

## THE IDEAS COLUMN

WRITTEN BY  
**LAWRENCE SMALLMAN**

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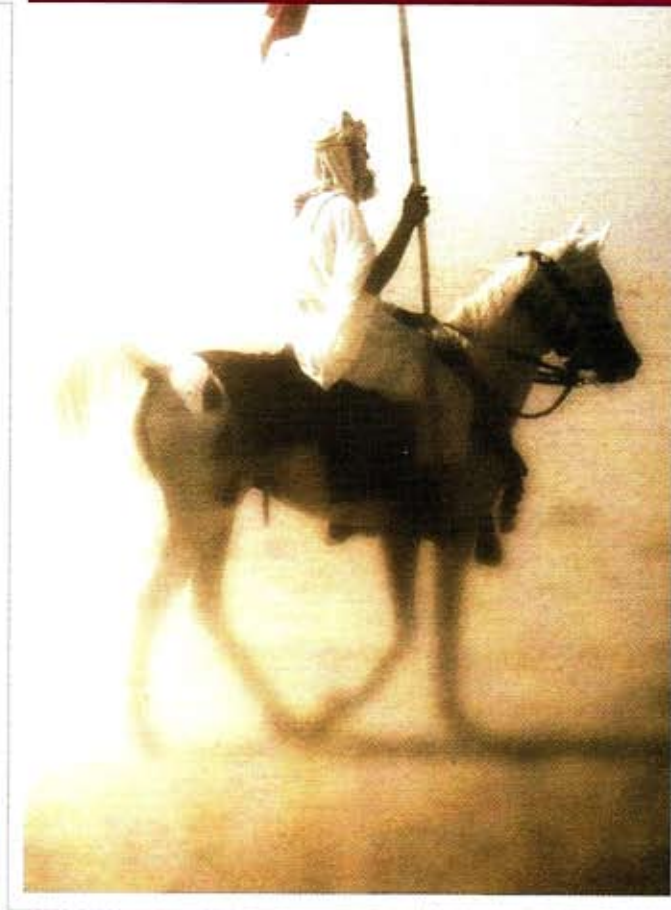
hat greater idea can there be than one upon which a nation is forged? Here *Think* reviews *Jassim the Leader, Founder of Qatar*, the new biography by Sheikh Mohamed AJ Althani

Published a century after his death, *Jassim* is the timely and absorbing biography of a most neglected statesman, a true player in the high imperial drama of the 19th century. Sheikh Mohamed Althani skilfully introduces his subject after a concise and elegant description of Qatar's history up to the 1830s. The reader is left under no illusion: Sheikh Jassim was born into a fragmented land in which British and Ottoman machinations had choked any idea of sovereignty or independence.

The author does not get overly caught up in Sheikh Jassim's personal achievements as a tribesman, political prisoner and poet, but rather stays true to his title – Jassim “the leader”. He was the first to conceive of Qatar as a nation and provide the political and military ability to realize that ambition. He understood the gulf between settled and tribal peoples on

the peninsula. He also knew how to bring both together, through force of conviction and arms. Sovereignty, Althani argues, was not bestowed – it was taken.

The author makes good on his claim, revealing that the calm oasis which is Doha today was anything but in the nineteenth century. The city was shelled five times by two different navies, attacked by tribal raiders, even cut off from its wells and wealth. Unity was always going to require a remarkable figure. Sheikh Jassim was that man, and though he came from a mercantile family, Althani explains how he took on the lifestyle and dress of the Bedouin and learnt their ways.



He remained true to his civic origins too, however, perfecting political skills with which to lead a nation and fend off a mighty empire.

**It is clear** from this light yet very readable and scholarly work that Althani has researched copious diaries, reports and correspondence in the Qatari, Turkish and British archives to resurrect Sheikh Jassim for himself. Additionally, there are many personal elements that give this book unique value – specifically the translation of (regrettably) few verses of his poetry, an account of the loving but tense relationship with his father, and a masterful characterization of the English Arabic scholar

William Gifford Palgrave, who has suffered little at the hands of British historians to date.

Although a descendant of Sheikh Jassim, Althani does not shy away from handling more sensitive topics – the issue of slavery, his admiration for the Salafist movement and even his tacit support for gun-running. The contextualization of these issues brings a “warts-and-all” reality to a well-researched book.

Qatar has emerged from its relative obscurity at a lightning pace. Given the frequency with which the state makes headlines today, it is hard to believe that not one of its emirs was mentioned in western newspapers until 1935. However, as Sheikh Jassim lay on his deathbed, no other country in the Gulf had had its autonomy recognized by both His Majesty's Government in London and the Sublime Porte in Istanbul. Sheikh Jassim had set this relatively new state on its enviable path to recognition, wealth and development. Althani's account explains how and outlines his genuine accomplishments, acknowledges his shortcomings and draws an intriguing parallel. Perhaps the imperial nature of the age in which Sheikh Jassim lived is not so very different from the one the nation finds itself in today. ●

Lawrence Smallman is a Senior Editor at Al Jazeera. *Jassim the Leader* is published by Profile Books.