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Persian Pride and Prejudice: Identity Maintenance and Interest Calculations Among Iranians in the United Arab Emirates

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Given the ongoing tensions between Iran and the Gulf States, it is odd that Persian speakers, and Iranians in particular, living in the Gulf's Arab States have received so little scholarly attention. Based on extensive fieldwork in both the UAE and Iran, this article examines conceptualizations of identity and interests within Iranian communities in the UAE. In building an understanding of the diversity of Iranians, while highlighting commonalities across their diverse spectrum, it paints a complex picture of people trapped between pride in their identity and the prejudice they face because of that identity. The article develops the concept of *identity maintenance* as a key tool, placing this approach within wider calculations of interests and hedging processes embarked on by Iranians within an environment which increasingly securitizes Iranian identity. The case both enriches our understanding of the mosaic of migration in the Gulf and highlights key drivers within processes of identity maintenance. These processes represent a logical outcome of the context of precarity and suspicion which pertains in the UAE, making identity maintenance both similar to and considerably different from more typical migration environments in the West.

Keywords: *Iranian Diaspora; Persian Gulf; Identity Maintenance; Migration; UAE*

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'An Iranian stays an Iranian no matter where they live,' Hamid, an elderly Iranian shopkeeper, told us when asked what it meant to be an Iranian living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).[1] 'It's an honor to be an Iranian,' he proudly added.[2] There are

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approximately 500,000 Iranians among a UAE population most commonly estimated at nine million,[3] making Iranians the fifth largest diaspora group in the UAE by nationality.[4] If we add in Afghans and Tajiks,[5] the UAE's total Persian-speaking community is around 650,000, which is equivalent to more than half the size of the UAE citizen population of 1,084,764 (Gulf, 2014). Iranians are one of the oldest and most established immigrant populations in the Arab States of the Persian Gulf (hereafter 'the Gulf') (Fuccaro, 2005). Their relationship with these states' governments has long been subject to the vagaries of the regional political environment, with regular periods of tension (Alshayji, 2002). Despite Iran's increasingly interventionist policies in the region, an Iranian diaspora remains rooted on the Gulf's Arab side,[6] yet surprisingly little is known about these communities. In recent years, the UAE's sudden and unexplained deportation of hundreds of Iranians who had lived in the Emirates for many decades have marked an increased level of hostility between the UAE and Iran (Mehr News Agency, 2012; *Donya-e-Eqtesad*, 2016).

It is against this backdrop that our study unfolded and that this article is situated. We begin the process of filling the research gap associated with Iranian

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[2]See the online appendix for more information on respondents; all names are pseudonyms.

[3] The last UAE census was in 2010 and estimated the total population at 8,264,070. Most estimates from 2016 and 2017 hover at, or slightly above, nine million (UAE, 2010, 5).

[4] Based on internal estimate of the UAE's Federal Demographic Council and perhaps the best open-source estimate made in 2015 by bq Magazine, (Snoj, 2015). Dubai, of course, has by far the highest concentration of Iranians in the UAE, due to the Emirate's long trading history. See Marchal (2005).

[5] Estimated by the Afghan Embassy in the UAE at 150,000, (Afghan Embassy, n.d.). This number makes no distinction between Pashto and Dari speakers, however, meaning that Persian mother-tongue speakers will be considerably fewer than this number. Figures for the numbers of Tajiks are difficult to find. It is likely that numbers of Tajiks are below 15,000 but growing at a moderate pace (Азия-Плюс [Asia Media], 2014).

[6] With predominantly Persian Iran on the North side and the predominantly Arab states of the Gulf Co-operation Council on the South side, the Gulf has a Persian and an Arab 'side,' hence the constant squabbling over the very nomenclature of the body of water which divides them. Arabian Gulf is used in the Arab World and Persian Gulf used in Iran. Since Persian Gulf is also the Western historical term, it is the more widely used name outside the region.

communities on the Gulf's Arab Side and contribute to wider literatures on identity and Gulf Migration (Ahmed, 2012; Kapiszewski, 2001). The large size, long-established presence, and economic contribution of the Iranian population in the UAE mean that Iranians are a significant and well-established part of UAE society. Yet because of regional tensions, restrictive citizenship practices, and active suspicion, Iranians are often placed in a third category within the UAE's demographic mosaic: they are not, and never will be, UAE citizens, yet they are unlike other migrant communities, given their history and greater embeddedness in the local social fabric. There are, for example, few commonalities between the Iranian population and the mass of migrant labor fulfilling menial tasks in the UAE. Indeed, while there are some similarities between Iranians in the UAE and the Gulf's Indian expatriate communities, Iranians still stand apart because of continuing deep suspicions and regional tensions. In this way, Iranians are simultaneously similar and yet deeply other.

The existing literature on Gulf migration remains fairly limited, and essentially non-existent, when it comes to Iranians. In addressing this gap, our research partly draws upon a wider literature examining the experiences of Persians/Iranians in the West, especially the United States and Australia (e.g., Asghari-Fard, 2017; Modaressi, 2001 and Mobasher 2012). This literature brings with it problems, however, particularly the comparability between the experiences of Iranians in western contexts and in the UAE, where Iranian migrants tend to experience more circular than fixed forms of migration, even though their roots in the UAE are surprisingly deep (Babar and Gardner, 2016). In the UAE, the lack of routes to citizenship, the absence of expectations for integration, and the hostility, uncertainty, and prejudice Iranians face create a different dynamic and set of pressures and

calculations from those commonly documented in western contexts (e.g., Mostofti, 2003).

Given this situation, the key questions with which this article engages are: How do Iranians in the UAE cope with their status in the third category in which they fall, and how does this status affect the calculation of their personal interests, as well as their sense of positionality and identity? While the reality of permanent impermanence is common to all migrant communities in the Persian Gulf (Ahmed, 2012), none share the pressures, position, and paranoia which Iranians face, due to the geo-political situation and nature of state power and suspicion in the region (Jones, 2010). Iranians' response to the specific pressures they face, therefore, contrasts with existing discussions of migrant identity negotiation and assimilation in other contexts (Dahinden 2012; Dewind, and Kasinitz, 1997).

To explore its core questions, this article engages key literatures on Gulf migration and Iranian diasporas to further develop the concept of *identity maintenance* as a distinct process from usual narratives of assimilation, identity negotiation, and multiculturalism. The idea of identity maintenance is remarkably little used in migration research, which is surprising, given the field's transnational turn in recent decades and recognition that assimilation processes documented in western migration contexts are not universal to migrant experiences everywhere (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). To date only a few studies have used the concept in a migration context (Alba and Nee, 1999; Brown and Bean, 2006). Often it is either used as a synonym for the struggle to retain elements of a separate identity within a context of gradual assimilation (Giles and Johnson, 2009) or connected with individual psychological processes (Boekestijn, 1988; Ethier and Deaux, 1994), neither of which captures our meaning.

In the case of Iranians in the UAE, identity maintenance is perhaps best conceived as a safety net. The costs of purchase are minimal, and the benefits are significant even if it is never required. The article posits that migrants attitudes toward, and practices of, identity maintenance are closely related to three key variables: 1) existing pride in national identity, 2) a political context of suspicion and established socio-cultural divisions, and crucially, 3) the need to safeguard interests and create options given the threat of deportation or non-renewal of visas. The case of Iranians in the UAE is particularly interesting since it contains a relatively high degree of suspicion and prejudice toward Iranians while also allowing them the space and opportunities to quietly maintain their identity, thus enabling identity maintenance in two ways.

In examining the workings of identity maintenance in the case at hand, we show how identity is actively reinforced, articulated, and transmitted through multiple interacting choices, path dependencies, and performances shaped by existing situational and opportunistic variables. We argue that identity maintenance is crucial for Iranians, given the context, but is also facilitated by the sense of superiority felt by almost all Iranians. In doing so, we demonstrate the utility of this process of identity maintenance for understanding the push and pull factors shaping migrant identity in similar situations.

