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[Nationalism](#)

# “Hypernationalism”?

The Debate on Identity and Nationalism in the Gulf

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Few regions are facing such massive changes to their economic, social, and security situations as the Gulf States. These changes are also leading to the dissolution of factors that previously formed their identity. They are now being replaced by nationalisation projects – attracting accusations that the Gulf States are pursuing an aggressive form of “hypernationalism”.

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### **“With your Blood, you Should Protect the Nation”**

On 29 November 2018 the Emirati daily *The National* published a report about how the National Day of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has changed over the years. The report describes a concert on National Day 2017 featuring the fictional story of a boy who pledges to serve in the military (known as “national service” in the UAE). His mother tells him: “With your blood, you should protect the nation and when it calls upon you, you must answer with your soul before your body.”<sup>1</sup> This kind of language is as new to the Emirates and the Gulf States as is the current status of the military. Some observers have described it as “hypernationalism”<sup>2</sup> – a concept of nationhood that focusses on isolationism and identity-building based solely on separation. However, the debates on creating identity are playing out in a differentiated manner across the Gulf.

In contrast to the founding of states in the Middle East or in Europe, the first states in the Gulf region were neither born out of struggles for national self-determination, nor national chauvinism, nor yet the desire for territorial expansion. The cohesion of the state and the legitimacy of its rulers were guaranteed through religion and by uniting the tribes. This is particularly true of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where religion replaced the idea of the nation. In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the state’s founder Mohammed Ibn Saud entered into an alliance with the religious leader Mohammed Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab. As a result, the political sphere was

dominated by the House of Saud and the religious sphere by the strongly puritanical interpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism. In this way, the Kingdom became a state in which religion provided its legitimacy and the key to its identity. “Religion moulded an overarching identity that also served to legitimise the ruling family. Islam was the identity of the population, strengthened by the importance of Saudi Arabia as the birthplace of the religion and the host of its two most holy sites.”<sup>3</sup> The House of Saud represented not only the nation’s political authority but also its moral and religious authority; the king is known as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques – Mecca and Medina – and views himself as the leader of the Islamic world.

Thus, until very recently Saudi Arabia and the Gulf have been perceived as a region dominated by very conservative Islam, a region of veiled women, a region where the Koran and Sunna serve as the constitution, where the legal system is based on Sharia law, where the religious establishment regulates daily life, and where governmental and social systems are extremely resistant to change.

This resistance to liberal changes in their economic and social spheres can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, their above-mentioned pronounced deference to conservative religious authorities explains this, and on the other, the political and social stability of the Gulf States is explained by the rentier state model they employ. This model is an attempt to answer the question of why their governmental and state systems enjoy such strength and stability.

The assumption is that an “implicit” contract exists between the people and their rulers – citizens have an obligation to the state because they are dependent upon it. Gulf nationals generally pay no income tax while enjoying free health care, free education, and subsidised electricity and fuel. Largely thanks to its oil revenues, the state is in a position to look after its people – and, in return, the population leaves matters of government in the hands of the state. This results in a consolidated set of intrinsically stable systems, rooted in religious and traditional power, and in the distribution of welfare state benefits. It is the combination of these systems which have formed the basis of the Gulf States’ identity.

**“I have Twenty Years to Turn the Tide in my Country and Launch it into the Future”**

However, this system of state support through oil revenues is now under pressure. A glance at the life expectancy versus oil reserves to production ratio reveals an alarming picture for states whose economic strength and political stability rely on their oil reserves. Kuwait and Qatar are the only countries to still have fairly substantial reserves. The reserves of every other state are set to run out within the lifetime of citizens born today.<sup>4</sup> Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman summarises this development as follows: “In twenty years, the importance of oil goes to zero, and then renewables take over. I have twenty years to turn the tide in my country and launch it into the future.”<sup>5</sup>

**The Gulf States have a very young population, with particular consequences for the education and health systems.**

In addition, there is a high volume of public expenditure at a time of relatively low and unstable oil prices. This makes it difficult to balance national budgets, which are still chronically

dependant on high oil prices. The fact that the Gulf States need higher oil prices is shown by the “breakeven oil price” – the price at which the national budget would theoretically be balanced after production costs. For Bahrain, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, this “breakeven oil price” has been well above the actual oil price since 2014. This highlights the growing pressure on national budgets.<sup>6</sup> However, the pressure on national budgets is also increasing due to the growth and composition of the population, a population, moreover, that is used to a high standard of living. In the Gulf States, the average age of the population is 20 to 24. This youthful population has particular consequences for the education and health systems of the Gulf States. By 2030, some 500,000 people will need to be integrated into the job market each year.<sup>7</sup>

