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‘Allen Fromherz has written an excellent book on Qatar based on a thorough knowledge of historical sources and enriched by his own experience in the country. This book will be essential reading to anyone interested in Qatar and useful to anyone interested more broadly in the dynamics of the Arab Gulf states.’

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‘*Qatar: A Modern History* fills a major gap as it provides for the first time the necessary historical basis for understanding this Gulf state in all of its contradictions and importance.’

— G. R. GARTHWAITE, Jane & Raphael Bernstein Professor Emeritus in Asian Studies and Professor Emeritus of History, Dartmouth College

# QATAR

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A MODERN HISTORY

ALLEN J. FROMHERZ

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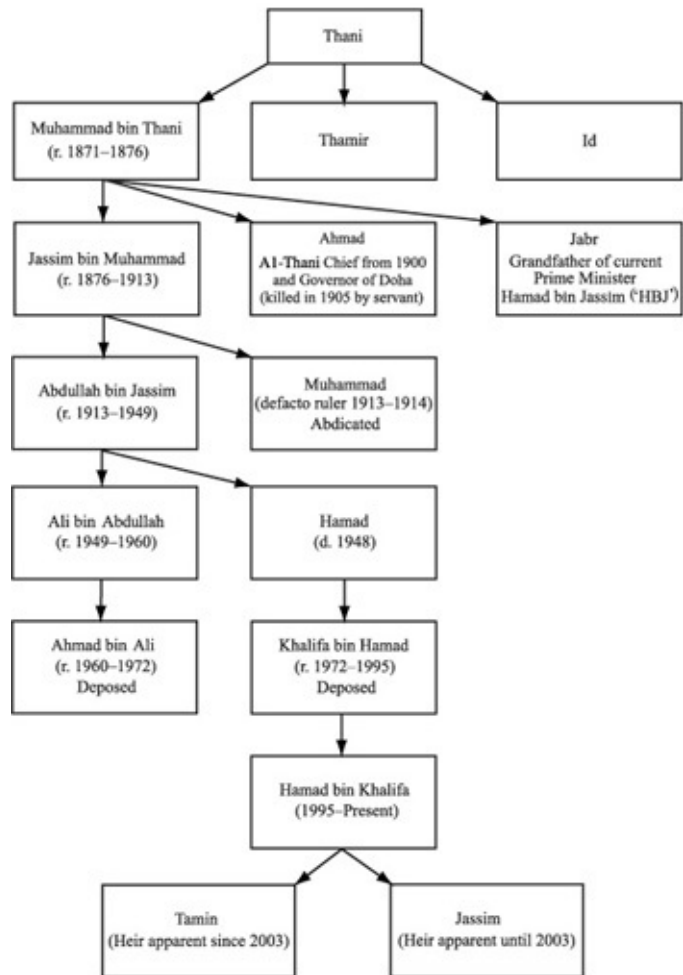
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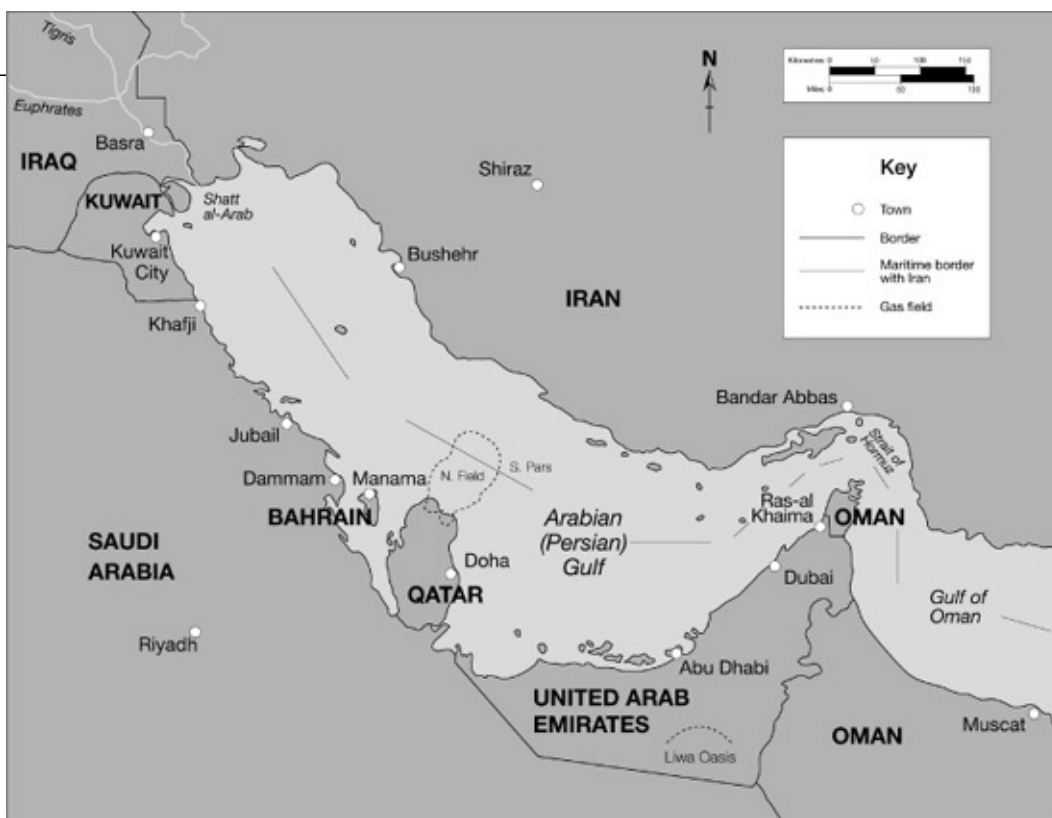
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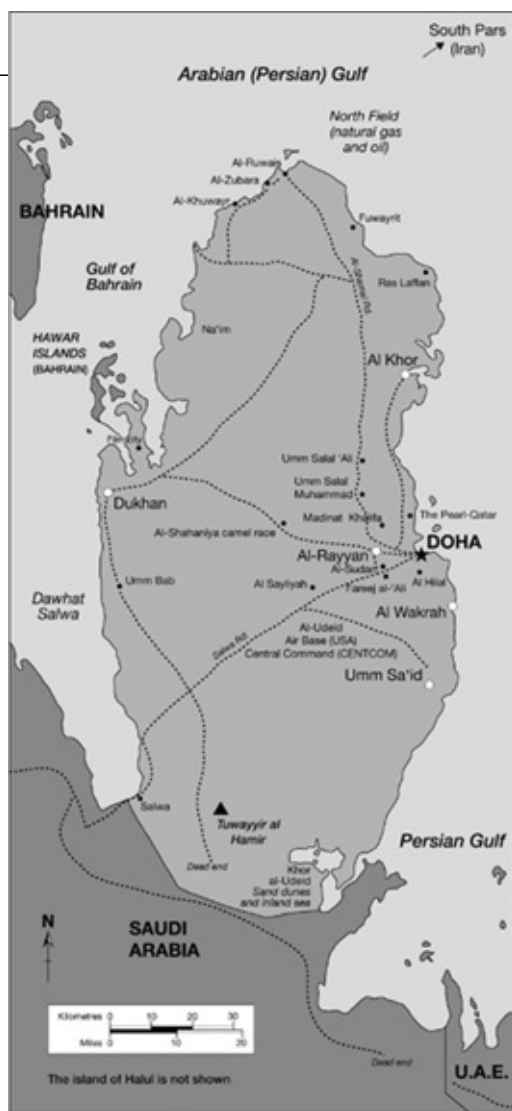
# Al-Thani Rulers and Princes







