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Milk Nationalism: Branding Dairy and the State in the Arabian Peninsula

1 Introduction

Dairy products seemed to gain a new political significance in the Arabian Peninsula in June 2017. Qatar was suddenly placed under an air, land, and sea embargo by its Gulf neighbours – locally referred to as a “blockade” – that temporarily disrupted the country’s food supply chain. While all foodstuffs were affected, residents in Qatar were especially concerned with their access to dairy products. The Middle East’s two major dairy companies – Almarai and Al Dahra – hail from Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively. And the Saudi and Emirati governments were leading the blockade. In the wake of the 2017 embargo news, dairy acquired a new importance for how people understood Qatar’s sovereignty and the wellbeing of the nation.

What followed was a unique expression of “milk nationalism” that spurred the development of a new Qatari dairy brand, Baladna. With Qatari government support, the company was able to import thousands of cows from abroad, as well as new high-tech milking machinery, to begin producing Qatar’s own milk in short order. The embargo further entrenched the nationalist branding of Saudi and Emirati dairy companies Almarai and Al Dahra, which were already major agribusiness conglomerates with a deep geopolitical reach into food, agriculture, shipping, storage, and transportation sectors across the MENA region and beyond.¹ Watching the embargo unfold on the other end of the Arabian Peninsula, leaders in Oman understood that they, too, were susceptible to a crisis such as Qatar was experiencing, and they similarly applied anxious narratives about food sovereignty and milk nationalism in promoting their own dairy projects.

This chapter asks why branding national dairy companies has been so important in these four Gulf Arab states and why dairy is accorded special attention in the broader arena of food geopolitics in the region. I employ the lens of critical geopolitics to analyse the history and narrative construction of milk nationalism in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman. Critical geopolitics is a leading framework in contemporary political geography that employs discourse analysis to interrogate geographic imaginaries, concepts, and practices. It recognises “the function-

1 Cf. Hanieh, 2018.

ing of geographical knowledge not as an innocent body of knowledge and learning but an ensemble of technologies of power concerned with the governmental production and management of territorial space.”² In this case, I examine state and corporate histories and texts to explain how milk nationalism circulates as a branding discourse in the Gulf countries and how it both draws upon and builds contemporary understandings of the state and sovereignty.

2 Food Nationalism and State Branding

The territorial state – a political entity exercising sovereignty over a defined space – is one of the most important political geographic concepts defining our contemporary world.³ The sheer diversity of practices that produce states can be overwhelming, but scholars who examine the “state effect” – as the practice-centred approach to theorising the state can be defined – consistently point to nationalism as an especially important discursive pillar of state-making.⁴ Indeed, in most of the academic literature, the idea of branding a state is not referred to as “state branding” but “nation branding.”⁵ There has always been slippage between the concepts of “state” and “nation,” but in nearly all case studies of nation branding, as well as in its casual usage, the speaker is discussing a branding project assigned to a territorial state.

Nationalism is key to processes of state-making because its core idea – that the “nation” is a discretely defined community – is typically territorialised. That is, the nation is typically imagined to have a particular homeland or a spatial extent where it must be able to exercise supreme control over politics, social life, ideas, material infrastructures, and people themselves. The territory to which a nation is imagined to “belong” is politicised in many ways, but it is most often understood to be a kind of lifeblood for the community. Without the land and the sustenance it offers, the people are imagined to be lost. Assigning territory this important place in the biological reproduction of the nation is an important part of many nationalisms. Biological themes are common to other elements of nationalist imagery specific to the human landscape, too, typically reflecting prescriptive thinking about how the community should reproduce itself through marriage, sex, birth and dying, combat and sacrifice, and most relevant for this chapter – access to food and life essentials.

2 Ó Tuathail, 1996: 7.

3 Cf. Kuus and Agnew, 2008; Moisió et al., 2020.

4 See Anderson, 1983; Billig, 1995; Mitchell, 1999; Painter, 2006; Paasi, 2020.

5 Cf. Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2012; Saunders, 2017; Volčič and Andrejevic, 2011.

“Food nationalism” refers to the wide range of nationalist storylines that are applied in some way to food. Scholars have examined food nationalism in a range of contexts, including by researching specific nationalist food brands, dishes that are said to be distinctive to the nation, national ways of relating to food in the home or community, broader issues of access to food and its production, and more.⁶ Another important theme in understanding food nationalism pertains to the geopolitics of food, where nationalist discourses are expressed through the ideas of “food sovereignty” or “food security.”⁷ Food is an important issue everywhere in the world, but in the MENA region, many leaders assign food a special political significance because their national homelands are predominantly desert.⁸ Limited access to water combined with arid soils make large-scale agricultural production a challenge for many countries in the Middle East – including the Arabian Peninsula.

