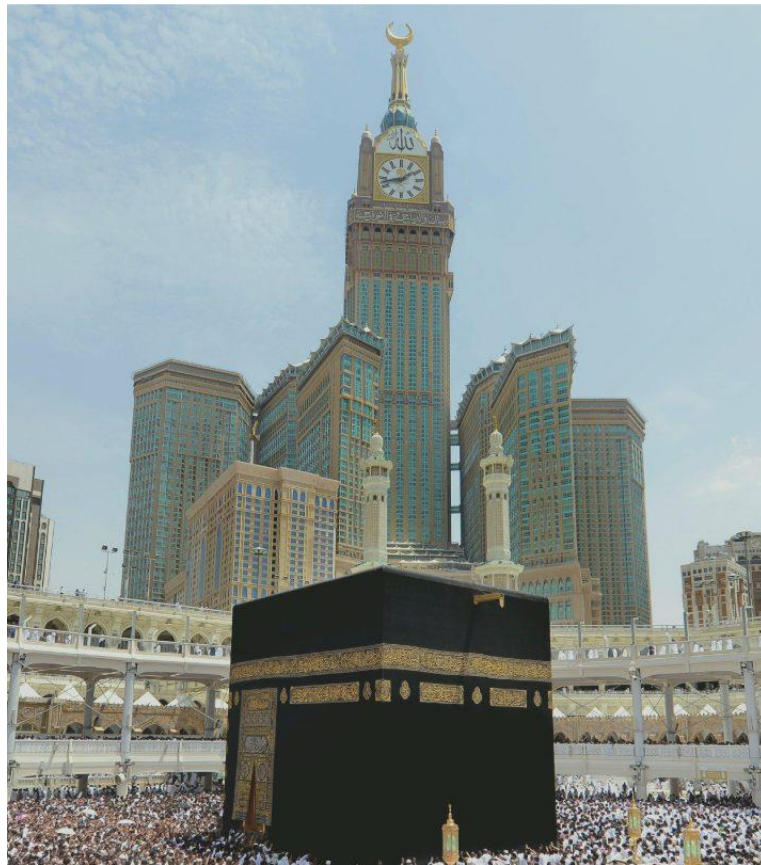


Photo 3: A picture of the towers that were built on the site of Ajyad Castle. The picture is taken from the official website of Abraj Al Bait complex: <https://theclocktowers.com/>

In January 2002, the Saudi government demolished the Ajyad Fortress, to make way for the Abraj Al Bait complex, a \$533 million construction project which is the result of the wider process of expansion and reconstruction of the “*Haram Makki*”⁵³⁷. This demolition was a subject of major international outcry, leading for example in Turkey and among numerous Muslim communities worldwide to interpret the action as a ‘crime’ against a significant Ottoman cultural Heritage⁵³⁸. The controversy has revealed the confrontation between the needs of historical preservation and the requirements of modern expansion in the heart of a very sacred place such as Makkah.

This incident not only triggered a disastrous response within the country, but it also extended beyond national borders, reaching Turkey. Turkey vehemently refuted the claim that Saudi Arabia was demolishing the fortress due to its Ottoman historical significance⁵³⁹. Given that the Ottomans are considered the predecessors of the Turks, and as a result, many Turkish individuals felt personally affronted by Saudi Arabia's choice⁵⁴⁰. Turkish Parliament Speaker in that time Murat Sokmenoglu appealed to religious and nationalist figures, describing Saudi Arabia's actions as “un-Islamic.” Sokmenoglu explained on the BBC Middle East:

⁵³⁷ The term the term "Haram Makki" means the Masjid al-Haram (the Sacred Mosque) in Makkah

⁵³⁸ Wangkeo K (2003) Monumental Challenges: The Lawfulness of Destroying Cultural Heritage During Peacetime. *Yale Journal of International Law* 28(1):185

⁵³⁹ Palmer, J. (2002). Destroying the Ottoman castle to build a hotel is 'cultural massacre'. *Independent Middle East News*.

⁵⁴⁰ Low, M. C. (2015). *The Mechanics of Mecca: The Technopolitics of the Late Ottoman Hijaz and the Colonial Hajj*. Ph.D., Columbia University.

*“A Muslim country’s destruction of another country’s historical heritage on sacred land is wrong behavior that violates the moral values of Islam, religious brotherhood and common sense”*⁵⁴¹.

The Turkish Minister of Culture in that time *Istemihan Talay* upped the nationalist ante, saying:

*“This is not just a display of disrespect for history but rather a reflection of a complex, an approach aimed at erasing the Turkish period from the history of Saudi Arabia”*⁵⁴².

He also regarded the castle as part of the "common heritage of mankind" principle, which means that these heritage sites are a shared asset and the countries hosting them have the responsibility of protecting them for the collective benefit of all⁵⁴³. The Turkish authorities have accused the Saudi Government of perpetrating a "cultural genocide," drawing parallels to the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan, calling for immediate involvement from UNESCO to halt this action⁵⁴⁴. Nevertheless, as the Castle was not included in the World Heritage list, UNESCO lacked the jurisdiction to intervene because it was an internal national matter⁵⁴⁵. Turkey escalated the pace of protest to the point that it prevented Turkish citizens from performing Umrah and Hajj rituals that year⁵⁴⁶.

Following months of silence, Saudi Arabia has finally addressed Turkey’s complaints. The response was given by Saleh al-Shaikh, the Saudi Islamic affairs Minister at that time, who based his answer on two key factors: The first factor is the statement that Saudi Arabia possesses absolute control over all aspects within its national area. Neither Turkey nor any other party has any internal involvement with it⁵⁴⁷. The second factor is to religion, as the decision to destroy the Castle was made to serve Islam and accommodate the Muslim pilgrims who visit every year for Hajj⁵⁴⁸. He stated that:

*Islam does not venerate structures and that the construction of this citadel served the aim of safeguarding Makkah from the prevailing war. Due to the current state of safety and security in Makkah, we have decided to discontinue its position*⁵⁴⁹.

⁵⁴¹ BBC NEWS. (2002). Saudis hit back over Mecca castle. can be consulted also in English via this link: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1748711.stm

⁵⁴² The Associated Press. (2002). Turkey berates Saudi Arabia for destroying Ottoman castle. the seattle times.

⁵⁴³ Ibid

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid

⁵⁴⁵ Bruno S. Frey & Steiner, L. (2011). World Heritage List: does it make sense? International Journal of Cultural Policy, 17:5, 555-573.

⁵⁴⁶ The Associated Press. (2002). Turkey berates Saudi Arabia for destroying Ottoman castle. the seattle times

⁵⁴⁷ Wheelan, S. (2002). Saudi government demolishes historic Ottoman castle. International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid

Al-Shaikh attempted also to justify the destruction by describing it as preservation plan, arguing that the reconstruction of the fort will be incorporated into the redevelopment of the site somewhere else.

The head of Patrimoine Sans Frontières⁵⁵⁰, Said Zulifcar strongly criticized the demolition of the Castle, especially, the justification given by the Saudis. He quoted:

*“Well, what’s the point of demolishing it if they are going to rebuild it? And if you rebuild something which was already historical, you don’t rebuild the authentic structure.”*⁵⁵¹

The demolition was also criticized by the Ottoman art historian Bertram Carel who interpreted it as a tentative from the Wahhabi⁵⁵² sect to eradicating cultural and religious diversity in Saudi Arabia. quoting:

*"The demolition is a very sectarian move, but it is not against the Ottomans or today's Turks. I see it as very ideological and as not the culmination -- because I think there is more to come -- but part of a long process of erasure of the past. And in that way, it relates to what has happened recently with the Taliban destroying the ancient Buddha monuments in Afghanistan. It is a way for the Wahhabi sect to show that there is no form of Islam -- on the ground, in the past, or in people's memories -- other than their own. It's very upsetting, I would think, to all the rest of the Muslim world."*⁵⁵³

According to Riedlmayer Andras, an expert on Islamic architecture at Harvard University, destroying an authentic castle and replacing it with a modern tower reflects what he calls a *"mentality that history is more real if you can recreate it."*⁵⁵⁴

Yet, even if Saudi Arabia’s law of antiquities⁵⁵⁵ recognizes the value of heritage and has legislation to protect it, the Ajyad Castle demolition indicated a tension between urban development and heritage preservation. Although Articles (3, 4, 9:2) of this law specifically empower the government to protect the country’s historical heritage sites, there was a greater urgency (conveniently labeled a need for development⁵⁵⁶) for the Abraj Al Bait Towers, a hotel

⁵⁵⁰ a non-governmental organization specialized in the protection of historical monument.

⁵⁵¹ Naegele, J. (2002). Middle East: Saudi Arabia Rejects Criticism Over Citadel Demolition. Archive RadioFreeEurope, Radio Liberty.

⁵⁵² Wahhabism is a reformist Islamic religious movement within Sunni Islam, based on the teachings of 18th century Hanbali cleric Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.

⁵⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵⁵ Which was created in 1972 after the establishment of The Supreme Council for Antiquities.

⁵⁵⁶ His Royal Highness Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. (2023). From extinction to prosperity: The cultural dimension of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Published by Heritage Foundation (in Arabic)

complex built in place of the former Ajyad Fortress, which was a prime example of Ottoman-era Islamic military architecture, and a key element in Makkah's urban and historical landscape. While many experts question whether the Law of Antiquities is applied or not, the weakening judicial review makes it a debatable point. Questions arise from the ratcheting up of development projects in Makkah designed to accommodate better the multi-million pilgrim traffic that has grown since the 1990s, and projects designed to generate construction and long-term economic profits⁵⁵⁷.

2. The Nabateans Old City of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ

"Surely the people of al-Hijr also rejected the Messengers, calling them liars. We also gave them Our Signs, yet they turned away from them. They used to hew out houses from the mountains⁴⁶ and lived in security. Then the Blast (Shirk) caught them in the morning and whatever they had been earning proved of no avail." (surah al-hijr, Qu'an, verse 80-44)

"Mada'in Salih, an ancient city built by the Nabateans, is a place of extraordinary cultural heritage. A place that necessitated to be safeguarded for future generations" (Royal Commission for Al-Ula, 2018)

14 centuries separate these two messages in Hegra Archaeological Site (al-Hijr / Madā' in Ṣāliḥ), the second major city of the ancient Nabataean Kingdom after Petra in Jordan located in northwestern Saudi Arabia⁵⁵⁸. So many centuries mingled with rejection, discovery, recognition and celebration of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ's remains among the most important event in the cultural heritage site in the whole gulf region⁵⁵⁹.

Madā' in Ṣāliḥ, known also as Al-Hijr, is Saudi Arabia's first World Heritage site. It has historical and religious significance in Islam, particularly in the story of Prophet Saleh and the Thamud tribe.

⁵⁵⁷ Alfelali, M. & Garcia-Fuentes, J. (2020). GROWTH OF THE HOLY MOSQUE IN MECCA AND THE FIRST LEGISLATION OF HERITAGE CONSERVATION IN SAUDI ARABIA (1955–2010). WIT PRESS.

⁵⁵⁸ Al-Talhi, D. (2000). Mada'in Salih, a Nabataean town in northwest Arabia: analysis and interpretation of the excavation 1986-1990.

⁵⁵⁹ Cassola-Cochin, V. (2020). The development of Nabateans Madā' in Ṣāliḥ (Saudi Arabia) in an attractive sightseeing: from traditional rejection to Official Recognition. Journal for history and Archeology. Volume14, No4.

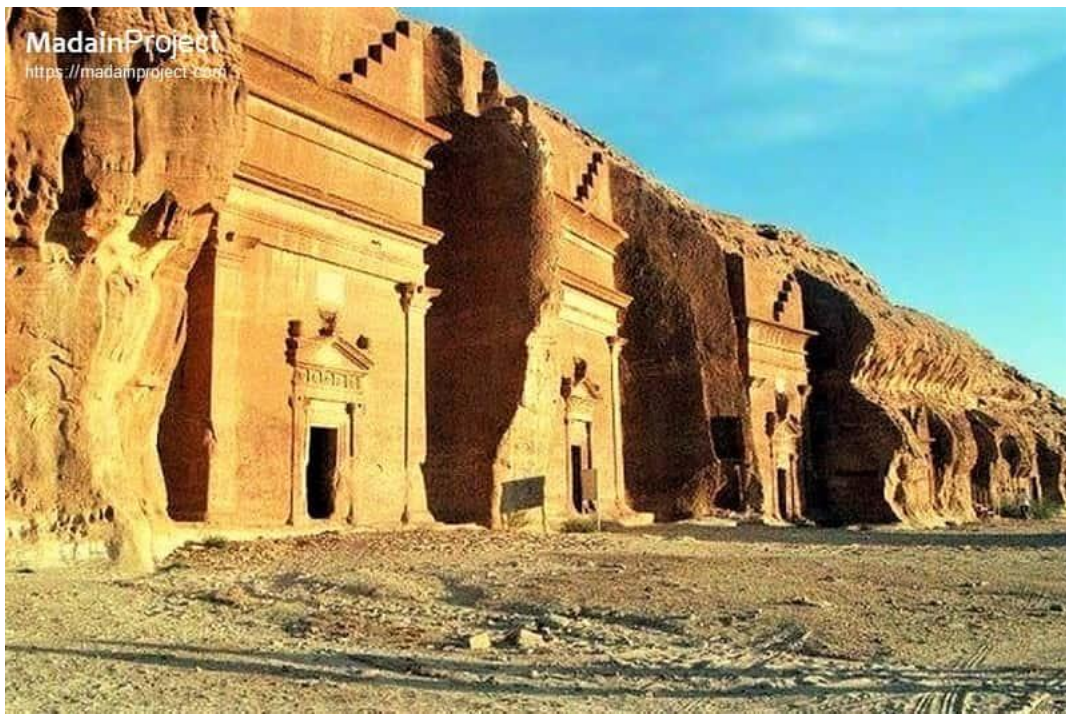


Photo 4: Madā' in Ṣālih, extracted from: https://madainproject.com/madain_saleh

The historical and cultural significance of Hegra Archaeological Site (al-Hijr / Madā' in Ṣālih) and its Outstanding Universal Values are best reflected in the site being the largest Nabataean site south of Petra. It served as a capital city in the Kingdom of the Nabataeans, which is one of the major civilizations of Middle East and the southern Levant after the Bronze Age⁵⁶⁰. It is located on the road that once linked southern Jordan with Aqaba and the southwest part of the Arabian Peninsula. Approximately 500km southeast of Petra, and 400km northwest of Medina, Madā' in Ṣālih's rock-cut monumental tombs, similar to those in Petra (Jordan), vividly demonstrate the extent of Nabataea's territory⁵⁶¹.

The manifestation of its Outstanding Universal Value is evident in the sites necropolises, which include 111 monumental tombs of which 94 are decorated with carved facades and inscriptions, dating from 1 BC/AD to AD 75, which reflect the property rights and burial customs of the time⁵⁶². Additionally, there are more than 2,000 non-monumental burial places, confirming the sites significance as a major agglomerated burial site⁵⁶³. In a largely flat landscape, the highest sandstone outcrop is Jabal Ithlib, which houses Madā' in Ṣālih's religious area, comprising the Dîwân room (a triclinium for solennis communal meals in ancient times), and a complex of buildings with a series of small Nabataean sanctuaries with sacred inscriptions dedicated to deities that the Nabataeans worshipped⁵⁶⁴. The residential area is found in the middle of the plain,

⁵⁶⁰ Courbon P., (2008). Les puits nabatéens de Madā' in Ṣālih (Arabie Saoudite). *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, 19: 48-70.

⁵⁶¹ Bouchaud C (2015) Agrarian legacies and innovations in the Nabataean territory. *Archéosci, Rev D'archéométrie* 39:103-124

⁵⁶² Charloux, G. (2011). Area 1. In L. Nehmé (ed.). Report on the Fourth Excavation Season (2011) of the Madā' in Ṣālih Archaeological Project, 25-45.

⁵⁶³ Ibid

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid

south of the religious area, with an enclosure that delineates the remains of houses built primarily of mudbrick⁵⁶⁵. These structures are less preserved than the monumental rock-carved monuments, but with an enclosing ruinous city wall, it is indicative of a once dense city. The existence of an ancient oasis ensured its functioning agriculture, likely with the support of 130 wells; in addition to providing subsistence for the population, they contributed to the agricultural development of the region⁵⁶⁶.

A. *Madā' in Ṣāliḥ in Islam*

In Arabic language the plural of Madinah (city) is Madā' in⁵⁶⁷. Madā' in Ṣāliḥ is named after the Prophet Ṣāliḥ, who was the 5th Prophet in the Islamic religion. Islamic tradition holds that Muhammad was the final messenger sent to mankind by God. However, for more than 1,000 years prior to the emergence of Islam, God had sent a series of prophets and teachers to spread the message of the one true religion. Among these individuals was Prophet Saleh whom God sent to the people of Thamud⁵⁶⁸. The story of Thamud is referenced in several Quranic verses⁵⁶⁹; the longest and clearest version of Thamud's story is:

And to the people of Thamūd, we sent their brother Ṣāliḥ. He said, "O my people! Worship Allah—you have no other god except Him. A clear proof has come to you from your Lord: this is Allah's she-camel as a sign to you. So leave her to graze 'freely' on Allah's land and do not harm her, or else you will be overcome by a painful punishment. Remember when He made you successors after 'Ād and established you in the land—and you built palaces on its plains and carved homes into mountains. So remember Allah's favours, and do not go about spreading corruption in the land." The arrogant chiefs of his people asked the lowly who believed among them, "Are you certain that Ṣāliḥ has been sent by Allah?" They replied, "We certainly believe in what he has been sent with." The arrogant said, "We surely reject what you believe in." Then they killed the she-camel—defying their Lord's command—and challenged 'Ṣāliḥ', "Bring us what you threaten us with, if you are 'truly' one of the messengers." Then an 'overwhelming' earthquake struck them, and they fell lifeless in their homes. So he turned away from them, saying, "O my people! Surely I conveyed to you my Lord's

⁵⁶⁵ Beni, T., Nava, L., Gigli, G., Frodella, W., Catani, F., Casagli, N., Gallego, J. I., Margottini, C., & Spizzichino, D. (2023). Classification of rock slope cavernous weathering on UAV photogrammetric point clouds: The example of Hegra (UNESCO World Heritage Site, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). *Engineering Geology*.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid

⁵⁶⁷ Gabriel Cruz, G. (2023). Origin Of The Name Medina (Complete History) - Slang & Language Enthusiast.

⁵⁶⁸ Dr. Tarik Al-Suwaidan. (2022). the story of the prophet Saleh and the miracle of the camel. consulted in Arabic via this link: https://suwaidan.com/the-story-of-the-prophet-saleh/?fbclid=IwAR27FtI0It_fFqpOCHbnVI4EzPHDsPRauSX8tuj5shBKGWewWqcojWNUmXc

⁵⁶⁹ Surah Al-A'raf (7:73-79), Surat Hud (11:61-68), Surat Ash-Shu'ara (26:141-159), Surat An-Naml (27:45-53), Surah Al-Fajr (89:6-14).

message and gave you 'sincere' advice, but you do not like 'sincere' advisors.” (surah Al-A'raf, verses 73-79)

The prophet Saleh advised his people to abandon their polycratic polytheistic practices and to worship only Allah, the one and true God⁵⁷⁰. However, the people of Thamud were intractable, and pressed the prophet Saleh to provide them with a sign of his prophethood. So, Allah (God) sent a she-camel to emerge from a massive rock as a sign of Saleh's truthful mission⁵⁷¹. Although the prophetic camel arrived, there were those among the Thamud people who chose not to believe in it, ending up by having a terrible punishment of an earthquake and divine wrath.⁵⁷²

On the other side, in the Sunnah, when the Prophet Muhammad passed by the place, he said:

“Do not enter the dwellings of those who have wronged themselves, lest what befallen them befall you, unless you are weeping. Then he masked his head and hurried off. He walked until he passed the valley.”⁵⁷³

The Prophet Muhammad descended with his people in the year Tabuk Al-Hijr near the houses of Thamud. The people drew water from the wells from which Thamud drank to prepare meals, The prophet ordered them to throw everything away. Then he traveled with them until he came down to the well from which the she-camel was drinking, and he forbade them from entering upon the people who had been tortured. Saying, “I fear that the same thing as what befell them will happen to you, so do not enter upon them.”⁵⁷⁴

Following what has been said in the Quran and by the prophet Muhammad, the Islamic position is that Madā' in Ṣālīḥ is a place of punishment for those who never believed in the message of God, and therefore it is a station of admonition and objection where all the Muslims should take a lesson from it.

⁵⁷⁰ Tafsir ibn Kathir - Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim تفسير القرآن العظيم (2009). DAR SADER. Surah Al-A'raf.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid

⁵⁷² Ibid

⁵⁷³ Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. Narrator: Abdullah bin Omar | Updated: Al-Bukhari | Source: Sahih Al-Bukhari, page or number: 433 | Summary of the hadith's ruling: [Sahih]

⁵⁷⁴ Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. Narrator: Anas bin Malik | Updated: Ibn Katheer | Source: The Beginning and the End, Page or Number: 5/10 |

B. The impact of UNESCO recognition

Before starting any discussion regarding the UNESCO recognition of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ's, it is important to note that it is the outcome of a series of events that began in the 1960s.

In 1963, The Department of Antiquities and Museums was established which launched Saudi Arabia's mission to protect and promote its past by overseeing the kingdom's archaeological heritage and museum development to educate the Saudi public. Following this, in 1966, the first survey of the site of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ was conducted by Saudi archaeologists. Then, in 1972, the site was protected when it became an archaeological park surrounded by a precisely enclosed and guarded area.

Meanwhile, in 1972, given the great influence of the Sahoua movement, a big debate in the Saudi public sphere was launched about the acceptability of residing in Al-Hijr – specifically in front of and near the ancient monuments – with this discussion eventually reaching the upper echelons of the ruling class under the reign of the late King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud⁵⁷⁵. The Council of Senior Scholars issued a fatwa based on the religious texts that we mentioned, prohibiting neighborhoods and housing where there are traces of mountains and plains, Thamudic wells, and the valley stream and its bed⁵⁷⁶. However, even with these strong protections, Madā' in Ṣāliḥ became recognized and known to scholars and the public alike, appearing in the first publication by the Department of Antiquities and Museums in 1975. It was titled *Introduction to Saudi Arabia's Antiquities* and is geared towards a non-specialist audience⁵⁷⁷. In 1976, it appeared in the first volume of 'The Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology', emphasizing its place as a non-Islamic site within the Kingdom's Comprehensive Archaeological Survey Program.⁵⁷⁸

The year 2001 marked a shift in archaeological collaboration, a major program of Franco-Saudi cooperative archaeological research began. This archeological mission, led by the French archaeologist Laïla Nehmé⁵⁷⁹, involved a systematic survey rather than excavation, employing methods of drawing, photography, archaeological documentation of the whole site, scaling of monuments, geophysical detection, and the study of inscriptions, architectural decor, cuttings, ceramics, coins, and other surface finds⁵⁸⁰. This work was the first major survey of the site since

⁵⁷⁵ Anazi, Zabin bin Muazi bin Saleh. (1996). *القرى وادي في القرى تاريخ و معجم* Dictionary and history of villages in Wadi Al-Qura.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷⁷ Cassola-Cochin, V. (2020). The development of Nabateans Madā' in Ṣāliḥ (Saudi Arabia) in an attractive sightseeing: from traditional rejection to Official Recognition. *Journal for history and Archeology*. Volume14, No4.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid

⁵⁷⁹ Léla Nehmé is a French archaeologist and researcher specializing in the archaeology and epigraphy of the Near East, particularly in the Nabataean, Aramaic, and Arabic inscriptions and languages. she was the first to inaugurate the research in Madā' in Ṣāliḥ after the French-Saudi agreement in 2001.

⁵⁸⁰ Nehmé, L., Al-Talhi, D. & Villeneuve, F. (2011) . Report on the Fourth ExcavationSeason (2011) of the Madā' in Ṣāliḥ Archaeological Project. Online: <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00671451>

the beginning of the 20th century⁵⁸¹. Its main achievements were the mapping and description of all remains, systematic recording of all rock-cut monuments and cultic monuments, geophysical detection, and study of inscriptions, architectural decor, cuttings, ceramics, and coins on the surface. Significantly, this mission at Madā' in Ṣāliḥ between 2001 and 2006 not only enhanced the knowledge of Nabatean architecture and society, but it also incorporated innovative technologies such as 3D scanning, laser scanning, and geophysical surveys to reveal previously unknown details about Nabatean construction techniques, social organization, and economic regimes⁵⁸².

In 2007, the Supreme Commission for Tourism⁵⁸³ in collaboration with the Director General of UNESCO organized an exhibition on stone antiquities at UNESCO headquarters in Paris, within the framework of registering the Madā' in Ṣāliḥ site on the World Heritage List. At this event, the Secretary-General of the Commission also followed up on the nomination file with the Director-General of UNESCO and some ambassadors of member states of the World Heritage Committee.

The nomination of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage list was justified by meeting two essential criteria that align with the organization's requirements for sites considered for World Heritage List classification. In the nomination document⁵⁸⁴, the criteria for the nomination of the Archaeological Site of Hegra (al-hijr / Madā'in Ṣāliḥ) came from the exceptional cultural and historical value of the site in terms of Nabataean civilization⁵⁸⁵. It was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site according to the following criteria:

Criterion (ii): Be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement that illustrates a significant interchange of human values: This category relates to the cultural exchange between the Nabataean kingdom and the surrounding regions of the site. Indeed, the Nabataeans were a culture of great architectural and hydraulic skills, which they conveyed to the surrounding areas in the distribution style of the monumental tombs of the site, as well as in their hydraulic ingenuity using the site's natural water mount to create a remarkable water management system⁵⁸⁶.

Criterion (iii): Be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape that exhibits significant interchange of human values or represents a significant standard-setting work of architecture or design or

⁵⁸¹ Ibid

⁵⁸² Bouchaud C (2015) Agrarian legacies and innovations in the Nabataean territory. *Archéosci, Rev D'archéométrie* 39:103–124

⁵⁸³ it is The Ministry of Tourism in Arabic: السياحة وزارة which changed its name three times: before 2020 it was the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH), Until 2015 as the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities (SCTA).

⁵⁸⁴ UNESCO. (2008). Hegra Archaeological Site (al-Hijr / Madā' in Ṣāliḥ). Dossier: 1293

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid

demonstrates a unique or at least exceptional interchange between traditional and innovative elements: The Hegra Archaeological Site is an outstanding example of the civilization of the Nabataeans. Its monumental tombs with their finely carved facades represent some of the most significant Nabataean accomplishments. Their exceptional state of preservation provides a unique testimony to this ancient civilization⁵⁸⁷.

The notable aspect of the absence of the story of Prophet Saleh in the UNESCO World Heritage nomination text for Madā' in Šālīḥ warrants critical examination. Even if the heritage site was named after him, as well as the great influence of his period on this place, there is no mention of that in the nomination text. This nomination drew critical comments by Leila Nehmé⁵⁸⁸ who highlighted that in privileging the Nabatean narrative over others, including Prophet Saleh's, the UNESCO application is inadvertently reproducing the Nabataea's aura generated by their architectural achievements and sophisticated civilization, which have shaped the legacy of the site, and that the Nabatean period is undoubtedly considered the pinnacle of the historical evolution of this heritage site and the main subject of historical and archaeological enquiry⁵⁸⁹.

After the nomination, the Royal Commission for Tourism and Antiquities decided to close Madā' in Šālīḥ to rebuild it with amenities for tourists⁵⁹⁰. As a result, Muslim public figures (sheikhs) launched a full-throttle attack on the preservation work. They have come to denounce Saudi Arabia's latest move toward a more progressive cultural agenda and allege that it idolizes the core of the Saudi people and deprives them of the influence of Islam. Following the Qur'an, several religious figures have stressed their reservations about Madā' in Šālīḥ which presents a rare case in which Saudi Arabia introduces important changes; trying to overpass the authority of the Text (Qur'an) and the Sunnah (the teaching of the prophet Muhammad).

During an interview on the Iqraa channel, which is known for promoting extremist Salafist Islamic ideology in the Arab world, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Arifi, a prominent religious figure and member of the Committee for the Prevention of Vice, expressed his disapproval of the current trend of visiting Madā' in Šālīḥ. For him, it is strictly prohibited, as these locations are solely intended for religious instruction.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸⁸ Léla Nehmé is a French archaeologist and researcher specializing in the archaeology and epigraphy of the Near East, particularly in the Nabataean, Aramaic, and Arabic inscriptions and languages. she was the first to inaugurate the research in Madā' in Šālīḥ after the French-Saudi agreement in 2001.

⁵⁸⁹ Nehmé, L., Al-Talhi, D. & Villeneuve, F. (2011). Report on the Fourth Excavation Season (2011) of the Madā' in Šālīḥ Archaeological Project. Online: <http://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00671451>

⁵⁹⁰ Cassola-Cochin, V. (2020). The development of Nabateans Madā' in Šālīḥ (Saudi Arabia) in an attractive sightseeing: from traditional rejection to Official Recognition. Journal for history and Archeology. Volume14, No4.

*“As Muslims, we should not be captivated by these places and visit them for leisure, photography, or relaxation. Instead, we should approach them with reverence, draw lessons from them, and be mindful of the potential consequences that befell those who inhabited these places before us”.*⁵⁹¹

Assim Alhakeem⁵⁹² stated that it is not allowed for Muslims to stay or reside in Madā' in Ṣāliḥ due to the teachings of our prophet:

*As Muslims, we are obligated to follow the route set by our prophet, who explicitly prohibited such actions. Therefore, we will not engage in this activity.*⁵⁹³

Othman al-Khamis⁵⁹⁴ asserts that imposing punitive measures on tourists goes against the divine instructions outlined in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad:

*These places were created by God to teach people the need to seek the truth from God and be firm in it while avoiding the lie they were previously following. Consequently, they were punished for their actions. For him, engaging in tourism or trekking in this area, or even visiting establishments such as restaurants, is strictly prohibited for any Muslim.*⁵⁹⁵

In 2012, Sultan bin Salman, the leader of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, employed all national television channels and publications to formally announce the reopening of Madā' in Ṣāliḥ to the Saudi population. Prince Sultan's remarks follow a message he received from Abdullah bin Muni, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars⁵⁹⁶ and Advisor at the Royal Court. Bin Muni visited Madā' in Ṣāliḥ and Al-Ula with the Permanent Committee for Fatwa to assess its potential as a means of support for the impoverished. Bin Muni expressed his readiness to go there to help to promote it.

⁵⁹¹ In this video, in Arabic, BBC made a comparison between what he said about Madā' in Ṣāliḥ before the arrival of Crown Prince Bin Salman how he radically changed his mind about it when the regime of Saudi Arabia changed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikJFgqU5irk>

⁵⁹² Assim bin Luqman al-Hakeem is a prominent Islamic preacher from Saudi Arabia who is preaching in English, and he is renowned for his strict interpretation of Islamic texts.

⁵⁹³ The full Fatwa is available in English via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAb71ikqB-0&ab_channel=assimalhakeem

⁵⁹⁴ is a jurist, academic and also a Sunni Muslim religious scholar, preacher from Kuwait.

⁵⁹⁵ Extracted from this video that gather a lot of Muslim Scholars opinion about Madā' in Ṣāliḥ: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYfElWoQJck>

⁵⁹⁶ The Saudi Council of Senior Scholars is a governmental Islamic religious body in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that was established in 1971. It includes a limited committee of religious figures in the country, all of whom are diligent jurists from various schools of jurisprudence. Its head is the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, and it is authorized to issue fatwas and express its opinions on several matters.

In 2016, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman officially launched Vision 2030 as a strategy framework to reduce Saudi Arabia's oil dependency, diversify its economy and enhance its quality of life⁵⁹⁷. The vision focuses on public service, including healthcare, education, infrastructure, recreation, and tourism. Madā'in Šālīh is one of the key points of focus for cultural reforms in Vision 2030, and in the Cultural Vision 2019, a framework document that directs Saudi Arabia's policy of cultural diplomacy and soft power, which describes cultural diplomacy as a top instrument for building on Saudi Arabia's reputation abroad and enhancing strategic communication.⁵⁹⁸

During a long interview with CNN, Kin bin Salman was questioned about his choices to deviate from Islamic teachings and confront Islamic authorities. In response, He Quoted:

*According to Islamic law, the ruler is the highest authority in the Islamic institution. Hence, the ultimate authority to decide on fatwas does not rest with the mufti (sheikh), but rather lies with the king, but the mufti and the Fatwa Authority offer counsel to the king. Most of the earlier fatwas were issued by Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab, who, like other preachers, is a regular individual and not a messenger. Instead, he had the role of preacher, alongside numerous politicians and military personnel in the initial Saudi state. During that period, a prevailing issue in the Arabian Peninsula was the limited literacy among the population, which was primarily confined to the pupils under his tutelage. History was predominantly recorded from their viewpoint, which was subsequently used by numerous fanatics.*⁵⁹⁹

in 2019, Dr. Aed Al-Qarni, one of the most extremist Saudi preachers associated with the Sahwa movement issued an apology to Saudi society for any errors or excessive rigidity coming from the Sahwa movement⁶⁰⁰. He said:

Boldly and courageously, I express on behalf of the Sahwa movement a sincere apology to all the Saudis for the transgressions committed against the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah. These actions have not only broken the principles of tolerance within Islam but also deviated from the balanced and moderate nature of the religion, which was revealed as a source of kindness for all humanity. We

⁵⁹⁷ Vision 2030, G. (2016). Government of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Government. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹⁹ Crown prince answered 72 common question about the new Saudi Arabia regime, consulted in Arabic via this link : <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2022/03/06/mbs-full-transcript-interview-the-atlantic>

⁶⁰⁰ Between 2015-2019 a wave of arrests took place arresting prominent religious scholars and thinkers to prevent and avoid any potential opposition to the ruling authority. Only those who regret and/or promised to support the new vision of the regime made it.

imposed stringent restrictions on individuals, thereby prohibiting them from engaging in any form of joyful expression. Later, when we grew up and reached a more mature emotional and intellectual age, we realized that there was a problem and the only way out of it was when we moved closer to a moderate version of Islam that is open to the world as per his [Prince Mohammed bin Salman's] direction.⁶⁰¹



Photo 5: A picture that shows a lot of Muslim Scholars who were strict about the Madā' in Ṣālīḥ enjoying a guided tour and promoting it. Taken from: <https://slaati.com/2013/02/10/p8139.html>

Following this apology, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Arifi, a prominent critic of the idea of opening Madā' in Ṣālīḥ, made a peculiar statement during an interview on the Iqra channel. In contrast, he distinctly articulated his viewpoint this time, specifically endorsing a visit to Madā' in Ṣālīḥ and expressing his willingness to advocate for it. Furthermore, he asserted his identity as a sheikh, emphasizing that being a sheikh does not exempt one from fallibility, as they, like any other individual, are prone to making errors and exhibiting correctness. Consequently, he committed an error in the past and expressed remorse for his wrongdoing. He now urges individuals to unite in support of King Muhammad bin Salman's efforts to rejuvenate the nation and usher in a new era of progress.