Persian Gulf



Qatar

## Qatar – A New Model of Modernity?

So rarely has a country of so few seemed to change so quickly over such a short period of time. Qatar's rise from an economically devastated backwater to the world's richest nation per capita in a matter of decades appears unprecedented. This rise is even more striking since Qatar's previous status as among the poorest of poor nations is within the living memory of the older generation of Qataris. The pearl price collapse and the disruptions of the Second World War had harmed the traditional exports of the Gulf. Yet even by dismal Gulf standards, Qataris were more marginal, more economically underdeveloped than the poor citizens of Kuwait, Bahrain or Dubai. In 1940 the British Political Resident provided a glimpse of Doha, capital of Qatar:

[Doha is] little more than a miserable fishing village straggling along the coast for several miles and more than half in ruins. The *suq* consisted of mean fly-infested hovels, the roads were dusty tracks, there was no electricity, and the people had to fetch their water in skins and cans from wells two or three miles outside the town.<sup>1</sup>

The entire population of Qatar had fallen to 16,000. Entire villages that had survived for centuries were depopulated as tribes emigrated en masse to neighbouring, more prosperous shores. In 1944 only 6,000 fishermen were engaged in the pearl harvest as opposed to 60,000 some 20 years before.<sup>2</sup> In stark contrast to today, many Qataris were in dire straits. The one thing that may have made it better than equally poor places on earth was the fact that it was not a theatre of war.

Only some 15 years after 1950, the end of the 'years of hunger', however, a visitor could remark that Doha had become:

[A] Sprawling city of concrete buildings, traffic lights, ring roads and soda stalls; air conditioning is the rule; the waterfront area has been reclaimed, and much of the filth removed; a large merchant class has grown up and social life has become conventional and 'big city'.<sup>3</sup>

From a place of poverty in the 1940s to an 'overgrown fishing village' in 1955 to a large city in 1965 and a growing capital in the 1970s, Doha is now the capital city of one of the most economically successful countries in the world. Qatari citizens, who endure the world's most stifling heat and who were at one time forced to survive on brackish water and reduced to starvation by the collapse of the pearl market, can now live almost perpetually in an air-conditioned, climate-controlled bubble, moving between five-star hotels, five-star shopping malls and even five-star universities imported *profectus in totum* from abroad. Qatar's population has boomed, far outpacing government predictions. It is now at around 1.7 million, more than 80 per cent of which consists of expatriate workers from around the world, servants and employees of the relatively small, and – depending on the job – somewhat unapproachable Qatari population of around 225,000. For comparison, this is approximately the population of Baton Rouge, Louisiana or Plymouth, England. Businessmen from abroad often wonder at the fact that weeks, months, even years can be spent in Qatar without even meeting a Qatari, so high are Qataris on the pyramid of economic development that has shaped their success. Much of this development, much of this disorienting, feverish change, a change in the physical environment so visible to the outsider, obscures what has not changed within Qatari society. To understand Qatar it is important to understand not just the image of rapid change and progress projected to the outside world, but the much-slower moving internal structures of Qatari society.

In much the same way that Dubai had, until recently, so skilfully adopted the branding of its success, Qatar has created an externally digestible narrative, even a brand of economic boom and

opportunity where a range of opinions and beliefs are welcome. In Qatar, people are able to debate differences in internationally publicized venues such as the BBC's *Doha Debates: Qatar's Forum for Free Speech in the Arab World*.<sup>4</sup> According to this projected image of Qatar, an image actively promoted through Qatar's tightly controlled international media outlets such as Al-Jazeera, there are virtually no internal problems. In the marketed image of Qatar, all Qataris accept being ruled by the Emir, and always have done. In the idealized vision of Qatar, the image projected to the outside world there is no politicking, there are not always even clear positions on international affairs, except a position defined by security, development and prosperity. Qatar seems full of venues for dialogue that enhance Qatar's image and the image of the ruling Al-Thani family. Yet this idealized narrative obscures a much more complicated and interesting local history, a history that lies just beneath the five-star hotels, international news channels and premium airport lounges. Qataris themselves have not forgotten this history, even as they are concerned that new generations will not remember the way of life that defined Qatari culture. Expensive and widely publicized attempts to showcase Qatari and Islamic culture in Doha attest to this concern with the preservation of the image of cultural authenticity. It is unclear, however, if these massive cultural projects, projects such as the building of the new Qatar National Museum and the Museum of Islamic Art designed by I. M. Pei and completed in 2008, will achieve this aim of authenticity. Yet Al-Thani family's concern with the apparent loss of visual and public authenticity does not mean that Qatar has broken completely from its past. In fact, this book argues that the traditional, underlying structures that defined Qatari life for decades remain remarkably resilient.

Qataris are the privileged citizen elite of a booming, modern state. There is little indication that Qatar's prosperity and rapid growth will be checked in the near future. Unlike other Gulf States such as Dubai, that have seen the dramatic bursting of their economic bubbles, Qatar's economy continues to expand rapidly. Qatar's economy is the fastest growing on earth with 19% growth.<sup>5</sup> Qatar relies primarily on long-term natural gas contracts that are not subject to the same short-term price fluctuations as crude oil. Yet, despite these riches and the stunning pace of development, there are still a surprising number of similarities between Qataris of today and the impoverished Qataris of 1940. Wealth has transformed Qatari society in some ways, but not nearly to the extent that it has been transformative in the Qatari economy or built environment. In fact, economic modernization has done little to damage long-established lineage loyalties. The names, loyalties and social networks of the past, a past that in some respects has actually been artificially deepened, somehow dug into memory as deeply as the gleaming new skyscrapers of the skyline are high, and they are still important for understanding Qatar's present and future. While Qatar's present economic success was created in recent decades, the future of Qatar lies as much in its historical particularities as it does in the deceptively impressive, emerald towers of glass that symbolize Qatar's wealth and prosperity. Some of what seems to have changed so quickly has not, in fact, really changed much at all.

