Abstract

This dissertation is a transnational social history of the transformation of relationships and identities around the Persian Gulf between 1900-1940. It approaches this history through the lens of Iranian migrants and their networks from southern Iran to Kuwait and Bahrain. By following these migrants, this study encounters and explores particular political, economic and social forces that impacted their movement and ultimately altered the way in which the littoral was connected.

Although the Gulf was previously characterized by overlapping sovereignty of imperial, regional and local actors, in the early twentieth century the people who constantly moved back and forth across the water became a battleground of belonging. Emerging states explicitly directed new conceptions of territory, sovereignty, jurisdiction and belonging towards this borderland region of the Ottoman, Persian and British Empires.

As much as political forces sought to regulate movement and identities by invoking legal boundaries between the eastern and western shores of the Gulf, they contended with forces undeterred by such structures; namely the global capital that pulled people to the western side and local actors who already knew the way.

Iranians invented new strategies for navigating the rules and regulations of states. Rerouting their networks to smaller ports allowed for a slow and steady flow of goods and people to the opposite shores. In no small way Iranian migrants on the western shores of the Gulf shaped the rapidly changing world around them. From language to food to technology and the built environment, the numerous and varied connections between either side of the Gulf that was kept alive by Iranian migrants in fact wove the shores closer together socially and culturally even as politically the region was being broken apart.
This study shows how movement within a single Persian Gulf arena came to be transnational; how traversing the water came to mean moving from one kind of space to another. It argues that although Iranians had been crossing the Gulf for centuries, the meaning of this movement changed in the early twentieth century, as did the scale.
Table of Contents

List of Illustrations........................................................................................................................................ viii

A Note on Transliteration and Conventions................................................................................................. ix

Acknowledgements.......................................................................................................................................... x

Introduction ....................................................................................................................................................... 1

Clusters, Circuits and the Western Indian Ocean ............................................................................................. 11

Foreignness and migration ................................................................................................................................. 14

The end of overlapping sovereignty ................................................................................................................ 18

Territorialization and protection ...................................................................................................................... 22

Nationalizing populations ................................................................................................................................. 29

The Global Economy and Changes in Scale .................................................................................................... 33

Transformed meaning of migration .................................................................................................................. 39

Dissertation Scheme ......................................................................................................................................... 43

Chapter 1 - Crossing the Gulf: Networks and Migration from Southern Iran to Kuwait and 
Bahrain, 1900-1940 ....................................................................................................................................... 45

Introduction ....................................................................................................................................................... 45

Historically Shifting Cities and People ........................................................................................................... 47

Political Geography and Disconnect in Southern Iran ..................................................................................... 51

Webs of Interaction .......................................................................................................................................... 55

Geographical considerations ............................................................................................................................ 58
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 2 - Traveling, Territorialization and the Iranians in Between</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local rule on the littoral ..................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The British move in ..............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A new “foreign” .........................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveling papers .........................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing the waters ......................................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition as a loophole .............................................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion .................................................................................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Chapter 3 - Nationalizing the Periphery .................................................. |
| Building an Iranian nation ................................................................... |
| Legal status and the nationalizing process ........................................... |
| Enforcing rights and obligations in the periphery: Bahrainis in Iran .......... |
| Iran Nationality Law .......................................................................... |
| Collateral damage ............................................................................ |
Retaliation in Bahrain ........................................................................................................... 137
Conclusion............................................................................................................................. 144

Chapter 4 - Building a New Homeland ........................................................................... 145

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 145

New trades of the 20th century ............................................................................................ 147

Expanding old networks ....................................................................................................... 151

Carrying the burdens of global capitalism .......................................................................... 157

British Patronage ............................................................................................................... 163

Transforming the port towns ............................................................................................... 170

Shaping the Built Environment ......................................................................................... 175

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 179

Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 181

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................. 186

Primary Sources .................................................................................................................. 186

Secondary Sources ............................................................................................................. 188

vii
List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Western Indian Ocean - Dhow Ports, ................................................................. 10
Figure 2: Webs of the Persian Gulf................................................................................. 59
Figure 3: Bandar Lingeh Coast and Hinterland............................................................. 60
Figure 4: Bushehr web ................................................................................................. 64
Figure 5: (1937/1367) Ilm-o-khabar................................................................................ 100
Figure 6: 1938 Certificate of Identity .......................................................................... 101
Figure 7: The Shatt al-Arab and the Northern Gulf...................................................... 102
Figure 8: Chronology of Iranian Takeover of its Present Territories in the Gulf ............ 119
Figure 9: Route from Tehran to Mohammerah and the Persian Gulf, via the Hamedan Highway .... 122
Figure 10: Hammāli arm patch from Kuwait ............................................................... 159
Figure 11: Ships carrying fresh water from the Shatt al-Arab........................................ 161
A Note on Transliteration and Conventions

All translations from Arabic and Persian are mine, unless otherwise noted. Arabic and Persian words of less common parlance have been italicized with diacritics according to the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) transliteration system.

For many of the city names there is significant discrepancy between spelling in archival records and in secondary literature. As many of the cities were historically inhabited by Arabic and Persian speakers, choosing the transliterating conventions of one over another is difficult. I have used Mohammerah (rather than Muhammera), Lingeh (rather than Linga, Lengeh, Lenga), Kazerun (rather than Kazeroun) and Avaz (rather than Evaz, Ewaz, Awad, Ewad). In the case of migrants from Avaz, in Kuwait and Bahrain they most commonly represent their name in English characters as Awadh, which diverges from the standard IJMES transliteration, which would be ʿAwāḍ. In this case I have used the local transliteration.
Acknowledgements

It is with a tremendous weight of humility that I attempt to account for the kindnesses and mercies afforded me throughout the duration of this project. Some people have cleared the path; others have cheered from the sidelines. Some have handed me a torch when the way was dark; others provided a map to help me understand my surroundings. There have been many gatekeepers, inn-keepers, clue-givers, policemen, and a few fellow travelers. Some helped me plan where I was going; some helped me choose how to get there. The story that emerged in the coming pages is a product of all of these encounters. I hope that everyone involved sees and appreciates the marks they have made.

I could not have hoped for a more encouraging environment than the one I found at Princeton. I am deeply grateful for the guidance of my adviser Cyrus Schayegh, who has energetically challenged me and engaged with my ideas from the outset of this project. Michael Laffan introduced me to the other half of the Indian Ocean and made me think critically beyond “steam and print” about what held this world together. Bhavani Raman urged me to consider the gaps between law and practice, and Bernard Haykel steered my attention towards Basra for understanding responses to modernity in the Arabian Peninsula.

At Princeton I have been fortunate to be a member of the flocks of truly admirable ru’yān. In the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Professors Michael Cook and Qasim Zaman were untiring springs of support, guidance, and wisdom. In the Muslim Life Program Arshe Ahmed and Sohaib Sultan provided food for the soul and kept the community mindful of struggles much more significant than our research. Many thanks to Emily Goshey, Hamid Said,
Ali Javadi-Abhari, Daniel Teehan and all of our Arabic students at EJSP for allowing me to be a part of one of those struggles. The year we spent together gave me a renewed appreciation for community and unity.

I am grateful to my community of good friends and colleagues that have critiqued material presented in these chapters and discussed the general framework of my dissertation from a variety of disciplinary perspectives: Ahmed Almaazmi, Alex Balistreri, Raissa Von Doetinchem de Rande, Murat Bozluolcay, Cevat Dargin, Saarah Jappie, Cecilia Palombo, Mert Pekşen, Ekaterina Pukhovaia, Samin Rashidbeigi, Ali Karjoo-Ravary, Deborah Schlein, Devika Shankar, and Wasim Shiliwala.

Support from several people at Princeton made my life easier. Amineh Mahallati, the noor of Princeton, graciously read Persian materials with me when I was in the beginning stages of my research. Karen Chirik, Jim LaRegina, and Reagan Maraghy fielded hundreds of questions and requests with patience and kindness. I am also grateful for the support I received from the Iranian Studies community and Center for Digital Humanities to visit archives and think about historical data in new ways.

Perhaps my greatest debt is to my friends, friends-turned-family, and colleagues in Kuwait who have for over ten years now been a source of love, support, encouragement, and inspiration. Bedoor al-Qanoor, Moza al-Ghurair, Fatmah al-Qadfan, Reem al-Onaizy, Sarah al-Mudhaf, Safiyya al-Shatti have all been with me from the very beginning of this project and others. They have on a number of occasions taken care of my mind, body, and soul. I am especially grateful to the al-Ghurair/al-Otaibi, al-Mudhaf/al-Bahar, and al-Shatti families for their generosity, conversation, and the open arms with which they always welcome me into their homes.
A number of fellow historians in Kuwait have been exceptionally generous with their time, and without whose help this project could have never come to fruition. Hassan and Jasem Ashkenani, and Mohammad Alhabib not only shared documents and their own collections with me, but put me in touch with other collectors, historians, and Kuwaitis with stories to tell. I am also grateful to Abdullah al-Ghunaim and Mohammad Jamal for the boxes and boxes of books they gave me (and to friends at KWI for helping me get them on the plane!). In Bahrain Isa al-Amin and Ali Akbar Bushehri opened up their libraries and spent countless hours sharing stories and helping me think about my research.

Abdullah bin Nasser, Ali al-Ra’is, the late Hajj Mubarak Dashti (Allah yarhamu), Zahra Ali Baba, Talal Behbehani, Adnan Abulhasan, Bu Jawwad Abulhasan, Haya al-Khaldi and family, Abdulhamid al-Awadhi, Saleh al-Misbah, Fahad al-Abduljaleel, Abdulhussain Fikri, Aslan bin Matrook, Reem al-Rudaini, Azim and Isa al-Gerashi shared documents, stories, and perspectives that provided critical elements of texture to the narrative. In Bushehr I was fortunate to meet Mahin, Shaker, Jafer, Iman, Mahmoud, and Maryam who welcomed me into their homes, showed me around Bushehr, and deepened my understanding of cross-Gulf connections.

In addition to the family archives these individuals shared, I was fortunate to have access to a number of private and public archives in the UK, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Iran. A special thanks to Anne, Arlene, and Haqq at the British Library; Debbie Usher at the Middle East Center Archives at Oxford University; Abdullah Al-Ghunaim at the Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait; Mohammad al-Shaibani at the Center for Manuscripts, Heritage, and Documents in Kuwait; and the archivists at the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iranian National Archives, Parliament Archives, and the Center for Iranian Studies - Bushehr. These archivists helped me more than they needed to, and certainly more than I expected.
The American University of Kuwait has graciously been an institutional home for me on several occasions, providing a space for thinking, writing, and respite from Kuwaiti summers. AUK has also been a forum for discussing ideas: portions of Chapters 1 and 4 were presented at their Gulf Studies Symposium in 2017. Chapter 3 was presented at the Gulf Studies Conference at Exeter University in 2016.

My friends and colleagues in Gulf and Indian Ocean Studies, Abdulrahman al-Ebrahim, Ali al-Kandari, Talal al-Rashoud, Wafa Alsayed, Matt MacLean, Rob Carter, Mohammed Alhabib, the late Mary Ann Tetreault, and Johan Mathew have contributed important insights to this project. Fahad Bishara has been a tremendous mentor and friend. Over the years he has provided key guidance and asked the most critical questions.

Many teachers have pushed me beyond my comfort zone and invested their time and energy in me: Sue Portwood never accepted mediocre writing; Ken Broda insisted on considering multiple perspectives; Michael Herb planted the first seeds of love for Kuwait; Isa Blumi taught me that questioning is not only ok, but necessary.

I am exceedingly grateful to have completed this dissertation alongside and in the company of wonderful friends who are exceptional human beings and scholars in their own right. Jelena Radovanovic was a resource for thinking about parallels between Iranian and Ottoman peripheries. She and Mert Pekşen, have given much of their time, love, and energy to me and my family over the years and I am truly honored to call them friends. Beeta Baghoolizadeh was always on call to help get me over writing blocks and slumps, and to articulate my ideas. She and Ali Karjoo-Ravary became my “Philly family” in the first weeks, and thanks to my good fortune have become real family! Sara Rahnama has always reminded me to take care of myself, and she and Idris Mokhtarzada have done so themselves many times over the last decade. Kalyani
Ramnath reinforced confidence in my ideas, read the entire dissertation, and has been an exemplary colleague and thought partner. Dana Lee was my sounding board, my partner in crime, and my twin. I called on her far too many times to help me find the right words (as Deborah knows, words can be hard), and she was forced to think about nation states and other bizarre aspects of the modern world more than she ever wanted to. But of course gracefully accepted the task. Emily Goshey constantly challenged me to give more of myself, as a scholar, a mother, a hokm player, and a citizen of the world. It has been so special sharing my love of Kuwait and pining away for Bastak with her and Hamid Sa’id (Fikri).

Finally, I must thank my many families who helped me along the way. My gran, Barbara Kennedy Brown has always been my most fervent supporter. My aunts Kay Revita and Lydia Rzucidlo have been sources of light, positivity and understanding. Philip, with his sharp intellect, has always kept me on my toes. Mom and Dad played no small role in helping me acquire all the tools I needed to get here, for which I am more grateful than they will ever know. They, along with Tom and Susan, will all be happy to learn that I am no longer a student.

In London I have been received by the comforting arms and cappuccinos of my sister, Valentina Viene, who along with Tam, Hamza, and Yasmine always make me feel like I am coming home.

Ilhan Cagri, with enough personality and energy to be a friend, sister, and mother all at once, has over the past eleven years has inspired tremendous personal, spiritual, and intellectual growth. I am grateful to her and the Mokhtarzadas for making me a part of their extended family.

In Iran my in-laws have treated me as their own daughter, and I have asked far too much of them. I am especially grateful to Maman for all of the time she spent accompanying me to archives and helping smooth my way. I will always cherish our adventurous trip to Bushehr
together! And a special thank you to my cousin Maryam for the critical last minute visit to the archives.

And finally, finally, but really firstly, Ali. My hamsar, hamdast, and hamrah. For his listening ear, editing eye, and abiding love I am eternally grateful. With the arrival of our special lady in the final stages of writing, it was only because of his partnership that this dissertation able to come to fruition. Indulging my binge-listening to Jalsat Wanasa, together Ali and Layli have kept me dancing and in the best of spirits all the way to the end.
To all living in ghurba
Introduction

In 1935 Agha Ahmed Haji Mohammad Bushehri, resident in Kuwait, appealed to the Iranian Government that he had some outstanding debts in Kuwait that he needed their help resolving. The Iranians forwarded the claim to the British Political Agent in Kuwait who was to represent the claims of foreigners. Upon corresponding with the Sheikh however, the Political Agent there came to find out that Bushehri was not considered an Iranian, having been born in Kuwait to parents were also born there. The Sheikh was annoyed that the Iranians would go to so much trouble for a single individual (especially one of bad repute, as we will see shortly) and considered their meddling as an affront to his sovereignty.

Bushehri was clearly trying to take advantage of a political and legal system that was not entirely ironed out. He had been issued two Certificates of Identity which identified him as Kuwaiti in order to travel to Basra. While in Basra he also secured an Iranian travel document, presumably to help make his case to the Iranian authorities. Furthermore, his case had already been heard by the judicial authorities in Kuwait who ruled in his favor. While one of his debts was owed by a slave who would pay him back gradually as he had only meager earnings as schoolteacher, the other debts, owed by two al-Foudaris were to be paid upon their return from Iran. Presumably Bushehri intended to expedite justice by chasing it from both ends.\(^1\)

The long-standing relationship between the Persian Gulf littoral and the south of Iran that brought Bushehri to Kuwait were in the first half of the twentieth century a target of a standardizing world order that sought to bind people and their identities (legal and otherwise) to a single territory, and regulate the flows of people and goods accordingly. Around the Gulf,

\(^1\) IOR R/15/5/300
nationalization projects, British imperial intervention, and the entrance of global capital to the region challenged the configuration of space. This dissertation studies how these processes, and the Iranian migrants who navigated and resisted them, restructured historical relationships and identities in the Gulf.

