

Capitalizing on Cosmopolitanism in the Gulf

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Abu Dhabi's new Louvre Museum opened its doors in November 2017 at an event attended by the French President Emmanuel Macron and his wife, and hosted by Abu Dhabi's ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahayan. Ten years prior, the government of Abu Dhabi 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 Pritzker Prize-winning French architect, Jean Nouvel, whose website describes it as "a project founded on a major symbol of Arab architecture: the dome." But, he emphasizes, this is no traditional dome. It is a *modern* dome – one with 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." The National Museum of Qatar was opened in March 2019 and, like the UAE's Louvre, it has been lavishly funded by the government. Numbers are hard to come by, but given the museum's eclectic and complicated design, plus extended delays, suggests a cost far higher than the initial construction price-tag of \$434 million from a 2011 contract with Hyundai. Other Western architects (or their firms, at least) have been engaged in building museums in the hydrocarbon-rich states of Qatar and the UAE, which will also include 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 Córdoba, India, Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt. He ultimately landed on a Cubist design familiar to anyone who knows the architect's work, but which he explained evoked 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 UAE and Qatar is, above all, 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, more glimmering, *cosmopolitan* modernity. The Guggenheim website explains, for example: "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 regions, 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 the two countries that I shall focus on here, Qatar and the UAE, citizens are a minority of the countries' total population – comprising under 10 percent of the local population. This means that 90 percent of their residents are noncitizen "expats." These individuals will never have the chance to gain the full rights of citizenship. And it is precisely this fact that has led so many outside observers to be skeptical of the region's new icons of cosmopolitanism.

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. Yet critics often simply stop there: 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. Nor is it a satisfactory end-point. In fact, simply highlighting the *exclusivism* of Gulf societies hides their *inclusivism*. By instead taking the narratives about 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 actually work through identity projects that include (and often co-opt) difference to lend them legitimacy.

But 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 role as trading ports linking South Asia, the Middle East, and beyond.

Yet in considering the spectacular new, monumentally-scaled projects like the Louvre, Guggenheim, or Qatar National Museum, we find that 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. That is, 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 story are they trying to tell about their countries, themselves, and their people? Lastly, who is profiting? And who isn't?

These are all questions that might be answered by following the money. 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 alone, 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, ports, and more.

To be cosmopolitan is to be free from local or national attachments or prejudices. It is, the dictionary suggests, to be at home or belonging all over the world. Of course, the dictionary doesn't tell us what "at home" or "belonging" means, nor does it give us a sense of how diverse the interpretations are of cosmopolitanism in popular imaginaries and political debates. Is it merely a pragmatic "mode of managing multiplicities" (as Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen put it), a personal identity or disposition, an ethical framework, or something else? Rather than searching for an essence of cosmopolitanism, we can learn far more by tracing how the concept is *politicized*. That is, to understand cosmopolitan ideals, we have to look to the political contentions that manifest in how 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 egalitarian community-building exercise, or otherwise work with its slippery potentialities.

Among philosophers and political theorists today, 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. Scholars might consider cosmopolitan ideals at any scale, but in contemporary usage, the idea most commonly indexes a politics defined by transcending identities defined around 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 is, and long has been, a key theme in nationalist storylines around the world.

Nationalist scripts

Notwithstanding the triumphalist visions of a post-national world that flourished after the end of the Cold War, the world is still organized around territorial states. A staple of this geopolitical order is that governments presiding over these territorial states seek to root their legitimacy in the idea of a nation. Nationalisms take many forms, though scholars have loosely slotted them on a spectrum running from more

strongly “ethnic” in their conception of who constitutes the nation and, on the other end, more “civic.” In the former, kinship, family lineage, or ethnic identity becomes the defining feature for how a nation is imagined, and in the latter, a territorial or ideological narrative of unity is the binding glue. The division is heuristic, but it sheds light on the differing visions that nationalist tropes might index.

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

In fact, there is a long history of nation-building agendas developed around cosmopolitan ideals extending beyond the U.S. They have figured prominently in certain nationalist storylines in Canada, France, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Jordan, and countless other places. And with each set of civic storylines comes the usual icons that focalize and concretize them. Sometimes these are architectural, other times they are statuary. Sometimes they are lavishly expensive, and other times they are modest. And sometimes they involve short-lived rituals like parades, and other times they involve 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 differently, is there something fundamentally different about how cosmopolitan identity narratives are being advanced and broadcast in the Gulf? The UAE and Qatar, while still embroiled in an intense regional feud with one another since 2017, have much in common. Like other countries of the world, they have overlapping and competing scripts of nationalism – some more ethnic, and others more civic in orientation. As I have explored in my research on Gulf National Days and other local expressions of nationalism, civic nationalist narratives informed by the cosmopolitan logic are not only present in the two countries, but incredibly powerful. Paradoxically, though, these are storylines that are advanced just as much (or perhaps more) for noncitizens as for citizens.

