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Iranian Migrations to Dubai:
Constraints and Autonomy of a Segmented Diaspora

Amin Moghadam
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Abstract

In this paper I examine the way modalities of mobility and settlement contribute to the socio-economic stratification of the Iranian community in Dubai, while simultaneously reflecting its segmented nature, complex internal dynamics, and relationship to the environment in which it is formed. I will analyze Iranian migrants' representations and their cultural initiatives to help elucidate the socio-economic hierarchies that result from differentiated access to distinct social spaces as well as the agency that migrants have over these hierarchies. In doing so, I examine how social categories constructed in the contexts of departure and arrival contribute to shaping migratory trajectories. On the other hand, I explore how these categories are embedded in a set of social processes, while also being transformed through different aspects of migrant lives.

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Introduction

Until the early 1980s, most Iranians living in Dubai originated from the southern regions of Iran. This presence on the southern shore of the Gulf resulted mainly from centuries of cross-border exchange, itself facilitated by cultural and religious affinities between southern Iranians (some of whom are Arab and/or Sunni minorities) and the inhabitants of the eastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula. However, the geographical origins of Iranians who settled in Dubai began to diversify in the 1980s, in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war. Today, the Iranian community of Dubai is composed of individuals who come from major cities of central Iran and of others who, after several experiences of migration in Western cities, have acquired the nationality of a Western country. For the latter, the emergence of Dubai as an economic hub provides an opportunity to live closer to their native country.

This diversity of the Iranian presence manifests itself in individual trajectories, transnational dynamics, and urban practices. It also raises the question of who, exactly, is Iranian in Dubai. For instance, while the new Iranians of Dubai like to recall that the city developed thanks to the Iranian community, they rarely have a clear idea of who came before them—namely, natives of southern Iran, some of whom are now Emirati citizens. In their everyday discourse, they often make the exaggerated claim that "Dubai was built by Iranians." Yet, in their conversations with visiting Iranians, they paradoxically say things like, "*In Dubai, there are Iranians you can't even imagine, they speak a strange language and they come from remote villages; I don't know what they came here for*." Unlike Iranian diasporas in countries of the global north, a segment of the Iranian community in Dubai maintains close relations with the host society due to its historical presence in the city. Indeed, Iranians from the south have a different relationship with Dubai than those from major urban centres or with Western citizenship, because they have long considered the southern and northern shores of the Gulf as part of a single geographical space—before nationalist visions attempted to dissociate them.

In short, the city of Dubai provides a meeting place for Iranians from a wide range of geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds. This internal diversity, which also exists among Iranians in other parts of the world (Bozorgmehr, 1997; Kelly, 2011; Khosravi, 2018; McAuliffe, 2008; Moghaddari, 2016), offers a good vantage point from which to observe the modalities of reproduction of the hierarchies inherited from the country of origin, as well as the situations that transform and challenge them.

In this paper I examine the way modalities of mobility and settlement contribute to the socio-economic stratification of the Iranian community in Dubai, while simultaneously reflecting its segmented nature, complex internal dynamics, and relationship to the environment in which it is formed. However, this stratification is constantly being renegotiated through migrants' everyday practices and initiatives. Social processes that unfold in the host environment redraw the social boundaries between groups and individuals within the distinct social fields to which they belong.

I will analyze Iranian migrants' representations and some of their cultural initiatives to help elucidate the socio-economic hierarchies that result from differentiated access to distinct social spaces as well as the agency that migrants have over these hierarchies. On the one hand, I examine how social categories constructed in the contexts of departure and arrival contribute to shaping migratory trajectories. On the other hand, I explore how these categories are embedded in a set of social processes, while also being transformed through different aspects of migrant lives—namely, urban practices, social and cultural initiatives, but also work, friendship, and love relationships.

While it is necessary to recall representational categories from the home country, it is not guaranteed that these categories and their attendant social hierarchies will persist in time. Moreover, legal categories produced by the administrative apparatus, such as "expatriate" or "temporary worker," may also operate autonomously in social interactions. From this perspective, migrants are seen as political actors who struggle to create a new living environment for

themselves. This struggle does not necessarily translate into acts of resistance against, for instance, the political system, but the mere necessity to live one's life can lead migrants to expose the limits of predetermined social categories and redraw their attendant social boundaries.
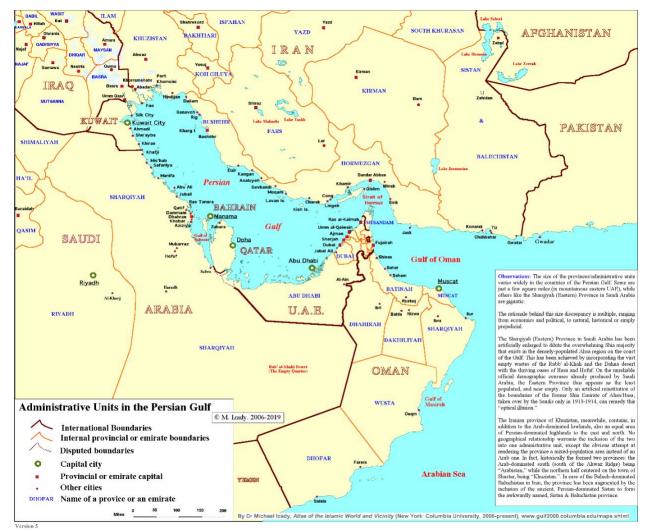
Historical Background and Context

Peregrinations between the Arab and Iranian coasts have long shaped the life of Persian Gulf cities. This migration has taken place on a regional scale to meet the needs of a local economy comprising villages and towns situated on either side of the Gulf, with the latter acting as an interface in the geographical sense of the term. The continuation of these old dynamics is often explained by the confessional and linguistic affinities between the inhabitants of southern Iran and those of southern Gulf countries; it is also attributed to the historical events that have marked the countries on either shore, and that have accelerated or slowed migration in either direction.