Limited food access may be seen as a national challenge, but the opposite – bountiful food for the nation – can be seen as a key nationalist victory for any leader who can successfully demonstrate the ability to provide ample sustenance for the people. It is at this intersection of these ideas about food, the nation, and leadership that we can begin to see how food nationalism fits in the contemporary practices of branding the Gulf state. Food access was a major concern for Gulf leaders prior to the discovery of oil, after which it was easier to secure imports. The region’s food situation changed quite dramatically between the 1930s and the 1970s, as many leaders in the Arabian Peninsula staked their legitimacy on their ability to secure food, typically through strategic alliances with outside powers like the United States and the British Empire.⁹ New Gulf relations with these powers led to a number of local agricultural projects, which started to change their food landscapes. However, following the British withdrawal from the region, its re-configured political geographies combined with the intensive globalisation of food supply chains means that large-scale food imports became the norm by the 1980s.

Yet the early experiments with local dairy farming in Saudi Arabia and the UAE seemed to have a special allure. Where other food ventures failed or lost funding, dairy held fast. Why? As this chapter details, different political contexts across the Arabian Peninsula shaped local relationships with dairy production and the eventual national branding of milk. These local histories are important, but they

6 Cf. Caldwell, 2002; DeSoucey, 2010; Goff, 2005; Ichijo and Ranta, 2016; Ichijo, Johannes and Ranta, 2019; Klumbyté, 2010.

7 Cf. Atkins and Bowler, 2001; Conversi, 2016; Hopma and Woods, 2014; Trauger, 2015.

8 Cf. Al-Ansari, 2018; Babar and Mirgani, 2014; ECSSR, 2013; Elmi, 2017; Harrigan, 2014; Joseph, 2018; Joseph and Howarth, 2015; Koch, 2021a, 2021b; Lippman, 2010; Monroe, 2020; Woertz, 2013, 2018.

9 See Bowen-Jones and Dutton, 1983; Jones, 2010; Koch, 2021a; Woertz, 2013.

should also be understood within a broader global history of equating milk with modernity – and its special power to promote national thriving, not just surviving.¹⁰ Although the focus of this chapter is on cow's milk, some scholars have also examined these nationalist celebrations of milk with reference to the milk of horses, camels, or sheep.¹¹ Indeed, for many outside observers who know the significance of camels in Gulf society, it can seem surprising that cow milk should be the centre of Gulf milk nationalism. To understand this, we need to examine the history of how dairy production began and, with it, the dual branding of dairy and the state in the Arabian Peninsula.

3 Milk Nationalism in Four Gulf Countries

3.1 Saudi Arabia

The first efforts to develop commercial-scale dairy farming in the Arabian Peninsula can be traced to the agricultural developments in Saudi Arabia's Al Kharj district, just south of Riyadh, in the 1950s. Al Kharj was a region famous for its limestone sinkholes, which offered ready access to the area's underground aquifers. In 1942, the American geologist and Saudi royal advisor Karl S. Twitchell headed the United States' Agricultural Mission in Saudi Arabia – a trek across the country to survey its water and agricultural landscape. Twitchell had already spent time in the area and knew that the Saudi King Ibn Saud wanted American support to develop it as a large-scale farm. Aramco (the Arabian American Oil Company, which later became Saudi Aramco) had already been managing the Al Kharj farming operations, but Twitchell secured US government funding to send a team of Arizona farmers to take over operations in 1944. The team left in 1946 and the farm reverted to Aramco control.

The Arizona team, headed by David Rogers, made its mark in Al Kharj, especially by expanding the production of alfalfa, which was then heralded as an ideal feed for milk cows in Arizona. But the initial spark to develop a dairy farm in Al Kharj came only after Ibn Saud's son, then-Crown Prince Saud, visited Rogers on an agricultural tour in Arizona in 1947. Saud was completely enchanted by the Arizona cattle industry and the dairy farms he visited there. Not long afterward, he started pushing Aramco to build him his own "Grade A Dairy" at Al Kharj. The

¹⁰ See Atkins, 2010; Clay and Yurco, 2020; DuPuis, 2002; Sinno, 2020; Smith-Howard, 2014; Valenze, 2011; Wiley, 2011, 2014.

