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Capitalizing on Cosmopolitanism in the Gulf

NATALIE KOCH

Abu Dhabi's new Louvre Museum opened its doors in November 2017 with an event attended by French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife, and hosted by the emirate's ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. Ten years earlier, the government of Abu Dhabi had signed a \$525 million deal with the French museum to use the “Louvre” name for 30 years, plus an additional \$750 million for management support.

The building was designed by the eminent French architect Jean Nouvel, whose website describes it as “a project founded on a major symbol of Arab architecture: the dome.” But Nouvel emphasizes that this is no traditional dome. It is a modern dome, with a latticed design that allows for both shade and “bursts of sun.”

Just across the Gulf sits another brand-new, Nouvel-designed museum, also said to be a modern take on a traditional theme—the “desert rose.” This is the National Museum of Qatar, which opened in March 2019. Like Abu Dhabi's Louvre, it has been lavishly funded by the government. Numbers are hard to come by, but the museum's eclectic and complicated design and extended construction delays suggest a cost far higher than the initial price tag of \$434 million set in a 2011 contract.

Other Western architects (or their firms, at least) have been engaged in building museums in the hydrocarbon-rich states of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Among these museums is a Frank Gehry–designed Guggenheim set to open in the UAE in the next few years (projected in 2010 to cost \$800 million).

The first of the Arabian Peninsula's iconic museums was I. M. Pei's Museum of Islamic Art, which opened in 2008 in Doha. The famous Chinese-American architect toured the Muslim architectural world for inspiration, including visits to Spain, India, Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt. He ultimately landed on a Cubist design familiar to anyone who knows his work, but which he explained was meant to evoke an “abstract vision of the key design elements of Islamic architecture.”

In each case, the vision that these Western men profess to build into the urban landscape of the capital cities of the UAE and Qatar is devoted, above all, to modernity. The architects make gestures to local Arab heritage, but play up the idea of the new museums as icons of a more global, more gleaming cosmopolitan modernity. The Guggenheim website, for example, explains: “From its location in the Middle East—a central axis between Europe, Asia, and Africa—the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi will contribute to a more inclusive and expansive view of art history that emphasizes the convergence of local, regional, and international sources of creative inspiration rather than geography or nationality.” This museum, like its siblings in the Gulf region, aims to be an icon of cosmopolitanism.

The museums are not alone: spectacular urbanization projects across the Arabian Peninsula have been described in largely similar terms, as places where cosmopolitan ideals are not just practiced by welcoming people from all backgrounds, but also inscribed onto every urban edifice. These cosmopolitan narratives are especially significant for understanding governance in the Gulf because of the region's unique demographic configuration. In Qatar and the UAE, citizens account for a minority of under 10 percent of the countries' total populations. The other 90 percent of their residents are noncitizen expatriates who will never have a chance to gain the full rights of citizenship.

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Critics have accordingly pointed to the contradictions of characterizing the Gulf states as cosmopolitan, emphasizing instead that they are predicated on reinforcing rather than challenging exclusivist citizenship regimes. They often simply stop there, content with unmasking such claims as “false.” Yet this critique is hardly a great revelation: nation-building efforts across the region have always been predicated on strict *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes, determined by parentage.

Merely highlighting the exclusivism of Gulf societies hides their inclusivism. Instead, by taking the narratives of cosmopolitanism in the region seriously, and asking who uses them and why, we can gain a better sense of new forms of governance in the Gulf, which work through identity projects that include (and often co-opt) difference to gain legitimacy.

It is worth emphasizing that cosmopolitanism isn't new in the Gulf. Before, during, and since colonialism, the Arabian Peninsula has had highly diverse societies. Cosmopolitan ideas and realities have always been built into the cityscapes of places such as Abu Dhabi and Doha, thanks in no small part to their historic roles as trading ports linking South Asia, the Middle East, and parts beyond.

Yet there is something different about the new, spectacular, monumentally scaled projects like the UAE's Louvre and Guggenheim, and the Qatar National Museum. The manner in which certain actors use them may suggest a unique perspective on governance that capitalizes (on) cosmopolitanism to validate particular kinds of exclusion. That is, “cosmopolitanism” in this configuration is both capitalized as an economic source of power, and capitalized on as a political source of power. In both cases, this is made possible through the logic of iconicity.