⁶⁰¹ The whole interview can be watched via : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbURkz6nQHE&ab_channel=%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AE%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A9

3. Discussion

The interconnection between religion, cultural heritage, and nation-building in Saudi Arabia is an intricate and diverse phenomenon that highlights the dynamic methods in which religious narratives are utilized or disregarded to accomplish greater national goals. The demolition of Ajyad Castle to facilitate the refurbishment and enlargement of Makkah was deemed necessary by the Saudi authorities, introducing us to the concept of the “Unwanted Heritage” which refers to heritage that poses challenges and how states address such heritage in the context of nation building⁶⁰². Or alternatively, to the "Authorized Heritage Discourse" (AHD) which refers to the examination of how specific narratives gain prominence in the depiction of legacy, sometimes disregarding or dismissing less desirable or unwelcome aspects of history⁶⁰³. They justified this action by highlighting that the castle held no religious significance, and that the expansion was essential for the improved provision of services to the Muslim community. This incident serves as a significant illustration of how religious justifications are employed to advance state-led development initiatives⁶⁰⁴. Conversely, the heritagization of Madā'in Šālīḥ, notwithstanding its characterization as a site accursed and proscribed within the Islamic tradition, illustrates how authoritative entities leverage heritage sites to disseminate their ideological narratives. Indeed, this process serves dual purposes: firstly, it functions to bolster tourism, acting as a catalyst for economic development and cultural exchange. Secondly, it asserts the ruling dynasty's capacity to dictate norms, positioning it as a paramount normative authority, even within the context of Islamic discourse.

These instances illustrate a nuanced dynamic in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the boundaries of religious limitations in the nation-building process are not static but contingent on the interpretative authority of those in power⁶⁰⁵. The ruling family, wielding significant sway over religious and political narratives, appears to selectively mobilize Islamic principles to bolster or legitimize their objectives. This selective invocation of religious tenets highlights a context-dependent approach to governance, wherein religious dictates are emphasized to endorse certain policies but may be downplayed or overlooked when they conflict with the broader objectives of development and nation-building. This strategy underscores the complex interaction between religion and statecraft, where religious directives are subject to the interpretations and priorities set by the governing authorities, who also argue following the Islamic register.

⁶⁰² Sharon, M. (2009). *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*. Routledge.

⁶⁰³ Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*, London: Routledge.

⁶⁰⁴ King, K. (2020). Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 10:2, 328-330.

⁶⁰⁵ Boville, B. B. (2020). *Saudi Official Religion: Bringing New Meaning to Old Ideas*. The University of Texas at Austin ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

The Saudi regime's strategic enhancement of the cultural and historical significance of sites like Madā' in Ṣālīḥ, by promoting them as key components of national heritage, serves as a compelling example of how religious connotations can be nuanced or even sidelined in the interest of nation-building. This effort not only aids in the preservation and global recognition of these sites but also contributes to crafting a more layered national narrative for Saudi Arabia. By doing so, the state delineates a chosen historical narrative that extends beyond its Islamic foundations, echoing the concept of 'inventing tradition' posited by Eric Hobsbawm. This process involves the construction of a collective national memory that may not always align with historical accuracies but serves the purpose of nation-building, mirroring strategies employed by 19th-century European states as they forged national identities through similar “inventions of tradition.”

The Saudi approach to intertwining religion with cultural heritage and nation-building articulates a broader strategy reminiscent of Hobsbawm's analysis of European nation-building efforts. By selectively leveraging religious narratives or bypassing them when convenient, the state navigates the complex terrain between tradition and modernity. This maneuvering underscores a nuanced governance model where religion, while central, is adaptably invoked to align with the state's nation-building objectives. Such a model illuminates the adaptive nature of nation-building processes in the 21st century, wherein cultural heritage is not just a backdrop but an active element in crafting a national identity that is deeply anchored in a selectively remembered past while ambitiously reaching towards future goals. This sophisticated blend of leveraging and sometimes sidelining religious elements in favor of national identity formation suggests that, within the Saudi context, Islam's universalist ideals can be reconciled with the concept of the nation, albeit through a selective remembrance and promotion of heritage that aligns with state-driven narratives of nationhood.

4. Al-Zubarah Archeological site in Qatar

A. Introduction

Al-Zubarah archeological Site is the remains a historic port-town covered in white sand in northwestern Qatar, providing unique insights into life in a town supported by sea trade, pearling and date Agriculture, highlighting also the socioeconomic culture of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Gulf prior to oil and gas.



Photo 6: Al-Zubarah Archeological site seen from the sky
extracted from: <https://qm.org.qa/en/visit/heritage-sites/al-zubarah/>

The city of Al-Zubarah was founded in the mid-18th century by Kuwaiti merchants with the purpose of becoming a prominent hub for commerce and pearling, attracting individuals from far regions such as the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India, and the Horn of Africa⁶⁰⁶. During its peak period of prosperity from 1765 to 1810, Al-Zubarah thrived along with other commercial towns in the Arabian Gulf, such as Basra in Iraq⁶⁰⁷. Over time, these cities vanished as new cities took their place while Al-Zubarah and its history remained intact, buried under the sand⁶⁰⁸. The city's position, 105 kilometers northwest of Doha, in a maritime corridor funnel, made it strategically vital, since the Arabian Gulf was a major marine area that connects the Gulf's rich and diversified culture with the numerous linked markets of the Indian Ocean globe⁶⁰⁹.

Regarding the terminology of the city as Al-Zubarah, there are two hypotheses. The primary reason for the town's name is coming from the high height of its elevated landscape which means

⁶⁰⁶ Walmsley, A., Barnes, H., & Macumber, P. (2010). Al-Zubarah and its hinterland, north Qatar: Excavations and survey, Spring 2009. *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 40: 55–68.

⁶⁰⁷ Yeomans, L. (2016). Preliminary report on fish remains from the 18th- and 19th-century pearl fishing and trading settlement of Al Zubārah, Qatar. *Environmental Archaeology*, 21, 381 - 388.

⁶⁰⁸ Andrew, P. (2020). 'Arabia and the Gulf', in Bethany J. Walker, Timothy Insoll, and Corisande Fenwick (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Archaeology* (online edn, Oxford Academic,).

⁶⁰⁹ Campbell, K. (2022). Presenting Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site in Al-Zubarah : Qatar's World Heritage City (eds. Al-Thani, H, Abdulla, N, Muhsen, S, Walmsley, A, Hassan al-Sulaiti, F, Rosendahl, S & Thuesen, I), pp. 195-206. Qatar University Press: Doha

in Arabic Al-Zubara⁶¹⁰. Secondly, the interpretation of the name in an ethnic context, associating it with the Al-Zubayr tribe that relocated to the town, particularly after the damage that occurred in Basra, located in southern Iraq, becoming a refuge for people who were displaced during that period⁶¹¹.

The importance of Al-Zubarah to the Qatari people extends beyond its architectural and historical wonders, representing a critical chapter in the growth of the Arabian Gulf⁶¹². In 2013, Al-Zubarah was officially recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, celebrating Qatar's historical and cultural peak, and a reminder of the dynamic interplay between land, sea, and civilization that have changed the Gulf area for ages⁶¹³. Furthermore, Al-Zubarah is inextricably linked to the beginnings of the reigning Al Thani family, with Sheikh Thani bin Muhammad of Al Maadid from *Al Wahba* from *Bani Tamim*, the patriarch of the *Al Thani* dynasty⁶¹⁴, being regarded as one of its noteworthy sons⁶¹⁵. This relationship elevates the city's status, cementing it in the public psyche as a national symbol of Qatar's Cultural and Social History⁶¹⁶.

This part will provide an analysis of the City of Al-Zubarah, which serves as the inaugural World Heritage site for Qatar and, at the same time, as a national symbol that underpins Qatar's new heritage vision and national identity. Furthermore, we shall elucidate the historical significance of the location, its pertinence to both the local and international communities, and the contentious dispute between Qatar and Bahrain concerning the territorial control of Al-Zubarah, which transcended geographical boundaries and reached the LaHaye Supreme Court. We will conclude by analyzing how Qatar transformed the archaeological site into a nation-building opportunity.

B. The history of Al-Zubarah

Given the scarcity of written documentation on Al-Zubarah history, the exact date of the establishment of the town remains uncertain⁶¹⁷. However, considering the archaeological investigations initiated in 1980 and progressed with the implementation of the Islamic archeology

⁶¹⁰ Madina Az-Zubara Al-Athariya. 2013. Al Rayyan Television.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVE37tNyyvGA&t=6s&pbjreload=101>.

⁶¹¹ Ibid,

⁶¹² Carter, R. (2005). The History and Prehistory of Pearling in the Persian Gulf. *Journal of The Economic and Social History of The Orient*, 48, 139-209.

⁶¹³ Polak-Springer, P. (2022). Bordering Zubara: oil politics, the 1937 Qatari-Bahraini conflict, and the making of a modern Arabian (Persian) Gulf Borderland. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 37(5), 1071–1095.

⁶¹⁴ The Al Thani dynasty has ruled Qatar since the mid-19th century and remains the ruling family to this day.

⁶¹⁵ Althani, M. A. J. (2012). Jassim the leader: Founder of Qatar. Profile Books LTD.

⁶¹⁶ Al Abdulla, A.Y. (2022). British-Ottoman Competition in Qatar: 1868-1916. University of Nebraska at Omaha, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

⁶¹⁷ Walmsley, A. (2011). The legacy of Zubarah. *Qultura*, 1, 58-65.

project in conjunction with Copenhagen University, the history of Al-Zubarah may be categorized into six fundamental periods⁶¹⁸:

Estimated Period	Main events
1860s and earlier	A period of stability preceded the primary development of Al-Zubarah . Historical narratives suggests that the region was densely populated with tents and huts, and that the beach and shore were frequented by seasonal transient beginning.
From the 1860s until 1811	The major phase of the Zubarah settlement was the building of the massive city walls, palace, and courtyard dwelling complexes.
From 1811 to the 1820s	The town of Zubarah was attacked and burned by forces loyal to the Sultan of Muscat in 1811, resulting the demolition of many stone buildings.
Late 1820s to 1860s	Creation of a small community of pearl fishermen. Buildings were constructed in stone and a new inner wall was built for the town.
Late 19th century to mid-20th century	The town was gradually abandoned, and the Al Murir fort remained inhabited until the construction of the Al-Zubarah fort in 1938.
From 1950 until now	The city was the martyrdom of the first excavations and restoration work carried out in the eighties of the last century and at the beginning of the third millennium, in addition to the work begun in 2009. The city was also inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2013.

Tableau 5: the history of Al-Zubarah city.

retrieved from the information booklet available at the Al-Zubarah castle museum.

Before going into further explanation of this chronology, it is necessary to highlight that Qatar from the early modern period to the mid-nineteenth century, before *Al-Thani* acquired control and established an autonomous emirate, has no separate history as an independent political entity⁶¹⁹.

The city's emergence may be attributed to a historical coincidence, encapsulated by the well-known Qatari proverb, "*Kharab Al-Basra, Ammar al-Zubarah*," which signifies that the city

⁶¹⁸ Qatar Museum Authority. (2021). Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site: Information Booklet (english).

⁶¹⁹ Commings, D. (2014). The Gulf States: A Modern History. I.B. Tauris.

prospered during the decline of Al-Basra city in Iraq⁶²⁰. However, the existence of Al-Zubarah has been substantiated by several historical sources, for instance, *Hamad bin Naeem bin Sultan Al-Muraikhi Al-Zubaari Al-Qatari's*⁶²¹ 1638 statement which described it as a port town consisting of 150 houses and a population of 700 diverse and inclusive individuals, comprising of Muslims, Bedouins, Al-Na'im, Al-Awar, Al-Hawajer, and others⁶²².

During the 1760s, the city of Al-Basra in Iraq was a trading hub, well-known for its advantageous geographical position at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers⁶²³. Al-Basra had a crucial role in connecting the Persian Gulf with the interior areas of the Middle East and Asia, serving as an important hub in the massive commerce of dates, pearls, and textiles⁶²⁴.

The city of Basra was devastated due to two main factors⁶²⁵:

1. During that period, the city was confronted with a pandemic that had initially spread throughout Iraq, then reached Al-Zubayr, and ultimately extended to Kuwait, resulting in the demise of a substantial proportion of the surviving citizens to relocate to Al-Zubarah.
2. From 1775 to 1776 AD, the Persians besieged Basra for approximately eighteen months. Therefore, a considerable proportion of scholars and entrepreneurs were forced to relocate from Basra and Kuwait to more isolated areas, specifically Al-Zubarah and Al-Ahsa.

Among the notables the merchants that flocked to the city, was Sheikh Khalifa bin Muhammad Al-Khalifa (1708–1783)⁶²⁶, who relocated to Al-Zubarah in 1766, and Muhammad bin Hussein bin Rizq (before 1756 -1809)⁶²⁷. These two figures are primarily accountable for the dispute between Bahrain and Qatar regarding the city of Al-Zubarah, as the Bahrainis consider Al-

⁶²⁰ Madina Az-Zubara Al-Athariya. 2013. Al Rayyan Television.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVE37tNyyGA&t=6s&pbjreload=101>.

⁶²¹ One of the prominent personalities in the history of Al-Zubarah who was a teacher at Al-athria School, and the grandson of Sheikh Sultan bin Ali Al Muraikhi, the Sheikh of the Town at that time.

⁶²² Frías, S.M. Archaeological site of Al-Zubarah town and its Cultural Landscape. Retrieved from:

https://medomed.org/featured_item/archaeological-site-of-al-zubarah-town-and-its-cultural-landscape-qatar/

⁶²³ Taqoush, M.S. (2013). *Tarikh Al-Jazira Al Arabia Al-hadith wa Al-Mouassir*. (the Modern and Contemporary History of the Arabian Peninsula). Dar AN-NAFAS, Beirut, Lebanon.

⁶²⁴ Ibid,

⁶²⁵ Mirza, H.K. (2010). Basra, its history - its clans - its rulers - its scholars. Arab Encyclopedia House. pp: 18

⁶²⁶ Khalifa bin Muhammad bin Khalifa (1708 - 1783) is the second ruler of Bahrain. Born in Kuwait, his father is Muhammad bin Khalifa Al Khalifa. He ruled the Emirate of Zubarah from 1772-1782, known as a pious man and scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and poetry. He died while performing the Hajj rituals in Mecca on November 26, 1783.

⁶²⁷ Ahmed bin Muhammad bin Hussein bin Rizq (before 1756 -1809) is a famous merchant and philanthropist, known for being benevolent towards the needy. He was also known for rebuilding several villages and regions in several parts of the Arabian Peninsula, starting with the construction of Umm Fort, reaching Al-Zubarah in Bahrain (at that time), and ending with Jaw. He died in Basra city, Iraq.

Khalifa to be the founder of Al-Zubarah, whereas the Qataris consider Muhammad bin Hussein bin Rizq to be its founder⁶²⁸.

Then, Al-Zubarah flourished and became a key trading hub in the region, and a mosaic modest city⁶²⁹. The pearling business was boosted by *Ibn Rizq's* ambitious efforts, which earned him a reputation for owning every pearl in Qatar and Bahrain, solidifying the wealth and trade of these rare stones in Al-Zubarah⁶³⁰. This increased economic activity drew several talented artists, traders, and people looking for pearls, transforming the city into a thriving marketplace where goods, concepts, and various civilizations coexist⁶³¹. Furthermore, Al-Zubarah demonstrated an outstanding degree of moderation and cultural diversity at a time when Saudi Wahabism⁶³² was dominant, resulting in unprecedented freedom of thought and belief⁶³³. Al-Zubarah's reputation for openness drew many people seeking sanctuary and chances, notably those fleeing oppression in neighboring countries⁶³⁴. Due to this opposition, in 1805, Saudi Arabia launched a military invasion on the city⁶³⁵. Subsequently, in 1811, another military invasion was initiated by the Sultan of Muscat against the city of Al-Zubarah, which led to considerable devastation, the complete disappearance of most of its structures, and the obliteration of its aesthetic allure and magnificence⁶³⁶. This occurrence marked the official termination of the city's operations⁶³⁷.

Moreover, the city was subjected to several raids over different periods of time. For example, during British colonial expansion, the city was blasted by a British vessel in 1893, resulting in the destruction of what remained of its structures and the migration of its last residents⁶³⁸. Finally, in 1937 Qatari Army, led by of Al-Thani family, launched an invasion on Al-Zubarah, which, in that time, belonged to Bahrain⁶³⁹. In the same year: Britain, which was asserting its hegemony over the Arabian Gulf, intervened and successfully resolved the issue, resulting in the

⁶²⁸ Al-Qattan, A. (2018). Bahraini Documents Reveal Historic Al-Khalifa Rule of Qatar Peninsula. Asharq Al-Awsat News Paper. (consulted in the national library of Doha)

⁶²⁹ Morton, M.Q. (2020). *Masters of the Pearl: A History of Qatar*. Reaktion books Ltd, London.

⁶³⁰ Bin Sanad, O. (1898). Sabayik Al-Asjad in the news of Ahmad, son of Rizq Al-As'ad, library of Genealogy. Pp: 9. retrieved from: https://archive.org/details/olomnasb_ymail_1315/page/n11/mode/2up

⁶³¹ Al-Binali, R.B. (2013). *A collection of virtues in the art of lineage and tribal history*. Badr Publishing Qatar.

⁶³² the Wahhabi school of thought is a sect that was founded in 1742, based on the teachings of cleric Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. the sect evolved with the help of the Al Saud family, and it was always a point of disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

⁶³³ Fromherz, A.J. (2012) *Qatar: a modern history*, Georgetown University Press. Pp: 47.

⁶³⁴ Ben Saleh Khulaifi, A.R. (2014). *Pearl diving in Qatar - rooting and documenting (1)*. Katara Publishing House.

⁶³⁵ Rahman, H. (2005). *The Emergence of Qatar: the turbulent years 1627 - 1916*. London: Thames & Hudson. Pp: 20.

⁶³⁶ Richter, T., & Nymann, H. (Eds.) (2011). *Qatar Islamic Archaeology and Heritage Project: End of Season Report: Stage 2, Season 1, 2009-2010*. University of Copenhagen and Qatar Museums Authority.

⁶³⁷ Ibid,

⁶³⁸ Awad, A. A. (1985). The Gulf in the Seventeenth Century. *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 12(2), 123 - 134.

⁶³⁹ Agnieszka Magdalena Bystron, A.M. (2021). *Al-Zubarah and Freiha : Formation of Modern Qatar: a Socioeconomic Study Drawn from Recently Discovered Ceramic Evidence*. PhD thesis. University of Copenhagen, Faculty of Humanities. Pp:74

establishment of the current delineated borders between Bahrain and Qatar as it still exists today⁶⁴⁰.

C. Al-Zubarah: a source of conflict between Qatar and Bahrain

In 1716, three distinct families from the *Unayzah* tribes relocated from the city of Najd, now located in Saudi Arabia, because of insufficient rainfall⁶⁴¹. These families were Al-Sabah⁶⁴², Al-Khalifa⁶⁴³, and Al-Jalahma⁶⁴⁴. They first traveled to Al-Ahsa, then to Qatar, and finally, Kuwait, where the dispute between Al-Khalifa and Al-Sabah began, compelling Al-Khalifa to return and settle in Qatar again⁶⁴⁵. Subsequently, they assumed power in the city of Al-Zubarah, emancipating it from the governance of the Al-Muslim family, and also expanding their authority over Bahrain⁶⁴⁶.

The Al-Thani, the present-day ruling family of Qatar, originated from the Al-Maadid tribe of Bani Tamim and established their residence initially in *Fuwayrit*⁶⁴⁷ and subsequently in Al-Zubarah⁶⁴⁸. As time passed, the Al Thani family amassed more influence and was entrusted with the responsibility of zakat collection (Obligatory charitable contribution under Islamic law) from the Qatari people and distribution to the Al-Khalifa family in Bahrain⁶⁴⁹. However, they were in the interim contemplating a separation from the Al Khalifa family. Multiple occurrences impacted this decision, for instance, the Al-Thani family's reprisal of the capture of *Jassim*, the heir to the throne and the progeny of Muhammad Al Thani⁶⁵⁰.

The conflict then escalated, and because Great Britain controlled the Arab Gulf peninsula at the time, it intervened to mediate the dispute between the two sides in order to protect its interests in the region⁶⁵¹. The Political Resident of Louisville effectively coerced the conflicting factions into a peace accord in 1868. This agreement led to the official secession of Qatar from Bahrain, thereby creating an autonomous sheikhdom ruled by Mohammed Al Thani⁶⁵².

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid, pp: 75

⁶⁴¹ Taqoush, M.S. (2013). *Tarikh Al-Jazira Al Arabia Al-hadith wa Al-Mouassir*. (the Modern and Contemporary History of the Arabian Peninsula). Dar AN-NAFAS, Beirut, Lebanon. (Arabic book)

⁶⁴² The Al-Sabah family is the ruling family of Kuwait, having governed the country since the early 18th century.

⁶⁴³ the Al Khalifa family is the ruling royal family of Bahrain.

⁶⁴⁴ Al Jalahma is one of the four Utub clans that founded the modern state of Kuwait in 1716, along with Al Bin Ali, Al Sabah, and Al Khalifa.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, pp: 445.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid, pp: 445

⁶⁴⁷ Fuwayrit is a Qatari coastal town in the municipality of Ash Shamal, approximately 90 km north of the current capital, Doha.

⁶⁴⁸ Sinan, B.M. (1966). *General History of Qatar*. Al-Maarif Press. First Edition. (Arabic book)

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid,

⁶⁵⁰ Taqoush, M.S. (2013). *Tarikh Al-Jazira Al Arabia Al-hadith wa Al-Mouassir*. (the Modern and Contemporary History of the Arabian Peninsula). Dar AN-NAFAS, Beirut, Lebanon. Pp: 446

⁶⁵¹ Sinan, B.M. (1966). *General History of Qatar*. Al-Maarif Press. First Edition.

⁶⁵² Ibid,

Al-Zubarah was the subject of intense political disagreement and debate between Bahrain and Qatar, and its reputation reached international courts⁶⁵³. The following table resume all the event regarding the conflict between the two nation-states on Al-Zubarah:

Year	Event
1937	Qatari forces attacked the Zubara area, which was part of Bahrain, leading to a settlement mediated by Britain and the delineation of borders.
1986	Diplomatic relations between Bahrain and Qatar were severed after Qatar detained Bahraini workers on Fasht Al Dibal Island.
1987	Both parties agreed on a framework for resolution based on Saudi proposals, with provision for further negotiations if current talks failed.
1990	Tensions escalated due to Qatar's exploitation of the Gulf summit to stoke conflict, prompting Bahrain to appeal to the International Court of Justice.
1991	Bahrain severed diplomatic ties with Qatar after Qatar unilaterally approached the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and Bahrain filed two applications concerning jurisdiction and Qatar's unilateral move.
1992	Formal documents for the case were submitted to the International Court of Justice by both Qatar and Bahrain.
1994	The International Court of Justice issued a judgment accepting jurisdiction over the dispute and specifying points for negotiation. October 30 was the final deadline for submission of all disputed points.
1998	Bahrain filed objections regarding the authenticity of some documents submitted by Qatar, alleging forgery. The court recorded Qatar's abandonment of some documents proven to be forged.
1999	Qatar formally relinquished forged documents before the International Court of Justice.
2000	Oral arguments began before the International Court of Justice between Bahrain and Qatar, concluding in June of the same year.
2001	The International Court of Justice in The Hague issued a final judgment on the Bahraini-Qatari dispute, binding both parties to its decision.

*Tableau 6: the history of the conflict between Qatar and Bahrain regarding Al-Zubarah*⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁵³ Al-Araved, J.S. (2003). *A Line in the Sea: The Qatar v. Bahrain Border Dispute in the World Court*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

⁶⁵⁴ swissinfo.ch. (2001). International Court of Justice: Hawar Islands, for Bahrain. Al-Zubarah and Fasht Al Dibal for Qatar. retrieved from : [Direct link](#)

Despite being definitively resolved by the international court, the issue remains deeply ingrained in Bahrain's conscience and resurfaces whenever relations with Qatar experience instability⁶⁵⁵. In 2018, at a symposium hosted by the University of Bahrain titled "*The rule of Al Khalifa in the Qatar Peninsula, history and sovereignty*," the Al-Zubarah issue reappeared amidst the pariah status of Qatar by its Arab neighboring countries. The conference explored the historical rule of the Al-Khalifa dynasty over the Qatari Peninsula, with a particular focus on Al-Zubarah as their capital⁶⁵⁶. The event not only emphasized the strategic and historical importance of the Al-Khalifa reign since 1762, but also alleged that the Al-Thani dynasty has been promoting conflict and division in the Gulf area to accomplish their expansionist objectives via illicit methods, including the use of coercion and forced relocation, as shown by the military incursions into Al-Zubarah in 1937 and Al-Dibal in 1986⁶⁵⁷.

The Qatari side has characterized this conference as an unsuccessful attempt to recall a historical memory to address perceived tensions between the people of Qatar and Bahrain⁶⁵⁸. They asserted that the matter has already been resolved, as the city of Al-Zubarah is under Qatari sovereignty and it is the first world heritage site to be included on UNESCO's world heritage list, serving as a significant testament to Qatar's commitment regarding the cultural history of the whole region⁶⁵⁹.

D. Al-Zubarah : Qatar's Premier UNESCO World Heritage Site

The Al-Zubarah archaeological site bestowed Qatar with the esteemed status of being included in the World Heritage List⁶⁶⁰ and, at the same time, it played a significant role in reshaping Qatar's approach to heritage making⁶⁶¹. The UNESCO worldwide recognition of Al-Zubarah is the outcome of thorough and precise archaeological endeavors⁶⁶². The excavations began in the 1980s under the direction of a team of Qatari archaeologists. Following the official end of their conflict with Bahrain in 2002, excavations recommenced in 2002-2003⁶⁶³. In 2004, Qatar

⁶⁵⁵ Polak-Springer, P. (2022). Bordering Zubara: oil politics, the 1937 Qatari-Bahraini conflict, and the making of a modern Arabian (Persian) Gulf Borderland. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 37(5), 1071–1095.

⁶⁵⁶ Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies. (2018). "Al Khalifa Rule in the Qatar Peninsula: History and Sovereignty". Event review: Retrieved April 12, 2024, from <https://www.derasat.org.bh/al-khalifa-rule-in-the-qatar-peninsula-history-and-sovereignty/>

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid,

⁶⁵⁸ Al-Ali, Kh. (2022). The cultural and economic history of Al-Zubarah in the period (1765-1810). Visual Archives: Qatar Historical Encyclopedia.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid,

⁶⁶⁰ Exell, K, and Rico, T. 2013. 'There is no Heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, Colonialism and other Problematic Histories, *World Archaeology* 45 (4): 670–85.

⁶⁶¹ Campbell, K (2022) Presenting Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site in Al-Zubarah : Qatar's World Heritage City (eds. Al-Thani, H, Abdulla, N, Muhsen, S, Walmsley, A, Hassan al-Sulaiti, F, Rosendahl, S & Thuesen, I), pp. 195-206. Qatar University Press: Doha

⁶⁶² Walmsley, A. (2011). The legacy of Zubarah. *Qultura*, 1, 58-65.

⁶⁶³ Ibid,

launched its permanent constitution where cultural heritage was categorized in Chapter Two, which deals with the fundamental components of society.

In compliance with the execution of Article 24:

*"The state sponsors sciences, literature, arts, and national cultural heritage, preserves them, helps disseminate them, and encourages scientific research."*⁶⁶⁴

In 2008, Qatar unveiled Vision 2030, which emphasizes the pivotal role that cultural heritage performs not only in bolstering the nation's identity but also in advancing cultural tourism by highlighting the country's multifarious cultural facets.⁶⁶⁵ Then, in the same year, the *Al-Zubarah* archeological site was included in the UNESCO World Heritage Tentative List, together with the *Khor Al-Adaid* Natural Reserve⁶⁶⁶. In 2009, the state of Qatar launched the Islamic Archaeology and Heritage Project (QIAH) which is a notable initiative conducted by the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen, in collaboration with and financially supported by the Qatar Museums Authority⁶⁶⁷. This archaeological collaboration has the objective of investigating, safeguarding, and showcasing Islamic archaeology as well as the natural and cultural heritage of northern Qatar to the general public⁶⁶⁸. In January 2012, the Nomination dossier for the *Al-Zubarah* Archaeological Site was officially submitted as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site, following two years of rigorous archaeological excavations⁶⁶⁹. The *Al-Zubarah* archaeological site was ultimately included on the UNESCO World Heritage list in June 2013⁶⁷⁰.

Al-Zubarah was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site based on 3 main criteria⁶⁷¹:

- **Criterion (iii):** *Al-Zubarah* provides remarkable evidence of the commercial and pearl dealing customs that prevailed in the Persian Gulf region throughout the 18th and 19th

⁶⁶⁴ State of Qatar. (2004). "The Permanent Constitution of the State of Qatar." Article 24. Retrieved from: <https://www.refworld.org/legal/legislation/natlegbod/2004/en/101710>

⁶⁶⁵ Qatar General Secretariat for Development Planning. (2008). Qatar National Vision 2030. pp: 22. Retrieved from: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/GCO-QNV-English.pdf>

⁶⁶⁶ Campbell, K (2022) Presenting *Al-Zubarah* Archaeological Site in *Al-Zubarah : Qatar's World Heritage City* (eds. Al-Thani, H, Abdulla, N, Muhsen, S, Walmsley, A, Hassan al-Sulaiti, F, Rosendahl, S & Thuesen, I), pp. 195-206. Qatar University Press: Doha

⁶⁶⁷ Richter, T., & Nymann, H. (Eds.) (2011). *Qatar Islamic Archaeology and Heritage Project: End of Season Report: Stage 2, Season 1, 2009-2010*. University of Copenhagen and Qatar Museums Authority.

⁶⁶⁸ Walmsley, A. (2014). *Islamic Archaeology in Qatar: Al-Zubarah and its Hinterland(s)*. Proceedings of the 8th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East. Volume 3, pp 479-497.

⁶⁶⁹ Kinzel, M., & Tanaka, M. (2015). *Imagining the Past: Visitor specific applications for Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site, Qatar*. 2015 *Digital Heritage*, 2, 723-726.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid,

⁶⁷¹ UNESCO. (2013). *Nomination of Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site for inclusion on the World Heritage List*. Retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1402/documents/>

centuries. It symbolizes the near culmination of a long-standing practice that supported significant coastal cities in the area from the early Islamic era until the 20th century.

- **Criterion (iv):** Al-Zubarah is a remarkable illustration of a fortified town that was connected to nearby villages. It played a crucial part in transforming the political and demographic dynamics of the Persian Gulf during the 18th and early 19th centuries. The region's strategic importance as a trade route is emphasized.
- **Criterion (v):** The site provides exceptional evidence of how humans have interacted with both the sea and the challenging desert environment. The town's growth was driven by trade and commerce, as shown by artifacts like as pearl divers' weights, imported pottery, and fish traps.

The site's authenticity is maintained through the conservation of its physical remnants, which have remained largely undisturbed since their initial 20th century abandonment and subsequent burial in arid dunes⁶⁷². Previously, the primary means by which the integrity is maintained is the preservation of the entire town and its immediate environs, including its palaces, mosques, streets, courtyard houses, fishermen's cottages, harbor, double defensive walls, and the adjacent arid landscape⁶⁷³.

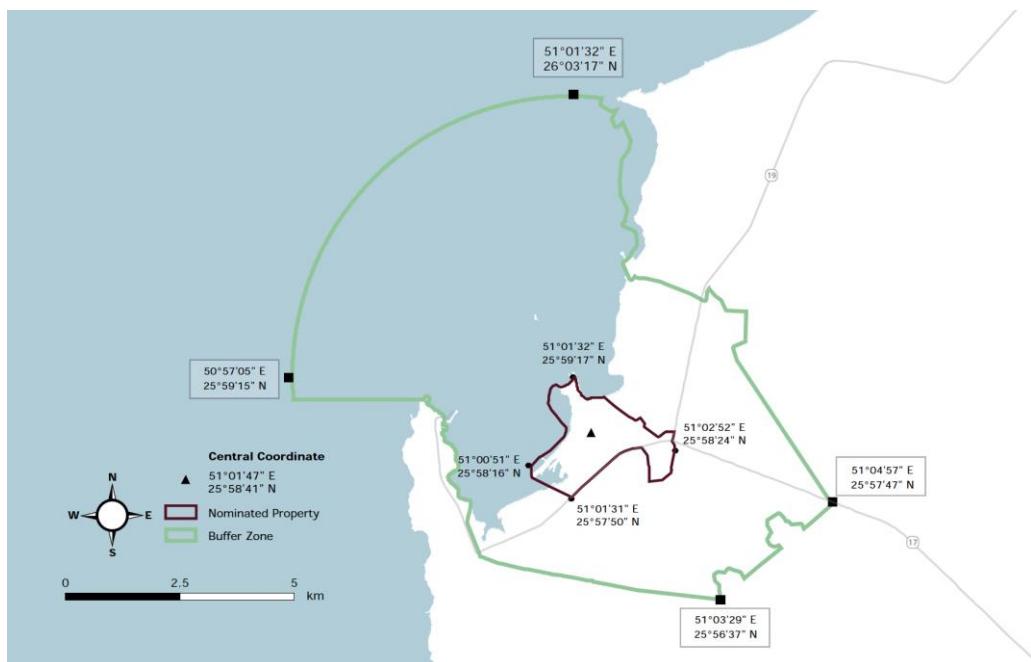


Photo 7: the Map of the inscribed property⁶⁷⁴

⁶⁷² Ibid,

⁶⁷³ Ibid,

⁶⁷⁴ UNESCO. (2013). Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site. Map of the inscribed property. Retrieved from: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1402/maps/>

Al-Zubarah has been officially recognized as an archaeological site according to Qatar's Law of Antiquities, which grants it legal protection. As seen in the map above, the archaeological site is divided into two sections: the Protected Area and the Buffered Zone.

The protected area of the Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site includes the primary archaeological remains, including the residential structures, mosques, roadways, and outer walls⁶⁷⁵. This region has been classified as a core zone, which means that the site's integrity and archaeological evidence are fully protected possible. The Buffered Zone is intended to give an extra layer of protection, assisting in mitigating external factors that may harm the site, such as urban growth or natural deterioration. The buffer zones are administered in accordance with particular criteria to guarantee that activities do not negatively influence the archeological site⁶⁷⁶.

