

Car Decals, Civic Rituals, and Changing Conceptions of Nationalism

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With the onset of the Gulf diplomatic crisis in June 2017, citizens and expatriate residents in Qatar affixed patriotic decals to their cars in a show of support. Using visual evidence and ethnographic interviews gathered between August 2017 and September 2018, we analyze Qatari and expatriate participation in this shared ritual of nationalism, and what each group's participation meant to the other. Our conclusions highlight the growth of civic nationalism narratives in Qatar as a response to the diplomatic crisis, and a corresponding reduction in regional ethnic narratives of communal belonging.

Keywords: diplomatic crisis, nationalism, citizens, expatriates, Qatar

What can a car decal tell us about changing conceptions of nationalism and belonging in Qatar? The small, resource-rich monarchy of Qatar is characterized as an “ethnocracy” (Longva, 2005), in which belonging to the nation is based on ethnicity. Regimes such as Qatar have citizenship laws that make it nearly impossible for foreigners to naturalize. Yet while legal citizenship remains inaccessible for most foreigners in these states, nationalism—both personal identification with and public practice of—may be an important part of these noncitizens' daily lives and of the regimes' political legitimacy.

Nationalism in Qatar took on new importance on June 5, 2017, when regional neighbors Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, along with Egypt, broke diplomatic relations with Qatar and closed their land, sea, and air borders. Within days, patriotic car decals began appearing on the Qatari streets as a public show of support by both citizens and expatriates. In this article, we investigate this phenomenon to consider the impact of the ongoing regional diplomatic crisis on the nationalism narratives of Qatar. Our research builds on Koch's (2016) call to look beyond rights-based frameworks of belonging to analyze how expatriates participate in nationalism alongside citizens (see also Vora & Koch, 2015). Using visual evidence and ethnographic interviews, we analyze Qatari and expatriate participation in a shared ritual of nationalism, and

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what each group's participation meant to the other. Our conclusions investigate the extent to which civic nationalism narratives in Qatar are increasing as a response to the regional diplomatic crisis.

Nationalism and the Case of Qatar

Nationalism is an ideological system of belonging, socialization, and legitimation, which defines the criteria for group membership in modern states (Breton, 1988; Smith, 1998). Building on Anderson's (1983/2006) concept of imagined communities, we focus on how nationalist narratives include or exclude members of society and adjudicate claims of belonging and access.

There are two categories of nationalism—ethnic and civic—which are “*differently inclusive*” (Brubaker, 1999, p. 62; Kohn, 1944): Ethnic nationalism uses ascriptive characteristics, whereas civic nationalism uses legal criteria (Breton, 1988; Greenfeld, 1992). These nationalisms are a continuum rather than a dichotomy; many countries employ elements of both (Brubaker, 1999; Smith, 1998). Likewise, nationalism is not teleological, but rather can shift from more ethnic to more civic, or vice versa (Hobsbawm, 1990/1992). Finally, nationalism, as a national sense of community, is a dynamic understanding of belonging that changes according to events or experiences that affect its members (Sarason, 1974).

For whom is nationalism? The classic understanding is that citizens are both recipients and practitioners of nationalist narratives (Anderson, 1983/2006; Gellner, 1983/2006). Yet the narrow view that “nationalism is for nationals” misses the ways in which state decision-makers take seriously their noncitizen populations (Koch, 2016). “Framed in these exclusionary terms,” Vora and Koch (2015) argue, “it is easy to miss how ‘foreigners’—their agencies, subjectivities, and imaginaries—are all called into service of the broader political projects of creating nations” (p. 548).

Qatar has stringent citizenship laws of *jus sanguinis*, which defines citizenship access through patriarchal parentage and proof of generational residency in the country (Babar, 2014). By definition, the expatriate community—even long-term, multigenerational groups—is excluded from legal citizenship and its associated rights because of its ascriptive characteristics of birth.

Restrictions on citizenship, however, should not be conflated with restrictions on nationalism. While Qatar's focus on preserving local culture, language, and identity contains elements of ethnic nationalism (Alshawi & Gardner, 2013; Babar, 2015), Qatar's state-led rhetoric and actions also contain elements of civic nationalism that include foreigners in the communal fabric of Qatar. Mitchell (2013) documents the example of the 2012 National Day parade along the seaside Corniche in downtown Doha. For the first time, the Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (now known officially as the Father Amir), walked along the parade route himself, waving and shaking hands with overwhelmed citizens and expatriates. A Pakistani expatriate recounted,

I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the Amir just two feet away from me. I was emotionally overwhelmed, so much so that my eyes were wet. The Amir began shaking hands with people and embracing children. He didn't differentiate between nationals and expatriates. He shook hands with whoever could reach up to him. I will never ever forget this gesture of the Amir. (Mitchell, 2013, p. 185)

Qataris also expressed pride in the Amir's actions: A local artist published a cartoon depicting an image of the Amir shaking five outstretched hands, symbolizing Westerners, South Asians, male and female Qataris, and children (Abdulatif, 2012). Since 2013, Sheikh Hamad's son and successor, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has repeated this National Day tradition.