Briefly, the history of the Naim tribe is instructive. Long a rival and even outright enemy of the dominant Al-Thani Sheikh of Qatar, most of the Naim left Qatar decades before the oil boom, leaving their vast grazing lands, or *dira*, that cover much of the north of Qatar behind them. When they returned in the 1950s, their ancestral claims remained untouched. Indeed, many Naim could claim that their tribal chief should rightly be called an Emir, as he had been in the recent past.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the legitimacy of the claims of Al-Thani and of Qatar over inland areas and over the Qatar national border is tied to their association with Bedouin tribes such as the Naim. This was especially true because of the 'importance Ibn Saud [ruler of Saudi Arabia] attached to tribal territory as a basis for defining state boundaries'.<sup>7</sup> In the midst of territorial disputes, urbanized rulers such as Al-Thani actively competed to lure Bedouin into their territories as citizens.

There are other ways that tribes like Naim have been able to maintain a sense of internal coherence despite state intervention, changing cultural influences and the growth of state-licensed property ownership. The non-ruling tribes of Qatar remember their past and they are careful to transmit that past even to the most ‘Westernized’ of their sons. While genealogy in the West has lost its functional meaning, becoming an internet hobby of ancestral Facebook, genealogy and ancestry in Qatar is still functional – an important indicator of social position, status and rights. As much as some in Al-Thani elite may want it to do so, development and modern education has not caused deep memories of historic rights to disappear. The chiefs of the Naim still have a throne; they still have the trappings of independence within their own group and social dynamic. Anie Montigny-Kozłowska, an anthropologist writing in French, observed in the 1980s that only very recently have Al-Thani appropriated the title of ‘Emir’ exclusively for themselves within Qatar.

[Only recently,] the names of the heads of groups evolved. Now there is only one Emir who directs the state. Traditional Emirs, chiefs of tribes or a sub-division of tribes have been renamed by the now, official state function they occupy as Rais al-Baladiyya (President of Municipality or Mayor) or Emir al-Qawm (Chief of the Village). Nevertheless, the old titles have not been forgotten.

A similar pattern of tribal groups being incorporated into the state while also losing some of their formal power, if not the memory of that power, prevailed for other Qatari tribes and lineage groups as well. Al-Sudan and Al-Ainain, for instance, were in Qatar long before Al-Thani. They were also chiefs of Doha and Wakra before Al-Thani, a fact even Al-Thani recognized this when they gave Al-Sudan tax-exempt status during the pearling years. Modernization and rapid economic change has not destroyed either these memories or the lineage groupings and consequent cultural attitudes and norms of Qataris themselves as quickly as might be expected in classic Western models of development. While the devastation of the 1940s may have created a gaping hole that makes the present development that now plugs it seem even more impressive, Qatar is not a place ‘without a past’ or ‘without a culture’ as it has been described in popular literature.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, anxiety about a lack of historical roots appears to be felt more by visitors to Qatar than by Qataris themselves. Perhaps expecting exotica, adventure and orientalized Arabness, the expatriate is disappointed by the modernity, by places that look ‘Western’ or ‘just like home’. Many Qataris, in contrast, rarely express the same level of postmodern angst. The environment has appeared to change, but many fundamental human relations remain the same for a Qatari. From their perspective, they are still bound by many of the same social rules and strictures as their parents, even if the built environment often appears Western and modern. Even so, the strictures and social rules are changing, albeit at a much slower pace than the rise of the skyscrapers.

It is not simply that the Western visitor does not see the ‘real’ Qatar, or that the elusive ‘real Qatar’ as experienced by Qataris cannot, in fact, be experienced by the vast majority of visitors. In fact, an explanation for the feelings of ‘inauthenticity’ experienced by the Westerner or Westernized visitor in Qatar comes from the intellectual, social philosophies shaped by the particularities of Western history, particularities that seem obvious to the Westerner but do not easily apply to Qatar or to the way Qataris experience their country today. First, there is an assumption among many in the West that modernization is exhilarating yet painful, necessarily leading to historical loss and to the collapse of past identity. There is a deep assumption in Western literature and thought that an essential conflict must exist between tradition and economic modernity.<sup>10</sup> This assumed, ‘inevitable’ conflict, experienced so vividly in the West, has been foisted upon the Middle East. According to this classic theory, Qatar should be a boiling stew of problems brought about by the conflict between tradition and modernity, but it is not. Instead, many of the same social structures, many of the same arrangements of lineage remain in the midst of apparent modernity. Qatar is a stable country and many political

scientists, at one time predicting its fall, now predict a long-term future for Qatar's existing political system. The old political system is usually the first to go after the forces of modernity and tradition have clashed. Yet Qatar remains a monarchy and many social structures remain unchanged. What explains this?

The answer is to be found in Qatar's history. Only through history can the differences between the historical experience of modernity in Qatar and in the West be explained. Although often assumed to be universal, or structural, the limitations of Western philosophical and sociological perspectives about tradition and modernity are evident in Qatar. From a Western perspective, Qatar should be doomed to what the nineteenth-century sociologist Émile Durkheim called 'anomie': the devastating situation that arises when cultural norms shift too rapidly. Anomie occurs, he said, when a 'social type rests on principles so different from the preceding that it can develop only in proportion to the effacement of that preceding type'. The new economic principles, the division of labour perpetuated by the endlessly expansive, assimilative amoeba-state, fundamentally alter social relations.<sup>11</sup> It is easy enough to witness this erasure of non-work-related identity in post-industrial USA. What you do is who you are. One of the first questions that most new acquaintances ask in the USA is what do you do, where do you work? This appears to Americans as the most reliable way of knowing somebody. In many cultures, however, what you are, that is what you are in terms of inherited relations with others is more important than what you do. Indeed, the extended names of Qataris, 'Muhammad bin Khalifa bin Ahmad bin...', for instance, reflect a long string of ancestors rather than the merely one in the case of Western names. The transfer of identity from what one is to what one does can create tremendous fissures in society. In fact, Durkheim, with typical French flair, identified this erasure of the traditional self with suicide. According to Durkheim, 'anomic suicide' both individually and culturally, the self-erasure of a culture's essential existence and the self-destruction of people who feel 'rootless', occurs not only when a society is devastated by economic depression but also during economic boom when the possibilities are limitless. Most Arab countries also experienced a particularly pernicious form of anomie: not only was modernization a threat to traditional values, it often seemed to originate from an outside, Western culture that was associated with a much more invasive form of colonization than that experienced by Qatar. Qatar was never really colonized, especially not in a way remotely similar to the colonization of states such as Algeria or the Congo.

This relative lack of anomie is new for the Arab world. The renowned scholar and Arabist G. E. von Grunbaum could remark in the 1960s that 'it is the near impossibility of painless accommodation to culture change which is causing much of the unrest that is today tormenting the world outside of the core countries of Western civilization.'<sup>12</sup> Fifty years later, modernization is no longer equated with Westernization. Indeed, technocratic, one-party rule in China has become an alternate model of development. The leaders of Qatar and other Gulf States can choose from an expanding buffet of choices when it comes to selecting their culture of modernization. Grunbaum would be criticized today for suggesting that 'the West' is the only relevant core style of modernization. Also, modernization, whether Western-style or Chinese or Indian, need not immediately break those traditional bonds that Durkheim felt so vital to the social psyche.