Of course, identity maintenance is not always as simple as it seems, and Iranians are far from homogenous in their composition. This heterogeneity impacts approaches to identity maintenance. The major division here is between those who hold only Iranian passports and those who hold *both* Iranian and Western citizenship.[7] Those with Western citizenship have already had to negotiate their own

[7] Western in this context implies citizenship of European, North American, or Australasian states.

identity in a different context (Brøndsted-Sejersen, 2008) and are much more secure in their position in the UAE, as they are typically in well-paid employment (rather than running their own business), sponsored for their visas by powerful employers, and elevated and better protected by holding Western citizenship. Despite these divisions among Iranians, the theme of identity maintenance remained consistent; it merely expressed itself slightly differently between the two groups, as we examine below.

The context and shared experiences of all three variables (pride, prejudice, threat) outlined above mean that dual-citizens, representing perhaps 10 percent of the Iranian population in the UAE, actively engage in forms of identity maintenance similar to those who hold only Iranian citizenship. This shared process of identity maintenance differs in a fundamental way from the *preservation* of cultural and linguistic heritage among settled Iranian migrant communities that has been documented in the 'traditional' countries of Iranian migration, such as Australia, Canada, and the United States (Mostofi, 2003). The existing literature on Iranians abroad skews toward examinations of the diaspora in the United States (Mobasher, 2012) and Australia (Asghari-Fard and Zakia-Hossain, 2017) and focuses on issues such as language retention (Modarresi, 2001; Megerdoomian, 2012), sensory worlds (Dennis and Warin, 2007), signage (Izadi and Parvaresh, 2016), and the *negotiation* of identities, given Iran's contentious politics (Mobasher, 2006). As this article shows, these factors notably different from the process of identity maintenance we encountered in the UAE.

With no possibility of citizenship or permanent residency, Iranians in the UAE are all too aware of their vulnerability to the vagaries of geopolitical tensions and posturing. With many having significant investments and often generations of embeddedness in the UAE, there is therefore a great deal at stake both financially

and emotionally, and this situation forces a mindset of hedging and calculation. The example of how Iranians, regardless of whether they are single or dual nationals, actively engage in identity maintenance within the UAE is a fascinating response to pressures which, given individual differences in citizenship status, should not necessarily be shared and experienced to the same extent. Thus, another contribution this article makes is to the literature on dual citizenship, especially dual citizens in third countries with a significant presence of fellow nationals. Given the UAE's specific context, the nature of the Iranian population, and the political backdrop, Iranians in the UAE are linked by enormous pride in being Iranian and an experience of prejudice and threats which makes the active maintenance of identity a necessity not a luxury.

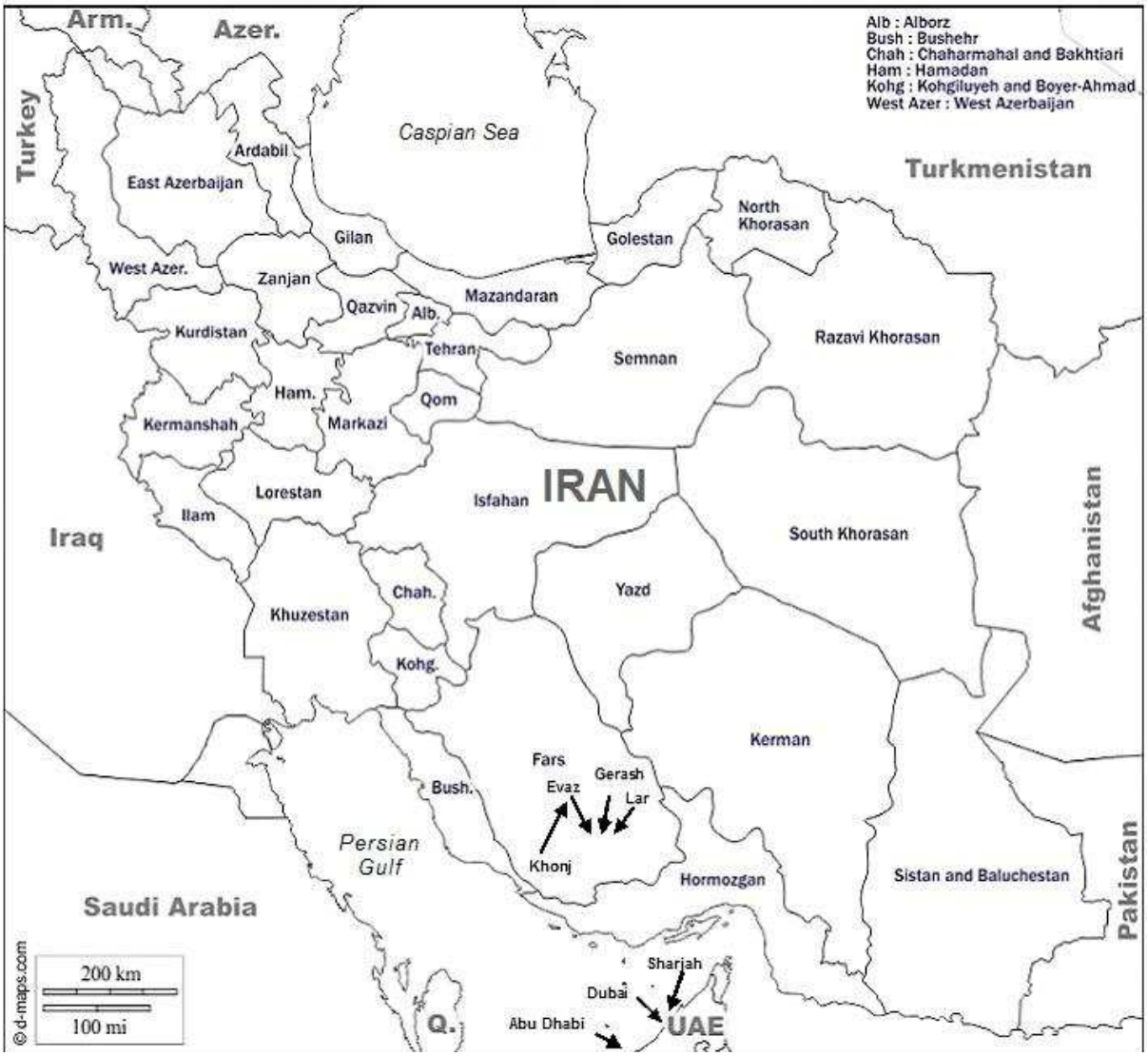
To develop these ideas, the article begins with a discussion of our fieldwork and approach to data collection. This section is followed by an examination of the critical internal and regional contexts in which Iranians in the UAE find themselves. From these foundations, the article proceeds to its main focus in examining how and why Iranians in the UAE maintain their identity and how Iranians' personal interests are calculated through the interactions between commerce and identity across multiple spaces. In highlighting these processes, the article demonstrates how these facts make Iranians far less of the potential 'fifth column'[8] feared by UAE authorities and far more a unified identity group than the UAE might like. As the conclusion lays out, the article's findings have significant implications for Gulf politics and migration studies since they shed new light on the similarities and differences of Iranian diasporas, open avenues for fuller differentiation within discussions of Gulf migration, and importantly offer a markedly different context in which identity maintenance as a

[8] i.e. infiltrators, saboteurs, subversives

concept can be deployed to understand different modes of coping in a non-assimilationist environment.

Fieldwork and Approach

This article is based upon three periods of fieldwork during 2013 and a number of shorter follow-ups in 2014 and 2016. Fieldwork in the UAE, a federal state in which the seven constituent Emirates retain considerable policy levers, took place in three Emirates - Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah - as well as in key towns in Iran's Fars province (see map below). Given its concentration of Iranians, Dubai accounted for around sixty percent of fieldwork. We spent long periods engaging in participant observation in Iranian-run shops, cafes, and restaurants, as well as in districts known for a large Iranian presence. In these spaces, we gathered information through observation and brief discussions with those present. Alongside this work, and generating the bulk of our data, were a number of semi-structured interviews with a wide range of respondents within the UAE's Iranian population and with those in Iran's Fars province who had spent significant time in the UAE.