By the turn of the twentieth century, social and economic ties had intimately connected the Persian Gulf littoral for centuries. The movement of people and goods between the shores was also connected by water to the larger regional trading system of the Indian Ocean. Networks also stretched inland, carrying people and goods by caravan deep into the Arabian Peninsula and the region of Fars in Iran, and by water into Mesopotamia and Arabistan/Khuzestan in Southwest Iran. The Gulf was a crossroad between the Arabic and Persian-speaking Middle East and the Hindi and Swahili-speaking Indian Ocean. From the perspective of commodities, it was where Mesopotamian grains met South Asian rice and where dates from the Gulf littoral met wood from the East African and Western Indian littorals. Trade in these goods from distant shores gave cause to the rhythmic flows of ships by the seasonal monsoon winds eastward in October and westward between February and April.

These broad and deep environmentally determined strokes may color the backdrop, or to use Fernand Braudel’s term the longue durée, of connectivity across the water across time, but as recent works on the Indian Ocean have shown, the environment was no more responsible for animating life than the people who forged relationships across great distances and differences.² At the same time, one did not have to travel great distances around the Indian Ocean rim to

discover difference that was routinely bridged by relationships, sometimes in addition to a conducive environment and sometimes despite the lack of it.

Sugata Bose famously suggested that the Indian Ocean be considered an “interregional arena.” However the Indian Ocean itself contains a number of interconnected arenas and micro-circulations. Bose does not propose a schema for understanding these constituent pieces of the Indian Ocean arena itself. Perhaps it is because, as he argues, “these arenas where port cities formed the nodal points of exchange and interaction, have been mostly theorized, described and analyzed only for the premodern and early modern periods.”

This dissertation begins to theorize these spatial relationships and their transformations in the early twentieth-century Persian Gulf. It is a story of the changing nature of connectivity between spaces across the northern Gulf. Its primary subject are the Iranians who moved between the Persian Gulf’s eastern and western shores, and ultimately migrated to the western side, specifically Kuwait and Bahrain. Following their movement, we witness the impact of intertwining national, imperial and global processes on historical relationships, processes which resulted in the transnationalization of Iranians’ networks.

These networks were “transnationalized” because of the new ways that historical connections had to contend with nation-states, both shaping, and being shaped by, new state regulations. Iranian networks were of course not the only ones transnationalized. The processes that this dissertation explores affected many people moving around the Gulf and Indian Ocean in this period. However, the situation of Iranian migrants (and anyone from the region who was traveling to Iran in this period) was unique in its complexity. They had to contend both with the

---

way the British Empire was territorializing the Arab sheikhdoms of the Gulf in its role as their protectors, but also Iran’s territorialization of its own state.

The process of territorialization is key for understanding how the meaning of space changed in this period. As a process of making a states’ borders congruent with the territory it claimed, one of the primary projects of territorialization was the drawing of lines to distinguish between spaces of differing sovereignty. I argue that the Gulf sheikhs, having signed away their external sovereignty – the responsibility of protection of the borders and control over foreign affairs – allowed the British to create a sovereignty that encapsulated their own. The territorial sovereignty of states depended on preventing the encroachment of another sovereign state on those lines, or as I argue, the semblance of the lines. In our story it is the British and Iranians working to prevent one another’s encroachment. This dissertation shows how their border lines were invoked, enforced, and evaded to give new meaning and shape to cross-Gulf relationships.

Although the underlying rationale for the technologies of territorialization were similar (permission for traveling, customs checks), the instruments themselves and the ways they were used differed. Sometimes this was logistical and sometimes it was due to outright competition and opposition between the British and Iranians. For example, the Iranians with their long coastline issued internal traveling passes for travel between its ports. States on the western side of the Gulf did not have such long coastlines to make such passes necessary. The British Empire did, however, issue Certificates of Identity for travel between their treaty states in the Gulf, and perhaps their entire informal empire. Opposition arose in cases where the British and Iranians refused to accept one another’s sovereignty over certain territory, and not permitting the holders of other state’s passes to land.
Even until the 1930s, passes were more about documentation and the recognition of a state’s territorial sovereignty than personal permission to enter. There was not an active attempt to prevent Iranians from entering Kuwait or Bahrain until the late 1930s and early 1940s. Still, the requirement of having documentation to enter was exceptionally prohibitive for most people crossing from the eastern to western coast because it required them to first go larger ports where the authorities were present to obtain the necessary papers, and then cross the Gulf from there. So while the border technically existed along the entire coast, only a few spots existed where one could legally and officially cross. In consequence, what were previously local connections directly across the water became transnational ones when they were supposed to be mediated by state apparatuses at major ports where the state was present.

This dissertation does not explain only how states envisioned the law working. It is also interested in what happened in practice. Actual implementation of the law was always fraught with gaps in enforcement, whether due to limited resources, oversight, or exceptions. All three of these plagued the full implementation of the law on both sides of the coast, under the British Imperial and Iranian authorities.

Aside from lack of funds, which is the first and foremost problem of every administration, there were two primary reasons why the borders were so difficult to enforce. First, the movement between the two coasts was constant and spread out along the entire lengthy coastline. Secondly, the people enforcing the borders were outsiders and did not know the intricacies of the territory they were policing. For some time, this allowed people to continue crossing the Gulf as they had prior to the regulations, or with slight modifications to avoid being seen. They used local craft, generically referred to as “dhows” by colonial administrators, to land almost anywhere along the shores, which was precisely what these small ships were built to do. Although they were seen as
backwards and inefficient, the use of *dhows* was still booming well into the twentieth century, in part due to their ability to skirt regulation.\(^4\)

In some cases however, the state caught up with transgressors. It was not typically while they were illegally crossing into Kuwait or Bahrain that they were caught, but rather for some other illegal activity such as theft or begging. Upon discovering their undocumented status the border then was invoked and enforced retroactively. Some Iranians were subsequently deported back to the other side. But transgressors also learned the language of the state and began to cite exceptional circumstances to avoid enforcement of the border regulations. They would claim (though not necessarily untruthfully), for example, that their entire family was living in Bahrain, or that they were only part-time beggars with other sources of income. Employing these tactics, many Iranians were allowed to stay.

National identities were also transformed by the process of territorialization. While asserting “external sovereignty” by establishing borders was the first phase – from roughly 1900 to 1940 – the second, overlapping phase – roughly from 1925 to 1940 – was “internal sovereignty” and the nationalization of the population. My story explores how the Iranian nationalization project, whose goal was to create a unified Iranian identity, met particular challenges in one area of the coast, which was home to Arabs, who saw themselves as subjects to another sovereign: the Sheikh of Bahrain. In consequence, Iranian nationalization efforts spilled over into Bahrain, and the Iranians living there were retaliated against. As the Bahrainis in Iran were forbidden from holding property there unless they became legally Iranian, so were the Iranians in Bahrain forbidden from holding property unless they became Bahraini. Such

---

\(^4\) In 1933 there were forty *jalbout* making the trip between Kuwait and the Shatt al-Arab. “Note on Kuwait in 1933,” Political Agent, Kuwait. IOR/R/15/5/179 f25.
measures marked an important turn in the orientation of populations away from the water, for
taking up Bahraini nationality would have prevented them from legally traveling to Iran again.

The borders of territorial belonging were also necessarily reflected in the legal world. As
states claimed sovereignty over territory, they also claimed jurisdiction over the people inside it.
While this is not a history of the changing nature of jurisdiction in the Gulf, the struggle for
jurisdiction over Iranian migrants particularly in Bahrain gave shape to the way that the politics
of identity unfolded there to eventually erase the deep and longstanding connections it had with
the Iranian coast.

Although the Sheikh of Bahrain considered the Iranians his subjects, the British prevented
him from exercising jurisdiction over them to prevent a diplomatic fallout with Iran.\(^5\) Instead, the
Iranians were treated as foreigners under British protection and likewise were subject to another
legal system, and a separate set of rights. Doing so kept the Iranians in Bahrain close to the
British, receiving lucrative contracts and privileges that Bahrainis did not have.\(^6\) Whereas
previous migrants from Iran had after generations become Bahraini, Iranians’ new legal status,
which bound them to a foreign identity and colonial protectors, made them increasingly suspect
and in the 1950s a target of Bahraini Arab Nationalism.

If state regulations complicated and obstructed the continuation of relationships and
mobility across the Gulf, by contrast, the economic situation on the western shores encouraged
more movement than ever. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an economic
boom was underway that connected the Gulf to global capitalist markets. It is well known from
the work of Hopper that in this period global demand in pearls and later dates created a labor

\(^5\) They were concerned that a fallout with the Iranians would push them into the hands of the Russians.
\(^6\) For example the Iranian police were allowed to carry weapons but tribal leaders were not.
shortage in the Gulf. That shortage was remedied by bringing in slave labor from East Africa. Later, the labor shortages caused by the expanding oil economies would be filled predominantly by South Asian migrants. These two stories are both only halves of two periods in the economic history of the region.

Although East Africans were involved in pearling in the Persian Gulf, the effects of wealth created by this industry resulted in a demand for more labor in other parts of the societies. Inversely, the South Asians filled the demand for labor that resulted from the oil industry. But they were not the migrants who filled labor demands within the oil industry itself. My story deals with the first gap. I argue that the Iranian migrants filled the demand for labor created by the booming pearl economy and connections to steamship lines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were also a large contingent of the oil industry workers, but this period is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Many wealthy pearl merchants in the Gulf in the early twentieth century had moved to the western coast from Iran, and Bandar Lingeh in particular. In doing so they shifted the economic center of the region, and other smaller traders followed them. These pearl merchants and other Iranian merchants involved in global markets such as the lucrative weapons trade and shipping built large patronage networks that brought thousands of others from Iran to Bahrain and Kuwait in this period. They were mostly unskilled laborers who worked in the port unloading ships and distributing cargoes of new global products around the town, or as builders constructing the edifices of the new town that were rapidly replacing barastīs built from palm fronds. New

---

Iranian migrants in the twentieth century thus filled a key gap between the modern economy and technology and earlier ways of life and infrastructure of the ports.

In Bahrain and Kuwait, the patronage networks of some of the wealthy Iranians were also connected to larger British patronage. The landing contractor at the port (hired by the British Political Agent) for example was usually Iranian. This translated into patronage for migrant workers as laborers in the port. In Bahrain, for construction projects large and small, they turned to the Bushehris to supply construction laborers. The Bushehris then brought in migrants from Bushehr and the surrounding region in Iran.  

But the migrants were also entrepreneurial and many were involved in small businesses. Those businesses usually involved combining raw materials from Iran such as grain, with another layer of production that turned those products into something readymade like flour, bread or sweets. This extra layer of production is what planted the migrants firmly in their new homes. Their trade with the western shores was no longer simply a matter of delivering raw goods to be sold and returning home. They were there to stay.

Migrating did not mean cutting ties to Iran. To the contrary, connections back to Iran remain important throughout the period and well into the growth of the oil state that followed. The success of the migrants of the nineteenth century helped to gain a foothold for the migrants of the twentieth century. However, although the filling of the twentieth-century labor demand relied on historical connections across the Gulf, the increased scale of movement and migration from the Iranian side fundamentally changed the nature of those connections.

The migrants of previous decades had been more sparse, and came from the littoral regions whose daily life was more intertwined. As the number of migrants began to increase around the

---

9 Interview with Ali Akbar Bushehri, Manama, Bahrain, September 1, 2016.
1920s, the networks of migration began to move beyond the littoral and deeper into the Iranian interior. As they were less familiar with Gulf society, their presence was more visible. It did not help that Iranians were also legally marked as foreigners and as such were seen as having a special status with the British. As time passed the territorially-bound legal identities that seemed irrelevant and incongruent with the way people lived when they were articulated in the early twentieth century, had by the 1940s created the distinctions between people and spaces that the law described.

Figure 1: Western Indian Ocean - Dhow Ports
(Perry-Castañeda Library, University of Texas, Austin)
Clusters, Circuits and the Western Indian Ocean

In studying how state-led territorialization, global capital, and empire building affected migration networks in the Persian Gulf and were, in turn affected by those networks, this dissertation contributes to a range of scholarly debates, not only about the Persian Gulf and the Middle East but also the Indian Ocean.

The breakdown of space in the literature on the Indian Ocean has primarily been at the macro level, distinguishing between eastern and western halves. Those halves I consider to be circuits, which themselves contain smaller clusters. The Persian Gulf is one cluster within the Western Indian Ocean circuit. The language of clusters and circuits helps us to grasp constituent parts of the vast Indian Ocean arena. Rather than designating regions inside of the “interregional arena,” theorizing the various parts of the Indian Ocean as clusters of relationships and circuits of travel helps us to maintain the original goal of understanding connectivity and frees us from the need to bind together particular socio-cultural attributes or polities, as the language of “region” tends to do.

The clusters themselves are contained within eastern and western circuits. This division is already present (if implicitly) in the scholarship on the Indian Ocean which positions the Indian subcontinent acting as a fulcrum mediating between these two sides. Aside from its geographical centrality, ports along the Indian coast (usually on the western side) often acted as nodes shared by both eastern and western circuits. In most cases the western coast of India was a terminus from which ships traveling there would turn around and return home. However there are a number of examples in which Indian ports and Bombay in particular served as a transit point between the eastern and western circuits rather than a terminus. Even if ships tended to remain within either the eastern or western circuit, people could easily disembark at a transit point and
continue their journey in another circuit. The relationship between Yemen and Indonesia is a prominent example of one such tie that spans the two sides of the vast ocean but logistically was often mediated by a stopover in various ports of Indian coast. As this dissertation is situated within the Western Indian Ocean circuit, I will continue the exploration of this circuit in further detail and leave the Eastern circuit to be properly situated by scholars working within it.

In the Western Indian Ocean, from as far afield as Basra, local ships annually made their way to India (or East Africa) and back. These long, seasonal sea voyages, known in the Persian Gulf as al-safar were guided by the monsoons and strung together ports of the Gulf, Arabian Sea, East Africa and Western India. It is this string that I refer to as the Western Indian Ocean circuit. This long-distance circuit was like a basting stitch; loosely holding the lager arena together. But daily life that intimately connected ports to one another was fashioned by shorter, finer stitches clustered together. These clustered connections did not always depend on the monsoons, but sailed along the coasts and across smaller bodies of water. Within these smaller clusters of interaction, ships were never on the water for more than a few days or a week at a time. In the Western Indian Ocean circuit there are several of these clusters that represent frequent interaction: the Arabian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea. Each of these clusters has a shared node (port) with another cluster. Because of the greater traffic through them, these shared nodes are also part of the larger circuits. The specific nodes changed over time, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Aden, Muscat and Bandar Lingeh were major nodes

---

12 Pearson suggests calling this the Afrasian Sea. Michael N. Pearson, Port Cities and Intruders, 36.
shared between clusters and within the Western Indian Ocean circuit. In general this meant that a large concentration of people and goods met in these major port cities and fanned out along the coasts.

This does not mean however that all movement was to and from major centers. *Dhows* were sailing ships, but they did not require monsoons to travel. Sometimes a small breeze would do. In the Gulf, ships of all sizes moved back and forth across the Gulf, and along the coasts, daily retracing long-standing routes of commerce and social interaction. For most ports these connections existed before more direct routes to India, and many of these connections remain even today. In the early twentieth century, the short-distance trade between ports was known locally as *al-qīṭaʿah*. This frequent movement across the Gulf facilitated the binding together of life on opposite shores. Port cities were not simply a linear string of nodes as they are often depicted, but were a part of complex webs which extended inland, along the shore and across the water.

Families, tribes, and businesses were commonly represented on both sides. Familiarity created by constant contact also provided lines of escape in times of need, whether the challenges were environmental, political or economic. To those who knew it well, the water was more like a bridge than a gulf that divided two different places. This bind did not create cultural, linguistic or political homogeneity within the region, but rather societies of woven difference.

---

14 During various periods of civil strife in Bahrain, whether with the first Omani attack of 1700 or when the Al-Khalifa family took over Bahrain in 1783, the Shi’a clerics often fled across the water to Bushehr.
Foreignness and migration

Around the coast there were representatives of the long and short distance connections residing in the port towns. Throughout the Western Indian Ocean there were communities of Indian (predominately Gujarati) businessmen. In all major Gulf ports there were Baharna (Shi’a Arabs from Bahrain). In Zanzibar there were Yemeni religious teachers. Up until the twentieth century, the ports of the Gulf were cosmopolitan in the sense that a variety of ethnicities, religions and cultural practices were present and the sedentary population was not surprised by difference. Although each of these groups differed from the majority of the population where they lived, their differences did not translate to a lack of belonging. This is because the notion of belonging in this period was tied to patronage and overlordship rather than geographical origin or national purity, and is probably due to the frequent movement of groups and sometimes individuals around the Gulf throughout history. The constant contact between the Arabs who were the majority around the entire Gulf coast, and the diverse communities of the Western Indian Ocean meant that even the Arabic that was spoken was mixed with Persian, Hindi and Swahili.

