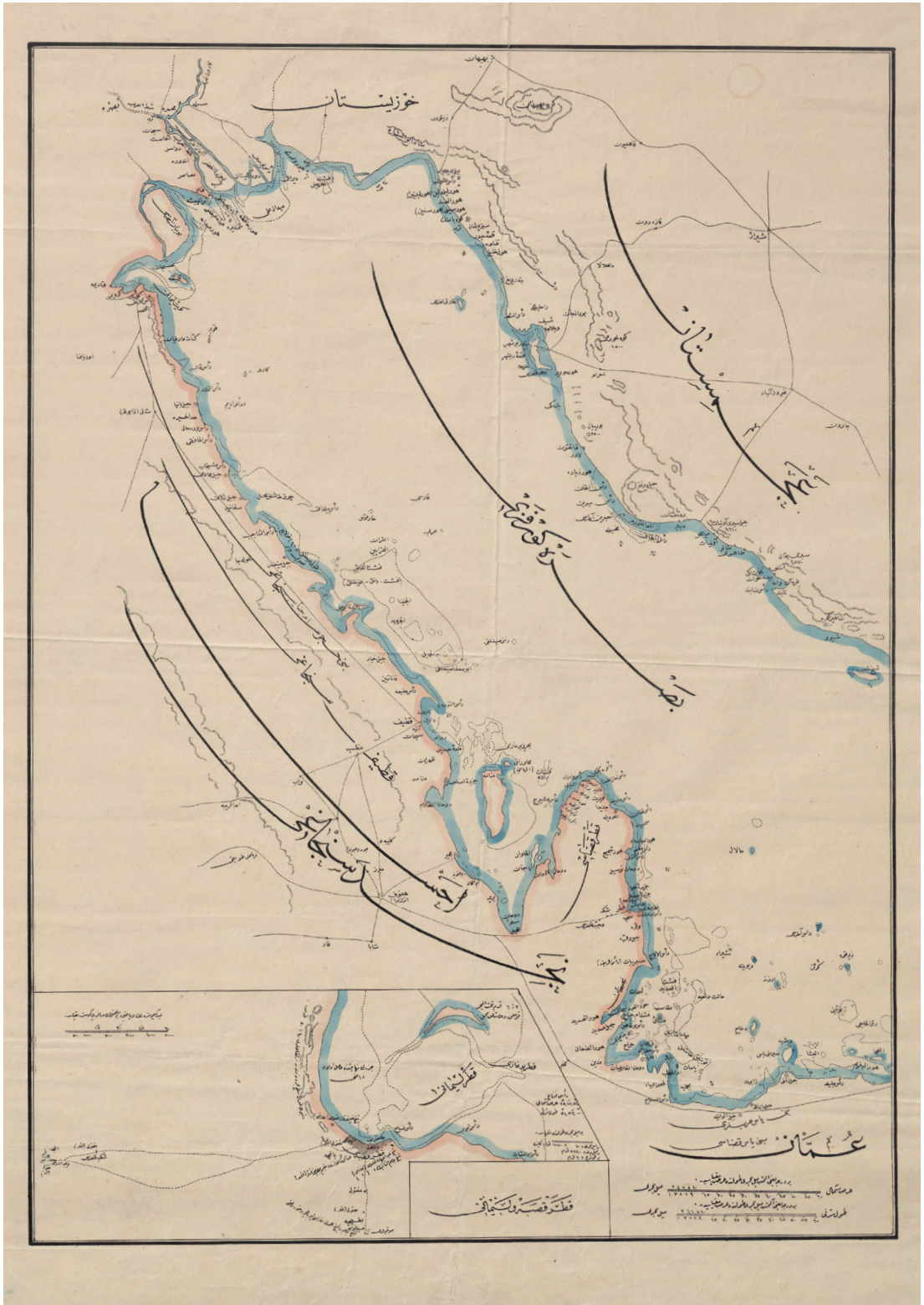


# A Historical Backdrop



1.1. Ottoman map of the Arabian Gulf, early 20th century, inset: Doha Bay (cf. fig. 3.3).

Around the shores of the Qatari peninsula lie many archaeological sites, some with standing buildings often labelled as abandoned villages or ghost towns. Their stories bear witness to an epoch when local families inhabited those houses before moving to the rapidly developing capital. For instance, the ruins of the city of Fuwayrit are scattered over an extensive area not far from the northernmost tip of Qatar, presenting a variety of historical layers. Part of the settlement uncovered by recent excavations dates to the 19th century. Although there are no obvious signs to indicate it, this was where the country's ruling family, the Al Thani branch of the Ma'adid Arab tribe, emerged onto the political scene. The following pages will discuss how this family came to power and managed to unify Qatar as a country, focusing on the life of Sheikh 'Abd Allah bin Jasim Al Thani (r. 1913–1949), the patron of the Old Palace.