E. Al-Zubarah and the Fabric of Qatari Nationhood

Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani⁶⁷⁷, representing Qatar, regarded the nomination of the Al-Zubarah archaeological site as a world heritage site in 2013 in Cambodia as a remarkable national accomplishment. During the subsequent panel discussion, the Qatari mission emphasized the significance of this event, stating:

"The global recognition of the Al-Zubarah archeological site is an achievement for all of us and a source of happiness and pride for every Qatari and every intellectual, this is only the beginning and not the end, we promise a commitment to protecting and not harming the history of the site⁶⁷⁸."

⁶⁷⁵ UNESCO. (2013). Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site. The nomination Text.

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1402/documents/>

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid,

⁶⁷⁷ She is the sister of Qatar's ruling Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani. She is the Chairperson of Qatar Museums, the institutional entity responsible for cultural heritage and many other national organizations.

⁶⁷⁸ extracted from the official discourse presented by Qatar representatives during the 2013 37 UNESCO World Heritage Committee held in Cambodia. the whole event can be consulted via this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgmZrs4rIEM&list=PLWuYED1WVJIOYz9yAMuVdbz9pnf7xSbdQ>



Photo 7: the celebration Qatar representatives during the same Event⁶⁷⁹

According to her, this recognition further elevates its role within the imagined community of Qatar, creating a shared mental image of Qatari history that unites individuals across the nation despite the vastness of the country and the diversity of its population, she quoted:

“The archaeological site of Al-Zubarah is a window of communication and interaction with its near and far neighbors, it is not only an exceptional archaeological site, but it also reflects the current reality of the State of Qatar, where people from many different civilizations coexist and Qatar has become the second home of each of them. The city's history, along with that of other contemporary Gulf cities, has played a leading role in shaping the political reality and current social situation of the Gulf region⁶⁸⁰.”

Subsequently, Ali Zeinl Musa, who was then the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to UNESCO, emphasized the significance of UNESCO's recognition as it promotes a cohesive national narrative that enlightens both people and visitors about Qatar's marine heritage and archeological relevance⁶⁸¹.

“Al-Zubarah is more than an archaeological site; it is a narrative cornerstone for Qatar’s national identity. Through its intensive preservation and UNESCO global

⁶⁷⁹ Extracted from the visual report done by the Qatar national TV channel AL-Rayyan, can be consulted via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oAw1nBceCS8>

⁶⁸⁰ extracted from the official discourse presented by Qatar representatives during the 2013 37 UNESCO World Heritage Committee held in Cambodia. the whole event can be consulted via this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgmZrs4rIEM&list=PLWuYED1WVJIOYz9yAMuVdbz9pnf7xSbdQ>

⁶⁸¹ Interview with the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar to UNESCO, Ali Zinl Moussa. (2013). Al-Rayyan TV channel.

recognition, we are reclaiming a history that affirms both our Hadar legacy in maritime trade and pearling, as well as our Badu resilience, rooted in inland mobility and autonomy. It gives us a unifying symbol of past glory, allowing Qataris to see themselves not as fragmented communities, but as inheritors of a shared and dignified historical continuum.’’⁶⁸²

The nomination of Al-Zubarah archeological site demonstrated the new cultural orientation of Qatar, which, after the definitive constitution of Qatar was formally inaugurated in 2004, has placed cultural heritage as an essential pillar of the national identity building process⁶⁸³. The Qatari regime have started shedding lights to cultural heritage sites with dual objectives: The first reason is a desire to safeguard their own historical and cultural heritage, while the second reason is to engage in the process of nation-building and construct a more prominent national identity⁶⁸⁴.

Accordingly, the Al-Zubarah archaeological site in Qatar demonstrates the deliberate use of heritage for political purposes, acting as a key element in developing a national identity⁶⁸⁵. The UNESCOs recognition of Al-Zubarah as a world heritage site not only places Qatar on the global heritage stage, but it also validates the ancestry of the current ruling family, the Al-Thani⁶⁸⁶. Al-Zubarah holds a deeper significance for the ruling family as it is the birthplace of their great-grandfather and the site where they first assumed the reins of power after a coup against the Al Khalifa⁶⁸⁷. As an invented heritage site, the ruling family in Qatar deliberately made significant efforts to conserve it to promote social cohesion and justify their authority, as a result, exemplifying how invented heritage is used to construct a shared narrative that resonates with national identity building process⁶⁸⁸. Furthermore, Al-Zubarah also increases its value as a manifestation of the continuity of Qatar's Islamic identity which is historically linked to the spread of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence⁶⁸⁹ that was introduced to the town by its founder, Ahmed bin Rizq⁶⁹⁰. The city was one of the most ardent opponents of Sheikh

⁶⁸² A statement that I got from Dr. Faisal Abdullah Al-Naimi, Director of Archaeology at Qatar Museums. April 2023.

⁶⁸³ Hamad, A. (2016). *The Process of Building Identity in the Gulf / the Case of Qatar*. Hamad bin Khalifa University Press (HBKU Press)

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid,

⁶⁸⁵ Boussaa, D. (2014). *Conservation And Development of Cultural Heritage in Doha*. Hamad bin Khalifa University Press (HBKU Press).

⁶⁸⁶ Exell, K., & Rico, T. (2013). ‘There is no heritage in Qatar’: Orientalism, colonialism and other problematic histories. *World Archaeology*, 45(4), 670–685.

⁶⁸⁷ Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies. (2018). “Al Khalifa Rule in the Qatar Peninsula: History and Sovereignty”, conference summary.

⁶⁸⁸ Exell, K., & Rico, T. (2013). ‘There is no heritage in Qatar’: Orientalism, colonialism and other problematic histories. *World Archaeology*, 45(4), 670–685.

⁶⁸⁹ Al Ishaq, A. (2016). Identity and belonging and their role in Qatar’s steadfastness. Al Jazeera Center for Studies (paper in Arabic)

⁶⁹⁰ Al Thani, A, A. & Al Jaber, J, B, M. (2018). *History of jurisprudential schools of thought in Qatar*. Published by Afak (horizons). (book in Arabic)

Muhammad Abdul-Wahhab's appeal during his era, entangling it in a longstanding ideological conflict with Saudi Arabia that persists to the current days⁶⁹¹.

Moreover, the Al-Zubarah archaeological site has been essential in allowing Qatar to present a much broader historical narrative. Qatar, being a country with a very short history of political independence⁶⁹², has substantially improved its national identity via the investigation and promotion of this site. Al-Zubarah established a connection between the contemporary state and its cultural history, extending the nation's historical chronology, and confirming Qatar's rich heritage and cultural inheritance, which existed before its formal recognition as an independent country. By strategically using archeological heritage, Qatar was able to present a past that is both extensive and influential, therefore enhancing its identity and credibility on the international scene⁶⁹³.

⁶⁹¹ Al-Naqidan, M. (2012). "Qatar and its project to support Wahhabism". Al-Mesbar Center for Studies and Research. (Arabic paper).

⁶⁹² Fromm, N. (2018). Why study Qatar and how? An introduction to the topic of this book. Constructivist Niche Diplomacy

⁶⁹³ Rico, T. (2022). Change Over Time. Muslim Heritage Preservation Stewardship Under Unesco.

IV. Conclusion

The cases of Saudi Arabia and Qatar demonstrate how cultural heritage serves as both a historical archive and a strategic structure of visibility, generated, shaped, and employed via interconnected mechanisms of religious authority, state governance, and global recognition. What at first appears to be a shift from religious prohibition to cultural promotion is, in fact, a deeper epistemological transformation: a movement from the sacred as a site of moral truth to the heritage site as a node of geopolitical performance and economic futurity⁶⁹⁴.

These cultural heritage projects construct memory instead of conserving it; they carefully highlight fragments of the past that fit national narratives, post-oil diversification plans, and global soft power. In this context, UNESCO recognition is not simply a validation mechanism, but a transnational instrument of legibility that Gulf states appropriate to project an image of continuity, authenticity, and cosmopolitanism⁶⁹⁵. This alignment presents contradictions; Islamic heritage is frequently referenced to establish national legitimacy, yet it is also aestheticized, instrumentalized, and reinterpreted, detaching it from its theological origins.

What emerges, then, is a paradoxical cultural project, one that aestheticizes rupture while narrating coherence, and that mobilizes the past not to remember, but to govern. In both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, heritage is not rediscovered; it is manufactured through institutional acts of framing, erasure, and spatial choreography. These acts constitute what might be called a cultural heritage apparatus: an ensemble of discourses, architectures, exhibitions, legal codes, and ceremonial performances that render the past governable and the present desirable⁶⁹⁶.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar's engagement with cultural heritage reveals a broader shift in the politics of time: the future is no longer what must be built after history, but what can be extracted from it—curated, branded, and projected as evidence of sovereign modernity⁶⁹⁷. In this context, cultural heritage is viewed not as a retrospective consideration, but as a prospective assessment. The critical inquiry is whether this heritagization regime can support plural narratives and historical complexity or favor coherence over contradiction, unity over diversity, and spectacle over substance.

⁶⁹⁴ Hayajneh, H. (2025). *Against All Odds: Keeping Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Arab World Vibrant*. Springer.

⁶⁹⁵ Wippel, S. (2023). *Branding the Middle East: Communication Strategies and Cultural Politics*. De Gruyter.

⁶⁹⁶ Santamarina, B., & Beltran, O. (2016). Heritage and Knowledge: Apparatus, Logic and Strategies in the Formation of Heritage. *Anthropological Forum*, 26(4), 397–414.

⁶⁹⁷ Bhattarai, K., & Yousef, M. (2025). Urbanization and Sustainability in MENA: Challenges and Pathways to Smart Cities. In *The Middle East: Past, Present, and Future*. Springer.

Finally, if cultural heritage regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar reveal how the past is mobilized as a technology of governance, then the strategic rollout of Vision 2030 signals an even more ambitious discursive formation in which the future itself becomes an object of governmental structure. In the next chapter, we will explore how Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Qatar's National Vision 2030 reframe cultural heritage not only a repository of cultural identity, but also an essential pillar in the architecture of national reform, economic diversification, and global rebranding. these Visions 2030 operates as a performative projection of state-led transformation, wherein historical continuity is fused with futurist ambition and shaped by a presentist orientation. Yet, can such visions, grounded in centralized authority and technocratic orchestration, authentically reconcile modernizing and secularizing imperatives with the plural, often contested textures of cultural memory they claim to preserve?

Chapter 5: Vision 2030: Cultural Heritage as a Foundation for Qatar's and Saudi Arabia's National Reforms.

I. Introduction

In the contemporary discourse, the concept of "vision" refers to a strategic framework that outlines a nation's long-term goals and aspirations and the means to achieve it⁶⁹⁸. The term, however, carries deeper historical connotations that reach beyond its immediate application in governance and planning. A vision, in its most profound sense, is a projection of a collective imagination, an articulation of aspirations, values, and goals that a society, organization, or nation seeks to realize⁶⁹⁹. Visions have been employed by leaders and thinkers as a means of shaping and directing social and political change⁷⁰⁰. In Qatar and Saudi Arabia, a vision can be understood as a mechanism of power and knowledge⁷⁰¹, enabling states to construct, disseminate, and control the collective imagination through a complex interaction of historical narratives, economic policies, and cultural discourses. This imagination is deeply embedded in relations of power, deployed to regulate social behavior, establish authority, and redefine governance.

In both countries, the introduction of Vision 2030 marks an institutionalized reconfiguration of governance, utilizing historical narratives, economic policies, and cultural discourse to reconfigure the social order⁷⁰². The leadership transitions: most notably Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's ascent in Saudi Arabia (2015) and Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's (2003 & 2013) leadership in Qatar, ushered in a new era of modernization, laying the groundwork for the comprehensive transformations we see nowadays⁷⁰³. These leaders deployed Vision 2030 not merely as a policy initiative but as a biopolitical⁷⁰⁴ tool designed to redefine the relationship between the state and its citizens. Vision 2030, in this sense, functions as a regime of knowledge that articulates the future through the lens of governance, creating new discursive spaces where economic diversification, cultural reform, and social reorganization become technical goals and, at the same time, normative frameworks through which the whole population

⁶⁹⁸ Vaishnavi, Virendra, Jadhav. (2024). Strategic Marketing Approaches for Startup Expansion: Vision, Mission, and Goals. *Indian Scientific Journal of Research in Engineering and Management*.

⁶⁹⁹ Kinninmont, J. (2017). Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia's social contract: Austerity and transformation. *Chatham House Research Paper*. 1-41

⁷⁰⁰ Fukuda-Parr, S. & Muchhala, B. (2020). The Southern Origins of Sustainable Development Goals: Ideas, Actors, Aspirations. *World Development*, 126,

⁷⁰¹ Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Shendan. Pantheon Books.

⁷⁰² Amin H, Sakbani K, Tok E. (2024). State Aspirations for Social and Cultural Transformations in Qatar. *Social Sciences*. 13(7):359.

⁷⁰³ Ulrichsen, K. C. (2018). *The Gulf States in International Political Economy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁷⁰⁴ Foucault, M., Senellart, M., Burchell, G., & Davidson, A. I. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

is engaged⁷⁰⁵. The ongoing heritage boom, the reforms in women's rights⁷⁰⁶, cultural openness, and economic innovation in both countries are direct outcomes of these strategic frameworks.

In this chapter, I will start by highlighting the historical context of both visions, situating them within the broader regional trend of political and economic reform that emerged across the Gulf states in the 2000s. This will provide a contextual framework for understanding the origins and significance of these national strategies. Afterwards, I will delve into how Vision 2030 embodies a new social contract between the state and its citizens, offering large-scale reform across multiple sectors in exchange for public engagement and support. I will also highlight and analyze the key pillars of each vision, examining their goals in terms of economic diversification, social development, and cultural preservation. This chapter will primarily focus on the role of cultural heritage within both visions, highlighting how both states manipulate heritage to shape national historical narratives, legitimize authority, and modify the past to stimulate economic diversification, particularly through tourism and global cultural diplomacy. Finally, I will conclude with a comparative synthesis, drawing out the similarities and differences between Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's approaches to Vision 2030.

⁷⁰⁵ Alemahu, A. (2023). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Its Regional Implication. *International Journal of Public Administration and Management Research*, 9(1), 79-85.

⁷⁰⁶ For instance, today 11, October 2024, Saudi Arabia Announced a massive new reform regarding women rights.

II. Vision 2030: A historical context

The foundations of these visions can be traced back to the broader cultural and social reforms across the whole Gulf region that began in the 1970s, a decade that followed the post-independence progress of many Gulf states. These early reforms, which prioritized infrastructure, education, and the first institutionalization of national heritage, were largely fueled by a boom in oil revenues⁷⁰⁷. However, as I mentioned in the previous chapters, these reforms coincided with the emergence of political Islam, particularly represented by the *Sahwa movement*⁷⁰⁸, which introduced a more conservative religious perspective that hindered the cultural sphere in the region. During this time, Gulf states also faced international criticism for their perceived ideological roles in extremism, complicating their global reputation⁷⁰⁹. Vision 2030 denotes a conscious rupture with this legacy of cultural stagnation, while also reflecting a sort of continuity of these massive reforms that began in the 1970s.

Both countries were strategically using their cultural heritage to construct their national identity and connect with global audiences. For example, Qatar opened its first National Museum in 1975, shortly after gaining independence⁷¹⁰, while Saudi Arabia established the National Museum of Antiquities and Folklore in 1978, marking the early steps of both nations in institutionalizing their cultural heritage preservation⁷¹¹. These museums served as places to expose archaeological findings; like those gathered during Saudi Arabia's Comprehensive Archaeological Survey in 1976, and at the same time, as platforms for crafting national narratives⁷¹². However, the series of events that unfolded obstructed both countries from maintaining their previous progression, diverting their attention from development of culture to address pressing challenges of that period, particularly those related to territorial security.

Event	Year	Description
the capture of Saudi Arabia's Grand Mosque	1979	A group of Islamist militants seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, demanding the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy, leading to a violent siege and crackdown.

⁷⁰⁷ Rahman, M.M., Al-Azm, A. (2023). Social Change and Transformation in the Gulf Region. In: Rahman, M.M., Al-Azm, A. (eds) Social Change in the Gulf Region. Gulf Studies, vol 8. Springer, Singapore.

⁷⁰⁸ I have deeply explained in the last chapter how this movement made everything regarding culture Haram, putting culture in inactive mode for more than 30 years.

⁷⁰⁹ Kumar H.M., S. (2015). Responding to Western Critiques of the Muslim World: Deconstructing the Cliché of Islamophobia and the Genealogies of Islamic Extremism. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(4), 579–598.

⁷¹⁰ Al-Hammadi, M., Exell, K., & El-Menshaw, S. (2020). Camel, blockade and a historical memory perspective: a theme of historical memory portrayed at Qatar National Museum. *STUDIA ANTIQUA ET ARCHAEOLOGICA*, 26(2), 185–198.

⁷¹¹ Cassola, V. (2014). Archaeological collecting in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in P. Erskine-Loftus (ed.), *Museums and the Material World. Collecting the Arabian Peninsula*, Boston, Edinburg: Museums Etc. 74-91

⁷¹² Ibid,

Iran-Iraq War	(1980–1988)	A devastating war between Iran and Iraq, which affected the Gulf states economically and geopolitically, as they supported Iraq to contain Iranian influence.
the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)	1981	The GCC was established by six Gulf monarchies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar) for mutual economic and security cooperation in response to regional threats.
the Gulf War	(1990–1991)	Iraq's invasion of Kuwait led to a U.S.-led coalition liberating Kuwait, significantly increasing U.S. military presence and reshaping regional security dynamics.
1995 Bloodless Coup in Qatar	1995	Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani deposed his father in a peaceful coup, ushering in a new era of modernization and assertive foreign policy for Qatar.
9/11 Attacks	2001	The terrorist attacks on the U.S. led to greater scrutiny of Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, due to the involvement of Saudi nationals, and reshaped global security alliances.
U.S. Invasion of Iraq	2003	The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime, destabilizing the region and increasing sectarian tensions, with long-term consequences for Gulf security.
Economic Crisis	2008	The global financial crisis triggered a sharp drop in oil prices, affecting the Gulf economies and accelerating efforts toward economic diversification.
Arab Spring	2011	A series of uprisings across the Arab world that led to political instability in many states; Bahrain experienced protests, which were suppressed with Gulf cooperation.

Tableau 8: the most important event in the Gulf region from the 1970s-2011

Over three decades, the events presented in (table 1) indicate significant marginalization, if not suppression, of culture. Cultural heritage, rather than serving as a dynamic factor in the formation of national identity as envisioned, has become essentially passive, overshadowed by broader political agendas and influenced by regional and global instabilities. The Arab Spring represented a significant turning point, characterized by political protests that compelled the Arab world, including Gulf states, regimes to address their internal vulnerabilities, shifting their attention

from external threats to internal governance challenges, catalyzing the formulation of concrete plans for extensive reforms and encouraging active citizen participation in their realization⁷¹³.

III. Visions 2030: a regional tendency

The early twenty-first century saw the emergence of national visions among Gulf states, reflecting a strategic response to internal and external influences⁷¹⁴. Thus, national visions, including Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Qatar's National Vision 2030, were developed as extensive frameworks for economic diversification, modernization, and massive socio-cultural reforms⁷¹⁵.

These strategic plans have symbolized a new era of governance focused on global integration, economic resilience and a rupture with the ideologies that had previously dominated the region.

Country	Vision name	Date of Launching	Objectives
Oman	• Vision 2020 • Vison 2040	• 1995 • 2021 (planning started in 2013)	Economic diversification, human capital, sustainable environment, governance
Qatar	National Vision 2030	2008.	Transform Qatar into an advanced society with a high standard of living
Bahrain	Economic Vision 2030	2008.	Economic competitiveness, social equity, sustainability
UAE	Vision 2021	2014	Sustainability, innovation, infrastructure, business environment

⁷¹³ Kitchen, N. (2012). After the Arab Spring Power Shift in the Middle East? IDEAS Reports Editor. 5-64

⁷¹⁴ Godfrey, M. K. (2024, April 26). Gulf States and Sharp Power: Allies to Adversaries | Journal of Democracy. Journal of Democracy. Vol35, 1;102-117.

⁷¹⁵ Alawadi, K., Abdelghani, R., & Daghash, F. (2024). Rethinking Urban Sustainability in the GCC: Translating Plans into Practices. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 0(0).

Saudi Arabia	Vision 2030	2016	Economic diversification, social development, sustainability
Kuwait	Vision 2035 ("New Kuwait")	2017	Infrastructure, human capital, economic diversification, governance

Tableau 9: Visions in the Gulf states

Despite the emphasis placed on the Emirati example, which has become a role model and a goal for other Gulf states⁷¹⁶, to the point of being referred to as "Dubaization"⁷¹⁷, it should be noted that the Sultanate of Oman was the first government in the Arabian Gulf to adopt a broad vision in 1995⁷¹⁸. The Omani state's anticipation of change and vision for the future was primarily because it did not take the same historical and cultural path as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Essentially, the effect of the *Sahwa movement* stated in the previous chapters was not as strong in the Omani state since Oman practices *Ibadism*⁷¹⁹, a form of Islam that differs from both Sunni and Shia sects.

Moreover, although the visions of the gulf states may vary in terms of time and details, they share a core focus on economic diversification, sustainability and human capital development. These common objectives support the recognition of the need to modernize economies and governance structures in response to global economic shifts, while concurrently safeguarding cultural heritage that is integral to their national identities.

IV. Visions 2030: a new form of social contract

Both Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Qatar's National Vision 2030 can be interpreted as modern iterations of a new social contract, reflecting a shift in the relationship between the state and its citizens where the state offers economic opportunity, social reform, and cultural enrichment in exchange for citizen participation and loyalty to national development plans.

⁷¹⁶ Elsheshtawy, Y. (2008). *The Evolving Arab City: Tradition, Modernity and Urban Development*. London: Routledge.

⁷¹⁷ The term "Dubaization" refers to the rapid urban development and economic diversification strategies modeled after the city of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

⁷¹⁸ It is essential to note that Egypt was the first Arab Muslim country to articulate a modern national vision, beginning in the early 19th century with intellectuals such as Rifā'a al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, whose writings laid the groundwork for cultural reform, educational modernization, and engagement with European ideas.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibadism* is known for its more moderate and tolerant interpretations of Islamic teachings, which historically led to a different societal and political atmosphere in Oman.

The concept of social contract, as defined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, suggest that political legitimacy is derived from an agreement among individuals to establish a society and adhere to collective authority in return for protection, security, and the promotion of the common good⁷²⁰. This contract enables individuals to attain freedom by conforming to the general will, which embodies the collective purpose of the society, rather than the preferences of any single group or individual⁷²¹. The social contract serves as a framework that regulates the relationship between the state and its people, based on reciprocal duties and responsibilities⁷²².

Historically, the concept of the social contract has been questioned in the Gulf states, particularly due to the region's unique political and economic structures⁷²³. In the traditional frameworks of Gulf societies, tribal loyalty constituted a social contract that regulated the interactions between the tribal *sheikh* and those who were under his authority⁷²⁴. This contract stipulated that the tribal sheikh must provide economic security for the people and political security for the territory, while the individuals were obligated to demonstrate obedience, allegiance, and submit to the governing sheikh⁷²⁵. This form of social contract collapsed in the nineteenth century as colonial authorities emerged as significant players in both international and internal matters, leading to the transformation of the governing sheikh into an alternative agent representing their interests⁷²⁶. British intervention in the sheikhdoms affairs resulted in the elimination of the traditional social contract, giving rise to a “colonial contract” in which British agents and political residents exercised control over the political and economic aspirations of both individuals and the sheikhs themselves⁷²⁷.

In the 1970s, with the independence of the majority of Gulf states, a new social contract emerged. This was a result of the exponential growth of oil revenue, which led to a social contract anchored on rentier state economies. These economies were led by ruling families and were characterized by external rents, mainly from oil revenues, which replaced taxes⁷²⁸. In contrast to the western model where taxes underpin political responsibility and public involvement, Gulf rentier governments maintained political legitimacy via wealth distribution⁷²⁹. This structure allowed

⁷²⁰ Rousseau, J.-J. (2018). *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. (V. Gourevitch, Ed.) (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷²¹ Ibid,

⁷²² Ibid,

⁷²³ Al-Etaibi, Abdulla, “Identity and Globalisation: Tribal Identity in the Age of Social Media”, in M.D. Mizanur Rahman and Amr Al-Azm (eds), *Social Change in the Gulf Region: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer, 2023), pp. 41–60.

⁷²⁴ Al-Etaibi, A. (2022). Transnational Identity and Foreign Policy: Tribal Identity and the Gulf Crisis. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 12(1), 84–102.

⁷²⁵ Ibid,

⁷²⁶ Al Morchid, A. (2021). Social Contract: The Missing Formula of the Gulf State Concept. Gulf House Studies and Publishing. (Arabic paper)

⁷²⁷ Ibid,

⁷²⁸ Ibid,

⁷²⁹ Wang, T. (2024). The Arab Gulf States in Transition: Power Centralization, Economic Transformation, and Neo-Nationalism. In: Yang, G., Zhang, J., Liu, L., Xiong, X. (eds) *Countries and Regions*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

ruling families to maintain authority and political stability by providing economic benefits, social services, and subsidies in exchange for political loyalty and compliance⁷³⁰.

The manifestations of this agreement also faded with the events that followed the Arab Spring, which led to a shift toward more participatory and accountable governance. This transition responds to the demands of modernity while respecting the Arab world's cultural and historical context, where citizens are no longer mere subjects of state control but also active agents in decision-making process. As a result, Vision 2030 became a new social contract between the Qatari and Saudi Arabian regimes and their respective citizens where, both parties commit to respond to internal, regional and global challenges. The two countries, through their ambitious Vision 2030 plans, aim to diversify their economies beyond oil reliance and provide new opportunities for their citizens.

“My first objective is for our country to be a pioneering and successful global model of excellence, on all fronts, and I will work with you to achieve that”⁷³¹. ”

“Qatar’s National Vision belongs to the government, the private sector, civil society and to all Qatari citizens. I call on all to work hard and utilize your expertise to help achieve the goals of the Vision and to advance our nation’s development. In this way, we will build a bright future for the people of Qatar.”⁷³²”

The two statements from the official documents of Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Vision 2030 illustrate a shift in the governance discourse, with an increased emphasis on citizen participation in the political sphere.

In Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, the government has initiated wide-ranging social reforms, including the increased inclusion of women in the workforce, cultural liberalization, and investments in sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and education. This redefinition of societal roles and opportunities, particularly through cultural initiatives such as the expansion of heritage sites and the creation of the entertainment industry, signals a new social contract where the state, in exchange for economic participation and adherence to the national agenda, provides enhanced social freedoms, opportunities for entrepreneurship, and an improved quality of life⁷³³.

⁷³⁰ Al Morchid, A. (2021). Social Contract: The Missing Formula of the Gulf State Concept. Gulf House Studies and Publishing. (Arabic paper)

⁷³¹ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. First Message from KING SALMAN BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

⁷³² General Secretariat for Development Planning. (2008). *Qatar National Vision 2030*. Intro by Emire Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/national-vision2030/>

⁷³³ Kinninmont, J. (2017). Vision 2030 and Saudi Arabia’s social contract: Austerity and transformation. *Chatham House Research Paper*. Pp: 1-41

Similarly, Qatar's National Vision 2030 aims to establish a diverse economy while preserving national values and heritage. Qatar's emphasis on human development illustrates the government's dedication to improving individual welfare⁷³⁴ (*Arrafahia*) as part of the social contract. Qatar is redefining citizenship by promoting knowledge-based industries and encouraging citizen involvement in government and economic activities, transforming it from just a passive allegiance to an active participation in national growth⁷³⁵. For instance, Qatar's investment in education and research, as evidenced in the establishment of the Qatar Foundation and Education City, empowers citizens to contribute to the global knowledge economy, while promising them an economic and personal growth in return⁷³⁶.

In both cases, the state is offering a new model of governance, where the citizen's role is no longer defined by solely political acquiescence, but rather by active and engaged participation in the country's future through economic and social engagement. In return for citizen's participation and loyalty to national development goals and political stability, both states engage to offer economic opportunity, social reform, and cultural enrichment.

V. A contextual background: why visions?

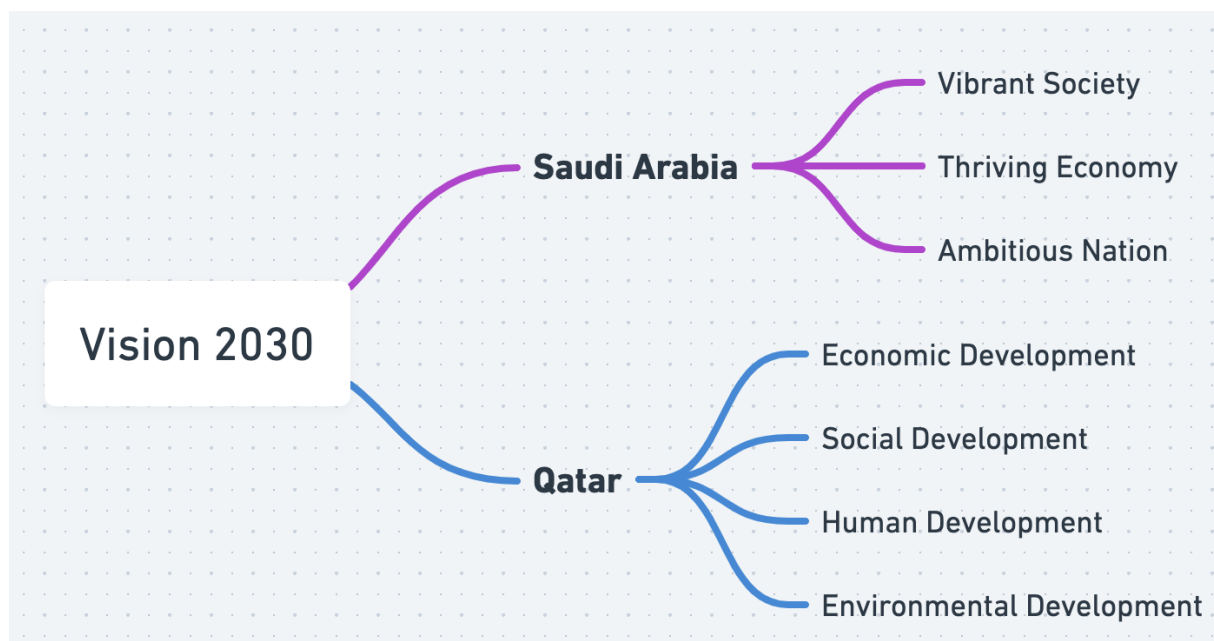


Figure 1: Mind Map of the Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's Vision 2030 Pillars

⁷³⁴ The notion of welfare is quite widespread in the Gulf nations, and it is a condition of living in luxury and elegance, which entails spending large sums of money on goods that boost pleasure and comfort but are frequently unnecessary.

⁷³⁵ Alabdulqader, K. (2016). Qatar National Vision 2030: Assessing the Present and Foreseeing the Future. Al Jazeera Center for Studies. 1-28. (Arabic paper)

⁷³⁶ Amin, H., & Cochrane, L. (2023). The development of the education system in Qatar: assessing the intended and unintended impacts of privatization policy shifts. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 1–21.

In 2008, Qatar launched its National Vision 2030 as a strategic response to a range of domestic and international problems. The goal was to:

"Transform Qatar into an advanced nation capable of achieving sustainable development and ensuring the perpetuation of a dignified life for its citizens, across generations."⁷³⁷

Qatar's National Vision 2030 is based on four core pillars. The first is the human development which aims to guarantee the holistic advancement of Qatari individuals, focusing on their physical and mental health as well as promoting social connections and encouraging generosity. The second is the social development pillar which highlights the importance of building a unified society based on values like respect, tolerance, and brotherhood, with the goal of fostering unity within Qatari society and in its connections with the global community. The third pillar of economic development aims to enhance sustainable quality of life by diversifying and stabilizing the economy, promoting creativity, dealing with the challenges of a connected world market, and guaranteeing that Qatar's economic development is inclusive and environmentally friendly. The final pillar is the environmental development which focuses on the strategic administration of Qatar's natural assets., aiming to guarantee the sustainable exploitation of resources while balancing Qatar's ecological heritage preservation and national development. Collectively, these foundations create a unified structure with the goal of establishing Qatar as a contemporary, environmentally friendly, and internationally connected community by 2030.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia launched its Vision 2030, with three main pillars⁷³⁸: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation.

Vibrant society focuses on improving quality of life, fostering cultural heritage, extending social freedoms, and fostering a more open and inclusive society, all while staying rooted in the country's Islamic identity. Here, Saudi Arabia strives to navigate societal transformation while respecting its foundational religious and cultural values through a careful balance of modernization and tradition. The thriving economy pillar seeks to minimize the Kingdom's reliance on oil income by expanding into new sectors like tourism, entertainment, technology, and renewable energy, also stimulating innovation and providing job opportunities. Finally, the ambitious nation pillar stresses governance reforms, transparency, and international engagement to improve institutional efficiency, combat corruption, and establish Saudi Arabia as a worldwide leader in diplomacy, commerce, and environmental sustainability. Together, these pillars provide a comprehensive plan for modernizing the nation while conserving its cultural and religious heritage.

⁷³⁷ General Secretariat for Development Planning. (2008). *Qatar National Vision 2030*. <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/about-qatar/national-vision2030/>

⁷³⁸ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

The divergent nature of Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's national visions stems from the distinct historical, political, and economic landscapes that have shaped their respective paths. While these visions are contextually unique, both countries converge in their strategic recognition of cultural heritage as a pivotal element within their broader objectives. Cultural heritage, in both instances, is not treated as a static remnant of the past but rather as an active agent in national development, mobilized to fulfill multiple state-driven goals. Such dynamic highlights how cultural heritage becomes embedded within the current national plans, receiving institutional support, visibility, and financial investment as a direct outcome of its instrumentalization.

Rather than functioning only as a repository of memory or identity, cultural heritage in these long-term plans serves as a tool for fostering national cohesion within the socio-political reforms and as a driver of economic diversification, particularly through tourism and cultural diplomacy. The interconnectedness between cultural heritage and these development plans thus creates a synergetic relationship where each enhances the other. National visions, by promoting cultural heritage, bolster the state's global image, attract international investment, and foster societal alignment with modernizing ambitions, while the institutional support for heritage itself gains traction and legitimacy in the global cultural arena. This mutually reinforcing dynamic of cultural heritage and national development is indicative of the complex methods in which both states have woven cultural narratives into their visions for future progress.