These challenges lead to uncertainties and questions of self-affirmation. Added to this is the composition of the population: around 50 per cent of the Gulf States’ residents are expatriates. At 88.5 per cent of the total population, the UAE has the largest proportion of expatriates, with Qatar close behind at 85.7 per cent. The local population is mainly employed in the public sector, while the private sector is dominated by expatriate workers. This model has led to a dependence on cheap labour – and, across the Gulf, the indigenous population has become a minority that is barely integrated into the wider labour market.<sup>8</sup> Other major challenges are the high rate of youth unemployment and the low number of women in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>

**“An Ambitious Nation” – From Rentier State to Reform Programmes**

In the last few years, every Gulf State has set out its long-term reform programmes in so-called “Visions”. Their aim is to prepare for the post-oil age. The programmes focus on key areas, such as the economy, infrastructure, education, and health.<sup>10</sup> In 2016, Saudi Arabia’s National Reform Plan, Vision 2030, announced a focus on the following strategic objectives: diversifying the economy (for example by promoting the entertainment industry, tourism and

armaments); privatisation and the creation of sovereign wealth funds; expanding the private sector; increasing the contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises; introducing reforms in education, the labour market, regulation, and governance; introducing value-added tax; increasing the proportion of women in the labour market; and creating 15 million jobs by 2030 (of which eleven million are to be filled by nationals, among them 3.6 million women).<sup>11</sup> This reform programme does not limit itself to economic matters but also intervenes in social reality. For example, in April 2018, cinemas opened in Saudi Arabia for the first time in 35 years, the guardianship system for women was weakened, and women were granted the right to drive.<sup>12</sup>

This attempt to prepare society for the end of the oil-financed rentier state model, in which the state looked after everything, has been accompanied by a change in mentality, expectations, and identity – a shift to less state responsibility and more individual responsibility. “Overall, the leadership has broken from the old social contract by emphasising that Saudi Arabia has now entered a new era in which citizens must contribute to the good of the country, as opposed to simply receiving benefits as their forebears did.”<sup>13</sup>

What will this new social contract look like? How will it be possible to preserve people’s loyalty to the royal families when the welfare system is under pressure, standards of living start to decline, and people have to work for a living – perhaps even doing the more “menial” jobs that were previously done by migrants?

Of course, religion will continue to play an important role. But the “Visions” published by the various Gulf States suggest that it is now the concept of the nation which is intended to fulfil the functions of legitimacy, identity, and motivation. For example, the UAE Vision 2021 states: “The UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda strives to preserve a cohesive society proud of its identity and sense of belonging. Thus, it promotes an inclusive environment that integrates all segments of society while preserving the

UAE’s unique culture, heritage, and traditions and reinforces social and family cohesion. Furthermore, the National Agenda aims for the UAE to be among the best in the world in the Human Development Index and to be the happiest of all nations so that its citizens feel proud to belong to the UAE.”<sup>14</sup> The Saudi Vision 2030 meanwhile aims to create a “vibrant society with strong roots” that involves “taking pride in our national identity [...] [a]n ambitious nation”.<sup>15</sup> The aim is to promote “national values”, a sense of national belonging, Islamic, Arab and Saudi “heritage” and to uphold the Arabic language.

### **Building National Identity**

In his 2019 work “Being Young, Male and Saudi. Identity and Politics in a Globalized Kingdom”, Mark C. Thompson asks: “What is Saudi?” Thompson is a leading expert on social developments in the Kingdom. His findings are based on focus group interviews that he conducted in Saudi Arabia. When asked what constitutes Saudi identity, the respondents were rather vague, though most of them said a Saudi identity exists. They just seemed to have no clear view of what it was – it seems to be a work in progress.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, one of the key factors is the significance of religion, but even this is changing. It still plays a vital role in society but some of its power has been severely curtailed, such as that wielded by the religious police and leading clerics.<sup>17</sup> Religion has become more personal. Moreover, the legitimacy of the system and people’s loyalty to it can no longer be maintained through rentier payments. “Saudi religiosity is changing, undermining the political potency of the clerics who once could reliably rally followers to the flag, [...] With the religious and economic planks weakened, Riyadh has sought to use nationalism as a salve to patch the strained relationship between rulers and ruled.”<sup>18</sup>