¹¹ Cf. Alhadrami, 2002; Goff, 2005; McGuire, 2017.

company eventually acquiesced and put the Texas farmer Sam Logan in charge of the project. Logan imported the necessary equipment and a range of cattle breeds from the US, and the cows were fed with the region's now-plentiful alfalfa supply.¹²

The dairy was an instant success and Logan was soon at work building two more in the region – one for the Saudi Finance Minister, Sheikh Abdallah Sulaiman, who had been championing the Al Kharj initiatives since the 1930s, and one for Saud's son Prince Abdullah bin Saud. The early Al Kharj dairy farms not only showed that local dairy production was possible, but also that royal family members and well-connected elites could stand to reap significant profits by securing (variably configured) state subsidies for their agricultural projects – which included privileged access to land and water in exchange for milk. All of this was justified in the name of “food security,” although the food and milk itself primarily went to feed the vast royal family networks in Riyadh. Nonetheless, as Sulaiman and other later agricultural elites learned at this time, the early scripts of milk nationalism served them well in securing state benefits, regardless of who was actually drinking that milk.

The royal Al Kharj farms were always described as being an exemplar that could be scaled up across the entire country, though its desert farming vision stayed relatively confined to the region until a new golden age of agricultural investments in Saudi Arabia began in the 1970s. Following the world food crisis of 1972–75 and the 1973 oil crisis, when US President Richard Nixon threatened to embargo Gulf food supplies, “food security” was suddenly charged with new political and nationalist significance in the Arabian Peninsula. Actors in different political and economic sectors used the food security narrative to pursue their interests, but it was especially powerful for large farmers seeking government subsidies in the wake of the dual 1970s crises. The scale of subsidies that Gulf governments accorded to food production exploded thereafter, especially in Saudi Arabia.¹³

Almarai, headquartered in Al Kharj and now the largest dairy company in the Middle East, was one of the early beneficiaries of these subsidies. Almarai was founded in 1977 by Prince Sultan bin Mohammed bin Saud Al-Kabeer (who remains with the company as the chairman of its board) with the support of two Irish brothers. Like many other food products, “milk has no single brand or logo to support its marketing. While there may be recognition of multinational corporate names such as Nestlé most fluid milk is consumed from local processors with

12 For a fuller account and reference to the archival records on these developments, see Koch, 2021a.

13 Cf. Bowen-Jones and Dutton, 1983; Elhadj, 2004; Gerlach, 2015; Nowshirvani, 1987; Lambert and Bin Hashim, 2017; Wallenstein, 1976; Woertz, 2013.

indigenous brands.”¹⁴ That said, Almarai has developed a strong association between its brand and milk products. In doing this branding work, the advertisements also brand the nation. Often this works through implicit references to nationalist themes, such as in Fig. 1, which emphasise, in one advert, milk’s ability to strengthen the individual’s body by transforming the cow product into human muscle and, in the other, to unite a wholesome family in Gulf national dress. Together these images are vague enough to apply to any Gulf context, but bolster the ideas of biological health that underpin all nationalist narratives in the region.



Fig. 1: Two Almarai advertisements: “Make yourself stronger” (left) and “The flavour of authenticity and quality” (right)

Sources: Boles, 2020; Almarai, 2018.

While consumers in Saudi Arabia and regionally largely imagine Almarai as a milk company, it has actually expanded into additional products like juice, baked goods, and infant formula, and it now manages a massive global logistics network for the distribution of food, grain, and more.¹⁵ Almarai’s spectacular growth is never recognised in the media or its own public relations as the result of equally spectacular governmental subsidies. Nor is it acknowledged that the state-controlled sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), now owns significant shares in the company and exerts considerable influence on its direction. Rather, Almarai is celebrated as a company committed to Saudi national ideals, modernisation, and

¹⁴ Wiley, 2011: 12.

¹⁵ Cf. Fabbe et al., 2018; Hanieh, 2018: 127–128; Lambert and Bin Hashim, 2017.

its “painstaking dedication to quality.”¹⁶ This dynamic corporate configuration reflects a significant transformation of Saudi elites’ effort to brand the state as a place burdened with food security concerns. This in turn consolidates the idea of a freestanding Saudi state acting to protect its sovereignty, but simultaneously justifies Almarai’s spirited efforts to deepen their control of global agro-commodity circuits including agricultural inputs, storage, processing, trade, and distribution.