It was within this social milieu that people easily migrated from Iran across the Gulf in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lives were lived between the two sides and people frequently traveled back and forth. Within the Gulf context, their migration was unlikely to have attracted much attention, particularly in the urban centers of Bahrain where the population

---

15 Many Baharna fled Bahrain during 1835-1943 due to extortion, raids and plundering of their villages by the Al-Khalifa. Khuri, Tribe and State in Bahrain, 30.
17 This is particularly visible in the British Political Agent’s Court, which frequently adjourned cases until one of the parties returned from Iran. IOR R/15/3
was constantly fluctuating with the seasons. Furthermore from the worldview of the Sheikhs of the Gulf, whomever was living under their rule (and not protected by a European power) was their subject. As long as they posed no threat to their rule, there was no question of “different” people being allowed to live within the sheikh’s domain. Practically, this meant that everyone in the sheikhdom answered to the sheikh’s authority, except for those exempted by their status as subjects of a European power. Thus by the late nineteenth century, the concept of “foreignness” was strongly tied to the legal distinction of being subject to another power’s jurisdiction.

As migrants from Iran were not (at least initially) foreign in terms of who had jurisdiction over their affairs, they were not necessarily perceived as outsiders. While Iranians were migrants in the sense that they had come from Iran, it is not clear how much the western side of the Gulf represented a different or disconnected space in the migrants’ own perspectives. Politically speaking, the Al Madhkur and Al-Qasimi tribes had both ruled simultaneously on opposite shores. The migrants had certainly heard of, and possibly even traveled to the other side of the Gulf. From the perspective of the receiving society, the presence of people from the Iranian side of the Gulf was also nothing new. Furthermore, the migrants were connected to port towns on the western shores through diverse networks from across the entire south of Iran. Prior to the territorialization of identities, there is no reason for us to imagine that Arabic-speaking tribes migrating from Bandar Lingeh would themselves feel or be seen as connected to the Achmi-speaking peasants from Gerash just because they all migrated from Iran. The acceptance and perpetuation of the idea that all migrants from the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf are a single group of people is problematic and this dissertation will begin the work of nuancing their

---

18 As we will see in Chapter 3, the Sheikh of Bahrain’s claims to subjects abroad is based on his duty to protect them as members of his flock “ra‘iyya” rather than their belonging to the land.
differences and understanding why they have been collapsed into the single category, “Persian,” and how this is tied into the conception of their foreignness.

Scholarship on the Gulf almost unanimously refers to those who migrated from Iran as “Persian.” Such categorization stems primarily from the British sources who do the same, and is at best a translation from the Arabic “‘Ajam.” This is not only a problem in the Gulf, but in the broader Indian Ocean as well. Michael Laffan has noted the problematic “pan-ethnic categories in colonial files and metropolitan discourses”19 across the Bay of Bengal. Just as many of the southern sojourners there were hardly Tamil, the southern sojourners in the Persian Gulf were hardly Persian. In both cases, large swaths of people were grouped together by colonial authorities according to the language they (presumably) spoke. Tschacher warns against relying on language as the primary marker of ethnicity, especially in areas where multiple languages were in use for day-to-day interactions.20 This critique has been voiced more generally by borderlands historians who argue such general categories often obfuscate local identities.21 Although the salience of ethnic categories in the Gulf in the early twentieth century is unclear, the migrants from Iran were Arabs, Baluchis, Laris, Luris, and Turkomans in addition to Persians (Fars). One group of Arabs, the Hawala, did have a distinct identity founded on a narrative of movement back and forth across the Gulf.22 When and if there is a discussion of multiple

communities of migrants, the Hawala are usually cited as the Arabs amongst a sea of migrating “Persians.”

To avoid ethnic generalizations, this dissertation will refer to migrants from the eastern coast as “Iranian” rather than the standard “Persian.” Doing so alleviates the pan-ethnic categorization, but is still problematic in that glosses over difference. It adopts the territorial states’ notion of identity. However, I retain this category because much of this work is concerned with the involvement of central governments in regulating flows based off of these general, territorialized, national identities. To that end I also predominantly refer to the eastern and western sides of the Gulf rather than the “Persian” and “Arab” sides, unless I am referring to the territory of the Iranian state in which case I will use “Iranian side.” It is worth noting here briefly that even using “eastern” and “western” reveals the perspective from which I write given that in Persian language scholarship the coasts are referred to as “northern” and “southern.”

So although I refer to migrants from the eastern shores broadly as “Iranian,” within the chapters I draw out the multiple and distinct cross-Gulf networks through which the migrants moved westward. Doing so brings Iran into Gulf historiography in a meaningful way. Until now very little has been written about the eastern coast of the Gulf in modern history.23 Even historical scholarship on Iranians in Bahrain has tended to focus on their lives while in Bahrain rather than the networks and processes that brought them to Bahrain. These works have referred to them as “Persians,” distinguishing only between Sunnis and Shi’is. Because these histories are not concerned with tracing the story of diverse local networks back to Iran, there is limited understanding of historical relationships that brought the migrants to the western side of the

23 Writings of Lawrence G. Potter and Willem Floor are notable exceptions.
Gulf, how these relationships were drastically transformed in the early twentieth century, or furthermore how these transformations made Iranians both legally and socially “foreign.”

**The end of overlapping sovereignty**

The continuous circulation of people around the Gulf did not mean that movement was always fluid and without incident. Plenty of forces, natural and political were barriers to movement. Traveling on the water of course presented its own dangers, and there was a fearful respect of the sea deeply woven into the culture of those who routinely crossed and spent much of their lives on it. There was also violence and raids, sometimes carried out by individual actors and sometimes political entities. Although these threats were real, the violence they engaged in was not regulated and predictable, and thus was not a serious impediment to lives woven across the water. In the nineteenth century however, the nature of violence and concentration of force began to change and supplant the previous political order.

The nineteenth century-Gulf had been a space of many authorities. The port towns had long existed under what Bose called “layered and shared sovereignty;”\(^{24}\) controlled by local rulers and contested by regional actors, while simultaneously being claimed by multiple empires. The competition between the Ottomans and Iranians for control over Basra between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries is well known.\(^{25}\) The tentative imperial control extended further south and east to the region of Arabistan/Khuzestan, located at the northernmost tip of the Gulf. Demonstrating sovereignty in this area rarely meant more than the ability to collect tribute from


the local ruler. And even when empires were successful at collecting payment, it was rarely consistent and was often a negotiation. Though the province was claimed by Iran in the early twentieth century, the local ruling sheikh did not pay taxes to the central government between 1915-1920, citing his expenses protecting the region during the First World War.26

It was the custom amongst the local rulers of the Gulf to seek protection from stronger powers when threatened, but for the most part they ruled autonomously. There was a hierarchy of protectors, and the rulers understood who to appeal to for protection based on who the threat was coming from. Sometimes this came in the form of tribal alliances, at other times in appeals to empires, and often both. Local rulers were not terribly picky about who protected them as long as they remained in power. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Sheikh of Bahrain at different points sought or accepted the protection of the amirs of Najd, the amir of the second Saudi state, the imams of Oman, the Ottomans (at Mecca, Egypt and Baghdad), the Egyptian army at al-Hasa, and the Iranians (at Bushehr and Shiraz).27 The Sheikh of Bahrain also had dependents himself: roughly fifteen tribes in Qatar paid him tribute in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.28

In the Gulf the relationship between local protectors and protégés was incredibly volatile because local forces did not have a consistent monopoly of force over long periods of time. This constantly shifting balance of power changed when the British began patrolling the Gulf with gunboats, initially to eliminate piracy. In the 1820s the British began signing treaties with the sheikhs of the Gulf that gave the British control over the their borders and foreign affairs, while

the sheikhs maintained control internally. Such an arrangement was referred to as “quasi-sovereignty” and was not unique to British affairs in the Gulf. Lauren Benton explains that quasi-sovereignty was conceived of in the nineteenth century as “the status of sub-polities within empire-states that were said to retain some measure of authority over their internal legal affairs while holding only limited capacity to form international relations.”

It appears however that the sheikhs either did not understand the full implications of signing away a portion of their sovereignty, or they only considered it a temporary solution. For example, when frustrated by British demands in 1860, the Sheikh of Bahrain appealed simultaneously to the Ottomans and Iranians for protection. Both sent representatives listing their terms (but apparently no military force). Some years later, the Kuwaitis concurrently asked for help from the British and Ottoman authorities when the Iranian customs agents were bothering their merchants. Even long after the famed Gulf maritime truce, which Bahrain entered into in 1861, the Sheikh of Bahrain requested the protection of the Ottoman governor at Basra on several occasions in the early 1900s. In each response the governor reiterated the 1892 agreement with the Ottomans in which Bahrain was mentioned at Ottoman territory.

Appealing to the Ottomans for help was a trend that existed beyond the Gulf and even prior the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. From the sixteenth century local rulers in Yemen,

30 Khuri mentions that Muhammad bin Khalifa is said to have possessed both Turkish and Iranian flags and hoisted either one to appease whoever approached first.” Tribe and State in Bahrain, 31.
31 Apparently the Iranians reached him first, and he responded by declaring Bahrain a Iranian dependency as well as raising the Iranian flag. A month later however, the Ottoman representative arrived with more favorable terms and the Sheikh subsequently removed the Iranian flag and replaced it with the Ottoman one. Onley, “The Politics of Protection in the Gulf,” 52.
32 1904, IOR L/PS/10/50, f220.
33 IOR R/15/2/93, f16.
Gujarat,\textsuperscript{34} and Aceh asked for protection, even though their status as subjects in the years both preceding and following was nominal at best.\textsuperscript{35} That they invoked their Ottoman subjecthood only in times of crisis didn’t seem to offend the Ottomans, who regularly jumped at the occasion to declare their sovereignty whenever called upon. It appears that in the far frontier lands of the Ottoman Empire, little more was expected of subjects than proclamation of loyalty during Friday sermons, and occasional payment of zakat (alms).\textsuperscript{36}

To the local sheikhs, British protection was attractive because it was more immediate than that of Ottomans and Iranians who made claims but never came with gunboats. But British expectations were also more demanding. The British were not content to share sovereignty with either the Ottomans or Iranians, and set about on a course of action to slowly pry local rulers away from their nominal imperial affiliations. When it came to eliminating overlapping sovereignty, the British were active in keeping practical (i.e. administrative) sovereignties from overlapping, but were much less concerned with Iranian and Ottoman verbal claims to territory. They were very careful not to enter into direct confrontations or talks regarding sovereignties of the Arab sheikhs of the Gulf; a point which was frequently mentioned in discussions between the Political Residents and Political Agents during times of tension.

Rather than publicly contend with imperial claims, the British set about changing facts on the ground that would later strengthen claims of independence.\textsuperscript{37} By the time the Ottomans and Iranians realized the full extent of British encroachment, it was much too late for both of these

\textsuperscript{34} Giancarlo Casale, \textit{The Ottoman Age of Exploration} (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), p.121.
\textsuperscript{35} Casale, \textit{The Ottoman Age of Exploration}, 128-129.
\textsuperscript{37} Anscombe notes that the Ottomans relied too much on “paper promises and principles” and paid too little attention to “facts on the ground.” Frederick F. Anscombe, \textit{The Ottoman Gulf: The Creation of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 2.
weakened empires to reverse them. In fact, they may not have seen themselves as permanently ousted by the British, especially given that the “protected” status of Kuwait and Bahrain was kept secret until 1949.\(^{38}\) So while the Iranians and Ottomans expressed frustration with British meddling, they continued to reiterate their own claims to Bahrain and Kuwait.

**Territorialization and protection**

By the early twentieth century, the modern state system had begun to work its way into the Persian Gulf. Particularly after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the British and Iranians worked to eliminate what remained of the overlapping sovereignty in the area. This required making central state power fully congruent with the territory it claimed. The era of relatively autonomous local rulers was coming to an end, and particularly those ruling territories in the borderlands between empires. The sovereignty of the central state relied on its ability to assert at the edges. This process, what I will refer to as “territorialization,” included direct rule in the borderlands, standardized rules and regulations especially with regard to crossing borders, and vigorous enforcement of these policies.\(^{39}\) Territorialization in Bahrain and Kuwait involved a similar approach to borders, but primarily in defense against Iran’s claim over them.

It is worth reiterating here that although the British Empire did not operate a state in the Gulf, British officers made and enforced territorial sovereignty on behalf of the local sheikhs.\(^{40}\) They did so to ensure both the small states’ autonomy from the larger states beginning to congeal around them, and their continued cooperation with British economic interests. Although James


\(^{40}\) I refer to “the British” because affairs of the Gulf were reported to both British India and the Foreign Office, and policy decisions were often decided mutually between them.
Onley has argued that the British only reluctantly accepted to protect the sheikhs, they also benefitted from the arrangement on a number of levels. What began with protecting Indian and British property between Mesopotamia and India in the nineteenth century led eventually to lucrative oil concessions throughout the region in the twentieth.\(^{41}\)

Sheikh Khazʿal of Arabistan (later Khuzestan) was eager to gain British favor and protection from the Iranian central government. While his late brother had been an antagonist to the British in Arabistan and closer to the central Iranian government, Khazʿal was eager to distance himself from those positions. Khazʿal assured the British vice consul at Mohammerah, the capital of Arabistan, that he would maintain law and order and support British trade interests. Already in December 1902 the kārguzār (Iranian central government agent) at Mohammerah stated in a dispatch to the Foreign Ministry that Arabistan/Khuzestan was almost a part of the British Empire.\(^{42}\) Sheikh Khazʿal was not under a protection treaty, but according to the British Consul of Arabistan in 1911, the British Government had “undertaken to protect the Shaikh against encroachments on his jurisdiction, recognized rights, and property in Persia.”\(^{43}\) The timing of this agreement is key because only three years prior oil was discovered in Arabistan/Khuzestan and coincides with the transition of British navy ships to burning oil instead of coal.

The success of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company depended on the cooperation of Shaikh Khazʿal and permission to contract the oil pipeline through his territory. He did not give such permission easily, as he saw that doing so “would inevitably cause the Persian (sic) Government

---


\(^{42}\) IMFA “Files of the English Department” Vol 177, 1320 [1902/1903], No. 219/63, 19 Ramadan 1320 [December 20, 1902]. In Ansari, “The History of Khuzistan, 1878-1925,” 172.

\(^{43}\) IOR L/P&S/20/C108, fs “A Précis of the Relations of the British Government with the Tribes and Shaikhs of Arabistan.”
He needed assurances from the British that they would protect him. And with extensive negotiating, by 1914 Khaz’al had managed to get the British guarantee of protection for himself and his descendants from external powers and defense of his autonomy from the central government, regardless of royalist or nationalist changes in the government.

“Protection” I use here in the informal sense as the agreements with local sheikhs differed, and within the British Empire there was a difference between “protectorate” and “British-protected state.” The nature of “protection” also changed as the nineteenth century progressed. Unlike the Sheikhs of Kuwait and Bahrain, Sheikh Khaz’al of Muhammerah was not under an official British protection treaty, a fact which he recognized and complained about. Khaz’al saw himself as having a similar relationship with the British as his southern neighbors did, and was confused about why he was not afforded the same assurances that they were.

Sheikh Mubarak of Kuwait however, saw this in a positive light and was worried that continued assurances from the British would eventually bring himself and “their Sheikh” (Khaz’al) into the undesirable condition of Bahrain whereby every order was required to be approved of by the British political agent. While initially the British Residents and Political Agents who were posted in major port towns were involved in protecting British trade interests, they gradually took on a more political role of enforcing treaties and eventually by the second half of the

---

44 Sir Arnold Wilson, *SW Persia: A Political Officer’s Diary 1907-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 93.
45 F.O. 881/11794, Letter from the Hon’able Sir Percy Cox, Political Resident in the Persian Gulf to His Excellency Shaikh Sir Khaz’al Khan, Sardar-i-arfa, Shaikh of Muhammerah and Dependences, 21 November 1914.
48 FO 881/9633. Shakespear to Trevor, 11 October 1909, Confidential.
nineteenth century, managing the sheikhdoms’ foreign affairs. This effectively put the British in control of the borders: where they were, who/what could cross them, and by what means.