Examples abound. One of the most vivid was seen during 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 Book world record to further broadcast how inclusive they are. On the UAE’s National Day in 2014, for example, the country broke the world record for most nationalities singing one anthem at one time (119!), which the *Gulf News* described as signifying “the diversity and tolerance of the country.” Similar media accounts are found across the region during the holidays, but are actually 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. The challenge is that most people (academics and lay observers alike) assume that “nationalism is for nationals.” That is, because most countries in the world have populations consisting of only a tiny minority who are noncitizens, it is assumed 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, where 90 percent of residents are noncitizens, the governments simply derive much of their legitimacy from *noncitizens*. This awkward fact is never stated so explicitly locally, but it is constantly reiterated through the profuse expressions of civic nationalism unfolding through the cosmopolitan storylines.

Configuring inclusion

Narratives and practices aimed at fostering expat inclusion are prevalent not just because cosmopolitan ideals make for good PR (which they certainly do), but also because noncitizens are the backbone of the Arabian Peninsula’s political economy today. Some Qatari and Emirati citizens do not favor this situation, though, and as a result, 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, the regime, or any range of corporate actors that allow the Gulf states to thrive. Other individuals may fail to 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, nationalism scholar 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, the strict *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes has led to a unique demographic balance, whereby noncitizens are the majority of the population. Yet noncitizens are not only excluded; they are differently included. Or, rather, in contrast to hegemonic Western conceptions of the relationship between citizenship and a "proper" state configuration, the citizenship regimes are differently inclusive. So much of what Western media readily interprets as Gulf efforts to promote a cosmopolitan identity narrative merely for PR purposes is geared exactly toward challenging this hegemonic interpretation of citizenship.

The basic configuration of who is accorded the rights and entitlements of citizenship will not change any time soon in the Gulf, 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 Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, or the Qatar National Museum and designer stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and countless others are promoted by the ruling families as correctives for 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 at the time on the new Qatari and Emirati museums is telling. Running under the title, "Building Museums, and a Fresh Arab Identity," it opened 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." Not only are the high-profile museum projects described as an "audacious" experiment, the article goes on to suggest that the leaders in Qatar and the UAE are risking "alienating significant parts of the Arab world" in 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 *New York Times* article is precisely the kind of coverage that the Gulf leaders have sought. Indeed, this story is one of countless others about the spectacular urban developments across the region following the same script: these 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. It is, in short, a story of cosmopolitanism being peddled by the Western media. The story may still come up against the ignorance and national prejudice of Western readers, but it ultimately reaffirms the comforting narrative of a cosmopolitan Occident juxtaposed with a backward Orient, which still prevails in Western media about the Middle East.

More cosmopolitan than thou

Another aspect of the West's comforting narrative of itself is its 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. Thus when the Soviet Union fell, so too do many Stalin and Lenin statues. And when the U.S. invaded Iraq, the statue of Saddam Hussein was among the first things torn asunder.

The Gulf's iconic development projects have likewise been subject to attack. Instead of being treated as signs of cosmopolitanism and modernity, critics have attacked the museum projects, stadiums, university projects, and more for using slave labor. Although labor problems abound, due to the region's *khafala* sponsorship program that leads some employers to hold 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 millions of migrant workers are quite well-off.

But like any trope, the slave labor narrative sticks because it is evocative, not because it captures the nuance of an unfamiliar structure of inequalities that defines the Gulf's complicated labor politics. It is also a feel-good narrative among Western audiences, who relish the chance to feel more cosmopolitan than thou. Here the nationalisms in places like the United States, advanced through influential news outlets like the *New York Times*, intersect with how nationalisms in the Gulf are articulated: as the sociologist Michael Billig writes about nationalist orators, they excel by dressing 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 the spectacular development projects as icons of cosmopolitanism and modernity, and reject the Western claims of being "more cosmopolitan than thou," the 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 become a subject of attack – and how they have pushed back.