According to the classic Durkheim model, Qatar should have experienced the particularly pernicious whiplash of both forms of anomie, from depression in the 1940s to an endless economic boom, accelerated to a white-hot pace in the last decade. Yet the expected feeling of anomic rootlessness, while real in many circumstances, is deceptive in others. Just below the gleaming surface of commercialized modernity, the political, social and cultural realities of Qatar remain deeply rooted despite the seeming anomic whiplash of economic change. Even if some of the past has been or refashioned as sanitized, state-controlled 'heritage', the social structures, beliefs, and fundamental

values and motivations of Qataris are still shaped by historical and social forces that have persisted and are often more profound than recent economic changes.

Durkheim's theories, so useful for the sociology of Western industrialization and modernization, simply do not apply as well to Qatar. This does not mean Durkheim's theory was fundamentally flawed. But rather, it means that Qatar cannot be explained by the same modernity-tradition paradigm used in the West. Reasons for this can already be grasped a few sentences later in Durkheim's work.

In effect individuals are here grouped no longer according to lineage, but according to the particular nature of the social activity in which they concentrate themselves. Their natural milieu is no longer the natal milieu but the occupational milieu. It is no longer the real or fictitious consanguinity which marks the place of each one, but the function which he fills.<sup>13</sup>

In Qatar, despite enormous economic changes, individual Qataris are still grouped according to lineage, or a largely 'fictitious' if authentically felt consanguinity. Although the word 'tribe' has become problematic, a term often associated with categorizing, orientaling tendencies in Western scholarship, the creation of and adherence to 'tribal' lineage is an internally recognized social form in Qatar. As the anthropologist Richard Tapper noted, 'Administrators—and many academics—still take a highly positivist view of tribes in the Middle East. They expect them to be mappable, bounded groups with little membership change, and they want an exact terminology for classificatory and comparative purposes.'<sup>14</sup> This desire to map out tribes into a manageable and unchanging human taxonomy is problematic and does not reflect the history of lineage and myths of lineage in Qatar. This simplistic approach must be avoided. Yet ignoring tribes is itself a form of politically correct, neo-orientalism: means ignoring the major self-identified groupings of Qatar's society, whether imagined or not. The risk of over-categorizing is less than the risk of ignoring a major part of Qatari society. While certainly not experienced as a positivist category, one's *qabila*, one's extended 'tribe' or family, remains the fundamental determinant of an individual Qatari's social position and future. This remains true even if that ancestry is in some ways imagined, created or politically repositioned. As the historian and master at tribal negotiation Ibn Khaldun observed while living among the tribes of North Africa, 'When the things which result from (common) descent are there it is as if (common descent) itself were there ... In the course of time, the original descent is almost forgotten.'<sup>15</sup>

Viewing the world from the context of a nineteenth-century industrializing society, Durkheim assumed that economic changes always led to severe social disruptions of lineage. For Qataris, however, the necessity of work and the central focus of labour in life are important but not existentially pressing—thereby eliminating the need to distance one's self from lineage as the primary basis of social organization. Compared with industrializing Europe or America, wealth has come without the disruption of actual, industrialized 'work' and its many environmental and social ills. The division of labour is not a threat to the division of lineage in Qatari society since labour is not really an issue—most labour is taken care of by guests. Although in the 1950s and 1960s there were some Qataris who worked on the oil fields and even some protests against the excesses of Al-Thani, these protests quickly subsided and were never substantial enough truly to threaten the traditional nature of Qatari social and political relations. Oil is not a particularly laborious industry, nor did it require many Qataris themselves to do the work. In fact, the ruling Al-Thani learned early on about the risks of riot and resistance from the few Qataris who did engage in the oil industry in its first stages.<sup>16</sup> Resources, employment, the future itself, are all provided by the state, ruled by Al-Thani sheikh, or, more locally, by the tribe—contained and reinforced by the massive, wealthy, extended family compounds that dot the Qatari built landscape. Despite the expected anomie, almost the opposite has occurred. Tribes, lineage, consanguinity, whether imagined or not, remain remarkably strong in Qatar; they are still the primary ways individuals organize their lives.

It fact, it could be argued that the hold of tribal 'tradition', especially in relation to the marriage practices of women, traditional dress and expected social roles, is often *increased*, not decreased by wealth and the pursuit of acceptable social status within an extremely wealthy but still extremely lineage-based society. Similarly, the designation and proliferation of spaces and buildings and compounds for family groupings and tribes, impossible during times of poverty, create the new social and geographic forms in real estate. While before the 1960s Qatar's families lived in mud-brick homes, they can now live in family compounds with their own mosques, their own cohort of servants their own self-sufficient systems. Instead of erasing the past, the distribution of wealth in Qatar to an elite citizen class can serve to magnify certain aspects of history and lineage. Only the expatriate labour, grateful for employment, largely single, male and tied to their culture in their home countries need experience the anomie of the division of labour. Even in this instance, however, anomie is usually expressed in social consequences in the guest's home country (for example, a maid's own family left behind in the Philippines while she attends to a wealthy Qatari's child), not in Qatar. It seems at first glance that Qatar has bought itself out of the possible ill effects of modernity.

In 2009 there were more than 1.2 million males in Qatar compared with some 350,000 females. Most of these males are single, temporarily rootless expatriates from south Asia with no investment in the country or married men who have left their families at home.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, non-Qatari females are also predominantly single when in Qatar. Even Western expats and diplomats who are allowed to bring their families rarely stay longer than a year or two and they send their children to specially designated schools. Especially when compared with the expatriate population that surrounds them, Qataris are not 'rootless' but incredibly well rooted and seemingly oblivious to the significance of massive changes that have only begun to creep inside the family compound. Postmodernism and attempts to critique and reflect upon the limitations of the modernization process are rare.

## A SHEIKHA'S POSTMODERNISM

Perhaps this seeming lack of change within the fundamental structure of Qatari lineage groups and the continuity of Qatar's political system is one explanation for a particularly intriguing and enigmatic statement I heard from one of Qatar's most respected educational leaders. Professor Sheikha Abdulla Al-Misnad is president of Qatar University, close to Mozah, the favourite wife of the Emir, and the woman most in tune with the sentiments and desires of Qatar's youth.<sup>18</sup> Granted an interview in 2008 I asked Sheikha Misnad what she thought was the most significant challenge for Qatar. Impeccably and conservatively attired, Sheikha Misnad did not seem to feel the need to display material signs of wealth in her dress. Her status was self-evident and clearly known not only within her own circle but among all Qataris. Contemplating her response, she looked into the distance at the bustling construction and development, at the endless cranes, the sea of glassy blue limitless on the horizon. After staring out of the window for what seemed a prolonged period, Sheikha Misnad mused that the biggest problem in Qatar is not water shortages, not rare political threats, not even education *per se*, as I had expected her to say. The biggest challenge to Qatar is 'the lack of postmodernism', the fact that 'Qatari youth, have no sense of postmodernism', no sense of angst or anomie in response to Qatar's red-hot development. Sheikha Misnad's concerns are striking. They seem to reveal the extent to which Qatar has 'developed' but not developed at the same time. External change, fuelled by petroleum rents, fuelled by the state and the Emir, had not led to those fundamental changes in mentality that are often associated with the excesses of modern consumption.