The food security discourse, Adam Hanieh explains, has thus “validated state-led support of the largest capital groups involved in agribusiness activities, helping gird their internationalisation through regional and international agro-circuits, and simultaneously reinforcing their control over domestic agricultural production and distribution.”¹⁷ These transnational flows of milk, food, and other agricultural goods all work to bolster the Saudi state, insofar as the “agro-circuits” Hanieh describes can become an important means of exerting influence beyond the state’s borders – whether through the ownership of land and serving as an important employer and tax-generator in other countries, or by controlling huge shares of other countries’ food markets. The seemingly wholesome milk nationalism celebrated by Almarai is in fact enlisted in a broader geopolitical field, whereby its deepening control of food supply chains extends well beyond Saudi borders. This was felt intensely in Qatar in 2017, as we will see later in the chapter.

3.2 The United Arab Emirates

The UAE’s first experience with locally producing cow milk was also tied to a colonial model farm project – in this case the British Digdagger Agricultural Trials Station in the northern emirate of Ras al-Khaimah. Colonial administrators opened Digdagger in 1955, but it was not until 1969 that the farm manager Robert McKay first tried his luck with a milk cow experiment. That year he received a herd of 28 Friesian dairy cows from the United Kingdom, which would go on to produce approximately 170–265 litres of milk a day.¹⁸ The fact that the cows not only survived the summer heat, but actually produced milk at all was deemed a feat. These were European-bred animals with different climate tolerance, but unlike the handful of Brahman cows imported from India that one might have previously seen in the Gulf, they were milk-producing specialists. The Digdagger staff provided extra water for the cows and, to cool them on demand, they developed an early

¹⁶ Rasooldeen, 2012. See also National Geographic, 2012.

¹⁷ Hanieh, 2018: 118.

¹⁸ Cf. MacLean, 2017: 97.

misting technology – something that would later become standard in Gulf dairy facilities. Digdagga-branded milk was soon stocked in the groceries stores across the UAE, and the cows were treated as celebrities.¹⁹

The cows provided a convenient nationalist story that they, like the Emirati people themselves, could not just survive but thrive in the Arabian desert's harsh climate. The British managers left Digdagga in early 1972, shortly after the UAE's independence, but the cows remained and the dairy operations were expanded. Though Digdagga now has over 1,200 Holstein Friesians producing milk, the brand remains quite small. Rather, this early experiment with dairy was more of a proof-of-concept for Al Dahra, which is today the most influential dairy company in the UAE. The company was founded only in 1995, but it controls a significant share of the Emirati milk market and exports regionally. Like Digdagga Dairy, Al Dahra's 3,200-cow herd in the UAE consists entirely of Holsteins.²⁰

Unlike Digdagga's limited corporate profile, Al Dahra's trajectory has closely tracked with the Saudi Almarai model – meaning that milk and dairy farms are an important part of its brand image, but that it is really a much broader agro-commodity conglomerate. Like Almarai, it has a sprawling network of subsidiaries across the globe, reaching into virtually every part of the food supply chain. For example, in addition to a sprawling network of trade, processing, and logistics holdings, Al Dahra subsidiaries own over 160,000 hectares of farmland in many countries in Africa, North America, Asia, and Europe. Analogously to Almarai and Saudi Arabia, Al Dahra is firmly under the control of one of the UAE's diverse sovereign wealth funds. In May 2020, Abu Dhabi Developmental Holding Company (ADQ) agreed to acquire a 50 per cent stake in Al Dahra.²¹

ADQ is a large holding company established in 2018 that is owned by the government of Abu Dhabi. Board Chairman is Sheikh Tahnoon Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the country's current National Security Advisor and son of the UAE's "founding father" Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. ADQ's primary objective is to fulfil the Abu Dhabi development agenda, including "accelerating the transformation of the emirate into a globally competitive and knowledge-based economy."²² Again like Almarai and the Saudi PIF, "food security" figures prominently in how ADQ narrates its investment in Al Dahra. When the 2020 deal was announced, its CEO explained: "Al Dahra will complement our existing efforts to extend ADQ's reach in food production and distribution. With our investment, Al Dahra will be well posi-

¹⁹ Cf. Zacharias, 2013. On the water demands made by Gulf dairies, see Shadbolt, 2013.

