

Is nationalism just for nationals? Civic nationalism for noncitizens and celebrating National Day in Qatar and the UAE

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Abstract. Is nationalism just for nationals? The scholarly consensus seems to be yes, but two small monarchies on the Arabian Peninsula suggest the need to reconsider this assumption. In Qatar, citizens account for about 12 percent of the country's 2 million inhabitants. Of the UAE's 8.2 million residents, 13 percent are citizens. Citizen-nationals enjoy significant legal privilege in these states, preserved by their *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes, which preclude noncitizens and their children from naturalizing. Although they are frequently dismissed as "ethnocracies," Gulf states are not exclusively dominated by ethnic nationalism. Rather, as this study of "National Day" holidays in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) illustrates, an incipient form of civic nationalism is increasingly being used to narrate state-based belonging on the part of noncitizen "expats." Through textual analysis of celebration discourses in the lead-up to the 2013 and 2014 holidays in the UAE and Qatar, supplemented by participant observation, I analyze the political geographical imaginaries at work in these ostensibly inclusivist narratives. Extending the citizenship studies literature on noncitizen inclusion, this case study shows how the Gulf countries challenge traditional assumptions about nationalism being the exclusive domain of citizens, and points to the need for more research about how noncitizens elsewhere in the world participate in nationalist rituals and to what end.

Keywords: ethnic nationalism; civic nationalism; citizenship; Arabian Peninsula; Qatar; United Arab Emirates

Introduction

National Day is celebrated yearly in the small Gulf monarchies of Qatar on 18 December and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on 2 December. On the eve of the holiday, the flags start coming out, slowly at first, and then gush to the surface of all public facades and private spaces, bodies and apparel, consumables and trinkets. State symbols, slogans, icons, and colors saturate the countries and the paternal gaze of the monarchs and their heirs seems to follow one's every movement. In the UAE, the late Sheikh Zayed, the "father of the nation," looks out from the towering heights of a 30-story building, which is covered with his likeness. Plastered onto the body of countless cars, Dubai's Sheikh Mohamed gives a thumbs up and an enormous smile to drivers all over the Emirates. In Qatar, Sheikh Hamad and his son, the current Emir, Sheikh Tamim similarly peer out from billboards, scarves, pins, banners, t-shirts, posters, and other paraphernalia. In both countries, the leaders are depicted in an endless parade of newspaper advertisements commending their "visionary leadership" and extending their "heartfelt congratulations" on the holidays (see **Fig. 1**).

On the eve of National Day, semiotic landscapes become saturated with symbols of the nation, the state, and the leadership of Qatar and the UAE – but who is their audience and who is helping to produce these ritual landscapes? These questions, I argue, are central to explaining the political significance of the annual National Day displays in the two small Gulf Arab monarchies, where citizens make up under 15 percent of the total populations. Understanding these events demands that scholars take seriously the place-based affinities of the remaining 85 percent of their populations who are noncitizen residents. Existing social science research typically considers noncitizen immigrants' identity narratives through the lens of diasporic nationalism or transnationalism (Délano and Gamlen, 2014), but in Qatar and the UAE, noncitizens frequently exhibit a form of nationalist attachment to the country where they reside. Running counter to a scholarly and generally-held assumption that "nationalism is for nationals," it is clear that statist nationalism is *not* the exclusive realm of citizens in the Gulf



Figure 1. UAE National Day advertisement for Mushrif Mall, depicting four of the UAE leaders, including the late Sheikh Zayed (top center), as well as the “Spirit of the Union” National Day logo. Source: *Gulf Times* newspaper, December 2014 (*fair use*).

states. This case study thus points to a need for a stronger theory of the role of noncitizens in the nationalist performances of their host states.

My central argument is that scholars have a great deal to learn about nationalism by looking at how it is activated by foreign residents – whether they are voluntarily refusing to naturalize, only temporarily denied naturalization, or forever barred from attaining citizenship, as in the Gulf. The story of enlisting foreigners in nationalist projects has a long and checkered history, but the idealized conception of sovereignty and the nation-state myth suggest that states should eventually deport or “normalize” the status of these outsiders, however long this process might take. Sovereignty hinges on the idea that states have absolute authority over a specific territory, but also of the population residing there (Weber, 1995). In this framework, state policymakers are generally concerned with how to manage “their” populations, the majority of whom are typically accorded a legal status of “citizen.” As such, in examining the role of nationalism in how governments seek to legitimate state power,

scholars have logically given much more attention to government efforts to create a political community of citizens, and to promote these citizenries' attachment to place and the state – what Guntram Herb (2004) calls “territorial bonding” and “statist bonding.” While this work has been tremendously fruitful, the idea that nationalist discourses are solely produced and consumed by “insiders” of the state/nation is insufficient for explaining power and politics in contexts with large noncitizen populations.

A handful of scholars in citizenship studies have shown how noncitizens engage in, and are engaged by, multiply-scaled forms of political participation in their resident states. These studies make the important case for analyzing the political participation of noncitizen “denizens,” showing both how they directly engage with formalized state institutions, as well as “extra-legal” or “extra-electoral” forms of participation (e.g. Basok, 2004; Brubaker, 1989; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas, 2012, 2014; Miller, 1989). This work is primarily concerned with how people perform and negotiate legal frameworks of citizenship defined by states, but as Eleanor Kofman (1995, p. 126) has argued, “it is easy to accept the idea that citizenship, complete with its inclusionary/exclusionary boundaries, simply emanates from the state as the regulator of diverse societal interests.” However, when treated as “an abstract set of formal qualities,” she adds, this perspective can “ignore the complex interplay between the state and civil society in making citizenship a reality” (Kofman 1995, p. 126). Given their juridical or rights-centered approach, citizenship studies have thus tended to underplay the affective dimensions inherent in all nationalist projects that help “make citizenship a reality” – even if, as in the case of noncitizen residents in the Gulf, this entails reinforcing one’s own exclusion from claims to formal citizenship. By stressing the affective dimensions of territorial and statist bonding that are the hallmark of nationalist imaginaries, this study unites research on nationalism with citizenship studies to extend the literature on noncitizen incorporation beyond a rights-based framework.