In Qatar, for example, a *New York Review of Books* article criticized Zaha Hadid for her disregard for working conditions and the rights of migrant workers at the Al-Wakrah Stadium, set to be a World Cup venue. Hadid went on to sue the news outlet in August 2014 for defamation and won, since the article alleged there had been worker deaths on a project that had not even begun. Likewise, various outlets from the U.S. and Britain (e.g. *The Observer*, *The Guardian*, *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 said the conditions in Abu Dhabi were actually better than for some workers employed in Europe.

Frank Gehry and the Guggenheim Director, Richard Armstrong, have also responded to boycott efforts of the new Abu Dhabi museum by rejecting the claims as exaggerated, but also publicly announced a set of standards for workers' rights issues on the project. NYU-Abu Dhabi and a number of other Western institutions involved in these projects have done something similar. In this instance, the Western planners and administrators are partly trying to get ahead of a potential (or real) PR-firestorm, but they are also doing so by painting 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 broader 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 in Qatar and the UAE are not only waging a PR battle around this "more cosmopolitan than thou" issue by building the narrative of cosmopolitanism into the urban fabric, but 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. Like any context, there are actors who truly believe in an ideological value system, others who are outright skeptics, and yet others who understand the financial, political, or social rewards of engaging with it. And just building an icon does not mean that the builders and the viewers necessarily internalize the value being concretized. Americans, for example, know that Lady Liberty stands for the nationalist self-understanding of a people who value "freedom." But it does not mean Americans actually internalize and act on that value. Some may, some may not.

Some Qataris may look on 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. And some Emiratis may do the same in looking at the new museums on Saadiyat island. Equally, noncitizen residents in Qatar and the UAE may also look on these icons and see them in the same way. Yet others, citizens and noncitizens alike, may reject the icons because they personally reject the cosmopolitan ideals or simply see them as false assertions.

Because nationalisms are inherently contested, and because each place will have multiple scripts competing for the place of being 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 simply 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 pin their aspirations or critiques to. 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 to organize political speech, domestically and internationally.

Cosmopolitanism commodified

Another aspect of the focalization effect of iconicity is that it works to *divert* attention from more diffuse or less concrete issues. By fixing attention in one strategically-defined place, icons help shape, or at least clutter, the conversation. What, then, are those unspectacular Others that might not be getting due attention because of the focalization effect? They are many. One, which I will set aside but nonetheless highlight, 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” counties. Critics in the West are well versed in decrying “authoritarian” states and their allies through the familiar language of liberal norms, including human rights, free speech, etc. But the kind of attacks launched at the Emirati or Qatari governments, or the likes of Hadid, Nouvel, or Gehry, do not actually get to the heart of a global political economy and geopolitical order that is built on a fiction of “democratic” and “authoritarian” counties existing as separate units.

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

If there is something fundamentally different about how cosmopolitan identity narratives are being advanced and broadcast in the Gulf states, this far-reaching capitalization of cosmopolitanism is what sets them apart from other cases in history. To be clear, it is the *manner* in which those living and working in the Gulf have capitalized (on) cosmopolitanism – not *that* they do, or even the *amount* of the capital flowing to these projects. Of course, large sums of money are available to the region's governments because they control substantial hydrocarbon reserves.

But money alone does not an iconic project make. And more fundamentally, money alone is not the only resource that might measure value. How, for example, should we compare the cost of a new Guggenheim museum to the cost of Stalin's Moscow metro project of his steel city in Magnitogorsk, built as they were by gulag prisoners and untold resources stripped from Soviet land without a price-tag attached? The point is rather that cosmopolitanism has been uniquely transformed into a commodity, which individuals and institutions, local and foreign alike, are buying and selling in the course of doing business in the Gulf, and engaging in the tricky business of legitimating their political regimes.

In his 2009 book on cosmopolitanism, David Harvey suggests that cosmopolitan narratives arise through one of three mechanisms: from philosophical reflection, the ferment of social movements, or out of 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 – in the most basic economic sense seen with the high-flying architects recycling tired clichés to sell a project, and in a broader political sense of authoritarian regimes that see the power of the concept in their systematic PR campaigns designed to deflect or overtake critical narratives from the Western media about their countries' supposed backwardness, violation of labor rights, or 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 does actually include noncitizens in the body politic and promote certain forms of belonging and participation for them. But the governments in 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 cosmopolitan ideals as being realized despite, or perhaps even through, their exclusion from the rights of citizenship. The nationalist storyline not only requires, but 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 reaping the rewards and capitalizing on and profiting from a system of noncitizenship. This cosmopolitanism of strategic exclusions is what easy liberal critiques of is spectacular urban projects miss. But it is now etched into the fabric of contemporary Gulf cities.