How is this new, young nationalism being built? The first element involves reverting to the country’s founding myths, history, and culture – which are always interpreted in terms of present and future. For example, the Saudi royal family commemorates Mohammed Bin Salman’s



Pulling the trigger: Reform programmes have changed the role of women in the region. Source: © Mohamed Al Hwaity, Reuters.

grandfather, King Abdulaziz, considered to be the founding father of today's Saudi Arabia in an age before oil brought prosperity. According to Mohammed bin Salman, King Abdulaziz united the Kingdom without the help of oil.<sup>19</sup>

Recent years have seen a growing number of festivals and museums, which showcase the cultural heritage of the Gulf States, along with modern art and culture. They have been expressly designed to help build a sense of national identity. These include the Qasr al Hosn Festival in Abu Dhabi, the SIKKA Art Fair in Dubai, the opening of the new National Museum of Qatar (inspired by a desert rose, the new national symbol), the planned Zayed National Museum

in Abu Dhabi (conceived to look like a falcon's wings, the national symbol, and commemorating the state founder's love of falconry), the National Museum in Muscat, the National Museum in Riyadh, the Jeddah Season, and the Red Sea Film Festival.<sup>20</sup>

They are also projects which use their architecture to contribute to national self-image and pride ("spectacularisation"<sup>21</sup> or "mega museums"<sup>22</sup>) and, also, to draw international interest.<sup>23</sup> These include the Sharq District in Kuwait, the King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the latter aiming to bring different cultures together so as to shine fresh light on the shared stories of humanity.<sup>24</sup>



The National Museum of Qatar also stands for diversity and inclusion, according to HE Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Chairperson of Qatar Museums. She goes on to explain that the museum is a physical manifestation of Qatar's proud identity, connecting the country's history with its diverse, cosmopolitan and progressive present.<sup>25</sup>

## Appeals are made to national identity, history, and tribal traditions in order to ensure cohesion and legitimacy.

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In this way, appeals are made to national identity, history, and tribal traditions in order to ensure cohesion and legitimacy. This is combined with legitimising modernisation through major economic narratives and projects, such as Expo 2020 in Dubai; the 2022 World Cup in Qatar; the construction of an Arab counterpart to Silicon Valley with Knowledge City in Medina / Red Sea; and the construction of Neom, a fully automated desert city in Saudi Arabia.

This recourse to heritage while simultaneously affirming a modern identity can also be seen in sport. Of course, the Gulf States are already well-known for hosting major international sporting events such as Formula 1 races in Bahrain and Abu Dhabi. But now they are supporting or reintroducing sports that have a long history in the Gulf, such as falconry, hunting, and camel racing. Like the camel, the falcon has become a national symbol of the UAE.<sup>26</sup> In sport too, clear attempts are being made to combine tradition and modernity, for example, camel races in which the camels are ridden by "robo-jockeys".<sup>27</sup>

### National Holidays and Military Engagement

National holidays are another key element of the Gulf States' nationalisation programmes. Saudi Arabia made its National Day an official holiday in 2005, in order to strengthen national

identity against the competing forces of tribal loyalties and transnational Islamism. In the past, the religious establishment had deemed this kind of celebration un-Islamic.<sup>28</sup> But today countries in the Gulf often use their National Days as an opportunity to show off their military strength through military symbols, parades, flags, speeches, and uniforms. The military is also being instrumentalised in other ways, such as through the introduction of compulsory military service in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. Known as "national service" in the Emirates, its declared aim is to forge internal cohesion and a common identity. This is also done by adopting a confrontational position towards foreign opponents, especially Iran. On the one hand, Iran is criticised for meddling in the region, while at the same time there is evidence that some Gulf countries are seeking to ease tensions with the majority Shi'ite nation, particularly in light of the coronavirus pandemic. In the future, using Iran as a means of forging national identity through demarcation may, therefore, become less pronounced.

The increased use of national service and military rearmament as instruments for nation-building is a recent phenomenon in the Gulf States, leading to accusations of militarised nationalism<sup>29</sup> and warnings that this strategy may increase polarisation between the Gulf States, particularly between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE – at the expense of a shared Gulf identity. Military symbolism is being espoused to different degrees across the Gulf, with Kuwait and Oman being more reticent in this respect. However, Qatar and the UAE have raised the profile of their armed forces and are using it to build national cohesion.<sup>30</sup> For example, it is now normal for children to wear military uniforms on the Emirates' National Day and on Commemoration Day, a day for honouring fallen soldiers that was introduced in 2015. Some schools make it compulsory for children to wear military uniforms on National Day and children's uniforms and camouflage gear are now stocked by department stores. Mosques, streets, and public buildings are named after soldiers who died in the service of their country.