CONCRETE ICONS

All icons are designed to be consumed. They focalize and concretize intangible concepts. In other words, they give material form and sharper focus to an idea that is otherwise too diffuse, tenuous, or abstract to visualize. But if this focalization effect implies an audience, then who are the consumers of these icons of cosmopolitanism? And who are the sellers? Why are Gulf governments investing so heavily in such projects? What stories are they trying to tell about their countries, themselves,

and their people? Lastly, who is profiting? And who isn't?

Financial flows are a significant part of the story, of course, but focusing on money alone would leave us unmoored. To understand the curiously extravagant efforts to concretize cosmopolitanism in the Gulf, we also need to examine the political, social, and cultural geographies underpinning them. These efforts are not limited to museums, but include investments in other major cultural institutions, like impressive new university campuses and research facilities, as well as music halls and sporting venues, international convention centers, airports, seaports, and more.

To be cosmopolitan is to be free from local or national attachments or prejudices. It means, the dictionary suggests, to be at home or feel a sense of belonging all over the world. But is cosmopolitanism merely a pragmatic “mode of managing multiplicities” (as the scholars Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen put it), a personal identity or disposition, an ethical framework, or something else?

Rather than search for an essence of cosmopolitanism, we can learn far more by tracing how the concept is politicized. To understand cosmopolitan ideals, we have to look to the political contention manifested in the ways that different actors

describe and debate cosmopolitanism, enact it or reject it, build it into their museums or constitutions, adopt it as an elite worldliness or an egalitarian community-building exercise, or otherwise work with its slippery potentialities.

Among today's philosophers and political theorists, cosmopolitanism is most often discussed as a normative framework rooted in inclusivity rather than exclusivity—whether defined by nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, language, territorial belonging, religion, or any other kind of essentialist identity politics. In contemporary usage, the idea most commonly indicates a politics of transcending identities defined by the borders of territorial states. In this sense, cosmopolitanism would seem to imply a kind of identity politics running counter to nationalism. Yet this is not the case: cosmopolitanism has long been a key theme in nationalist storylines around the world.

NATIONALIST SCRIPTS

Notwithstanding the triumphalist postnational visions that flourished after the end of the Cold

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War, the world is still organized around territorial states. Governments presiding over these states still seek to root their legitimacy in the idea of a nation. Nationalisms take many forms, and scholars have loosely slotted them on a spectrum: on one end is a type more strongly “ethnic” in its conception of who constitutes the nation; on the other is a more “civic” type of nationalism. In the former, kinship, family lineage, or ethnic identity defines how the nation is imagined; in the latter, a territorial or ideological narrative of unity is the binding glue.

In practice, all nationalisms have multiple scripts or storylines. This is readily apparent in the United States, where there have long been competing nationalist storylines around religion: one claims that America is a “Christian nation,” while another says that it is committed to religious freedom and diversity. Likewise, the civic nationalist “melting pot” storyline coexists with the ethnic nationalist storyline of white supremacy. Cosmopolitanism, in a context like this, is harnessed by individuals and institutions seeking to promote a more civic vision of the nation. Their nationalist icons are icons of cosmopolitanism: not the monuments to Confederate generals or the Ten Commandments in granite, but Lady Liberty in New York Harbor.

There is also a long history of nation-building agendas developed around cosmopolitan ideals beyond the United States. They have figured prominently in certain nationalist storylines in Canada, France, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Jordan, and many other countries. And with each set of civic storylines come the usual icons that focalize and concretize them. Sometimes these are architectural; other times they are sculptural. They may be lavishly expensive, or they may be modest. And they can involve short-lived rituals like parades, or drawn-out exercises of social mobilization like military conscription or the construction of new cities.

Icons of cosmopolitanism, in short, can and do take many forms. So what makes such projects in the UAE and Qatar stand out? Or put another way, is there something fundamentally different about how cosmopolitan identity narratives are being advanced and broadcast in the Gulf?

Although they have been embroiled in an intense feud since 2017, the UAE and Qatar have much in common. Like other countries, they have overlapping and competing scripts of nationalism. Some are more ethnic and others more civic in orientation. As

I have found in my research on Gulf National Days and other local expressions of nationalism, civic nationalist narratives informed by cosmopolitan logic are not only present, but also incredibly powerful in the two countries. Paradoxically, though, these storylines are advanced just as much (or perhaps more) for noncitizens as for citizens.