Bose has argued that the British Imperial conception of sovereignty was a unitary one, which he argues replaced the layered sovereignty that had characterized Indian Ocean polities under the Mughal and Ottoman Empires.\(^ {49} \) The role of the Persian Empire is curiously absent from his discussion, but as I have demonstrated above was also a part of the overlapping sovereignty in the Gulf arena. The “unitary” sovereignty Bose conceives of however also contains within it the “personalized sovereignty” accorded to the Indian princely states. To avoid confusion I suggest we consider British imperial sovereignty as a kind of membrane around the sovereignty of local rulers. Although in the Gulf there was less ceremony emphasizing their longstanding rule, a number of similarities exist between the agreements between the British and the Gulf sheikhs and those with the princely states. As such, Onley has included them both in the category of “informal empire.”\(^ {50} \) One of the primary similarities was the way in which the local rulers gave the British control at the borders and the responsibility of protection, while themselves maintaining internal sovereignty. The membrane of British sovereignty also mediated between the foreign and the domestic. In neither the princely states nor the Gulf protected states were local rulers allowed contact with foreign powers.

Protecting the borders also meant affirming the sovereignty of the sheikhdoms vis-a-vis the Iranians. To prevent the Iranian state from realizing its claims over the sheikhdoms and Bahrain in particular, the British employed many of the same tools of territorialization that the Iranians used on the opposite shores, namely traveling passes for individuals and border patrolling.\(^ {51} \)

\(^ {49} \) Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*, 43.  
\(^ {50} \) Onley, “The Raj Reconsidered.”  
\(^ {51} \) Portuguese trading licenses, *cartazes* were issued during the sixteenth century to ships.
Although Bose suggests that precolonial states in the Indian Ocean arena had a notion of territorial boundaries, he does not support his claim. Furthermore he provides no sense of the implications of crossing such boundaries. Throughout the Persian Gulf, prior to the invocation of political boundaries, people did not conceive to be crossing them. The rules and regulations which established borders were applied to individuals according to their national status. For Charles Maier this is an essential aspect of territoriality as he notes the importance of bordered political space for creating a framework for ethnic and national identities.\textsuperscript{52} This observation is particularly salient for helping us think about how people related to space in the Gulf during this period. Before the advent of such bordered space, residence in the urban areas of Bahrain and Kuwait was not regulated and thus did not invoke an association between national status and belonging to a territory.

John Torpey argues that the regulation of movement is a key aspect of what constitutes the very “state-ness of states,”\textsuperscript{53} and that efforts to do so have mutually reinforcing aspects which include the definition of states, codification of laws establishing particular people’s rights to cross borders, and stimulation of techniques to identify each and every person. Around the porous littoral of the Gulf, key to the establishment of the borders was distinguishing the people inside them as either legally belonging to the territory within the borders (nationals) or as border-crossers (foreigners). In 1904, the British assumed jurisdiction over “foreigners” in Bahrain. This decision was reached as a result of attacks that were carried out by Bahraini subjects on German and Iranian subjects. Lacking the ability to do so themselves, the respective governments of the victims then requested for the British to seek justice on behalf of their subjects and to protect

\textsuperscript{52} Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era." \textit{The American Historical Review} 105, no. 3 (2000): 808.

them in future cases. The British Political Agent took the opportunity to extend extraterritorial jurisdiction to all foreigners in Bahrain.

Although sheikhs of the Gulf were familiar with the legal distinctions between their subjects and subjects of the British Empire or between religious communities, territory-based legal identities were an anomaly. The Sheikh of Bahrain argued (unsuccessfully) that Iranians were his subjects because they were Muslim. He considered all of the Muslims in his territory to be under his jurisdiction. The British limited this to Bahrainis, although this category was not clearly defined until the late 1930s. The practice of extraterritorial jurisdiction of foreigners, especially in a place like Bahrain where there were a large number of foreigners (according to the new definition) was a major strike against the sovereignty of the sheikh. As Lauren Benton has shown in other imperial settings, exercising extraterritorial jurisdiction gave the colonial authorities the power to establish the meaning of nationality and develop legal strategies for avoiding local law.

The enforcement of this new kind of legal distinction of jurisdiction according to territorial origins produced a new understanding of belonging across the Gulf, and of difference with regards to the Iranians in particular. Some Iranians were considered Bahraini by virtue of their ancestors having migrated generations prior. Others with similar backgrounds remained legally Iranian. British control over legal national identities marked a major turning point in the politicization of space in the Persian Gulf. Regardless of the arbitrariness of these boundaries and their incongruence with the organization of life in decades prior, borders created meaning and

---

54 It is unclear whether this was due to his understanding of the rules of jurisdiction in the dār al-Islām or whether he was referring to the language of Capitulations.  
55 They presumed all Bahrainis to be Muslims.  
had to be contended with. Migrants’ traditional networks across the Gulf were “transnationalized” by the invocation of boundaries: physical, legal and identity-based.

We have discussed the impact of territorialization on Iranians as legal subjects on the western side of the Gulf. This process of drawing borders also impacted how Iranians interacted with the physical world, as for many their lives and livelihood were tied up in movement that became transnational as a result of the territorialization of the region. It is important to keep in mind that although borders are conceived of and drawn on maps as lines, in reality they are points. I have emphasized above the pervasiveness of the idea of the border in shaping legal identities, but physically the state was not everywhere along the border checking traveling passes and charging customs taxes. This allowed for migrants and traders to avoid regulation by physically restructuring the ties across the Gulf though rerouting of their networks to areas where the state was less visible. As Mathew succinctly put it, “the littoral was a geographic margin but continued to be a hive of activity that was sidelined only in the geographic imaginations of colonial officials.”57 When taxes and regulations were implemented at major port towns, movement and trade that previously flowed through them simply shifted to smaller villages nearby.

While this strategy was successful for petty traders and those traveling by dhow, it was less available to merchants trading their goods with steamships that called only at major ports. The networks that continued then were smaller in scale and more intimate. They also reinvigorated the dhow traffic at a time when colonial officials imagined them to be taken over by the faster, more efficient steamship. The narrative of modern progress drowning out irrational and backwards dhows was also picked up and perpetuated by major historians of the Indian

Ocean such as Chaudhuri.⁵⁸ But as Erik Gilbert has shown in his study of Zanzibar, the versatility of dhows and their ability to land at any beach made the dhow economy “deep subversive of the colonial project.”⁵⁹ The centraiity of small scale dhow traffic for Iranian cross-Gulf networks is corroborated by al-Hijji who mentions that Iranian short-distance nakhodas (dhow captains) had by 1930 taking over shipping of goods from the eastern coast to Kuwait.⁶⁰

**Nationalizing populations**

Territorialization on the Iranian frontier was on a much greater scale than that of the British in the Gulf sheikhdoms. It began in the second half of the nineteenth century under the Qajars as they began to implement customs reforms in the major port towns on the coast and set up agents (kārgozār, sing) at the borderlands who were directly appointed by Tehran to manage the affairs of foreign traders and creeping empires.⁶¹ It continued with the extension of direct rule from Tehran to the southern provinces that had previously been ruled by local Arab sheikhs. Rather than continue to accept tribute payments as they had in the past, the transformation of the empire into a state involved the implementation of a new, unitary sovereignty that placed officials from the center in control over the periphery. The conception of the Iranian territory along the Gulf as a single national space is apparent in the administrative restructuring that led to the establishment of the Gulf Ports District in 1887/8 (mamlekat-e Banader-e Khalij-e Fars),

which was established and headquartered in Bushehr and included Lingeh and Bandar Abbas.\textsuperscript{62} Notably, the Gulf district was placed directly under Tehran rather than the Governor General of Fars,\textsuperscript{63} to which the ruler of Bushehr had previously reported.

But territorialization of the state was a process more thorough than shoring up borders. Scholars of territoriality have also emphasized the reliance of states on the saturation of the nation inside the borders. Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat have further developed this saturation by illustrating that the \textit{internal} constitution of sovereignty within states occurs through the “exercise of violence over bodies and populations.”\textsuperscript{64} In this dissertation I conceive of the filling of the national space as a project of “nationalization.” Nationalization illuminates how the territorialization of the Iranian state was not only undertaken by invoking the central state at points throughout the land, but physically connecting the land and infusing individuals with national identity and binding them to a national community.

Focusing on the physical saturation of the state in Europe after the First World War, Maier explains that,

Territory would be pervaded with prefectures and subprefectures, post offices, railroads and infrastructure, mass circulation newspapers, telegraphic communication, and the possibilities of electrical power in general. Territorial consciousness now meant that no point inside the frontiers could be left devoid of the state's control, just as no point within a field was devoid of physical force.

Administrative energy in the form of primary schools, prefectures, and railroads

\textsuperscript{62} Floor, \textit{The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh}, 52.
would pervade and "fill" the nation's space.\textsuperscript{65}

While the capacity of the Iranian state was too limited to reach the extent that Maier describes, the program for filling the nation’s space was comparably holistic.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Iran, maintaining direct rule at the edges was dependent on infrastructural projects to physically connect them. Massive railroad and road-building projects were undertaken to ensure the ability of the state to penetrate the territory it claimed.\textsuperscript{66} In the case of the south of Iran, these roads not only connected the periphery to the center, but also peripheries to one another. In the 1930s for example, work began on a project to connect Bushehr to Bandar Lingeh by land. Previously people had traveled between them by water. Connecting the Iranian territory across the south together by land was an important aspect of reorienting life away from the water. New landed routes physically connected people in the periphery to their national community inland.

Even as the state was physically brought under a single sovereign, there was still work to be done to create a national community that would, as Kashani-Sabet puts it, “insure the territorial unity of the Iranian nation.”\textsuperscript{67} Iranian intellectuals had in the nineteenth century been in dialogue with intellectuals in Europe, the Ottoman Empire and India about the recovery of ancient national essences. Through these conversations they began to develop a “new conception of the Iranian nation emerged from a complex interplay between traditional Iranian myth

\begin{footnotes}
\item[65] Maier, 818.
\item[66] Arash Khazeni, \textit{Tribes and Empire on the Margins of Nineteenth-Century Iran} (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 193.
\end{footnotes}
narratives and new European styles of thought.” While during this period such ideas were circulated in elite networks, Afshin Marashi argues that, “the politicizing and popularizing of Iranian nationalism began with the constitutional revolution of 1905-11 and the burgeoning of a journalistic print culture that circulated nationalism beyond the culturally heterodox elites.” Then finally under the Pahlavi state, the nationalizing of the Iranian population became official government policy to “help bring about a new polity in which state and society were unified and mediated by a single national culture.”

Recognizing the ways in which the state was concerned with every individual body is key for understanding how the Iranian state measured its territorial sovereignty and the thoroughness of the nationalization project. Historians of borderlands have long demonstrated that these porous and often diverse areas are primary targets for nationalizing regimes. Patricia Clavins argues that “Borderlands, both real and symbolic [are] where nationalism is defined.” In the Iranian case, sartorial symbols became symbolic borders as the state sought to unify the dress of the nation. Iranian nationalism was intimately connected to modernization, and as Houchang Chehabi has shown, the state’s dress policies were intended to promote modern nation-building. Attempts to enforce the sartorial symbols of the Iranian nation at the border in Arabistan/Khuzestan backfired. Rather than erasing the communal Arab identity of the people and blending them into a singular Iranian nation, many instead claimed to be subjects of the Sheikh of Bahrain, and therefore exempt from rules governing Iranians. Although the clothing

68 Afshin Marashi, Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940 (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008), 57.
69 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 76.
70 Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 88.
law could not be enforced on every body at every moment, central government authorities
punished those who refused to comply with imprisonment, beatings, and in some cases death.

The reverberations of the violence of the nationalization process were felt in Bahrain. The
anger about these incidents in particular, along with the perception of special British protection
of Iranians there, as well as the increased visibility of Iranian migrants and claims of the Iranian
government over Bahrain led to a wave of anti-Iranian sentiment. Although Bahrain did not have
a campaign or program for nationalizing the identity of the population, there was a strong sense
that it was certainly not Iranian.\footnote{Ironically, two of the lead figures of Bahraini Arab nationalism were Yusuf Fakhru and Yusuf Kanoo, whose ancestors were themselves migrants from Iran in the previous century. Saeed Khalil Hashim, “The Influence of Iraq on the Nationalist Movements of Kuwait and Bahrain, 1920-1961,” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 1984), 212.} In the late 1930s Kuwaiti Arab nationalism also emphasized
distinguishing between Kuwaitis and Iranians, again due to the increased visibility of migrants
and the sense that they were receiving special treatment from the British.\footnote{Talal Al-Rashoud, “Modern Education and Arab Nationalism in Kuwait, 1911-1961” (PhD diss., School of Oriental and African Studies, 2016), 153.} As the histories of
both shores were so intimately woven together, processes on one side were impacted by and
influenced processes on the other.

The Global Economy and Changes in Scale

Across the south of Iran the territorialization and nationalization programs were not as
clean as authorities had hoped. Around the turn of the twentieth century, many traders from the
Iranian coast avoided the regulations by moving to the opposite shores. Like historical
migrations around the coasts that had been going on for centuries, when faced with challenges
related to their specific locale, the people moved elsewhere within their social and economic
networks. Earlier migrants having successfully relocated, a constant trickle of migrants followed
them to Kuwait, Bahrain and in some cases Dubai. The migrants were quickly absorbed due to the expanding economy’s labor shortage and as the years passed the scale of migration grew. When the often violently enforced modernization policies began in Iran in the 1920s, a line of escape already existed for the tens of thousands who were willing to go.

The regulations and restrictions of movement at the turn of the century coincided with an economic boom in the region. These two factors are not unrelated as the interest of the central government in asserting control over its territory was the potential for tax revenue from the economic prosperity at the ports. This prosperity was created by the Gulf’s growing and transforming ties to the global economy, first through the booming pearl trade in the nineteenth century and later as a result of the connections to Global Capitalist networks in the Indian Ocean arena. The most overarching changes in the early twentieth-century Gulf were in the scale of production and trade, and importantly for our purposes, migration.

The Persian Gulf had for centuries been connected to a large regional economy centered in India through the pearl trade. From the sixteenth century there is evidence of the Gulf’s pearls circulating in India and Europe. Unlike other pearling centers such as Ceylon, the Gulf pearl trade remained steady from the years 1820-1912 until it finally bottomed out in 1930. By the late nineteenth century pearling profits were in the millions of rupees; profits so high that entire Gulf towns were supported by the pearling industry. But it was not only pearls that connected Gulf products to the world market. As Hopper has shown, the demand for dates especially from

---

the United States fundamentally altered the scale of production of this commodity which was previously circulated within the regional Indian Ocean market. While a relatively unknown commodity in the early 1880s, 10 million pounds of dates were imported to the U.S. in 1885\textsuperscript{78}. This trend continued to grow rapidly all the way into the 1930s, when California began producing its own dates using cuttings from Basra.\textsuperscript{79} Dates, which were most abundantly produced in Basra and on the Batinah Coast were previously used for ballast in the large wooden ships that sailed every year from the Northern Gulf to either India or East Africa. Although the dates were sold along the route, it was wood that the ships brought back from India and East Africa that afforded merchants the profits to make the journey worthwhile. However, in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, dates being exported from Basra and the Batinah coast were no longer headed for the regional market. British and later American companies eventually set up headquarters in Basra and Muscat to manage and secure produce for the coming years. By the late 1890s there were direct steamship routes to New York exclusively for carrying Basra dates.\textsuperscript{80} In 1926, twenty-six percent of Iraq’s date exports went to the United States.\textsuperscript{81}

Another less frequently mentioned commodity of global demand was shells, the market for which exploded in late nineteenth-century Europe as the demand for mother-of-pearl buttons rose.\textsuperscript{82} Although in 1910 pearl boat captains in Bahrain agreed amongst themselves not to sell shells, and the practice spread throughout the Gulf, their collective action was not enough to stop one Iranian migrant, Abdullah Germany (whose nickname-turned-legal last name was acquired

\textsuperscript{78} Hopper, \textit{Slaves of One Master}, 70.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, 79.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid, 73.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 72.
\textsuperscript{82} Hightower, “Pearls and the Southern Persian/Arabian Gulf,” 51.
from his extensive trade with Germany), from making incredibly profits by selling shells to Germany in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{83} The shell trade with Europe would not have been profitable without steamships; shells were too bulky and heavy to be worth the trip.