This article’s focus on noncitizens is particularly relevant today as state policymakers are actively closing the mechanisms for immigrants and other stateless individuals to attain formal citizenship and, thus, the supposed requisite for becoming a full-fledged member of the nation (Miller, 1989). State-defined “foreigners” all around the world are increasingly locked into a legal and affective limbo of outsidership. However, this liminality exists on a spectrum. For example, some would-be migrants languish in prison-like detention centers in Europe or the US, while others live a life of excess and pleasure in cosmopolitan Dubai or Monaco. Scholars have tended to focus on those vulnerable populations at the more negative end of this spectrum, but it is also important to consider the subjectivity of those perennial outsiders who may actually enjoy significant privilege on the basis of their noncitizen status – or at least, not feel oppressed by it. All around the world, state decision-makers are aware of the need to manage the latter population, whether it is to entice them to move to their countries, derive financial and political rewards from them, or otherwise support the prevailing political economic system. Often, and especially in the Gulf countries, this involves promoting a sense of place and territorial affinity, but which is importantly *not* tied to the promise of citizenship.

Recognizing that the modes of performing and narrating belonging among noncitizens around the world is just as diverse as the people and contexts themselves, this article asks how scholars might rethink nationalism studies through the perspective of non-nationals. Through a case study of National Day celebrations in Qatar and the UAE, I examine how noncitizens are hailed in official nationalist discourses, which are increasingly promoting forms of territorial and statist bonding through a set of civic nationalist scripts. Ethnically-defined conceptions of the nation prevail in these two countries, which have strict *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes that uniformly deny foreigners the possibility to naturalize (Babar, 2014; Vora, 2013). Foreigners or noncitizens are locally referred to as “expats,” a term I will use throughout this article to reflect the prevailing framing in my data sources. Although I recognize that in some places around the world, the term “expat” has a class inflection, in the texts I considered, the word was applied uniformly to all noncitizens, irrespective of class or national origin.

Drawing upon textual analysis, this article primarily considers newspaper reports and advertisements connected to the National Day holidays in Qatar and the UAE. My analysis is deepened and contextualized by participant observation in the lead-up to and during the December 2013 and 2014 celebrations in the capital cities, Doha and Abu Dhabi. Unfolding over the course of many days, I attended as many related events as I could, which included holiday events at local malls, hotels, and museums, as well as concerts, special cultural and artistic exhibitions, official parades, and one of the most popular events in both cities: the unofficial car parade along the seaside promenades. The central method, however, is textual analysis of English-language newspaper materials. Most mainstream newspapers in the UAE and Qatar are in either Arabic or English, although a number of other papers cater to the large numbers of East and South Asian residents, and focus primarily on news in their countries of origin. For this study, I considered English papers, such as *The National*, *Abu Dhabi Week*, and *Gulf News* in the UAE, and *Doha News*, *The Peninsula*, and *Gulf Times* in Qatar, and compiled in a database consisting of approximately 375 separate articles and advertisements (available with the password “national” at: <http://nataliekoch.com/gndp/>).

Targeted at the international expat population, the English-language papers provide an excellent illustration of officially-sanctioned state discourses. Most are owned by a member of the ruling families and all are subject to state controls. As in any context with strict media censorship, content control more frequently takes the form of self-censorship and anticipating what officials will allow or disallow. This discursive control is particularly acute in the case of English-paper newspapers because most of the writers and staff are foreign expats. All noncitizens reside in Qatar and the UAE on the basis of renewable-term visas tied to their employer – meaning that a transgression may result not only in losing one’s job but also losing one’s right to reside in the country. Although many in fact live in the region long-term, people are well aware of the stakes pertaining to what can and cannot be said, but also what will please their higher-ups – whether this is their immediate boss or the royal family member, to whom the newspaper directors must answer.

In this respect, elites themselves do not directly dominate the production of discourse through these media outlets. Rather, they hold a strategic role in setting the playing field, within which individuals, like those writing the articles considered here, must operate. Sometimes people experience and understand this as oppressive, but certainly not always: they quickly learn the possibilities and rewards for deploying the state-sanctioned rhetoric and symbols, and craft themselves as loyal subjects in the process, willingly or otherwise (Koch, 2013a, 2013b). In considering settings characterized by limited freedom of speech, scholars and other observers frequently stigmatize this form of self-policing as the mere production of “propaganda.” However, such a normative dismissal would neglect the way that officially-sanctioned texts can lend insight into shifting discursive regimes and, as such, can provide a useful window onto elite identity projects (Koch, 2011; Kuus, 2007; Wedeen, 1999). As such, a critical analysis of these texts would not treat them as a reflection of some objective “reality,” but rather as situated performances, in which a wide range of actors work to produce a particular political narrative or imaginary.

In critically analyzing such texts, scholars should neither blindly take their narratives at face value, nor simply aim to “unmask” their falseness. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere about conducting research in authoritarian settings, the intellectual puzzle lies in discovering what work these formulaic or orthodox discourses *do* as political practices (Koch, 2013b). That is, what sort of agencies, subjectivities, and geographical imaginaries do they simultaneously draw upon and produce? For example, looking back at Figure 1, in sponsoring this National Day advertisement, the Mushrif Mall is not simply harnessing nationalist iconography to promote its own interests, it is also participating in a larger local practice of glorifying the emirs, which both caricatures their leadership as “visionary” and naturalizes their position at the helm of the United Arab Emirates government. Regardless of whether the mall’s decision-makers “really” believe in that nationalist message conveyed by this

ad, they are nonetheless drawing on a range of discursive opportunities opened up by the holiday to position themselves as “good” subjects, further their material interests, and, in so doing, they both draw upon and further entrench the understanding of the Emirates as a discrete territorial state, defined by a federation of seven benevolent emirs. Even when they follow a state-approved formula, such texts are an important avenue through which residents are instructed in how to imagine the “nation” and the “state.”