VI. The Role of Cultural Heritage in Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Vision 2030

In the context of the massive reforms articulated within Saudi Arabia's and Qatar's respective Vision 2030 frameworks, cultural heritage assumes a role beyond mere preservation. It is instead deployed as a deliberate asset that intersects with multiple aspects of governance, national identity, and economic development.

First, cultural heritage plays an integral role in the (re)constructing national identity and the shaping of historical narratives, legitimizing and reinforcing the authority and the presence of the current ruling families. Also, as both nations experience fast industrialization, the focus on cultural heritage ensures that they stay anchored in their rich past, offering a feeling of continuity and unity despite change.

Furthermore, both countries actively employed cultural heritage in their efforts to enhance their presence in the international arena, particularly through engagements with UNESCO, where promoting heritage sites becomes an act of cultural diplomacy.

Finally, the commodification of cultural heritage through its incorporation into the tourism sector is a key strategy for their economic diversification. Both countries are seeking to reduce their reliance on oil incomes; hence, the advancement of heritage tourism presents a sustainable

pathway for economic expansion and employment generation, making the conservation of cultural assets a direct factor in economic stability.

1. The role of Cultural Heritage in Qatar vision 2030.

I. *Qatar's Nation-building and shaping historical narratives.*

Cultural heritage occupies a central position in Qatar's 2030 national vision. The official document of Qatar's 2030 national vision underscores the practical significance of cultural heritage, as it mirrors the nation's history and serves as a fundamental aspect of its national identity and social cohesion⁷³⁹. Consequently, it serves as a bridge between authenticity and modernity, guaranteeing that financial prosperity and social progress are harmonized with a reverence for Qatari history, traditions, and values⁷⁴⁰.

This emphasis on cultural heritage in Vision 2030 is a sort of continuity of the cultural reforms that began with even before Qatar's independence. In the 1960s the Qatari government acknowledged the necessity to safeguard its past and invited Beatrice de Cardi, a distinguished British archaeologist with extensive experience in the Gulf region, to gather materials for the country's proposed national museum⁷⁴¹. Immediately after its independence in 1971, Qatar joined UNESCO as member in 1972. In 1975, Qatar opened its first national museums⁷⁴². In 1980, the Qatar National Museum won the prestigious Agha Khan Award for the restoration and rehabilitation of Islamic architecture which was pivotal in sparking a wave of heritage conservation projects across Doha such as the very famous *Souq Waqif*⁷⁴³. In 1995, *Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani* became Emir, seizing the power from his father, *Sheikh Khalifa Bin Hamad Al Thani*, and announced a significant cultural liberalization⁷⁴⁴. The new Emir, in that period, increased his focus on cultural heritage within the context of the development of a globally recognizable national identity, which sought to present Qatar as the heart of Islamic culture and to develop Qatar as a tourist destination⁷⁴⁵. In 1998, the Supreme Council of Culture, Arts and Heritage was established, followed by the establishment of the Qatar Tourist Authority

⁷³⁹ General Secretariat for Development Planning. (2008). Qatar National Vision 2030. Accessible in English via: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/GCO-QNV-English.pdf>

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid, pp: 3

⁷⁴¹ CRAWFORD, H. (2017). Beatrice Eileen de Cardi 1914–2016 in Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy, XVI, 109–118. McDonald Institute, University of Cambridge. pp: 116.

⁷⁴² Liloia, A. (2020). Qatar's Cultural Heritage Projects: How Museums and Markets give a sense of National Belonging. Middle East Centre.

⁷⁴³ Exell, K., & Rico, T. (2013). 'There is no heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, colonialism and other problematic histories. *World Archaeology*, 45(4), 670–685.

⁷⁴⁴ Món Sanromà, M. (2015). Qatar during the reign of Hamad Al Thani (1995–2013): from soft power to hard power. ICIP Working Papers. 1–71.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid, pp: 20

in 2000, and finally, the Qatar Museums Authority was established in 2005, the latter is the core responsible for Cultural heritage management to the present day⁷⁴⁶.

In November 2008, one month after the official announcement of Qatar National Vision 2030, Qatar Museums Authority announced the opening of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, an extension of the planned reforms that started 9 years before. In 1999, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani invited the famous architect I.M. Pei (1917-2017)⁷⁴⁷ to establish a distinctive museum for the Qatari capital, Doha⁷⁴⁸. Due to his lack of experience and knowledge about the Islamic world, he initially rejected the offer. However, after studying Islamic art for six months and traveling to Arab and Islamic countries, he returned to accept the offer⁷⁴⁹.



Photo 8: Islamic art museum, Doha, Qatar.
retrieved from <https://qm.org.qa/en/>

The design of the museum is inspired by the dome of the ablution fountain of the Mosque of *Ahmed Ibn Tulun* in Cairo and building it, on an artificial island on the southern side of the Doha Corniche (Figure 1), took five years to showcase its beauty and ensure its visibility from all sides of Doha, free from any building's shadow⁷⁵⁰. The museum presents a diverse range of temporary and permanent exhibitions, illuminating the rich heritage of Islamic cultures spanning 1400 years worldwide⁷⁵¹. It is considered as a beacon of knowledge and inspiration, as it connects the history of art and ancient Islamic civilization to the present and the future, including a variety of

⁷⁴⁶ Exell, K., & Rico, T. (2013). 'There is no heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, colonialism and other problematic histories. *World Archaeology*, 45(4), 670–685.

⁷⁴⁷ He is a Chinese-born architect known for modern designs such as the Louvre pyramid in Paris and the Bank of China tower in Hong Kong.

⁷⁴⁸ Khiyam news. (2008). Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar: A New Cultural Icon. (article in Arabic) <https://khiyam.com/news/article.php?articleID=5209>

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid,

⁷⁵⁰ Ferwati, M. S. (2013). The Museum of Islamic Art: Form, perception, and environment. *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* Volume 6.

⁷⁵¹ Tepest, E.M. (2019). Temporary Until Further Notice': The Museum of Islamic Art and the Discursive Endeavour of Displaying Islamic Art in Qatar. *Museum & Society*. 17(2) 157-172

collections, most notably a rare and ancient copy of the *Holy Quran* dating back to the early eighth century, as well as the curtain of the *Kaaba* dating back to the 19th century⁷⁵².

The Islamic Museum was established to align with Qatar's national identity, as outlined in Article 1 of the 2004 proposed permanent constitution, which recognized the State of Qatar as:

*“Qatar is an independent sovereign Arab State. Its religion is Islam and Shari'a law shall be a main source of its legislations. Its political system is democratic. The Arabic Language shall be its official language. The people of Qatar are a part of the Arab nation.”*⁷⁵³

During the opening ceremony of the museum, which was a major national and regional event attended by many heads of state, *Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani*⁷⁵⁴ emphasized Qatar's new role as a leader in crossing cultures and civilizations. She quoted:

*"Qatar is on its way to become a global capital of culture and an authentic global meeting point that calls for peace and love through intellectual and creative encounters between different cultures. This museum is an important cultural and artistic bridge that extends across space and time, to be a means of communication with the world's cultures and arts. Our goal is to showcase the artistic and creative creations of our people, to enhance the educational foundations to understand and motivate the past to create a better future. We want to highlight the role of Islamic civilization in human history and displaying its creativity and treasures, which has become an urgent and important matter for the West to understand Islam and its civilization, and that it is a religion of tolerance, knowledge and civilization, not a religion of terrorism.”*⁷⁵⁵

This statement reflects Qatar's deliberate engagement with cultural heritage as a tool for showcasing its national identity. The Museum of Islamic Art was positioned as a global meeting point, framing Qatar as both a steward of Islamic civilization and an important actor in the global cultural discourse. The museum was then the starting point for the opening of several museums over the past ten years, the last of which was the Qatar National Museum in 2019.

Another significant action was the unlimited support of the royal decree of 2007, which shifted Qatar's National Day celebration from September 3 (commemorating independence in 1971) to

⁷⁵² Gierlichs, J. (2014). A Vision becomes an Institution: The Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar. In: Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region, edited by St. Wippel, K. Bromber, Ch. Steiner, B. Krawietz. Ashgate Press 2014, 199-210 [Siehe Rezension S. 61 im vorliegenden Bulletin].

⁷⁵³ Qatar. (2004). The Constitution. In *The Constitution* (pp. 1–4). <https://www.gco.gov.qa/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/GCO-Constitution-English.pdf>

⁷⁵⁴ Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani is the sister of Qatar's current ruling Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, she is the responsible of the cultural sector and the chairman of Qatar Museum Authority.

⁷⁵⁵ Khiyam news. (2008). Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar: A New Cultural Icon. (article in Arabic) <https://khiyam.com/news/article.php?articleID=5209>

December 18, marking the accession of *Sheikh Jasim bin Mohammed Al Thani*, the founder of the State of Qatar⁷⁵⁶. This decision demonstrated the regime's emphasis on advancing nationalism, cultivating a stronger feeling of unity among the Qatari population and constructing a historical narrative that bolsters national pride and loyalty to the current ruling family⁷⁵⁷.



Photo 9: Military service agents with traditional Qatari clothes and in the background the skyscrapers designed with the Emir name and picture

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2017/12/19/qatar-national-day-meaningful-and-symbolic-amid-siege>



Photo 10: Qatari kids with traditional clothes and in the background, women next to men in the stage watching the celebration

Source: <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2017/12/19/qatar-national-day-meaningful-and-symbolic-amid-siege>

⁷⁵⁶ Law No. 11 of 2007 considering the Power Assumption Day of Sheikh Jassim Bin Mohamed Bin Thani as a National Day of the State. <https://www.almeezan.qa/LawPage.aspx?id=2479&language=en>

⁷⁵⁷ Mohamed A. J. Althani. (2022). Jassim the leader, founder of Qatar. Revised edition (first edition 2012). Profile books ltd.

The 2008 National Day was particular significance, occurring shortly after the declaration of the National Vision 2030. It was designated as the “Day of Dignity” “العزة” during which the ruling family articulated their belief that “*Qataris today recognize the necessity of adhering to the message of the brave founders who confronted challenges and sacrificed greatly for the sake of unity and dignity,*”⁷⁵⁸ emphasizing that the founding sheikh resisted external pressures despite the prevailing regional and international conflicts of his time.

The deliberate choice to elevate *Sheikh Jassim* as the symbolic father of the nation represents an act of inventing a tradition that glorifies the current regime. Invented traditions, as articulated by Eric Hobsbawm, function to create a sense of continuity with a curated past, often highlighting historical events or figures that align with contemporary political objectives⁷⁵⁹.

*“History is in some ways the holy book of peoples: it is important and necessary. It is the mirror of their past and doings; the record of revelation and morality, the legacy of ancestors to their descendants, a supplement to and an explanation of the present, and an example for the future.”*⁷⁶⁰

The *Sheikh Jassim's* legacy also fits within the concept of “usable past” which holds that states selectively draw upon historical events or figures to develop a narrative that supports the state's current purposes⁷⁶¹. By commemorating this legacy, Qatar's current regime emphasizes the continuity of unity and national sovereignty that dates back to the establishment of the Qatari state, thereby ensuring that national pride and allegiance remain aligned with the *Al Thani* dynasty⁷⁶².

II. Crafting Global Identity: Qatar's Strategic Use of cultural heritage:

In the context of Qatar National Vision 2030, cultural heritage has been positioned as a fundamental pillar in the country's strategic efforts to enhance its global image.

According to Vision 2030, Qatar aims to enhance its international standing by⁷⁶³:

- increasing its regional role culturally, particularly within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Arab League (ALECSO) and the Organization of Islamic Conference (ISESCO).

⁷⁵⁸ Al-Jazeera. (2008). Qatar tahtafilu bi yamniha alwatani- Qatar celebrates its national day.

<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2008/12/18/%d9%82%d8%b7%d8%b1-%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%aa%d9%81%d9%84-%d8%a8%d9%8a%d9%88%d9%85%d9%87%d8%a7-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%88%d8%b7%d9%86%d9%8a>

⁷⁵⁹ Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷⁶⁰ Utz, R. (2005). Nations, Nation-Building, and Cultural Intervention: A Social Science Perspective. *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law*, Volume 9, 2005, p. 615-647.

⁷⁶¹ Bouwsma, W.J. (1990). *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History*. University of California Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp5kk>

⁷⁶² Al-Jalabi; Abdul Rahim, S; Mahmoud, J & others. (2009). *Jassim bin Muhammad bin Thani: Research of the historical symposium accompanying the celebrations of the National Day of the State of Qatar, 2008*. National Day Celebrations Committee.

⁷⁶³ General Secretariat for Development Planning. (2008). Qatar National Vision 2030. Accessible in English via: <https://www.gco.gov.qa/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/GCO-QNV-English.pdf>

- Intensifying cultural exchange with the Arab nations in particular and with other nations in general.
- Sponsoring and supporting dialogue among civilizations, promoting coexistence between different religions and cultures.

The National Vision 2030 of Qatar underscores the significance of collaboration with Arab and Islamic nations and organizations, such as ALECSO and ISESCO. However, in practice, the country has prioritized its engagements with UNESCO. The rapid modernization and substantial wealth of Qatar have also encouraged it to play a significant role in the global cultural arena⁷⁶⁴. UNESCO serves as a global recognized organization that facilitates cultural diplomacy⁷⁶⁵, enabling Qatar to utilize its cultural heritage to strengthen its soft power and position itself as a cultural hub in the Middle East, especially with the regard to the potential hosting of significant international events such as the FIFA World Cup 2022⁷⁶⁶.

This emphasis on UNESCO represents an extension of a longstanding relationship. The most significant event in this history is when Qatar organized the "Doha Conference of ‘Ulamâ on Islam and Cultural Heritage"⁷⁶⁷. In 2001, Qatar assumed a pivotal role by convening an urgent conference that brought together all Arab and Islamic nations, alongside the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)⁷⁶⁸. This initiative was a response to the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues, which they unjustly used Islam to rationalize, as well as the terrorist attacks on America that similarly misappropriated the faith to justify violence which significantly heightened the prevalence and intensity of Islamophobia⁷⁶⁹. The conference successfully proposed the “Doha Statement”, in which the *Ulamâ*⁷⁷⁰ participating in the Symposium affirmed that the position of Islam on the preservation of cultural heritage is a principled stance that reflects the essence of the Islamic faith

⁷⁶⁴ Abou Khashabh A.S., Akhmedova N.S. (2023). The rise of Qatar in the international arena: causes, factors, consequences // RUDN Journal of World History. Vol. 15. - N. 1. - P. 56-64.

⁷⁶⁵ UNESCO. (2022). Cutting Edge | From standing out to reaching out: cultural diplomacy for sustainable development. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-standing-out-reaching-out-cultural-diplomacy-sustainable-development>

⁷⁶⁶ Brannagan, P. M., & Perkin, S. J. (2023). Soft Power as “Beauty, Brilliance, Benignity”: The Case of the Aspire Zone Elite Sports Complex in Qatar. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 13(1), 91–109.

⁷⁶⁷ I have mentioned the same conference when I wrote about the position of Islam regarding cultural heritage preservation in Chapter 1

⁷⁶⁸ Bouchenaki M (2020) Safeguarding the Buddha statues in Bamiyan and the sustainable protection of Afghan cultural heritage. In: Nagaoka M (ed) The future of the Bamiyan Buddha statues. Heritage reconstruction in theory and practice, pp 19–30. UNESCO-Springer, Paris.

⁷⁶⁹ Sheridan, L. P. (2006). Islamophobia Pre– and Post–September 11th, 2001. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 21(3), 317-336.

⁷⁷⁰ Ulama is the plural of Aalim which mean a scientist in the Arabic language.

and that any individual or collective behavior that deviates from that position does not accurately represent the Islamic stance⁷⁷¹.

This decision elucidates the growing interest in UNESCO heritage lists among Qatar and other Arab Muslim countries since the 2000s. From 1972 to 2001, Arab states had only 38 sites, whereas from 2002 to the present, they have been increased to 96 World Heritage sites and over 80 intangible cultural heritage elements⁷⁷².

Type	Inscribed element	Year	Description
Tangible	Al-Zubarah Archaeological Site	2013	A historic town that was once a thriving pearling and trading hub in the 18th and 19th centuries.
Intangible	Majlis, a cultural and social space	2015	Traditional communal spaces for social gatherings and discussions.
Intangible	Arabic coffee, a symbol of generosity	2015	Traditions associated with preparing and serving Arabic coffee.
Intangible	Falconry, a living human heritage	2021	The art and practice of hunting with trained falcons.
Intangible	Date palm, knowledge, skills, traditions and practices	2022	Knowledge surrounding date palm cultivation and harvesting.
Intangible	Henna: rituals, aesthetic and social practices	2024	Henna is used in celebratory rituals—especially weddings—to express beauty, social bonding, and cultural continuity.
Intangible	Arabic coffee, a symbol of generosity	2024	Serving Arabic coffee is a ritual of hospitality and respect, symbolizing generosity and social cohesion across generations.

Tableau 10: Qatar's Inscribed elements in the UNESCO heritage lists.

Following the implementation of Vision 2030, Qatar added seven new elements to UNESCO's cultural heritage lists, thus linking heritage to its broader goals of global visibility. This strategy reached its peak during Qatar's bid for the FIFA World Cup 2022, a significant instance where

⁷⁷¹ UNESCO. (2001). Proceedings of the Doha conference of Ulama on Islam and cultural heritage. Paris: UNESCO.

⁷⁷² Centre, U. W. H. (n.d.). Arab States. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/arabstates/>

sport and culture intersect to advance the regime's broader geopolitical goals⁷⁷³. *Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani*, an avid sportsman, utilized his role as Chairman of the National Olympic Committee to obtain the World Cup, indicating Qatar's ambition to transcend regional boundaries and establish itself as a prominent actor in the international arena⁷⁷⁴.

Qatar's manipulation of sport as a cultural instrument, akin to its manipulation of historicity⁷⁷⁵, highlights the complicated link between the past and the present, as well as the conflict between local identity and global aspirations. Football, with its enormous public, serves as the ideal foundation for Qatar's ambitious temporality; a country profoundly rooted in history yet pulled into modernity by global ambitions. As a result, the World Cup bid has evolved beyond simple sports achievement, becoming an embodiment of regime memory⁷⁷⁶, where the event itself is carefully curated to craft a narrative of progress, modernity, and global values.



Photo 11: Croatian fans cheering with Qatari traditional clothes (Qamiss)
Source: <https://x.com/samstreetwrites/status/1594108390456057857>

⁷⁷³ Amara, M., and Y. Bouandel. 2022. "Culture and the World Cup: The Case of Qatar. "In *The Business of the FIFA World Cup*, edited by C. Simon, W. Paul, A. Christos, and P. Daniel, 243–251. London: Routledge.

⁷⁷⁴ Qatar's Sheikh Tamim: 33-year-old groomed for power. (2013, June).

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140227190954/http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5htPpfymY16NhjQ2uMXevlkb0P9xQ?docId=CNG.afefc1a5cc994e46ec54e8cf3b663698.691>

⁷⁷⁵ I used this concept to highlight Qatar's strategic recontextualization of its cultural past, selectively highlighting cultural heritage elements to align with its modern geopolitical and global ambitions.

⁷⁷⁶ Qatar's deployment of the World Cup as a form of regime memory allows the state to meticulously construct/control the collective memory, creating a lasting legacy that ties national progress, modernity, and cosmopolitan values to the current ruling family.



Photo 12: The football legend Lionel Messi wearing the Qatari Bisht at the world cup celebration ceremony.
Source : <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/12/19/why-was-messi-wearing-a-bisht-at-world-cup-ceremony>



Photo 13: Al-bayt stadium designed as a traditional Bedouin tent.
Source: <https://www.qsl.qa/en/al-bayt-stadium>

When Qatar hosted the FIFA World Cup 2022, it deployed its cultural heritage with remarkable intensity, using the global spotlight to construct and showcase a carefully curated image of the nation⁷⁷⁷. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida once remarked, "*Beyond the touchline, there is nothing.*" His intention was not to elevate football above the complexities of life but to suggest that the football field serves as a microcosm of society⁷⁷⁸. Everything happening off the field—

⁷⁷⁷ Griffin, T. R. (2023). Identity Matters: Qatar and Paris Saint-Germain. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 13(1), 73–90.

⁷⁷⁸ Isidori, E. (2010). Deconstructing Sport: When Philosophy and Education Meet in Derrida's Thought. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*, 48(1), 2010. 15-20.

whether in the realms of politics, economics, art, or culture—finds its reflection within the game⁷⁷⁹. In this sense, Qatar's strategic use of its cultural heritage during the event was a sophisticated exercise in cultural diplomacy, in which the boundaries between sports, politics, and heritage were deliberately blurred⁷⁸⁰. The Qatari regime perceived the World Cup as a sporting event and a unique performative stage, where the country could project an image of modernity deeply rooted in tradition, appealing to both its regional identity and its global aspirations⁷⁸¹.

One of the most striking aspects of this intense use of heritage was the moment when Lionel Messi donned the *Bisht* (photo 12)—a traditional Arab cloak—while receiving the World Cup trophy from the Emir of Qatar and FIFA President Gianni Infantino. This event was one of the most symbolically charged events in modern sports history. The *Bisht*, typically worn during significant ceremonies and signifying honor and respect⁷⁸², was placed on Messi by the Emir, a gesture that carried profound cultural significance. Such an act was not just a recognition of Messi's achievement but also a deliberate cultural statement by Qatar, infusing a global sporting celebration with its rich traditions. By cloaking the world's most famous footballer in the *Bisht* at the very moment of his triumph, Qatar asserted its cultural identity on the world's biggest sporting stage. It symbolized Qatar's desire to connect its national heritage with global modernity, using the World Cup as a bridge between East and West, Authenticity and Modernity (والمعاصرة الأصالة). Furthermore, the World Cup stadiums themselves became emblems of Qatar's cultural heritage, integrating architectural designs that reflected local heritage, such as the Bedouin tents and Islamic geometric patterns. (photo 13)

*The State of Qatar received great Arab and international praise during its hosting of the World Cup, the tournament was a great challenge for us, but it changed the stereotypical image of Arabs and Muslims in general, as the audience and fans got to know the Qatari culture, customs and traditions and admired the Qatari heritage. They also expressed their admiration for the Qatari traditional clothing, which was an icon of the sporting event, as everyone was keen to wear it and also to acquire it when leaving the country. We are inviting those who were not lucky to visit us in their second home, Qatar.*⁷⁸³

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid,

⁷⁸⁰ Bianco, C., & Sons, S. (2023). More than a Game: Football and Soft Power in the Gulf. *The International Spectator*, 58(2), 92–106.

⁷⁸¹ Parvez, Z. (2024). The FIFA World Cup 2022, National Identity, and the Politics of Women's Sports Participation in Qatar. *Asian Journal of Sport History & Culture*, 3(2), 154–179.

⁷⁸² Bäckström, Åsa. (2023). The 'Bisht': Mediatized Values, Transnational Cultural Flows and Complexities in Football. In: EASM BELFAST 2023 CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS: Diversity and Inclusion Issues in Sport Management. 309-310

⁷⁸³ Al Sharq newspaper. (2022). Citizens to Al Sharq: Qatar has exported its heritage and culture to the whole world. Link in Arabic : [Al Sharq newspaper](#)

This meticulous orchestration of cultural heritage during the World Cup reflects Qatar's new orientation. By aligning its heritage with the world's most-watched event, Qatar sought to project itself as a cultural and political leader in the Arab world and as a prospective global tourist destination⁷⁸⁴.

III. Qatar's Integration of Cultural Heritage in Tourism

The third important aspect of cultural heritage in Qatar's Vision 2030 is its incorporation as an essential element for the development of the tourism sector. In fact, according to statistics from the International Tourism Organization, 40% of international tourism is related to cultural tourism which refers to travel centered around experiencing a location's culture, including its historical buildings, art, language, and living traditions⁷⁸⁵. In this sense, Qatar, like other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, has positioned tourism as a key sector in its National Vision 2030, aiming to diversify its economy away from oil dependency⁷⁸⁶.

As a driver of sustainable development, tourism can play of significant role in further propelling forward, particularly when considering Qatar's significant tourism potential which is still to be fully explored and leveraged. Indeed, with its rich cultural heritage, central geographic location, expanding state-of-the-art infrastructure, award-winning national airline, business-friendly environment and reputation for hospitality, Qatar has everything it takes to be a major tourism destination⁷⁸⁷.

Since 2008, Qatar has extensively invested in museums, inaugurating over 10 museums covering topics from Islamic art (2008) to modern exhibitions like the Museum of Illusion (2019). Such focus goes on the one hand with Qatar's national plan regarding the preservation of Cultural heritage and on the other hand actively constructing a cultural discourse that enhances its image internationally. In the tourism sector, these museums function as points of interests, attracting visitors to engage with a curated representation of Qatari culture, history, and modernity⁷⁸⁸.

⁷⁸⁴ Al-Kubaisi, H. A. (2023). The 2022 World Cup and Shifts in Qatar's Foreign Policy. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 13(1), 30–50.

⁷⁸⁵ UNWTO. (2021). *Big Data in Cultural Tourism: Building Sustainability and Enhancing Competitiveness*. Madrid: World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

⁷⁸⁶ Hilal N. (2020). Tourism in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries as a Priority for Economic Prospects and Diversification. *J Tourism Hospit* 9:451.

⁷⁸⁷ Qatar Tourism Authority. (2015) QATAR NATIONAL TOURISM SECTOR STRATEGY 2030. Issa Bin Mohammed Al-Mohannadi: Chairman Qatar tourism authority.

⁷⁸⁸ Bounia, A. & Hendrick, C. (2020). *Studying Museums in Qatar and Beyond*. UCL Qatar, Humanitarian Building, Education City, Doha. pp: 65.



Photo 14: General view of the Katara Cultural Village
Source: Cultural Village Foundation-Katar (2020).



Photo 15: Souk /market) Waqif
Photo taken by the Author.

Furthermore, Qatar has also invested in creating other cultural hubs that will highlight its heritage and modern identity. Katara Cultural Village (Photo 14) showcases the nation's pride in its rich history while also serving as a vibrant center for cultural exchange today. The name “*Katara*” was the first and most ancient name of Qatar Peninsula in found on the map drawn by the Greek geographer *Claudius Ptolemaeus* in 150 AD⁷⁸⁹. Architecturally, Katara blends traditional Qatari elements with modern design, offering venues for art exhibitions, theater, and international

⁷⁸⁹ Cultural Village Foundation. (2020). About Katara. <https://www.katara.net/About-Katara>

festivals. The establishment offers a plethora of cultural activities; spanning from music performances to film screenings, creating a vibrant space for tourists to experience both local and global cultures, reinforcing Qatar's image as a sophisticated, historically rich destination⁷⁹⁰. Moreover, *Souq Waqif* (Photo 15) is one of Doha's most famous tourist attractions, a vibrant bazaar that embodies Qatar's long-standing traditions. The Souq (market), rebuilt to preserve its historical character, is constructed as a narrow alley (like Marrakech's medina) where tourists may explore stores selling traditional products, spices, and handicrafts, as well as restaurants serving local food⁷⁹¹. Beyond business, Souq Waqif is a cultural hub that hosts festivals, concerts, and art exhibits. Its ability to combine the old-world Souq experience with contemporary tourism has made it a key component of Qatar's cultural tourism strategy, attracting both locals and foreign tourists to experience authentic Qatari life⁷⁹².

In addition, Qatar has performed other measures that have markedly enhanced its tourist industry, including major events such as the FIFA World Cup 2022, strategic collaborations with Qatar Airways, and the establishment of great infrastructure, etc. Additionally, initiatives like the Doha Exhibition and Convention Center (DECC) and upscale hotel additions have enhanced Qatar's emerging status as a premier worldwide destination. Collectively, these initiatives have established Qatar as a significant participant in the regional and global tourist industry.

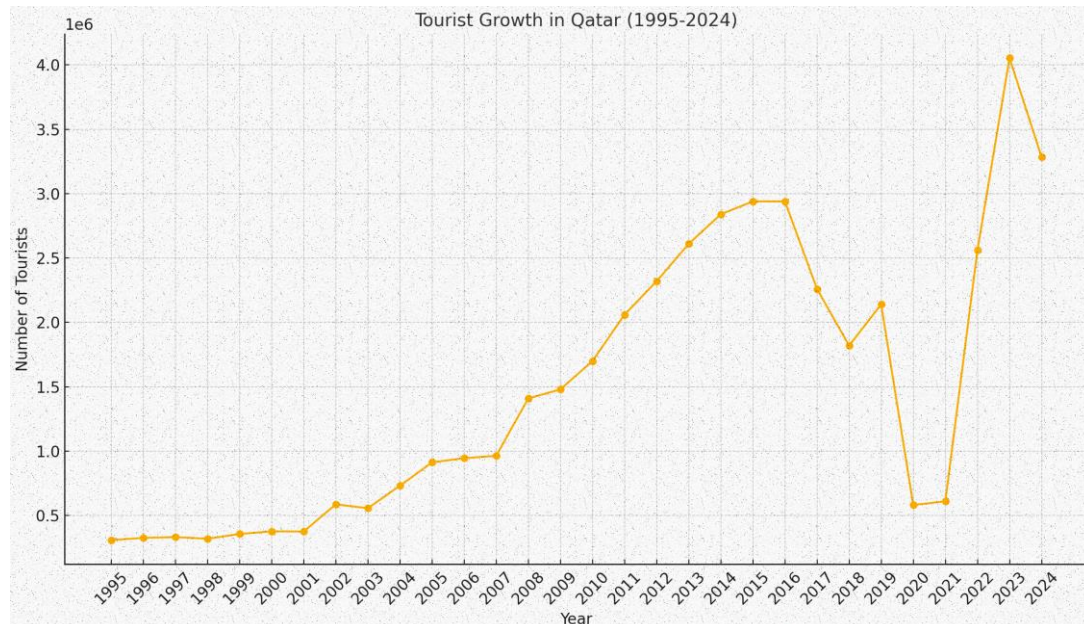


Figure 2: Tourist Growth in Qatar (1995-2024)
Source: <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/qatar/tourism.php>

⁷⁹⁰ Abaalzamat, K. H., Al-Sulaiti, K. I., Alzboun, N. M., & Khawaldah, H. A. (2021). The Role of Katara Cultural Village in Enhancing and Marketing the Image of Qatar: Evidence From TripAdvisor. *Sage Open*, 11(2).

⁷⁹¹ Boussaa, D. (2014) Rehabilitation as a Catalyst of Sustaining a Living Heritage: The Case of Souk Waqif in Doha, Qatar. *Art and Design Review*, 2, 62-71.

⁷⁹² Tannous, H & Furlan, R.(2018). Livability and Urban Quality of the Souq Waqif in Doha (State of Qatar). *Saudi Journal of Engineering and Technology*. Vol-3, Iss-6 (Jun 2018): 368-387

As illustrated in (Figure 10), Qatar has experienced a significant advancement in its tourism sector⁷⁹³. However, it is important to know that from the time of Qatar's independence in 1971 until 1995, discussions and data regarding tourism were almost nonexistent due to the prevailing wars and political circumstances in the region, as previously noted. In 1995, Qatar marked an important turning point in its foreign relations by hosting the World Youth Cup, an event that had been initially scheduled for Nigeria but was relocated to Qatar in response to the la meningitis epidemic outbreak⁷⁹⁴. The hosting of such an international tournament represented the initial catalyst for the evolution of tourism, in its contemporary definition, within the country. The tournament subsequently played a significant role in enhancing Qatar's visibility, and regardless of the coup that occurred a few months later, Qatar welcomed 300,000 tourists that year, a remarkable increase relative to previous figures.

Subsequently, the Qatar's tourism sector demonstrated consistent growth, reaching 1.41 million in 2008⁷⁹⁵, which was the year the nation's 2030 long-term development vision was initiated. The vision 2030 projected the arrival of 6 million tourists by the year 2030. Over a span of 16 years, from 2008 to 2024, Qatar successfully hosted 4.05 million visitors in 2023⁷⁹⁶. These figures indicate that Qatar's extensive efforts in developing a robust cultural offering are yielding positive results, reflecting the nation's dedication to positioning tourism as a fundamental component of its economic diversification strategy as outlined in Qatar National Vision 2030.

⁷⁹³ All the data that I used is retrieved from <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/qatar/tourism.php> and <https://www.qatartourism.com/en/news-and-media/sector-statistics/tourism-dashboards>

⁷⁹⁴ [insidethegames](https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1088143/qatar-club-world-cup-host-nation). (2019). Philip Barker: the history of Qatar's FIFA Youth Cup hosting.

⁷⁹⁵ World Data. (n.d.). Tourism in Qatar. WorldData.info. <https://www.worlddata.info/asia/qatar/tourism.php>

⁷⁹⁶ Planning and Statistics Authority. (n.d.). Qatar Open Data Portal. Data.gov.qa. <https://www.data.gov.qa/pages/homepage/>

2. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Cultural Heritage

I. Nation-building and shaping the historical narratives.

In the introduction section of the vision 2030 document authored by the crown prince Mohamed Bin Salman, the following was articulated:

"Our Vision is built around three themes: a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation (...) We believe in the importance of a vibrant society. Members of this society live in accordance with the Islamic principle of moderation, are proud of their national identity and their ancient cultural heritage, enjoy a good life in a beautiful environment, are protected by caring families and are supported by an empowering social and health care system."⁷⁹⁷

Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman* has laid out three essential pillars: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. These pillars reflect the Saudi regime's vision for a modernized future and the direction in which cultural heritage is also viewed as a critical component in resolving the conflict between authenticity and modernity⁷⁹⁸. However, it is essential to emphasize that this approach aims to continue the efforts initiated in the 1970s. In 1972, a royal order was enacted to establish the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) and endorse the Law of Antiquities. This legislation at the time set forth guidelines for archeological excavations and restrictions for the preservation of discovered artifacts⁷⁹⁹. In 1976, the SCA initiated the first extensive archaeological survey in the country's history, resulting in the establishment of the National Museum of Antiquities and Folklore in 1978, which houses several items gathered during this survey⁸⁰⁰. The prevailing political conditions at that period hindered the completion of the work, particularly due to the influence of the awakening movement who deemed cultural heritage to be prohibited and promoted idol worship⁸⁰¹.

Crown Prince *Mohamed bin Salman* was extended an invitation to have a public interview with the American Atlantic magazine in March 2022. The purpose of this interview was to commemorate and emphasize the accomplishments made over the five-year period from the initiation of Vision 2030. He emphasized that his nation should not take pride in this period of history, since the awakening movement had a deep influence on the growth path of the Saudi

⁷⁹⁷ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. Pp:13 <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid,

⁷⁹⁹ Al-Baqawy, G.A.S. (2018). Architectural Heritage in Saudi Arabia Between Laws, Organizational Structures and Implementation. Doctoral thesis. University of Liverpool.