Examples abound. One of the most vivid was on display in Qatar’s 2013 National Day theme of “OneLove,” represented by a logo of two differently colored hands to symbolize Qataris and foreign residents. And each year’s holiday in both countries brings a new effort to achieve a Guinness world record to further broadcast how inclusive they are. On the UAE’s National Day in 2014, the country broke the world record for most nationalities singing one anthem at one time (119!), a feat the *Gulf News* described as signifying “the diversity and tolerance of the country.” Similar media accounts are common across the region during the holidays. They are part of much broader civic nationalist storylines that frame tolerance and diversity as core values in Qatar and the UAE.

Surprising as it may seem to outside observers, Qatari and Emirati nationalist storylines actively include noncitizen expats. Most people (academics and lay observers alike) would assume that nationalism is for nationals. Since most countries in the world have only a tiny minority who are noncitizens, it may seem obvious that nation-building projects are always designed with citizens in mind. Citizens are, after all, the social community from which most governments derive their legitimacy. But in Qatar and the UAE, governments derive much of their legitimacy from the noncitizens who comprise 90 percent of residents. This awkward fact is never stated so explicitly locally, but it is constantly alluded to by the profuse expressions of civic nationalism in cosmopolitan storylines.

RECONFIGURING INCLUSION

Narratives and practices aimed at fostering expat inclusion are prevalent not just because cosmopolitan ideals make for good public relations (they certainly do), but also because noncitizens are the backbone of the Arabian Peninsula’s political economy. Some Qatari and Emirati citizens do not favor this situation, though, and certain exclusivist ethnic nationalist scripts cast doubt on the rights—and right to belong—of noncitizens. But noncitizens do belong. Many of them develop a deep emotional bond with their adopted home, laboring in service of the state or the range of corporate actors that

allow the Gulf economies to thrive. Others may not develop any kind of emotional attachment, but they nonetheless bolster local economies by paying the costs of making a life in the Gulf's rapidly developing cities, however fleetingly.

All nations, as the sociologist Rogers Brubaker has argued, are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive; they simply differ in terms of the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. In the Gulf states, strict *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes have led to a unique demographic balance. Yet the noncitizens who form the overwhelming majority of the population are not only excluded; they are differently included. Or rather, in contrast to Western conceptions of the relationship between citizenship and a "proper" state configuration, these citizenship regimes are differently inclusive. Much of what Western media interpret as Gulf efforts to promote a cosmopolitan identity project merely for PR purposes is geared toward challenging this hegemonic interpretation of citizenship.

The basic configuration of who is accorded the rights and entitlements of citizenship in the Gulf will not change any time soon, but local leaders and their allies have actively harnessed the power of spectacle and iconicity to advance their claims to being cosmopolites. Massive projects like the Louvre and the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, the Qatar National Museum, designer stadiums for the 2022 World Cup, and countless others are promoted by the ruling families as correctives to Western interpretations of the region, which treat their societies as provincial and exclusionary on the basis of their citizenship regimes.

A 2010 *New York Times* article by the paper's architecture critic on the new Qatari and Emirati museums is telling. Titled "Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity," the piece opens with a bold assertion: "It is an audacious experiment: two small, oil-rich countries in the Middle East are using architecture and art to reshape their national identities virtually overnight, and in the process to redeem the tarnished image of Arabs abroad while showing the way toward a modern society within the boundaries of Islam." The article goes on to suggest that leaders in Qatar and the UAE risk "alienating significant parts of the Arab world" with their embrace of "Western-oriented cosmopolitanism that flourished in places like Cairo and Tehran not so long ago, and that helped fuel the rise of militant fundamentalism."

As Orientalist and problematic as this binary narrative of cultural opposites is, the *Times* article

represents precisely the kind of coverage that Gulf leaders have sought. Indeed, this story is one of many about the spectacular urban developments across the region following the same script: visionary leaders are using their lavish wealth to lead the way on a new path to modernity, and buck the provincial trappings of Islam, sectarianism, and national prejudice prevailing in their region. This story ultimately reaffirms the comforting narrative of a cosmopolitan Occident juxtaposed against a backward Orient, which still prevails in Western media coverage of the Middle East.

MORE COSMOPOLITAN THAN THOU

Another staple of this Western narrative is the West's commitment to exposing human rights violations and holding violators to account. Here, the Gulf's icons of cosmopolitanism come up against the double bind of any iconic project: just as an icon concretizes a narrative that its author wants to advance, it also affords critics something to pin their grievances on. When the Soviet Union fell, so did many Stalin and Lenin statues. And when the United States invaded Iraq, a statue of Saddam Hussein was among the first things to be torn asunder.