The European steamship routes that carried cargo, mail, and weapons around the Gulf and Western Indian Ocean followed the same routes that local ships had travelled prior to their arrival.\textsuperscript{84} Steam completely transformed trade in the Gulf, through exposure to world markets, higher quantities of goods, and to a trading season year-round. But like other aspects of life in the Gulf, modern technology did not entirely supplant tradition but rather moved alongside it. One of the most immediate difficulties faced by steamships was that none of the Gulf ports were deep enough for them anchor on the shore.\textsuperscript{85} Shallow shorelines were good for local craft to sail directly up to and beach, but steamships had to anchor sometimes up to three miles out from the ports. The cargo would then be transported by small lighterage vessels. These small, shallow-water wooden boats such as \textit{tashalas} and \textit{sanbūks} were built for fishing, pearling, and short-distance coastal sailing, making them well-suited for unloading the steamships. While dhows themselves did not change much between the eighteenth and second half of the twentieth century, the goods, routes and networks were “transformed to accommodate steamship lines and circumvent colonial regulations.”\textsuperscript{86} Mathew argues that,

“Our Colonial regulators saw dhows as a relic of traditional transportation and consequently as insignificant components of the modern world of trade. This colonial neglect allowed dhows

\textsuperscript{83} Among his possessions upon his death were six houses and twenty-five bags of shells. The shells were later sold for 20 rupees R/15/3/6808

\textsuperscript{84} The route taken by C.M. Cursetjee in 1916-1917 is outlined in \textit{Land of the Date} (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 1994).

\textsuperscript{85} Lamented that if only they were to dredge the harbor of Bushehr for steamships, it would be as great a port as Bombay.

\textsuperscript{86} Mathew, \textit{Margins of the Market}, 22-23.
to carry goods and make profits in places and trades that regulators deemed insignificant. They served ports and populations that steamship lines were incapable of reaching.

Steamships could benefit from economies of scale by servicing trunk routes, but they relied on the feeder routes of dhows to obtain and distribute goods from major entrepôts to smaller anchorages.”

The steamship trade was made possible (profitable) by the illicit trade to small towns on the Iranian coast.

The traditional networks of the nineteenth century provided migrants with a particular form of capital: the local geographical knowledge and networks that allowed them to circumvent both state borders and official markets. In many ways the migrant networks survived by operating at the margins of the market that Mathew has analyzed. They traveled on and operated ships that went unrecorded, entered new territory undocumented, and many traded in illicit cargoes, specifically weapons. The weapons trade between Kuwait and Mohammerah was well known, and Iranians migrants benefitted from the difficulty that the British and Iranians had in policing the trade. As weapons could be legally imported into Kuwait, smugglers would take them from there to Arabistan/Khuzestan. The wealthy Kuwaiti weapons traders of the early twentieth century like Najaf bin Ghalib, Mohammad Ali Ma’raf and his sons were from southwest Iran and maintained connections there. These continued connections between the successful migrants of the early years of the twentieth century and networks of extended family or economic connections on the eastern side were key to the continued flow of migrants into the

87 Ibid, 22.
88 Ibid, 51.
89 Ibid, 91.
1920s and beyond. As Fucarro has shown, patronage and protection of wealthy merchants allowed later migrants to find work and gain a foothold in their new home.91

As more cargo came through the small ports, it also required more infrastructure and labor to manage the cargo. The bodies of the new migrants manned the lighterage vessels, transferred fresh water by boat, painstakingly broke sea rocks and laid them to build municipalities, hospitals, and merchants’ mansions, and ensured the steady flow of goods throughout the town on their backs and shoulders. Their bodies remedied the lag between growing economic prosperity and the very limited infrastructure of the state.

Colonial attempts to regulate the influx of Iranians were largely unsuccessful. By the mid-1930s tens of thousands of people had migrated from Iran to the western coast of the Gulf. Although the 1930s are known as decade when the bottom fell out of the pearl market, this seems to have had no impact on the flows of migrants who continued to arrive. Although the crash of the pearl market produced real fears, there were only two years of real crisis (1932-1933) in Bahrain,92 and by 1935 the first oil revenue began to come in and turn the economy around.93 The oil companies needed workers just as desperately as the steamships did, and were eager to employ the recently arrived migrants, even if they entered undocumented. 94

93 IOR/R/15/1/750/1
Transformed meaning of migration

One critique of the literature on borders and borderlands is that if as Adelman and Aron suggested “colonial borderlands gave way to national borders,”⁹⁵ we must show “how nations actually go about the business of ‘fixing’ and transforming border society.”⁹⁶ It was not only nations but global capitalism as well that “required implementing a regime of documentation and standardization that the region had not previously witnessed.”⁹⁷ I argue that rather than a fixedness, these two processes produce new spatial meaning in border societies. That meaning transforms the society because people are forced to contend with it. While there may appear to be a fixedness, it is usually only markers that become fixed, or standardized as Mathew has put it. This dissertation shows a variety of ways that border societies of Iran, Kuwait and Bahrain responded to and contended with the standardization regime that transformed the imperial borderland of the Gulf littoral into national borders.

By looking at the process by which the state and global capitalism impose new meaning on spaces, we are able to imagine a history of different social and spatial arrangements. This is particularly valuable for writing the Iranian coast into a historiography that has largely ignored it. While the Iranian side and its people are present in pre-modern histories of the Gulf and Indian Ocean, they only receive a passing mention in works on the modern period in the English. While there are a few manuscripts and articles about the eastern coast, it remains ghettoized and does not play a role in shaping the general historiography. A lack of access to sources also plays a major role in the underrepresentation of the Iranian coast, both in terms of language and Iranian

---

⁹⁷ Mathew, Margins of the Market, 157.
archives. This has led some scholars of the modern Gulf, like Khuri, to conclude that “Persians are not known in history for their maritime skills or seafaring adventures; until recently all those who practiced seafaring on the eastern coast of the Gulf were Arabs.” In al-Rasheed’s edited volume, the Gulf is located “between the Indian subcontinent, Africa and Europe,” with no mention of Iran. In his *The Ottoman Gulf* Anscombe notes that “Iran [was] a country that Istanbul viewed with much suspicion,” but his monograph contains no more than five references to Iran and Iranians.

Works with a longer view of history however note the predominance of Iranians (usually referred to as “Persians”) in the Gulf and Western Indian Ocean. They rely on the premodern Arabic works of Ibn al-Faqih (c.850), Al-Maqdisi (c.985), ibn Majid (c.1420) and others, as well as a number of Chinese sources that mention Iranians in Sri Lanka, Java, Acheh and East Africa. The result of including such sources is not only an inclusion of Iran and Iranians in the history of the Western Indian Ocean, but a broader sense that the lines between “Persian” and “Arab” historically went undefined. It is telling that Hourani’s very first footnote is an explanation of the difference between “Arabs” and “Persians” as he uses the terms. He begins by distinguishing between speakers of the respective languages, and then moves to geographically situating the terms. Eventually he concludes that as “we do not always know what language people spoke” there is a margin of choice for referring to people as one or another. Indeed his entire book on Arab seafaring is completely entangled with the Persian seafaring that preceded it.

---

and existed alongside it. The back and forth between Arabic and Persian for sea-related terms further complicates the extent to which Persians and Arabs can be distinguished from one another historically, and begs the question of whether, in the context of the Western Indian Ocean, they should. One gets the sense that patronyms carry the full weight of this ethnic distinction. Sheriff for example concludes that the *nisbas* of merchants Ibn Battuta mentions in Quan-zhou (Zaytun) were all related to Iran so they must have been Persian. Given the historical migrations of Arabs to the Iranian coast, it is likely that the backgrounds of these merchants was more complex. The problematic nature of the conflation of “Iranian” and “Persian” which I discussed previously is relevant here. Referring to people from the eastern coast of the Gulf as Iranian is a useful way of referring to a geography without making unnecessary commitments to race or ethnicity.

Discussions of whether the Gulf is Persian or Arab are mostly political and achieve few valuable historical conclusions. The continued claims of the Iranian central state over the small states of the Gulf in the first half twentieth century, the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and the fear of the spread of revolutionary sentiment after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 produced particular effects in both the Arabic and Persian historiography of the Gulf. In Arabic, modern historical studies tend to highlight the relationship between the western side of the Gulf, India, and East Africa. Iran is rarely mentioned, and never in a substantive way. If it is mentioned, it appears as an antagonistic actor. The only major attempts to demonstrate historical ties across the Gulf do so to reclaim the history of the Arabs on the Iranian coast. These studies refer to connections with “Bar Fares” (the specific geographical region roughly equivalent to the Shibkuh coast) rather than “Iran.” While Arabic historiography is intensely local, Persian

---

literature tends towards the opposite problem in that the historiography is often state-centered political history of the major ports on the Iranian side. The local sheikhs are portrayed as having previously been loyal, but encouraged by the British to turn against the central government. There is also particular emphasis on the use of the historical name, “Persian” Gulf.

Neither in English nor Persian or Arabic has there been an attempt to write the modern history of the Gulf as a single space. There has however been some interest in transnationalism in the region. In the Introduction to her edited volume *Transnational Connections in the Arab Gulf*, al-Rasheed states that “transnationalism assumes that ordinary people engage in conscious and successful efforts to escape control and domination ‘from above’ by capital and the state.” Anscombe, who works on the Ottoman period, rightly points out the reliance of the “transnational” on the “national” - a sentiment that did not yet exist in nineteenth century Arabia. “The strongest elements of identity,” he claims, were those related to “each person’s daily experiences” of family, bonds of social, economic or political patronage, economic activity, and locale. For many people along the Gulf littoral, crossing the water was a part of these daily experiences, and the opposite shores were sites of family, economic and sometimes political bonds.

---

Dissertation Scheme

This study looks at how what Anscombe calls the “anational” societies of the nineteenth century Gulf become transnational societies by the mid-twentieth centuries: the creation of national spaces and the process of transnationalizing movement and relationships between them.

Chapter 1 articulates the webs of everyday connections between the shores of the Persian Gulf and into the Iranian hinterland prior to the advent of state borders. I argue that in the south of Iran there were three distinct but often overlapping microregions that sent migrants to Kuwait and Bahrain in the first half of the twentieth century. It also examines the Iranian context within which these connections became routes of migration.

Chapter 2 shows how new conceptions of territorial sovereignty around the turn of the twentieth century overtook the overlapping sovereignty of previous centuries. In Iran it meant the gradual ousting of local sheikhs in the borderlands and their replacement with central government officials whose responsibilities included regulating flows across the borders. On the western side of the Gulf it was the British Empire that worked to establish territorial sovereignty on behalf of the local sheikhs. I show how the process of territorialization unfolded, namely by examining how new borders were invoked through the regulation of movement across them, and the use of traveling documents as a technology for invoking both the physical border, but eventually identity borders as well. The documents themselves were not just papers, but three different narratives located in the archives in London and Tehran and in houses in Kuwait. In this chapter I weave them together to produce a kind of genealogy of travel papers in the region.

For people whose home was the very borderlands whose porousness was the target of territorializing states, the regulations were confusing, illogical, and in many ways forced them to reconfigure their lives. But they were not insurmountable. Importantly this chapter shows the
gaps between law and enforcement, and in particular the many strategies used by common people to evade authorities.

Chapter 3 deals with the difficulties migrants faced in belonging to two spaces. Building off of the previous chapter, it explores how in Iran the assertion of “internal sovereignty” through nationalization of the population was an attempt to infuse community identity onto people within its borders. When the state tried to nationalize the Bahrainis living in southwest Iran, Iranians in Bahrain were retaliated against. This chapter shows how nationalization in Iran set into motion a new sense of national belonging in Bahrain that forced Iranians to choose the side of the Gulf to which they belonged.

Chapter 4 pivots to look closely at how the cross-Gulf networks of Iranians articulated in the first chapter mapped themselves onto society in Kuwait and Bahrain. It explores the ways in which the flows of migrants through these networks was transformed over time through contact with the new economic system and the deep and pervasive patronage networks made possible by particular concentrations of capital amongst Iranian merchants. It also considers the importance of historical trade of migrants in previous centuries for laying the foundations that new migrants were able to build upon.
Chapter 1 - Crossing the Gulf: Networks and Migration from Southern Iran to Kuwait and Bahrain, 1900-1940

Introduction

On October 10, 1936 Sheikh Abdullah of Bandar Kulat, with three sons and several others surrounded the Customs Administration of the port, locking up all of the Iranian officials inside. Over the next five hours, the entire town of Kulat proceeded to pack their necessary belongings and board the ships waiting to take them across the Gulf. The next day the Customs Administration reported to the Ministry of Interior that the village was “empty of residents.”

Throughout the early twentieth century, industries, individuals and even entire villages in the South of Iran moved across the Persian Gulf. By 1950 tens of thousands of people had migrated. It was not a coordinated effort or a response to a single event. Rather, their migration was gradual, and often in response to the various political, environmental and economic calamities that befell them. As the numbers of migrants began to increase, in the late 1930s states began to explicitly try to prevent permanent emigration, particularly in the cases of Bahrain and Iran.

In the 1930s, and still today after many of those migrants have become citizens of the Arab Gulf states, a nuanced understanding of how and why so many people from the south of Iran made their way across the Gulf is lacking. Migrants from the eastern shores are referred to broadly as “Persians” by primary sources, secondary literature, and colloquially grouped together.

---

107 INA 1315 Shamsi - 8-9/150-151
108 A number of files from the Iranian Foreign Ministry Archive at the time contain the subject “preventing migration to the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf. See also Chapter 3 regarding the implementation of the Bahrain nationality law. The Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) was given specific instruction not to hire Persians (sic), and to lay them off first when employee numbers were reduced. Ian J. Seccombe “Labor Migration to the Arabian Gulf: Evolution and Characteristics 1920-1950,” in Bulletin (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies), 10, 1 (1983): 3-207-8.
and called “ʿAjam” in the Arab Gulf countries. Such labels are misleading because they suggest that all people who migrated from Iran are of a single ethnic or sectarian group.109

In the early twentieth century, British colonial officers referred to migrants collectively as “Persians,” but occasionally distinguished between different communities of Iranian migrants that had formed in Bahrain. There the first line of difference for the British was sect. All Shiʿas, they reported, were led by the Bushehri and Kazeruni families. The Sunnis were broken into three groups led by the Awadhis, Khunjis and Pseudo Arabs.110 Their reports, and the secondary literature built upon them has remained focused on the lives of these migrants while in the Arab countries, with only passing reference to Iran and the networks that connected the entire Gulf littoral and brought them to the other side.

This chapter represents the first scholarly attempt, to my knowledge, to construct a picture of the multiple microregional networks operating in the south of Iran in the early twentieth century, and to connect those networks to the cities across the water to which many Iranians migrated during that time.111 We begin by reflecting on the term “migrant,” its connotations, and how we are to understand the migration(s) at hand within its historical and geographical context. I argue that migrations occur not only between nodes (towns), but within networks that I refer to as “webs.” As opposed to other kinds of networks, such as circuits, webs are a particular kind of

109 Although ʿAjam is an ethnic designation, in recent years it is often used to refer to Gulf Shiʿis, and is sometimes used as a diminutive slang term.
110 IOR R/15/2/485 Report by Belgrave on Persians in Bahrain 17 Feb 1948; IOR R/15/2/138 A series of exchanges and reports between the Political Agent at Bahrain and the Political Resident in Bushire, 1929-1930.
111 Although I borrow the language of “microregion” from Horden and Purcell, the microregions I discuss are constructed in what Braudel terms the medium time of societies, economies and cultures, whereas Horden and Purcell were theorizing at the ecological level. See Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000) and Fernand Braudel, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).
network with flows in non-linear directions. Furthermore, the scale, direction and content of flows changed over time. Although I am primarily concerned with the people who flowed through these networks, they cannot be disconnected from the goods, and also the intangible relationships, ideas, skillsets that moved with and alongside them.

The second section of the chapter identifies the particular webs of migrations and movement more generally that operated within the Gulf. Given that Bahrain and Kuwait are the primary settings of the story that follows in subsequent chapters, I provide an overview of the three microregions of the south of Iran which sent the majority of migrants to those countries. In addition to the political geography, I discuss the nature of the geographical relationships of webs that connected nodes from the Iranian hinterlands to port nodes on either side of the Gulf in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Having established the historical connections between spaces, the third section explores the changes that occurred during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that turned webs of interaction into routes of migration.