Nationalism for non-nationals: From exclusion to inclusion

Daily, [states] are reproduced as nations and their citizenry as nationals. And these nations are reproduced within a wider world of nations. For such daily reproduction to occur, one might hypothesize that a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices must also be reproduced. Moreover, this complex must be reproduced in a banally mundane way, for the world of nations is the everyday world, the familiar terrain of contemporary times. (Billig, 1995, p. 6)

In *Banal Nationalism*, Michael Billig here uses a set of passive constructions that he critiques in his newest book, *Learn to Write Badly* (Billig, 2013), as problematically pervading social science writing. The passive voice, he notes, can obscure *who* is performing the actions described. It is fair to say that scholars of nationalism have been just as inclined to the passive voice as other social scientists and, consequently, have largely left unexamined one central assumption of nationalism studies that comes out in the above quote: are nationalist rituals performed exclusively by and for *citizens* of the state and/or members of the nation? The scholarly consensus pervading the nationalism studies literature appears to be yes: nationalism is for nationals (for classical examples, see e.g. Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Smith, 1991).

Political geographers have typically approached nationalism through two nested and overlapping scalar expressions. These include: (1) state-based expressions of nationalism, in which the members of the nation are imagined as those resident in the state, or (2) sub-state expressions, in which the members of the nation are imagined as an ethnic, regional, or other groups subordinated to or perhaps stretching across the borders of the territorial state (Herb and Kaplan, 1999). In this article, I am primarily concerned with state-based nationalism, insofar as the form of belonging being narrated for and by noncitizens in the Gulf is one of attachment to the state as a “civic” or territorially-defined entity rather than to the “ethnic” Qatari or Emirati nations.

While geographers have been at the fore of the so-called “spatial turn” in the study of nationalism (Rembold and Carrier, 2011), which tends to emphasize territorial claims and the role of space in constructing national identities, nationalism studies has also long been framed around a divide between “civic” and “ethnic” nationalist variants (Smith and Hutchinson, 1994). Sometimes this divide gets mapped onto the two scalar approaches above, with civic variants being equated with state-based nationalism. However, it is important to note that state-based nationalisms are not always civic in nature, and often fall on the more explicitly “ethnic” end of the spectrum. Indeed, Rogers Brubaker has argued that “the deep ambiguity of the terms ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic,’ and in particular the uncertain place of culture in the civic-ethnic scheme, calls into question the usefulness of the distinction itself” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 139). Instead, he argues, “all forms of nationalism are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive,” and scholars might more productively focus on how actors imagine and implement criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the “nation,” rather than fixate on how to precisely categorize any particular nationalism (Brubaker, 2004, p. 141).

This notwithstanding, the civic-ethnic divide can be used as a heuristic marker of state-based nationalisms which are more inclusive of national/ethnic “otherness” (civic) and those which are more exclusive of “otherness” (ethnic). So long as scholars do not take these categories as pre-given or mutually exclusive, they can be useful in

shedding light on the tensions over inclusionary and exclusionary modes of narrating belonging and constructing place-based identities through a range of, often contradictory, “scripts.” These may include “civic nationalist” (“civic” or “inclusivist”) scripts, tropes, imaginaries, or “ethnic nationalist” (“ethnic” or “exclusivist”) scripts, tropes, etc. Different state and non-state actors may deploy these multiple scripts at various moments and places, while the overall saturation of such scripts may shift over a longer period of a time. For example, in Qatar and the UAE, civic scripts narrate a more inclusive vision of Qatari and Emirati society, which supposedly embraces the countries’ large expat populations. Ethnic nationalist scripts, by contrast, focus exclusively on the cultural symbols of the small ethnically-defined citizenries. And as I illustrate below, state planners in both countries have been responding to a range of domestic and international events by intensifying their use of civic nationalist scripts, especially in certain outlets like the English-language newspapers and other internationally-attended events – but not necessarily reducing their use of ethnic nationalist scripts.

Nationalism in the Gulf monarchies is an understudied phenomenon. I believe this is largely connected to the prevailing assumption that “nationalism is for nationals,” and is manifested in the way that Gulf studies scholars frequently characterize its exclusivist character as part of the region’s wider regime of privileging ethnic nationals, with reference to Ahn Nga Longva’s (2005) use of the label “ethnocracy.” Though her use of the term in reference to Kuwait is much nuanced, highlighting the importance of large foreign resident populations to patterns of rule in the region, it has become reified in the literature to index the region’s supposedly straightforward ethnic nationalism (Vora and Koch, forthcoming). As it is used in Gulf studies, the ethnocracy concept implies that the state is controlled by the minority national populations and, thus, that official state discourses are the exclusive realm of national elites. This is not to say that ethnic national symbols are not privileged: they certainly are. As with any more ethnically-inflected nationalist setting, these tropes are often accompanied by a mix of civic symbols, such as flags, national colors, state seals, and so forth, but cultural markers of the nationals’ ethnic heritage are clearly valorized above them to highlight the nationals’ alleged primordial link to the land (Koch, 2015a).

The nationalist principle of congruency between the nation and the state is enacted through a wide range of political practices, institutions, and symbols. In the Gulf, National Day holidays are but one example of how these claims are continually reproduced. The UAE’s National Day on 2 December marks the date that it was officially recognized as a sovereign state. Upon the end of the British Protectorate Treaties on 1 December 1971, six of the seven Trucial State emirates (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah, Umm Al Qawain) were unified as the United Arab Emirates on 2 December. The seventh, Ras Al Khaimah, joined several months later.. Although Qatar was also a British protectorate, it declared its independence on 3 September 1971. Qatar’s National Day is similarly said to commemorate the state’s unification and independence, but the 18 December holiday marks a rather different historical milestone: the ascension to power of today’s ruling al-Thani family. The holiday was established in 2007, by a decree of Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (who was then the Heir Apparent, but is now Qatar’s current Emir). He chose to mark 18 December 1868, because this was when the Qatari state was acknowledged as a distinct entity under control of the al-Thanis, as a consequence of the British-imposed peace settlement ending the Qatari-Bahraini War (1867-1868). In both countries, nationalist discourses have been central to narrating these colonial encounters in a manner that legitimates the Qatari and Emirati “ownership” of the state territories.