The story begins with Sheikh Muhammad bin Thani (r. 1847–1878). When moving from Fuwayrit to Doha in the mid-19th century, he was little more than one of the influential tribal chiefs, until he gradually managed to expand his influence over the neighbouring tribes and settlements. He was also known to be successful in the pearling business, administering several ships to harvest oysters and selling their valuable pearls on the international market.<sup>1</sup> However, the Bahrainis repeatedly attempted to compromise – or, at least, to counterbalance – his growing power. The inevitable war between them culminated in the nearly complete destruction of Bidha and Doha in 1867; nonetheless, Sheikh Muhammad kept his head above water. With the Saudi emir's military support, he managed to push back the Bahrainis.

This was the point when the British government – by then the foremost imperial power in the region – felt it timely to intervene, notably to maintain their empire's trading privileges in the Arabian Gulf. They declared British protection for Sheikh Muhammad and his territories on 11 September 1868. In return, Sheikh Muhammad stated the next day: 'I promise to return to Dowha (Doha) and reside peacefully in that port', meaning that hostilities in the region would cease on his part.<sup>2</sup> This so-called Anglo-Qatari treaty was the first official document to recognise Qatar as an independent country under Al Thani rule and Doha as its capital. Controversial as it might be to define the 'foundation' of Qatar through the lens of an outside power, British support undeniably favoured the Al Thani family in their growing authority.

The Ottomans' landing in Qatar in late 1871 further complicated the political landscape. By then, their empire had stretched from Tunisia to Iraq to Bosnia, and they had also ruled over parts of the Arabian Peninsula for centuries. Qatar came to their notice only when it started to develop its own political system, the seeds of the present-day nation state.

1. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey*, vol. 2: pp. 231–234; see also Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 61–62; Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, p. 164.

2. 'Letter No. 111 of 1868', Tuson, *Records of Qatar*, vol. 2: pp. 124–125; al-Shilaq, *Fusul min tarikh Qatar*, pp. 233–234; see also Crystal, *Oil and Politics*, pp. 28–31; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 75–79; Fromherz, *Qatar*, pp. 54–57.

The Ottoman governor of Baghdad, Ahmet Şefik Midhat Pasha (1822–1883), sought to restore control over Eastern Arabia and establish a new administrative unit, the Najd *sanjak* ('district'). He sent a small army to the Ahsa' Oasis (in eastern Saudi Arabia), and its leader decided to make a move for Qatar too. The occupation was quick and nearly painless. Playing on a disagreement between the ageing Sheikh Muhammad and his son, Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad (r. 1878–1913), the Ottomans favoured the latter and appointed him as *kaymakam* ('lieutenant') in Doha.<sup>3</sup> Qatar was designated as a *kaza* ('sub-district') within the Najd *sanjak*, even while enjoying relative autonomy within the empire (fig. 1.1). The fact that the Ottomans made a deal with the Al Thani family also solidified their status above other tribal leaders in the territory.

The relationship between Sheikh Jasim and the Ottomans soon began to deteriorate. For this reason he preferred to live outside the capital, as Bidda Fort hosted an Ottoman garrison of 250 men. He had residences in east Doha, Wakra (15 kilometres south of Doha), Wajba (15 kilometres west of Doha; fig. 1.2),<sup>4</sup> Daayen (30 kilometres north of Doha), and elsewhere. Rumours about his dissatisfaction with the Ottomans surely had some truth, especially since they required him to pay customs to Istanbul. In 1892, Sheikh Jasim resigned as *kaymakam*, which was interpreted as a rebellious act.