**Historically Shifting Cities and People**

Populations, trade, and towns of the Persian Gulf have historically been on the move. If one were to look at only the ruling families of the current Gulf states, a majority of them migrated to the areas they rule in the past 300-400 years. Similarly, the locals themselves can often easily trace their ancestors’ recent immigration to those countries from the surrounding areas. Those whose ancestors emigrated from within the Gulf are not considered “migrants” because the Gulf is conceived of as a single cultural zone. The sense of being “local” then is fluid and can apply to anywhere within Gulf region.

---

112 Steamships for example traveled in circuits from port to port throughout the Western Indian Ocean.
This is because until the modern period it was common for people to move in the face of economic, political and environmental difficulties. Historically, many Gulf ports were entrepôts for the transshipment of goods, producing very little of what they shipped. For such communities with few permanent structures and little agricultural investment, the cost of relocating was low. When people migrated they took trade and commerce with them, which meant that the towns moved as well. Over time we see the fall of major ports around the Western Indian Ocean and their subsequent replacement by the rise of another port nearby. For example, archaeologists have documented the transition of trade and people from Rishahr to Siraf to Sohar to Hormuz from the eighth to sixteenth centuries.¹¹³ These premodern nodes were replaced by new nodes that arose in adjacent areas in the modern period.

The phenomenon of shifting towns in the Gulf has been addressed by several scholars of the region. Potter argues that because boats rather than land were the most valuable capital, it was easy for tribes and entire villages to transplant themselves somewhere else along the coast or across the water. The Qawasim (Jawasim) Arabs are the most familiar example, moving back and forth between Bandar Lingeh and the Shibkuh Coast of Iran, and Sharjah and Ra’s al-Khaimah in the modern day United Arab Emirates.

Fattah proposed that the appearance of small towns, which she calls “secondary market towns” were a result of migrations of branches of Najdi tribes to the coast due to tribal infighting, drought, and overpopulation. Eventually these migrants built small towns in southern Iraq and the Gulf which she argues “sprung up to take over the commerce of blocked or temporarily inaccessible market towns.”¹¹⁴ These temporary towns maintained the older long-

distance trade routes by redirecting trade with the bigger centers during times of crisis. A common example of this scenario is when Kuwait began its rise to prominence during the Persian-Ottoman war at Basra in 1775-1776. As there was a Persian blockade of Basra and it was not safe for ships to travel along the Shatt al-Arab between the warring territories, goods were embarked at Kuwait instead and carried inland by donkeys.\(^{115}\)

Both Potter and Fattah are correct to some extent. Potter’s observation of “boat capital” helps us to understand how people were able to move so easily, which is useful for a general understanding of the fluidity of the region. Fattah’s conclusion that new towns are alternatives to older centers is also helpful, but it is grounded somewhat in an economic determinism that considers new towns always as the result of seeking better trading conditions. Furthermore, her focus on Arabia and Iraq leads her to erroneously conclude that strategically placed market towns were an anomaly prior to the mid-eighteenth century.\(^{116}\) Perhaps in southern Iraq such was the case, but other regions of the Gulf experienced movements of people and towns at different points in time for different reasons. It was not always about trade. Sometimes it was a matter of life and death. The Omani invasion of Bahrain for example in the early eighteenth century caused a number of Baharna (Arab Shi’ites of Bahrain) to flee to al-Ahsa and al-Qatif on the Arabian Peninsula and to a number of cities around the littoral.\(^{117}\) Due to continued unrest many more people left Bahrain over the next 150 years. Taking their skillset with them, the Baharna

---


\(^{117}\) Saeed Khalil Hashim, “The Influence of Iraq on the Nationalist Movements of Kuwait and Bahrain, 1920-1961” (PhD diss. University of Exeter, 1984) 4. One of the most well-known migrants of this time is Yusuf bin Ahmad al-Bahrani, the Shi’i Usuli-turned-Akhbari scholar from a family of pearl merchants. Al-Bahrani fled first to al-Qatif and then moved to Shiraz and finally Karbala where he led the seventeenth-century Neo-Akhbari movement.
formed centers of ship-building all along the Gulf in Mohammerah, Kuwait, Bushehr and Bandar Lingeh.

A second major issue with Fattah’s formulations is the hierarchy of major cities versus “secondary” market towns. While she shifts between referring to the new towns as “secondary” and “alternative” there is a clear sense that all of the towns she mentions are alternative to Basra. However, the so-called secondary towns were also sometimes alternatives to one another. For example, in the twentieth century the Sheikh of Kuwait received arms shipments on behalf of the Sheikh of Mohammerah which were then transshipped by land in order to evade the Iranian authorities stationed at the port of Mohammerah.

Furthermore, there was not a fixed hierarchy of ports. Flows shifted between them as economic, environmental and political circumstances required. For example Kuwait itself was not always just a “secondary” port to Basra and Mohammerah. By the early 1900s it too had become a major trading center. In one well known story Bahrain becomes an alternative to Kuwait when in 1910 several wealthy Kuwaiti merchants protested increased taxes by moving to Bahrain and al-Ahsa.

Understanding why people and towns move at certain moments gives a picture of the context of migration, but is only one half of the story. The other half is concerned with the direction of movement: where do people, trade and entire cities move to and what can we learn from that directionality, if indeed the movement is systematic?

The migration of Iranians westward across the Gulf in the first half of the twentieth century is not a story of movement from one place to another. Rather it is a story of individuals and groups moving through their preexisting networks; networks which included nodes on the opposite side of the Gulf. And the directions of these movements have something to tell us about systems in
the Persian Gulf. While recent historical literature on the Gulf has tended to remain concerned with the water, and thus focus on the larger Indian Ocean system of which it was a part through long-distance trade, following the migration of people from Iran to Bahrain and Kuwait reveals similarly complex short-distance networks of movement in the Gulf that were inextricably connected inland. We should consider port cities then as not simply a linear string of nodes as they are often depicted, but as a part of complex webs which extend inland, along the shore and across the water. Before proceeding to the factors influencing the movement of Iranians across the Gulf then, we will focus on the regional webs of networks that migrants moved within. Those inland relationships with the coast are the subject of the following section.

**Political Geography and Disconnect in Southern Iran**

In the early twentieth century, central government control in the south of Iran, and in most of its border regions was weak. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Qajar Dynasty ruling from Tehran had been particularly concerned with reestablishing control over frontier areas that the Safavids had lost in the previous century. Iran’s northern border with Russia and western border with the Ottoman Empire were the primary concern of a number of border negotiations. The eastern border with Afghanistan and Baluchistan had also been scaled back by local rulers declaring their independence. When in 1856 the Qajars tried to reclaim Herat in Afghanistan, the British Empire also entered into Iran’s territorial struggles. Wanting to maintain an independent Afghanistan as a buffer between themselves and Russia, the British opposed the Iranian re-occupation of Herat by invading Iran on the southwestern coast of the Persian Gulf. British ability to penetrate the south and quickly win campaigns at Bushehr,

---

Abkhush, and Mohammerah revealed the weakness of the central government in those areas. While there was some military presence there, the strongest force the Qajars could muster remained much further north in Shiraz.

The relative independence of the area between the Zagros mountains and the coast was longstanding; central government weakness there did not begin with the Qajars. It seems that commanding control over interior lands and the sea was a difficult balance to strike. The Safavids were to some extent successful in establishing themselves in Bandar Abbas and Bahrain, but were too weak nautically to enforce any real control over the entire Gulf coast.\(^{119}\)

The Omanis by contrast were much more successful, but their empire was an entirely seaborne one. The inability of the Iranian state to insert itself into the affairs of the Gulf in the eighteenth century is perhaps best highlighted by the difficulties that their lack of seafaring readiness brought about.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the Safavid rulers frequently requested the help of other parties to either defend or seize territory around the Gulf. Because they had no naval vessels, in 1717 the Safavids asked to borrow ships from the English and Dutch to recapture Bahrain from Muscat. When they refused, the Safavids sought help from Arabs in the south of Iran to ferry 6,000 men across the water. Later in the 1730s Nader Shah was unable to pursue rebels who fled south of Shiraz and into the Gulf.\(^{120}\)

---

\(^{119}\) While the role of a Persian-speaking central state in the Indian Ocean trade is unclear, especially prior to the Safavids, there is still plenty of evidence for the centrality of the Persian language as one of the major languages of trade over the centuries. The Galle Trilingual Inscription installed by the Chinese Zheng He in 1411 during his expedition on behalf of the Ming Emperor included both a Tamil and Persian translation of the Chinese text. Lorna Dewaraja, “Cheng Ho’s Visits to Sri Lanka and the Galle Trilingual Inscription in the National Museum in Colombo,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* 52 (2006): 59–74.

When in 1734 Nader Shah made building a navy a priority and sent an admiral to buy ships from the English and Dutch in Bandar Abbas and set up a base in Bushehr, he found no one willing to sell him a ship. It was recommended to him by the English that he commission some from Surat on the western coast of India, at the time the boat-building capital of the Western Indian Ocean. The ships did not arrive until 1741, so until then the Safavids took to buying small ships, commandeering European ships, and continued to rely on the Arab seamen of the Iranian coast to engage in various battles against the local rulers of Bahrain and Baluch tribesmen, and sometimes in support of the Sultan of Muscat. In the historiography it has been passed down (though never cited) that Nader Shah found no one experienced in shipbuilding in Bushehr, nor was there any wood for building ships. Consequently it is said that he had timber brought from the forests of Mazandaran near the Caspian Sea and 600 miles north of Bushehr, to be made into ships for his fleet.121

If the story is true it elucidates the extent of disconnect between the central state and its coastal territories. That the Safavids would first, find a lack of shipbuilding knowledge in Bushehr, and second, get information about where to procure ships from the English rather than communities they claimed sovereignty over seems unbelievable - and even more so the transporting of timber over a thousand miles across the country! Thus, the attempts to write the Safavids into the history of the eighteenth century Gulf feel awkward and contrived. While there certainly were individuals who considered themselves Safavid subjects operating in the Gulf area, Safavid sovereignty was certainly not complete and was almost always shared with local rulers.

Practically speaking, effective sovereignty meant the ability to claim tribute payment from local rulers. As such, imperial sovereignty overlapped with the sovereignty of a local ruler at the very least. This situation was not unique to the frontiers of Iran, and was in fact pervasive throughout the world prior to changing conceptions of sovereignty in the nineteenth century that began to emphasize a certain kind of control over territory in addition to people. So although local rulers paid tribute to the Qajars, local autonomy in the nineteenth century was quite strong. For example, a Khan of Bastak and the Madhkur Sheikhs of Bushehr both minted their own coins in the nineteenth century. While Iranian historians sometimes claim that minting coins was not necessarily a sign of independence, the Khan of Bastak was hanged in 1879/1287 for minting his own coins.

If the central government was disconnected from the goings on south of Shiraz, the lands across the Gulf were even more of an enigma to Tehran. This became apparent as they tried to understand the steady stream of emigration from the Iranian coast in the early twentieth century. In records from the Ministry of Interior, governors and customs officials of the southern ports often describe the migrants as leaving for “‘Omānāt” a general term they used to describe the opposite coast, or for the “Sheikh Nishīnha-ye Khalij-e Fars” (the sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf). In Tehran it was rarely clear exactly where the migrants were going.

---

122 Alireza Mozafarizadeh. *Hukmrān-e Bushehr va Banāder-e Janūb*. Volume 1: Khāndān-e Al Mazkūr. (Tehran: Safhe-ye Safīd, 1395), 461-467. Another coin, the “lari” was first minted in Laristan from the ninth century. Although it is unclear under whose authority it was minted, it became standard currency in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century and it circulated in northern Iran and the Indian Ocean until the nineteenth century. Mathee reports that it was also in use in the Maldives until the twentieth century.

Webs of Interaction

Had the central government authorities understood the networks that crossed the Gulf, they would have had a clearer sense of where the migrants were going. They were either unconcerned with or did not understand that microregions of the Iranian coast were connected to particular areas on the other side of the Gulf through a long history of trade and migration. These connections also reached into the interior of Iran country, forming deep economic and social networks. Although given the nature of the government reports it seemed that migrants’ movements were sporadic, they were not. People moved within long-established webs that stretched from the Iranian interior across the Gulf.

The literature on oceanic societies such as the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean have theorized the nature of such long-established connections over a *longue durée*. In the case of the Mediterranean, Horden and Purcell argued for ecologically distinct microregions that distinguish certain kinds of places from others. In the Indian Ocean, Pearson focuses instead on culture, claiming that there is a distinct littoral society which is shared between places across distant shores, but is foreign further inland. For historians and geographers alike, the littoral and its role as a kind of fulcrum between water and land is a key element of the maritime world. Four concepts have been used by Indian Ocean historians to relate spaces to the littoral: the *foreland*, that is linkages to the land across the sea with which a coastal community interacts; *umland*, land surrounding the port with which it shares social relations and regularly exchanges goods.

---

hinterland, the mainland area from which exports are drawn and to which imports are sent, and entrepôt, a distribution center that lacks a hinterland.125

It becomes quickly apparent that the explanation of these concepts foregrounds trading relationships. Such a conception of movement in and out of the littoral grew out of a world systems approach to trade history. Unfortunately, such an approach tends to perpetuate colonial hierarchies whereby flows are seen as moving from an agrarian, backwards hinterland towards an industrialized foreland in the metropole. As we have seen, movement in the Gulf was much more complex and multidirectional. Still, some of these concepts taken in a strict geographical sense can be put to use for our present discussion.

Most discussions of networks in the Persian Gulf refer to those involved in long-distance trade with India and East Africa that occurred on an annual basis due to their reliance on the seasonal monsoon winds. However, the networks that concern us are of a different nature; they are short-range webs with frequent contact, on a weekly and even daily basis. The concept of webs allows us to understand that flows occurred in multiple directions between multiple nodes (towns). A web then is a kind of network with a high-frequency of interactions between a set of nodes, and is distinct from a circuit. The coastal travel of long-distance trade moved in circuits. Although movement within webs and circuits is distinct, any given node may be a part of several webs or circuits at one time.

Webs also may consist of different nodes depending on the nature of the network one is modeling. Here our lens is constricted by the fact that we are primarily concerned with migration from Iran to Kuwait and Bahrain. Because migration networks were built on top of previous

relationships, the webs that I will describe must invariably survey the underlying economic, political and familial networks.

I situate each web geographically by identifying a hinterland, a littoral arena with a primary center of trade, and a port across the water. “Hinterland” I use to distinguish the inland area of the network. The “littoral arena” is a coastal area with villages strongly connected to one another socially, culturally, economically and sometimes politically. Located within the littoral arena is a town that functions as the “primary center.” These towns are primary in the sense that they have the most number of connections to other nodes whether inland, to the surrounding coast, or across the water. Finally, because the webs which I will discuss here are only short-distance ones, I do not use “foreland” to refer to nodes of the web across the Gulf. In the case of the Persian Gulf, “foreland” should be reserved for the destinations of long-distance networks in India and East Africa.

In the south of Iran in the early twentieth century, there were four distinct short-range webs. For simplicity, I have named the webs after the primary center of trade on the Iranian coast within the web: Mohammerah, Bushehr, Bandar Lingeh and Jask. Sometimes these ports on the Iranian coast served as a mediating point between the Iranian hinterland and the port across the water, but as we will see flows occurred in multiple directions and scales.

This chapter will specifically focus on the first three webs as those are the primary ones which brought migrants to Bahrain and Kuwait in the early twentieth century. For each of these

---

126 Specialists will note that Bandar Abbas is curiously absent. This is because the networks passing through it are split between Jask and Bandar Lingeh. Furthermore, more migrants came by way of Lingeh than Bandar Abbas. Mohammerah is not technically on the coast of the Persian Gulf, but the bank of Shatt al-Arab river. Still in this period from the point of view of the Iranian government it marks a crossing point from one territory to another.
webs I will identify a number of the towns that were a part of them, and give a brief sense of the nature of their geography, social relationships, trade, and movement between them.