The Gulf's iconic development projects have likewise been subject to attack. Instead of treating them as signs of cosmopolitanism and modernity, critics have condemned the museum projects, stadiums, university projects, and more for using slave labor. Although labor problems abound—the region's *kafala* (sponsorship) system for migrant workers gives employers broad discretion, and some withhold their workers' passports—the slave labor storyline is essentialist and inaccurate. Few of the region's millions of workers are subject to such egregious violations, and many migrant workers are quite well-off.

Like any trope, the slave labor narrative sticks because it is evocative—not because it captures the nuance of the unfamiliar structure of inequalities that defines the Gulf's complicated labor politics. It is also a satisfying narrative for Western audiences, giving them a chance to feel more cosmopolitan than thou. After all, influential news outlets like the *New York Times* promote their own nationalist narratives, often in contrast with foreign nationalisms. As the sociologist Michael Billig says of nationalist orators, they dress up the imagined national audience in "rhetorical finery" and then "hold a mirror so the nation can admire itself."

While the Gulf nationalist storylines frame spectacular development projects as icons of cosmopolitanism and modernity, and reject Western claims to a superior form of cosmopolitanism, foreign media critiques consistently come back to this old Orientalist vision of a bifurcated world of the “real” protectors of human rights and enlightenment, and the insincere pretenders. One curious aspect of this clash of nationalisms around the Gulf’s iconic projects, though, is how the star foreign architects have come under attack—and how they have pushed back.

A *New York Review of Books* article criticized Zaha Hadid for disregarding working conditions and the rights of migrant workers at the Al-Wakrah Stadium in Qatar, set to be a World Cup venue. In 2014, Hadid sued the journal for defamation and won: the article alleged that workers had died on a project that had not even begun. Likewise, various US and British outlets (such as the *Observer*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times*) have asserted that construction projects at the Abu Dhabi Louvre and the nearby New York University (NYU) branch campus were marred by “modern-day slavery,” drawing on a 2015 Human Rights Watch report. Jean Nouvel flatly rejected these assertions about the Louvre and claimed that the conditions in Abu Dhabi were actually better than those for some workers employed in Europe.

Frank Gehry and the Guggenheim director, Richard Armstrong, have also responded to efforts to boycott their new Abu Dhabi museum by rejecting claims of labor abuses as exaggerated, and publicly announced a set of standards for workers’ rights on the project. NYU-Abu Dhabi and a number of other Western institutions involved in these projects have taken similar steps. The Western planners and administrators are trying to get ahead of a potential (or real) PR firestorm, but they are also cultivating an image of themselves as enlightened actors who are uniquely positioned to offer Gulf states a model for doing things right.

The colonial logic of this narrative is glaring, but in justifying their involvement in these high-profile projects, the foreign architects and others bolster the idea that what they are building really is an icon of cosmopolitanism—not an icon of oppression, as detractors suggest. By continuing to invest in these high-profile projects, the leaders of Qatar and the UAE are not only waging a PR battle

over this “more cosmopolitan than thou” issue by building the narrative of cosmopolitanism into the urban fabric—they are also recruiting powerful allies among the global cultural elite’s foremost influencers.

None of this is to say that the commitment to cosmopolitan ideals in the Gulf is somehow false. In any context, there are some actors who truly believe in an ideological value system, others who are outright skeptics, and still others who understand the financial, political, or social rewards of engaging with it. The value being concretized in the process of building an icon is not necessarily internalized by the builders and the viewers. Americans know that Lady Liberty stands for the nationalist self-understanding of a people who value freedom. But this does not mean Americans actually internalize and act on that value. Some may, some may not.

Some Qataris may look at Doha’s new desert rose-inspired museum and feel proud of their modern country, which cherishes its past but is open to bringing in the world’s leading architects and leading the way to a cosmopolitan future for the Arabian Peninsula. Some Emiratis may feel the same way when they see the new museums on Saadiyat Island. Noncitizen residents in Qatar and the UAE may also see these icons in the same light. Yet others, citizens and noncitizens alike, may dismiss the icons because they personally reject the cosmopolitan ideals behind them, or simply see them as false assertions.