Building on findings by Vora and Koch (2015) on the shift in nationalist rhetoric in the Gulf states toward civic scripts that include expatriates alongside citizens as "active participants in Gulf state- and nation-building projects" (p. 540), Koch (2016, 2019) highlights how noncitizens demonstrate loyalty to the state, despite the absence of legal citizenship. Using evidence from the 2013 and 2014 National Day celebrations in Qatar and the UAE, Koch demonstrates how expatriates are included in advertisements, state rhetoric, and public activities (2016), including car decorations (2019). Yet she also makes clear the limitations to this inclusiveness. Regarding state-led narratives of expatriate belonging and gratitude, Koch (2016) notes that

these narratives are less about promoting true civic participation on behalf of the expats, but actively *reinforce* the borders between the citizen-nationals as the rightful owners of the land, and the expats whose attachment to place is always mediated through another statist identity. (p. 52)

Likewise, while both citizens and expatriates may decorate their cars for National Day, Koch (2019) argues that large-scale decals are "understood to be the realm of citizen-nationals only" (p. 195), constituting a performance of elite status rather than a "practice that unites all residents" (p. 195).

The ongoing diplomatic crisis in the Gulf provides us with an opportunity to consider whether Qatar's nationalistic scripts have further changed toward increased civic inclusion. What was initially seen, in June 2017, as a severe crisis has largely settled into a *détente*—giving Qatar the room to focus on domestic and international concerns (Mitchell, 2018). And indeed, amid the geopolitics of this crisis, Qatar's state-led rhetoric has emphasized the importance of the expatriate community to the country's development. In September 2017, the Amir attended the UN General Assembly and declared, "Allow me, on this occasion and from this podium, to express my pride in my Qatari people, along with the multinational and multicultural residents in Qatar" (Al Thani, 2017, para. 36). This statement made an immediate impact on the public discourse in Qatar; it was prominently displayed throughout the country, in local newspapers, in public art exhibits, on commercial websites, and on roadside billboards (Mitchell & Curtis, 2018). When the Amir returned to Qatar, he was greeted by a massive, spontaneous celebration along the Corniche, planned by citizens and residents through viral hashtags on social media ("Amir Returns Home," 2017). The state's powerful rhetoric and the people's supportive responses suggest that we may be witnessing an increased civic nationalism in Qatar because of the crisis.²

We interrogate this question by focusing on the car decals that were displayed soon after the crisis began, as both citizens and expatriates participated in this form of nationalism. In this analysis, it is fair to ask

² The Amir's inclusive rhetoric has continued throughout the crisis, such as his tweet on National Day 2018 that read, "I congratulate the people of Qatar, citizens and residents on National Day." See <https://twitter.com/TamimBinHamad/status/1075040601152851968>.

whether it matters that Qatar is an authoritarian country, with limitations on public forms of expression, especially dissent (Duffy, 2013). Social and legal pressures to falsify one's true opinions may call into question the authenticity of such expressions of regime support (Kuran, 1995; Wedeen, 1999). Koch (2016) notes that while some may dismiss the practice of these rituals in authoritarian conditions as "the mere production of 'propaganda'" (p. 45), she suggests treating this participation "as situated performances"; her earlier work demonstrates the purposeful agency of noncitizens' use of state-sanctioned symbols to show loyalty and reap benefits (Koch, 2013). In the end, we argue that the authoritarian nature of Qatar does not obstruct our ability to analyze both the practice of this ritual and its impact on changing notions of belonging in Qatar.

Methodological Approach

Researchers are increasingly using visual material—both media content and the context of reception—to understand the sociocultural world (Rose, 2016). Connecting knowledge with sight, images are visual records (Khatib, 2012) that help with "documenting the spectacles" of "symbolic space in which visual icons are sending political and social messages" (Allagui, 2014, pp. 996–997). In this research, we analyze these spectacles within the semiotic landscape, a "space with visible inscription made through human intervention and meaning making" (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010, p. 2; see also Allagui & Al-Najjar, 2018; Koch, 2019, p. 192). As Bock, Isermann, and Knieper (2011) explain, "Examining how pictures are contextualized (for example, in a newspaper page) is of major importance, because the appearance of a picture in specific media . . . arouses certain expectations" (p. 279).

For our purposes, we consider the street, and specifically the cars, as the media channel through which communication is transmitted. Streets may express both resistance and political loyalty—a "performative space" (Gardner & Zakzouk, 2014, p. 140) that depicts a "plethora of ways in which the visual is part of social life" (Rose, 2016 p. 4). Within these streets, cars are used to convey economic, commercial, political, sociocultural, and sporting messages. In Qatar, cars decorated with images, poetry, and illustrations created a motivated public spectacle intended to inform others of the messengers' opinions about the diplomatic crisis. Our units of analysis are the messages conveyed on these decals, whereas the materiality of the cars, well covered by Gardner and Zakzouk (2014), is beyond the scope of the present study.