Citizenship regimes are another, intimately related, mechanism for reproducing ethnic national claims to ownership of the state-defined territories of Qatar and the UAE. Citizenship, “as a legal category, as a claim, as an identity, as a tool in nation-building, and as an ideal,” Lynn Staeheli (2011, p. 393) notes, is a contested concept in the social sciences. For the purposes of this discussion, I use the term to simply designate who is legally entitled to full benefits from the state (*citizens*) and who is not (*noncitizens*, including residents of all backgrounds

and entitlements). This simple distinction is important because it is impossible to reduce state-society relations to state-citizen relations. This is true anywhere in the world, but especially in the Gulf monarchies, which have stringent *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes and almost no mechanisms for naturalization. Although *jus sanguinis* regimes are not uncommon globally, these countries' small populations, coupled with pro-immigration development policies, have resulted in a rather unusual demographic balance of citizens to foreigners. In Qatar, citizens account for about 12 percent of the country's 2 million inhabitants, while 13 percent of the UAE's 8.2 million residents are citizens. Although variable across the region, most Gulf citizens enjoy wide access to "welfare state goods," which might include free or subsidized education, housing, healthcare, as well as privileged access to state-sector jobs and state-mandated higher salaries than noncitizens for equivalent posts. Gulf nationals thus enjoy unparalleled privilege that the governments entrench through a range of institutional arrangements, which work together with nationalist discourses to validate the citizens' entitlement to the benefits afforded by the state, its territory, and resources.

Given this situation of apparently stark political and economic differentials between citizens and noncitizens, observers typically assume foreign expats in the Gulf resent the fact that they are denied citizenship rights and, by implication, should naturally withhold support for the state (Vora and Koch, forthcoming). If nationalism, as a political doctrine, is understood to be the idea that the nation and the state should be congruent, then why would those being excluded support these narratives? Here again, common assumptions must be questioned. Although expats are systematically excluded from accessing various political and social goods and rights in both Qatar and the UAE, this is highly variable on the basis of an individual's class, race, and geographic origin (Vora, 2013). Especially among lower-class South and East Asian populations, whose residency in the Gulf tends to be more temporary and more tenuous than their higher-class counterparts, expats can indeed be extremely proud of being Gulf residents. This is largely because they perceive living and working in the Gulf as prestigious, and it thus indexes a certain social status in their home countries. Accordingly, Neha Vora and Koch (forthcoming) have called for Gulf studies scholars to adopt a more expansive view of expat belonging, which moves away from the literature's typical focus on modes of *exclusion* to consider the way that noncitizens experience and perform *inclusion* in Gulf societies through various place-based attachments. So while we would agree with Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas' (2012, p. 248) important point that "civic exclusion is itself a mode of inclusion," we show that it is not always and for everyone "repatriated" as a "subordinate stigma," as they suggest. For some, exclusion from the benefits of citizenship is a nonissue – especially if the benefits they reap from residency are not tied to the formal legal status of "citizen" (see also Koch, 2015b; Vora, 2013, 2014).

While the focus on how state institutions and actors exclude noncitizens is particularly prevalent in the literature on the Gulf states because of their extremely limited citizenship regimes, this actually parallels the nationalism studies literature's prevailing tendency to focus on *exclusion* in the analysis of how "others" are constructed in nationalist imaginaries. While a large body of work in political geography and beyond has amply illustrated the relational nature of nationalism, which depends on producing and constantly maintaining the distinction between the national "self" and the foreign "other" (e.g. Krishna, 1994; Megoran, 2004; Paasi, 1996), foreigners are not always demonized and migrants are not always excluded from forms of belonging and social inclusion. In many settings around the world, foreigners are actively included in nationalist agendas and imaginaries in a more positive fashion than one might deduce from the work of scholars and others focused on the politics of exclusion and social injustice. In raising this issue, I do not dismiss this work, which importantly raises awareness about the dangers of repressive ideologies, practices, and other mechanisms of social marginalization. Rather, I want to suggest that this represents only a partial vision, which threatens to obscure the way that people are enlisted in nationalist projects that work as much through *pleasure* as through repression, and as much through

inclusion as exclusion. Considering the role of noncitizens in performing and producing nationalist rhetoric is just one step toward developing a more expansive view of how “otherness” factors into nationalist imaginaries.

Celebrating National Day in Qatar and the UAE

Narrating civic nationalism for noncitizens

Expats in Qatar and the UAE are active participants in the annual National Day celebrations – some with great enthusiasm, others with more indifference but happy for the ritual release and leisure time they afford. While every individual may have a unique reason, or set of reasons, for attending the events, it is important to note that they are increasingly being *invited* to do so by the official apparatus in both states. For the past several years, civic nationalist tropes have increasingly entered the discourses surrounding the National Day holidays. In the UAE, the slogans of “unity through diversity” and “spirit of the union” have been rather consistent. Whereas the idea of “diversity” was previously used to reference the diversity represented by the seven separate emirates of the federation, it is now increasingly being applied to encompass the expat population. Although Qatar’s National Day is relatively young (beginning only in 2007), there was a similar shift to include expat populations in 2013, when planners introduced the “OneLove” theme to the holiday celebrations – including a new logo picturing two differently-colored hands to symbolize the Qataris and the foreign residents (Khatri, 2013) (**Fig. 2**).



Figure 2. The Qatar National Day “OneLove” logo.
Source: Wikipedia Commons (*fair use*).

What explains this shift? I believe it can be explained as a response to two recent international transformations. The first was the series of protest movements, beginning in late 2010, unfolding across the Middle East and elsewhere, commonly referred to the Arab Spring uprisings (if problematically; Tyner and Rice, 2012). During this time, neither Qatar nor the Emirates witnessed any large-scale mobilization agitating for political change. The manifold reasons for this cannot be detailed here (see Herb, 2014; Ulrichsen, 2014), but for the purposes of this article it is important to note that the absence of a visible protest movement did not

stop the leadership from clamping down on opposition voices or any activity that might somehow be construed as anti-regime. While there is, of course, dissent among national elites, this is not widespread and is certainly not considered by the regimes as significant a threat as the large expat population. This anxiety has not only been accompanied by strong-hand tactics, but as the National Day rhetoric suggests, an invigorated set of discourses that narrate the state’s imaginary about how “proper” expats should comport themselves – i.e. grateful, loyal, and deeply appreciative of the stability offered by the states’ authoritarian political configurations (on “good” immigrant/citizen narratives, see also Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2012, 2014).