The Gulf - Showing the UAE's main cities and the location of Fars Province in Iran. Amp modified from: https://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=51725&lang=en

In identifying respondents for interviews, we took three approaches: 1) Drawing on existing contacts and networks, 2) Identifying key individuals with whom interviews were arranged prior to our arrival in country, and 3) Approaching people in establishments with Persian names, tropes, or symbols in key commercial and service districts. This mix proved to be very successful and frequently led to significant snowballing effects. We gained access to a diverse range of respondents and frequently engaged in protracted and profound discussions with interviewees. We had expected much more suspicion, being researchers from British universities, but people opened up remarkably quickly, and almost all were willing to discuss very

sensitive topics in great depth. The research team's composition as a Western researcher and an Iranian researcher appeared to create confidence. Average interview length was 41 minutes, if we remove the two longest and shortest interviews at 147 minutes, 108 minutes, 19 minutes, and 25 minutes, respectively. Indeed, if we discount the additional large numbers of interviews of less than fifteen minutes, this article is based on almost 110 interviews with just over 130 respondents in the UAE and Iran's Fars Province. Interviews were mostly conducted in Persian/Farsi, although three interviews were in English and two in Arabic.

In conducting these interviews, we wanted to build rapport and gain a fuller picture of respondents' experiences, opinions, and feelings, while allowing them space to raise key issues, provide background and context, or offer explanations. In this way we proceeded with a palette of questions devised before fieldwork, to which we added as new themes emerged. These questions largely pivoted around position in the UAE, sense of identity, and links with Iran. We focused, for example, on people's use of Persian in their day-to-day lives, their linguistic abilities in Arabic, and general attitudes toward their language use/choice. We also discussed cultural activities, including *Nowruz* celebrations and religious activities. The objective was to assess respondents' position in the UAE, their sense of the UAE's sensitivities, and how both of these factors affected their practical and emotional sense of place, with particular regard for their practices of interest calculations (i.e., the balance of material interests with other factors - a cost-benefit analysis) and hedging behaviors (i.e., behaviors taken to offset risks, which in turn factor into interest calculations). In selecting respondents, we began by initially targeting those which prior research and knowledge suggested were key influencers among different groups and who could give us access to other key respondents. We were wary of the possible implications

of gatekeepers, however, and, thus, both relied on our own contacts to help us and simply approached people for more detailed interviews. This latter strategy produced around 60 percent of the total interviews.

These approaches enabled us to reach a representative sample of respondents in three core ways. First, it helped us access the elite, dual citizens, small shopkeepers (who form the backbone of the Iranian population), and their employees, thus ensuring broad representation across class lines. Second, we sought to sample from different regions of Iran representing different ethnic groups. Given Iranians' demographic makeup in the UAE (they are mainly from one Iranian province), we worked hard to seek out those from other regions and different ethnic minorities. In the end we managed to conduct interviews with Iranian Baloch and Arabs, as well as those from other provinces, but were less successful in finding Iranian Kurds and Azeris to interview. We went to some effort to check with respondents about the relative size of these ethnic groups and were reassured that our difficulty in finding them represented their low numbers in proportion to the rest of the Iranian community.[9]

Finally, we worked especially hard to ensure access to a representative age and gender sample. While around 20 percent of interviewees were women, clearly this is not a truly representative sample. Factoring in the demographic imbalance between men and women within the UAE's Iranian population (which is, more in balance than the wider mass of South Asian migrants, for example) and the difficulties in accessing Iranian women due to cultural norms and our being two male researchers, 20 percent represents a better-than-expected proportion and goes some way toward being a representative sample. It should, of course, be noted here

[9] We use the word "community" here because it was frequently used by respondents and because it is the common way of talking about different groups within the UAE. Respondents believed firmly that, despite their differences, they were all Iranians.

that around half the women interviewed were dual nationals, who were easier to access, more represented in our initial contacts base, and had clearer and more forcefully expressed opinions. We also, however, interacted with a surprisingly large number of female shop owners or managers, with whom we conducted some of our most fruitful interviews. These women tended to be younger than male interviewees in similar positions. We obtained a roughly even one-third split between our age categories of 18-30, 31-50, and 51 plus, although within different categories of the population, these age splits were more compressed due to the community's structures and cultural norms.

Regional and Domestic Context

The Gulf is an important region for migration, with an estimated 25.2 million migrants comprising a full 49 percent of the population of the Gulf Co-Operation Council States (GLMM, 2016). The region is also of critical geopolitical importance, given its oil reserves, and is the scene of significant tensions, especially with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although the Gulf has traditionally been a cosmopolitan trading space, both Persian and Arab identities hardened over the course of the twentieth century, resulting in heightened identity awareness (Alshayji, 2002). It is no secret that the Arab Gulf States' fear of Iran has profoundly shaped regional politics since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Guéraiche, 2016). In particular, the rhetoric after the 2005 election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, alongside Iran's nuclear program and the Islamic Republic's history of subversion attempts, gradually increased the Gulf States' paranoia about Iranian intentions to fever pitch, even leading to deeper security co-operation with Israel (Jones and Guzansky, 2017). In reality, though, despite geopolitical tensions, extensive migration and connections between the Gulf's two sides are historical facts (Sindelar and Peterson, 1988; al-Rasheed,

2005), and the movement of Iranians to the Gulf's Arab side continues on a large scale today.[10] While Persian and Arab identities have always been somewhat in tension, attempts to export revolutionary Shi'ism from Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to Shi'a Arab minorities have driven sectarian narratives. These sectarian tensions have often been manipulated by states such as Saudi Arabia, which in turn have further stoked prejudices and suspicions of Iran across the region. Geopolitics and reinforced identities, therefore, make Iranians' position in the UAE uniquely uncomfortable.[11]

Scratch below the surface of these tensions, however, and the legacies of a shared Arab-Persian Gulf remain apparent (Nadjmabadi, 2009). There is grudging recognition by many Emiratis, not only of the Persian contribution to the UAE, but also of the Persian ancestry of many UAE citizens (Glioti, 2018). Many Iranian interlocutors in our study sought to play up these facts to justify their presence in the UAE, sometimes using this historical understanding to suggest that because many Emiratis had Iranian backgrounds, the UAE was not a true Arab state and simply a part of a traditional Persian space in which inhabitants had lost or abandoned their identity for political and economic purposes. This history places Iranians in a unique social and cultural position in the UAE, but the nature of identity politics, mutual suspicions, and geopolitics also strongly separate Iranians from Gulf Arabs.

Since Hassan Rouhani's election as President of Iran in 2013, the interim Iran Nuclear Deal in late 2013 (Guéraiche, 2016), and the rise of *daesh* or the so-called Islamic State in 2014, Gulf 'unity of fear' of Iran has diminished somewhat (Bianco and Stansfield, 2018). Beneath the façade of common fear of Iran, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait were always less hard-line than Bahrain and Saudi Arabia toward Tehran.

[10] For Arabs on the Iranian coast, see Nadjmabadi, 2014.
[11] Compared to other migrant groups in the country.

Even within the UAE, a clear fault line divides the two dominant Emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. In January 2014, Dubai's Ruler, Sheikh Mohammed, called for sanctions on Iran to be lifted, sanctions which had been strongly supported by the richest and most powerful Emirate - Abu Dhabi - which traditionally monopolizes the levers of federal foreign policy. Sheikh Mohammed stated in regards to lifting sanctions: 'Iran is our neighbour and we don't want any problem, everybody will benefit' (Bayoumy, 2014). Our fieldwork straddled the end of the Ahmadinejad era and the start of the Rouhani era, yet the change appeared to have little real effect on respondents' identity maintenance and interest calculations.