²⁰ Cf. Al Dahra, 2021. According to the company's website, the bulk of its dairy is now produced in Serbia, where it has approximately 16,000 cows in seven different farms.

²¹ Cf. ADQ, 2021.

²² Khaleej Times, 2020.

tioned to further expand its reach and footprint while enabling Abu Dhabi to reach its goals of continuing to diversify its food sources and growing into a regional food hub.”²³

Here again, we see the nationalist idea of protecting the country’s food supply, which is actually about a larger effort to become a global player in the “agro-circuits” that enable the UAE to exert influence beyond the state’s borders. Through the fusion of Gulf state funding and corporate ownership structures, the early version of Holstein milk nationalism has been amplified into something much larger than milk. And yet, milk’s wholesome image has facilitated government elites’ branding of the Gulf state not as an actor seeking to expand its geopolitical influence overseas, but, in a simpler story, as a benevolent authority seeking to strengthen the national body and provide for its food needs. Together with the Saudi variant, Emirati milk nationalism was experienced in Qatar in 2017 not as a benevolent force, but as a particularly vengeful one.

3.3 Qatar

As noted at the outset of this chapter, Qatar was suddenly placed under an air, land, and sea embargo in June 2017.²⁴ When the news broke, residents rushed to Qatar’s grocery stores to stock up on food. They were keenly aware that the country imported nearly all of its food, and especially from the UAE. In response, the Qatari government and its sovereign wealth fund’s subsidiary Hassad Food worked around the clock with partners in Iran and Turkey, which were not participating in the embargo, to re-source products and establish new distribution and logistics networks.²⁵ Milk products were especially prominent in the social media and everyday conversations that rippled out from the panic-buying episode and even after the new supply chains were mostly normalised, milk was a flashpoint. The embargo was spearheaded by Saudi and Emirati leaders – those countries with the largest share of Qatar’s dairy market.

²³ Quoted in Khaleej Times, 2020.

²⁴ A detailed discussion of the crisis is outside the scope of this paper, but relations among the Gulf states have been unsteady for years. The embargo of Qatar was initially justified after a hack of Qatari government sites planted content that Saudi and Emirati leaders found inflammatory, but the embargo leaders in those countries quickly expanded their complaints about Qatar’s regional policies and actions. For a general introduction to the crisis, see Bianco and Stansfield, 2018; Miller, 2018.

²⁵ Cf. Sergie and Wilkin, 2017. For Hassad Food’s narration of this process, see HSSD, 2018.

Although grocery stores in the country had long stocked products from countries that were not participating in the embargo, consumers were annoyed with the quality and durability of the dairy products from other countries. During my fieldwork in Qatar in 2019, for example, many Doha residents told me that substitute Turkish milk products were frequently rotten or of poor quality. When I pointed out that Qatari supermarkets had always carried Turkish dairy products and there were never problems before, none of my interlocutors could explain what led to the quality problem. Whether exaggerated or not, these anecdotes built what had come to be a dominant version of Qatar's newly formed milk nationalism. In this narrative, the Turkish help in the wake of the embargo was a kind gesture, but not a sustainable solution to Qatar's food security issue. What the country needed was milk independence. And this was to come from one place: Baladna Farms.

Like Almarai in Saudi Arabia and Al Dahra in the UAE, Baladna is now imaged as *the* Qatari national milk brand. In the wake of the embargo, the country faced numerous food-related challenges that were arguably more significant than accessing milk. Yet milk was symbolically important and the dairy company was held up as the most prominent icon for the country's effort to retake its sovereignty by retaking its ability to provide its population with locally produced dairy.²⁶ Baladna, which means "our country" in Arabic, began in 2014 as a small sheep and goat farm. It was quickly transformed into a major dairy operation in 2017, when Qatar Airways flew in nearly 5,000 Holstein milk cows from Europe and North America.²⁷ The company quickly became a nationalist symbol of the Qatari "defensive" response to the Saudi and Emirati "offensive," in which those governments tried to use their monopoly of the Gulf dairy markets as a geopolitical weapon.