The second issue behind the shift toward civic scripts in Qatar and the UAE is the recent flurry of negative international reporting about the local exploitation of expat laborers. Critiqued by international bodies such as the United Nations and Human Rights Watch, and in high-profile reports in *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, both countries have recently come under fire in connection with a number of major events and projects, such as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and New York University’s branch campus project in Abu Dhabi (e.g. Booth and Gibson 2013; Kaminer and O’Driscoll 2014; Pattison 2014). This bad press has sparked controversy among Gulf elites, and regimes have even censored local publication of international media, such as

The New York Times (Schlanger, 2014). State decision-makers have long been concerned with creating a positive image of their states as “modern” and “cosmopolitan” (in stereotypically Western terms) and they have thus taken negative press coverage about the local treatment of workers very seriously. Confronting what they see as an assault on their image-making project, then, Qatari and Emirati leaders have redoubled their efforts to develop more inclusive nationalist frames.

As tightly-controlled statist discourses, the rhetoric surrounding National Day celebrations – and especially the increased prevalence of civic nationalist scripts – provides insight into the shifting political calculus of the Gulf monarchies. The celebration discourses, I argue, reflect the two governments’ efforts to deflect criticism – both at home and abroad. Partly aimed at shaping the geographic imaginaries of outsiders, the celebrations’ discursive intensification of civic nationalist scripts illustrates the regimes’ efforts to challenge these critical narratives and reassert their claims to being cosmopolitan and modern nations that treat their large foreign worker population with dignity. Directed inward, these scripts are also used by officials to craft an image of a benevolent regime, against which expats would never – and should never – want to protest. In so doing, civic nationalist scripts narrate Qatar and the UAE as a place of belonging for noncitizens. Following similar contours in both countries, the narratives tend to emphasize two primary themes: territorial belonging and gratitude. The first theme of territorial belonging is common to civic nationalist scripts around the world. The theme of gratitude, though being common to legitimation efforts in authoritarian regimes and developmental states, is rather unique to the form of civic nationalism at work in Qatar and the UAE. I will consider the two themes in turn.

“Home away from home”: Expat territorial belonging in the Gulf

Civic nationalism tends to place a strong focus on the image of a unified homeland, in large part because territory is seen as a way to transcend ethnic or cultural divides in a country marked by many divisions (Anderson, 1983; Anderson, 1988; Brubaker, 1996; Gellner, 1983; Herb, 2004; Knight, 1982; Paasi, 1996). The idea of a unified homeland is made explicit in both Qatar and the UAE through the frequent use in National Day knick-knacks and promotional materials with the image of the state territory. This is also exemplified in one widely-circulated advertisement for the Qatari holiday, sponsored by the national Sidra Medical and Research Center, which depicted a satellite image of Qatar’s territory, brushed over with an image of a fetal baby (see **Fig. 3**). The text reads:

From the foundation of this glorious nation, a new generation is born. Wishing the people of Qatar a happy National Day. Qatar’s enriching culture, heritage, history and pride have always been its stronghold. We at Sidra feel its pulse, priding on its every moment of strength and cheering on its every achievement. And now, it is our mission to serve our women and children, who have helped the nation prosper by keeping them healthy and nurturing their future. It is the generation of tomorrow that will carry forward the legacy of this glorious nation we call home.

Notably, the advertisement references the “the people of Qatar” and “our women and children, who have helped the nation prosper,” without delineating between the Qatari and the non-Qatari. It is explicit in creating the idea of the Qatari peninsula as a womb, uniting themes of fertility and the nation’s future prosperity around a de-bordered satellite image of the territory.

National Day discourses in Qatar also consistently reiterate the theme of Qatar as a “second home” or “home away from home” among expats, as in one *Peninsula* newspaper article titled “Expats display love for their ‘second home.’” The article describes National Day celebrations on the previous day in a special venue targeted at individuals of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin:

Thousands of expatriates from Pakistan and Bangladesh gathered at Al Wakrah Stadium yesterday to celebrate the National Day held under the theme ‘OneLove’, highlighting the bond shared between Qataris and expatriates who have made Qatar their second home. [...] Participants sang songs and danced around the venue expressing their joy. “We are very excited to take part in National Day celebrations. This year expatriates have been accepted as part of the event. My children have lived here more than in our country. We are happy about it as Qatar is our home away from home,” said Habib Ulah Sheikh, a Pakistani, who has been living with his family here for 17 years. (*Peninsula*, 2013a)

In dozens of similar articles about Qatar’s new OneLove theme, the images of joy, as seen here, are consistent.

Quotes from the expat interviewees consistently attribute this sense of joy and gratitude toward Qatar for allowing them to make the country their new *home*.

The theme of the “home away from home” is equally prevalent in the civic scripts in the UAE: “As well as being a time of great pride for Emiratis, National Day was also a chance for expatriates from the Middle East to show their love for their home away from home” (Oueiti, 2014). Formulaic newspaper stories similar to those in Qatar highlight token expats who have come to see the country as a second home, such as, “Mohammed Siddique, 30, a driver from Pakistan, [who] came dressed in a UAE scarf and hat, saying he loved the people in the country he has called home for 10 years” (Khaishgi and Carroll, 2014). Another story introduces a Filipino boy, John, who lives in Sharjah:

John, 12, was born in the country and some of the Emirati ways of celebrating National Day had clearly rubbed off on him. [...] “I have decorated the car myself with UAE flags. We are going to honk the horn and celebrate National Day. It’s going to be a blast. I was born in the UAE. I have been to my home country a few times but, to be honest, I consider the UAE my home. I have great loyalty to this country.” (Zriqat, 2014)



Figure 3. Qatar National Day advertisement from Sidra Medical and Research Center. Source: *The Peninsula* newspaper, December 2013 (*fair use*).