⁸⁰⁰ Cassola, V. (2016). Museums and Identity in Saudi Arabia, Identities & Islam: Material Culture, Self and Society in the Pre-Modern Muslim World, Inaugural UK Early Career Symposium on Islamic Archaeology, University of Southampton, 19-20 April 2013.

⁸⁰¹ Hamad, A.R. (2018). The relationship between AL-SAHWA social movement and the Saudi regime, an appraisal. QATAR University. College of Arts and Sciences. pp: 29.

state, as well as on the suppression and deprivation of people's quality of life, exerting a significant influence also on the subjugation and deprivation of individuals pleasure in life⁸⁰². He also justified the important function of cultural heritage in the process of nation-building in his country, arguing that the primary goal is to ensure that Saudis are aware of the accurate and authentic history of their identity⁸⁰³. He quoted:

" The problem in the Arabian Peninsula was that the only people who were able to read and write at that time were the students of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab, so history was written from their perspective, and this was misused by many extremists. (...) But today, we are back on the right track, as I said. We are going back to the roots, back to pure Islam, to be sure that the soul of Saudi Arabia, based on Islam, our culture, whether tribal or urban, is serving the nation, serving the people, serving the region, serving the whole world, and is leading us to economic growth⁸⁰⁴. "

A few days later, Oxford University arranged a public conference with the Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom, *Prince Khalid bin Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud*, to discuss the transformations occurring in his country as a consequence of the implementation of Vision 2030. The ambassador opened his speech by emphasizing that the need to shape history is a sentiment shared by all members of the ruling royal family and citizens. He then proceeded to quote:

"When I first arrived as ambassador here, I was asked what I want to achieve, and I said I want to take the last 40 years of facts about Saudi Arabia and correct them because they're wrong, and the problem with wrong basic facts is that when people analyze what is Saudi Arabia, the analysis may be wonderful, but it'll end up in the wrong place and that's unfortunate. We are not a perfect country, and we have plenty of problems, but we are not what most people think we are and that I think is very important to change.⁸⁰⁵"

This increasing obsession with shaping the past and reconstructing national history has elevated cultural heritage to a central role in the formation of national identity. These public statements illustrate the significant role that cultural heritage plays in the 2030 vision. It is given significant

⁸⁰² SaudiGazette. (2022). Full transcript of Crown Prince interview on reforms, religious, future of Saudi Arabia and relations with US. Consulted in English via this link: <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/617738>

⁸⁰³ Ibid,

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid, Crown prince answering to the question: So, if you say, we're getting rid of this outside Muslim Brotherhood influence, that's one thing. But how are you dealing with the Saudi component of extremism?

⁸⁰⁵ OxfordUnion. (2022, March 17). Saudi Ambassador to UK on Vision 2030 and Regional Security | Full Q&A | Oxford Union [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mduW-n6lN8M>

emphasis, especially under the "Vibrant Society" pillar, aiming to improve the quality of life for Saudi people by implementing cultural, recreational, and social activities.

“We take immense pride in the historical and cultural legacy of our Saudi, Arab, and Islamic heritage. Our land was, and continues to be, known for its ancient civilizations and trade routes at the crossroads of global trade. This heritage has given our society the cultural richness and diversity it is known for today. We recognize the importance of preserving this sophisticated heritage to promote national unity and consolidate true Islamic and Arab values. We will endeavor to strengthen, preserve and highlight our national identity so that it can guide the lives of future generations. We will do so by keeping true to our national values and principles, as well as by encouraging social development and upholding the Arabic language. We will continue to work on restoring national, Arab, Islamic and ancient cultural sites and strive to have them registered internationally to make them accessible to everyone and, in the process, create cultural events and build world-class museums that will attract visitors from near and far. This will create a living witness to our ancient heritage, showcasing our prominent place in history and on the map of civilizations.”⁸⁰⁶

This passage from Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 stresses the potential commitment to preserving and reviving cultural heritage, communicating a strong awareness of the importance of cultural heritage as an imperative aspect that can instigate national cohesion and further reinforce moderated Islamic values. Consequently, the first action taken by the Saudi regime to implement the 2030 vision was the issuance of a royal decree regarding the invention of a new tradition that seeks to commemorate the founding of the Saudi state in 1727, under the name “*Founding Day*” (22, February) and its subsequent designation as an official holiday⁸⁰⁷. Similar to the Qatari example, this new invented tradition was added to the existing National day (September 23) that celebrate the unification of the scattered parts and splintered tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

The decision also coincided the opening of the city of Ad-Dir’iyah which is the home of the At-Turaif UNESCO World Heritage Site, a preserved mud-brick city that was the birthplace of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the original home of House of the *Al Saud* current ruling family⁸⁰⁸.

⁸⁰⁶ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. Pp 17 <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

⁸⁰⁷ King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. (2022). *Royal Decree on the designation of Founding Day as an official holiday*. <https://www.spa.gov.sa/2324647>

⁸⁰⁸ Bay, M.A. ; Alnaim, M.M.; Albaqawy, G.A.; Noaime, E. (2022). The Heritage Jewel of Saudi Arabia: A Descriptive Analysis of the Heritage Management and Development Activities in the At-Turaif District in Ad-Dir’iyah, a World Heritage Site(WHS). *Sustainability* 2022,14, 10718.

A significant historical milestone in Saudi history has been overlooked, or let's say erased, which is the 1744 formation of the Saudi kingdom when *Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab* (1703–1792)⁸⁰⁹ formed an alliance with *Muhammad ibn Saud* (1687-1765)⁸¹⁰. The alliance concept was founded on the rejection and combat of heresies and polytheism, symbolized by the tombs and shrines distributed around the Arabian Peninsula at that period, aiming to advocate for the restoration of authentic and unadulterated Islam⁸¹¹. Therefore, the agreement specified that *Ibn Saud* would protect *Ibn Abd al-Wahhab* in his efforts to spread his beliefs in exchange for granting religious authority to the rule of *Muhammad ibn Saud* in the Arabian Peninsula, thereby shaping the Kingdom's identity through political slogans, laws, and even the national flag, which bears the word monotheism (*Tawhid*), based on religious principles⁸¹².

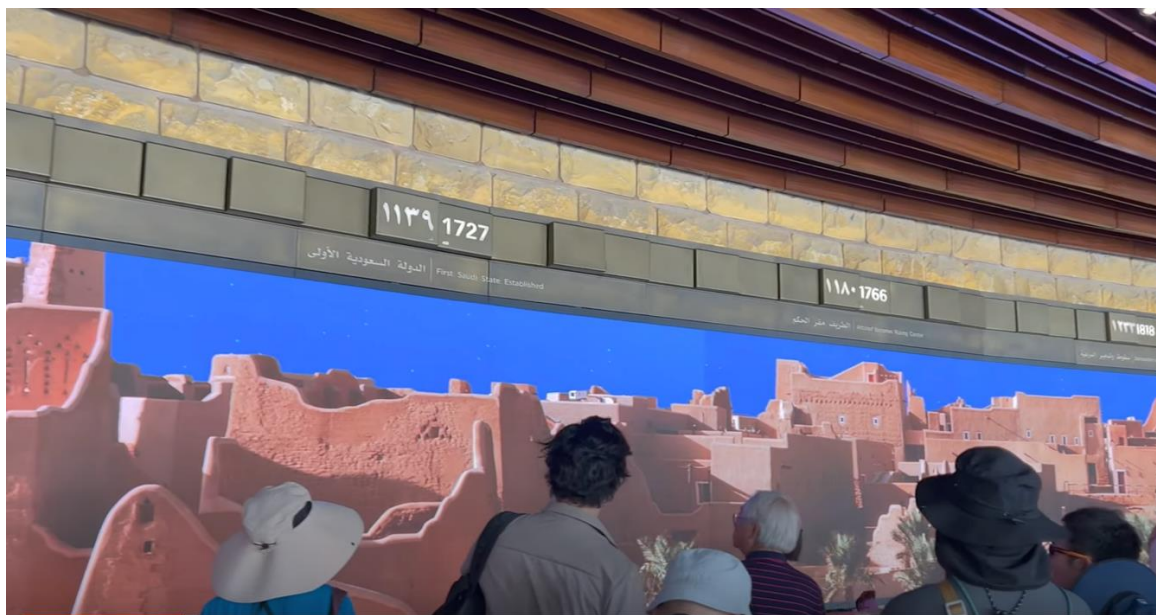


Photo 16: Diriyah Museum commemorating the 1727 as the founding day of Saudi Arabia's first state taken by the author.

The commemoration of Saudi Arabia's "*Founding Day*" which marks the year 1727 instead of the previously recognized 1744, can be interpreted through the lens of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of the "invention of tradition" as practices that are of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with suitable historic past⁸¹³. This decision to reframe the historical national narrative reflects the central theme of political reforms in the current regime, led by Crown Prince *Mohamed bin Salman*, which is increasing nationalism and decreasing religious prejudice⁸¹⁴. By the invention of the tradition of commemorating the 1727 foundation day, the Saudi regime

⁸⁰⁹ Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab is the founder of the Wahhābī Islamic reform movement.

⁸¹⁰ Imam Muhammad ibn Saud known also as Ibn Saud was the emir of Diriyah and is the founder of the First Saudi State and the Al Saud dynasty.

⁸¹¹ ALGAR, H. (2002) Wahhabism: A Critical Essay. North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International.

⁸¹² Darwich, M. (2014). The Ontological (In)security of Similarity: Wahhabism versus Islamism in Saudi Foreign Policy. German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA).

⁸¹³ Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸¹⁴ Hope, B; Scheck. (2020). *Blood and Oil: Mohammed bin Salman's Ruthless Quest for Global Power*. Hachette Books.

emphasizes the political and dynastic roots of the *Al Saud* family, distancing the national narrative from its previous religious focus on the alliance with *Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab*⁸¹⁵.

Furthermore, the royal family has focused on the world heritage site of Historic Jeddah, known as the Gate to Makkah. This site is the second most important national historical site, after Ad-Dir'iyah, since it serves as a connection between Saudis and their maritime past, as well as a trading route and conduit for commodities to Mecca⁸¹⁶. Historically, Jeddah served as the entrance for Muslim pilgrims going by sea to Mecca, and it is still a destination for all Muslims today, since it contains the nearest airport to Mecca for Muslims intending to do Hajj or Umrah⁸¹⁷. Vision 2030 included the Jeddah Historic District strategy that aim to establish it as a center of culture, arts and a globally recognized cultural heritage destination⁸¹⁸.



Photo 17: street celebration during Jeddah season

Source: <https://waradana.com/english/article/148315-heritage-evenings-filled-with-colors-and-arts-in-historic-jeddah>

During my fieldwork in April 2024, I have observed a significant departure from the usual patterns, which the local population perceived as a manifestation of moderate Islam. Effectively, the city has transformed into a dynamic cultural center, characterized by its narrow streets, bustling souks (markets), and a blend of traditional Hijazi architecture. This altered environment

⁸¹⁵ Alhussein, E. (2022). Saudi Arabia's National Day(s): An Evolving State-Formation Narrative. The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

⁸¹⁶ Maneval, S. (2019.). A brief history of Jeddah in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. in *New Islamic Urbanism: The Architecture of Public and Private Space in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia*. University College London. 22-39.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid,

⁸¹⁸ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. Jeddah Historic District. (n.d.).
<https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/explore/projects/jeddah-historic-district>

offers a multitude of cultural events, including poetry, dance, and singing, which stresses the new culturally based reforms (photo 17).



Photo 18: glorification of the crown prince in Jeddah as he gave life to the city again taken by the Author.

I took the photo 18 during my visit to the historic city of Jeddah in April 2024. It shows the Crown Prince in traditional Saudi dress and next to him is a logo describing him as the revitalizer of Jeddah's historical buildings, referring to the preservation or restoration of the city's architectural heritage. The case of *Jeddah Al-Balad* demonstrates how cultural heritage sites may serve not only to confirm the ruler's legitimacy but also to elevate him to the status of national hero. The inclusion of this historic site in Saudi Vision 2030 resulted in the easing of severe Islamic norms, transforming Jeddah into a cultural hub and one of the country's most promising tourist destinations⁸¹⁹.

In conclusion, cultural heritage has become an increasingly important factor in shaping national narratives by allowing the Saudi regime to reinterpret its history in accordance with contemporary norms, thereby empowering it as a tool for shaping the future and establishing a collective national identity that reflects the current aspirations. The preservation and reinterpretation of historical sites, the liberation of women, the normalization of dancing, and

⁸¹⁹ Badawi, S., & Farag, A. A. (2023). Improving The Urban Qualities of Historic Streets in Jeddah. *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice*, 14(1), 30–57.

festivals could not have been achieved without the pretext of national heritage, which represented Saudi society prior to the 1970s.

II. Cultural Heritage to enhance Saudi Arabia's global image.

The second impact of Vision 2030 on cultural heritage is its recognition as a fundamental component in reshaping and enhancing Saudi culture within the global cultural landscape⁸²⁰. The inscription of cultural heritage sites into UNESCO's Heritage Lists serves as an effective means for nations to enhance their international reputation, highlighting their commitment to preserving heritage and identity while simultaneously improving their status in global cultural diplomacy⁸²¹. For these reasons, Saudi Arabia has collaborated with UNESCO, the leading international organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of cultural heritage, to highlight its historical and cultural richness.

Through Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has established two primary objectives⁸²²:

- More than doubling the number of its heritage sites registered with UNESCO by 2030.
- Establishing a platform for cultural exchange and education, developing world-class museums and organizing global cultural events

Heritage Type	Element/Site	Year of inscription	Brief description
Tangible Cultural Heritage	Al-Hijr (Madain Salih)	2008	Nabataean city with monumental rock-cut tombs.
	At-Turaif District, ad-Dir'iyah	2010	Historic capital of the first Saudi State, with unique Najdi architecture.
	Historic Jeddah	2014	A Red Sea port city known for coral architecture and links to Makkah.
	Rock Art in Hail Region	2015	10,000-year-old petroglyphs depicting humans and animals.
	Al-Ahsa Oasis	2018	Oasis with archaeological significance and millions of date palms.

⁸²⁰ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

⁸²¹ Moscatelli, M. Cultural identity of places through a sustainable design approach of cultural buildings. (2022). The case of Riyadh. In Proceedings of the International Conference on Sustainability: Developments and Innovations, ICSDI, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 19–22 February 2022; IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science. IOP Publishing: Bristol, UK; Volume 1026.

⁸²² Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

	Hima Cultural Area	2021	Rock art and inscriptions from travelers along ancient caravan routes.
	Uruq Bani Ma'arid Reserve	2023	A desert reserve preserving unique ecosystems and wildlife.
	Al-Faw Archaeological Area	2024	An ancient trade and agricultural hub in the Empty Quarter desert.
Intangible Cultural Heritage	Alardah Alnajdiyah	2015	Traditional Saudi performance involving dance, drumming, and poetry.
	Majlis: A cultural and social space	2015	Traditional communal spaces for social gatherings and discussions.
	Arabic Coffee	2015	Traditions associated with preparing and serving Arabic coffee.
	Almezmar: Drumming and dancing with sticks	2016	A folk-dance involving drumming and stick performance.
	Al-Qatt Al-Asiri	2017	Women's traditional wall decoration in the Asir region.
	Traditional weaving of Al-Sadu	2020	Textile weaving practiced by Bedouin communities.
	Arabic Calligraphy	2021	Traditional techniques of Arabic script writing.
	Falconry	2021	The art and practice of hunting with trained falcons.
	Date palm: Knowledge and skills.	2022	Knowledge surrounding date palm cultivation and harvesting.
	Khawlani coffee cultivation knowledge	2022	Practices surrounding the cultivation of Khawlani coffee beans.
	Alheda'a: Oral traditions of calling camel flocks	2022	Traditional oral calls used to herd and guide camels.
	Arts of engraving on metals (gold, silver, copper)	2023	Techniques used in metal engraving craftsmanship.
	Harees dish	2023	Culinary knowledge surrounding the traditional preparation of Harees.

	Semsemiah: instrument crafting and playing	2024	A traditional stringed instrument used in Red Sea coastal regions, the Semsemiah reflects local craftsmanship and maritime musical heritage.
	Henna: rituals, aesthetic and social practices	2024	Henna is used in celebratory rituals—especially weddings—to express beauty, social bonding, and cultural continuity.
	Arabic coffee, a symbol of generosity	2024	Serving Arabic coffee is a ritual of hospitality and respect, symbolizing generosity and social cohesion across generations.
	Cultural practices related to Taif roses	2024	These practices involve cultivating, harvesting, and distilling the fragrant Taif roses, reflecting deep-rooted agricultural and communal traditions.

Tableau 11: Inscribed cultural heritage elements in the UNESCO lists

Saudi Arabia has a total of 25 elements registered in the UNESCO lists, eight of which are in tangible heritage and 17 other elements in tangible heritage. Despite being a founding member present at the UNESCO founding conference in 1945 and having accepted⁸²³ the 1972 Convention in 1978, Saudi Arabia was unable to inscribe its cultural components until 2008, owing to previously described political circumstances that imposed restrictions on culture. Prior to Vision 2030, it had only eight elements, four of which were tangible and four intangible elements shared with neighboring countries. Subsequent to Vision 2030, it successfully included four more tangible elements and thirteen intangible heritage elements, therefore achieving the objectives established by Vision 2030 to date.

Moreover, in 2019, Saudi Arabia confirmed its presence within the corridors of UNESCO through a joint project through which Saudi Arabia contributed \$25 million allocated to protect world heritage sites⁸²⁴. Saudi Arabia was then elected by UNESCO member states to Executive Board (Member State, 2019 – 2023; 2023 – 2027), the Intangible Cultural Heritage Intergovernmental Committee (Member State, September 2020 – 2024), as well as its election World Heritage Committee Member (Vice Chair, 2021 – 2023)⁸²⁵.

Saudi Arabia's engagement with UNESCO was a must for us. First, it is an international global recognition of the importance of this heritage, which makes me,

⁸²³ In the Saudi Arabian section in the UNESCO website, its written accepted and not ratified.

⁸²⁴ United Nations Saudi Arabia. (2019). Saudi Arabia Commits US\$25 Million to UNESCO for the Protection of Heritage. Consulted in English via: <https://saudiarabia.un.org/en/34309-saudi-arabia-commits-us25-million-unesco-protection-heritage>

⁸²⁵ Permanent delegation of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia to UNESCO. (2024). The long History Between KSA and UNESCO. Consulted in English via: <https://ksaforunesco.org/our-history-with-unesco/>

*as a Saudi citizen, proud of the presence of such heritage in my country. Second, it creates a kind of curiosity among other foreigners, encouraging them to know and visit our country which is very much in line with the new direction of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a global tourist destination*⁸²⁶.

III. Cultural heritage as an economic lever contributing to tourism.

Vision 2030 has set goals related to cultural tourism as another potential source that the Saudi state is adopting within the framework of its path to diversify its sources of income⁸²⁷:

- Increasing the number of Umrah pilgrims from 8 million to 30 million by 2030 through infrastructure expansion and streamlined visa processes.
- Restoring and promoting cultural and historical sites, including ancient Islamic and national heritage locations, while building new museums and cultural venues.
- Developing entertainment hubs and amusement parks to enhance global tourism appeal.
- Liberalizing visa procedures with electronic systems to ease entry for foreign visitors.

It is important to know that, historically, Saudi Arabia's tourist industry was mostly centered on religious pilgrimages to the sacred sites of Mecca and Medina⁸²⁸. However, as the Kingdom seeks to transform itself into a leading player in international tourism through Vision 2030, it has expanded its focus beyond religious tourism to embrace the richness of its cultural heritage⁸²⁹. This approach focuses on the establishment of seasons and festivals, such as the Riyadh Season, which is one of the world's largest annual festivals. This latter takes place during Saudi Arabia's winter months and showcases the Kingdom's culture, music, art, and customs, while attracting global audiences, with 20 million tourists, both local and foreign, counted in 2023⁸³⁰.

According to the Saudi Ministry of Tourism, Saudi Arabia received 109.3 million tourists⁸³¹. Domestic tourists accounted for 75% of the total, numbering approximately 81.9 million, while international visitors made up 25%, totaling 27.4 million⁸³². It is noteworthy that 55% of all tourism trips were cultural tourism, driven by the Kingdom's diverse cultural offerings following the recent heritage boom⁸³³. Saudi Arabia has benefited from the incorporation of UNESCO-

⁸²⁶ A statement that I personally obtained during a brief interview with Ahmed Al Sulaim, the Chief Executive Officer of Jeddah Central Development Company. April 2024.

⁸²⁷ Saudi Arabia. (2016). *Vision 2030*. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>

⁸²⁸ Abuhjeeleh, M. (2019). Rethinking Tourism in Saudi Arabia: Royal Vision 2030 Perspective. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, Volume 8 (5)

⁸²⁹ Yehia, E. F., Alzahrani, H. J. M., Reid, D. M., & Ali, M. A. (2022). Tourism, national identity, and the images on postage stamps: the case of Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Tourism History*, 14(1), 70–102.

⁸³⁰ Nazir Mir, R & Kulibi, T.A. (2023). Tourism as an Engine for Economic Diversification: An Exploratory Study of Saudi Arabia's Tourism Strategy and Marketing Initiatives. *Saudi J Bus Manag Stud*, 8(8): 186-201.

⁸³¹ Saudi Arabia Ministry of Tourism. (2023). Annual Statistical Report 2023 Data & Decision Support Deputyship. Consulted Via: <https://mt.gov.sa/tic/publications>

⁸³² Ibid,

⁸³³ Ibid,

inscribed historic monuments into its tourist offerings⁸³⁴. The Kingdom's investment in infrastructure and marketing for these UNESCO sites has led to a substantial rise in heritage-driven tourism by integrating UNESCO World Heritage sites such as AlUla, Diriyah, and Historic Jeddah, which, through their UNESCO designation, have augmented the country's visibility⁸³⁵.



Photo 19: wizz air campaign to promote Saudi Arabia as a heritage destination.

For instance, as shown in the figure, the Wizz Air campaign used the UNESCO World Heritage site of Ad-Dir'iyyah to identify Saudi Arabia as a heritage destination where authenticity meets modernity (والمعاصرة الأصالة). Simultaneously, including Riyadh's modern skyline highlights the Kingdom's rapid development and futuristic ambitions. This juxtaposition reflects Vision 2030's strategy of blending tradition with innovation to diversify the economy, attract global tourism, and rebrand Saudi Arabia as both a preserver of history and a beacon of modern progress.

To conclude, Vision 2030 elevates cultural heritage from a source of national pride to a key driver of economic diversification, thereby positioning Saudi Arabia's rich past as an essential component of its future. This repositioning demonstrates a deliberate effort to surpass the perception of Saudi Arabia only as a site for Islamic pilgrimage, and to highlight its distinctive contributions to world culture.

⁸³⁴ Sampieri S, Saoualikh A, Safaa L, de Carnero Calzada FM, Ramazzotti M, Martínez-Peláez A. (2024). Tourism Development through the Sense of UNESCO World Heritage: The Case of Hegra, Saudi Arabia. *Heritage*. 7(4):2195-2216.

⁸³⁵ Ibid,

VII. Comparative synthesis

In this Chapter, I have argued that Qatar's and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reveals how both states are strategically deploying cultural heritage as a key component of their nation-building projects, while also highlighting significant differences in their approaches. In the two visions, cultural heritage is used not only as a means of national cohesion, but also as a vehicle for global engagement and economic diversification, reflecting a *presentist* approach in which the past is reworked to serve the needs of the present and the aspirations of the future.

In the case of Qatar, the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) serves as a powerful example of how the state uses heritage to project a modern Islamic identity that simultaneously engages with global audiences. The museum underscores Qatar's ambition to bridge its past with the present, using cultural heritage as a form of cultural diplomacy. The MIA, as a global hub for Islamic art, is a clear manifestation of *Laurajane Smith's* theory of the uses of Heritage which stresses that heritage is not simply about preservation but about active use in the present to serve political and social objectives⁸³⁶. Comparatively, Saudi Arabia's focus on cultural heritage-driven modernization is demonstrated through the revitalization of Jeddah's historic district, where the state seeks to restore the city's historic significance while simultaneously promoting it as a key driver of tourism. Like Qatar's MIA, Jeddah's transformation reflects the Saudi state's goal of positioning its cultural heritage as an economic and cultural asset within the global arena, symbolizing the broader ambitions of its Vision 2030.

While both states have employed cultural heritage to shape national identity, their narrative construction reveals divergent focal points. In Qatar, the invention of National Day in 2007 to celebrate the accession of *Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani* instead of the date of independence reflects an attempt to reinforce the legitimacy of the current ruling family. This aligns with Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented traditions, where states selectively draw on historical figures or events to craft a cohesive national narrative that supports contemporary political goals⁸³⁷. Qatar employs this narrative of *Al-Thani's* continuity to instill national pride and foster unity, especially in the face of regional tensions such as the 2017 Pariah; an event that generated loyalty through a shared externalized threat that forges the identity of the state in opposition to its neighbors⁸³⁸.

⁸³⁶ Smith, L. (2006). *The uses of heritage*. Routledge.

⁸³⁷ Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸³⁸ Umar, S., Ghurab, S. (2023). The 2017 Gulf Crisis and Changes in Qatar's Economic Landscape. In: Rahman, M.M., Al-Azm, A. (eds) *Social Change in the Gulf Region*. Gulf Studies, vol 8. Springer, Singapore.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's introduction of "Founding Day" in 1727, instead of the previously celebrated 1744 alliance with *Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab*, signals a deliberate rupture with the religious narrative that had previously dominated the Kingdom's identity. By emphasizing the dynastic and political origins of the Saudi state, Crown Prince *Mohammed Bin Salman's* regime actively reconstructs the past to reflect a more inclusive and modern national narrative, thereby distancing itself from the religious conservatism that had conventionally defined Saudi identity. This shift highlights presentism in both cases, as described by François Hartog⁸³⁹: both Qatar and Saudi Arabia deploy cultural heritage not for the sake of the past itself, but to justify their present and shape their future.

Cultural heritage's role as an economic lever is also critical in both Visions. In Qatar, the MIA and its broader network of museums form the centerpiece of Qatar's effort to transform its economy through cultural tourism. This is reflected in Vision 2030's emphasis on tourism development, where the promotion of cultural heritage serves as a means of diversifying the economy away from oil dependency. The creation of cultural hubs such as *Katara Cultural Village* and *Souq Waqif* illustrates how heritage is commodified and curated to attract global visitors, thus reinforcing Qatar's image as a culturally rich yet modern nation. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 seeks to use cultural heritage to promote cultural tourism as part of its broader economic diversification strategy. The revitalization of AlUla, with its Nabatean ruins, and Jeddah's historic district, both UNESCO World Heritage sites, exemplify Saudi Arabia's strategy of using tangible heritage to generate economic growth and global engagement. Additionally, the emphasis on promoting Saudi cultural heritage to international audiences, whether through Jeddah Season festivals or the restoration of Ad-Diriyah, demonstrates the Kingdom's efforts to position itself as both a preserver of history and a leader in global cultural diplomacy, much like Qatar's efforts.

⁸³⁹ Hartog, F. (2015). *Regimes of historicity: Presentism and experiences of time*. Columbia University Press.



Photo 20: the football legend Cristiano Ronaldo wearing traditional Saudi Bisht and holding the national Sword symbol
Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/56998751526877448/>



Photo 21: Saudi goalkeeper shaving on the field due to strict islamic rules.
Source : <https://www.dawrinews.com/2023/08/Watch-Referee-Prevent-Walid-Abdullah-From-Match-Because-Strange-Haircut-And-Decide-To-Shave-Video.html>

The ongoing opposition between Saudi Arabia and Qatar represents a defining feature of their relationship, and this competitive dynamic also justifies the selection of these two countries as case studies. Despite the eight-year gap between their respective national visions, both countries are pursuing similar objectives, yet Saudi Arabia has accelerated its efforts with the clear ambition to outpace Qatar. This competition (cultural jealousy) has manifested in various arenas, notably in the context of sports diplomacy, where Saudi Arabia's bid to host the 2034 FIFA World Cup illustrates its aspiration to exceed the objectives initially set out in Vision 2030⁸⁴⁰. This competitive drive is further reflected in Saudi Arabia's strategic use of football as a tool of

⁸⁴⁰ BIDDING NATION SAUDI ARABIA 2034. <https://saudi2034bid.com/>

cultural diplomacy, mirroring Qatar's efforts during its hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. During this event, the image (figure 12) of the Qatari Emir presenting the world cup to the champion with the traditional *Bisht* became a globally significant cultural moment.

In a similar vein, Saudi Arabia has transformed its domestic football league into a global showcase, establishing the World Stars League by investing substantial resources in attracting international football legends⁸⁴¹. The signing of Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo, one of the most iconic and widely followed athletes in the world, as a key figure in Saudi football serves to illustrate this shift⁸⁴². Ronaldo has been positioned not only as an athlete but also as an ambassador for Saudi culture, with particular emphasis on promoting Saudi traditions, such as wearing traditional clothes (Photo 20). this symbolizes the cultural soft power strategy that underpins Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

This transformation starkly contrasts with the Saudi Arabia of just two decades ago. In 2016, a football referee famously halted an entire match to shave a Saudi player's head (photo 21) because his hairstyle did not conform to the Islamic law, specifically the prohibition against the "*Qaza'a*" القزع haircut⁸⁴³. The juxtaposition of these two images, separated by only 10 years, underscores the profound transformation in Saudi Arabia's cultural and political orientation. What was once a rigid adherence to religious conservatism has now given way to a more open and globally engaged mentality. This is evident in the country's effort to position itself as a modern cultural and economic power, using cultural heritage as a vital instrument in this national rebranding.

In conclusion, the comparative mobilization of cultural heritage in Qatar and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reveals both shared strategies and distinct trajectories. Both states engage in presentist reconfigurations of the past, employing cultural heritage to legitimize contemporary political projects and future ambitions. Through the examples that I have mentioned, cultural heritage was mobilized to bridge the past and present, serving as a crucial instrument in shaping both domestic and global perceptions of nationhood. This practical use of heritage highlights how the past, far from being static, is actively reconstructed and repurposed to meet the evolving political, economic, and social requirements of each state. As both countries progress, their capacity to balance authenticity and modernity (والمعاصرة الأصالة), local identity and global ambition, will continue to shape their trajectories within the global cultural and political landscape.

⁸⁴¹ Mutz M. (2024). A new flagship of global football: the rise of global attention towards Saudi Arabia's pro league. *Front Sports Act Living*. 1; 6:1293751

⁸⁴² Dominik, S. & and Carl, S. (2024). Cristiano of Arabia: Did Ronaldo increase Saudi Pro League attendances? *Contemporary Economic Policy*, 0 [10.1111/coep.12661].

⁸⁴³ In the Islamic religion, Qaza'a is the practice of shaving certain areas of the head's hair and leaving others uncut.

VIII. Conclusion

The national visions of Qatar and Saudi Arabia represent both a governance strategy and a performative system of knowledge that reconfigures temporality, history, and subjectivity. These visions—dressed in the language of reform and framed as modern contracts—function less as linear roadmaps to the future than as discursive instruments through which both countries produce the conditions under which its citizens may imagine, remember, and desire.

In this system, cultural heritage plays an essential role in preserving history, focusing on directing attention to specific ruins, rituals, and symbols while overlooking others. What is remembered and preserved serves the present goals of leadership; what is forgotten and marginalized often cannot be easily ordered. Festivals, museums, and restored heritage sites are organized not simply for cultural pride but to generate loyalty, admiration, and emotional belonging. It is not the past that speaks in these spaces; it is the present, dressed in the language of tradition. In both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, cultural heritage is a bridge, an intermediate space that connects a past marked by religious rigidity and ideological control with a future imagined as open, modern, and globally integrated. It functions as a transitional language that allows the state to reframe formerly suppressed or theologically contested histories as sources of pride and progress. Historical sites, traditions, and rituals once rejected under strict Islamic policies are now reconceptualized as symbols of civilization and tolerance, declaring a rupture from doctrinal rigidity. In this way, cultural heritage allows both countries to reimagine their own history, not by erasing the past, but by reinterpreting it as an essential introduction for their transformation.

Having traced how cultural heritage is increasingly reoriented through the developmentalist logic of Vision 2030 and its Qatari counterpart, we have come to see how the past is not only curated but strategically projected as part of broader state imaginaries for the future. This transition has taken us from the terrain of archaeological sites and demolished landscapes (chapter 4) to the performative revival of intangible heritage and invented traditions (chapter 5), each shaped by shifting ideological priorities and policy imperatives. Nevertheless, there is one more institutional space where these various dimensions are consolidated, aestheticized, and made officially visible: the national museum. In the last chapter, I focus on these official institutions, where states condense their narratives, assemble identity, and craft cohesive representations of nationhood for both national and international audiences. National museums operate as focal points, organizing the past, justifying the present, and pointing toward futures envisioned by government leaders and cultural elites alike⁸⁴⁴. However, can these institutions truly speak for

⁸⁴⁴ Harding, T. (2020). World culture, world history, and the roles of a museum: a conceptual study of the Swedish museums of world culture, debates concerning them, and their roles in cultural politics. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 27(3), 330–343.

the nation, or do they reflect the image the Saudi and Qatari regimes wish to see in the mirror of their own making?

Chapter 6: Two Museums, One Project: National Identity and Cultural Strategy in Qatar and Saudi Arabia's National Museums

I. Introduction

In modern nation-states, particularly those undergoing rapid modernization and geopolitical reorientation such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, National museums have evolved beyond their traditional role as repositories of essential historical items⁸⁴⁵. National museums are no longer confined to preserving the past; they are active power structures curating collective memory, maintaining social and ideological cohesion, and managing the borders between tradition and modernity⁸⁴⁶. The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) exemplify this transformation, functioning both as cultural institutions and as tools for nation-building and branding. We aim to position these two official institutions within broader dynamics of authoritarian cultural control. Their return illustrates what Bennett refers to as the "governmentalization of culture": the increasing reliance of the state on cultural infrastructures to shape emotional loyalty and public consciousness⁸⁴⁷.

This chapter conducts a critical comparative study of the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) to explore how such cultural institutions are employed to shape and control narratives of national identity. The research illustrates how both museums function as state-approved mechanisms that produce knowledge, memory, and emotion through spatial, visual, and discursive practices, employing a combination of curatorial analysis, architectural interpretation, and empirical audience research.