Visual and textual analysis alone—without taking into account group effects or perceptions among receivers—cannot tell the full story of the car decals (Bock et al., 2011). As a significant number of cars with messages circulate the streets, group effects amplify the meaning of this phenomenon and influence how viewers interact with these messages. Thus, we include ethnographic research that explores not only why people decided to display their decals, but also how they perceived and processed others' participation.

In our mixed-method research approach, we first visually and textually analyzed our sample of 27 car decal images. All images with text are written in Arabic; one includes both Arabic and English. We consulted several specialists in Arabic translation, Qatari and non-Qatari, to understand the linguistic meanings. Collected by the researchers from August 2017 to May 2018 (given traffic laws and safety while driving), our research captures a moment in time in which these extravagant car decorations were permitted by the authorities. In April 2018, the General Directorate of Traffic asked Qatari motorists to remove decals that hinder the driver's

visibility, and traffic officials began removing these decals during the annual registration process ("Motorists Urged to Remove Stickers," 2018). Since this policy change, almost all the large-scale decals have disappeared.

Second, we analyzed the content of 32 semistructured interviews (Bernard, 2017) to understand the intent behind decorating their cars and their response to others' participation in this ritual. These interviews were conducted face-to-face and through mobile communications between March and September 2018, in the interlocutor's language of choice, by three undergraduate student research assistants fluent in English and Arabic. The respondents were both randomly and conveniently selected, approached in public locations such as schools, malls, and cafés. The demographic makeup of the interviews consisted of 18 citizens and 14 expatriates, 27 males and 5 females, and an age range of 19–42 years old. To protect privacy, identifying details were removed during the translation and transcription process, and pseudonyms are used.

We analyzed the interviews via categorizing strategies (Maxwell, 2013), in which segments of data were identified (coded) as meaningful based on our deductive categories from our semistructured interviews, including the decision to display a decal, the intended message, the response of others, and assessments of nationalism and citizen–expatriate relations during the diplomatic crisis. Our gathered evidence allows us to analyze both the iconography and the performative meanings of the car decals, building a productive entry point to a contextual understanding of changing notions of nationalism and belonging in Qatar.

Visual Analysis of the Car Decals

In our semiotic analysis, we identified patterns of meaning and linked them back to our research questions. Here we analyze the car decals for visual and textual evidence of civic scripts, inclusion of expatriates, and indications of change.

The Amir

In our sample of 27 visuals, one image predominated: Virtually all car decals included the Amir's image, except one that nevertheless refers to the Amir indirectly through the word *Leadership*, intertwined with the word *People*. The dominant presence of the Amir indicates that he became the symbol of visual nationalism during the diplomatic crisis. Within our sample, the Amir appears in traditional dress 18 times. More modern portrayals include 12 instances of the Tamim Almajd ("Tamim the Glorious") headshot, a black-and-white artistic portrait of the Amir, which became a symbol of support for Qatar during the diplomatic crisis (Prabhakaran, 2017), along with three images that portray the Amir in suit and tie, with his head uncovered. (See Figure 1 for a large-scale traditional portrayal of the Amir as well as a separate car with Tamim Almajd.) Last, one image depicts the Amir in military garb. Our sample suggests that images that were unique, large-scale (covering the back window or the entire back of the car), and poetic tended to represent the Amir in traditional garb. Because the traditional thobe and headdress are used throughout the Gulf monarchies as elite symbols of citizenship (Davidson, 2005), these traditional representations of the Amir do not suggest a more inclusive nationalism, although it could also be simple respect to depict the Amir in his traditional outfit.



Figure 1. Car (left): Large-scale traditional portrait of the Amir; car (right): Tamim Almajd (left) and decal of the Qatari Foreign Minister (right).

Flags

After the Amir's image, the next most repeated image is the Qatari flag, which appears 14 times in our sample. Of these Qatari flags, 11 appear alone, and three appear with flags from Egypt, Kuwait (twice), Oman, and Turkey. Except for Egypt, which is one of the blockading countries, these countries are Qatar's allies in the current conflict. Figure 2 includes an image (on the tire cover) of the Egyptian flag beside the Qatari flag, with the Amir's photo between them. This image implies a public disavowal of Egypt's official position in the conflict by an Egyptian expatriate. Egyptians in Qatar constitute one of the largest expatriate communities, and they have expressed concerns about their jobs and stability in Qatar (Ismail, 2017). This decal speaks to these concerns, but also to the expatriate's support for Qatar and the Amir: Three different images of the Amir cover the back of the car.



Figure 2. On tire cover: Qatari flag (left) and Egyptian flag (right), with the Amir in the middle; across back window: "Expect Glory and Prosperity."

Additionally, our sample contained four examples of flags or nationality markers that were displayed separately, without the Qatari flag but with Tamim Almajd or another decal: Nepal, South Africa, Texas (U.S.), and the Philippines. We cannot know whether the owner of the car displayed both of these nationality markers side-by-side to send a message. While the car with the South African flag is privately owned, and thus presumably its decals are purposeful choices, the Nepali and Filipino markers are on commercially owned vehicles, and the ownership status of the truck with the Texan flag is unknown. However, we can infer that these expatriates meant to signal to others both their expatriate nationalities and their support of Qatar.