These regional political tensions also interact with the UAE's fears over population control and migrant dominance (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2011), as well as with the role and rights of citizens (Sater, 2014). Concerns over the potential threats brought by large numbers of migrant workers have led the UAE to develop complex practices of pre-emptive policing, surveillance networks, and advanced identification and bureaucratic control systems to counter subversive and criminal activities and to assist in managing the cultural impact of such a diverse population (Lori, 2011). These processes are reflected in a new drive, post-Arab Spring, to engage the native workforce, reduce under- and unemployment, and encourage solidarity among Emirati citizens by changing and reinforcing the social contract (Fagotto, 2013; Jones, 2017). We thus have a state which does not expect or desire migrant assimilation into the culture of its citizens, which benefits from globalization, but which simultaneously seeks to control globalization's impacts and to protect itself by imposing boundaries.

Migrants in the UAE are considered contractual workers, not potential citizens; indeed, workers fall under contractual law rather than immigration law (Ali,

2010, 138). Iranians are naturally subject to the UAE's stringent requirements regarding residency and status, as well as its complex visa regulations. A key principle underpinning migration to the Gulf is the *kafeel* system of sponsorship (Lori, 2012), in which visas are tied to employment and, until recently, there was no specific retirement visa. The *kafeel* system combines with company ownership rules which, except in the case of businesses operating in Free Zones or as Offshore Companies, require that 51 percent of company ownership is held by an Emirati citizen.[12] For most Iranians the ability to circumvent these ownership rules are minimal, given the nature, tenure, and physical location of their businesses, which are distant from these "Free" zones. Ownership rules, combined with residency and visa restrictions, clearly shape Iranian insecurities and, in turn, shape their interest calculations and identity maintenance as well.

UAE migration policies have become more restrictive in recent years. This shift has in part been justified by the localization process termed 'Emiratization' (Al-Waqfi and Forstenlechner, 2014), leading to decreased numbers of visas and a clampdown on widespread fraud and collusion (Jamal, 2015, 605-606). Since 2003, the Emiratization strategy has been linked to the UAE's Cultural Diversity Policy, which aims to reduce labor migration by increasing the role of technology and diversifying sources of incoming migrants, while ensuring that Emirati citizens are the largest single national group in the population (Vora, 2011). Alongside these recent changes, there are also multiple hierarchization processes associated with issuing visas to migrant workers in the UAE. As Manal Jamal (2015) writes, migration flows

> are carefully engineered so that no one homogenous group prevails, work visas are issued and/or renewed for certain migrant communities but not for

[12] There are 23 Free Zones in Dubai (Cherian, 2017). Offshore companies can only be created in Dubai and Ras al-Khamiah at present. This ownership requirement remained after the comprehensive review of Federal Commercial Companies Law in the UAE in force from 1 July 2015 (PWC, 2015, 2).

> others, and preferential access to public sector jobs is granted to some communities and not others. As a result, an informal... “hierarchization” of migrant communities is in place. (603)

This process is strongly affected by security perceptions, leading in recent years to restrictions on workers from countries particularly affected by the Arab Spring and from Gaza (Jamal, 2015, 607). These restrictions have also applied to Iranians, with numerous, seemingly random, expulsions of Iranians holding valid visas (Saudi Gazette, 2013; BBC Persian, 2013).

The popular image of Gulf migrants is of large numbers of unskilled workers with few rights toiling in intolerable conditions in construction or the most menial jobs (Mednicoff, 2012). While this image is not entirely false, as Attiya Ahmed points out, it tends to 'discipline foreign residents into "temporary labor migrants"' and obscure 'two other elements of foreign residents' experiences of the Gulf, namely historical interregional relations and contemporary forms of socio-political belonging’ that ‘fit awkwardly - under the rubric of labor' (2012, 22-23). These observations are important for the study of Iranians in the UAE, where Iranians’ long history means the specific forms of work they do are far from the Gulf labor stereotypes. As Vora points out in her work on Indians in Dubai:

> [T]he Emirati government considers foreign residents temporary guest workers, [yet] the South Asian-dominated neighborhoods of Dubai's city center have been flourishing for over a century and many foreigners are into their second, third or even fourth generation. (2013, 3)

This observation is also true of many Iranians in the UAE. The widespread binary conception of elite migrants and the lumpen-mass fails to account for the realities of Iranians' position in UAE society. Thus, in terms of the hierarchy identified by Jamal, Iranians are barely mentioned. As with Indians, Iranians can be found in a range of sectors. There is, however, a clear tendency for Iranians to work in the private sector. Indeed, except for naturalized Persian speakers, the public sector is avoided

by most Iranians. There is an equally strong tendency for Iranians to run their own businesses or work in family businesses. In this sense, much of the Iranian population still represents a traditional *khaleeji* merchant class (Fuccaro, 2005) and is very much in the middle to higher echelons of the earnings scale. This positioning gives them more influence and connections than many other communities living in the UAE. However, the vast majority of Iranians must also 'experience, narrate and perform belonging [and identity]... within a state of permanent temporariness' (Vora, 2013, 3). In this way, the challenges facing Iranians are shared to some extent with other migrant communities in the UAE. Before examining the impacts of these contextual factors on identity maintenance and interest calculations among Iranians in the UAE, it is worthwhile briefly disaggregating the Iranian population itself to gain a better picture of its diversity and the aspects which divide and unite it, while exploring its positions in society.

Iranians in the UAE

The first wave of Iranian migration to the Gulf's Arab side originated from southern Iran, especially Fars, Bushehr, Hormozgan, and Khuzestan provinces, which formed part of the maritime trading network that stitched together the Gulf's trading and cultural community over centuries (Riahi, 2012). Thus, it is unsurprising that the bulk of Iranians in the UAE still originate from these provinces (Hojjati, 2014a). Only since the 1990s has Iranian migration to the Gulf diversified into wealthier, more educated, and skilled individuals from elsewhere in Iran (Hojjati, 2014b). These newer migrants, however, comprise only perhaps a fifth of the overall group. While many Iranians migrated to the West after 1979 for political reasons or in search of more social freedom, most Iranian migrants in the Arab Gulf States moved because of the better economic opportunities available or to expand existing

businesses (Hojjati, 2014b). This economic motivation, coupled with the UAE's proximity but also hostility toward integration, especially since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, has meant that Iranians have been reluctant to integrate.

These broad trends are important for understanding the UAE's Iranian population, as well as respondents' regional and ethnic alignment. The majority of those interviewed in the UAE were ethnically Persian, some 87 percent.[13] In terms of regional distribution, 72 percent of respondents were from the Iranian provinces of Fars or Hormozgan and frequently from four towns and their associated villages in the southern region of Fars Province (Lar, Gerash, Khonj, and Evaz). The next most significant origin point in Iran was Tehran, at 11 percent.[14]

The clear majority of respondents were businessmen, either running their own enterprises or working in the family business. This trait was almost universal in those from the Lar region, where only very small numbers worked outside their own or a family business and when working for someone else this was almost exclusively for a businessman from their home town or province. Compared to other Iranian businesses, women were almost entirely absent from these businesses, partly because the community from Fars Province is far more traditional than those from more cosmopolitan Iranian areas and cities and partly because many in this community practice more temporally limited forms of migration, leaving families in Fars province. Those from elsewhere in Iran were also usually in business, although such businesses could include working for larger Iranian enterprises such as banks and travel agencies, something which those from Fars province were never associated with and indeed looked down upon. Iranians with Western passports

[13] We also interviewed Iranians of Arab, Baluch, and Azeri ethnicity, comprising four, seven and two percent of the total, respectively.
[14] We noticed a tendency for some respondents to say Tehran to conceal the reality of their origins or because of the prestige associated with the capital.

were rather different, with most being highly educated professionals working for multi-national corporations or occasionally even the UAE state itself.

There are over 8,000 Iranian trading firms registered in Dubai alone (Fuchs, 2011), and Iranians' accumulated assets in Dubai are estimated at over $300 billion (Corsi, 2006). This figure equates to almost three and a half times Dubai's GDP (Dubai Statistics Center, 2015). As such, Iranians are not only numerically significant and well established but also economically important. Despite political conditions, they are a force to be reckoned with.