Three interconnected phases make to the chapter's structure. First, it offers the historical and architectural genealogy of every organization, so mapping the symbolic and political rationale behind their founding, design, and institutional development. Second, it analyzes the thematic and narrative structure of the displays, noting how various periods, events, and social groupings are placed within each national narrative. Its third point is to employ unique survey data from 200 museum visitors—100 from each site—to explore how people understand and respond to

⁸⁴⁵ Macdonald, S. (2003). *Museums, National, Postnational and Transcultural Identities*. *Museum and Society*, 1(1), 1–16.

⁸⁴⁶ Exell, K. (2016). *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula*. Routledge.

⁸⁴⁷ Bennett, T., Dodsworth, F., & Joyce, P. (2007). INTRODUCTION: Liberalisms, government, culture. *Cultural Studies*, 21(4–5), 525–548.

the selected national narratives, thematic emphases, and display tactics.

II. The National Museum of Qatar: Vision, Design, and Historical Development

In 1971, Qatar obtained independence as a sovereign state following the withdrawal of the British administration, which had governed Qatar as a protectorate since 1916, and the separation from the federation of seven emirates currently forming the United Arab Emirates⁸⁴⁸. At that time, the state-building process in the country revealed the essential task of developing a national identity⁸⁴⁹. In 1972, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad Al Thani assumed leadership and immediately ordered the establishment of the Qatar National Museum to preserve Qatar's cultural and historical authenticity during a period marked by internal and regional changes⁸⁵⁰. In 1975, the National Museum of Qatar opened for the first time as the first decisive political decision beyond its cultural scope⁸⁵¹.



Photo 22: the old Emiri palace and its surrounding where the museum was in the 1970s

Source: <https://aldeera.gisqatar.org.qa/portal/home/item.html?id=883657272bff48d0a70ec5fc20ed44bf>

The Old Emiri Palace served as the museum's location (photo 22), holding great symbolic importance because it functioned as both the home and administrative center of *Sheikh Abdullah bin Jassim Al Thani* throughout his reign from 1913 to 1948⁸⁵². The selection of the Old Emiri Palace as the museum's location further symbolized continuity between past governance and the nation's new direction⁸⁵³. The museum showcased its exhibits for this purpose, arranging

⁸⁴⁸ Peterson, J. E. (2006). Qatar and the World: Branding for a Micro-State. *The Middle East Journal*, 60, 732-748.

⁸⁴⁹ Rice, M. (2009). National museum of Qatar, Doha. *Museum International*, 29, 78-87.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid,

⁸⁵¹ Qatar Museums. (n.d.). *The Old Palace*. <https://qm.org.qa/en/visit/heritage-sites/the-old-palace/>

⁸⁵² Al-Mulla, Mariam, "The Development of the First Qatar National Museum", *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices*, edited by Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 117-25.

⁸⁵³ Ibid,

historical objects that illustrated Qatar's cultural and economic evolution while strengthening the theme of its unique balance between desert and sea environments⁸⁵⁴. In 1980, the museum won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture because of its authentic architectural design⁸⁵⁵.

In the first decade of the 2000s, as Qatar emerged as a new important global actor and developing a museum that matched this new status became a key topic of discussion⁸⁵⁶. In 2007, *Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani* announced a full rehabilitation plan for the national museum as part of the broader new national cultural strategy that aimed to strengthen national unity during a challenging demographic and geopolitical transition⁸⁵⁷. The Qatari regime choose the French architect *Jean Nouvel*⁸⁵⁸ to design this new museum.



Photo 23: Museum Design Inspired by the Desert Rose
Source: <https://www.wernersobek.com/projects/national-museum-of-qatar/>

His design concept for the National Museum of Qatar was inspired by the desert rose mineral formation, which can be found in Qatar's dry regions⁸⁵⁹. The interconnected discs that make up the structure represent both the desert's geological formations and the historical strata of Qatar⁸⁶⁰. The Old Emiri Palace remains central to the design, bridging traditional values and modern architectural expression.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid,

⁸⁵⁵ Aga Khan Development Network. (n.d.). National Museum of Qatar. <https://the.akdn/en/how-we-work/our-agencies/aga-khan-trust-culture/akaa/national-museum>

⁸⁵⁶ Al-Tamimi, N., Amin, A., Zarrinabadi, N. (2023). Creating Nation Brand: The Model of Qatar. In: Qatar's Nation Branding and Soft Power. Contributions to International Relations. Springer, Cham.

⁸⁵⁷ Iervolino, S. (2020). *Qatar's accelerated museum developmental model: Rhetoric, actors and expertise*. In *Museums of the Arabian Peninsula* (pp. 128–143). Routledge.

⁸⁵⁸ Jean nouvel is famous for his contextualistic approach which means that he is committed to designing buildings that are responsive to their context and surroundings, taking in consideration the site, history, and cultural context of each his projects.

⁸⁵⁹ Elmoghazy, Z., Nour Afify, H. (2019). Patterns: The crime that has become the haven in architectural practice, *Ain Shams Engineering Journal*, Volume 11, Issue 3, Pages 823-838.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid,

The National Museum officially opened in March 2019, marking a significant cultural and political milestone. Far from being a regular ceremonial event, the inauguration ceremony was a worldwide spectacle, attended by heads of state, diplomats, and significant cultural leaders, showcasing Qatar's deliberate use of heritage in its soft power strategy⁸⁶¹. The event occurred during a period of rising regional geopolitical conflicts (during the 2017–2021 blockade), enabling Qatar's leadership to express the country's sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and resilience once again in the global arena⁸⁶². Through this meticulously prepared occasion, the museum was elevated above its position as a cultural institution to become a performative proclamation of nationhood, unity, and global influence⁸⁶³.

1. A Nation in Three Acts: The Structural and Thematic Composition of NMoQ Exhibitions

The National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) is an architectural and cultural landmark that offers an immersive journey through Qatar's historical and contemporary narrative⁸⁶⁴. It combines historical artifacts with interactive exhibits and documentary storytelling. This analysis of the Museum's structure is based on firsthand observations made during multiple personal visits, allowing for a detailed and authentic account of the thematic and spatial organization of the exhibitions. The Museum organizes its structure into three main sections that house eleven galleries to give visitors a chronological and thematic journey⁸⁶⁵. The sections demonstrate Qatar's geological formation and cultural heritage while also showcasing its economic changes and modern progress to provide a unified dynamic representation of the country's transition⁸⁶⁶.

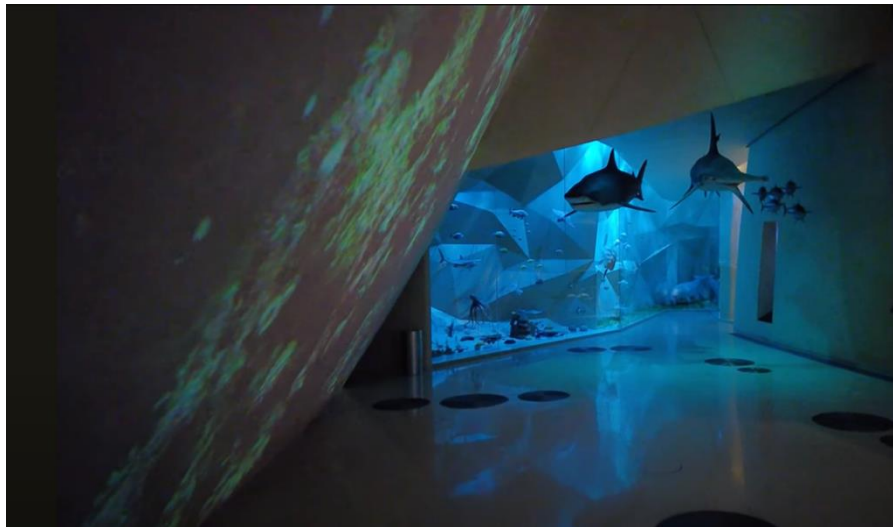


*Photo 24: the maritime natural heritage part
Taken by the Author.*

⁸⁶¹ The Peninsula. (2019, March 28). *Amir inaugurates National Museum of Qatar* [PDF]. The Peninsula Qatar. https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/pdf/20190328_1553730236-12567.pdf

⁸⁶² Ibid,

⁸⁶³ Bounia, A., Hendrick, C. (2020). *Studying Museums in Qatar and Beyond*. UCL Qatar. pp 26

⁸⁶⁴ Al Fadala, E & Furlan, R & Awwaad, R & Marthya, K & Osman, T & Al-Matwi, R. (2023). "Rethinking urbanism in Doha: The Qatar National Museum transit-oriented development," *Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal*, Henry Stewart Publications, vol. 16(4), pages 421-444.

⁸⁶⁵ Jodido, F. (2020). *National Museum of Qatar. The museum Guide*, Thames & Hudson.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid,

The opening section of the National Museum of Qatar explores Qatar's natural history and early human settlement development through an examination of geological and environmental influences that have sculpted the region. The chronological exploration starts with Gallery 1, where visitors learn about Qatar's geological evolution from an ancient seabed to its present-day landmass. The evolutionary development of the region becomes apparent through the display of fossilized marine remains and mineral formations alongside rock samples, which provide visitors with deep insights into natural history. The Museum moves from geological history to showcase Qatar's various habitats (Gallery 2), which display the nation's thriving biodiversity in its desert environment. Visitors experience Qatar's different habitats through interactive displays showcasing dunes, rocky plateaus, and marine ecosystems. The Museum showcases interactive displays that feature important species like the Arabian oryx and falcons as well as marine life to demonstrate the current conservation work and the fragile equilibrium of these ecosystems. The last exhibit space in this section (Gallery 3) explores Qatar's initial human settlements by illuminating the everyday existence of its earliest residents. Archaeological evidence from pottery discoveries, alongside ancient tools and structural remains, demonstrates early human settlement adaptation strategies and trade practices. The documentary, which digitally animates daily life in ancient societies along with expert analysis, amplifies the immersive experience. With this multi-sensory approach, visitors can understand history as a dynamic narrative that connects successive generations over time rather than just a fixed record.



Photo 25: visual storytelling of the image, reflecting on heritage, hard work, and the resilience of the Qatari people before the oil era.

Taken by the Author.

The second section of the National Museum of Qatar investigates traditional life during the pre-oil period by examining social structures and economic and cultural practices that characterized this era. The Museum showcases pre-oil Qatari society using immersive exhibits to demonstrate

traditional lifestyles and survival techniques that helped communities prosper amidst environmental challenges. This part features exhibits of historical dwellings, traditional tools, and clothing that reveal essential details about everyday living, subsistence activities, and community practices. Visitors learn about traditional Qatari survival techniques, including fishing and pearling, to navigate environmental challenges. The dedicated gallery on pearling stands out as a prime attraction since it profoundly influenced Qatar's economic development and international standing. The pearl diving industry maintained regional prosperity across centuries through the dangerous, hard work performed by divers. The exhibition showcases a vast collection of diving gear alongside traditional wooden dhows and beautiful pearls to highlight the intricate skills and physical strength needed for this challenging trade. The pearling industry lost its importance during the early 1900s because Japanese cultured pearls entered the market, signifying a significant economic shift for Qatar. A poignant documentary depicts the transformation by chronicling the life of a young pearl diver, revealing the industry's historical importance alongside the personal dangers faced by divers.

The final section explores the transformation of Qatar into a modern state, addressing its political history, the impact of oil and gas discoveries, and its vision for a sustainable future. This section begins with "Building the State Gallery," covering Qatar's political history from 1907 to 1913, from the first mention of Qatar in historical documents to the reigns of *Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani (1788-1878)* and *Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani (1825 - 1913)*. It also highlights Qatar's critical connection with the Portuguese, Ottomans, and British before *Sheikh Jassim* united the tribes. Following that, as the cultural mediator of the Museum highlighted, the dark side of the history of Qatar examines two pivotal moments: The collapse of the pearl trade and the unearthing of oil reserves.



Photo 26: A Larger Creative Transition: From Darkness to Light, Past to Petroleum
Source: Taken by the Author.

The exhibition examines how Qatar's primary economic source (pearling) fell during the early 20th century because of Japan's cultured pearl's introduction, along with regional plague outbreaks and typhoon damage to diving boats. This dark hallway in the image (26) above, with the roof falling towards the ground, is a very confined space designed to let the visitor feel the strain and worry that the people of Qatar experienced at the time. After departing this

passageway, the visitor is relieved to discover a large, lit hall that discusses oil production and export, which is exposed to be the country's saving grace, ushering in a new era of economic and social development. This section presents scientific models and industrial equipment demonstrating the complex natural gas extraction and exportation procedures. The gallery's highlight is John Sanborn's⁸⁶⁷ artistic film "*Chemistry*", which combines artistic visuals and scientific storytelling to portray Qatar's energy industry's technical transformation and human elements.

The economic boom that followed the oil discoveries caused a significant urban change that will be examined in the following museum section. Interactive models and digital displays illustrate Doha's transformation from a quaint fishing village into a modern metropolis by charting its architectural and infrastructural growth.

The last few galleries showcase the modern history of Qatar, highlighting national progress in education, culture, healthcare, and sports beyond economic successes. The exhibits demonstrate Qatar's dedication to building innovation through leading universities, medical research advancements, and cultural programs. Furthermore, it provides visitors insight into Qatar's leadership journey through official documents, personal artifacts, and multimedia presentations showcasing its strategic policies and diplomatic decisions.



*Photo 27: a memorial photo of the people of Qatar during the blockade of 2017
Taken by the Author.*

The Museum concludes with a forward-looking gallery that explores Qatar's sustainability goals and future urban planning, focusing on carbon reduction strategies, investments in renewable energy, and cutting-edge infrastructure projects. Interactive displays engage visitors in Qatar's long-term vision for sustainable growth, while a concluding documentary presents expert predictions and speculative designs that envision the nation's technological and environmental advancements over the next fifty years.

⁸⁶⁷ John Sanborn is a key member of the second wave of American video artists that includes Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Dara Birnbaum and Tony Oursler.

The National Museum of Qatar presents the country's historical development and plans through a detailed account of its geological background, social traditions, and modernization efforts. While the Museum delivers an engaging and immersive experience, its interpretative choices raise critical questions regarding the construction of national identity through institutional narratives. The Museum uses a forward-looking perspective to reveal major themes about Qatar's resilience through difficult periods followed by its dynamic transformation. Such an approach promotes reflection on how national museums influence collective memory and identity formation. To what extent does the National Museum of Doha balance the local cultural and ethnic diversity with the need to promote a unified national identity? How does it influence how people understand the ongoing interaction between cultural heritage and modernity, particularly in fast-changing societies?

2. Curating the nation: national identity discourse in the national museum of Doha

According to Michel Foucault, knowledge production operates within power structures where institutions act as creators of knowledge through their discursive practices rather than just mirrors of existing knowledge⁸⁶⁸. This theoretical lens finds resonance in the role of museums, which function as sites of preservation and institutional actors that actively construct and regulate historical meaning⁸⁶⁹. National museums, for instance, often function as state-sanctioned arenas that naturalize selective memories while obscuring others, thereby shaping collective identity by prevailing ideological frameworks⁸⁷⁰. In the context of Qatar, the NMoQ exemplifies what Bennett terms as the "governmentalization of culture"—where heritage is mobilized as a strategic resource to mediate national belonging and consolidate state legitimacy⁸⁷¹. The museum's architecture, curatorial strategies, and public pedagogy serve not only to narrate history but also to discipline memory, producing subjects who internalize a cohesive and politically expedient sense of national identity. At the same time, the selective inclusion and omission of narratives reveal how power circulates through representational regimes, echoing Foucault's assertion that power is most effective not when it is repressed but when it constructs knowledge.

In 1972, two Qatari artists, Jassim Zani, and Yousef Ahmed, organized a small museum where they displayed ethnographical artifacts such as gypsum specimens, costumes, fishing and diving

⁸⁶⁸ Poorghorban, Y. (2023). On Michel Foucault: Power/Knowledge, Discourse, and Subjectivity. *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra*, 17(2), 318-328.

⁸⁶⁹ Nielsen, J. K. (2014). The Development of Social Structures within a Changing Museum Frame: Discussing Luhmann and Foucault. University of St Andrews. Vol 17, (pp 47-52).

⁸⁷⁰ Watson, S. E. R. (2021). National museums and the origins of nations: Emotional myths and narratives. Routledge. (1-15)

⁸⁷¹ Bennett, T., Dodsworth, F., & Joyce, P. (2007). INTRODUCTION: Liberalisms, government, culture. *Cultural Studies*, 21(4-5), 525-548.

equipment, and artifacts related to the rituals of married life⁸⁷². The reputation of the exhibition and museum was reviewed in local and regional newspapers, which considered such initiative as a turning point in the cultural history of the country⁸⁷³. The large number of official and unofficial visitors to the museum provided concrete evidence for Sheikh Khalifa, who was amazed by the idea, that the community was ready and eager for a bigger and official institution⁸⁷⁴. Afterward, the decision to build a national museum was made, and the ruler formed a local committee to collect the ethnographical materials to form a narrative that would recognize the fact that there were two distinct societies within the small population of Qatar that shared the same ethnicity: a more urban society of fishing villages *Hadar* and the more traditional nomadic Bedouin culture *Badu*⁸⁷⁵. The Qatari government at the time sought the assistance of English and Danish archaeologists by encouraging them to perform fieldwork on elements that may be displayed at the National Museum to demonstrate Qatar's historical origins⁸⁷⁶.

One of the most important aspects of national identity is the focus on secondary socialization, which refers to the education children receive from the school and their environment. Many Qatari children, receiving education from foreign teachers, were informed that their country lacks a historical narrative⁸⁷⁷. The local children began to visit the newly constructed museum in the evenings, transcribing the extensive texts that confirmed their country's historical narrative, and they engaged with this information⁸⁷⁸. After that, and over the past four decades, the national narrative displayed in the Museum has acknowledged and integrated both *Badu* (Bedouin) and *Hadar* (urban) identities, positioning them as foundational elements of the nation's heritage and cultural memory⁸⁷⁹. The Qatari government has committed substantial financial resources annually to acquire artifacts, oral histories, and intangible heritage materials⁸⁸⁰. As Al-Mulla (2013) demonstrates, these acquisitions are not merely about preservation but are part of a calculated narrative-building effort that reorders cultural codes within the framework of national identity, using the national museum's displays to institutionalize shared memory and collective pride⁸⁸¹.

⁸⁷² Al-Mulla, M.I. (2013). Museums in Qatar: Creating narratives of history, economics, and cultural cooperation. The University of Leeds: School of Fine Art, History of Art, and Cultural Studies. (PhD thesis)

⁸⁷³ Ibid, pp 76

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid, pp 77

⁸⁷⁵ Al-Mulla, M.I. (2014). "The Development of the First Qatar National Museum", Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices, ed.ExellandRico(2014),pp.117–25.

⁸⁷⁶ Al-Khulaifi, M. J. (2003). Archaeological Sites, Architectural Heritage, Museums in Qatar. Doha: National Council of Culture, Art and Heritage.

⁸⁷⁷ Al-Mulla, M.I. (2013). Museums in Qatar: Creating narratives of history, economics, and cultural cooperation. The University of Leeds: School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies. (PhD thesis)

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid, pp 135

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid,

⁸⁸⁰ Al-Thani, N. A. (2022). Public Art, National Identity and Islam in the Gulf: A Study of the Miraculous Journey Exhibition and the National Museum of Qatar. Manara - Qatar Research Repository. Thesis.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid,

The 2019 reopening of the National Museum of Qatar marked a curatorial upgrade, constituting a deliberate recalibration of the cultural narrative in response to intensified political and regional pressures⁸⁸². During the inauguration ceremony, the Emir of Qatar quoted:

*The National Museum of Qatar reflects our country's journey—rooted in our past, inspired by our values, and led by our goals. It is more than just a place to gather and display rare objects; it's a place to express and appreciate our collective memories; it is a place to express and feel our national identity. We hope this museum will create a story that ties our past to our future, respecting our society's diversity while promoting our nation's unity*⁸⁸³.

The transformation of the National Museum of Qatar into a central cultural and political symbol reflects Michel Foucault's (1980) theory of regimes of truth, where national institutions create and validate specific realities that align with prevailing power structures⁸⁸⁴. As such, the museum becomes a space for displaying cultural artifacts, and a discursive site where the past is ideologically ordered, and identity is pedagogically shaped. Through its exhibitions, spatial narratives, and symbolic architecture, the NMoQ guides public consciousness toward state-preferred understandings of unity, resilience, and loyalty⁸⁸⁵. The curated national story does not operate as a neutral reflection of heritage but as a disciplinary mechanism—one that encodes cultural celebration within the logic of governance⁸⁸⁶. In this light, the museum functions as what Foucault describe as a technology of subjectivation, cultivating citizens who internalize an identity that is both affectively resonant and politically expedient⁸⁸⁷. This theoretical lens sets the stage for a closer examination of how the National Museum of Qatar operationalizes these discursive strategies, wherein history and memory are actively curated to construct an emotionally resonant and politically useful narrative of national identity.

*“Here in the Museum, our aim is to display Qatar’s past and weave it into a shared narrative that speaks to all generations. Every gallery is designed to foster a sense of belonging, resilience, and unity—values that define the national identity we want to reflect and reinforce.”*⁸⁸⁸

⁸⁸² Giusti, S., & Lamonica, A. G. (2023). The Geopolitics of Culture: Museum Proliferation in Qatar and Abu Dhabi. *The International Spectator*, 58(2), 123–139.

⁸⁸³ The inaugural discourse of the Emir of Qatar during the opening ceremony of the national museum of Doha, 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfOn481xJss&ab_channel=GovernmentCommunicationsOffice

⁸⁸⁴ Lorenzini, D. (2016). Foucault, regimes of truth and the making of the subject. In *Foucault and the Making of Subjects* (pp. 63–85).

⁸⁸⁵ Al-Hammadi, M. I. (2020). National Museum of Qatar: New Architectural language, New Vision. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 9(1), 195-208.

⁸⁸⁶ Ibid,

⁸⁸⁷ Villadsen, K. (2024). ‘The Subject and Power’ – Four Decades Later: Tracing Foucault’s Evolving Concept of Subjectivation. *Foucault Studies*, 293–321.

⁸⁸⁸ Jassim al Kouari, a tour guide and a cultural mediator in the national museum of Qatar, April 2023.

This statement from the mediator to the public shows that the museum's curatorial choices are consciously framed to evoke emotional resonance and foster national cohesion. It sets the stage for a deeper analysis of how history, memory, and identity are strategically curated to serve the sociopolitical imperatives of the contemporary Qatari state.

The relationship between history, memory, and national identity at the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) is strategically curated to align with the sociopolitical imperatives of the contemporary Qatari state⁸⁸⁹. Rather than offering an objective chronicle, the museum constructs a selective narrative, employing symbols, oral histories, and archival materials to produce an emotionally resonant vision of shared identity⁸⁹⁰. Exhibitions such as “The People of Qatar” are recontextualized to support a narrative of national unity, showcasing how various social groups—tribal, urban, and coastal—contributed to the formation of the modern state⁸⁹¹. The museum's focus on national unity represents a strategic answer to important regional disorders⁸⁹². Following the Arab Spring events, Qatar and the other Gulf states adopted unity narratives as key themes in their discourse to prevent dissent and bolster their legitimate authority⁸⁹³. Furthermore, the 2017 Gulf blockade further intensified this imperative, with unity reframed as an expression of national resilience and sovereign endurance⁸⁹⁴. Within the NMoQ, this translated into a curated narrative (photo 27) that downplays social divisions in favor of a collective identity grounded in shared struggle and loyalty, revealing how cultural institutions are mobilized to serve broader geopolitical agendas.

In sum, the National Museum of Qatar stands as a typical case of how cultural institutions operate within the nexus of power, knowledge, and identity formation. From its grassroots ethnographic beginnings to its monumental post-2019 rearticulation, the museum has consistently served as both a mirror and mechanism of the state's evolving ideological needs. the NMoQ functions as an instrument of subjectivation, carefully shaping how Qatari citizens understand themselves in relation to history, tradition, and national belonging. Through selective narrative strategies and a persistent focus on unity, the museum reinforces political legitimacy while neutralizing potential social and regional fragmentations⁸⁹⁵. In doing so, it exemplifies how memory, heritage, and

⁸⁸⁹ Mitchell, J. S., & Al-Hammadi, M. I. (2020). Nationalism and Identity in Qatar after 2017: The Narrative of the New National Museum. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 10(2), 256–277.

⁸⁹⁰ Mitchell, J. S., & Curtis, S. (2022). *Documenting Doha: Community archiving and collective memory in Qatar*. *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 9(1).

⁸⁹¹ Erskine-Loftus, P. (2016). *National museums and the politics of heritage in the Gulf*. In P. Erskine-Loftus, V. M. Exell, & M. Rico (Eds.), *Museums in Arabia: Transnational Practices and Regional Processes* (pp. 15–36).

⁸⁹² Ibala, I. (2022). *Museums as National Identity Catalysts: A Typological Study of Museums in Doha*. Manara - Qatar Research Repository. Thesis.

⁸⁹³ Resta, V. (2018). Political change in the Middle East and North Africa: after the Arab Spring. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45(3), 523–525.

⁸⁹⁴ Viramontes, E. (2021). *Remembering 'The Blockade on Qatar': National Memory and the Assemblage of the Event* (pp. 211–229). Springer, Singapore.

⁸⁹⁵ Ibala, I. (2022). *Museums as National Identity Catalysts: A Typological Study of Museums in Doha*. Manara - Qatar Research Repository. Thesis.

cultural space can be orchestrated to perform the work of the state, encoding affective belonging within institutional frameworks designed for governance, resilience, and global image-making.

III. The History of the Saudi Arabian National Museum: Vision, Design, and Development

In 1999, the Saudi National Museum began operations in Riyadh, representing a significant event in Saudi Arabia's historical and cultural narrative⁸⁹⁶. Its inauguration formed part of the centennial commemorations of King 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān Āl Sa'ūd's (1880-1953) recapture of Riyadh on the same date in 1902⁸⁹⁷, an event widely regarded as the catalyst for the eventual unification of Saudi Arabia three decades later, in 1932.

However, this inauguration is a continuity of national efforts that began in the 1970s. In 1976, the Saudi regime, following the 1970s national museum trend in neighboring gulf states (UAE 1970, Oman and Bahreīn 1974, and Qatar 1975), opened its first museum of archaeology and ethnography in Riyadh, aiming to boost the scientific examination of the country's past and its mediation to the Saudi citizens⁸⁹⁸. Although this museum was initially conceived as a precursor to the National Museum, it ultimately lacked the characteristics of a formal national museum⁸⁹⁹. As previously stated (in chapter 4), the interval between 1980 and 1995 was characterized by a cessation of cultural development due to the *Sahwa movement* (a radical Islamic movement) and particularly the Gulf War, an event that profoundly impacted Saudi national identity discourse. In 1997, the vision for a national museum in Saudi Arabia began crystallizing under international expertise and local ambition. The Arriyadh Development Authority (ADA) appointed the renowned Canadian consultancy *Lord Cultural Resources* to shape the museum's exhibition narrative and curatorial strategy⁹⁰⁰. The museum's development was a component of an extensive governmental program designed to strengthen Saudi national identity while validating the state's historical standing and establishing its authority over national cultural heritage⁹⁰¹.

⁸⁹⁶ Hadrovic, A. (2024). The Historical Riyadh City in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publications (IJMRAP)*, Volume 6, Issue 8, pp. 143-157.

⁸⁹⁷ Cassola, V. (2014). Alam al-matāhif: museum studies in Saudi Arabia. *Museologica Brunensia*, 3(4 (Jaro 2014), 24-33.

⁸⁹⁸ Cassola, V. (2016). Saudi Arabian National Museum: Unexpected collections and narratives. Erskine-Loftus, P., Al-Mulla, M., & Hightower, V. (Eds.). *Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives, and Identity in the Arab Gulf States* (1st ed.). Routledge. (pp. 321–330)

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid,

⁹⁰⁰ Alkhabbaz, M. H. (2010). Renewable success: development of good architecture in the case of Arriyadh Development Authority, Saudi Arabia. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (thesis)

⁹⁰¹ Ibid,



Photo 28: the king Abdul-Aziz Historical Center in Riyadh
Source: <https://www.rcrc.gov.sa/en/projects/kahc/>



Photo 29: The national museum of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
photo taken by the Author.

The King Abdulaziz Historical Center in Riyadh (photo 28) was the broader urban and cultural regeneration project framework for the museum's inauguration. The complex includes the Murabba Palace, the King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives, a Memorial Hall, and a public park that contains 100 date palms representing each year since the 1902 recapture⁹⁰². The architectural tasks were given to Raymond Moriyama (1923-2023), whose work before this project demonstrated his ability to blend cultural symbols into architectural designs⁹⁰³. The firm created a sweeping limestone façade inspired by central Arabia's geological and spiritual

⁹⁰² Insoll, T. (2019). Opening Doors: The King Abdulaziz Centre for World Culture, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. *Material Religion*, 15(4), 520–522.

⁹⁰³ Boddy, T. (2023). Why Raymond Moriyama matters. Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC). Volume :68. N : 08. Pp 16-19.

elements, aligning with the qibla direction towards Mecca⁹⁰⁴. As the sun sets, the façade turns red, reminiscent of the region's characteristic desert canyon formations⁹⁰⁵. The design choice establishes physical and spiritual connections between the building and its Islamic heritage through its geographic context.

1. The Museum's structure.

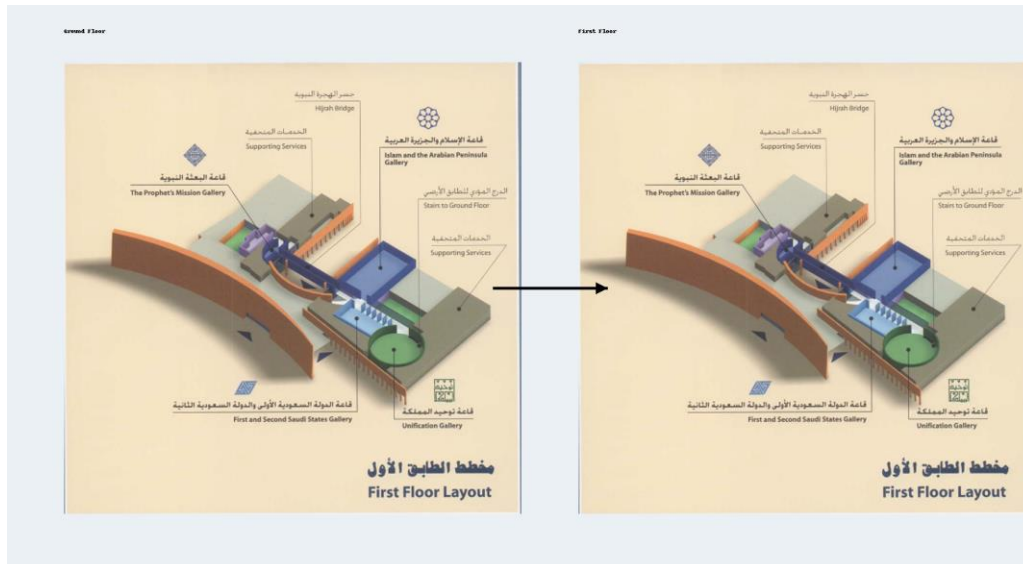


Photo 30: Architectural Floor Plan and Exhibit Zoning of the National Museum of Saudi Arabia
Source: <https://medium.com/@abdulqaht/ux-case-study-mobile-app-to-digitalize-the-experience-of-the-saudi-national-museum-066002c8182d>

The National Museum of Riyadh covers a vast 28 000 square meters, ranking it as one of the most significant cultural institutions in the Middle East⁹⁰⁶. It features eight halls distributed between two floors. Two additional halls at the museum serve as spaces for temporary and visiting exhibitions⁹⁰⁷. The analysis and description of the museum presented in this part are grounded in firsthand observations conducted during multiple visits to the institution, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of its spatial organization, curatorial strategies, and narrative structure.

The museum starts with the Man and the Universe Hall, which presents guests with the geological and environmental background of the Arabian Peninsula. Emphasizing the area's natural history, this part offers fossils, minerals, and rock formations dating back millions of years. Among its many displays are colorful ones of meteorites, ancient flora, and fauna, as well as many interactive and visual features clarifying the development of the Earth, its moving plates, and climate change.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid,

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid,

⁹⁰⁶ Royal Commission for Riyadh City. (n.d.). *King Abdulaziz Historical Center Project*.

<https://www.rcrc.gov.sa/en/projects/kahc/>

⁹⁰⁷ Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities. (2010). *The National Museum Guide* (Dr. Majeed Khan, Trans.). Riyadh: Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities.



*Photo 31: Art from the region of Al Faw, the capital of the first Kindah kingdom.
Taken by the Author*

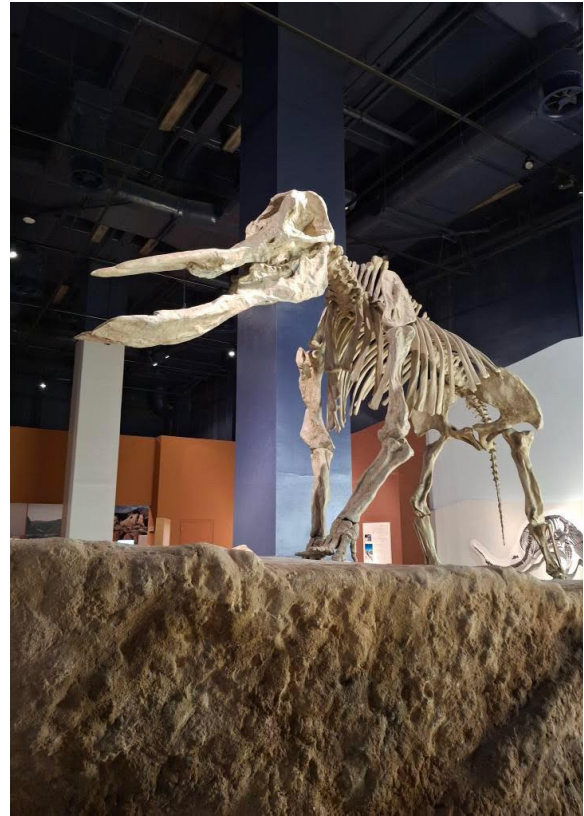


*Photo 32: A display of the mastodon elephant
Taken by the Author.*

The Arabian Kingdoms Hall revives the early civilizations in the area before Islam's advent. It displays archeological treasures from famous ancient kingdoms such as Dilmun, Thamud, Lihyān, Kindah, and Qataban. The hall also emphasizes the importance of Arabia's geographic position as a bridge between ancient Mesopotamia, the Levant, and East Africa, hence underlining the deep historical foundations of commerce, cultural interchange, and diplomacy that existed millennia ago.