Since nationalisms are inherently contested, and each place will have multiple scripts competing to be the “correct” vision of national identity, there will always be dissent. This does not mean that an icon can be judged as a failure or a success. Rather, icons work as a trope that organizes political speech and defines the contours of a political landscape that people must navigate. Whether working in service of or against that value system, an icon gives people something to which they can pin their aspirations or critiques. Such is the case with the icons of cosmopolitanism in the Gulf today. They focalize the narrative of cosmopolitanism in the built environment, but they also help organize political speech, domestically and internationally.

Another aspect of the focalization effect of icons is that it works to divert attention from more dif-

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fuse issues. By fixing attention in one strategically defined place, icons help shape, or at least clutter, the conversation. One of the many unspectacular issues that might not be getting due attention as a result is the violence done to the environment as staggering amounts of natural resources are poured into lavish cities of empty towers where there should be none.

Another is the extent to which these projects are facilitated by substantial and sustained flows between “democratic” and “authoritarian” countries. Critics in the West are well versed in decrying authoritarian states and their allies with the familiar language of liberal norms, including human rights and free speech. But the attacks launched at the Emirati or Qatari governments, or the likes of Hadid, Nouvel, or Gehry, do not go to the heart of a global political economy and geopolitical order that are built on a fiction of democratic and authoritarian countries existing as separate units.

COSMOPOLITANISM COMMODIFIED

The global system is one of exchange, just as it always has been. Although diversity and global connectedness are not at all new in the Arabian Peninsula, they are politicized differently today. State-based and private actors have learned to work together in pursuing their sometimes mutually supporting, sometimes competing agendas and strategic goals. In both spheres, astute players have handily learned to capitalize (on) cosmopolitanism. And to do so, they routinely work across borders and with borders: using them when it serves the cosmopolitan narrative and ignoring them when it doesn't.

This far-reaching capitalization of cosmopolitanism is what sets apart the identity narratives being advanced and broadcast in the Gulf states from other cases in history. Of course, large sums of money are available to the region's governments because these states control substantial hydrocarbon reserves. But money alone does not an iconic project make. And money is not the only resource that might measure its value. How should we compare the \$800 million price tag of a new Guggenheim museum with the cost of Stalin's Moscow metro project or his steel city in Magnitogorsk, built as they were with massive gulag labor campaigns and untold resources stripped from Soviet land? The point is rather that cosmopolitanism has been transformed into a commodity that individuals and institutions, local and foreign alike,

are buying and selling in the course of doing business in the Gulf, and deploying in the tricky business of legitimating their political regimes.

In his 2009 book *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*, David Harvey suggests that cosmopolitan narratives arise through one of three mechanisms: philosophical reflection, the ferment of social movements, or practical demands for basic human needs. There is some irony that this comes from a famous Marxist geographer, since he seems to exclude the possibility of actors harnessing and commodifying the idea of cosmopolitanism. Yet this is plain to see in the Gulf, both in the most basic economic sense, as with high-flying architects recycling tired clichés to sell their projects, and in a broader political sense of authoritarian regimes that recognize the power of the concept and use it in systematic PR campaigns designed to deflect critical narratives from the Western media about their countries' supposed backwardness, violations of labor rights, and exclusionary citizenship regimes.

The Gulf's spectacular development projects shed light on new forms of governance in the Middle East insofar as they point to the uniquely configured partnerships of corporate/state and foreign/domestic actors that bolster an authoritarian system through a cosmopolitanism of strategic exclusions. As a civic nationalist storyline, this vision of cosmopolitanism actually does include noncitizens in the body politic and promote certain forms of belonging and participation for them. But the governments of the Arabian Peninsula have no reason to radically alter the citizenship regimes that afford them and a select group of citizens so many privileges.

Rather, the Gulf's cosmopolitanism of strategic exclusions requires that noncitizens and corporate allies learn to parrot the message that cosmopolitan ideals are being realized despite, or perhaps even through, their exclusion from the rights of citizenship. The nationalist storyline not only requires, but also entrenches an exclusivist citizenship regime. And just as countless actors in the region and beyond have reaped the financial and political rewards of mobilizing cosmopolitan rhetoric, so too are they capitalizing on and profiting from a system of noncitizenship. This cosmopolitanism of strategic exclusions is what easy liberal critiques of the spectacular urban projects miss. But it is now etched into the fabric of contemporary Gulf cities. ■