For centuries, the inhabitants of southern Iran, whether Arabic or Persian speakers, systematically participated in the Gulf economy. On the Iranian coast, and especially during the second half of the 19th century and thanks to the pearl trade, the city of Lengeh (now called Bandar Lengeh) was the main seat of the Arab tribes and the local dhows that crossed the Gulf easily transferred goods from Lengeh's wharves to ports situated in the Trucial States[1] and in the other Gulf countries.

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[1] In 1853, the British signed a series of treaties with the Sheikhs who ruled over the territories of the present-day UAE. These treaties guaranteed the cessation of attacks against British ships (described by the British as piracy), hence the name Trucial States. These territories were brought together in 1971, after the withdrawal of British troops, in the form of a federation called the United Arab Emirates.

Source: Dr M Izady, Atlas of the Islamic World and Vicinity (New York, Columbia Univ., 2006-present) at gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml

At the beginning of the twentieth century, emigration from Iran towards the Arab coast coincided with the reform of the Iranian tax system (Stephenson, 2018). This was reinforced in the 1900s, notably following the decision of the central government in Tehran to impose, via the Belgian representatives of the Tehran-based Department of Imperial Persian Customs, very high taxes on all products imported or exported through Iranian ports (Nashat, 1982; 'The Opening up of Qājār Iran', 1986). The new measures not only reinforced the migratory trend towards the Arab coast, but also encouraged smuggling, making it the main activity of residents on both sides of the Gulf. This was especially true of trade in tea and sugar, which had become very lucrative after new taxes were imposed by the government of Tehran in 1925 (Abdullah, 1978, p. 25).

Given the economic chaos prevailing under the end of Qajar dynasty (1789-1925), the Iranian political economy of the time formed around the protectionist principles of border control and domestic product development (Kashani-Sabet, 1999, pp. 75–100). This decision directly affected the daily lives of Iranian Arabs—and of border region populations in general—whose main activities consisted in trading through these ports. Taking advantage of this situation, the Emir of Dubai Maktūm bin Ḥashar (1894-1906) eliminated the five percent tax that was previously imposed on all imports and exports to and from Dubai. From then on, Dubai became a centre for the distribution of goods to the entire Arabian Peninsula, as well as for the re-export of Indian

products to Iran (Heard-Bey, 2005, p. 244). This led to an increase in the number of Iranian merchants in Dubai, who quickly became, along with Indians, the most important merchant class in the city. By 1901, there were 500 Iranians in Dubai and 96 in Abu Dhabi (Abdullah, 1978, p. 105). Plots of land were allocated to Iranians to encourage them to settle in Dubai, resulting in the reunification of entire families, even whole villages—for instance, the district of Bastakiya was populated by the residents of Bastak, a small, predominantly Sunni town of southern Iran.

Meanwhile, in 1904, the British India Steam Navigation Company chose Dubai as the main port for its activities(Abdullah, 1978, p. 232). In 1904, more than 21 ships belonging to the Indian and Iranian divisions of the India Steam Navigation Company entered the port of Dubai; their number reached 34 in 1905, turning Dubai into a veritable trading hub in the region, to the detriment of Lengeh in Iran(Al-Sayegh, 1998). At the same time, the Iranian currency, the *qiran*, was gradually replaced with the Indian rupee by regional traders, favouring the position of cities such as Dubai, Manama, and Kuwait City, which were already using it for trading (Fuccaro, 2014, p. 45).

In Iran, anxiety regarding the need to delimit and preserve borders also gave rise to a new vision of peripheral territories: From then on, they and their multi-ethnic populations were expected to submit to the national order and to defend the great country of Iran(Stephenson, 2018). The nationalist and secularist rhetoric of Reza Shah (1925-1941) was confronted with the religious beliefs and multiple affiliations of peripheral populations (Boroujerdi, 2003). In order to create the image of a modern, unified nation-state, the Shah sought to eliminate cultural differences, in particular those of peripheral populations and tribes, by encouraging the "Persianization" of Iranian culture via a series of policies such as Persian-language-only schooling. The question of nation-state territoriality thus coincided with that of the affiliation of frontier populations, at a time when frontier lines still seemed reversible and modifiable (Beaugrand, 2007).

Moreover, new measures implemented in 1936 prohibited women from wearing the veil, based on the same principles of Westernization. These measures triggered waves of emigration of Sunni (including Persian) and Shiite inhabitants, who regarded the new rules as heretical and morally unacceptable. On the one hand, then, Iran's peripheral regions seemed to be increasingly integrated into the national territory, notably thanks to the construction of an important infrastructure network (including the railway line connecting the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf that was put in service in 1927). On the other, peripheral populations, especially in the south, continued to emigrate to the southern Gulf, while also maintaining ties with the Iranian coast via exchanges now considered illegal by the Iranian authorities.

