

# CONFLICT & DISPUTE RESOLUTION

## Qatar Living on National Day

Qatar celebrates its National Day on December 18 to commemorate the unification of the area's disparate tribes into a single, Qatari people by Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani on that date in 1878. Every year since Qatar National Day was established as a public holiday in 2007, its celebrations have grown more and more elaborate.

On this day—and often during the weeks building up to it—all major roads in Doha, Qatar's capital city, grind to a near halt. Ornately decorated SUVs unfurl giant Qatar flags in their wake, while people sit on their hoods of their cars or stand through their windows waving, as all traffic crawls down the streets in a parade-like atmosphere. It is also not uncommon for raucous crowds to mill about cheering and spraying the stalled vehicles with silly string. While some view these traffic jams as harmless fun, others find them extremely annoying.

The following is a chronology of events that took place on and following the 2009 Qatar National Day celebrations.

### 18 December, 2009 (Qatar National Day)

Lisa Clayton is an American expat who teaches at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCU-Q). For eleven years she has lived in Qatar, where she converted to Islam and married a Khaleeji. On the evening of Qatar National Day, she posts a sarcastic note on her Facebook page entitled "Shame on Qatari National Day" about the festivities:

It is Qatar National Day and what should be a time of celebration and pride, presented this country and Qataris in a terrible light of lawlessness, arrogance and disrespect for others, as well as property. Young Qatari boys were completely blocking traffic; spraying expat's cars with shaving cream and silly string; blasting their music so loud you couldn't even carry on a conversation in your own car with the windows rolled up; but no problem because only Qataris matter on Qatar National Day.

They were riding on the roofs of their cars, seated on the windows and even on the front windshield blocking the driver's view; but no problem because life is cheap in Qatar.

Qatari boys in their Landcruisers were waving huge flags that blocked visibility and revving up their engines so high the gas fumes exploded from the tailpipe, hence destroying their engines and polluting the air; but no problem because they can just buy a new one and who cares if they pollute the air when they spend their lives in an air conditioned bubble.

Qatari youth were roaming the streets with traditional swords, stopping cars and traffic while they danced in the middle of the streets, but no problem because all that matters to anyone is showing off on Qatari National Day.

One guy was even driving his car by standing on the door where the window was open with his left foot and steering with his right foot, while his buddy in the passenger seat reached across and operated the gas and break pedals. So what if they endanger their own life or the lives of others? As long as they show off for QATAR NATIONAL DAY!!!!

It took an ambulance 20 minutes to get through a single round-about with their lights flashing and sirens blasting, because these Qatari boys were so intent on showing off they blocked all traffic and couldn't hear the sirens with their music blasting. No problem if anyone died because the ambulance couldn't get to them; after all, it's more important to have a HUGE display for Qatar National Day!

One bedu<sup>1</sup> kid directed his friends who were on a motorcycle to try to drive between my friend's car and the one in front of her even though clearly there was not enough room to fit, and he hit her car. Then these arrogant creeps essentially told her to go to hell and drove off while the kid directing them disappeared in the crowd. No problem for my friend's car, right?

One idiot was running around in an Osama bin Laden mask running up to expatriates in their car and trying to scare them.

And there were NO POLICE anywhere in sight on the entire trip from Qatar Decoration round-about to West Bay. No signs of organization by the authorities to control the huge crowds and the chaos in the streets.

Ya Qatar, you really did yourself proud today. . . . :(((

Only those "friended" by Clayton on Facebook can see this and know that Clayton wrote it. Clayton then posts this note pseudonymously on Qatar Living, Qatar's most notable English-language online forum. It is publicly available to anyone visiting Qatar Living, though it does not reveal the identity of its author.

### 19 December

Several VCU-Q students and alumnae read the original post on Facebook and are incensed. They mass-SMS many Qataris, identifying Clayton as the author of the identical post on Qatar Living both by her name and her university. They encourage other Qataris to post responses on Qatar Living. Some representative comments include:

Yet another thread bashing Qatar.

QatarLiving.com should be changed to IHateQatar.com what with all the Qatar hate.