Yet even if there is no obvious anomie, some of the consequences of modernization still seem to seep through. Many visitors and reporters in the Gulf have commented, sometimes rather insensitively, about the sudden, severe problem of obesity and diabetes among wealthy citizens over



the past decades, medical conditions that were almost completely non-existent before the oil boom.<sup>19</sup> These observers seem to feel that the diabetes, an inability of the body to absorb glucose because of lack of insulin, is analogous to a deeper intellectual and philosophical problem existing in the social fabric of Qatar: the inability to digest and process the meaning and possible negative consequences of modern change. The issue is not an inability to digest change but a persistence in not facing the negative consequences of change in a meaningful way. Instead of dealing with internal issues, there is sometimes a tendency to blame the 'phenomenon' of expatriate labour, even the dependence on expatriate labour for the ills of globalization, so that far from it being simply an economic issue, it has come to be a means of avoiding, delaying and deflecting the negative consequences of modernization.

## EXPATRIATES AND ANOMIE

This creates a twist of logic. Even as the most poor and vulnerable expatriates are asked to absorb the anomie of change, they are also blamed for being a threat to authentic heritage and culture.<sup>20</sup> Officials of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the council of wealthy Gulf countries including Qatar, have said that 'expatriates' are a 'danger worse than the atomic bomb'.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, if slightly more diplomatically, Sheikh Hamad of Qatar has blamed expatriate labour for a host of ills in statements tailored to Qataris.<sup>22</sup> As he remarked in 2009 in one of his official addresses:

[The] requirements of completing the building of the infrastructure and improving the public services, including education and health, led to a number of forms of exhaustion in our national economy represented by continued rising of the consumer price indexes, the increase of the cost of projects and the delay in their completion dates. A number of bottleneck areas have risen in the economy, caused by the big increase in expatriate labour.<sup>23</sup>

In this speech Sheikh Hamad equated the decline in Qatar's economy and fundamental structural problems with increases in expatriate labour. By this logic it is expatriates, not the decisions of the government who should be blamed. Although Sheikh Hamad may have been scoring political support from Qatari citizens by blaming outsiders for economic decisions and real estate policies that are determined by the government, expatriate labour does pose several fundamental, even existential problems for Qatar. Indeed, conflict with expatriate labour runs deep in Qatar's modern history. Although almost no Qatari would be expected to engage in manual labour today, in the 1950s most of the workers were Qataris. Several strikes pitted Qatari nationals against Dhofaris from Oman and Pakistanis who undercut their wages and appeared to be taking their jobs. Pointing to the 'problem' of expatriates has something of a civic history in Qatar.<sup>24</sup>

There is little internal criticism, however, of internal policies and structural imbalances that have caused the surge in expatriate labour. True, the 'price' of modernity in Qatar is the existence of an expatriate culture. However, this expatriate culture is kept subservient in terms of rights and access to Qatar's economy. Gulf citizens and their governments have failed to consider that they are themselves a source of the decisions that have led to the rise of expatriate culture, and with it the challenge of integrating that culture into Qatari society. There is little motivation for such introspection. The misplaced fear of expatriates is useful to the elite—it deflects attention from the failures of the government to bring its people honestly and willingly into the depths of modernism or, in macro-economic speak, the failure of the government to make its people 'marketable' in the global economy. This failure to make Qataris marketable is directly related to a system that denies active, internal participation in effective rule even as it promotes an agenda of freedom abroad. The aim of Qatar's new focus on creating world-class education for Qataris at Education City is not to create a larger ruling-class that is a source of criticism of the ruling Al-Thani family. Instead, education is viewed as a means of creating marketable, international skills; education is focussed on connecting Qatar to the

outside world, not on the issues of governance and society within Qatar itself. Various attempts at 'Qatarization', or the enforcement of quotas for Qataris in expert positions, have only yielded limited results, and can be no more effective in the long term than attempts to fix pricing with an inflating currency. It is unclear, in fact, if it is even in the long-term interests of the Emir and his immediate family to develop a dependence on the labour of Qatari citizens, as opposed to a migrant labour class whose destiny is ultimately in the hands of the government as guests of the Sheikh.

## TOO MANY EXPATRIATES?

Although this book will explain Qatar's history and the rise of Al-Thani before oil and the expatriate influx, the current state of Qatar's demography should always remain in the background. While it could be argued that the appropriate, singular focus for this book would be the extraordinary rise of Al-Thani elite and their co-opting of Qatar's tribal system, the broader history of Qataris who are not from this elite, and of non-Qataris who created much of Qatar's infrastructure in the last 50 years should not fade from view. The modern history of Qatar cannot be fully understood without understanding the history of expatriate labour in the country. As the most visible dilemma of growth in Qatar, the history of the expatriate community and its interaction with Qataris deserves to be dealt with at some length in this introduction.

The dilemma of expatriate labour is particularly extreme for Qatar. Although Qatar relied on imports of basic foodstuffs and supplies long before the discovery of oil, there was only one South Asian expat living in Qatar in the 1930s—a barber from Baluchistan.<sup>25</sup> Since the British claimed the right to intervene for colonial subjects, all other South Asians had been expelled. South Asians now make up the largest portion of Qatar's population. The 39 per cent of Qatar's population that were considered 'foreigners' in 1939 were mainly from Africa. Most of these African residents, originally slaves, became honorary members of tribes, adopting the names of their former owners. The only truly independent group of foreigners were 5,000 Persians involved in merchant activities. The Qatari population itself visibly dominated society with Qataris engaged in basic tasks at all levels of the economy. Both the Persians and the Africans were historic expatriate populations; Qataris had known about and traded with both groups for centuries. They assimilated fairly well into the dominant, Arab Qatari society and did not seem to pose any major cultural or identity crisis.

The Second World War and the 'years of hunger' caused by falling pearl prices led to a significant decrease in the number of expatriates and even an exodus of Qataris. Compared with Bahrain and its much more established labour tradition dating to 1932 when oil was discovered, the influx of expatriate labour only really began in Qatar in the late 1960s.<sup>26</sup> By the late 1970s, however, the numbers were rapidly increasing. Qatar had a severe housing shortage. Sheikh Khalifa's industrialization projects only compounded the demand for expats. A similar situation obtains today. Even Education City, established to train Qataris for high-end sectors of the global economy, has led to the need to import large numbers of professionals from the USA and Europe. The fact that 90 per cent of Qatar's food supply comes from overseas is symbolic of this general dependence on the outside, a dependence that has become an obsession of Qatar's political elite. According to the Emir, Hamad Al-Thani, 'We established the Qatar National Food Security Programme in 2008, which aims to reduce Qatar's reliance on food imports through the realization of the principle of self-sufficiency.'<sup>27</sup> Although functionally impossible even if Qatar could devote all of its desert territory to agriculture, the dream of self-sufficiency certainly appeals to the Qatari citizen elite, especially with the 'years of hunger' after the Second World War still in living memory. Recent investment in 'food security' is in the same vein as Qatarization, the attempts to increase the number of Qataris participating in the labour force.