Marginalized in Iran but taking advantage of affinities with the culture of the host country, southern Iranians fully participated in the development of the city of Dubai. They established relations with Arab families already present, and marriages between the two groups were commonplace, often facilitated by cultural, religious, and linguistic proximities. Iranians, like Indians, became involved in a wide range of economic activities, strengthening their power vis-à-vis local families. Iranians thus monopolized the fruit and vegetable trade, as well as most retail stores in the city. Their economic power allowed them directly to influence the political scene of Dubai. This, however, did not stop them from maintaining relations with the Iranian coast, in particular through smuggling, which had by then become the main activity of its inhabitants.

In the 1950s and 1960s, two other factors influenced migratory movements between the shores. First, Iranian policy focused on developing the country's capital and northern regions, leaving the peripheral regions of the south underdeveloped. Second, oil was discovered on the Arab coast, and education and health systems were developed in the Arab Gulf (first in Kuwait and Qatar in the 1950s, and then in the Trucial States in the 1960s). These factors prompted a new wave of emigration from southern Iran to the Arab coast.

In the late 1960s, however, the construction of new roads between the recently-built modern ports of Bandar Abbas (in 1964) and Bushehr (in 1965), which also connected the Iranian

hinterland to the southwestern city of Ahvaz in 1969, gave a new impetus to the development of southern Iran. As a consequence, the wave of emigration to the Arab coast slowed down in the 1970s. The education system in southern Iran was strengthened, as several schools opened in the region. Moreover, having realized the importance of Iranian communities in the Arab Gulf, especially in the Trucial States, the Iranian government opened a consulate in Dubai in 1952 (followed by an embassy after the creation of the UAE in 1971)(Gargash, 1996, p. 150); it also founded its first school in Dubai in 1962, and a second one in Abu Dhabi in 1972 (one year after the creation of the UAE federation). During those years, the Iranian government encouraged Iranians, via its envoys in the Gulf, to request Iranian passports so as to preserve their Iranian identity. Some even agreed to return.

The improvement in economic and diplomatic relations between Iran and Dubai directly influenced migratory movements between the two shores. Nevertheless, a new increase in customs tariffs in the 1970s (which corresponded to the Shah's policy of financing development projects) encouraged some Iranian merchants to leave Iran and to settle in the city of Dubai, which had then initiated its major port projects, including the Jebel Ali Free Zone and Port Rashid. According to Christopher Davidson, these projects convinced Iranians that Dubai was the ideal city for trade with foreign countries, and especially for long-distance journeys(Davidson, 2005, p. 158). In the early 1970s, it is estimated that half of the 50,000 dhows then trading with Dubai were involved in re-exporting products to Iran (Siavoshi, 2011). During this period, Iranians also contributed to improving the city's education and health systems, for example by building the Iranian hospital of Dubai, still one of the most important. Two years after the creation of the UAE (in 1971), 40,000 Iranians originating from the most recent waves of emigration lived in Dubai, out of a total Dubai population of 100,000[2].

From 1979 (the year of the Iranian Revolution) to today, the large-scale migration of Iranians to the Emirates has largely resulted from the geopolitical context and the state of relations between Iran and the Arab Gulf countries. The proximity and dependence of the Iranian community of Dubai in relation to Iran, as well as the UAE authorities' perception of Iranian citizens, often associated with "Shiites and Ajam[3] dangerous for national stability" in a Sunni Arab state, have had a direct impact on the lives of Iranian migrants.

Precarity and Geopolitical Tensions

Today we may distinguish at least four legal statuses concerning Iranian migrants in Dubai. First, there are those who have been naturalized and are considered UAE citizens. These migrants no longer hold Iranian nationality. Most of them emigrated from the southern regions of Iran before UAE independence in 1971 or in the years afterwards. Naturalizations continued to be granted thereafter, but in arbitrary, limited fashion. In fact, it is impossible to obtain statistics on naturalized Iranians because they are included without distinction in the "nationals" category. Second come migrants who left Iran for economic reasons after independence, especially in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq war. These migrants have retained their Iranian citizenship and hold residence permits as temporary or family workers in the Emirates. The third category is made up of Iranians who emigrated to Western countries and managed to obtain the nationality of their host country before settling in the UAE as Westerners. Finally, there are the Iranians who, unable to obtain a residence permit, continue to travel back and forth between the two countries and work illegally in the Emirates on tourist visas, relatively easy to obtain and renew.

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[2] Dubai Municipality Statistics, 1973.

[3] "Ajam, the name given in medieval Arabic literature to the non-Arabs of the Islamic empire, but applied especially to the Persians….in general, *Ajam* was a pejorative term, used by Arabs conscious of their political and social superiority in early Islam", see https://iranicaonline.org/articles/ajam

As such, the migration regime, articulated around various legal statuses, has its own dynamics that impact the socio-economic hierarchies of the country of origin. On the one hand, like all other foreigners, Iranian migrants without UAE citizenship are affected by the UAE's labor migration policies, structured by the kafala sponsorship system[4] and characterized by non-integrative policies, in particular those concerned with access to nationality and long-term residence status, which effectively prevent any permanent settlement or integration of foreign populations(Longva, 2005; Thiollet, 2016). On the other hand, they are also strongly impacted by diplomatic tensions between Iran and the UAE, which they must integrate into their residence strategies and modes of sociability(Moghadam, 2016). The precarity experienced by Iranian migrants, then, results both from the UAE's administrative and legal mechanisms for migrant management and from the (geo)political context in which these are embedded.