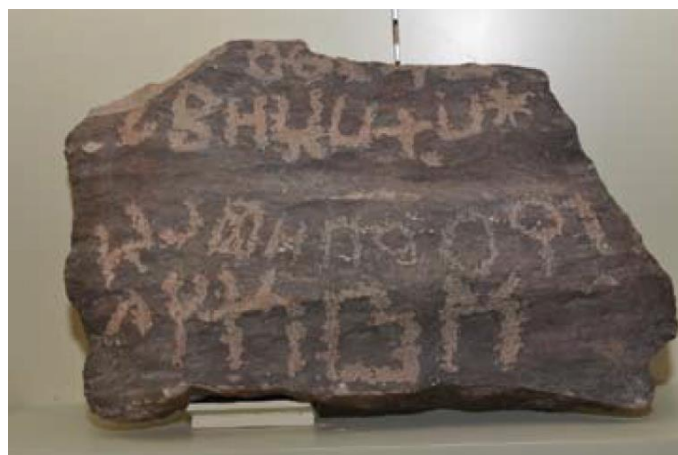


*Photo 33: Written Thamudi text on a stone
Taken by the Author.*

The third exhibit hall examines Arabian life during the pre-Islamic period by tracing social, cultural, and economic conditions from the Stone Age to the emergence of Islam. Saudi Arabia has incorporated pre-Islamic material culture and stories as a new strategic direction for heritage conservation and historical narrative delivery. The religious discourse traditionally depicted the

pre-Islamic period as the *Jahiliyyah* or "Age of Ignorance," which involved paganism and chaos. However, the museum's display of Nabataean, Lihyantine, and Kindah artifacts represents pre-Islamic history as an integral part of continuous national narrative instead of a separate or opposing period.

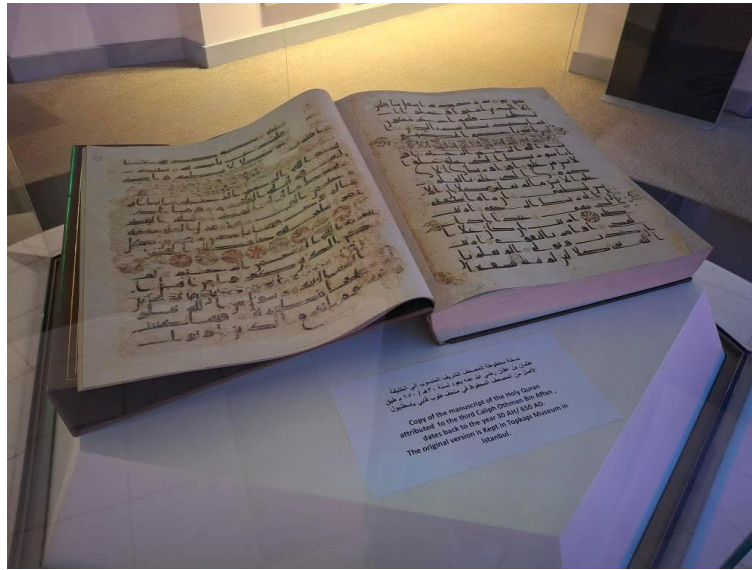


*Photo 34: Copy of the Quran attributed the third Caliph 30AH/650AD.
Taken by the Author.*

The next stage in the visitor's path is the Prophet Muhammad's Mission Hall, an essential part showing the life and message of the Prophet Muhammad and the transformation of Mecca and Medina into spiritual and political hubs. This hall tells the story of the important events of the Prophet's life, the revelations of the Qur'an, and the foundation moments of Islam using thorough exhibits, manuscripts, dioramas, and video presentations. It also emphasizes the expansion of Islam and the creation of an ethical framework that would guide the area's development. Afterward, the Islam and the Arabian Peninsula Hall shows the spread of Islam beyond Arabia's boundaries, the rise of the Islamic caliphates, and the blossoming of culture, science, and government throughout the Umayyad and Abbasid periods after this. Among the many items on display are early Islamic coinage, architectural remnants, Qur'anic inscriptions, and maps of pilgrimage routes and commerce channels. The hall shows how Islam linked different areas through a common religion and cultural traditions, promoting developments in astronomy, medicine, mathematics, and literature.



Photo 35: King AbdulAziz Al Saud with his Family
Source: The National Museum Guide

The story then moves to the First and Second Saudi States Hall, which examines the political and religious awakening of the Arabian Peninsula in the 18th and 19th centuries. This part discusses the First Saudi State's emergence in Diriyah, its Islamic reform initiatives, its final collapse, and the founding of the Second Saudi State in Riyadh. This time's artifacts include letters and proclamations from important people, treaties, clothes, and military equipment. This hall offers a multifaceted view of early Saudi leadership's aim of uniting different areas under a common national and religious identity. The Unification of the Kingdom Hall chronicles King *Abdulaziz Al Saud*'s accomplishments in restoring unity and constructing the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the 20th century, marking a turning point in the historical path of the museum. The hall closely depicts King Abdulaziz's wars and statesmanship through rare images, personal items, weaponry, audiovisual documents, and thorough battle maps. It shows how the Peninsula's fragmented tribal terrain was turned into a centralized, modern state and how this change set the foundation for government, infrastructure, and national institutions.



*Photo 36: the Haram Al-Makki section
photo taken by the Author.*

Finally, focusing on Makkah and Madinah as the spiritual core of Saudi Arabia, the last exhibition is the Hajj and the Two Holy Mosques Hall (photo 36). Using scale models, rare Qur'anic manuscripts, and multimedia presentations to record the construction of the two holy mosques and the infrastructure erected to service pilgrims, this profoundly evocative chamber exhibits the growth of the Hajj pilgrimage from pre-Islamic times to the present. It emphasizes the religious importance of Hajj and the logistical, architectural, and cultural aspects of this lasting Islamic legacy. Architectural designs show the constant change and extension of the sacred locations, remnants from prior pilgrimages, and ceremonial clothes.

Our observation through the Saudi National Museum unfolds along a meticulously structured chronological path, beginning with prehistoric Arabia, progressing through the Islamic era, and culminating in the rise of the Al Saud family. This linear progression does more than narrating history; it shapes a story in which the ruling family is positioned as both the origin and destiny of the nation. Such a narrative invites more profound reflection on the mechanisms behind its construction: what forms of power influence this shaping of memory? How does the museum's structure serve as a discursive tool for legitimizing sovereignty and influencing collective identity?

2. Genealogies of Power and Memory: The Saudi National Museum as a Site of Discursive Nation-Building

Rather than functioning as a neutral platform for preserving heritage, national museums increasingly operate as a disciplinary tool, a place of organized memory, spatialized identity, and educational control⁹⁰⁸. From this perspective, the National Museum of Saudi Arabia is a managed map of power: a palimpsest through which the Saudi leadership marks the sanctioned ancestry of the country. As a center of visibility and knowledge, the museum reflects Pierre Nora's concept of *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) that replaces lived memory with institutionalized history instead of preserving the past⁹⁰⁹. Nora argued that memory had become a regulated, symbolic system meant to represent specific national belonging ideas and stories⁹¹⁰. Locating the museum within the King Abdulaziz Historical Center, a symbolic site of the founding monarch's former palace⁹¹¹, further emphasizes its role as *lieu de mémoire*, encouraging visitors to ground their knowledge of the nation's beginnings in the history of the Al Saud ruling family. The Saudi regime employed Micheal Foucault's concept of spatial governmentality to establish an order that combines history, memory, and state sovereignty⁹¹². The museum's narrative structure honors the ruling family's lineage by portraying them as political leaders and nation founders while presenting their ascension as an inevitable historical progression⁹¹³. Such narrative exemplifies how power operates through memory, not by coercing the citizen to remember but by producing what will be remembered⁹¹⁴. The linear historical narrative disciplines the past into legibility; it renders the chaotic fragments of memory into a structured account convenient for nation-building and loyalty production.

However, the disciplinary function of the museum extends beyond narrative control; it also encompasses the governance of historical temporality itself⁹¹⁵. Through its meticulously ordered galleries and linear sequencing, the Saudi National Museum participates in what might be termed a *chronopolitics* of heritage, a politics of what is remembered and how time is structured and rendered intelligible⁹¹⁶. History's fragmented and contingent events are refashioned into a

⁹⁰⁸ Wróblewska, M. (2019). Museum Practices as Tools to (Re)Define Memory and Identity Issues Through Direct Experience of Tangible and Intangible Heritage. *Heritage*, 2(3), 2408-2416.

⁹⁰⁹ Nora, P. (1989). *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*. *Representations*, (26), 7–24.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹¹ Insoll, T. (2019). Opening Doors: The King Abdulaziz Centre for World Culture, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. *Material Religion*, 15(4), 520–522.

⁹¹² Kirsanova, Y. A. (2024). The Concept of Space in the Philosophy of M. Foucault: The Territorial Nature of Power. *Общество: Философия, История, Культура*, 12.

⁹¹³ Bowen, W.H. (2014). Saudi Arabia in the Modern World (1973–2001). In *The History of Saudi Arabia* (pp. 143–158). Santa Barbara: Greenwood.

⁹¹⁴ Lisa Tota, A. (2003), "COLLECTIVE MEMORIES AT "WORK": THE PUBLIC REMEMBERING OF CONTESTED PASTS", Engelstad, F. (Ed.) *Comparative Studies of Culture and Power* (Comparative Social Research, Vol. 21), Emerald Group Publishing Limited, Leeds, pp. 63-85.

⁹¹⁵ Walklate, J.A. (2022). *Time and the Museum: Literature, Phenomenology, and the Production of Radical Temporality* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁹¹⁶ Witmore, C. (2014). *Chronopolitics and Archaeology*. In: Smith, C. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*. Springer, New York, NY.

teleological progression, culminating in the unification of the Kingdom and the ascendancy of the Al Saud dynasty⁹¹⁷. This temporal choreography disciplines the imagination, anchoring national identity in a forward-moving, inevitable past. The exhibition halls, as I described before, are not arranged to elicit critical engagement with the complexities of pre-Saudi Arabian history, nor do they gesture toward the fractures and multiplicities that inevitably attend any national story. Instead, I have observed a production of historicity, a temporal narrative regime where the ruling family Al Saud family's emergence is positioned as origin and destiny. This genealogical closure, wherein the sovereign is simultaneously the author and guardian of national history, serves to naturalize state power⁹¹⁸. Virginia Cassola notes that the Saudi National Museum is "an obvious attempt to connect the public with the glorious past of their homeland."⁹¹⁹

What emerges most forcefully in the Saudi National Museum is not simply a recounting of the past but a deliberate stretching of history to accommodate the sovereign's need for deep roots⁹²⁰. Though the Al Saud dynasty only enters the historical record in the 18th century—and politically consolidates power in the 20th⁹²¹—the museum's curatorial strategy retroactively folds millennia of Arabian history into a singular narrative arc that culminates in the modern Saudi state. From the earliest galleries in prehistoric Arabia to the Islamic era and beyond, every hall serves as a steppingstone that legitimizes the present by claiming ownership of the past.

The result is a sort of historical ventriloquism⁹²² in which ancient civilizations, regional cultures, and tribal pluralism are made to speak in the voice of national unity. All internal contestation traces—tribal rivalries, regional identities, or competing historical interpretations—are either erased or domesticated within a triumphalist meta-narrative of continuity and cohesion. This tendency mirrors a broader regional trend in the Gulf, particularly intensified after the Arab Spring, where regimes worked to prevent fragmentation by promoting strong centralized heritage narratives⁹²³. Museums throughout the region have adopted narrative control strategies to convert cultural institutions into platforms for historical unification and emotional nation-building⁹²⁴. In this sense, the Saudi National Museum is a projection of historical authority designed to proclaim that the nation, like its ruling family, has always existed.

⁹¹⁷ Al-Rasheed, M. (2004). *The Capture of Riyadh Revisited: Shaping Historical Imagination in Saudi Arabia* (pp. 183–200). Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

⁹¹⁸ Bennett, T. (2017). *Museums, Power, Knowledge: Selected Essays* (1st ed.). Routledge.

⁹¹⁹ Cassola, V. (2016). Saudi Arabian National Museum: Unexpected collections and narratives. Erskine-Loftus, P., Al-Mulla, M., & Hightower, V. (Eds.). *Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives, and Identity in the Arab Gulf States* (1st ed.). Routledge. (pp. 321–330)

⁹²⁰ Ibid,

⁹²¹ Hoffman, J. (2025). Saudi Arabia. In *Islam and Statecraft: Religious Soft Power in the Arab Gulf States* (pp. 65–112). London: I.B. Tauris.

⁹²² I use the term *historical ventriloquism* to describe the rhetorical strategy by which modern regimes appropriate and animate historical voices to speak on behalf of contemporary national ideologies.

⁹²³ Rabi, U. (2019). *The return of the past: State, identity, and society in the post-Arab Spring Middle East*. Lexington Books.

⁹²⁴ Koch, N. (2019). Capitalizing on Cosmopolitanism in the Gulf. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 9(2), 251–267.

IV. Survey Results: A Comparative Analysis of Visitor Perceptions in the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) and the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ)

1. Justification

The decision to use systematic quantitative surveys demonstrates a purposeful methodological stance influenced by ongoing discussions in museum studies about research focused on audiences⁹²⁵. The integration of quantitative methods has become a valuable component within interdisciplinary museum studies to address the abstract tendencies of critical museology⁹²⁶. Our research prioritizes empirical approaches highlighting visitor interpretation abilities because museums now function as dialogic and participatory contact areas. Multiple-choice survey instruments allow researchers to gather large datasets that standardize information collection, supporting cross-case analysis and unveiling broad patterns of audience engagement in different institutional and geopolitical contexts⁹²⁷.

Conducting research on politically and culturally sensitive themes—such as nation-building, regime legitimacy, and collective memory—within the context of severe Gulf states presented significant methodological challenges. In both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, access to participants was restricted by the securitized nature of cultural institutions and the social dynamics of museum audiences, particularly among nationals. Many Qatari and Saudi visitors approached the museum primarily as a leisure space, not as a site for critical dialogue, and were generally reluctant to engage in extended interviews. This hesitation was further intensified by class-based and status-conscious attitudes, where individuals frequently exhibited a level of social reserve or self-distinction that obstructed open participation. These circumstances required a more flexible and ethically sensitive approach to data collection, one that respected the institutional protocols under which access was granted, acknowledged the cultural dynamics of the environment, and still produced analytically significant findings.

For these reasons, my choice to use multiple-choice questionnaires was both strategic and ethically grounded. In a setting where direct questioning risked social discomfort or disengagement, this method enabled discreet, respectful, and efficient forms of interaction with a wide range of visitors⁹²⁸. The educational and cultural diversity of the two national museum's audiences, particularly the presence of international visitors unfamiliar with local customs,

⁹²⁵ Macdonald, S. (2007). Interconnecting: museum visiting and exhibition design. *CoDesign*, 3(sup1), 149–162.

⁹²⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. Routledge.

⁹²⁷ Dal Falco, F., & Vassos, S. (2017). Museum Experience Design: A Modern Storytelling Methodology. *The Design Journal*, 20(sup1), S3975–S3983.

⁹²⁸ Kelly, L. (2005). Evaluation, research, and communities of practice: Program evaluation in museums. *Archival Science*, 4(1–2), 45–69.

requires the use of structured response options to support varied literacy levels and interpretation styles. The choice of research design improves the reliability of comparative analysis. It enables the creation of typologies that apply to visitor interactions, which are essential in cross-national museum public studies.

2. Fieldwork Limitations:

During my research at the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) and the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ), I came into logistical and methodological challenges as well as firmly ingrained epistemic obstacles that exposed the authoritarian framework supporting cultural institutions in these Gulf states. Unlike Western institutions, where research is integrated into a larger cultural legacy and open archive policy, these two museums function under unclear gatekeeping levels. Permissions are delicate, dependent, and often intertwined with diplomatic mediation. Hence, researchers must interact with ministries, cultural attachés, and bureaucratic intermediaries whose power is neither open nor straightforward. (These interlocutors control the narrative, not just the entrance.) I was welcomed as guest—conditioned, observed, and limited—not as independent researchers.

Importantly, my positionality as Arab Muslim academics turned out to be more of a liability than an advantage. Cultural authority in Qatar and Saudi Arabia showed a clear preference for Western scholars, especially those linked with top Euro-American universities. My ability to speak the language, grasp the cultural customs, and critically question national myths from within appeared to disqualify me rather than recommend me. Here, access rights are given not depending on academic excellence but rather by geopolitical optics that strangely mistrust closeness. Such epistemic structures reverse the postcolonial promise of indigenous research, reifying instead a colonial language of knowledge validation. Authorization procedures institutionalize this control even further. Approval letters must be written with linguistic care, translated into Arabic, free of "sensitive" language, and supported by official academic recommendations. Even then, when given, permissions are typically time-bound, geographically limited, and revocable without reason. Research is seen as a possible danger, an invasion into the symbolic order managed by the state rather than a generating work of public study. Visitor studies, especially those investigating narrative omission or exclusion, are quietly characterized as subversive.

Although it may seem discomfiting to inscribe these constraints in such uncompromising terms, it is both analytically necessary and epistemologically vital to underscore that the act of conducting this research (specifically regarding national museums) approached the threshold of the improbable. Within a landscape governed by surveillance, institutional opacity, and the disciplinary regulation of knowledge, pursuing fieldwork of this nature demanded scholarly perseverance bordering on the miraculous.

3. Survey Results

A. The demographic profile

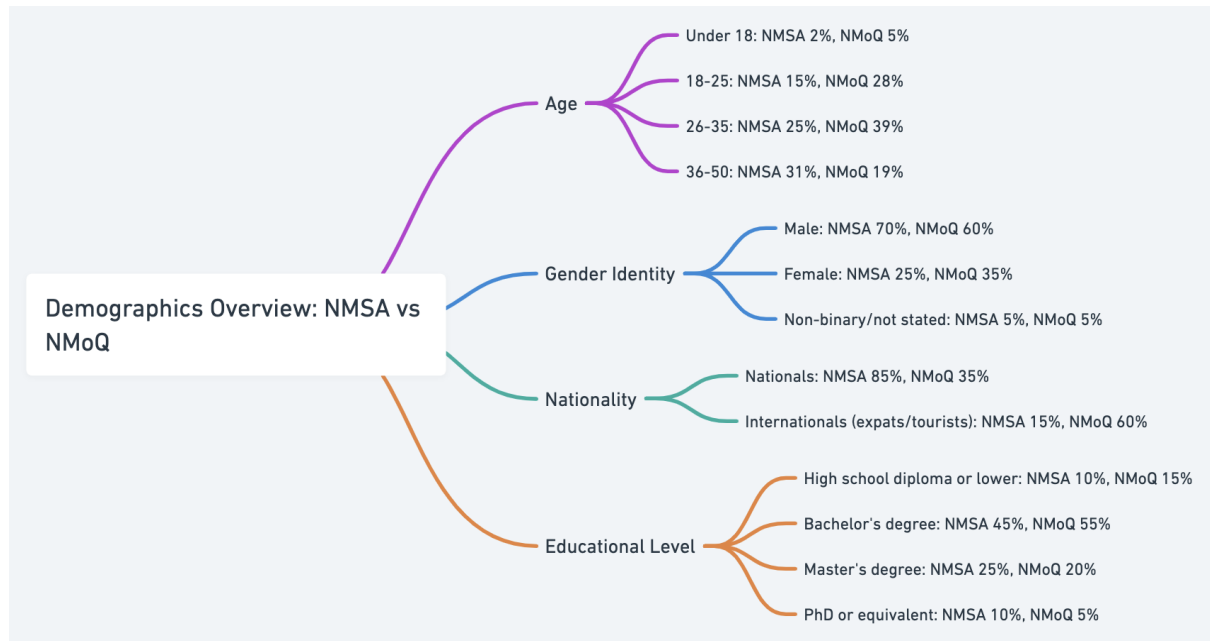


Figure 3: The demographic profile of the Questioned people

The demographic profile of the questioned visitors shows a clear difference in audience composition between the two national museums, reflecting their different curatorial aims and geopolitical orientations.

The National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) has a much older and more academically qualified visiting base: 58% of those polled were 36 or older, and 42% had postgraduate degrees. This implies that NMSA mainly operates as a teaching and heritage-focused institution drawing historically intellectual audiences from universities, cultural ministries, and heritage-sector professionals. With 63% of the interviewed people being male visitors, the gender imbalance is clear and may reflect more general dynamics in Saudi public culture, especially in connection to the traditional accessibility norms to the public areas. The museum's national orientation is emphasized even more because 85% of its visitors claimed to be Saudi natives, supporting its primary function in domestic identity consolidation and nation-building narratives.

On the other hand, the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) draws a younger and more demographically varied audience. While non-Qataris comprised 57% of the visitor pool, comprising both expatriate residents and foreign tourists, 67% of those polled were under the age of 35. Though the educational level is still high, with a significant number of university-educated people, the percentage of postgraduate degree holders is lower than that seen at NMSA. With 3% identifying as non-binary or choosing not to reveal, gender distribution at NMoQ approaches

parity (45% female, 52% male), reflecting the museum's more inclusive spatial and discursive ethos.

The data presented above clearly shows that Saudi nationals are more prominently represented among museum visitors (85%) than their Qatari counterparts (35%). This difference can be partially accounted for by variations in demographics: Saudi Arabia's population surpasses 36 million, featuring a notable percentage of nationals⁹²⁹, while Qatar's total population is below 3 million, with Qatari citizens making up approximately 10–12% of that number⁹³⁰. Moreover, in addition to demographic significance, this trend illustrates the growing cultural involvement of Saudi citizens, propelled by the government's heightened investment in national heritage projects as part of Vision 2030. Fieldwork observations indicate an increasing public interest among Saudis in museums, as well as in various cultural venues and heritage sites. This trend suggests that the cultural policies implemented by the Saudi state are starting to produce noticeable outcomes in fostering domestic appreciation for national identity through cultural institutions. In contrast, although Qatar has made similar investments in cultural infrastructure, the smaller national population seems to be less visibly involved in these public cultural spaces.

B. Motivational Differences & Information Pathways and Media Strategies

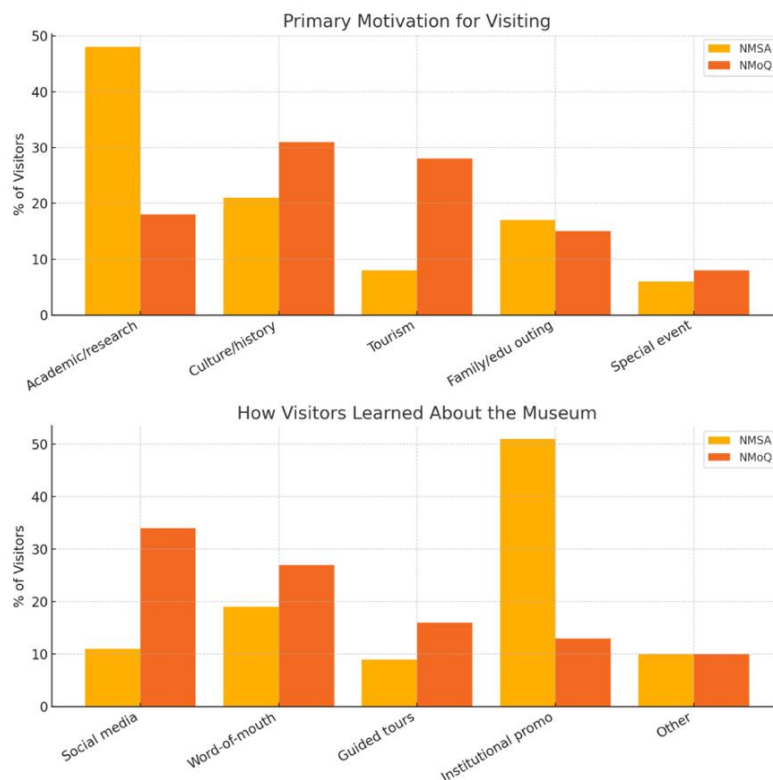


Figure 4: Motivational Differences & Information Pathways and Media Strategies

⁹²⁹ Global Media Insight. (2024, June 12). *Saudi Arabia population statistics 2024*. <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/saudi-arabia-population-statistics/>

⁹³⁰ Global Media Insight. (2024, June 12). *Qatar population statistics 2024*. <https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/qatar-population-statistics/>

Visitor motivations at the two museums underscores their divergent institutional logics. At the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA), nearly half of the surveyed respondents (48%) cited academic or research-related reasons for their visit. This finding reinforces the museum's identity as a didactic, state-sanctioned repository of national history, serving primarily pedagogical and heritage-related functions. The predominance of scholarly motivations aligns with the museum's curatorial emphasis on historical continuity and national identity.

In contrast, the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) exhibits a markedly more public-oriented and leisure-driven visitor profile. Most respondents (59%) selected general interest or tourism as their principal motivation, highlighting NMoQ's role as a flagship site within Qatar's soft power and cultural diplomacy infrastructure⁹³¹. The museum's immersive aesthetics and narrative interactivity appear calibrated to attract diverse publics, including international tourists and transnational residents, whose engagement is less shaped by scholarly intent and more by experiential or affective consumption.

The communicative ecologies through which visitors became aware of each institution further reflect these strategic divergences. At NMSA, more than half of respondents (51%) were introduced to the museum via formal institutional channels, such as schools, universities, or state-affiliated bodies. This reliance on structured, knowledge-based networks supports the museum's alignment with official educational circuits and top-down dissemination practices.

By contrast, NMoQ is significantly more reliant on digital and lifestyle-oriented platforms. Social media was the primary source of awareness for 34% of respondents, a stark contrast to the NMSA figure of 13%. This reflects NMoQ's cultivation of a digitally literate, mobile, and globally networked audience, consistent with Qatar's broader investment in nation-branding and millennial outreach strategies. (it is also due the big influence left on the country after the organization of the last world cup in 2022).

These findings provide factual evidence for the interpretative separation between the two organizations:

- NMSA is a site of state historicism designed to support a centralized national narrative among domestic populations.
- By contrast, NMoQ is a tool of cultural diplomacy and soft power that provides a globally relevant, youth-oriented tourist experience in line with Qatar's outward-facing heritage approach.

⁹³¹ Exell, K. (2016). *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula*. Routledge.

C. Thematic Resonance & Interpretive Reception

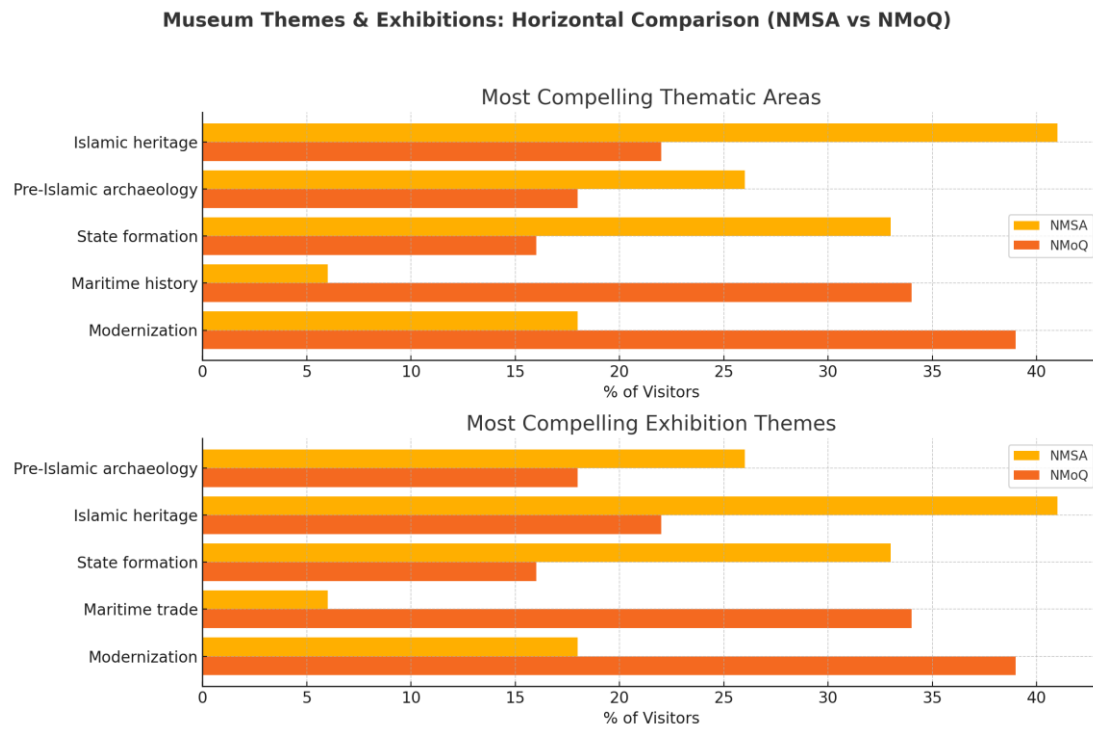


Figure 5: Thematic Resonance & Interpretive Reception

The comparative statistics in these charts show how visitors interact with fundamental thematic and exhibition material. While the first graph measures which broad thematic areas visitors found most conceptually compelling, the second graph focuses on how engaging those themes were when experienced through specific exhibitions, highlighting the distinction between abstract interest and curatorial execution. These results give a useful metric of curatorial efficacy and audience appeal and allow us to critically evaluate how larger ideological and institutional forces shape interpretive methods.

The results in the upper section of the chart show a clear divergence in what visitors to each museum find thematically engaging. NMSA's most compelling thematic area is unequivocally Islamic heritage (see photo 36), selected by nearly 40% of visitors, followed by state formation and pre-Islamic archaeology. By contrast, NMoQ's thematic appeal is more equally distributed. It ranks highest in modernization (40%) and maritime history (35%), with Islamic heritage and state formation slightly lower. These results suggest that NMoQ successfully taps into contemporary and transnational narratives. The prominence of modernization and maritime history reflects Qatar's historical trading networks and current global ambitions, both presented as static heritage and as living, future-oriented trajectories.

The fact that NMSA ranks lowest in maritime history (6%) while NMoQ excels in it signals a broader difference in curatorial priorities. While NMoQ frames its maritime heritage as central to Qatar's historical and cultural identity, NMSA emphasizes a more land-based civilizational

narrative, marginalizing coastal trade-related histories that may be less central to national narratives.

The second section of the chart, focusing specifically on exhibition execution, reinforces the patterns from the thematic level but offers insight into visitor experience and curatorial delivery. NMSA's highest-rated exhibition theme is again Islamic heritage (39%), followed by pre-Islamic archaeology (26%) and state formation (24%). These selections reaffirm the museum's emphasis on presenting civilizational continuity, a reflective approach of the museum's role in staging ritual affirmations of identity and authority. Here, historical grandeur is emphasized over contemporary connection or emotional narrative. NMoQ, however, shows higher visitor engagement in modernization (39%), maritime trade (34%), and state formation (21%), indicating that its exhibitions succeed in translating thematic ambitions into compelling and engaging experiences. These findings illustrate that visitor engagement is significantly enhanced when exhibitions integrate contemporary relevance, digital interpretation, and emotional storytelling.

Interestingly, both museums perform well in pre-Islamic archaeology, but NMSA's lead suggests a stronger institutional investment in archaeological legitimacy as a tool for historical continuity. In contrast, NMoQ frames the past through the lens of present identity formation and future vision, particularly through a detailed exposition the country's process of modernization and maritime connectivity. Both museums excel in specific thematic areas; however, NMoQ demonstrates a greater alignment with contemporary museological principles, perceiving identity as relational, flexible, and co-constructed rather than fixed or singular. The focus on modernization and maritime connectivity reflects Qatar's geopolitical narrative and supports the notion that contemporary museums serve to envision futures alongside preserving histories.

D. Thematic Chart Results (NMSA vs NMoQ)

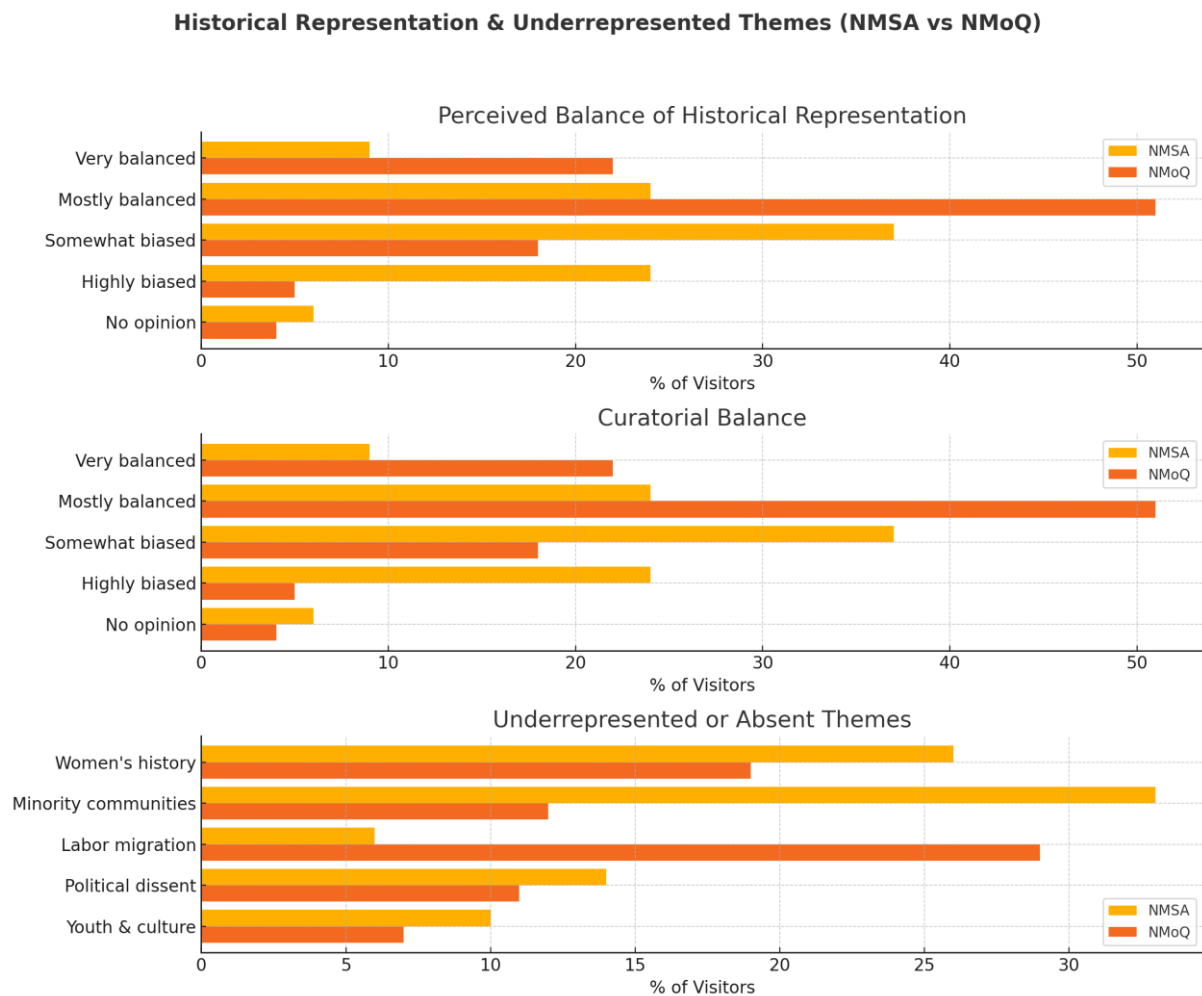


Figure 6: Thematic Chart Results

The first chart reveals a striking disparity in how visitors assess the fairness of historical narratives. At NMoQ, more than half of respondents (just above 50%) view the historical representation as "mostly balanced," while NMSA garners only around 23% in this category. In contrast, NMSA records significantly higher ratings for "somewhat biased" (37%) and "highly biased" (over 20%). This divergence can be partially attributed to the chronological narrative structure favored by NMoQ, as previously discussed in the section on museum structure. This structure allows visitors to follow a coherent and temporally ordered storyline, facilitating interpretive understanding. The findings also indicate that visitors perceive NMoQ's historical narrative as more inclusive, reflective, and balanced, while NMSA's is viewed as more selective and ideologically slanted. Such differences illustrate the museum's function as a pedagogical institution, shaping historical knowledge within specific power frameworks. A perception of bias at NMSA may indicate that its curatorial voice adheres more closely to state-centered historical continuity. In contrast, NMoQ allows for a greater plurality of voices and interpretive space.