But as Baladna's operations chief John Dore defiantly quipped: "The people that have shot themselves in the foot are the Saudis. If the blockade was lifted, there is so much pro-Qatar sentiment and nationalist pride that the people will buy Qatar milk, not Saudi. (...) If we can make enough milk, the people in Qatar will buy it."²⁸ That is, if there was no milk nationalism in Qatar before the embargo began, there was an intense new form of it thereafter. Indeed, many Qatar residents I spoke with in 2019 – citizens and non-citizens alike – spoke of Baladna with deep reverence. For them, it was an exemplar of national perseverance and the government's ability to overcome the audacious challenges posed to their basic right to food.

²⁶ Cf. Koch, 2021b.

²⁷ Cf. The Economist, 2018; Sergie, 2017.

²⁸ Quoted in Wintour, 2017.

This nationalist storyline is vividly illustrated at the farm itself, just north of Doha, which has been transformed into a kind of dairy theme park. Inside the main building, visitors can watch the cows being milked by machines and can learn the site's history through a brief introductory film. In it, dramatic news clips announce the embargo and then the bold narrator's voice tells the Baladna story, layered over images of the cows being imported and the farm being developed: "Our vision is to become a pillar of national self-sufficiency to support building an independent nation – a nation where its goodness comes from its own produce. For 'Made in Qatar' to be universally recognized for quality products."²⁹ The 4:45-minute video runs on loop in the visitor centre, echoing through the halls and lending a sombre sense of nationalist pride both in the milk being mechanically sucked from the cows in the adjacent milking gallery, and in the country of Qatar more broadly.

The story about how Baladna milk can promote positive associations with "Made in Qatar" is simultaneously one of branding the milk and the country. The milk and all other corporate materials carry a symbol that references the Qatari national flag with the slogan in English and Arabic, "Proudly made in Qatar" (Fig. 2). In this way, we see the corporate production of nationalism that is so common in the Gulf countries.³⁰ But the famous "cowlift" that enabled Baladna's rapid shift to commercial-scale dairy production was also an act of state-making that both drew upon and further entrenched state institutions in Qatar. It was only possible with strong government support, both directly and indirectly through the parastatal Qatar Airways and Hassad Food, the agriculture-focused subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority. The country's quick resolution of the supply chain problems was also heralded as a success of longer-term government planning that had begun with the introduction of the Qatar National Food Security Programme (QNFSP) in 2008.³¹

QNFSP is now defunct, but it was established after the global food crisis of around 2006–2008 as a taskforce under the Office of the Heir Apparent (then Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the current Emir) with a goal of developing a more coherent governmental approach to (potential) supply disruptions. One of the QNFSP's objectives was to diversify Qatar's supply routes, which was reflected in the 2010 start of construction on a new deep-water port facility that allowed

²⁹ English translations from Arabic were included as subtitles. A more detailed discussion of this video and the farm can be found in Koch, 2021b. The full video clip is available at the author's website with the password "national" at: <http://nataliekoeh.com/gndp/>.

³⁰ Cf. Koch, 2020.

³¹ Cf. Al-Ali, 2017; Al-Ansari, 2018; Lambert and Bin Hashim, 2017; Miniaoui, Irungu, and Kaitibie, 2018.

larger ships to dock, where previously the country depended on redistribution chains via the UAE's Jebel Ali port. The new Hamad port was also designed to accommodate livestock and bulk grain imports, as well as grain storage.³² Opened in September 2017, just three months after the embargo began, it now can presumably host as many dairy cows as the country's new milk nationalism demands. The port can also send Qatari milk overseas – as it has been doing since 2019.³³



Fig. 2: Baladna milk bottle with the “Proudly made in Qatar” logo on the bottom left
Photo: Natalie Koch, 2019.

3.4 Oman

The nationalist spectacle of Baladna also had an effect elsewhere in the region. In Oman in particular, many people watched with a degree of foreboding as Qatar's government and people navigated the challenges of the embargo. In fact, the Omani government had already begun planning for such an eventuality through its own National Food Security initiative, akin to the QNFSP. This included the development of Mazoon Dairy as the “flagship dairy company” of the initiative, with

³² Cf. Koch, 2020; Siegel, 2013; Smith, 2019.