Iranians' general attitudes toward the UAE and UAE citizens' attitudes toward Iranians range from outright hostility, especially from UAE citizens, to mild distrust and disengagement and on to tolerance, respect, and a degree of warmth. For the most part, both sides' default position remains one of mild distrust, with many Iranians complaining about their treatment by Arabs in general, while distinguishing between how they are treated by Emiratis of Iranian origin and Arabs. While our research did not focus on the Ajm population of Iranians who technically arrived in the UAE before 1925 but in practice includes those who arrived later and were awarded citizenship (Jamal, 2015), it seems that many in this category have largely abandoned or played down their original identity but clearly tend to have better relationships with Iranians in the UAE. As Saeed stated, "When I go to government offices and I encounter Iranian Emiratis, they respect us equally and they are quite helpful to us. Whereas when I work with an Emirati, they often may not." Overall, though, there was clear distance between locals and Iranians. As Maryam highlighted, "Personally, most Arabs are okay – good in business, but if it wasn't for the need in business, they would probably not interact."

Broadly speaking, through both choice and the structure of the UAE's social environment, Iranians remained separate from other groups and could easily choose to be relatively self-contained. The sheer numbers of those from Fars province further enabled a hierarchy of preferences to be both identified and enacted within the Iranian population itself. This reality can lead other Iranians to feel somewhat excluded. The clear internal hierarchization enacted by those from Fars province was especially evident in employment, business contacts, and social dynamics. Nonetheless, despite the often tight-knit nature of different groups of Iranians, living in a country as globalized as the UAE can present challenges for Iranians in upholding demarcations and identity.

Identity Maintenance of Iranians in the UAE

The usual frame through which to explore the shaping of migrant's identities in their new homes is that of identity negotiation (Friedman and Randeria, 2005), a practice which becomes more pressing for subsequent generations born in the host country (Tehranian, 2004; Brown and Bean, 2006). Things are different in the UAE, however, in large part because of the essential impossibility of obtaining citizenship, the distance between communities, and the UAE's suspicion of Iranians. The reality of permanent impermanence means that the usual ways of exploring issues of identity and belonging, especially assimilation and identity negotiation, have their limits in an Emirati context, where never being able to become a citizen and facing a constant threat of deportation or visa non-renewal have profound effects on identity. Even though, as we found, many Iranians in the UAE were third, fourth or fifth generation, only a tiny proportion of those with Iranian ancestry had an Emirati passport, and fewer still a *khulasat al-qaid*, or 'family book' given to those who can trace their lineage in the UAE to 1925 or earlier - the true marker of full citizenship

(Jamal, 2015, 602). Andrzej Kapiszewski puts the number of expatriates granted citizenship from 1971 to 1997 at around 50,000 or 8 percent of the citizen population (2001, 51). Since 1997, opportunities for citizenship have been considerably restricted (Jamal, 2015). Even those previously granted citizenship have seen their rights eroded (Jamal, 2015, 606). Citizenship is thus, at best, a distant dream for Iranians. Therefore, as avenues toward naturalization after independence became ever tighter and more opaque and as hostility toward Iranians grew, assimilation was ever less desirable and identity maintenance ever more necessary.

This reality means that the bulk of the literature on integration and assimilation, especially on second- and third-generation immigrants, has limited resonance (Ali, 2011). Early theories of assimilation assumed that migrants would be almost totally absorbed into the host society (Gordon, 1964); later neo-assimilationist theory accepted that migrants might influence the host society during the integration process (Dahinden, 2012), while segmented assimilation theory suggests that different elements of a migrant community will integrate differently, at a different scale and pace, into specific segments of the host country, with all the issues of class, *habitus*, social climbing (and falling), or even resistance to integration that this entails (Waters *et al.*, 2010; Rumbault, 1997; De Wind and Kasinitz, 1997). Elements of segmented assimilation are visible among some Iranians in the UAE but are always incomplete, because of the constraints upon them.

As Dahinden (2012) argues, these existing approaches neglect the way in which processes of incorporation and styles of belonging intertwine and are simply not built to explore types of mobility that go beyond migration as a one-way process. These critiques of the existing literature on assimilation have resonance for any examination of Iranians' sense of identity and belonging in the UAE. As discussed

later in this section, the strength of ethnic identity among Iranians was particularly powerful and often very visible. Nonetheless, Iranians were not immune from non-ethnic forms of identification. There was certainly evidence of other forms of identity expressed by interviewees, but a Perseo-Iranian identity[15] was a theme overwhelmingly described by those with whom we interacted as critical to their ways of living and thought.

The contexts of Iranian diasporas in the West differ societally, geographically, and politically from that of the UAE, where the context of precarity of tenure, the proximity of Iran, and the closed nature of Emirati society create very different dynamics. The existing literature on assimilation raises important questions about the nature of the host society, in terms of culture and homogeneity, especially what culture migrants are supposed to be assimilating into (Rumbaut, 1997; Pantoja *et al.*, 1976; Dewind and Kasinitz, 1997). This question is especially vexing when it comes to the UAE, where the citizen population is overwhelmingly outnumbered by the migrant population and remains insular and concerned with maintaining its extensive privileges (Dresch, 2005). Add class (Hanieh, 2010) and prejudice to this hierarchy, and it becomes very difficult for most migrants to assimilate into the culture of UAE citizens; indeed, there is not only no expectation of doing so but outright hostility to those who try. While the UAE is clearly Arab and Islamic, in many respects it is also a truly global space in which consumption, brands, and lifestyles can be an important factor in identity (Kanna, 2011). All of these factors make it difficult to identify a predominant culture into which to assimilate.

[15] For discussion of Iranian national identity, see Saleh and Worrall, 2015. Here, Persian identity tropes are most important, but such is the nature of Iranian national identity that even non-ethnic Persians can feel attachment and belonging to an Iranian identity so clearly bound up in Persian culture. Distance from home can also enhance these feelings of Iranian identity.

Emirates like Dubai often play up their 'multicultural' credentials but in doing so, sometimes create images which do not necessarily reflect realities (Epps and Demangeot, 2013). In the face of multiple challenges of new forms of migration (Castles, 2006), the UAE state has gone all out in asserting control of migration, while never desiring anything in terms of assimilation besides respect for the law. Given this context of government control and unpredictability, Iranians face not just the necessity to hedge and calibrate escape plans in the practical and financial sense but also the need to balance the benefits of the UAE's cosmopolitan milieu with the need to ensure that connections are developed, tradition upheld, and children properly rooted. Identity maintenance then is critical. Naturally this maintenance becomes slightly easier in the UAE's segmented society, with its clear class and ethnic divisions, but can also be harder in this context, as global influences and cultures compete for attention while watering down identity. Thus, in the UAE, it is relatively easy for Iranians to retain social and cultural endogamy, as they face a degree of threat to identity from a globalized environment and an impermanence of tenure from the UAE state itself. As the next section shows, on both a practical and a political level, not maintaining a Perseo-Iranian identity would be potentially disastrous, should a visa not be renewed or a return to Iran enforced. These factors combine to create a common desire to maintain a Persian identity.

Methods of Identity Maintenance

Almost every respondent wanted to talk at length on the issue of his/her Persian-Iranian identity and without exception was keen to preserve it in some form. The idea of maintaining identity resonated with respondents in profound ways and was something which they believed required continual work and care. The most

common ways of doing so were through schooling, cultural and social activities and by conducting as much business as possible with fellow Persian speakers.

It is worth noting that religion was rarely seen as a primary source of identity. The majority of interlocutors were relatively pious, but there was seldom a political dimension to the religious views they expressed. Most seemed comfortable being Shi'a in the UAE; indeed, as Hesam stated, 'there is no discrimination against Shi'a in the UAE; we even have the right to have our own Husseiniya!' We saw Shi'a references in the iconography in shops, homes, and offices, and our questions touched on religious themes. The identity references used by most interviewees, however, generally steered clear of religion and focused instead on issues connected with Iranian identity. It could well be that religion did not raise its head because Iranians in the UAE were all too aware of sensitivities toward Shi'a Islamism or the generally Islamic milieu in which most Iranians found themselves in the UAE. Mara Leichtman identifies a similar phenomenon in the context of the Lebanese diaspora in Senegal, which is 95 percent Muslim in an overwhelmingly Muslim society. As she puts it, 'when "Islam" travels to another Islamic context, it is the *national*, and not strictly the *religious*, that becomes the focus of migrant identity' (2010, 271).