It may seem far-fetched that a 12-year-old could claim to have “great loyalty” to any country or cause, but the “truth” of these stories is less relevant than the manner in which they caricature the officially-sanctioned image of the obedient expat, who harbors little more than joy and gratitude, and honors the ways of his or her adopted home. More so than the Qatari coverage, the UAE reporting highlights the stories of expatriate populations from other parts of the Middle East – and in particular, those states marred by conflict and civil strife. Portrayed as the place that has taken them in during their time of need, the UAE is praised for providing the order and stability that their own countries cannot. Not only do these narratives operate as a subtle justification for the UAE’s involvement in the US-led ISIS bombing campaign that was unfolding at the time of the 2014 National Day celebration, they also affirm the officially-promoted values of stability and security provided by a strong, authoritarian state.

In another expat profile, a Palestinian engineer, who has resided in the UAE for seven years, tells *The National*:

National Day is a nice day for Emiratis and for us. In our country we don’t have something like this. We are happy when we see something like this because it’s not available for us. The UAE stood out among other Arab countries for its safety and its accomplishments over the past 43 years. We hope to some day have the same for Palestine. (Khaishgi and Carroll, 2014)

Notably, this quote paints a stark contrast between the speaker as separate from the Emiratis. Even though he has been resident in the country for many years, his imagined community is located elsewhere: “In our country we don’t have something like this.” The prosperity and order being celebrated in the Emirates effectively reduced to an issue of territory. But these home/land narratives do not fundamentally challenge the idea that the territories are the rightful property of Gulf nationals. On this issue, Robert Kaiser (2002, p. 230) has observed: “The homeland thus tends to be perceived by members of the nation as exclusively theirs, consigning all non-members to the status of foreigners or outsiders who do not properly belong.”

While these texts develop more inclusive descriptions of the UAE or Qatar as expats’ home, theirs is a qualitatively different kind of belonging. Their connection to the place is always mediated through other national and territorial affinities: “I am Palestinian, but the UAE is my second homeland so I feel so proud while celebrating the National Day” (Oueiti, 2014), or “Even though I’m not a UAE citizen, I consider it my country” (ADW, 2014). Expat belonging in the Gulf is one of caveats; it is not the “primordial homeland to reinforce the depiction of the nation as an ancient community of belonging; an organic singularity ‘rooted’ to a particular place” (Kaiser, 2002, p. 230). Those who call the place their home, even if they were born there, are all narrated as having been uprooted and transplanted to the Gulf. According to the official rhetoric, it is only thanks to the virtues of the citizens and state leaders that these expats have been allowed to blossom in their new habitat.

“Havens” of diversity and stability: Crafting the grateful and loyal expat

Gratitude is the second major theme that arose in this study. The official discourse here hinges on the image of the grateful expat, who praises the regimes/states/citizens for their tolerance and hospitality, and for allowing them to reside and make a living in “their” country. Taking innumerable forms, two especially telling examples can be found in each country’s efforts to achieve Guinness Book of World Records recognition for various nationalist exhibitions. On the UAE’s 2014 National Day, the country was reported to have broken the world record for most nationalities singing one anthem at one time: 119. The *Gulf News* story embellishes that “the record signifies the diversity and tolerance of the country,” and quotes the Director of Government Relations at GEMS Education (the school whose students were the anthem singers) as saying: “this is a special day where 120 out of the 140 nationalities, who call the UAE home, have come together to thank the UAE in a special way”

(Nazzal, 2014). It is never explained what these students are “thanking” the UAE for, but presumably it is the country’s tolerance for their presence in the *nationals’* land. As guests in a foreign land, they are here expressing their gratitude for the hospitality of their hosts. While this narrative may appear inclusive at first glance, it actually makes explicit the idea that other nationalities do not belong in the same way that Emiratis belong: there are no schools of Emirati children thanking the UAE.

Qatar similarly achieved Guinness Book recognition in 2013 for the largest flag in the world: an area of 101,978 square meters (or as large as 19 football fields). Blatantly exemplifying the theme of gratitude, it was named the “Flag of Gratitude and Loyalty,” and dedicated to the Father Emir Sheikh Hamad and the current Emir Sheikh Tamim “for their efforts in achieving national development” (*Peninsula*, 2013b). The flag project was sponsored by Katara, a foundation that operates a high-end “cultural village” complex in Doha, which regularly hosts numerous National Day events. Celebrations in 2014 marked the third year of Katara’s super-sized “Book of Loyalty,” “a giant book on whose pages visitors from all walks of life jot down words of love and gratitude in different languages and dialects” (*Gulf Times*, 2014) – which they did with great diligence (see **Fig. 4**).



Figure 4. Photograph of a section of the Qatar National Day “Book of Loyalty” in Katara Cultural Village. Source: Author, December 2014.

In this discursive production, all residents of Qatar and the UAE are narrated as thankful for the visionary leadership of the ruling families, but noncitizens are differentiated: through civic nationalist scripts, they are also narrated as thankful for the opportunities that have been afforded to them by the countries’ (nondemocratic) political configurations. The following quote provides an excellent synopsis of the official discourse about expat gratitude in the UAE:

For the expatriate population, the draw [to the UAE] is two-fold: the high earning potential and the multicultural environment. There is no doubt that the UAE offers the prospect of a life that often simply does not exist in many expatriates’ countries of origin, for reasons of corruption, economic stagnation and bad governance. For people like Palestinians and Syrians, who are unable to return to their former homes, being able to live and work in the UAE means the ability

to get ahead and forge a life of dignity through hard work. It is no wonder they value our stability and feel responsible for behaving in a manner that ensures that continues. These findings [from the newspaper's recent poll] are important because all those who live in the UAE need to not just benefit from tolerance and stability but also understand the social contract that underpins it. These kind of havens do not happen by chance but from deliberate effort – not just by the leaders but also from all those who live here. (*National*, 2014)

In Qatar, similar stories circulate about opportunities provided in the face of hardship in expats' home countries, such as the formulaic praise offered by a Sri Lankan expat, quoted as saying: "I never miss to join Qatar's National Day celebrations. Living away from home, such events offer a kind of refreshment to us. This is also an opportunity to express my gratitude to Qatar which helps me support my family back home" (Chandran, 2013). Here again is the simultaneous effect of producing an image of generosity and benevolence on the part of the citizen-nationals, as well as reinforcing the out-of-placeness of the foreign residents who are there to make a living, as the result of the state's clemency. There is insufficient space to detail them here, but it should be noted that parallel narratives circulate in the state-owned and parastatal companies, which host numerous festivities and special meals for workers, and sometimes their families, around National Day. Sometimes even framed as "corporate social responsibility," these events work to create a similar image of benevolence and good-will on the part of the citizen-elites in control of the country's state-corporate sectors.