Personages

Five images in our sample depict persons other than the Amir, usually alongside him. Three of these images show the Amir with other Qatari leaders. One image (Figure 1, car on the right) features the Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, portrayed in a black-and-white image similar in style to Tamim Almajd. While Sheikh Mohammed's image is a standalone picture—the only image in our sample in which a person appeared without the Amir—it has been placed next to a larger Tamim Almajd decal, symbolizing the support of both of these figures in relation to each other.

Two images feature one or both of the Amir's parents. The Father Amir appears in one image, in the foreground with the Amir positioned partly behind him (Figure 5, later in this article). In another image, the Father Amir is positioned face-to-face with the Amir's mother, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, while the Amir

is in the background, positioned above them, the three of them forming the shape of Qatar (Figure 3). This decal is the only image in our sample where Sheikha Moza appears. In colors of black and white and maroon, the illustration—placed on the back bumper—is smaller than most visuals in our sample. The subtle placement and size of this image may be related to the relatively conservative Qatari culture in which images of women are less visible in the public domain than men (Mir & Paschyn, 2018). Nevertheless, it should also be understood as a tribute to Sheikha Moza, whose leadership role in the country, especially through Qatar Foundation and its educational, scientific, and philanthropic projects, is highly regarded (Kamrava, 2013). The image both pays homage to the Amir's parents, by placing them in the foreground, and reflects the higher position of their son by positioning him above them—reminding viewers that both parents ushered their son into this leadership position after the Father Amir abdicated in June 2013 (Nordland, 2013).



Figure 3. The Amir (top) with his parents, Sheikha Moza (left) and Sheikh Hamad (right).

Two other images include non-Qatari leaders beside the Amir. The Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al Sabah, is in both of them, demonstrating the perception of Kuwait as a strong ally and mediator of the conflict. In one, Sheikh Sabah stands to the right of Sheikh Tamim. With smiles on their faces, both men look toward the Qatari flag on their left, with the Kuwaiti flag on their right. The text reads, "From the homeland of Abu Nasser Sabah [the Amir of Kuwait], our souls support you, oh Qatar. We will never forget

your support in 1990.” A message from a Kuwaiti expatriate in Qatar, this decal recalls Qatar’s help during the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and vows to repay this support by standing with Qatar now.

The second image (Figure 4) depicts three leaders, alongside Sheikh Tamim, who have supported Qatar since the early days of the diplomatic crisis: From left to right, they are President Recep Erdoğan of Turkey, Sheikh Tamim, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said of Oman, and Sheikh Sabah, their four flags in the background. Each man has a descriptor: President Erdoğan is “honorable”; Sheikh Tamim is “glorious”; Sultan Qaboos is the “sultan of peace”; and Sheikh Sabah is the “prince of wisdom.”



Figure 4. President Erdoğan of Turkey, Sheikh Tamim of Qatar, Sultan Qaboos of Oman, and Sheikh Sabah of Kuwait.

In our sample, there are no images of ordinary “people of Qatar,” whether citizens or expatriates. But typically, iconic images of authoritarian leaders are used as symbols of a unified nation, in which ordinary people are included, albeit implicitly, as loyal citizens of their nations (e.g., Kershaw, 1987). While the other Qatari leaders depicted in our sample are all members of the ruling Al Thani family, depicting the leaders of Kuwait, Oman, and Turkey shows respect and appreciation for both these leaders and their citizens, and the inclusion of Erdoğan as a non-Arab leader is especially important for inclusivity.

Texts

Turning from the visuals to their texts, 23 of our 27 images contain Arabic prose, usually poetic in nature, written in varying, sometimes intermingled forms of Modern Standard Arabic and Qatari and Bedouin dialects, and sprinkled with colloquialisms and idioms that emphasize the diversity of both the messengers and their audiences. The messages are very supportive of Qatar and the Amir, sometimes using religious or military connotations to further strengthen their messages of patriotism.

Figure 5 depicts the Amir and the Father Amir, using religious prose to emphasize its message: “You are on the right path.” While ostensibly an indication of the population’s approval for the way the Amir

is handling the crisis, the religious connotation speaks to a more conservative segment of Qataris (Scharfenort, 2012). The Arabic expression *antum 'alā al-ḥaqq al-mubīn* is derived from a Quranic verse (Surah An-Nūr [24:25]: "Allah is indeed the manifest truth") and gives religious authority to the just decision making. As well, the visual and textual message encompasses both leaders, emphasizing that the young Amir is not ruling alone, but with the support of his still-powerful father and (implicitly) his people. The Arabic uses the pronoun "*antum*," which is a plural pronoun that can address a male individual (respectfully) or a group, just like "you" in English. The choice to use the plural form of "you" rather than the dual form of "you" (*antumā*) indicates that the statement may include the viewer along with the leaders as those who are on the right path.



Figure 5. The Father Amir (foreground) and the Amir, "You are on the right path."