In terms of maintaining Persian identity, our interview questions focused on several key themes – schooling, language use, cultural activities, and travel to Iran. We also devoted a lot of time to exploring Iranians' existing identities and attitudes, using proxies such as interaction with non-Persians, attitudes toward out-groups, and discussion of political themes. A thread of soft nationalism and deep pride in being Persian ran through all these topics, but discussion kept returning to the need to maintain and strengthen that identity.

Schooling was a critical aspect of identity maintenance for Iranians in the UAE. There are nine Iranian schools in the UAE, with approximately 10,000 students attending.[16] The relative freedom to establish these schools is a key indicator of Iranians' ability to maintain their identity in the UAE. There is even an Iranian school in Abu Dhabi named after Imam Khomeini. The chance to educate children in a Persian environment was valued by all interviewees, even if it was not always an opportunity which they exploited. After a while, an interesting pattern began to emerge, neatly expressed by Majid, who stated, 'Most of the Iranians here are from the southern part of Iran, these southerners often send their children to Iranian school, but those from other parts of Iran usually send their students to the English schools.' What was perhaps most telling was that school choice had no correlation with attitudes toward the importance of identity maintenance and transmission of identity to children, both of which mattered uniformly across interviews. The transmission of a strong identity to the next generation was a key signifier of the process of identity maintenance.

Thus, even those who sent their children to English language schools were keen to tell us of the lengths to which they went to ensure that their children maintained their Persian language skills and developed an understanding of Iranian history. Indeed, demand was such that according to Hasan, 'there are many Iranians here who do not send their children to the Iranian schools, they send their children to foreign schools, and there are many foreign schools who may teach Persian. If the children need it, then a Persian teacher will come in for two hours (or two days) to

[16] Six in Dubai, one in Abu Dhabi, one in Sharjah, and one in Al Ain (ICRO, 2015). According to the Charity Organization for Building Schools, Iranians in the Gulf states agreed to pay around £5 million annually to build schools. Muhammad Reza Hafezi, the head of the Organization, stated: 'Children of Iranians living abroad are gradually forgetting their mother tongue, due to the bad quality of foreign schools, necessitating [us] to build more schools there' (Asre Iran, 2016).

teach them Persian.' Another typical response from those who sent their children to non-Iranian schools came from Ali: 'My child goes to an English school although we do not forget our nationality and we are becoming more universal. Learning Arabic, however, is compulsory, yet in summertime I send my child to an Iranian school for him not to forget his origins, despite the fact that it is expensive.'

Most respondents complained with varying levels of intensity about school costs, with Sajjad stating, 'I do not bring my family here because of schools, it's too expensive.' There was, however, a range of choice of Iranian school, as Sohail informed us. 'Persian schools are categorized, some are very expensive, some are cheaper however, and they are all sponsored by the Iranian government.' It should also be noted that a certain income level is required even to bring children to the UAE in the first place. Some chose to leave their children in school in Iran, both to save money and because their position in the UAE was seen as transitory, rather than as their permanent home.

While there are Persian-medium (i.e., language) schools catering to a range of price points, not all parents who sent their children there were happy to settle with these schools. Some worried that it would not have a good effect in the longer term, with Naser stating, 'If I can afford it, I would send my child to an English School. This will cost me 15,000 dirhams.' There was a marked tendency for better-off Iranians to send their children to English-medium schools and an awareness of the opportunities presented by the UAE for giving children a better, more global future. Some, like Ehsan, even expressed regret at not seizing these opportunities: 'I sent my three children to Persian school. In fact, 40 years ago, when we came here, we didn’t think much ahead. For instance, my children cannot get an official job here

because of their education. In fact, we should have sent our children to Emirati School.'

This fact further reinforces the importance of language and culture, which were not simply about ensuring that children were properly educated but also viewed as key issues for all respondents. Language use resulted in consistently lively and interesting discussions with interlocutors, and almost all remained firmly committed to Persian being the language used in the home, although some holders of Western passports said that the language of their other passport was also used at home on a regular basis. We found over time a pronounced tendency for most Iranians to have remarkably little competency in Arabic and often a degree of hostility toward the need to learn Arabic. Many respondents said they preferred to use English when speaking to Arabs. Although for those involved in trade, code-switching in conversation was extremely common, decent competence in Arabic (and other languages, especially English and Urdu) was much more likely here than anywhere else, except for those few who had gone to Emirati schools. While there was general praise for the sense of freedom to be able to speak Persian openly, there was also a desire to do business wherever possible with other Persian speakers, and a noticeable clustering in terms of these businesses and extremely close connections among them. This preference became even clearer in the pattern through which interviewees were keen to introduce us to colleagues and business partners.

Most Iranians' ability to exist within a largely Persian-speaking milieu was striking. Only those working for larger multi-national companies and choosing to live a more Westernized lifestyle fell outside this trend and, for the most part, were either dual nationals or highly educated recent arrivals from Iran. While both groups were distant geographically from Iranian spaces, they still valued the opportunities to visit

these districts and mix with fellow Iranians. For the vast majority who lived within these more Iranian spaces, despite the ability to put a degree of distance between themselves and the wider environment in which they lived, there was still a real sense of needing to maintain boundaries and assert a Persian identity. Many were keen to emphasize the Iranian community's richness, depth, and resources, with the Iranian Club and Iranian Hospital being raised repeatedly as symbols of the community's power and ability to replicate itself. As Mahsa proudly told us, 'the first-ever hospital built here was built by the Shah of Iran, called *Shir Khourshid* [Lion and Sun - symbol of the Iranian Empire]. Now they call it the Iranian hospital. The first club here was also founded by Iranians; these two institutions still have Iranian deeds.' Here, she was asserting Iranians' unique position in the UAE and contribution to the country's development but also commenting on their separateness, superiority, and ability to maintain a distinct identity. While there were differences in emphasis, the content of discussions and the focus on issues of interest calculations, identity maintenance, and strong national pride remained surprisingly consistent across both genders.

Many others also commented on their use of the Iranian Club, and we soon began to ask interviewees if they went to the Club and why they did so. While some said that they 'worked too hard to go to the Iranian Club,' it quickly became clear that they went there for specific events or attended other events organized by the community or their specific sub-section or grouping. As Hasan said, 'Iranians can hire venues and organize their own events and festivals, and we do this. It is very important to meet and celebrate our culture.' We later spent time at the Iranian Club in Dubai and conducted a number of interviews there. The general sense was that the club was valued as a specific 'Persian Space' and seen as an important

component in identity maintenance. As Afshin framed it, 'Iranians like it here [the Iranian Club] because everything in it is Iranian and also because of their sense of nationalism. Iranian movies refresh their memories about Iran, and it is also *different* from other places.'

Away from the club, younger respondents commented on the ability to attend Persian concerts given by big-name singers. As Hasan said, 'so many Iranian singers [from the United States who are banned from Iran] come to Dubai to perform', clearly, for some, the chance to tap into wider Persian diaspora culture was an important reason to be in the UAE itself. Access to cultural and religious events, especially Persian movies, and the excuse to come together and interact with other Persian speakers outside a purely business environment were greatly valued. As Majid stated, 'Iranians try hard to maintain their identity through festivals like Nowruz, language and *even* religious ceremonies,' further highlighting the focus on identity and its non-sectarian nature.