The Ottomans responded by sending an army of about 200 soldiers from Basra to Qatar. They attempted to attack Sheikh Jasim's forces near Wajba Fort, but he intercepted them on their way and forced them to withdraw. The Ottoman army retreated to Bidda Fort, where Sheikh Jasim laid siege to them, cut their water supply and eventually persuaded them to surrender. They soon reached a peaceful

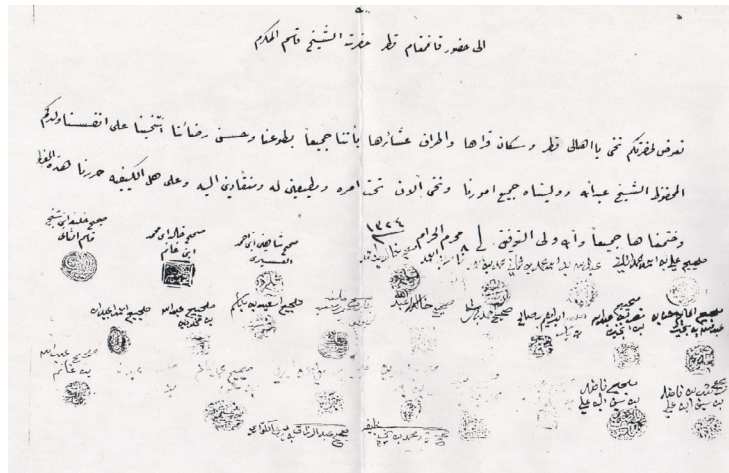
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1.2. Wajba Fort, palace of Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad, built in the late 19th century.

3. See Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 48–65; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 94–96.

4. See Al-Kholaifi, *The Traditional Architecture in Qatar*, pp. 89–92.



1.3. Letter to Sheikh Jasim bin Muhammad in which members of the Al Thani family declare their support for the heir apparent Sheikh 'Abd Allah, dated 1324 AH/1906 CE.

settlement in which both parties agreed to reconfirm the status quo: Sheikh Jasim received a pardon and amnesty.<sup>5</sup>

After Sheikh Jasim's final resignation, the title of *kaymakam* passed on to his brother, Sheikh Ahmad bin Muhammad.<sup>6</sup> From 1901 until his death in 1913, Sheikh Jasim lived in semi-retirement in his fortified residence at Lusail (20 kilometres north of Doha),<sup>7</sup> mostly earning his income from pearling while several of his relatives acted as governors of cities. For instance, his brother Sheikh Ahmad represented him in Doha, his son Sheikh Khalifa in Bidda, another son Sheikh 'Abd al-Rahman in Wakra and yet another son Sheikh Muhammad in Umm Salal. His eventual successor Sheikh 'Abd Allah was not prepared to have a political role and showed more interest in pearl fishery and trade. However, when his uncle Sheikh Ahmad died in 1905, he was nominated as governor of Doha and even as heir apparent.<sup>8</sup> Sheikh Jasim sent a letter to Istanbul, requesting the appointment of his son as *kaymakam*. No less importantly, he needed to have his extended family on board, so he invited many of the Al Thani notables to a gathering on 4 March 1906. They produced a short document, including the names and seal impressions of various family members, with which they declared their backing for Sheikh 'Abd Allah as the future ruler of Qatar (fig. 1.3).<sup>9</sup>

Sheikh 'Abd Allah still retained his pearling business and even worked as an agent for his father. In 1907, he spent three months in Mumbai (then part of British India) attempting to sell pearls.<sup>10</sup> Since that city was one of the largest trade centres in the Indian Ocean and was being rapidly developed by British and local investments, it must have made a favourable impression on him. Coincidentally, against a background of strengthening ties between the Ottomans and the Germans, the

5. Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, pp. 51–54; Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 89–98; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 99–112.

6. *Administration Report 1892–93*, p. 10; *Administration Report 1893–94*, pp. 8–9; Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1: pp. 822–824; Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 89–100.

7. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 2: p. 1112.

8. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 1: p. 826; vol. 2: p. 491; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 177–179.