Part of the challenge of labour in Qatar today is that there is little incentive in a distributive rentier economy, an economy where revenue comes from natural resources, not from taxes, for an individual Qatari to choose or be compelled to choose the full, frightening package of modernity with all of its anomic risks. This failure to address modernity head-on, as much structural and part of the cultural package of a highly rent-based economy, as it is conscious, has occasionally surfaced into something of a panic, only to subside again like a glacier sinking into glassy waters.<sup>28</sup> A recent scandal over the hiring of Saudi Arabian Muslim women as maids for Qatari households reveals the true nature of this anxiety. The fear of these protestors is not of expatriates; the fear is of some day being treated like them. The deep-seated fear of expatriate culture is merely a projection of the fear of facing a long-term anomic debt, a debt of the ills of modernism, a debt only compounded by a looming fear over the soundness of economic progress in a 'rentier' or natural resource exporting economy. If Saudi Arabians, Qatar's close relatives could be brought to these depths, why not, in some dreaded future, Qataris? The sheer outrage at the notion of Saudi maids even as reports of serious human rights abuses against Sri Lankan maids emerge without such protest by the local population is telling. The fact that Saudi maids are feared for their powers of traditional 'black magic', a power that non-Arab maids presumably do not have, is yet another indication of an externally projected anxiety.<sup>29</sup>

Despite rather disingenuous messages against expatriates and other attempts to distract the public from systemic failures, Gulf monarchies have begun to reassess the future. As Al-Thani seem to implicitly realize with their new educational initiatives and somewhat failed attempts at Qatarization of the labour force, the only real hope of a remedy to this deficit of globally competitive Qataris can come from the education and employment of Qatar's youth, not simply for the creation of more consumers of Western products. That said, the billions invested in educational initiatives such as the Qatar Foundation for Education headed by Sheikha Mozah, the Emir's wife, may not work unless critical thinking, not memorization, not even simply the acquisition of foreign language ability or sundry facts about the world, permeates and is nourished throughout all of Qatar—a change that will require much more than an investment in 'Western' educational institutions used by expats and the children of Al-Thani elite. Even as Education City expands, many non-elite Qataris continue to be educated at Qatar University with largely traditional methods.

While Durkheim correlated anomie with the destructive tendencies of modernization, there is a positive side to anomie: *internal* criticism of those negative aspects of the social status quo. With lack of postmodernism and lack of social anomie comes a lack of self-reflection, a lack of fundamental concern about the consequences of unbridled development. Although there are some exceptions, most Qatari youths, exposed and bombarded by the same endless plethora of ambiguous and confusing Western trends as American youth, remain remarkably, even disturbingly, composed in their identities. They do not feel that the external modernization and development of their country is somehow unnatural or outside 'God's plan'. In fact, many Qatari in my classes as a professor at Qatar University in 2007–8 said to me that they support the Emir because he allows for some development to occur faster than they, themselves, would think to allow or promote. This attitude, perhaps more than anything, is a sign that anomie has not taken hold in Qatar.

## CHANGELESS CHANGE?

So much has changed in the infrastructure and physical, built environment of Qatar. So little has changed within the Qatari citizen's basic social milieu. It is not that no change has occurred within Qatari society but that these changes have not become significant enough to change Qatari society from its current system of governance and patronage. Perhaps the best predictor of fundamental change in Qatar, whether desirable or not, will not be when there is a huge change in oil prices or

when there is some internal political disruption within the house of Al-Thani. The best indication of significant change may even be the creation of a Qatari intellectual tradition, an articulated opposition to the particular manifestations of 'modernity' in Qatari society. Fundamental political change in Qatar will probably only occur when the superficial effects of modernity, so striking to the visitor but still comparatively irrelevant to the deep-set cultural, social and political realities of the Qatari, finally leaks into the deep roots of a still prevalent neo-traditionalism, when a true sense of postmodernism arises among the youth, a postmodernism that uses modernity not only to advocate external change but a complete reformation of internal, social structures. To be real and effective this postmodernism must not be a postmodernism of blame, or of projection onto an expatriate other, but postmodernism of introspection. Then, and perhaps only then, could a sturdy and coherent intellectual craft of critique set sail onto the teaming ocean of social or political change. That said, as the next section will discuss, Qatar's history and future is not merely the continuation of a deep-seated status quo: Qatar is still vulnerable to changes within the prevailing social paradigm even as Al-Thani elite has continued to concentrate power.

## MODERN HISTORY OR HISTORY MODERNIZED?

This book began with an analysis of the ways Qatar and Qataris have reacted in unique ways to modernization. Rather than following the typical, course of angst and anomie normally associated with rapid modernization by Western theorists and sociologists, Qataris have instead maintained tradition or, at the very least, constructed neo-traditional notions of identity. Shielded from the most ravishing consequences of modernization by enormous wealth and by a dependence on a massive expatriate community, Qataris can maintain a bubble of culture and internalized authenticity. It is no mere fashion that leads all Qatari men to wear their traditional *thob* at all times in Qatar, moving through Western spaces and even influences while maintaining lineage and family as the primary determinant of destiny. The Emir and his government have perpetuated these neo-traditional myths of culture and authenticity, allowing the creation of a citizen aristocracy of Qataris even as they have slowly and steadily appropriated power from truly pre-modern, traditional elites, replacing the segmentary system of power by lineage with a centralized, unitary state where the continuity of Al-Thani is so entrenched as to appear inevitable.

Most books on the history Qatar are themselves products of the manufacturing of cultural tradition. A comprehensive study of the bibliography on Qatar will reveal several studies sponsored, if not outright financed and published by, the Qatari government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>30</sup> These glossy publications and annual reports glide over social problems and political differences, presenting a society of serene contentment and wealth and a state that is a friend to all. Even Rosemarie Said Zahlan's well-researched and standard account, *The Creation of Qatar*,<sup>31</sup> although very useful in many respects and highly respected, praises Al-Thani somewhat uncritically and contains numerous prognostications for the unconditionally 'bright future' of Qatar. Other books on Qatar include guidebooks and even children's books. There are some exceptions to the lack of serious scholarship on Qatar such as Jill Crystal's informative work on merchants and sheikhs in Qatar and Kuwait,<sup>32</sup> but even these studies do not focus primarily on Qatar. The lack of scholarly work on Qatar seems stunning, especially considering Qatar's rising regional and global prominence, a prominence that, unlike Dubai's which has received much more attention, is not ephemeral but is based on truly deep reserves of natural resources and economic potential. Works in Arabic proliferate but focus almost exclusively on the pre-independence period. In the same way that the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera satellite station is allowed to report on other regimes but is limited in its ability to report too critically on Qatar itself, the writing of national history and the presentation of history to the world is almost

completely monopolized by the state and the Emiri Diwan (executive council). Even images from the nineteenth century, such as the nineteenth-century paintings that line the walls of the new Museum of Islamic Art, images that would seem starkly orientalist to heroes of cultural criticism such as Edward Said, are embraced as archival portrayals of a legendary past.<sup>33</sup>