Identity was also maintained through travel to Iran. All respondents commented on the importance of regular return trips, although a number said that this kind of regular return was not as practicable as it might seem, with some raising concerns over conscription in Iran, the inability to get sufficient time off, and even a desire to restrict visits to Iran because of concerns over the regime. In essence, though, they divided into four groups: those who returned to Iran for brief visits (usually once a year), those who returned for slightly longer visits (usually every six months), those who rarely or never returned to Iran (usually for political reasons), and those who made longer visits because of family business arrangements which essentially led to a rotation system through businesses in the UAE. As Hamid told us, 'My family are in Iran. I stay in Iran six months, and six months I stay here. So,

my brother will cover for my business, and I go to Iran.' These kinds of arrangements were almost exclusive to those from southern Iran. We found that while travel to Iran was valued, it played different roles in processes of identity maintenance between different segments of the population. For those from Fars province, it was crucial to both interests and identity. With family and investments on both sides of the Gulf, regular visits were essential and played into a wider sense of hedging and balancing between the two states. For others whose visits were less frequent or highly sporadic, opportunities to go 'home,' to visit extended family, and to soak up, as Saeed stated, 'the green, the peace, the place' were vital. Even those who could not go to Iran for practical or political reasons talked about the importance of the *idea* of travelling there to their identity, thus further reinforcing national identity as a crucial marker.

Soft Nationalism

Underpinning this theme of identity maintenance was what we came to term soft nationalism.[17] While initially wanting to avoid discussion of politics, many interlocutors eventually brought the discussion around to these themes. The vast majority of respondents were moderates, with many critical of the Iranian regime and Ahmadinejad for making their position in the UAE more difficult. They, along with those who avoided speaking of politics directly, were, however, fiercely proud of being Iranian. This feeling was represented in similar ways for both Iranian nationals and those holding dual nationality and expressed itself in subtle and overt ways. In these ways, soft types of nationalism pervaded almost every interview we conducted. Soft nationalism was emphatically not support for the Iranian regime but

[17] Here, we use 'soft nationalism' to mean a deep form of patriotism which underpins an absolute sense of cultural superiority but is often kept to oneself. It is not about political support for a particular regime but something more profound which transcends day-to-day politics, perhaps most similar to the examples in Watson (1990).

instead a wistful nostalgia which was very powerful and all pervasive.[18] In its more extreme forms, this soft nationalism tended to manifest itself in an absolute sense of superiority over all things non-Persian, especially Arab things, which were frequently perceived to be inferior or appropriated bastardizations of Persian culture and traditions by Arabs. As Arjang expostulated when asked about the idea of the "Arabian Gulf," 'the Gulf is the Persian Gulf, it has always been the Persian Gulf. In school they used Persian Gulf in their teaching – we are Iranian, we *know* it is the Persian Gulf. Everywhere uses the term Persian Gulf!'

It also often seemed that Iranians sought to justify their presence in the UAE in terms of both the community's long history in the country and its contribution to the UAE's development, as seen in reference to the Iranian Hospital above. On an individual level, a significant group of respondents wanted to justify why they had left Iran and appeared slightly ashamed that Iran was not providing them with the opportunities and lifestyle they desired, almost as if it was a personal and national humiliation that Iran was not as wealthy or modern as the UAE. As Naser exclaimed, 'I am here [in the UAE] only for financial reasons; Iran has much better weather and climate, nature, culture, food – everything!' While the reasons for many Iranians choosing to live and work in the UAE were more complex than just finances, it is clear that opportunities to earn more were key drivers. Thus, understanding how Iranians calculated what was in their best interest and how they weighed these interest calculations with their identity maintenance is the subject of the article's final part.

[18] This finding is consistent with general ideas about Iranian cultural identity (Davaran, 2010).

Interest Calculations Among Iranians

In a globalized, neo-liberal, and pluralist state like the UAE, individual migrants are invited to pursue their pecuniary interests either because their specific skills are needed or because their investment is sought (Ali, 2010). Yet clearly, not all migrants are equal, with some more welcome (or more disposable) than others. The UAE's Iranian population is sizable, comes from a powerful neighboring country, is mostly non-Arab, and is overwhelmingly Shi'a, all of which make them appear as a potential threat to the UAE. Iranians in the UAE are also not, in the main, recent migrants and have become important to the UAE's economic success and developmental story. Most interviewees were keen to stress that economic opportunities brought them to the Emirates, but a few highlighted the relative personal freedoms compared to Iran as shaping their choice, with others pointing to the UAE as a halfway house between the West and Iran, in which moral values could be better upheld. In terms of calculating interests once established in the UAE, however, business interests always took precedence.

The bargain which exists between the UAE and migrant communities is simple: migrants are given economic opportunities and a degree of personal freedom in return for political silence, performances of loyalty, and a strict adherence to Emirati law (Kanna 2010). This bargain works very well for both sides in the main, but for Iranians especially, it can be more problematic because of regional tensions which bring the whole community under suspicion. As a result, Iranians must be careful to play by the rules. Thus, every Iranian business displayed both the UAE flag and pictures of the relevant rulers, and almost all interlocutors were keen to extol the UAE's virtues, at least in the initial parts of our interviews.

Caught between conflictual regional politics and the precarity of their positions, Iranians in the UAE had much to lose in financial terms. As indicated above, visas remain the UAE state's key tool in maintaining control, and the withdrawal of a visa could destroy livelihoods. This uncertainty added to the need for identity maintenance, which was driven not just by necessity but also by deep commitment to being Iranian. These identity-interest interactions have seemingly been understood by the UAE government and mostly tolerated within its multi-ethnic fabric.[19] The UAE does create some space for people to maintain their identity. Such tolerance, however, has its limits and is increasingly influenced by both internal and external politics and the need for performances of control (through deportations) to be enacted at intervals by the state. Almost all interviewees focused extensively on the issue of visas, and while there was much concern, there was also understanding of the UAE's position and blame directed toward Iranian actions which increased tensions.

Given these pressures, and especially the timing of initial fieldwork at the end of the Ahmadinejad era and during the transition to the more moderate and engaged period under Rouhani, it was unsurprising that a noticeable sense of hope and relief was emerging among respondents. Some highlighted previous periods where a moderate president in Iran had eased their position. As Aziz, a Dhow Captain from Bushehr, stated, 'During [Reformist President] Khatami's period [1997-2005], their treatment was amazing to us. We were very comfortable, but when Ahmadinejad came, he ruined everything.' Others, though, believed that things were too far gone for the change of president to have anything more than a fleeting effect. As Sharif

[19] 2019, for example, has been given the theme of *The Year of Tolerance* by the UAE Government, and in 2016 the Post of Minister for Tolerance was created (ENA, 2018).

explained, 'Rouhani is just a way for the regime to buy time in office. His election will have no effect on the Iranian community here in the UAE.'

These cycles of tension, or indeed perspectives of permanent downward relations, led to a careful policy of hedging strategies amongst almost all Iranians we met. There was considerable awareness of the risks of livelihood loss should a visa not be renewed or expulsion take place. Hedging was much more complex, however, than simply not placing all eggs in one basket. Many respondents were remarkably open in explaining how they moved money around, invested in Iran and the West, and delayed investment decisions in the UAE to spread risk. As Aref, a small businessman trading dried fruit and nuts across three shops, said, 'We spend money on our businesses, yes, but we are careful when and how much we invest. I must only buy what is necessary or what will bring me a really good profit. A wise man gets value and invests only where it is really needed. In this time it is especially the case.' Ahmad, another small businessman, stated, 'Profits are for investing in Iran. This is what everyone does.' Despite clear economic stratification among the population, almost everyone thought in terms of diversification. These strategies, of course, apply much more to those only in possession of an Iranian passport; however, even many of those with Western citizenship had clear exit strategies with property, savings, and sometimes businesses in the West. As our contact, Mahmoud, informed us, 'We still have a shop in the UK, and I make sure I pay into my personal pension in the UK. I also have investments with my family in Australia. I have bought a flat in Dubai, but my family lives between here and our house in the UK. This is normal, even for those who have been in the Emirates for many years.'