While several nationalistic words are repeated throughout the images—"Tamim," "Qatar," "loyalty," "obedience," "honor," "homeland," "country," and "people"—only one set of words explicitly identifies the messenger as a non-Qatari (the Kuwaiti expatriate). We do not see any text that refers to expatriates as part of the people of Qatar.

In sum, the decals provoke important questions about the shifting nationalism narrative in Qatar. While none explicitly refers to expatriates as part of that narrative, the persistent juxtaposition of symbols of Qatari nationalism (Amir, flag) with symbols of other nations (leaders, flags) suggests an extranational element to this ritual. Even if we cannot be sure that the owners of such decals were expatriates, the visual patterns demonstrate an expanded discourse of nationalism in Qatar on the street level as a result of the diplomatic crisis.

Qualitative Interview Analysis

In analyzing our 32 semistructured interviews, we document the personal experience of our interlocutors while also providing contextual insights for our larger research questions: Has participation in this ritual changed the "nationalist script" in Qatar, and the relationship between Qataris and expatriates? Here we use both individual and group comparative analysis to determine shifts in perceptions of nationalism and belonging in Qatar.

While the vast majority of our interlocutors chose to display a car decal (17 of 18 Qataris, and 13 of 14 expatriates), the motives and meanings of this performative display are the main analytical question. Here we follow Koch's (2013, 2016) focus on the agency of individuals within nationalist spectacles. According to both Qataris and expatriates, what messages did they intend to send by displaying these decals, and to whom?

We do not assume that participation is due to intrinsic nationalism. The traditional academic viewpoint (e.g., Luciani, 1987) is that citizens of resource-rich ("rentier") states have a pocketbook relationship with their governing systems, maintaining loyalty because of fiscal reward, not national myth or other types of intrinsic patriotism. This argument remains prevalent in scholarly, policy, and media analyses of Qatar and other Gulf states, albeit somewhat tempered by more recent takes on the subject (e.g., Davidson, 2005; Mitchell & Gengler, 2019; Okruhlik, 2016). Likewise, this pocketbook relationship can apply to the expatriates who live and work in Qatar as well, a viewpoint expressed by one of our interlocutors, Amal, a 31-year-old Egyptian-Irish woman. Amal argued that expatriate shows of support for Qatar during the blockade were performed for pragmatic and financial reasons rather than political loyalty:

I don't think there is necessarily a lot of thought that goes into this [displaying a car decal]. . . . For the South Asian expat, they have no position [but to stay and support the state]. And then for the Arab expat, it comes to whether they have a better alternative. And if you are from one of the blockading countries, you're under even more pressure to say, well, my country did this but we, as a people, we all love each other and we're all Arabs, and this is just political and there is no way to get us involved. And then finally it's the Western expat, who really can't be bothered to a large extent. . . . But the more financially dependent an expat is, the more they were likely to demonstrate some type of loyalty.

Amal's skepticism mirrors our earlier discussion about the dubious authenticity of regime support under authoritarianism (Kuran, 1995; Wedeen, 1999). Thus, we critically interrogate the intended meanings and audiences for both Qataris and expatriates when displaying these decals.

Meaning of Personal Participation

Overall, both our Qatari and expatriate interlocutors expressed that the main reason for their display of car decals was to show support for both the country as a whole and for the Amir specifically, as "an

expression of *mubāya'a* [pledging allegiance]" for the Amir. The wide variety of decals, analyzed previously, reflect nuanced differences in preferences, messages, and tone, but all serve the purpose of showing this support. For example, Abdelkarim, a 25-year-old Qatari man, explained the origin of the popular "Expect Glory" decal (see, for example, Figure 2):

The story behind it is, the Amir attended a funeral of one of the tribes in Qatar. . . . One of the old men, I think the brother of the deceased, asked him about the situation in Qatar, and he said, "*Abshirū bi'l-'izz wa al-khayr*" [expect glory and prosperity]. So, that was basically just to make people more relaxed about the situation. Our Amir is relaxed, and we can see that he has things under control, and that's what [my] second sticker symbolizes.

Some interlocutors, both Qataris and expatriates, expressed that it was not necessary to display a car decal to show support for the country. Khaled, a 34-year-old Qatari man, called the decal "superficial," elaborating, "The main thing is to prove oneself in one's field of work and studies. That is what we consider true patriotism." Khaled's opinion echoes Qatari academics and policy makers (e.g., Althani, 2012; Kane, 2015) as well as government rhetoric, such as the Qatar National Vision 2030. Yet for some respondents, a perceived lack of political efficacy meant that car decals were the only way they could express support for the country; as Ali, a 32-year-old Qatari man, stated, "I cannot change the situation or interfere in my country's foreign policy to make things better. Things are not in our hands as citizens." Likewise, Fahad, a Bahraini man, asked, "Other than social media, where else can I show my support?" For Ali, Fahad, and others, showing support through a car decal was an important and meaningful action.