Since the early 1990s, the politicization of migration policies (Thiollet, 2015), whereby migrants are selected taking into consideration ongoing geopolitical conflicts, helped reinforce a security-focused approach to migration management. Thus, the large-scale expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait in 1991 (owing to the PLO's support for Saddam Hussein), the Arab Spring of 2011 (which led to fears of an uprising) (Zelkovitz, 2014), and the subsequent involvement of the UAE in regional conflicts have prompted the *de facto* participation of the security apparatus in migrant selection.

This evolution has naturally resulted in policies that seek to attract certain nationalities to the detriment of others—for instance, policies favouring Asian workers from South and Southeast Asia over workers from Arab countries of the Middle East. In addition, the security approach to migration management, which involves surveillance and control mechanisms, translates into discretionary decision-making by the UAE administration. This is evidenced, for instance, by arbitrary expulsions, or the refusal to issue residence permits to individuals of specific nationalities despite recruitment contracts provided by their employers. The politicization of migration policies and the association of migrants with regional conflicts have led to strict monitoring of their presence on Emirati soil, which has in turn impacted their everyday lives. Thus, in a context of political tensions between Iran and the UAE, Iranians in the Emirates live in constant fear of having their residence permits cancelled or being unable to renew them once they expire.

In 2016, the UAE authorities commissioned a study from UK-based researchers on the presence of Iranians in the Emirates, with the aim of assessing the security threat they might pose to the country. While the study concluded that this presence did not threaten the country's stability, the mere fact that it was commissioned confirms that the UAE authorities perceive Iranians in the Emirates as potential agitators or as a fifth column for Iran and Shia networks in the region. In fact, since the 1979 revolution, the Iranian diaspora has been the object of suspicion worldwide (Mobasher, 2018; Sadeghi, 2016), though to varying degrees depending on the host society. Both the narratives and daily strategies of migrants take into consideration these elements of geopolitical life.

Due to economic sanctions and geopolitical tension between Iran and UAE, it is today difficult to register a business in Dubai with an Iranian passport; to obtain a new residence permit and, sometimes, to renew one. These restrictions on Iranian business activities (but not only) in the UAE have fueled a highly lucrative informal market for residence permits and business licenses, involving Emirati and Iranian intermediaries well-versed in the administrative machinery

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[4] The kafala is a tool for managing foreign labor that effectively grants economic privileges to nationals. Thus, all foreigners—whether individuals or legal entities—need to find a sponsor if they want to exercise a profession, invest, or reside in the UAE. Although in principle the kafala merely requires that the sponsor offer moral and social protection to the sponsored party, in reality the foreigner must give a percentage of his or her earnings to the sponsor in exchange for protection. In addition, the sponsor is expected to monitor the foreigner's economic activities and social behavior: In short, he or she must guarantee that the sponsored party will not disturb the public order.

of the Emirati state apparatus. Solutions exist, but they usually prove expensive: Business licenses can be transferred from one emirate to another, from one part of the city to the urban free zone, or from one Emirati sponsor to another. This situation exposes Iranians to increasing precarity, as evidenced by their narratives and by the strategies they are forced to adopt. While the wealthiest and those closest to power usually find solutions, the others sometimes have to leave their home after decades of residence in the Emirates.

The securitization of migration policies, then, primarily impacts migrants from the most vulnerable social backgrounds as well as those who lack sufficient social capital to mobilize resources that might mitigate the consequences of these policies. Indeed, the precarity of migrants' situations must be put into perspective, as there has been a trend towards granting long-term residence status to the most qualified migrants since the mid-1990s, and especially in the early 2000s. Therefore, in addition to differentiating by nationality, measures aimed at preventing migrant settlement in the countries of the Arab Gulf increasingly differentiate by class, favouring the settlement of the most educated migrants who often come from affluent backgrounds (Thiollet, 2016; Vora, 2013).

The stratification of access to residence rights is thus increasingly a function of migrants' economic power and skills. This stratification reflects the trend towards selective immigration—as found in Canada or Australia—which is embodied in new UAE regulations, whereby skilled migrants or individuals who invest huge sums in the country can obtain long-term residence permits.

Faced with such constraints, Iranian migrants are forced to adopt economic and social practices and modes of representation that allow them to mitigate their effects in their everyday lives. However, migrants' precarious situation and blocked access to citizenship do not prevent them from forming associative structures, engaging in cultural and artistic activities or developing multiple modes of belonging to Dubai. All of this effectively translates into urban practices that are integrated in different moments of migrants' everyday lives (Moghadam, 2013a).

Centre and Periphery in the Migrant Experience

When narrating their experiences of migration, Iranians from all backgrounds often highlight the date of their emigration from Iran or the Western country where they settled prior to coming to the UAE. The criterion of seniority is especially important in the context of Dubai, both because of the city's rapid transformation and because of the recent emergence of legal categories that have divided historical transnational communities, including the Iranian community. As in the case of the Indian migrants studied by Neha Vora (2013), seniority of stay in Dubai translates into claims to authenticity vis-à-vis those who came afterwards. In fact, most of my interlocutors from historical communities experienced their lack of legal integration into Emirati society as an injustice in light of what they viewed as their seniority-based authenticity and contribution to the prosperity of the city.