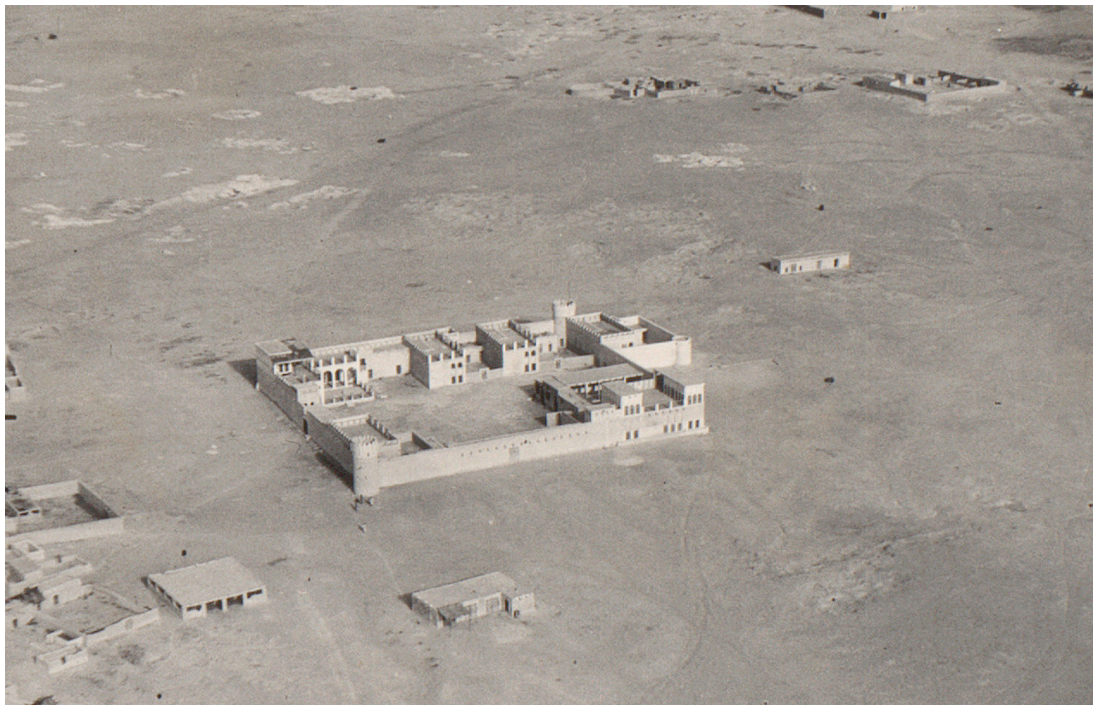
9. al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh 'Abd Allah*, pp. 65–66.

10. Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, p. 181.