The narrative of these states' generosity or openness to outsiders is also a way of reiterating nationalist ideals and imaginaries about Qataris and Emiratis as "cosmopolitan" and "tolerant." A woman from Pakistan, for example, is quoted as saying: "The UAE has also given me the opportunity to grow as a person as I've met people from so many cultures here. You don't get that anywhere else. The mix is amazing, and I appreciate the rulers who've maintained the harmony – they keep everyone happy" (*ADW*, 2014). Manufactured or not, such quotes from expats reflect a common habit of all good nationalist orators: "In addressing the imagined national audience, they dress it in rhetorical finery and, then, [...] hold a mirror so the nation can admire itself" (Billig, 1995, p. 98). In considering the official discourse, however, Gulf nationals do not necessarily have a coherent sense of what they are admiring in the mirror. The fact that these pro-diversity narratives prevail is the product of a long-fought, and far from complete, battle between the ruling families and more conservative elites in both countries. The latter consistently express significant anxiety about their countries' so-called demographic "imbalance," which they blame on official development policies favoring increasing numbers of expatriate workers. Ruling elites are acutely aware of this opposing attitude and, if spectacles do indeed "dramatize the aspirations of the regime but also promote images designed to convey certain ideas to spectators" (Wedeen, 1999, p. 13), the dissenting elites are also important spectators being targeted by recent efforts to imbue National Day celebrations with a civic nationalist spirit.

At a different level, expats themselves have also called into question the official discourse of inclusivity – particularly in Qatar when the OneLove campaign was initiated. Although certain residents saw the campaign as something of a sham, and simply refused to attend National Day events, others have taken the holiday's new civic dimension quite seriously. For example, the regime was criticized for the falseness of its rhetoric when large numbers of single East and South Asian men were denied entry to certain "mainstream" National Day events in 2013, which were belatedly or *ad hoc* declared "family-only zones." These "bachelors," who are stigmatized all across the Gulf, were primarily turned away from the official parade along Doha's Corniche avenue on the morning of National Day, leaving many feeling great disappointment – a sentiment they expressed primarily through social media (see Khatri, 2013). Curiously, though, this sense of disappointment arises as a result of officials denying these men the opportunity to celebrate and perform their affective attachment to Qatar during the

nationalist celebration. In a sense, it is unclear if the stir caused by this event can really be deemed a “critique” insofar as it extends rather than opposes the civic nationalist narrative of the OneLove campaign.

A more explicit challenge to the OneLove campaign, however, relates to the “Associated Activities” planned for South and East Asian expats on National Day itself. At four different venues on the outskirts of the city, they could attend a full-day of celebrations, food, sports, and cultural events specific to their community. With similar programs held in 2013 and 2014, Indians and Sri Lankans were hosted at the West End Park; Pakistanis and Bangladeshis at Al Wakrah Stadium; Filipinos, Indonesians and Malaysians at Al Rayyan Stadium; and Nepalis at the Al Khor Stadium. According to the *Qatar Tribune* reporting, migrant workers were uniformly positive about the arrangement: “The mood of thousands of Asian workers, especially the single ones, is upbeat this year as they eagerly look forward to Qatar National Day celebrations on Wednesday to attend the various cultural and sports programmes to be held at the West End Park in the Industrial Area” (Chandran, 2013). In practice, however, the venues are all extremely far from the center of Doha (some up to one hour away by car) and my ethnographic observations indicated that laborers felt that they were being “relegated” to the distant edges of the city – so as to be out of sight and out of the way of the mainstream events dominated by Euro-American, middle- and upper-class expats, as well as citizen-nationals.

During my observation of the unofficial car parades on the National Days in both countries in 2014, the small numbers of single South and East Asian men were marked in Doha – in stark contrast to Abu Dhabi, where they were essentially the exclusive demographic of observers. I analyze the car parades at length elsewhere (Koch, 2016), but I should note that in Abu Dhabi, this was an especially important space for the expat population, especially of the lower economic strata, to come together and enjoy themselves. Most people were dressed casually in their regular weekend clothes, but a number had draped themselves with Emirati National Day scarves and other nationalist accouterments (see **Fig. 5**). Many strolled along the waterfront promenade and snapped selfies, while others were teeming at the edges of the adjacent road to watch the parading cars and, at times, could be spotted in the cars too. There was a great deal of laughter as spectators attacked one another and those in the parade with silly string. Given that, as a woman, I was a prime target for these attacks, I was well aware that the car parade was a scene for expat *men* to come together and socialize during their day off work – and to enjoy the ritual role inversion afforded by the event. As a space of ritual release, the evening parade was the highlight of the National Day experience and an important way that people came to know and understand the holiday.