³³ Cf. Peninsula, 2019.

a stated objective of improving “self-sufficiency in dairy production in the Sultanate of Oman.”³⁴ It was incorporated in January 2015, but construction of the facilities stalled – beginning only in October 2017, a few months after the embargo was imposed on Qatar. Starting with 3,400 Holstein milk cows and a goal to expand the herd to 25,000 by 2026, Mazoon’s distribution finally began in October 2019.³⁵

As in the other Gulf countries, Omani milk nationalism has been heavily supported by state funding and other supports. In the case of Mazoon, this has included not only a close relationship with the National Food Security initiative, but also backing from government pension and investment funds and the Oman Food Investment Company (OFIC) – a state-owned-enterprise designed to “promote Oman’s food security.”³⁶ OFIC also controls a second dairy operation, the Al Morooj Dairy Company, but this is essentially just a milk collection project – it involves collecting milk from small farmers in the Dhofar region to process and sell through a centralised facility.³⁷ Because it involves a full-fledged, commercial-scale dairy farm, Mazoon is the posterchild of the celebratory milk nationalism in Oman today. Mazoon’s diffuse web of government support can also be seen in its strategic partnership with Sultan Qaboos University (a state-sponsored institution) to use its facilities for R&D, recipes, and packaging.³⁸ The terms of this partnership are somewhat unclear, but this is notable because the Sultan Qaboos University’s College of Agriculture has long sold its own milk products on campus. As Fig. 3 illustrates, the packaging is very simple but prominently features an Omani national emblem.

The nationalist ideas of food sovereignty and food security figure prominently in the scripting of Oman’s recent dairy projects, as does the idea that the national body can be strengthened by increasing its consumption of milk. But even more than in the other Gulf countries, nationalisation of the workforce, “Omanisation,” is especially prominent in the celebration of Mazoon’s contribution to the country’s development. According to the company’s website, “The project opens wide opportunities in the employment market for Oman. The Project is expected to reach around 90% Omanisation in 10 years. It would employ approximately 2300 staff in Year 10 and will also provide indirect employment through forwarding and backward linkage effects of the project.”³⁹ In addition to its own rhetoric, Mazoon is held up in other media outlets as an exemplar of how large state invest-

³⁴ Mazoon Dairy, 2021.

³⁵ Cf. FPT, 2018.

³⁶ FPT, 2018.

³⁷ Cf. Oman Food, 2021.

³⁸ Cf. FPT, 2018; Oman Food, 2021.

³⁹ Mazoon Dairy, 2021.



Fig. 3: Sultan Qaboos University's College of Agriculture-produced milk, with an Omani state seal as the logo

Photos: Natalie Koch, 2020.

ments in the corporate sector (here commercial agriculture) can create jobs for Omanis. The workforce nationalisation agenda is found across the Arabian Peninsula, but the Mazoon case is exemplary of the polysemic nature of milk nationalism – the national branding of dairy can be applied to any range of state agendas that legitimise its power. Domestic milk production thus helps to show that the Omani state is concerned about the welfare of its people on many levels, including their longer-term job prospects. That is, from the Omani perspective, branding the milk as a force for good is equally about branding the state as a force for good.

4 Conclusion

The irony of the 2017–2021 regional embargo of Qatar was that it created an opening for new regional competitors to Saudi and Emirati dairy companies, which had previously dominated Gulf markets in the last decade. It provoked a new expression of milk nationalism in Qatar, which seemed to politicise milk in a new way. Yet, milk was already immensely political in the Gulf region. And milk has a long history of being associated with ideals of modernity, national prosperity,

and wellbeing around the world.⁴⁰ In this respect, the Arabian Peninsula is no exception to a much broader global pattern. Yet the milk nationalism in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Oman has resulted in significant state support being directed to the dairy industries, in a way that stands apart from elsewhere in the world.

The heavy involvement of sovereign wealth funds in each country's leading dairy brands is indicative of the fuzzy relationship between state and non-state enterprises in the Gulf region. Their support for dairy has arisen from the funds' involvement in government-defined food security agendas, which reflects the fact that milk has become an important symbol in the effort to demonstrate concrete steps toward food independence. Of course, simply producing dairy locally does not free the Arabian Peninsula from its overwhelming dependence on food imports. But by branding the dairies as national, they can circulate as important icons that the governments can then use to brand the state. As a branding discourse, milk nationalism both draws upon and builds contemporary understandings of the state in the Gulf countries – as independent, benevolent, and wholesome. The credibility of this nationalist storyline, just like any branding effort, cannot be objectively assessed but rests with the eye (or tastebuds) of the beholder.

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⁴⁰ Cf. DuPuis, 2002; Valenze, 2011; Wiley, 2011, 2014.

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