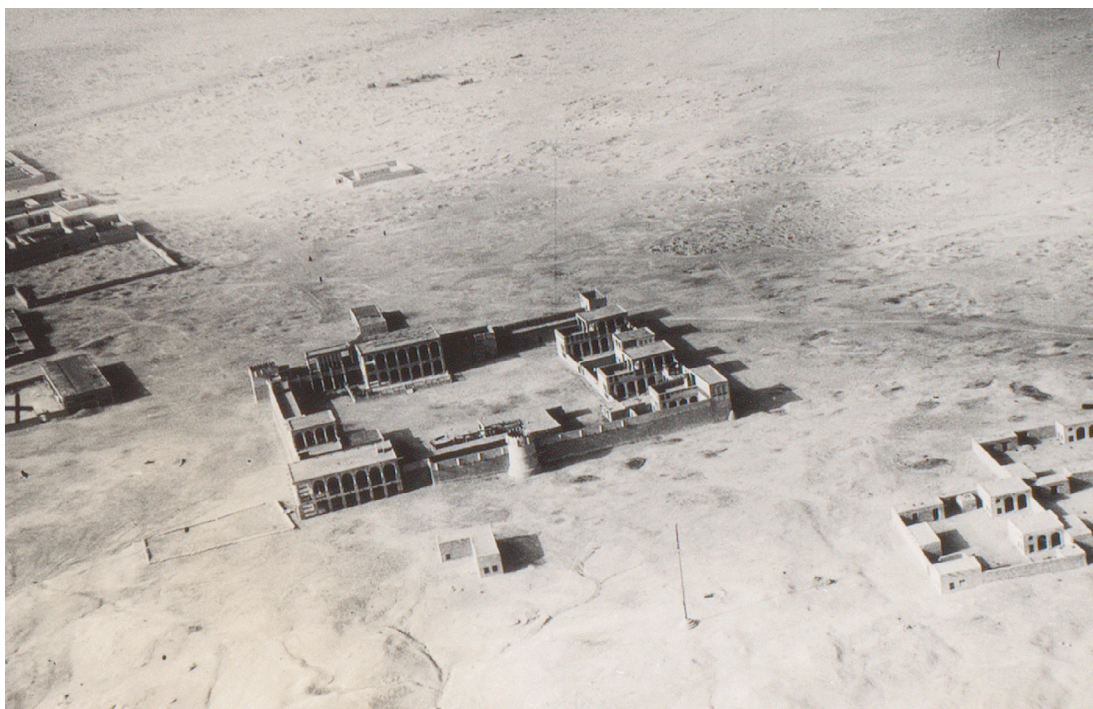


1.4. Zubara Fort, commissioned by Sheikh 'Abd Allah in 1938.





1.5. Rayyan Palace, 1934, commissioned by Sheikh 'Abd Allah c. 1930.



1.6. Doha Palace (present-day Amiri Diwan), 1934, commissioned by Sheikh 'Abd Allah c. 1930.

British Empire decided to expand its power over the Gulf. After repeated negotiations, they proclaimed control over Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, which the Ottomans had no alternative but to accept in the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention.<sup>11</sup> The agreement obliged the Ottomans to withdraw their troops from the Gulf, including the garrison stationed at Bidda Fort; it was not until 1915 that the withdrawal was complete.

As a further step, Britain sought to prevent Qatar from falling to the hands of the Saudis, who were quick to annex the Ahsa' Oasis, directly west of Qatar, into their state. This was the same year in which Sheikh Jasim died and Sheikh 'Abd Allah (r. 1913–1949) took over the leadership, although not without initial opposition. According to British intelligence reports, several of his relatives considered allying with Saudi Arabia in return for power, while Sheikh 'Abd Allah aimed to secure his territorial integrity and independence from the neighbouring states. The considerable sums inherited from his father came particularly handy at this moment,<sup>12</sup> in that he could offer to pay an annual tribute to the Saudis. He then signed the Anglo-Qatari Treaty on 3 November 1916. Officialising Qatar as a British protectorate, this document guaranteed defence against any outside force by sea.<sup>13</sup> The country thus became one of the many protectorates under the British Government of India, even while retaining autonomy over its internal affairs.

Yet, a key point was still missing from the country's territorial integrity: a solution to the Zubara conflict. This historic city, situated at the northwest of the Qatari Peninsula and mainly deserted by then, has often been a subject of dispute between Qatar and Bahrain. When British surveyors began to search for oil fields along the coast, they needed to know to whom the territory belonged. Proclaiming his rights, Sheikh 'Abd Allah made a ceremonial visit to Zubara on 3 May 1937. Part of his argument was that the ruling family's ancestor, Sheikh Thani bin Muhammad, had been born in that city. After a minor battle took place between the Qatari- and Bahraini-supported forces, the British decided to prevent further escalation and ruled in favour of Qatar. Then, reasserting his position both symbolically and effectively, Sheikh 'Abd Allah established Zubara Fort (fig. 1.4) a stone's throw away from the ruinous Murayr Fort, which had overlooked and protected the city's primary source of fresh water. The builders salvaged stones from the partly dismantled old structures.<sup>14</sup> The new Zubara Fort signified the ruler's expansion of power over the historical site. Once again, these events elevated the prestige of the Al Thani family in the eyes of many Qataris, strengthening their support for Sheikh 'Abd Allah.<sup>15</sup>

The life of Sheikh 'Abd Allah presents several shifts from pearl fishing to statesmanship and royal representation. After being officially appointed as governor of Doha and heir apparent in 1906, he retained his interest in the pearling

11. Kurşun, *The Ottomans in Qatar*, pp. 121–134; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 201–211; Tallon, 'Allies and Adversaries'.

12. Lowe, 'A Considerable Fortune'.

13. 'Persian Gulf Katr Treaty'; al-Shilaq, *Fusul min tarikh Qatar*, pp. 64–70, 235–241; Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, pp. 55, 59–61; Crystal, *Oil and Politics*, pp. 114–115; Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, pp. 214–226; see also Morton, *Masters of the Pearl*, pp. 98–100.

14. 'File 19/243 IV Zubarah', fol. 12r; Polak-Springer, 'Bordering Zubara'; Morton, *Masters of the Pearl*, pp. 110–114.