**Geographical considerations**

The physical terrain of Iran was crucial in establishing the kinds of relationships that the coast would have with the interior. Each one of the webs I will discuss has two geographical features in common that shape relationships between towns within the web in similar ways: mountains and coasts. The Zagros Mountains, extending from the Northwest of Iran to the Strait of Hormuz in the South form a major topological barrier to trade between regions north and south of them. While they did not completely cut off the ports from the major cities on the plateau as some historians have suggested, they were difficult to cross with caravans, and often unsafe.\(^{127}\) Roads for wheeled traffic only began to open in the 1930s.\(^{128}\) For this reason cities on the northern side of this mountain range are generally not a part of our webs which run from the foothills to the coast and continue across the water to ports on the opposite side of the Gulf.

Within each one of our webs is a portion of the Iranian coast, and one town in which migrants gathered on the other side. Unlike the agrarian and more densely populated Iranian coast, the population centers in Kuwait and Bahrain were much more concentrated. Thus migrants from broader areas of the Iranian coast were funneled into just a few towns on the opposite coast. Although in the map below I have represented the direction of migration in the twentieth century with a single arrow from the primary ports, each small town along the coast had networks to the other side that were not necessarily mediated by the large port.

Figure 2: Webs of the Persian Gulf  
(By author)
Web #1: Bandar Lingeh

The regional trading sphere of Bandar Lingeh extended in three primary directions: westward along the coast, north into the Zagros mountains and across the Gulf to the southeast and southwest. Coastal connections from Lingeh extended from Kangān south to Bandar Abbas located on the Strait of Hormuz. Between Kangan and Bandar Lingeh were a number of villages in the coastal district called Shibkuh. As suggested by the name (šīb meaning “incline” and kūh meaning “mountain”), this district was at the foot of the Zagros mountains. These villages were
primarily populated by Arab tribes\textsuperscript{129} that were active in pearl diving and as pastoralists.\textsuperscript{130} During pearl season divers from that area would trade pearls at Lingeh, but the Shibkuh villages had very close social relations and trade with one another and across the Gulf. Writing in the mid-eighteenth century, Dutch traveler Niebuhr explains that this entire tract was controlled by Houle (Hawala) sheikhs who are all descendants from the same family.\textsuperscript{131} As we will see later, these relationships transformed the small ports along the coast into alternatives to Lingeh during customs spikes.

The ties with the immediate hinterland, surrounding coast and ports across the Gulf are evidenced the names of different quarters in Lingeh: Kangani, Baharna (from Bahrain), and Bastakiha, Evaziha, and Lari (from towns inland).\textsuperscript{132} Bastak, Evaz, and Lar, along with Hormuz and Jahrom sent food products such as wheat, barley, rosebuds, almonds, raisins, dried fruit to Lingeh for export.\textsuperscript{133} Many Bastaki merchants carried their goods to Lingeh and from there continued to Bombay, Bahrain or Dubai.\textsuperscript{134} Although it was a ten-day trip between Lingeh and the furthest point in its hinterland, Lar, this mountainous region depended on trade with the port.\textsuperscript{135} Goods brought inland primarily consisted of kerosene, sugar, tea, piece goods and matches.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{129} These towns include Mughu, Charak, Hasina, Chiru, Kalat, Mugam, Gabandi, Ghaledar [Qaldar], Naband (Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1912), 41.
\textsuperscript{131} Niebuhr, Carsten, and Robert Heron. Travels Through Arabia: And Other Countries In the East / Performed by M. Niebuhr, trans. Robert Heron, vol. II (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 145.
\textsuperscript{133} Floor, The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh, 96.
\textsuperscript{134} Interview with Abdulhamid al-Awadhi, Kuwait March 14, 2017.
\textsuperscript{135} Floor, The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh, 96-97. While Iranian nationalist writers also include Shiraz in the hinterland trade of Lingeh, this is probably incorrect.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid, 95-96.
In addition to supplying its interior web, Bandar Lingeh was an important entrepôt between the Persian Gulf and India. Until the twentieth century it had been the center of the pearl trade in the region, and merchants would come to Lingeh to purchase pearls to take back and sell in Bombay. Lingeh then imported large quantities of goods like tea and cotton, and transshipped them throughout the Gulf.

Prior to the twentieth century, Lingeh’s strongest connections were across the water. The port was ruled from at least the seventeenth century until 1899 by Hawala Arabs who had migrated there from the Arabian Peninsula. The Qawasem tribe who ruled the longest straddled the Gulf, inhabiting Lingeh on the Iranian side and Ra’s al-Khaima and Sharjah in what is now in the United Arab Emirates.

Web #2: Bushehr

The port of Bushehr is located on the tip of a low-lying peninsula connected to the coast by marsh. Trading connections to the historical city of Shiraz to the north and east of Bushehr required traversing the often-unfriendly passages of the Zagros Mountains. In addition to its connections to Shiraz, Bushehr was the center of a regional economy which included hinterland towns such as Kazerun and Borazjan, agricultural districts such as Behbeh, Dasht, and

---


Tangistan and the coastal area between Ma’shour to the north and Kangan to the south.

Bushehr’s strongest cross-Gulf ties were to Kuwait and Bahrain.

Bushehr became an important center of trade for Iran and the Gulf particularly in the nineteenth century, and rose to become the wealthiest port of the northern Gulf in that time. It was also one of the first four sites of municipal government in the early twentieth century. In anticipation of the great trading city it was to become, between 1889-1901 France, Germany and Russia all opened consulates in Bushehr, which accompanied the British East India Company and British Residency that had been there from the early nineteenth century. Although Bushehr was then a relatively new city, it had developed along the peninsula as an outcrop of Rishahr, a town located further south that was ruled by an Arab tribe, the Al Madhkurs, who migrated there from the Omani coast in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{139} Bushehr remained a predominantly Arab area until migration of Behbehani, Kazeruni, Dehdashti and Shirazis in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{139} Mozafarizadeh, \textit{Hukmrân-e Bushehr va Banâder-e Janûb}, 22.

While the textual record often overlooks the cosmopolitan nature of Bushehri society in the nineteenth century in favor of a purer more nationalist past, it was almost entirely populated by migrants. The names of some of the neighborhoods of the old town, like Dehdashti, Behbehani, and Kazeruni took their names from the towns of emigration of their residents. The archaeological and architectural record also nods to the vast influence of the outside world on the town. Abandoned ‘amārāt, houses and mosques still retain the names of their previous owners and patrons: *Masjid al-'Ašfour* (a family from Bahrain), ‘Amārat-e Kazeruni, *Khane Ishaq Yahuda* (a Jewish merchant’s house), *Masjid-e ‘Arabha* (the Arabs’ mosque). In addition to the

---

names are the architectural styles found around the Gulf and building materials native to India and East Africa that allude to Bushehr’s ties across the seas.

Unlike Bandar Lingeh, Bushehr had deep ties to the Iranian plateau, and was considered the seaport of Shiraz. In the late nineteenth century, Bushehr was so important that two of our first webs pass through it. The “Bushehr web” that I refer to presently extended to Shiraz, eastward down the coast to Kangan and across the Gulf to Bahrain. However it was also the southernmost node in the Mohammerah web.

The Bushehr web is markedly different from the Lingeh and Mohammerah ones because there was a stronger history of central government presence there, and indeed in the early twentieth century was already directly appointing the town’s governor. Bushehr’s accessibility from Shiraz also helped to maintain a central government authority there over the centuries, although passing through the Zagros mountains was always a challenge. The central government’s involvement in this network also extended to Bahrain for 115 years under the Safavid Dynasty. The connection to Shiraz led to the extensive imports and exports passing through the port of Bushehr on their way to the Iranian interior or the Indian Ocean. The success of Bushehr was also due to its connection to the surrounding hinterland which produced dates, wheat, barley, legumes, wool, charcoal, melons, tobacco, gum, firewood and lime.

It’s important to remember however that flows were multidirectional, and that all relationships were not mediated by large trading centers. Some medium-sized towns located on the route between Shiraz and Bushehr were not simply stops along the caravan route, but were termini in their own right. The people of Borazjan for example were a medley of immigrants from the Bushehr web: Dasht, Khist, and Kazerun.142

Web #3: Mohammerah

The third web, the Mohammerah web, is located in the southwest corner of Iran on the Shatt al-Arab. Mohammerah’s web was largely a water-based one. It was connected inland along the Karun River to what was becoming the major oil towns of Ahwaz and Shushtar, and by the Dez River to Dezful, located at the base of the Zagros mountains. The web also had significant connections along the shores of the Shatt al ‘Arab, beginning at Basra and passing through Abadan. Along the Gulf coast, networks extended through Behbehan and reached Ma’shour, Deylam, and Bushehr. Across the Gulf its closest ties were with Kuwait.

During the early twentieth century it had a complicated political geography as in the previous century the local rulers there, the Arab tribe Bani Ka’b, intermittently paid tribute to both the Ottomans and Qajars. It was agreed upon in the 1847 Treaty of Erzurum that the town of Mohammerah would be under Qajar authority, but the ruler of Mohammerah frequently challenged central authority and often refused to pay tribute.

Throughout the Mohammerah web, towns were connected by tribal agreements between smaller sheikhs, and Sheikh Khaz’al who was the ruler of the province of Arabistan at the time. The personality of the Sheikh was an important aspect of what kept these towns connected to each other as he owned a great deal of the land that the population farmed and had the monopoly on the steamboat service on the Karun river. In 1909 he leased the Abadan Island to what would become the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. He also had several palaces throughout the area beginning in Basra, Failiya, Mohammerah and Kuwait. Because a large portion of this web

---

143 Sir Arnold Wilson, *SW Persia: A Political Officer’s Diary 1907-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 71.
144 The relationship between the Sheikh of Kuwait and the Sheikh of Mohammerah was a subject reported on by the British and Iranian authorities. Sheikh Khaz’al married to Mubarak’s daughter. Mostafa Ansari,
was connected by water, travel between the nodes was fast, and indeed on a daily basis wheat, legumes and vegetables passed between them. But navigating the waters was also difficult and often required local knowledge of shallow areas and sand bars. Indian Navy vessels traveling through the northern Gulf would stop at Bushehr and pick up nakhodas (ship captains) from Kharq Island to help them navigate the Shatt al-Arab.\textsuperscript{145} The Baharna who were known for their ship-building skills, in previous centuries migrated from Bahrain lived all throughout this web from Kharg Island near Bushehr to various areas in the Shatt and even inland to Ahwaz. People easily traveled back and forth and were intimately familiar with the area – a lifestyle that as we will see in subsequent chapters became much more difficult when the Shatt al-Arab became a formal border between the Ottomans and Qajars.

The independence and interconnectedness of this web in an area that bordered Ottoman Iraq and Kuwait was a constant source of worry for the central government in Tehran. In subsequent chapters we will see how the government specifically targeted this area as it sought to transform the relationships between individuals, land and the state.

\textbf{Twentieth century changes}

In the late nineteenth century, these microregions had already been longstanding clusters of interaction when relationships between the nodes began changing rapidly. In the early twentieth century, insecurity and instability grew from increased challenges to the established political order, both from the central government and local actors throughout the South. Although multidirectional trade continued, stress on particular nodes of the networks encouraged migration

\textsuperscript{145} Charles Rathbone Low, \textit{The Land of the Sun: Sketches of Travel, with Memoranda, Historical and Geographical, of Places of Interest in the East, Visited During Many Years’ Service in Indian Waters} (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 267.
towards other nodes. In the eighteenth century stress on the western shores of the Gulf caused movement eastward. In the twentieth century, people migrated in the opposite direction.

Studies that mention emigration from Iran during these years often cite British colonial records that tell of chaos and unrest. Disease, earthquakes, warring tribes, tyrannical governors, greedy customs officers and oppressive modernizing ideologies have all been (perhaps not unduly) cited for prompting the emigration of tens of thousands of Iranians in the first half of the twentieth century. There has yet to be a major scholarly attempt to reconstruct the state of affairs in southern Iran in this period such that it does not appear as a dizzying list of calamities. While there is no shortage of factors that contributed to emigration, there are several overarching and systemic changes that permanently restructured relationships within the webs outlined in the previous section, and set people on the move in the first half of the twentieth century.

Between approximately 1900-1940 there were two periods of migration from Iran to the Arab sheikhdoms of the Gulf. The first wave occurred between roughly 1900 and continued until 1925, and the second from 1925 until the late 1930s. As I will demonstrate presently, the people who first migrated across the Gulf were from the border areas; spaces that were already connected. But between 1900-1925 there were also many people migrating internally in Iran, and

146 Mohammad E. al-Habib, “The Shia Migration from Southwestern Iran to Kuwait: Push-Pull Factors During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” (Master’s Thesis, Georgia State University, 2010), 29.
148 Migration continued into the 1940s and even through the second half of the twentieth century, but were fueled by factors outside the scope of this study.
that movement was primarily towards urban centers and major trading cities. With extensive cross-Gulf networks established in the early part of the century, after 1925 migrants newly arrived to the southern coasts as well as many in their hinterland networks move to the other side of the Gulf. In the following section we will explore the circumstances that provoked and shaped these migrations.

**The encroaching central state**

The south of Iran became a subject of interest for the Qajar shahs in the second half of the nineteenth century due to increased trade and British Imperial involvement in the Persian Gulf. In addition to pushing back against British encroachment, the central state was also interested in taking advantage of the booming economic situation in the Gulf. By 1885, one half of Iran’s exports left from the Gulf. Previously preoccupied with Russian encroachment in the north of the country, the central government in Tehran began to slowly assert its sovereignty in major cities on the Persian Gulf coast. In the early 1850s Bushehr’s local ruler was replaced by a ruler appointed from Tehran and given the title *daryabeigi*. The *daryabeigi* was at least officially the ruler of all Iranian Gulf ports from Mohammerah in the northwest to Charbahar in the southeast. The creation of such a position signaled Tehran’s imagining of this space as a single unit, and foreshadowed Tehran’s increasing involvement to come over the next century.

In a move to assert territorial sovereignty, in 1898 the Iranian government placed the collection of customs revenues of the Gulf Ports under a central customs administration managed

---

by Belgian officials. With Bushehr firmly under Tehran’s control, the reorganization of revenue
collection primarily affected Bandar Lingeh, which had previously oscillated between being an
independently run tax-free port to being farmed out by a central Iranian authority. The scheme
worked quickly, and by 1901 the Belgian officials were strictly levying a five percent tax on
imports.\footnote{Floor, \emph{The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh}, 100. Iranian sources say that it was a
ten percent tax. This is likely due to the fact that most goods were re-exported from Lingeh, and incurred
a further five percent tax, which brought the total to ten percent. IMFA GH1339-K50-P1, f60.}

While Lingeh’s independence was brought under control, doing so was not without a price.
The tax was more easily absorbed at Bushehr and Mohammerah, but because Lingeh was
primarily an entrepôt for re-export, the new five percent tax was levied twice: first on imported
goods, and then again when the bulk was broken down and re-exported throughout the Gulf.\footnote{“Administration Report on the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Maskat Political Agency for the Year 1901-1902,” in \emph{Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1873–1947}, vol. 5, 1901-1902 (Gerrard’s Cross: Archive Editions, 1986), 13.}

This made trading through Lingeh increasingly unviable for merchants. The taxes even deterred
trade in goods that were intended to remain in Lingeh or be sold in the hinterland. An Iranian
official writing in 1911 reflected on the detrimental effect of the new taxes of 1317 (1898) on
Lingeh’s trade, which he complained diverted trade to Dubai and Bahrain instead.\footnote{IMFA GH1339-K50-P1, f60-61.}

The well-known Kuwaiti merchant Yusuf al-Marzouk posted shipping agents in Dubai and Sharjah for the explicit purpose
of smuggling silk into the Lingeh district.\footnote{Floor, \emph{The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh}, 101.}

It was not only the coastal areas of the Lingeh web that were affected. Traders deeper into
Lingeh’s hinterland nodes from Lar to Evaz (‘Awaḍ) also began to utilize the smaller ports of the

\footnote{Eran Segal, “Merchants’ Networks in Kuwait: The Story of Yusuf Al-Marzuk,” \emph{Middle Eastern Studies} 45, no. 5 (2009): 709-717, 713.}
Shibkuh coast for their imports rather than trade through Lingeh.\textsuperscript{157} Furthermore, the pearl market that was the backbone of Lingeh’s economy proved to be easily transferrable to Bahrain, as the pearls sold at Lingeh mostly came from waters near Bahrain and were purchased for the Indian market.