It's about time half of you self-righteous idiots get off your high horse and realize that if life here isn't doing it for you you can just pay for your plane ticket back home. I assure you you won't be missed.

Most of the comments here are incredibly disrespectful, "savages" really? It's like being in the 1800's.

And yet they all sound so ignorant and bitter which amuses me to no end.

If you really cared about Qatar and its development, you'd be offering helpful critique not mindless complaints.

Sorry to interrupt,

But I was only wondering why are you still living in Qatar if you don't like it... only wondering..

Hmm . . .

Ur a racist and offensive person, really. If u dont like that, get out of Qatar. Our country is better off without racist people like u.

WE ARE PROUD, OKAY!!!!

LIKE IT OR NOT, WE DONT GIVE A [explicative deleted]!!!!

SO SHUT UP OR LEAVE

YOU ARE ALL THE TRASH THAT ARE RUINING OUR COUNTRY

GAVE US MORE TRAFFIC YET COMPILING ABOUT IT!!!!!!!

NOTHING IS LAWLESS BUT YOU !!!!!

"SHAME" YOU Are the shame, PIGS!!!!

<sup>1</sup> This word "bedu" is used on Clayton's Facebook post. It is replaced with the word "Qatari" on her Qatar Living post.

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# Qatar Living on National Day (Continued)

Meanwhile, other visitors to Qatar Living are expats who side with Clayton:

Yesterday I saw many nationalities letting their babies hang out the windows and sit on top of the cars, the men in the street directing traffic did not even appear to be police they had no control of the bedlam. . . . Its sad we don't have an effective, active police dept. not yesterday or ever, no where else in the world would people get away with such lunacy even for a Natl. Day and no its not respectful to their own country.

Now people, she is trying to describe the actual events of the day. Theres nothing wrong about that, and nothing to hide as a fact. To be honest thats not racist, and thats how one would call freedom to express, constructively.

obviously there's a correlation between appalling behaviour and marrying your close relative.

expatriate made you remember!  
you only have dates, camel, and donkey here before...  
you know what you can put some camel [explicative deleted] or donkey in your mouth, then shout i am proud to be idiot!!!!!!

Late that night, Amal Al-Malki, a colleague of Clayton's and a popular English professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar, posts a blog entry called "Qataris This, Qataris That". Al-Malki calls for tolerance of social critiques, but lambastes the "condescending rhetoric" expats commonly use to criticize Qatar:

Whenever an expat writes a piece in which he criticizes "us", we get angry and suggest to him that if he doesn't like it here he can leave! His response, usually, is that we need to get educated about constructive criticism and we need to open up to different perspectives, and in short we need to grow up and stop thinking that we are always right.

Criticism can be harsh. I think that criticism should be harsh, and that burying one's head never changed anything. It is only when some one exposes the problematic status quo, critiques it and provides alternatives that a situation changes. In order to progress, we need to constantly evaluate our present to better our future. Yet, the criticism needs to come from a good place within us—one that hopes for the prosperity of one's country.

What makes us angry isn't the criticism in specific but its language! There is a negative rhetoric that is spreading among the expat community. . . . When they criticize a situation, they talk about the ignorance of the people involved, and ignorance triggers a chain reaction! How many times have we heard about the lazy, ignorant, super-wealthy Qatari who has no sense of responsibility or commitment! This myth that they have created has been employed in every piece of critique I've heard or read, reproducing such stereotypes and multiplying them within different discourses and under different topics. . . . Such condescending rhetoric is what gets us mad and not the actual criticism.

In her post, Al-Malki does not explicitly reference Qatar Living or Clayton's post, but comments on the blog entry immediately do. There, Al-Malki congratulates the students on coming together to defend their culture.

## 20 December

Two Facebook groups are formed in response to Lisa Clayton's post that quickly accrue hundreds of members. The first is the "Anti-Lisa Clayton" group, which demands her to apologize for her comments. Mashael B. N.

Al-Thani, the group's creator, maintains:

Guests in this country . . . certainly have no right to offend us in any way.