Geographical provenance in Iran is another very important status marker. It explains not only Iranians' reasons for migrating, but also their modalities of integration into the host society—in particular through the ties they maintain with Iran and the UAE and the resources they are able to mobilize. During my fieldwork, migrants often mentioned their geographical origins without my asking: "I am from Shiraz," "I am from Bandar Abbas," "I lived in Los Angeles before coming here." Beyond its instructive value, this information is presumed to carry symbolic weight for the interlocutor—in this case myself, an Iranian from Tehran and member of the diaspora. Migrants' selective enunciation of certain aspects of their lives should be seen primarily as a desire to convey a particular self-image and, consequently, as a strategy and form of political affirmation.

In Iran, as in any other nation-state, geographical origins convey stereotypical information about the person who enunciates them. The assignment of Iranians to a particular geographical

region, and hence to a collective stereotype, often takes the form of a dichotomy between central and majoritarian Shia Persian speakers and peripheral ethnic groups and sometimes marginalized Sunnis. The habitus and self-other representations of Iranian Arabs, Baluchis, Sunni Persians from the peripheral regions of Iran (e.g., Larestan), and Shia from major Iranian cities were partly formed through relations between the centre and the periphery of the country. Understanding how these formerly scattered groups live together in the small territory of Dubai (and its metropolitan area) requires us to revisit Iranian centre-periphery dynamics and their attendant socio-cultural differentials.

Throughout the 20th century, both the Iranian state and the urban elite played a key role in promoting an identification system centred on class and/or territory in addition to identities based on ethnic, linguistic, tribal and/or religious affiliation. As highlighted by Elling (2013), Iranian nationalism, the outlines of which were drawn in the 19th century, has remained an instrument of political legitimization under the Islamic Republic—though the political ideology of the regime has also led to attempts at associating nationalism with Islam.

Meanwhile, the nationalist conception of the state reinforced Persian-centrism, which revolves around the glorious image of ancient Persia, the exceptional character of Shiism in the Islamic world, and the racial superiority of the Iranian people due to its Aryan roots (Elling, 2013, p. 27). The centralization policies discussed earlier, initiated under the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), were resumed in the post-revolutionary period and, later, during the Iran-Iraq war, even as the war and reconstruction allowed for better integration of the peripheries (in particular through the building of multiple road and air infrastructures). The Persian-centrism driving these policies obviously strengthened feelings of exclusion among ethnic or religious groups who did not identify with this normative Iranianness.

Thus, under the two Pahlavi reigns as well as under the Islamic Republic (1979-Today), Persian and Shia urban cultures were promoted as the main components of Iranianness (even though only 50% of the Iranian population speaks Persian). These political and ideological trends were accompanied by growing urbanization, reinforcing the dominant character of urban culture vis-à-vis rural areas (in 1976, just over 47% of Iranians lived in cities, whereas urban dwellers account for 70% of the Iranian population today). In this context, Bernard Hourcade (1988) raises the question of whether urban dwellers in contemporary Iranian society might constitute "a new ethnic group," with its own habitus, since in Iran today "*to become a city dweller is to speak Persian.*" As Hourcade highlights(1988, p. 172):

> *Social identity therefore tends to supplant ethnic identity, but without fully erasing it... Iranian society, which is mainly composed of urban dwellers, young people, and employees, is thus influenced by notions of development and social success, according to a value system which contrasts markedly with that inherited from ethnic cultures based on the rural economy and the perpetuation of acquired values[5].*

Policies privileging Persian culture have thus shaped representations of populations from the peripheral regions. Still today, these policies reinforce the divide between the centre and the peripheries of the country—between the feeling of superiority of urbanites and the feeling of marginalization that prevails among people living in the peripheries. Such representations remain strong in the migratory context.

In Larestan, the southern region of Iran where I conducted fieldwork to study the links between local populations and Iranian migrants in Dubai, tensions between the centre and the peripheries are tangible. They are often reflected in the everyday discourse of the region's inhabitants, as is made clear by the words of a resident of Evaz, a city of 17,000 (mostly Sunni) people:

> *We are predominantly Sunni here, and the small percentage of Shia in the city were sent by the government to take on government functions. We depend on the city of Lar, but the*

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[5] Translated from French to English by the author.

city of Gerash is now a county in its own right. The people of Gerash are Shia, and they managed to get accepted as an independent county, which is strange and unfair since Gerash is located between Evaz and Lar. Evaz is a poor city and the government plays a minor role in development projects because we are Sunni[6].

While it is impossible to verify the objective reasons why Gerash, the city that competes with my interviewee's, was granted county status, there is no doubt that the feeling of being marginalized by the central state due to the city's Sunni identity persists in the minds of local inhabitants—a significant portion of whom have actually migrated to Arab countries of the Gulf. This representation stems from the perpetuation of discriminatory measures, but also from the fact that, for the last hundred years, the urban elite has struggled to recognize the role played by minorities on the public scene.