Two audiences were envisioned as the recipients of the intended messages: domestic and external. Some interlocutors displayed a car decal with a domestic audience in mind, as an expression of solidarity and unity within Qatar, whereas others displayed decals for an external audience, largely as a countermesssage to misinformation and "propaganda" from international sources, including the blockading countries. While our Qatari respondents were fairly split between the two audiences, the majority of expatriates had a domestic audience in mind: Their decals were predominantly intended to send a message to Qataris.

Those focused on an internal audience emphasized the importance of using the roads as a space in which public declarations of support could be made to a local community, demonstrating the importance of group effects in this nationalistic ritual (Bock et al., 2011). Faisal, a 23-year-old Qatari man, explained,

Because I drive a lot, I get to express myself with [the decal] a lot. People behind me get to see it and in this way I participate in spreading the idea that I am proud of my country's decisions and the Amir.

For Bader, a 22-year-old Qatari man, the public display of visual support helped assure him, in his words, "that all Qataris stand together, because I was afraid that the news would divide us. But it brought us much closer." He continued, explaining that the message "is not to show the Amir that I am loyal, but to show other people we are all on the same team." Expatriates agreed that they used the car decals to show "that we are part of this country and that we belong to this country," as Mona, a 40-year-old Lebanese woman, explained. Likewise, Basit, a 22-year-old Pakistani man, offered, "As I saw people around me doing it, I thought, why not? It's a

great way of showing solidarity, and telling Qataris that I am standing with them . . . as an expat." Perhaps particularly important for those expatriates whose home countries were part of the blockade, the decal became a way "to show everyone where I stand" and "to show everyone else I am part of this family just like they are," as Seth, a college-aged Egyptian man, said.

Social reasons seemed to play a role in the decision to display car decals, lending weight to Bock and colleagues' (2011) emphasis on group effects: Abdelkarim, for example, noted how "it became a must" for people to break their Ramadan fasts together on the Corniche by taking photos of their decals and posting the photos to Instagram. In a shift from Koch's (2019) analysis, some of our expatriate interlocutors felt comfortable displaying large-scale decals alongside Qataris, such as Fadi, a 23-year-old Palestinian man who displayed a back window decal with the phrase, "You can have the world, but we get Tamim." Expatriates and Qataris felt a joint sense of pride in this shared participation: Ameen, a 20-year-old Sudanese man, noted that "the first couple of days [of displaying the decal], it was a really nice reaction to the people having the same stickers, with people honking to each other and showing support," and Rashid, a 30-year-old Qatari man, stated, "I felt proud to have different people from different countries participate with us in this ritual."

For those interlocutors who were focused on an external audience, they expressed a desire to counter propaganda that was seen as an attack on Qatar and to "prove" to the world the steadfast unity between the Amir and his people, whether Qatari or expatriate. Nasser, a 21-year-old Qatari man, argued that the organic, bottom-up, viral nature of Tamim Almajd helped prove the people of Qatar's commitment to the Amir:

When this image first came out, it was done by a Qatari artist and it started circulating all over the country: it was on phone covers, laptops, cars, shops, even vendors started selling packages with the Amir's image on it. It was actually something amazing, because it not only tells a narrative but it's also like a counter-narrative to people who say that the people in Qatar or the citizens of Qatar are against their government, which is not actually true.

The danger of international "media manipulation" was also referenced by Farah, a 19-year-old Kuwaiti woman, who argued for standing up to "bullies like Saudi Arabia" through public display of car decals.

Did thankfulness for or expectation of material benefits play a role in communicating these messages of support? While a couple of Qatari interlocutors mentioned gratefulness to their country for providing them with comfortable lifestyles, they did not dwell on specific benefits, but rather spoke in general terms of blessings, a stable country, and wise leadership. While our interviews with Qataris show little evidence of a calculated pocketbook relationship, a couple of Qataris were forthcoming in their assessments that expatriates displayed the car decals for materialistic reasons rather than as intrinsic demonstrations of nationalism. Rashed, a 31-year-old Qatari man, argued that expatriates placed decals on their cars as pragmatic expressions of thanks for the benefits they received from their work:

I think, because the expats get these benefits, and because they are treated in such a good way in [Qatar], you know with salaries, homes, living, etc., they want to show support as a "thank you for everything you've done, so we are supporting you as well."

This narrative aligns with Koch's (2016) findings about nationalism in Qatar and the UAE, in which she highlights a local regime narrative that assigns to expatriates "a sense of deep gratitude for the many opportunities for personal advancement that the local leadership is said to grant them" (p. 52). But is this the way that expatriates themselves describe their decisions to display the car decals?

Several expatriate interlocutors were candid about their gratefulness for the "good life" in Qatar, as Aseel, a 21-year-old Palestinian man, called it. Jayesh, an Indian college-aged man, admitted that the royal family and the country, in his words, have "given me so much and a comfortable life—even when I go back to India, I don't have a similar lifestyle that we have here." And Salim, a 20-year-old Lebanese man, specifically noted the "free medical support, high salaries compared to outside," along with recent state-led discussions about additional support for expatriates in terms of job priority and expanded residency rights, as reasons to support Qatar.