What was more interesting was the fact that diversification spread further than simple investment choices and became intertwined with identity maintenance. This

was especially the case for those from Fars province who had a foot in both countries. It extended to the choices of charitable giving, the networks cultivated, and the courting of powerful sponsors, particularly in the UAE. By building networks within their hometowns and in Fars Province more generally, merchants could feel they were giving back to Iran while also ensuring that identity networks and other support mechanisms were reinforced. Numerous respondents either told us stories of rich businessmen generously investing in their communities back home or were keen to tell us how their own charitable giving or investments went back to Iran. We were, for example, told by three separate respondents of one businessman 'who built a lot of flats and just rents them for a very little rent for charity reasons to the poor back in Gerash' (Hasan). This was perhaps a key difference from dual nationals, who tended to speak less about investing in Iran and, instead, referred to investments in the West, broadly conceived, while rarely referring to charitable giving at all.

The calculation of interest, however, was even more complex than simply assessing the chances the UAE government would not renew a visa and understanding how regional politics impacted Iranians in the UAE. There is, of course, a two-level game at play for Iranians calculating their interests. Most Iranians were company owners and thus had to account for not only the chance of government action against them but also the danger of their Emirati sponsor withdrawing from a relationship which would then lead to the withdrawal of a visa if a new sponsor were not found. As Sharif explained,

> Most Iranians are in business here, and therefore their sponsors are Emiratis, so they must get along reasonably well. The sponsor, of course, also owns 51% of the company, even if he has not put any capital into it and could sell their part of it for the money, effectively robbing the person they are sponsoring. But in most cases, of course, the company includes everything in its value, and what would the sponsor do with a lot of office furniture? This happens very infrequently, but it is a

danger and adds uncertainty. That is why trust is very important between both sides.

The majority of business respondents said that they had excellent relations with their sponsors and co-owners but were equally keen to tell us about others who did not. Many said that co-owners were silent partners and were happy as long as profits remained good. In turn, though, the need to generate good profits could hamper investment strategies within businesses and make developing a hedged position a slower process. It was noticeable that those recently arrived seemed more concerned about the visa issue than those who had developed better networks and more diversified positions. As Fatima, the manager of a sweet shop from northern Iran, stated, 'The Gerashis have been here for a long time. They have people they know who help look after them, and they have each other. We have been here for ten years and are now feeling like our position is more secure now that we know people too, but this does not mean we are not scared about our visas still!'

This added layer of complexity meant that for many business owners and traders, the calculation of interests, while often discussed in terms of rational measurements, contained many 'known unknowns' and quickly became further muddied when issues of identity were added to the mix. Investments in Iran were made not just on estimations of profitability but in terms of diversification, demonstrations of utility to the regime in Tehran, and attempts not to draw the UAE authorities' suspicions, while also aiming to shore up solidarity networks among fellow businessmen from the same clan, town, or province. The same was true of charitable contributions, decisions on where to spend time, and how to socialize. These calculations also partly related, for those from Fars province, to the desire to retire home while still passing on the business to the next generation. The absence of a retirement visa in the UAE did not matter to them because they could either

continue on a visa linked to their business ownership and simply not do much work or return to Fars province anyway.

Perhaps the most important element to draw from this discussion is not the uncertainty itself, which was very real, but that Iranians developed multiple ways to calculate their interests and hedge their position. Indeed, possibly the key fact here is that if you played by the rules, worked hard at cultivating relationships, and generated good returns, you would likely have no problems. As many respondents were keen to point out, expulsions and visa issues 'probably happen for good reasons,' Emiratis have a right to control their borders, and many families were fourth- or fifth-generation residents, which probably indicated that for most, the likelihood of being able to remain in the UAE was good. Nonetheless, calculating interests, hedging bets, and maintaining identity became ways of life, given the uncertainties involved and the commitment to national identity so commonly evinced across fieldwork.

Conclusion

It is a truth universally acknowledged (at least by respondents) that the interaction of politics, culture, and business among Iranians in the UAE is problematic for all concerned. Levels of interdependence are such that many careful balancing acts must take place. As the UAE government attempts to securitize ‘Iranian nationality,’ Iranians respond by attempting to maintain a Perseo-Iranian identity disconnected from the regime in Tehran. It is clear that Iranians in the UAE felt considerable pride in their cultural heritage and national identity and went to great lengths to maintain and cultivate this identity both within the community and among the wider population. This pride was in part due to the prejudice which the community faced. Regional politics and centuries of antagonism between Persians and Arabs meant that Iranian

communities in the UAE experienced a degree of hostility. This prejudice not only created a climate of mistrust and fear but also led to a need to calculate interests and maintain the very identity which was subject to prejudice in the first place. The irony is that the pride taken by Iranians in their cultural and national identity regularly tipped over into forms of prejudice or superiority toward Emiratis. The pervasive soft-nationalism, while almost universally steering away from religious motifs or support for the Islamic Republic, was so prevalent that it could only further cement the prejudice felt against Iranians amongst Emiratis, especially given the realities of geopolitical tensions.

Remarkably, though, the pride and prejudice felt on both sides generally manifested themselves quietly. Iranians in the UAE, while distancing themselves from the host culture, have relatively few complaints about the Emirates' policies. The UAE government, benefiting from Iranian trade, investment, and cultural richness, had mostly focused on Tehran's politics, while maintaining levers which placed constraints on Iranians' potential for action in the country. The quiet certainty of identity, which was continually reinforced within an atmosphere of uncertainty, alongside the increased securitization of nationality across the Gulf, meant that between commerce, culture, and politics, Iranians in the UAE continually recalculated their interests and maintained their identity. For the most part, the Emirati state, by maintaining a degree of manageable uncertainty while allowing space for the maintenance of forms of cultural identity and soft nationalism, has created a situation in which distance and a degree of mutual suspicion reinforces the pride and prejudice felt by both sides. It seems that in many ways, despite the hype, the UAE's Iranian community has found ways to navigate between interests and identity, while the Emirati state maintains a sense of control.

What makes this case interesting and important for the wider study of international migration is that even in the context of deep suspicion and geopolitical rivalry, it remains possible for a migrant community to persist. As this study has shown, the very process of identity maintenance undertaken by Iranians in the UAE was driven by necessity, as well as desire. The interlocking of 1) existing pride in national identity 2) the political context of suspicion and socio-cultural divisions, and 3) the need to safeguard interests and create options given the threat of visa non-renewal (pride, prejudice, threat) produced a very different approach to identity than those seen in the traditional Western sites of Iranian immigration captured in the literature on identity negotiation (i.e., embracing two cultures and identities and needing to mediate between them) (Asghari-Fard and Zakia-Hossain, 2017; Modaressi, 2001; Tehranian, 2005) and the literature on assimilation (Young, 1976; Hieronymi, 2005; Brown and Bean, 2006). With no expectation and only limited opportunities for assimilation, along with an environment which facilitates and requires retention of identity (Mednicoff, 2012), processes of identity maintenance become essential for all Iranians.

One of the most interesting - and unexpected - findings from fieldwork was the similarities and differences between those who held only Iranian citizenship and those who were dual Iranian-Western nationals. Undoubtedly, there were differences in terms of the types of employment and education levels between these two groups and a degree of spatial separation in terms of workplaces and living arrangements. Yet in many other ways, these migrants, sharing a common citizenship and primary identity in a third country, exhibited strikingly similar understandings of and responses to the challenges and prejudice they faced. While experiencing *theoretically* different levels of protection from deportation and suspicion depending

on their visa status, in reality they emphasized the importance of hedging and protecting interests and maintaining identity. There were slight differences in the particular methods taken to achieve these goals, depending on resources and options available, but the end goals and sense of common cause and threat remained important themes, even for Iranians with the option of returning to Europe, Australasia, or North America. Although there is scant literature on how dual nationals in third countries align themselves with co-nationals, this article suggests that the study of these dual nationals in similar situations can tell us much about the wider context and ways in which identity is constructed. In sum then, research on Iranians in the UAE offers much to the study of international migration, shedding new light on the phenomenon of Gulf migration by bringing greater nuance to existing accounts, while also contrasting with studies of the experiences of Iranian migrants negotiating their different identities in Western assimilationist contexts. It also forces a reappraisal of the circumstances in which identity is reinforced, making identity maintenance a useful tool with which to approach migrants' coping strategies in non-Western contexts.

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