Similarly, ethnic minorities like Iranian Arabs continue to be marginalized by the policies of the Iranian government. In southern Iran, speaking Arabic in school is prohibited, even when the teacher is from an Arabic-speaking region. As for teacher-soldiers from non-Arabic-speaking regions who come to southern Iran for their military service, they have difficulty communicating with their students who, until the age of seven, speak only Arabic with their families and in their everyday lives. Such measures are part of the policy of purification of the Persian language that was initiated under the Pahlavis and perpetuated under the Islamic Republic. They have strengthened the sense of Arab identity among Iranian Arabs, who have retained their customs despite the predominance of the Persian language and the large-scale diffusion of the way of life that prevails in major Iranian cities.

To this are added stereotypes about Arabs, who are assimilated with "barbarians" and "grasshopper eaters" by Iranian urbanites. This image of the Arab largely results from the articulation between the views of the Qajar elite and of early 20th century modernist intellectuals with the state policies that accompanied them (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). As Reza Zia-Ebrahimi recalls, nationalist modernists sought to give historical depth to the conflict that was brewing between Arabs and Iranians at the time, and the arbitrary opposition they created was further reinforced by political and intellectual projects of nation building. Zia-Ebrahimi also highlights the role of European orientalists in creating distinct categories of populations: The latter notably opposed Arabs and Iranians on the grounds that they had incompatible cultures, often establishing a hierarchy between populations based on linguistic criteria and types of cultural production (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 109). Iranian modernists later embraced the modes of thought of European orientalists, which explains their aversion to any form of mixing between what they construed as Arab and Iranian cultures (and even races). They thus sought to preserve the alleged substance of Iranian culture, which was deemed superior to that of Semitic Arabs.

The inferior status attributed to Arabs by Iranian urbanites is clearly felt by Iranian Arabs themselves, who increasingly challenge this status while protecting themselves with their own self-definition. To some extent, the discourse of otherness between Arabs and Ajam is reproduced in the migratory context.

"Being Persian" in an Arab Land

On arriving in Dubai, Iranians emigrating from large Persian-dominated Iranian cities or Western capitals often ask themselves, "how can I live in an Arab country?" As we have seen earlier, the Arab evokes negative and stereotypical images in the Iranian collective imagination. Yet not only do many Dubai residents come from other Arab nations, but the Iranian population of Dubai is also composed of Arabs from the south of Iran. This raises the question of what it means, exactly, to be Arab.

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[6] Interview conducted in Larestan in 2011.

The Iranian notion that only Gulf Arabs can truly be considered "Arab," and, consequently, that Middle Easterners and North Africans cannot, is reinforced by Iran's geographical proximity to Iraq and the Arab countries of the Gulf. This notion surfaces even in the official discourse of politicians. Thus, during his 2007 visit to Egypt, former reformist Iranian President Mohammad Khatami boldly distinguished between "Arabs" and Egyptians:

> "*The Arab-Ajam question has often been posed in the history of the two peoples, but it has never concerned Iranian-Egyptian relations or the way these two peoples view each other; besides, Iranians believe that Egypt is close to Iran and its culture.*"
> (Kharazi, 2010)

This vision, however, essentially prevails in Iran's major urban centres and corresponds to the nationalist ideology that developed among the elites. The reality of Arab-Iranian or Arab-Persian relations is different in peripheral regions and especially in the provinces, where part of the population consists of Iranian Arabs who have established long-term ties with Iraq or the southern shore of the Gulf, and who continue to enjoy dual membership.

As mentioned earlier, the values of Persian-centric nationalism were gradually integrated into the modes of thought and representation of Iranians, prompting the exclusion of some and the acceptance of others. Yet, in the Dubai experience, these Persian-Arab and centre-periphery antagonisms take on a material dimension. Both groups are physically present in the same city, and it is not uncommon for Iranians arriving from Tehran or a Western city to discover that their Emirati sponsor—towards whom they are expected to show respect since migrants are dependent on their local sponsors—understands Persian and comes from southern Iran.

In effect, the diversity of Iranian populations in Dubai, the spaces of sociability in which they circulate, the modes of reproduction of their material culture, and the cultural and social practices they engage in have given rise to a sort of reconstituted Iran. The practices of migrants are in turn defined in terms of this new living environment. While these practices reflect a fragmented Iranianness, they can also help to overcome the divisions inherited from the country of origin. This can be observed in charitable and associative or cultural activities, which simultaneously function as places for the reproduction of hierarchies and as spaces of cosmopolitan encounters.

For instance, among Iranians who have acquired UAE citizenship, the desire for recognition of one's allegiance to the new nation seems to have weakened transnational relations with Iran. Certain Emirati families of Iranian origin have even come to ignore the Iranian New Year (Norouz), the most widespread tradition and certainly one of the prime vectors of the expression of Iranianness, while still retaining their distinctive markers in Emirati society. By contrast, members of historical Iranian communities who kept their Iranian citizenship maintain strong transnational relations with Iran—as evidenced by activities ranging from the social organization of their everyday lives (including the celebration of transnational marriages) to participation in the political field of the country of origin and to the creation of charitable networks on both shores of the Gulf (Moghadam, 2013b). Here again, distinctive markers remain between the different categories of migrants—between southern Iranians who choose to celebrate the last Wednesday of the year, the famous Chaharshanb-e-sūrī, in a park located far from urban or Westernized Iranians, and Iranians who consider themselves "world citizens" and celebrate this same event on the prestigious artificial island of Palm Jumeirah.