The second chart further amplifies this distinction. Over 50% of NMoQ visitors report the museum's curatorial balance as "mostly balanced," a substantial lead over NMSA, where that

figure hovers just above 20%. NMSA again records notably higher percentages in "somewhat biased" (35%) and "highly biased" (22%).

Such results replicate visitor perceptions of how interpretive decisions are made and which narratives are prioritized and omitted. Following the idea of the museum as a "ritual space" where civic ideologies are rehearsed⁹³², NMoQ may be succeeding in crafting a ritual that feels inclusive and dialogic, while NMSA is more rigidly scripting a narrative of national belief. The high proportion of "biased" responses at NMSA suggests a curatorial strategy that may privilege singular authority over narrative negotiation.

The third chart focuses on themes perceived as missing or marginalized. Visitors to NMSA report significantly higher levels of underrepresentation across four out of five categories:

- Women's history (28% at NMSA vs 24% at NMoQ)
- Minority communities (30% vs 25%)
- Political dissent (15% vs 12%)
- Youth and culture (12% vs 7%)

Interestingly, NMoQ is perceived as less representative in one area: labor migration⁹³³, with around 26% of its visitors noting this as a gap compared to just 12% at NMSA.

These results reveal the selective nature of museum narratives, often engineered to preserve hegemonic national imaginaries. NMSA appears to marginalize themes that could disrupt dominant historical narratives, particularly those involving gender, ethnic pluralism, and contestation of authority. NMoQ, while more favorably perceived in these domains, demonstrates limitations in confronting contemporary socio-political tensions, such as the realities of migrant labor, a topic fraught with ethical and political sensitivity in Qatar and the broader Gulf region. Finally, specific histories constitute difficult heritage, narratives that challenge institutional comfort zones and require a careful, often strategic balancing act between inclusion and exclusion⁹³⁴.

⁹³² Duncan, C. (1995). *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1st ed.). Routledge. (pp: 8)

⁹³³ Migrant labor has played a pivotal role in shaping Qatar's modern state and economy, particularly since the post-independence era following 1971. The country's rapid urbanization, infrastructure expansion, and global positioning—especially following the discovery and export of natural gas—have been almost entirely dependent on migrant workers, primarily from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa. Demographic data consistently underscore this reality: non-citizens have historically outnumbered Qatari nationals by a wide margin, with migrants now estimated to be five times the number of citizens, making up over 88% of the total population.

⁹³⁴ Macdonald, S. (2009). *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (1st ed.). Routledge.

E. Architectural Symbolism and the Construction of National Identity: A Comparative Reflection

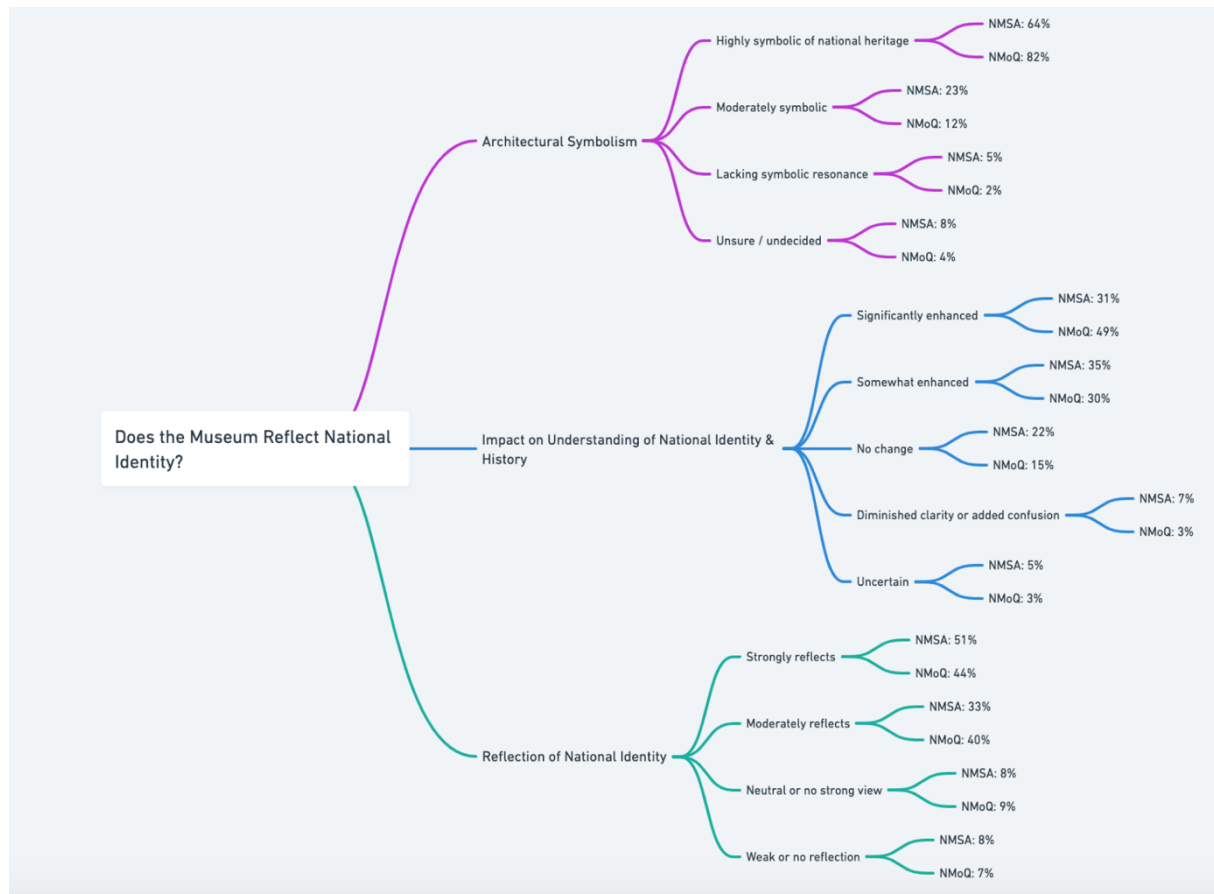


Figure 7: Architectural Symbolism and the Construction of National Identity

The first thematic strand, architectural symbolism, shows a profound distinction in how the two national museums embody cultural meaning through their built environments. 82% of NMoQ's visitors consider its architecture "highly symbolic of national heritage," compared to 64% for NMSA. Conversely, NMSA shows higher ratings for "moderately symbolic" (23% vs. 12%) and "unsure" or "lacking resonance" (13% combined vs. 6%).

These results foreground museums as aesthetic interfaces, where the very architecture acts as a signifying system⁹³⁵. The NMoQ's organic, sculptural form, designed by Jean Nouvel and inspired by the desert rose, clearly resonates with audiences visually and ideologically. The symbolic efficacy of NMoQ's building lies in its capacity to embody both natural heritage and futurist ambition, making it a spatial narrative of Qatari identity. By contrast, NMSA, though still perceived as symbolic by a majority, may rely on more conventional monumental styles that convey authority but evoke less interpretive depth. Notes, form, space, and layout are pedagogical tools that shape meaning before a single object is seen⁹³⁶. Here, NMoQ's architecture

⁹³⁵ Melis, A., Vavetsi, R., & Finotti, F. (2024). *The Architecture of Exhibitions: Experiential Design* (1st ed.). Routledge. (Pp. 21)

⁹³⁶ Dagalp, I & Hartmann, B. (2022) From "aesthetic" to aestheticization: a multi-layered cultural approach, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 25:1, 1-20,

is an effective prelude to narrative engagement, while NMSA's might appear more institutional than evocative.

The second branch addresses how effectively each museum supports the visitor's understanding of national identity. 49% of NMoQ visitors report a "significantly enhanced" understanding, compared to just 31% at NMSA. NMoQ scores lower in the "no change" and "diminished clarity" categories, signaling greater narrative effectiveness and emotional resonance. Contemporary visitors engage more deeply with multisensory and affective museum experiences, especially those that frame identity in dynamic, lived terms⁹³⁷. NMoQ's success suggests that it communicates national identity not as a fixed historical conclusion but as a layered and unfolding narrative, thus enhancing cognitive and emotional uptake. In contrast, NMSA's visitors are more likely to report "no change" (22%) or "confusion" (7%), possibly indicating that the institution's interpretive structure adheres more rigidly to didactic or chronological storytelling, which may feel less accessible or relevant. NMoQ seems to invite the visitor into the identity-making process, while NMSA may present identity as a pre-authored truth.

The third thematic strand explores the perceived clarity and intensity with which each museum reflects national identity. Interestingly, NMSA receives a higher percentage of "strongly reflects" responses (51%) compared to NMoQ (44%). However, NMoQ leads in "moderately reflects" (40% vs. 33%), and both museums score similarly in the neutral and weak categories. These patterns indicate a difference in how identity is performed rather than whether it is present. At NMSA, identity may be articulated more directly, uniformly, and perhaps nomologically, leading more visitors to report a "strong" reflection. NMoQ, by contrast, appears to mediate identity through nuance, reflecting the postmodern turn in museology, one that privileges multi-perspective storytelling and avoids monolithic nationalism. Visitors still perceive it as moderately reflective, which suggests that it communicates identity through multiplicity and emotional resonance, not just declarative content.

⁹³⁷ Tsita, C. *et al.* (2022). An Approach to Facilitate Visitors' Engagement with Contemporary Art in a Virtual Museum. In: Moropoulou, A., Georgopoulos, A., Doulamis, A., Ioannides, M., Ronchi, A. (eds) Transdisciplinary Multispectral Modelling and Cooperation for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage. TMM_CH 2021. Communications in Computer and Information Science, vol 1574. Springer, Cham.

F. Visitor experience, digital engagement, and multilingual accessibility

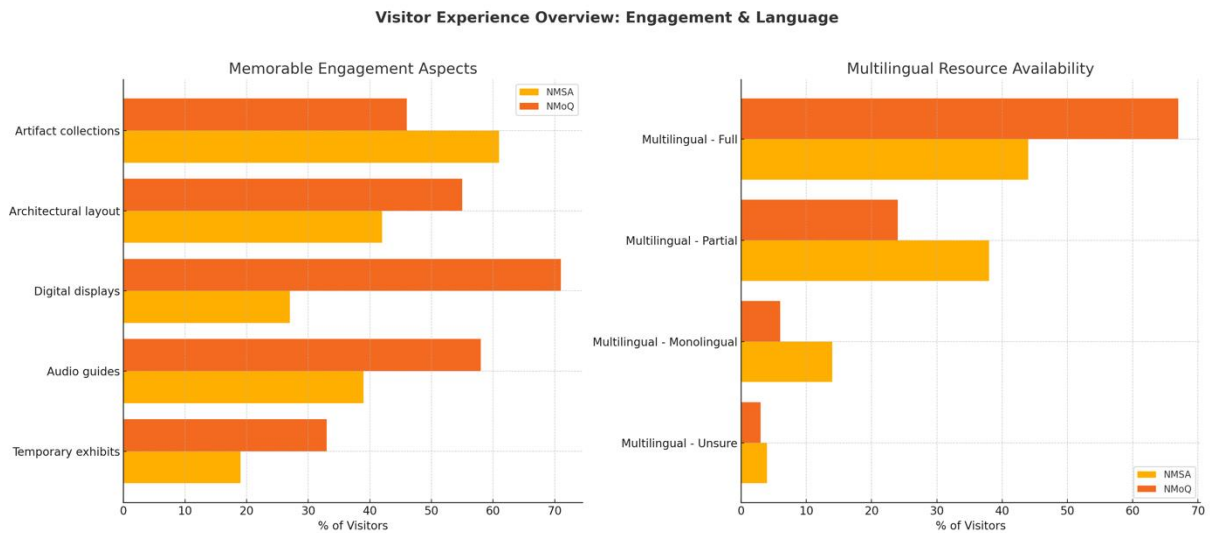


Figure 8: Visitor experience overview: Engagement and language

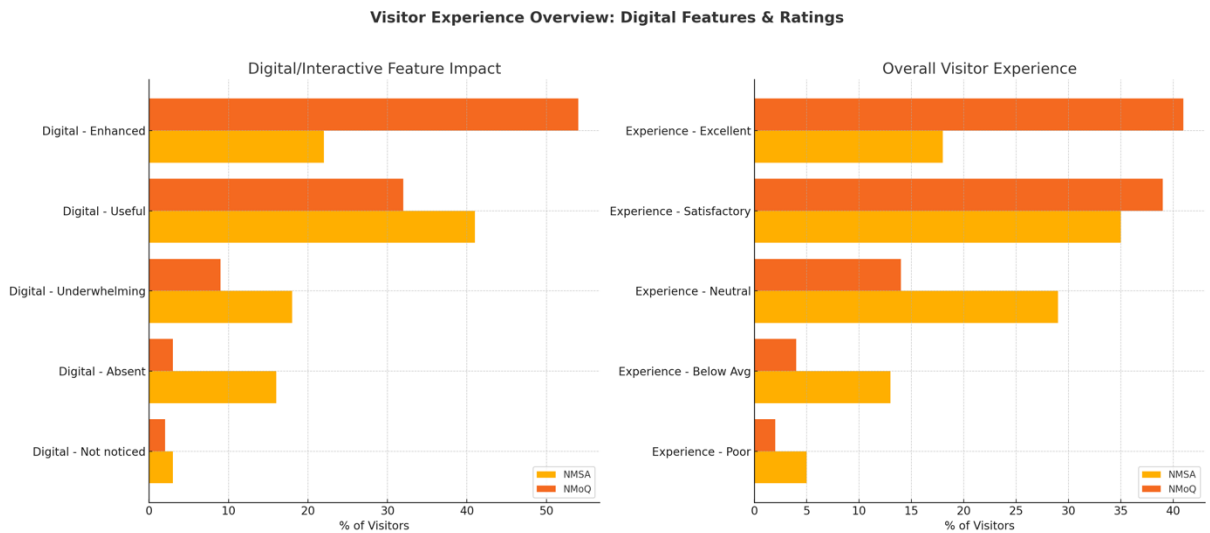


Figure 9: Visitor experience overview: Digital features and Ratings

This final section turns to the ethical dimensions of the museum experience, focusing on how visitors evaluate their encounters with the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) and the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ). Ethical museology requires an attentiveness to the quality, inclusivity, and emotional resonance of visitor engagement; not simply what museums present but how people feel, understand, and connect during their visit⁹³⁸.

Both institutions score highly in traditional areas such as *artifact collections* and *architectural layout*, as shown in the first chart on Memorable Engagement Aspects. However, NMoQ leads significantly in *digital displays*, *audio guides*, and *temporary exhibits*. NMoQ's investment in immersive technologies and rotating exhibitions appear to deepen engagement and encourage recommendations, demonstrating an evolving curatorial emphasis on dynamism and audience reactivation. In terms of multilingual resource availability, NMoQ again significantly outperforms NMSA. While NMoQ provides robust multilingual interpretation, NMSA

⁹³⁸ Decker, J. (2024). *Museums in motion: An introduction to the histories, functions, and aspirations of museums* (4th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. (pp 9-23)

respondents reported partial or monolingual offerings more frequently. This divergence illustrates that linguistic accessibility is a critical pillar of inclusive museology, particularly in culturally diverse or internationally oriented environments⁹³⁹. By adopting multilingual strategies, NMoQ affirms its role as a globally legible institution, actively dismantling linguistic barriers that otherwise alienate non-Arabic-speaking audiences.

The second chart deepens this analysis by examining the impact of digital/interactive features and their contribution to the overall visitor experience. Here, NMoQ registers substantially higher scores in categories such as *Digital – Enhanced* and *Digital – Useful*, while NMSA receives elevated responses in *Digital – Absent* and *Digital – Underwhelming*. This divergence is further mirrored in evaluations of Overall Visitor Experience, where NMoQ is disproportionately represented in the *Excellent* and *Satisfactory* categories. NMSA, by contrast, records higher proportions of *Neutral*, *Below Average*, and *Poor* responses. These outcomes are emblematic of what scholars and professionals increasingly refer to as the visitor-centered turn in museology⁹⁴⁰. According to recent reports from the MuseumNext digital conference and the ICOM 2022 survey on digital transformation, post-pandemic museums are being reimagined as hybrid, responsive, and participatory spaces⁹⁴¹. Institutions that fail to align with these emerging expectations risk alienating key demographic groups and undermining their long-term social relevance⁹⁴².

This relative success of NMoQ in these two points can also be understood as the result of the most ambitious cultural project in Qatar’s modern history. As previously outlined, the museum represents a landmark investment—both financially and symbolically—in the country’s soft power and cultural diplomacy strategy. It blends cutting-edge technology with immersive storytelling to position itself not only as a national institution, but as a global benchmark in museological innovation, often exceeding the experiential standards of long-established European museums⁹⁴³. Together, these findings affirm the proposition that visitor experience is not a secondary concern but a core ethical dimension of contemporary museum practice. Museums that invest in empathy-driven, multilingual, and technologically immersive strategies generate stronger affective responses and fulfill a broader ethical commitment to accessibility, inclusion, and co-creation.

⁹³⁹ MARINA, M. (2021). Building and Enhancing Intercultural Communication in Museum Spaces through SFL and Translation Studies. Sheffield - Bristol: EQUINOX.

⁹⁴⁰ Falk, J. H. (2016). Museum audiences: A visitor-centered perspective. *Loisir et Société/Leisure and Society*, 39(3), 357–370.

⁹⁴¹ MuseumNext. (2021). *Digital Summit 2021: How museums pivoted to using online tools*. Retrieved from <https://www.museumnext.com/article/digital-ideas-for-museums-in-a-post-pandemic-world/>

⁹⁴² Nikolaou, P. (2024). Museums and the Post-Digital: Revisiting Challenges in the Digital Transformation of Museums. *Heritage*, 7(3), 1784-1800.

⁹⁴³ Sarkar, B. (2022). *The Archaeology of Qatar Gallery at the National Museum of Qatar* (pp. 457-C23.N*). Oxford University Press eBooks.

V. Conclusion

Examining the two national museums question the structures of historical consciousness; those institutional forms where power and memory clash. With the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) and the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ), we come across locations of historiographical engineering rather than just records of the past. These institutions not only preserve the past; they are laboratories where time is fabricated, where the selective rendering of the past becomes a strategic exercise in nation-building, legitimization, and symbolic control. As we highlighted, both museums operate as discursive regimes that cultivate particular subjects: loyal citizens, effectively engaged visitors, and historically interpellated bodies. Their spatial logic, historical sequencing, and curatorial selection create a useable history fitted to support sovereignty, counter dissent, and show continuity.

We also stressed how these two cultural institutions reorder historical temporality. They transform heterogeneous, disjointed, and often conflictual historical moments into a teleological narrative, a field in which the present regime appears as the logical destiny of the future of the nation (This is not history as inquiry but history as destiny). Thus, these museums must be understood as reflections of national identity and, at the same time, as operations of governmentality. They are pedagogical auditoriums in which subjects are trained to remember, to belong, and to internalize the logics of the state. History, here, is not discovered, it is produced.

To walk through the halls of these museums is to move through a cartography of power. Every exhibit, every architectural gesture, every omission reflects memory and, most importantly, who has the authority to decide what is worth remembering. In this sense, heritage becomes less about the past than about who controls the conditions under which the past becomes legible. Finally, across both national museums, the two states have refined a more sophisticated mode of authority, not through direct censorship, but by preemptively scripting the narratives that citizens are allowed to remember and share. This process shapes the national memory not by restricting expression, but by selectively determining what can be articulated and recalled.

General Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to critically investigate the intersection of cultural heritage, Islamic tradition, and nation-building in the rapidly transforming Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Through a conceptual, historical, and empirical examination, it has shown how cultural heritage has evolved from a passive repository of memory to an active instrument in nation-building. At the heart of this transformation is a changing understanding of temporality, a fundamental analytical category that has significantly altered the meaning and role of cultural heritage and national identity in the region⁹⁴⁴. We started by viewing temporality not as a simple, neutral timeline but as a deliberately constructed and political structure of historical time. We argued that, drawing on François Hartog's concept of the "presentist regime of historicity,"⁹⁴⁵ the Arab world has increasingly adopted a global epistemological framework in which the past and future are subordinated to the present's needs characterized by conflicts and challenges stemming from modernization.

In both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the anxiety of a lost past and the uncertainty of an unpredictable future have led to an unprecedented expansion of the present. This presentist context transformed cultural heritage from a marginal concern to a central apparatus entrusted with anchoring memory, establishing legitimacy, and stabilizing identity during unstable times. Within this reconfigured temporality, cultural heritage has also progressed from a realm of conservation to a regime of governance⁹⁴⁶. We proposed a new paradigm—cultural heritage-based nationalism—to account for how Saudi Arabia and Qatar strategically deploy heritage to reframe their national identities, restructure state-society relations, and reposition themselves within global hierarchies. This paradigm does not replace older models of nationalism but integrates and reframes them through the operational logic of heritage regimes.

In our empirical case studies, we examined the validity of this paradigm by demonstrating how cultural heritage has been used to challenge traditional religious discourse and facilitate ideological reform. In both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, cultural heritage was actively employed to redefine collective memory and influence the current political objectives. In Saudi Arabia, the Hegra Archaeological Site (al-Hijr/Madāin Šālīh), once neglected due to its ties to pre-Islamic history, is being recontextualized as an emblem of national pride and cosmopolitan identity, thereby diminishing the dominance of religious narratives in public space and its historical

⁹⁴⁴ Brisini, T. (2024). The presence of the past: temporality, ontology, and the prehistory of performance. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 44(4), 254–270.

⁹⁴⁵ Hartog, F. (2015). *Regimes of historicity: Presentism and experiences of time*. Columbia University Press

⁹⁴⁶ Sonkoly, G. (2023). Regimes of Urban Heritage in Europe. In *Urban Heritage in Europe* (Ed.): Economic and Social Revival (1st ed.). Routledge. pp 1-23.

significance⁹⁴⁷. Historically deemed haram (forbidden) due to prophetic admonitions against visiting desolate sites, which were thought to be manifestations of divine retribution, its evolution as a renowned cultural and tourism hub immediately contests this religious ban. It indicates a secular reconfiguration of the national story, in which Islamic moral geography is redefined via state-sponsored heritage discourse.

During my interview with the prominent Islamic scholar Sheikh Dr. Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Muslih, he defended the state's repositioning of Hegra Archaeological Site (al-Hijr/Madā'in Šālīh), quoting:

*"Obedience (طاعة) to Wali al-Amr (the legitimate ruler) is not only a religious duty, but it's also a source of national unity and social stability. If UNESCO has recognized the site for its archaeological and historical value, then we, the Saudis, and Muslims, should take pride in preserving it rather than seeking religious justifications to reject or marginalize it. We made it unnecessarily difficult on people in the past—especially during the Sahwa era—by turning everything into a matter of prohibition. Today, if our Wali al-Amr has approved this direction, then we should follow him. Such an attitude is not a contradiction with Islam—it's a wise balance between our identity and our national orientation."*⁹⁴⁸

Similarly, Qatar's efforts to rehabilitate and present historical urban settings, such as Al-Zubarah, serve two purposes: affirming territorial sovereignty and preserving a pre-oil history that enriches the state's civilizational narrative. UNESCO inscription of Al-Zubarah in 2013 was especially significant in this regard. This act effectively transferred the symbolic ownership of the site, including its historical narrative, from Bahrain to Qatar, supporting the Qatar's thirst for an autonomous and legitimized past. While the site bears traces of tribal contestation, regional trade entanglements, and archival traces of Bahraini sovereignty—having been governed for centuries by the ruling Al Khalifa family, who held authority over both Al-Zubarah and significant parts of the Qatari peninsula⁹⁴⁹—its contemporary heritagization performs an erasure of that entangled past. Through archaeological reconstruction, UNESCO inscription, and curated exhibition, Al-Zubarah is reassembled not as a node in a shared Gulf history but as an original point of Qatari national continuity⁹⁵⁰.

⁹⁴⁷ Cassola-Cochin, V. (2020). The Development of Nabataean Madā'in Šālīh (Saudi Arabia) into an Attractive Sightseeing: From Traditional Rejection to Official Recognition. *Jordan Journal for History and Archaeology*, 14(4), 1–23.

⁹⁴⁸ Sheikh Dr. Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Muslih. A one-to-one interview done at the Islamic center (grand mosque) of Budapest in June 2024.

⁹⁴⁹ Matar, M. (2023). *Bahrain's Surviving Dynasty: The Al Khalifa's Rulership: Struggles and Successions. 1783–1932*. Gerlach Press.

⁹⁵⁰ Polak-Springer, P. (2020). Bordering Zubara: oil politics, the 1937 Qatari-Bahraini conflict, and the making of a modern Arabian (Persian) Gulf Borderland. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 37(5), 1071–1095.

We also examined the important role of cultural heritage as an essential tool in nation-building from the perspective of invented traditions. We analyzed how both states invented traditions as a tool of emotional governance. Through the invention of new national rituals—such as national days, heritage festivals, and curated folklore—both Qatar and Saudi Arabia manufacture a sense of historical continuity and cultural foundation. These traditions, many of which have no deep historical precedent, function as technologies of loyalty, producing what Hobsbawm called "invented traditions": symbolically loaded performances that generate a sense of affective belonging⁹⁵¹. As both states transitioned from the traditional rentier model of statecraft, where political loyalty was mainly secured through the redistribution of oil and gas revenues, they are progressively establishing a new form of legitimacy based on symbolic and cultural participation⁹⁵². Cultural heritage plays a central role in this new social contract. Saudi Arabia and Qatar now seek loyalty through emotional attachment to national culture rather than only depending on income rewards. Being Saudi or Qatari becomes an identity expressed through participation in shared heritage rituals and a fostered feeling of national pride. In this way, cultural heritage serves as both an alternative to and a supplement of economic redistribution, reshaping the foundations of state-society relations in a post-rentier context.

Moreover, we focused on national museums as the ending site of our investigation. The National Museum of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia and the National Museum of Doha in Qatar, act as state-approved spaces for shaping narratives and projecting ideology. They are not impartial archives of history; instead, they serve as ideological structures that carefully craft narratives to match the state's changing image. By transforming historical complexity into understandable narratives of unity, pride, and reform, these museums contribute to the process of national identity building. They encourage citizens to adopt a modern sense of identity built on curated heritage, while simultaneously broadcasting to the international community a polished image of as both Islamic and globally connected. In this way, both museums combine memory, ideology, and performance into a unified vision of the nation, reinforcing the idea that cultural heritage is an indispensable part of governance.

Finally, our investigation also revealed that cultural heritage has played a subtle yet foundational role in advancing secularization processes within both states. While secularism is never explicitly declared in national development agendas, the widespread use of heritage as a tool of governance suggests an implicit separation of cultural identity from religious authority. Through strategies such as national preservation initiatives, curated museum narratives, invented traditions, and mass international events organization, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have constructed a cultural sphere in which the sacred is either recontextualized or quietly sidelined. Cultural heritage in this

⁹⁵¹ Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (1983). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹⁵² Hertog, S. (2017). The political economy of distribution in the Middle East: Is there scope for a new social contract? *International Development Policy | Revue internationale de politique de développement*, 7.

sense becomes a politically effective mediator, providing a soft, symbolically resonant pathway for withdrawing political Islam from public life without confrontation. A telling example is the official response of both states to the ongoing conflict in Palestine, a region that historically served as a symbolic cornerstone of pan-Arab and Islamic unity and solidarity. Despite the proximity and emotional weight of the war, both Saudi Arabia and Qatar⁹⁵³ maintained strict prohibitions against public demonstrations and religious commentary, even preventing imams from addressing the topic in mosques⁹⁵⁴. At the same time, events such as the Riyadh Season festival continued uninterrupted, attracting record-breaking attendance for musical and entertainment performances. The combination of war and state-sponsored celebration reflects a profound shift in the political and moral priorities. National identity is no longer framed around religious or pan-Arab obligations, but increasingly around curated cultural expression and emotional alignment with the state's secularized self-perception. The moral obligations and the shared Islamic cause have been muted through the soft power of cultural programming, illustrating how heritage has become central to the new secular-nationalist reality.

⁹⁵³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs – State of Qatar. (2023, March 3). The State of Qatar reiterates position of supporting Palestine. <https://mofa.gov.qa/en/qatar/latest-articles/latest-news/details/1444/08/11/the-state-of-qatar-reiterates-position-of-supporting-palestine>

⁹⁵⁴ Gujarat Samachar. (2023, October 21). Saudi Arabia bans public displays supporting Palestine. Gujarat Samachar English. <https://english.gujaratsamachar.com/news/international/saudi-arabia-bans-public-displays-supporting-palestine>

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ANNEX

Survey Instrument: Comparative Analysis of Visitor Perceptions in the National Museums of Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Introuction:

This survey aims to examine visitor experiences and perceptions of the National Museum of Saudi Arabia (NMSA) in Riyadh and the National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) in Doha, with a specific focus on how national identity, historical narratives, and cultural representation are mediated through exhibition design, curatorial choices, and visitor engagement strategies. By collecting empirical data on audience reception, this research seeks to contribute to theoretical debates in museum studies, heritage discourse analysis, and the political economy of cultural institutions in the Gulf region.

1. Age Cohort (please select one):

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-25
- ☐ 26-35
- ☐ 36-50
- ☐ 51+

2. Gender Identity :

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary / Prefer not to specify.

3. Nationality (open-ended response) :

4. Highest Level of Educational Attainment:

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ High School Diploma or Equivalent Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Doctorate (PhD) or Equivalent
- ☐ Other:

5. Primary Motivation for Visiting (select up to two responses):

Check all that apply.

- ☐ General interest in history and culture
- ☐ Academic or research-related purposes
- ☐ Tourism
- ☐ Family or educational visit
- ☐ Attending a special exhibition or cultural event
- ☐ Other:

6. How did you learn about this museum?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Social media (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook)
- ☐ Word-of-mouth recommendation
- ☐ Guide or travel agency
- ☐ Government or institutional promotion
- ☐ Other:

7. Which thematic areas within the museum's exhibition content did you find most compelling? (Select up to two responses)

Check all that apply.

- ☐ ~~Pre-Islamic history and archaeological heritage~~
- ☐ Islamic heritage and the development of early Islamic societies
- ☐ National unification and state formation narratives
- ☐ Economic history and contemporary modernization
- ☐ Maritime history and trade networks (applicable to NMoQ)
- ☐ Other:

8. Which specific exhibitions or curated displays did you find most compelling in how they presented the museum's themes? (Select up to two responses)

Check all that apply.

- ☐ Pre-Islamic archaeology and material culture displays
- ☐ Islamic heritage and early Islamic life exhibitions
- ☐ State formation and national identity narratives
- ☐ Maritime trade and seafaring exhibitions
- ☐ Modernization and development-themed galleries
- ☐ Other:

9. On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you evaluate the overall visitor experience at this museum?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Very Poor
- ☐ Below Average
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Satisfactory
- ☐ Excellent

10. To what extent do you perceive the museum's exhibitions as balanced in their representation of national history and cultural identity?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Very balanced, providing a comprehensive and inclusive narrative.
- ☐ Mostly balanced, though some aspects seem underrepresented.
- ☐ Somewhat biased, privileging certain narratives over others.
- ☐ Highly biased, reinforcing a singular or state-driven perspective.

11. Which aspects of history or culture, in your opinion, were insufficiently represented or entirely absent from the museum's exhibitions? (Open-ended response)
-

12. In your view, how well does the museum reflect the country's national identity?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Strongly reflects national identity.
- ☐ Moderately reflects national identity.
- ☐ Neutral or no strong opinion.
- ☐ Weakly reflects national identity.
- ☐ Does not reflect national identity at all.

13. How would you rate the architectural design of the museum in terms of its symbolic representation of national heritage?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Highly symbolic and effectively representative
- ☐ Moderately symbolic, with some relevant cultural elements
- ☐ Neutral or undecided
- ☐ Lacking in clear symbolic meaning
- ☐ Entirely disconnected from national heritage

14. Did your visit to the museum enhance or alter your understanding of the country's history and cultural identity?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, significantly.
- ☐ Yes, somewhat
- ☐ No, not really.
- ☐ No, not at all.

15. Which aspects of the museum's visitor engagement stood out to you the most?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Architectural and spatial design
- ☐ Interactive exhibits and technological features
- ☐ Collection of artifacts and historical objects
- ☐ Audio guides and explanatory content
- ☐ Other:

16. Did the museum provide sufficient multilingual resources (e.g., Arabic, English, other languages)?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, all exhibits were well-translated.
- ☐ Some exhibits were translated, but not comprehensively.
- ☐ No, most exhibits were available only in one primary language.

17. Did the museum incorporate digital or interactive elements (e.g., virtual reality, multimedia installations, touchscreen displays)?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Yes, and they significantly enhanced the visitor experience.
- ☐ Yes, but they were not particularly engaging or informative.
- ☐ No, digital and interactive features were limited.
- ☐ No, the museum lacked any digital or interactive components.

18. On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you evaluate the overall visitor experience at this museum?

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Very Poor
- ☐ Below Average
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Satisfactory
- ☐ Excelle