It is not simply with mountains of glossy publications that Qatar celebrates a sanitized and controlled heritage. As the national day of celebration on the day of the birth of Jassim clearly implies, the nation is Al-Thani and Al-Thani is the nation. Nationalism, a fundamentally 'modern' concept based on historic claims, is conflated with monarchy, a fundamental 'traditional' concept that is, in fact, the heart of innovation and power. This is even more surprising when the history of Qatar reveals the truly contingent, chance nature of Al-Thani rise to power in the nineteenth century. In fact, the 'modernization' of Qatar in recent decades has meant less the abandonment of tradition than the creation of new claims to tradition and history. The Qatari experience of 'modernization' is, in many ways, distinct from the experience of modernization in much of the capitalist West which has experienced a much longer process of industrialization, state-sponsored education, specialization, division of labour and a focus on internal change.

According to Michel Foucault and Baudelaire, oft-cited theorists of Western modernity, the typical experience of modernity should, first of all, be characterized by a feeling of disruption and discontinuity:

[Modernity, for Foucault, is] a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment. And this is indeed what Baudelaire seems to be saying when he defines modernity as 'the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent'. But, for him, being modern does not lie in recognizing and accepting this perpetual movement; on the contrary, it lies in adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement; and this deliberate, difficult attitude consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it. Modernity is distinct from fashion, which does no more than call into question the course of time; modernity is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the 'heroic' aspect of the present moment. Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to 'heroize' the present.<sup>34</sup>

It may seem extraordinary to claim that Qataris, citizens of one of the most economically advanced, technologically savvy and wealthy societies in the world have not experienced the modern in the Western sense perpetuated and defined by Foucault. Yet it is precisely this that this book claims. The 'heroic' in Qatar is associated not with the 'now', a now dominated and built by expatriate labour, but with what is 'behind it'—a past reconstructed and reconstituted into nationalized historical moments associated irrevocably with the right of Al-Thani to rule and the right of the Qatari citizen to enjoy all of the benefits of modern materialism at the service of reconstituted, neo-traditional identities. Even as culture, heritage and tradition are highly praised and tribal lineage becomes the basis of symbolic forms of representation, they are at the same time being slowly eroded and disempowered, slowly changing the largely independent tribal emirs into citizens, and citizens into dependent subjects. Although there have been instances of serious protest against the unitary state, such as the famous protests of Abdullah Al-Misnad in 1963 against the decline of powers of the tribal chiefs, Qataris have largely acquiesced to this diminution of their traditional political powers as the state allowed them to retain control over their own internal affairs. In some, but not all respects the story of modernization in Qatar is reflected by wider trends in the Islamic world.

In his study of Islamic modernism, Leonard Binder suggested Islam itself was a way of shielding against the consequences of modernism. According to Binder, this wrestling with the cultural price of modernity through the adoption of Islamic alternatives is a phenomenon characteristic of the Middle East and north Africa:

From the time of the Napoleonic invasion, from the time of the massacre of the Janissaries, from the time of the Sepoy mutiny, at least, the West has been trying to tell Islam what must be the price of progress in the coin of the tradition which is to be

surrendered. And from those times, despite the increasing numbers of responsive Muslims, there remains a substantial number that steadfastly argue that it is possible without paying such a heavy cultural price. There are two important issues here, and not one. The first is whether Islam poses a substantial obstacle to modernization and development, and the second is whether Islam proposes a radically different and possibly much better social order than that which is adumbrated in the Western theory of development. The first issue assumes that Islam may be the barrier to development, while the second assumes that the West may be the barrier to development in the Islamic world. The first question identifies Islam and tradition, generically, while the second denies that Westernization is the only form of modernization.<sup>35</sup>

In a theoretical sense, Leonard Binder's observation applies to Qatar, to Qataris and indeed to Muslims of any nationality in Qatar at any level of society. What matters for the particular history of Qatar, however, is not that the conundrum and problem of modernity and tradition exists, but how it is projected, how its fundamental challenges are either met or not met. Binder's generalization does not fully describe the particular experience of Qatar. It is not simply Islam itself but a distinct, newly nationalized notion of Qatari history, citizenship and obligations of lineage that is maintained, even strengthened in some ways, in the face of modernity.

## A FUTURE OF CRITICAL REFLECTION?

Although Qataris are fabulously wealthy, this delaying of the 'vertigo' of modernity has not come without a price. It is not expected that Qataris will need to pay the debts of change any time soon and that the tide of comfortable neo-traditionalism will continue to rise. Yet it will inevitably crest—whether instigated by a revolution in petroleum demand or a fundamental rupture in Qatari society caused by the over-centralization of Emiri power, or even by an imponderable external force (of these possibilities there are always many in the Gulf). Qataris will someday come out of hiding and be seen not merely in boardrooms and the play palaces of the world but in the deep, horrid and heroic avenue of the 'now'. It is at that point that Qataris will begin to consider their own history critically, to write not according to the agenda of nation and Emir but the agenda of self-realization.

The lack of a fully experienced modernity amongst Qataris also means the lack of critical history, or at least the lack of the critical, allegedly 'objectively detached' modern form of history that has come to dominate the study of history in the West. The current lack of available written histories on Qatar is not a result of the irrelevance of history to Qatar—quite the opposite. The lack of recent, critical histories on Qatar by Qataris is due to sensitivity about history as a critical enquiry and a challenge to a prosperous status quo. In a society whose comfortable, traditional assumptions are perpetuated and shielded by billions in wealth and hundreds of thousands of expatriate servants, history in its modern sense as a synthesized narrative pursued by professionally trained historians using source-based scholarship, could seem only likely to cause disruption. Whereas the many histories based on local claims to Qatari identity within Qatari society can abide together underneath a very lightly constructed non-confrontational official history that explicitly supports the Emir.

When Qataris begin writing a critical, modern history, not an 'official' history but a history that opens the inner doors of Qatari society, it will put anything that I have written in this book as a guest and observer of Qatar in a different light. As the philosopher Heidegger claimed in *Metaphysics*,

Only as a questioning, historical, being does man come to himself; only as such is he a self. Man's selfhood means this: he must transform the being that discloses itself to him into history and bring himself to stand in it.<sup>36</sup>

The critical examination of history and neo-traditional assumptions could finally mean the birth of the modern and postmodern Qatari self. We will now introduce some of the central historical myths of Qatari origins and how these myths support current power and social structures in Qatar in ways that obscure history.