In Dubai, such space-times of sociability shared in the name of national culture function as a vector for the reproduction of Iranianness. They also sometimes provide opportunities for encounters between the periphery and the centre, between Arabs of Iranian origin and Iranians from Los Angeles. In the migrant experience, the Other may be Iranians from other geographical and social backgrounds, or non-Iranians as they are imagined within and beyond national borders—Arabs, for example. In her study of South Asians in England, Pnina Werbner (2004) observed a similar process, with members of the South Asian diasporas coming together in some

contexts and clashing in others, depending on their cultural or social affinities in the home country and the social and economic status they enjoy in the host society.

The case of Dubai allows us to see how stereotypes and representations inherited from past experience influence interactions between individuals, all of whom consider themselves Iranians, in a context in which professional relationships require them to live in a shared space. A number of my interviews illustrate this idea. Moein, for example, evoked the Arab-Persian question as follows:

"If you've come here to study and tell me it was Iranians who built Dubai, I have to tell you I'm not one of them. When I arrived in Dubai, I started working with westerners, but my best friends are Iraqis, Syrians and so on, and we work much better together. Also, Iranians have done a lot of harm to this country. They've borrowed thousands of dirhams from the banks and left Dubai without paying anything back. I don't think we should always say Dubai has developed thanks to Iranians. The Arabs know perfectly well Iranians look down on them. But sometimes, with a bit of effort you can change the way you behave. For example, my sister always puts on a little veil when she meets Arabs, even if she doesn't usually cover her head. Or, for example, in Ras al Khaimeh, where most of the population are of Iranian origin, whenever I arrived for a meeting with a local (an Emirati), I'd say a few words in Arabic - just basics because I don't actually speak Arabic. Then sometimes the person would reply 'Oh, but I'm Iranian too.' I understood that they had never set foot in Iran, but still wanted me to know they had Iranian origins.[7]"

Mojdeh related his experiences as follows:

"I was living in Denmark but decided to come and live here about ten years ago. At the beginning, I didn't even smoke hookahs, I thought it was too Arab! I worked with westerners, but now I find we're very close to the Arabs. I didn't realise when I lived in Europe or Iran. From as early as when I was a kid, I'd heard Arabic, the 'language of savages'! In Dubai now, I've got lots of Emirati and Syrian friends.[8]"

Many Iranian immigrants who arrived in the 1970s now speak Arabic. In some cases, their children may even speak better Arabic than Persian. Thus, their new personal experience of the Arab-as-other has led to a flexible view of differences between Iranians of the centre and those of the periphery, between the Arabs of southern Iran and those from Shiraz or Tehran, yet without eliminating the images and stereotypes associated with the origins of each.

Cultural Initiatives and the Reproduction of Social Hierarchies

Observation of initiatives taken by Iranian migrants to represent, or even "preserve", the culture of their country helps us distinguish the various ways in which social hierarchies are reproduced or negotiated in the migration context. Migrants' initiatives exemplify their ability to mobilize resources to carry through their migration project, combining their know-how with their capacity to act and indicating their autonomy. Thus, the actions of migrants can be read as "distinctions and differentiations on the one hand, affirmations and initiatives on the other" (Ma Mung, 2009).

In Dubai, these Iranians' initiatives create spheres in which they shape the self-representations they choose to give to other individuals and to Iranian communities both in and outside their country of residence, via cross-border relationships, but also through the social connections and spaces they create there. They are, therefore, as Aihwa Ong (1999, p. 88) puts it, "manipulators of cultural symbols" that they use to hone the image they and the groups they belong to project. The following example illustrates how this very process of conception itself

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[7] Interview conducted in Dubai in 2012.
[8] Interview conducted in Dubai in 2012.

takes into account the various representations different groups of Iranians have of each other. Similarly, participating in these activities is in itself a form of social distinction that creates new hierarchies among individuals asserting they are from the same national community.

The *Iranica* is an international project to create an encyclopedia of Iranian and middle-eastern studies, founded well before the revolution, in 1970, by Ehsan Yarshater of the department of Iranian studies at Columbia University in New York. The first version was published in 1982; the online version was launched in the late 90s and has continued to expand throughout the 2000s. The project has received significant financial support from major institutions, but also from wealthy Iranians, most of them living in the west. With the growing concentration of Iranian businessmen in Dubai, especially those previously resident in western countries, the emirate was also invited to participate in the global network and contribute to *Iranica*'s funding. In 2002, Mr L., a businessman who had settled there after numerous migrations, agreed to represent Dubai. At the time of our interview, in 2011, Mr L. was in charge of an import-export company.

Talking about Iranians in Dubai, Mr L. seemed surprised by those he met 'in certain parts of the city,' referring tacitly to the Dubai Creek district, where Iranians from southern Iran traditionally congregate.

> *"I'm not saying they're any worse than me, but we're very different. These are also very traditional families, some of them are very religious! So we don't have much in common to make up an Iranian community here. I got a few dozen of my friends together and proposed we set up a committee to collect funds for Iranica. But most of the people I invited to join were against the project. They said it was too risky to take it on because the Iranian government didn't necessarily support the Iranica, so it might create trouble for people involved. I was surprised at their reaction, as this is such a valuable project. So I went to see another group of people I knew in Dubai and together we set up an association, the Friends of Iranica in Dubai.[9]"*

Gradually, *Iranica*'s fund-raisers and gala dinners started to gain in importance. They started with ceremonies bringing together 30 to 40 people in relatively modest hotels, where the organizers were able to collect about $1800. But eventually, the dinners attracted over 400 participants and raised more than $100,000 at a time.