Yet a focus on the material benefits risks missing the accompanying feelings of loyalty to a country that feels like "home," with Jayesh explaining, "Even when I leave Doha, my first thought is I miss home and I want to go back. And that's what the sticker means for me." Several of our expatriate respondents were born and raised in Qatar, creating deep feelings of belonging despite their noncitizen status. Salim explained that he "grew up on the idea that we love Qatar." "Qatar is my birthplace and will always be my home," stated Ameen, noting that "it feels absolutely amazing to be a part of [the car decals]." For these expatriates, loyalty to their "home" is entwined with, and perhaps inseparable from, the recognition and appreciation of the material benefits that have allowed them to prosper in Qatar, and this sense of communal belonging makes them feel entitled to celebrate nationalism alongside citizens.

Reflections on Nationalism and Qatari-Expatriate Relations

In general, many of our Qatari interlocutors offered a new or renewed sense of solidarity with their country in the wake of the diplomatic crisis; as Faisal put it, "Nationalism has risen through the roof." Ali agreed: "Every day has become a national day since the blockade started." Why? Several Qataris were pleasantly surprised with the wisdom of Qatar's response to the crisis. Others emphasized a strengthened local community, including more support for locally produced goods and more kindness and support for each other. Abdelkarim noted that Qatari nationals have become more unified, stating, "Qatar after the blockade has overcome every type of tribalism that might have existed, and focused on becoming one nation. That is an amazing thing." Rashed also argued, "The stickers symbolize that everyone is hand-in-hand in what's going on. No one is alone anymore, everyone is strong and holding up together."

Does this increased sense of nationalism include the expatriates? Many of our Qatari respondents reflected that their personal feelings about expatriates changed as a result of witnessing their support during the crisis. Several of them reported emotional feelings of "love," "pride," "loyalty," "gratitude," and "happiness" when they experienced the support of expatriates. Tamadur, a 24-year-old Qatari woman, reflected on this shift toward greater acceptance of expatriates by citizens:

I feel like before, and I'm going to be honest, it came down to "Qatar and Qataris." Qatar was Qataris. It was very much like that. I mean, yes, we knew that there were people from other communities in Qatar, but it never felt like one community. And it still doesn't, for sure, but I feel like after the blockade, a lot of people started to realize that it's not just the Qataris, it's all of us, we're all contributing to the betterment and the development of this country—it's definitely not just the Qataris. I feel like there is more acceptance and openness toward other people by the locals.

This expanded sense of community due to the crisis aligns with Sarason's (1974) theory that highly charged emotional events, whether tragedies or celebrations, can create dynamic changes within a given community.

This shift in some Qataris' perceptions was discernible to our expatriate sample, many of whom indicated that they felt nationalism had become more inclusive and that expatriates and Qataris were closer than before. Even Amal, who said that "any expat here is a second-class citizen" and derided Qataris for believing in "fraud logic" if they thought expatriates stayed in Qatar out of loyalty, nevertheless conceded that the crisis "brought Qataris closer to the expats" by "soften[ing] this ice wall that has always existed between [them]." Basit argued that this increased sense of belonging was due to an expanded conception of nationalism. He explained,

The Qatari version of nationalism before the blockade did not include expats. But after the blockade when they saw expats standing with Qatar, and Qataris, and Sheikh Tamim, they've widened the circle and it also includes expats now . . . as they're grateful to all of the expat community for standing with them during a time of need.

Our expatriate interlocutors felt that displaying car decals helped make clear their supportive stance. Fahad drew a contrast between Qatar National Day, which is "the only time you [usually] see car stickers," and the diplomatic crisis, which includes "everyone and everywhere." He continued, "I found the car stickers to be a wonderful thing . . . a show of solidarity that I haven't seen before in Qatar." These "acts of patriotism," Seth agreed, "were much needed for our country. It brought everyone closer."

Sheikh Tamim's UN speech in September 2017, in which he thanked both citizens and residents for their support during the crisis, was referenced by both Qataris and expatriates as a particularly important turning point for the relationship between the two groups. Salim explained his emotional response to this speech:

When Sheikh Tamim spoke in the UN [General Assembly] meeting, he thanked his people for the support they're giving him, both Qatari and residents. He thanked them. Personally, when I heard that sentence, I got goosebumps that day. Because for the first time, the highest rank of the country recognized us. There is finally recognition that we are making a difference, and our support was recognized. . . . I feel like I belong in Qatar, and I think I feel that more now after the blockade.

Qataris responded to their leader's rhetoric as well. As Abdelkarim noted,

He [the Amir] recognized the expats for standing in support with him and in solidarity with his country. I think that's a really good thing . . . because now I can see that my country isn't just benefiting me but it's benefiting people who have been here for years and who have been born in the country and are living in the country.