## AL-THANI NARRATIVE OF HISTORIC POWER

Al-Thani dynasty was founded after the dynasties of the Emirates, Kuwait and Bahrain.<sup>37</sup> Until the discovery of oil Al-Thani only really controlled the area around Doha (or Bidaa), a city of about 12,000 inhabitants in the pre-oil period. Bahrain claimed Zubara and other prominent tribes, Al-Naim and Al bin Ali, claimed much of the land to the north and Wakra, the only other significant urban settlement. It could be said that the current power of Al-Thani family and especially the Emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, has no fundamental historical precedent outside of British interference. As such the history of Qatar became highly symbolic and significant as a means of constructing such a precedent. Contextual documents of the British and Ottoman powers, both of which were interested in legitimizing Al-Thani rule and ignoring or sidelining the rival claims of other tribes, largely support a narrative of complete co-dependence of the rise of Qatar and the rise of Al-Thani. As Zahlan observes 'the rise of one [Al-Thani] has heralded the independence of the other [Qatar]'.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, this narrative of co-dependence, something of a royalist historical narrative, ignores the more complicated history of Qatar and Qataris. As the scholar J.E. Peterson aptly observed:

Until comparatively recently, states in Arabia were minimalist, whether considered in terms of structure, functions, or their relationships with their citizens. In rural areas, the tribe was central to the individual's existence: in many ways, it formed something of a self-contained entity, politically, economically and certainly socially. Allegiance to a larger state structure was ephemeral, produced either by force or transitory self-interest.<sup>39</sup>

What is remarkable and unexpected about Qatar and Al-Thani, however, is that despite both internal and external threats and challenges to their power, Al-Thani and Qatar have remained independent even as other Arabian states, 'Asir, Jabal Shammar, Jawfa and the independent emirates of Dubai, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi that now make up the United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, were absorbed into larger, state and federal political structures. Qatar's current independence is even more surprising since it was Qatar that proposed to create a greater federation of Arab Emirates under a ruling council after Britain's decision to withdraw from the Gulf in 1968. Instead of welcoming the withdrawal of the British, the Qataris, like the other emirates, feared the domination of neighboring powers. Almost immediately after Qatar called for the creation of the federation and after Sheikh Khalifa al Thani, then heir apparent, had been elected the federation's prime minister, Al-Thani grew restless. The parties from Bahrain, the Emirates and Qatar could not agree on the specifics of a federal Constitution. Qatar campaigned for Doha as the capital of the federation but was rejected. It could be said that it was an innate exceptionalism and defense of Qatar's interests that may have so dramatically reversed its enthusiasm to form a federation.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the exceptionalism of Qatar, in hindsight, could be seen either as a stroke of luck or as a confirmation of the royalist narrative. Even as Qatar's independence and sovereignty was a product of circumstance and the collapse of negotiations that were led and instigated by Al-Thani themselves, Qatar's somewhat accidental independence is now fully embraced and celebrated as Qatar has developed the economic clout and diplomatic prestige to feel confident on its own. In this narrative it is Al-Thani in particular who have assured the independence and success of Qatar. Another narrative, a narrative that I will try to emphasize despite the difficulties of finding sources on Qatari, not just Al-Thani history, is that the history of Qatar is also the result of a compromise of power, a constant internal conversation, both subtle and sometimes not so subtle, between Qatari international powers and the royal family.

As modernization and state power has increased, however, this non-Al-Thani history has been steadily sidelined by the creation of a dynastic, Al-Thani centric, narrative. This does not mean, however, that Al-Thani are nearly as vulnerable as they were in the past. In fact, this book argues that Al-Thani have perhaps never been in a more favourable position not only to rewrite the narrative of

Qatar's creation but to stay in power in the long term. The only real risk is not that power will diffuse but that power itself becomes too concentrated, too top heavy in the hands of the Emir and his—immediate relations. That possibility will be the focus of a later section of the book. For now, the historical reasons for the success of Al-Thani will be outlined.

Dynasties transmit knowledge and experience through family and tribal ties. Modernizing monarchies such as Qatar have some advantages over developing democracies—they are able not only to make long-term decisions but can utilize continuity and historic legitimacy to avoid risk and take rapid advantage of opportunities. It is for this reason most of the same dynasties and tribes that were in power in the Gulf in the nineteenth-century pearl boom and bust—the so-called 'years of hunger'—were a result of an overdependence on pearls—are still in power today for oil boom and possible bust. The survival and prosperity of the small monarchies of the Gulf is not some historical accident, but the result of long historical trends with deep foundations. Most importantly, it is the result of the active, astute, diplomatic approach of the Gulf States towards their neighbours and towards superpowers that balanced one interested party against another. Throughout modern history, Gulf tribes have valued pragmatic independence more than ideology, adopting, for example, a form of 'Wahhabism-lite' more flexible than that found in Saudi Arabia and, since the increase in American dominance in the Gulf, a democracy-lite form that respects tribal traditions and boundaries. Modern commentators are often flummoxed by the blatant contradictions in the foreign policies of the Gulf States: allowing US Central Command to have its base there, while funding the wildly successful and critical Al-Jazeera channel and anti-war conferences. But these contradictions are nothing new to the Gulf or to a country like Qatar where the Ottomans, the British and Saudi Arabia and Iran all contended for influence over the Qatari Peninsula, a Peninsula that juts into the shallow waters of the Gulf like a tipping point, the position of strategic balance. Not committing completely to any ideology or power is what the Gulf States are good at, it is what has made Qatar able to pack a punch far beyond its weight.

For the casual visitor or even foreign resident of the Gulf, history seems so easy to ignore. With modern, Western amenities everywhere it may seem, in fact, that the Gulf has no history, or that most of its history has been erased or reinvented by modern development. While Western visitors are used to seeing history in structures and written documents, the Arab residents and citizens of Qatar and the Gulf view their identity through the lens of deep and abiding oral traditions, traditions that have continued to be celebrated in highly advanced technological media, with poetry contests one of the most popular shows on regional television.

Despite Arab citizens' deeply felt appreciation of the richness of their own history and identity, local history seems really irrelevant to the vast majority of non-Gulf residents or expatriates who live in the region and help run most of the Gulf economy. When 80 per cent of the population has arrived after 1980, what use is history to explain social and economic trends? When massive companies and projects are managed, bought and sold by expatriates, who is really in control of a country's assets? What is clear, however, is that the ruling Gulf tribes and their allies still call most of the shots. This is certainly the case in Qatar. A *laissez-faire* tolerance of economic success reigns, but for local issues often the buck still stops at the tribal *majlis* (traditional semi-democratic councils) and the Diwan of the Emir where almost no Westerner, no matter how connected to global finance, may enter. Inflation may increase beyond 14 per cent, new risks may emerge from Iran or Iraq, and some spending projects may be less successful than others, there may even be some palace coups carefully managed within the ruling tribe, but these weaknesses will not fundamentally alter the historically rooted political and social system of Qatar and the Qataris. Although the individual fate of rulers may be subject to sporadic coup attempts and threats, the basic institutions of the monarchy remain strong. Al-Thani and their closest allies have seen the rise and fall of the British, the Saudis, the Omani and the Ottoman



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