The second is the "Anti-Qatar Living" group, which demands that the website be shut down or blocked by Qatar authorities. Amal Al-Sulaiti, the group's founder, suggests that articles on Qatar Living reveal

How many unappreciative expats are walking amongst us in the streets, looking into our eyes, faking big smiles and pretending to be sooo fascinated with this amazing culture of ours.

Some representative remarks posted to these groups include:

Now about the blocked traffic, snow sprays and loud music. In this culture, this is how we celebrate, this is the way we express our happiness and excitement. This is called Maseera in arabic, which is some sort of a huge opened parade. Maseera means blocked roads because of people celebrating, and again I don't know how you have not learned that in the past 11 years and not know that there will be a 3 days Maseera all over the main roads of Doha to celebrate the National Day.

You talked about the boys "riding on the roofs of their cars, seated on the windows and the front windshield, and driving while standing". You made it sound as if it was formula one race. You forgot to mention that if you race a turtle against the Maseera, the turtle will most defiantly win. There is nothing life threatening about it, plus we've never heard of a man/woman/child who died/got killed in Qatar from sitting on the roof of the car in a Maseera. . . .

Now the ambulance that took 20 minutes to get through, I agree that people should've make it easier for the ambulance to pass. However, it is also known that our ambulance drivers' are very lousy and have a long history of killing their patients. An ambulance driver should've use alternative roads, not main crowded roads, but I am sure the driver did not know any other roads or shortcuts as this is the usual case. Do not blame it on the people, it is the authority again!

To conclude, I am wondering if you have such a negative point of view about Qataris and you seem to not be happy with life here, what made you stay for 11 years in Qatar? I am sure it is your own decision and would really like to know the reason that made you leave you country and live 11 years with such bad, ignorant, and selfish people who only love themselves.

Being an American as you are you should be ashamed to say that, because as we all know if it were in the STATES or any were else in the so called developed western world the following day we would have witness the usual barbaric behavior like steeling, shooting and perhaps rape by the highly educated modernized people of your society.

Some expats do join these groups, defending Clayton and Qatar Living:

If you don't like Qatar Living, don't read it. Easy, huh? :-)

Clearly there is a vocal group of local citizens who do NOT want freedom of speech. They don't want to hear people say offensive things about this country or its people, or criticize, question or make fun of religion in any way. But that's what freedom of speech means allowing.

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# Qatar Living on National Day (Continued)

## 21 December

*The Peninsula* prints a front-page article entitled “Remarks about National Day irk citizens” in which locals call for an apology:

Disparaging remarks about National Day celebrations on a popular local website have upset many in the local community, says a young national.

Some remarks against the festivities and the people of Qatar as well as Asian expatriates were in bad taste and smack of racism, said Mohamed Al Jufairi, a civil engineer.

“We are quite upset and writing to some major corporations which advertise on this website to withdraw their patronage,” he told this newspaper in a brief interview yesterday. . . .

Other nationals this newspaper spoke to yesterday also expressed disappointment on the humiliating comments posted by several expatriates on this popular website.

That afternoon, Qatar Living deletes Clayton’s post and removes her account. It issues the following statement:

We just want to point out that Qatar Living is not for or against anyone. . . .

Of course . . . there are bound to be disagreements. And unfortunately . . . there are bound to be a small number of people who make comments that are offensive. It is unfair for these comments to generalize and stereotype people.

In the same manner, the objectionable comments by a number of individuals should not be seen as indicative of most of the Qatari’s and Expatriates who make up the Qatar Living community. We use our Community Guidelines to clearly indicate what is acceptable on our website. We do apologise if any users have fallen short of these guidelines—we aim to treat every member of this community with respect and dignity.

Meanwhile, Clayton posts an apology on the “Anti-Lisa Clayton” Facebook group, which the group’s founder accepts. The group’s name is then changed to the more general “Reply to: Shame on Qatari National Day”. Clayton also posts an apology on Al-Malki’s blog:

Amal, I have repeatedly apologized on QL and on the Anti-Lisa Clayton FB group, as well as privately to many of my attackers. I have been banned from QL and can’t write anymore. I am destroyed by my own poor choice of words and my life here is over. I have nothing left to give.