> *"In the beginning, people in Dubai didn't know what the encyclopaedia was, or that it was a project initiated by Columbia University in the US. For the Iranian community, it was something new compared with the usual events for Iranians in Dubai, where pop singers come over from Los Angeles to organise dance parties and other leisure activities. Our events were on a different level, cultural evenings with a guest speaker talking about Persian and Iranian culture. For instance, one of our guests talked about the development of women's clothing in Iranian history. People started to really like these events. That's' how we helped Iranica, first by introducing it to a class of educated, well-off Iranians in Dubai, then by collecting money, our second objective."[10]*

These cultural and social activities, organised by middle-class or wealthy Iranians, reconstitute social spaces which include some and exclude others. The head of the Friends of *Iranica* in Dubai insisted that many divisions and "cultural differences" existed between Iranians there. He also reminded me that the *Iranica* was an English-language publication and, as such, could only be of interest to the educated. He concluded that *Iranica*'s evening events were a rare meeting-place for Dubai's "Iranian elite", compared with the many concerts organised by singers from Los Angeles or southern Iranians, which he viewed as popular and low-level.

Participating in these activities therefore contributes to strategies of social distinction and recognition, which in turn participate in shaping the image of migrants vis-à-vis their peers, but

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[9] Interview conducted in Dubai in 2011.
[10] Interview conducted in Dubai in 2011.

also vis-à-vis Iranians inside the country as well as those settled in other countries. The different communities of the diaspora judge each other and define each other in relation to knowledge that has circulated about their formation at a given period of Iranian history. Thus, Iranian communities in Los Angeles may be breezily branded as rich, shallow, and ignorant, while in Europe they are more often supposed to be intellectuals and politicians, and in Dubai, rich gold-diggers with no interest in culture at all. While certain historical factors may underlie these representations, they are also the result of stereotyping and normative discourses that ignore the evolution of these communities and their host societies.

In Dubai, if, generally speaking, the motives underlying the migration plans of individuals from the big cities are different from those of migrants from the south of Iran, both groups have created their own migratory world by bringing into play know-how and abilities acquired in urban environments both prior to their departure and through previous migrations. For Iranians from the big cities, or returning from the west, these cultural activities are more often globally-oriented, taking place at international level. While the determination to go beyond local or national identities and insistence on the global nature of their actions are common features of the discourse of "cosmopolitan" Iranians, this professed cosmopolitanism is also grounded in home-country social and geographical origins and in possibilities of distinction and differentiation via-à-vis other Iranians encountered in the migration context. As Aihwa Ong (1999) pointed out in the case of Hong Kong emigrants in the US, the practices of Iranians from the better-off middle classes draw their strength from the acquisition and deployment of a certain symbolic capital, seen as bringing recognition at the international level and in transnational spaces. Thus, the spaces devoted to accumulating this symbolic capital are not business environments, but configurations where cultural distinctions determine the relative symbolic status of migrants among themselves: those who come from the centre, the periphery, Europe or the United States, the old and the new, those who cooperate with the Iranian state and those who refuse, and so on.

Concluding remarks

Analysis of the daily life of migrants and their initiatives shows that, while hierarchies may well take on new forms, they are not eliminated from interaction between individuals, and give rise to new power relations. However, these capacities for distinction and differentiation do not always follow the patterns usual in the society of origin. Migration, as an "indeterminate" situation, allows those involved to question images and knowledge acquired in the pre-departure environment and form new ones in the course of the migratory experience, contributing to the creation of the migrant's universe. It is in these circumstances that the multiplication of registers of action can potentially blur the boundaries between migrants from different social classes and from diverse geographical origins, and the images and representations associated with them.

In other words, the migrant situation's indeterminate nature gives rise to new social positions. This undoubtedly depends on the types of economic, symbolic, and cultural capital migrants are able to bring to play—with the most vulnerable being the most exposed to precarity. Yet, the context of transnational relations and the experience of migration are also opportunities to acquire new skills and form friendships and bonds of solidarity that help in coping with structural constraints.

The moral geography of migrant life, grounded in various space-times, should therefore be explored through a holistic approach, aimed at restoring the agency of migrant narratives. This approach rests on the assumption that migrants build their autonomy via the skills they mobilize, the multiplicity of places they traverse, and the trajectories they follow. The agency of migrants effectively manifests itself in their ability to assert themselves through their own initiatives, starting with the "migration project" of leaving and settling in another country, and ending with the process of "migratory creation" (Ma Mung, 2009) whereby, as strangers in a foreign land, they are made

to reinvent their lives. Thus, whatever the level of precarity experienced by migrants in a given situation, and whatever the forms of structural violence (Gardner, 2010) they are subjected to under neoliberal conditions (Kanna, 2011; Vora, 2013), it is important to consider and acknowledge their subjective and emotional experiences as well as the autonomy they are able to achieve. The deterministic approach, which assumes a system of power whose surveillance mechanisms fully deprive migrants of their capacity to act, further consolidates the system in place. Accordingly, it seems more important to talk about migrants in their own words and understand their own ways of meeting constraints with coping strategies than to impose immutable categories on them —whether produced by administrative apparatuses or by the academic machinery.

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