Although not unanimous, a significant portion of our Qatari and expatriate interlocutors indicate that the shared participation in car decals, coupled with state-led rhetoric and daily acts of solidarity, may have begun a shift toward an increased civic nationalism. By "shar[ing] our celebrations of nationalism," Khaled argued, "this proves that this country includes expats." Nasser agreed, noting that "what unites us . . . is the people. It's the people in the country and the people who share that love, pride, and loyalty. And it's not just Qataris, it's also people from all over the world." Alanoud, a college-aged Qatari woman, explained her mentality shift as follows:

This show of solidarity brought together everyone in Qatar. Not just Qataris, but Lebanese people and Egyptians and Indonesians and Indians and Americans and Filipino people all suddenly became part of the family. I can say that after the blockade I view everyone here who supports Qatar and Sheikh Tamim through their stickers as full "Qatari."

This more inclusive sense of Qatari national community was accompanied by a shift away from the "supranational identity narrative" of the *khalij*, the shared cultural background of the Arabian Peninsula monarchies (Koch, 2019, p. 194). Before the recent diplomatic crisis, a common narrative about this sociocultural "Gulf identity" prevailed in the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (e.g., Al-Zoby & Baskan, 2014). Both Qataris and expatriates noted the "shock" of members of the *khalij* "family" cutting off all relations, as Mona put it. "It was like a brother cutting ties with a brother," added Ameen. Some interlocutors questioned whether relations would ever return to normal among the countries of the *khalij*. As Abdelkarim explained,

As *khalij* we have something we call *al-bayt al-khalij* [the Gulf house] because we are all related to one another, and I have a lot of relatives in the UAE, as well as some in-laws in Bahrain. It became a pain trying to communicate with them. Some of them even turned against us. Some of them don't even care. So, where is the Gulf house now?

Here we see how political crisis can cause rupture as well as belonging, as the imagined *khalij* community becomes less salient to the Qatari nationalist narrative than one of civic inclusion between citizens and expatriates. Our evidence highlights what Koch (2019) calls "the shifting space of nationalist narratives and citizen/noncitizen relations" (p. 197) that is mediated by spectacles of nationalism in the public streets of the Gulf, and it points toward the dynamic nature of a national sense of community, especially in times of crisis. Rather than assuming that national narratives or imagined communities are static, our analysis suggests that particular events—such as the ongoing diplomatic crisis—have the power to shift the discourse of belonging across different scales and contexts. It also reminds us that, as the diplomatic crisis fades into the background or heads toward resolution, the imagined community of Qatar may shift yet again.

Conclusion

Our sample of images and interviews is a targeted exploration of nationalism in Qatar, and we must take care not to generalize from a nonrepresentative sample. Nevertheless, we have captured a diversity of Qatari and expatriate viewpoints, expressed through visual, textual, and oral communication, about the car decals and their relationship to shifting ideas of nationalism and belonging.

In our semiotic analysis, our sample of decals focused on the Amir and specific Qatari imagery. Much of the text is written in poetic forms of Arabic, often in Qatari dialect, that indicate the origin and audience to be Qatari-centric. If that were the only pattern, we would not have much visual evidence of a larger shift in the national narrative. But if the images of the Amir in car decals could be read as signs of Qatari solidarity and national belonging, the significant number of decals with symbols of other nations could likewise be read as signs of expatriate solidarity with Qataris. Ultimately, the number of images depicting non-Qatari symbols of nationhood indicates that the political discourse of communal belonging may have shifted on the ground in Qatar.

Indeed, the qualitative interviews give us a sense of how the public display of car decals, a performative ritual shared by citizens and residents, may have begun a reconsideration of belonging in Qatar. For many of our expatriate and Qatari interlocutors, our interviews documented a sense of shifting inclusivity. These findings, although exploratory, are mirrored by governmental actions that may indicate a new relationship between Qataris and expatriates. Since the beginning of the crisis, the Qatari government has engaged in extensive domestic policy shifts that directly impact—and improve—life for its expatriate populations, including stronger labor protections; increased business and investment opportunities for foreigners; and a new permanent residency law that encompasses long-term expatriates (Mitchell, 2018). Next up is the anticipated opening, in March 2019, of the new national museum, which is rumored to highlight the contributions of expatriates to the country's development (Mitchell & Curtis, 2018). It will be equally important to see how, or whether, Qatar's relationships with its *khalijī* neighbors, especially Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, will be portrayed in this museum as well.

With the ongoing rupture of social, economic, and political ties, we are witnessing the emergence of new spaces and new narratives. To what extent can citizens and residents of Qatar use this moment of fluidity to raise their political efficacy and encourage more inclusive policies? Al-Zoby and Baskan (2014) describe several occurrences in which substantive policy changes started from the bottom up, in areas such as education in Qatar and dressing modestly in the UAE. Our analysis points to a revised framing of nationalism, one that may include residents in the exclusive sphere of citizenship. Whether this remains a fleeting oral narrative in response to a contingent political and emotional environment or a substantive narrative subject to enactment remains to be seen.

The diplomatic crisis, as of this writing, continues, and the domestic narrative of this crisis unfolds along with it. Yet our research here suggests that the shared participation of both citizens and residents in this public display of nationalism may have made a deep impact on the perception of belonging in Qatar, transforming an ethnic feeling of *khalijī* identity into a sense of civic community that can include both Qataris and expatriates.

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