The controversy is discussed on the other major Qatari social websites and even reported at Global Voices Online (“Qatar: Critiques bristle; calls to shut down popular online forum”).

## 22 December

Clayton posts an additional apology on her Facebook account:

To All the Qataris who I have hurt and upset, I will repeat this one last time in the hopes that the sincere message will finally be accepted. I am deeply sorry for criticizing anything related to the celebration of your special day and using such a thoughtless choice of words and tone. It is very clear after the 2 days of hell that I have been going through that my words hurt and that they opened up a platform for more hurtful words.

I don’t know how much strength I have to go on rising to further demands for vindication. Simply put, I am a destroyed woman who is afraid to leave her home and humiliated by being at the root of this terrible firestorm in my adopted home.

## 23 December

An article in *Al-Raya Newspaper* gives a scathing assessment of both Clayton and some of the National Day revelers:

It looks like Liza has forgotten what happens on the 4th of July, which is the US independence day, where people in the States would be terrified of terrorism and helicopters would be in the skies as if there is a war going on. Qatar is a state that’s independent and safe and its people are peaceful. And it seems that she forgot how Qatar secured her a job and benefits that she could not get if she was in the States. She forgot that Qatar is more advanced in issues they themselves ask us . . . and she didn’t expect this reaction because of her lack of literacy.

We now go back to the topic of the national day and the parade that some people abused and the behavior of a few and their inappropriate behavior that destroyed the purity of the day. That category is what pushed Lisa and others to talk like that when she had no excuse at all to do that. What happened that day has nothing to do with the Qataris’ national feeling. Celebrations are loved by a lot but some people must control their behaviors so that it doesn’t provoke the people and the country. This gave Liza the opportunity to say what she said.

We hope that this negative incident does not repeat itself next year so that we don’t give people the chance to talk negatively about Qatar or its people.

## 26 December

An article in *All Headline News* (“Qataris: Don’t Like Us, Then Get Out”) addresses the controversy, calling these events a “national culture war”:

Dr. Fadwa El Guindi, the head of the Department of Social Sciences at Qatar University, argued that historically-based Western notions of superiority lead to cultural tensions between Qatari nationals and skilled foreign workers.

“I don’t observe any open direct confrontations but there is a hidden tension here,” she told The Media Line. “Westerners who come here are generally better trained and often an air of racial superiority, but the Qataris say ‘wait a minute we are the ones who are wealthy and hiring here.’”

“There are special privileges for Qatari nationals in pay, promotions and job security and that can easily translate to bitterness on the other side,” Dr. El Guindi added. “With the background of colonialism, Westerners are used to having it the other way around, in which it is the Westerners that have the skills and the Westerners that have the money. So the tensions grow because those who are economically dominant are not the ones who are dominant in skills.”

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# Qatar Living on National Day (Continued)

## 21 February, 2010

Carnegie Mellon University in Qatar's student newspaper, *All Around*, publishes an editorial ("The National Day Of Qatar: Triggers Us and Them") about these events:

Many unanswered questions were raised regarding the relationship between Qataris and expats; who really holds the right to state what is wrong and right when it comes to national celebrations? . . . What boundaries must one respect in order to "constructively" criticize even if one was to belong to the community one criticizes? What is too extreme when doing so to the people of a nation you don't belong to? After the discussions, the exchanging of views would the Us/them oppositions finally come together?

## Aftermath

Before these events occurred, Clayton was planning on leaving VCU-Q to teach at another university in Qatar. While VCU-Q presumably did not approve of the negative publicity, it did not fire or take any direct action against Clayton. Instead, Clayton later left Qatar when her contract with VCU-Q expired in May 2010.

Qatar Living never shut down, nor has there been any indication that Internet service providers in Qatar ever intended to block access to the site. While public discussions on the Facebook groups lingered for about a year after the events, the "Anti-Qatar Living" group no longer exists and the "Reply to: Shame on Qatari National Day" group has since become private.