While the civic nationalist scripts at work in these events are certainly not about creating a unified national body with citizens and noncitizens as equals, this is also not to say that the affects they engender are somehow false. Rather, the sense of nationalist



Figure 5. South Asian men dressed up for the UAE National Day at the informal car parade spectacle on the Corniche. Source: Author, December 2014.

pride among expats across the Gulf is palpable and, I would argue, quite “real.” Although the embodied and affective experiences of expats at the parades generally had little overtly nationalist “content,” the overall effect was one of joyous *spectacle* – precisely what the authors had been working to create in the texts discussed above. Karen Petrone (2000, 6) has written about Soviet celebratory spectacles that they illustrate how “officials tried to create legitimacy through emotional appeals and mobilize citizens through apolitical gaiety.” At one level, this appears to be at work in Qatar and the UAE’s National Day car parades – but it begs the question of whether there is such a thing as “apolitical gaiety.” That is, even if spectators and other attendees are not necessarily at the events to show their love of country, does that make their pleasure and laughter somehow apolitical? As scholars who adopt a practice-based approach to analyzing nationalist spectacle suggest, the answer must be no: “spectacles make power palpable, publicly visible, and practical. Bodies serve as the apparent and immediate site upon which participation is enforced” (Wedeen, 1999, p. 21).

As with nationalist celebrations anywhere, some people may be there to celebrate their pride in being residents of the Emirates, actively positioning themselves as civil and obedient subjects of the state. Others may simply be there to hang out with friends. Whatever their motives, their joyous celebration is still being used by planners, newspaper photographers and journalists as an illustration of the state’s ideological agenda. All this can, of course, be said of celebratory spectacles anywhere in the world, including the United States and other more democratic settings. In this respect, the National Day celebrations are like all celebratory spectacles: they draw on and mobilize individuals around a wide range of motives, but ultimately illustrate the mobilizing capacity of the state around its officially-sanctioned norms and discourses (see Adams, 2010; Hagen, 2008; Kong and Yeoh, 1997; Petrone, 2000; Rolf, 2013; Tsang and Woods, 2014).

Discussion and conclusions

In explaining regime stability in the Gulf monarchies in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, many scholars have implicitly assumed that because foreign residents are excluded from formal political participation, the leadership need not to be concerned about their affinities and ideological commitment to the state’s nationalist agenda. Such an assumption is based on the prevailing characterization of nationalism in the Gulf states of the Arabian Peninsula as the exclusive domain of ethnic national elites. As I have noted, ethnic nationalist narratives remain dominant and serve to reinforce the citizen-nationals’ claims to the states’ territory and its extensive social goods. However, as the recent addition of civic scripts to the National Day celebrations in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates suggest, local regimes are increasingly concerned with how to narrate a particular kind of subjectivity for the foreign resident populations. This has included both civic nationalist imaginaries to promote an expat attachment to their “home away from home” and a sense of deep gratitude for the many opportunities for personal advancement that the local leadership is said to grant them.

Figuring centrally in the states’ international image campaigns, these narratives are less about promoting true civic participation on behalf of the expats, but actively *reinforce* the borders between the citizen-nationals as the rightful owners of the land, and the expats whose attachment to place is always mediated through another statist identity. Even if they were born in the Gulf, a Filipino, Indian, Sri Lankan, or Syrian is narrated as a “transplant,” eternally lacking a rightful claim to the state, the land, or the resources of full-fledged citizenship. Promoting this sort of mediated identity, this “nationalism for non-nationals” in the Gulf reifies the division between nationals and expats – and its concomitant status hierarchy. So rather than describing these narratives through adopting a broader term such as “inclusivist,” I have opted to term them “civic nationalist” because they are just as much about exclusion and denial as they are about inclusion and belong. They are, as Brubaker (2004) suggests, simultaneously inclusive and exclusive.

While the UAE and Qatar's huge demographic divide between citizens and resident foreigners is somewhat unusual in contemporary states, in their extremity, these cases highlight and challenge common academic assumptions about nationalism. The idea that "nationalism is for nationals" is pervasive, but as I have suggested in this article, challenging it both enriches our understanding of Gulf nationalism and opens up new avenues for research in other places around the world. By asking how nationalist performances engage and are engaged by noncitizens, scholars can advance more nuanced accounts of nationalism in a world increasingly characterized by vast numbers of stateless people, permanent foreign residents, and others with overlapping and mobile allegiances. Moving beyond the predominantly rights-based framework of citizenship studies, this study highlights the multiple ways that such individuals come to identify with the nationalist ideals and imaginaries of their adopted homes – whether they have legal recognition from the state or not. All over the United States, for example, undocumented migrants readily adopt and work with the language of American nationalism, which they and their children learn in US schools, and actively perform in numerous civic rituals, like Fourth of July celebrations. How are scholars to characterize their subjectivity, as they engage with the nationalism of an ostensibly "foreign" land? And among those liminal, aspiring citizens, who are actively preparing themselves to embrace the nationalist discourses of a new state – how might we conceptualize their conscious rearticulation of their national affinities? These are not merely questions that can be understood by considering diaspora identities, but must also include attention to how people embrace the hegemonic or mainstream identities promoted in their new homelands.

It is not surprising that scholars have given less attention to the latter. As Alexander Murphy notes, "nationalism has come to be viewed by many, if not most, scholars and social critics as a regressive, often destructive, ideology" – in no small part because of "the weak feelings of national attachment that most academics have (or at least profess to have) themselves" (Murphy, 2013, p. 1215). For many, nationalism is seen as somehow irrational or inherently retrogressive. But, he goes on to argue, "if we are to make sense of the contemporary world, we cannot and should not ignore the tenacity and power of modernist territorial thinking—and the identities and attachments that go with that way of thinking" (Murphy, 2013, p. 1215). As this case study illustrates, while outside observers may deem it "irrational" for the politically-, socially-, and often financially-excluded expat populations in Qatar and the UAE to develop emotional connections to the states where they reside, many are extremely proud of their adopted homes and actively participate in National Day celebrations and mobilize the nationalist frames that they afford. Sometimes this may be for want of a weekend diversion or true reverence for the state and its ethnic elites. But the overarching effect is the persistence of statist conceptions of space, and the unchallenged claim that citizen-nationals make to the state's territory – and this is precisely what Murphy suggests that we need to do a better job of understanding and explaining. My hope is that by exploring those unexpected cases of nationalism for *noncitizens*, scholars can gain a better understanding of how the state remains the most important mode of organizing global space today. And, as I have argued, this seems to work as much through pleasure as through repression, and as much through inclusion as exclusion.

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Conflict of interest statement

I am not aware of any conflict of interest.

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