15. See also Zahlan, *The Creation of Qatar*, pp. 85–91.



1.7. Meeting in the royal palace at Rayyan, c. 1940s, from left to right: Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh 'Abd Allah, Sheikh 'Ali and unknown British officer.

business, which was indeed the backbone of the economy.<sup>16</sup> Although he was among the wealthiest people in Qatar, his residence was perhaps little distinct from those of many other merchants. Located in the east end of Doha in a neighbourhood known as (Old) Salata,<sup>17</sup> it stood along the coastline, where he could draw his ships (commonly known as dhows) on the sandy seashore directly outside his home. After 1913, his status began to change significantly; his navigational skills in the sea of international politics not only successfully secured outside protection and internal independence for Qatar but also proved him an able ruler. It is reasonable to assume that,

16. Rahman, *The Emergence of Qatar*, p. 185; Carter, *Sea of Pearls*, pp. 165–175; Morton, *Masters of the Pearl*, pp. 82–90.

17. As will be described in Chapter 6, the name derives from the Suluta tribe, who were the main inhabitants there.

in parallel, his residential compound expanded and became a proper royal palace with representative functions.

Among the closest associates of Sheikh ‘Abd Allah was Muhammad bin Mani‘ (1883–1965). Born in Unayza (Saudi Arabia) and educated in Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, he was a renowned Hanbali Muslim scholar of his time.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, when Sheikh ‘Abd Allah invited him to Qatar, the ruler emphasised that he also followed the Hanbali school of Islamic law.<sup>19</sup> Bin Mani‘ worked as the chief judge, preacher, advisor and teacher in Doha from 1916 to 1939, during which time he established a school, known as the Athariyya School, inside the Old Palace.<sup>20</sup> He portrayed Sheikh ‘Abd Allah as a pious man of outstanding discipline, who would only allow the most virtuous into his *majlis* (‘council hall’) and who had learned a great deal about the Qur’an and its commentaries, the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, history and poetry.<sup>21</sup> An anecdote narrates that he banned the teaching of Arabic grammar from a certain textbook because its author had followed different tenets of Islam.<sup>22</sup>

Ever since coming into power, the Al Thani family have paid much attention to architectural patronage, especially concerning palaces, forts and mosques. Sheikh ‘Abd Allah himself commissioned three palaces: one in (Old) Salata, one in Rayyan (fig. 1.5) and one known as Doha Palace (fig. 1.6). The first is the subject of this book. The second was a rectangular compound with fortification towers in two corners, probably established in the 1920s and used as his main residence from around 1930 onwards. It also included apartments for his sons, Sheikh Hamad, Sheikh ‘Ali and Sheikh Hasan, and a mosque. Doha Palace stood where the Amiri Diwan does today, built near the site of the old Ottoman fort, and a few of its structures still survive incorporated into the more recent wings. It gave the impression of a fort, forming a square layout and including royal offices for state administration. After abandoning the Old Palace sometime after 1925, Sheikh ‘Abd Allah used the two others, perhaps one for official and one for private purposes (fig. 1.7).

These buildings, like Zubara Fort (built in 1938), indicate that Sheikh ‘Abd Allah continued his architectural patronage even during a period of fierce economic difficulties. The traditional methods of pearl fishing drastically and irreversibly declined in the Gulf around 1930. The international market, already shaken by the global economic crisis known as the Great Depression, turned towards the cultured pearls invented in Japan. Qatar lost its prime source of income – as did the ruler himself. The country’s economic troubles would only be solved after the discovery of oil fields and, in particular, with the onset of oil exportation in late 1949. Thanks to this natural resource, by the time Sheikh ‘Abd Allah died on 25 April 1957, Qatar had become a very different country.

18. On his life, see Al al-Shaykh, *Mashahir ‘ulama’ Najd*, pp. 411–417. Unfortunately, his memoirs from Qatar contain little information on this period and more on his second sojourn there between 1958 and 1965; Bin Mani‘, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*.

19. Bin Mani‘, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, p. 73; see also Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, vol. 2: p. 1113. Established after the teachings of Ahmad bin Hanbal (d. 855), Hanbalism is known as the most strictly traditionalist among the generally accepted Sunni schools and today remains the official school in Qatar.

20. Naji, ‘Tarikh al-ta’lim al-sha’bi’, pp. 296–304; al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ‘Abd Allah*, pp. 107–108; al-Durubi, *al-Shaykh ‘Abd Allah*, vol. 2: pp. 292–308; Khayat, *al-Shaykh Muhammad bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz*, pp. 134–136.

21. Bin Mani‘, *Qatar fi mudhakkirat*, pp. 73–74.

22. al-Ghanim, *al-Shaykh ‘Abd Allah*, p. 69.