This patriotic atmosphere was also evident in the early days of the Yemen intervention led by Saudi Arabia. Citizens were asked to fight for their country or to support the troops (such as via the “send your message to the troops” campaign on social media). The withdrawal of Emirati troops from Yemen and their arrival in the UAE were accompanied by images of a large military parade representing national unity. The troops were received by Mohammad bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Commander-in-Chief of the Emirati Armed Forces.<sup>31</sup>

### **New uncertainties have led the Gulf States to redefine themselves as nations.**

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While Saudi Arabia and the UAE were intervening in Yemen’s civil war, Oman actively refused to get involved, which in turn helped to rally nationalist sentiment in the country.<sup>32</sup> The decision underscored Oman’s traditional national narrative of being an independent, peaceful state that acts as a mediator in the region rather than an interventionist force. Oman has existed as a geographical and cultural entity for thousands of years and its citizens have long enjoyed a sense of nationhood. Nevertheless, the need for greater social integration and nation-building was recognised as important from the 1970s onwards, a trend that coincided with the beginning of Sultan Qaboos’ reign. Four elements of nation-building can be cited here: the founding of the Sultan’s Armed Forces (SAF), which recruited soldiers from all regions, tribes, and social groups and also assumed the role of educator; the founding of Petroleum Development Oman, which, like the SAF, also fulfilled functions of socialisation and education; the establishment of functioning state institutions; and finally, the creation of a cult of identity around the Sultan himself, who serves as a central integrative figure across tribes, religions, and geography.<sup>33</sup>





Pro-Iranian Houthi rebels: The war in Yemen promoted a patriotic atmosphere in countries in the region.  
Source: © Khaled Abdullah, Reuters.



Here, as in the UAE, the importance of religious tolerance in connection with nationalisation projects is also evident. Both states are pursuing strategies that aim to avoid politicisation and polarisation through religion. In Oman, for example, this is being done through a Ministry of Religious Affairs (not Islamic Affairs), while the Emirates created a Ministry of Tolerance in 2016, and declared 2019 to be the Year of Tolerance. In addition to rejecting religious polarisation, extremism, and sectarianism, the aim is also to demonstrate the cosmopolitanism of the Emirates, an essential trait for an international hub.

### “Hypernationalism” or Cosmopolitan Nations?

With their nationalisation projects, the Gulf States are responding to the challenges posed by the foreseeable end of the rentier state model, demographic developments, and the geostrategic situation. The latter involves uncertainties relating to open borders, the fragmentation of society due to the lack of a unifying identity, and sectarian movements.<sup>34</sup>

New uncertainties in the face of transnational Islamist networks, which cast doubt on the legitimacy of governments and ways of life in the Gulf, along with concerns about the influence of Iran and sectarian divisions, as well as the extreme pressure to reform, and the speed of these reforms have led the Gulf States to redefine themselves as nations and to place greater emphasis on their history, culture, and visions for the future. The question arises whether this is, in fact, “hypernationalism” or militarised nationalism, which is directed against domestic activists, academics, influencers, and public figures, and poses a threat to neighbouring states. With regard to Saudi Arabia, critics suggest that the dwindling power of religion is leading to the rise of “hypernationalists”. They keep watch over the public sphere – and particularly over what can be said on social media, and it is they who are now setting the boundaries.<sup>35</sup> An aggressive “with us or against us” mentality is becoming increasingly prevalent.<sup>36</sup> The greater

emphasis on military power in the UAE, for example, is attracting criticism for posing the threat of militarised nationalism. At the same time, all the Gulf States’ nationalisation projects can be viewed, both rhetorically and factually, as projects that combine history, culture, and successes on the one hand, with reform, modernisation, tolerance, pluralism, and cosmopolitanism on the other. This may be dismissed as lip service or viewed as a necessary prerequisite for the Gulf States’ business model. Either way, it counters the argument of pure “hypernationalism” or militarised nationalism. For Western states that favour a free and inclusive basic order, it follows that they are expected to respect the Gulf States’ traditions and culture in their dealings with them. At the same time, the combination of nationalisation and cosmopolitanism, coupled with economic and social reforms, offers opportunities for mutual learning and exchange.

*–translated from German–*

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*The author would like to thank Philipp Bernhard, Gulf Analysis Intern at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s Regional Programme Gulf States for his valuable research.*

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