The shift of Lingeh’s trade to Bahrain did not happen overnight, but by 1902 the British Political Agent in Bahrain was already remarking on the number of Persians (sic) that had moved there in the previous two years. Although in 1912 taxes finally came under the centralized Customs Administration, it did not deter the restructuring of relationships between nodes that had been set in motion. An Iranian report from 1921 noted that the serious decline in trade resulted in an estimated 3,000 people migrating from Lingeh each year: around 1,000 from Lingeh and its coastal area, and another 2,000 from Bastak and the interior. It was not only wealthy traders who were leaving, but day laborers (ʿamaleh) following the economic opportunity across the Gulf after the diversion of trade from Iran.

Even from the outset of their movement it was apparent that the migrants had left permanently. An Iranian officer lamented that they were settling there (mutavatan mishavand) and even taking their own building materials to build homes.\textsuperscript{158} A British official also observed the tie between the taxes and migration, noting that “inhabitants [were] prepared to desert Lingah (sic) rather than submit to increased taxation.”\textsuperscript{159} And indeed they did. The Iranians estimated that between 1902-1922 the population of Lingeh decreased by 22,000. By 1930 a good portion of Lingeh’s trade and population had moved to Bahrain.\textsuperscript{160}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Floor1921} Floor, \textit{The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh}, 103.
\bibitem{IMFA1912} IMFA GH1339-K50-P1, f61.
\bibitem{PoliticalAgent1929} Political Agent, Bahrain to Political Resident, Bushehr. 4 November 1929. IOR R/15/2/138 f44. Ali Bahranipour, “Barressi-yeh tahlili – sanad-e ‘alal-e muhajarat-e daste jam’i-ye ahali-ya banadar-e Kulat va
\end{thebibliography}
Mohammerah appears to have avoided these taxes altogether when Sheikh Khaz‘al convinced the British representative in Tehran to make a case for him with the central government. Both parties were concerned that allowing such measures would incite a rebellion, toppling Khaz‘al and creating instability for British trade and oil interests. In Bushehr the new taxes were in full affect, though not as detrimental to trade as in Lingeh. The increased regulations however, which included minor fees, stamps and other administrative costs were by 1904 proving difficult to absorb amongst smaller traders when the British Vice-Consul at Bushehr expressed concerned that such conditions were driving these traders out of Bushehr. Indeed a small community of Iranian shopkeepers dealing in groceries and dry goods was already established in Bahrain by 1904 when they were victims of a sectarian attack likely inspired by the increasing numbers of Iranian there. Due to the nature of their trade and their sect these shopkeepers were probably from the Bushehr web.

Similar to the alternative routes from Dubai to the Shibkuh coast used to avoid customs at Lingeh, in Bushehr the “contraband trade” was mainly in piece-goods (pre-cut cloth), tea and sugar – all articles whose trade, along with wheat, were monopolized by the government. The import of the former originated from Bahrain and the Trucial Coast in exchange for wheat that was smuggled out of Iran.

Gerze az valayat-e shibkuh-e Lingeh be ‘Oman 1315-1316,” Tarikh-e Ravabit-e Kharijī, 47 (Tābistān 1390): 55-76, 70.
The Customs Administration also played a role in restructuring dynamics between nodes by encouraging smuggling. Taxes and regulations impaired trading conditions but they also led to the reorganization of local power to protect extensive smuggling networks that were formed to maintain the flow of goods to and from the Gulf. Nodes that were previously connected through major trading centers began to interact directly to circumvent regulations in those same centers. The disruption of traditional relationships, and the government patrols deeper into the hinterland to prevent smuggling however created volatility, and innumerable local power struggles.\textsuperscript{165}

The instability was aided by the proliferation of arms throughout the Gulf region that caused warring between local tribes and insecurity on the roads. Most people, even peasants were armed.\textsuperscript{166} This had already become a problem by the late 1880s, which the Iranian government tried to halt with an official ban on the private importation of firearms into the country.\textsuperscript{167} The ban did little to stop the trade, and insured that it continued through smuggling channels. Kuwaitis were the largest supplier of arms to the Iranian coast, from Mohammerah to Bushehr. The close relationship between the Sheikhs of Kuwait and Mohammerah was tied up in the arms trade between them. Kuwaiti merchants would procure arms at Muscat and smuggle them on small boats which ran frequently between Kuwait and the Shatt al-Arab.\textsuperscript{168} Further evidence suggests that Kuwaitis supplied arms to Behbehan and Tangestan as well.\textsuperscript{169} Tangestan, a region

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[165] For more detail, the Persian Gulf Administration Reports for Bushire and Fars for this period recount the minutiae of local disturbances. Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1873–1947, vol. 9, 1931–1944 (Gerrard’s Cross: Archive Editions, 1986).
\item[167] F.O. 60/592 Thomas to Granville, July 21, 1881.
\item[169] Najaf bin Ghalib, the Sheikh of Kuwait’s agent in the early 1900s and a prolific arms trader was well known in Bushehr, and even robbed there in 1904. “Administration Report on the Persian Gulf Political Residency and Maskat Political Agency for the Year 1905-1906,” in Persian Gulf Administration Reports
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
in the immediate hinterland of Bushehr was infamous for local khans who were often at war, competing for resources, territory, and sometimes even control of Bushehr itself. During times of instability in this area in the last decades of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, many thousands of people gradually made their way from rural areas towards more urban centers like Kazerun and Borazjan, and from those centers to Bushehr.

Environmental incidents also contributed to instability and migration toward urban centers. For example, when a series of earthquakes in Lar in 1912 practically destroyed the region, a British officer at Lingeh reported that as a result, four-hundred inhabitants moved permanently to Lingeh and Dubai.\textsuperscript{170}

But it was not always chaos and insecurity that caused people to migrate. Many were also forced out of stable areas with plenty of economic opportunities. As the government began to take interest in the south, collect revenues from it and build industries there, it often overlooked (whether intentionally or not) the local population, and brought in workers from other areas of Iran to manage the developments. Towards the end of the nineteenth century as the Qajars began to develop a modern state they sent their own governors to rule alongside the local rulers in Mohammerah and Lingeh. Customs officers were also always outsiders, either from another area of Iran or Europe. This continued under the Pahlavis where each port was assigned a “Zabit”, who served as a municipal administrator.\textsuperscript{171}

Bringing in officials from other areas of Iran with no local context perhaps kept them loyal to the central government, but had detrimental effects for the locals. One resident of Lingeh wrote to the Interior Ministry claiming that anti-Sunni attacks at the hands of new officials led to the arrest of several merchants, and others fled across the Gulf fearing for their lives.172

These outsiders also knew very little about the organization of life and movement on the coast, and implemented central government policies that disconnected nodes in the web from one another.173 Residents of Bandar Kulat complained that the coal business that sustained the village was no longer viable after they were forced to first take the coal to the closest customs house, then pay an export fee before shipping it. Previously local ships on the way to Mohammerah would pass by and load the coal directly from Kulat.174

Even within private enterprises, some groups were favored over others. The salt mines on the Shibkuh coast which previously had been run by local sheikhs were rented out to people from the interior who brought their own day laborers to work the mines rather than continue to employ locals. Around Mohammerah, the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) had an agreement with the Bakhtiyari chiefs to hire their tribesmen.175 When the oil commissar complained that no Arabs from Mohammerah were being hired, the company responded that they were agriculturalists and not interested in working.176 Preventing locals from working in the main

172 IMFA GH1318-K13-P7
173 This is likely one reason why state and society were perceived as completely separate in the historiography. See Cyrus Schayegh, “‘Seeing Like a State’: An Essay on the Historiography of Modern Iran,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 42, no.1 (2010), 39.
176 This statement is ironic because many of the Arabs were left without work after the land they farmed, which was owned by the Sheikh, was taken from him by the central government in the 1920s.
industries in their villages denied them participation in the quickly monetizing economy. Without cash they soon became unable to continue living in these areas and migrated to areas where there was ample work to be found.

The internal migrations of the first quarter of the twentieth century let to clusters of poverty around economic centers, and Bushehr in particular. In an attempt to alleviate the situation, the Municipality put people to work building roads in the town and another between Bushehr and Lingeh. But such projects were limited to several hundred individuals, and many more left to find work on the opposite shores.\textsuperscript{177} The migrants in this second wave were often encouraged by relatives who had left in previous decades and successfully settled in Bahrain and Kuwait. News of opportunities for work spread quickly, and Bahrain and Kuwait gained reputations as lands of opportunity. In some cases new migrants were even recruited by brokers.\textsuperscript{178} By the 1920s there were established labor networks and patronage systems in place that supported the migrants upon arrival.\textsuperscript{179}

In addition to the increased connections between opposite sides of the Gulf that made it easier for people to navigate the process of migration, the 1920s marked a number of significant changes inside Iran that pushed people to leave. If in the first quarter of the twentieth century migrants escaped specific hardships in the areas where they lived, after 1925 many more people left to escape the state itself.

The nationalist and modernization policies of the 1920s and 30s presented a new threat to people’s ways of life, as we will discuss further in Chapter 3. The conscription law, for example,


\textsuperscript{178} These kinds of relationships are visible in the Bahrain Court records. See for example IOR: R/15/3/131.

\textsuperscript{179} Nelida Fuccaro, \textit{Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf Manama since 1800} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 100-102.
passed in 1927, was a major source of uprisings throughout the country. People living in border regions in all areas of Iran crossed into neighboring territory to escape mandatory conscription. The south was no exception. One estimate claims that 60,000-80,000 tribesmen left the southern province of Fars in the mid-1930s to avoid conscription. In the southwest of Iran, communities were targeted by both the Ottomans and Iranians for conscription. They then often left to join family members in Kuwait and Bahrain. Some also felt that their identity was attacked by the new modern clothing. Many Arabs were beaten and imprisoned in the late 1920s for refusing to remove their traditional clothing. The forced removal of the veil in 1936 is also among the most frequently cited reasons for migration amongst Kuwaitis of Iranian heritage.

Finally, many of the problems of the previous decade carried over into the 1920s and 30s. The high cost of living and taxes on common articles coupled with low wages created a tendency for people, both the merchant and poorer classes to emigrate from Bushehr and the district to Mohammerah, Abadan, Bahrain and the western coast more broadly. It is estimated that the population of the city declined from 20,000 in 1931 to about 8,000 in 1937.

### Conclusion

In the late nineteenth century, the networks that connected the shores of the Persian Gulf to the South of Iran were fluid lifelines oriented towards the sea. The webs that I have described in

---

180 In Kurdistan anti-conscription rebels were pushed by Iranian government forces “into the mountains” and across the border into Iraqi Kurdistan Stephanie Cronin, *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State, 1921-1941* (London: Routledge, 2007), 163.


182 IOR: R/15/2/486 Adviser to Bahrain Government to PA Bahrain 8 October, 1932.

this chapter represent not only trade relationships, but spatially represent the way that nodes in
the network understood and interacted with their world. Although in the late nineteenth century
far ends of webs were often mediated by large trading centers, in the twentieth century this began
to change.

Because the rules and regulations that “borders” invoked were mostly enforced in these
trading centers, the use and number of alternative ports greatly expanded, creating more
decentralized networks that crisscrossed the water. These networks were ones of trade, and
eventually migration.

From people living deeper in the interior, their migration across the Gulf was typically
mediated by a coastal port. Those who left from the coast went directly because they had direct
relationships with the other side. Even along the coast though, cross-Gulf connections amongst
the average population were mostly limited to certain webs. One would not go from around
Lingeh to Kuwait for example without first passing through Bahrain or Bushehr.

Migration from Iran in this period should not be understood as outsiders navigating unknown
territory. Familiarity was key, and old networks played an important role in shaping their
destinations. In the twentieth century however, the nature and meaning of crossing the Gulf was
beginning to change as well. In the subsequent chapters we will explore how some of the same
processes that caused people to migrate interrupted the traditional ways of moving across the
water.
Chapter 2 - Traveling, Territorialization and the Iranians in Between

In 1940 Mustafa bin Mohamad Irani was apprehended by a passport officer who charged him with illegally entering Bahrain. Irani was not a stowaway found aboard a ship, nor was he caught trying to swim to the shores under cover of darkness. In fact Mustafa was not a newcomer at all. He had lived for a number of years in Bahrain where he owned a bakery in partnership with a fellow Iranian. But by 1940 his long-term residence and Bahrain did not give him the right to re-enter the country. The King’s Regulation of 1937 required all travelers to carry a passport to enter Bahrain, and the passport officer had accused him of traveling to Iran and returning without proper documentation. The evidence against him was that he had not been seen for a
year and then suddenly reappeared. As alibis could not (consistently) account for his whereabouts, he was sentenced to three months of “vigorous imprisonment.”

This chapter explains how the territorializing measures combined with the British introduction of the category of “foreigners” (through its practice of exceptional jurisdiction) to create new ideas about territory and belonging for both the inhabitants and rulers of these small states. As territoriality is a characteristic of the states that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century, I begin by briefly laying out the political geography of the previous period. I then explain the nature of British involvement in the region and how British and Iranian competition in the Gulf led to particular territorializing measures that transformed the meaning of spaces and people’s belonging in and to them.

In the second half of the chapter I argue that these new developments left people of Iranian origin in a liminal space in between, both legally and physically, that complicated the fluid lives they were used to. I show how even with the barriers brought about by the implementation of borders, there were still ways across. The final section of this chapter elucidates how individuals were able to use their historical networks and knowledge to identify gaps in the new system, and thus work their way around and through it.

**Local rule on the littoral**

To understand the implications of the changes occurring in the twentieth century, we must get a sense of the lie of the land in the years prior, particularly on the Iranian littoral because it is understudied. For centuries Iranians of various ethnicities made up the majority of the settled people around the shores of the Gulf. People born on the northern shores stretching over 1,500

---

184 He was released after forty days and the forty-rupee fine he paid for his offense was returned. IOR R/15/3/7023
miles (2,400 kilometers) found their livelihood living and working throughout the Gulf trading sphere from Basra to Zanzibar to western India.\textsuperscript{185} They worked in a diverse range of trades from farmer to fisherman to artisan. They were also ethnically and linguistically very diverse, speaking a range languages including Arabic, Persian, and Turkic dialects as well as Lori and Baluch. The orientation of their lives was towards the Gulf and Indian Ocean where they exported a number of products, particularly grains and animals.

Politically, the south of Iran was part of the former Persian Empire.\textsuperscript{186} But in the centuries leading up to the twentieth, local rulers ruled over the major ports of the three microregions I articulated in Chapter 1, with fluctuating degrees of autonomy from the central government. Many of those local rulers were sheikhs of large Arab clans,\textsuperscript{187} for whom history took a variety of paths.

The Al Madhkur family\textsuperscript{188} for example ruled Bushehr from probably the middle of the eighteenth century, and for a brief period also ruled Bahrain\textsuperscript{189} between the fall of the Safavid

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{185} It is impossible to refer to these vastly diverse people as Persians. When talking about people, I will try to use categories with caution given the overlap of people and cultures. Identifiers that might otherwise lead us to categorize people in one way do not work in similar ways in the Gulf. For example, just because one spoke Persian does not mean that he or she considered themselves Persian, was considered a Persian by the authorities, or that the category “Persian” had any particular resonance in our period. Because at this point the specific ethnicities of the migrants from Iran is not the subject of discussion, I will call them “Iranian” to note the land from which they emigrated, but to avoid attaching to them to any ethnicity, Persian or otherwise. I will similarly refer to the Iranian Government rather than Persian Government.


\textsuperscript{187} Abbas Ashoori-Nejad mentions the Bani Ka’b between Basra and the Karun river, Āl Haram from Kangan to Kooshkenar, the Malaki around Bandar Taheri and Asalouyeh, ‘Abeydali and Marzouqi at Bandar Shibkooh, the Qawasim at both Bandar Lingeh and Bandar Rig, and the Bani Mo’in around Bandar Abbas and Qishm. Emperatori-ye osmani dar Bandar-e Bushehr (Qom: Daneshname-ye Ustan-e Bushehr, 1394), 22.

\textsuperscript{188} The Al Madhkur are said to be from the Abu Muhair tribe and have migrated from Najd in the 17th century, but an exact date for the beginning of their rule is unknown.

\textsuperscript{189} They ruled Bahrain as representatives of Iran. In Fuccaro, Histories of City and State, 19.
\end{footnotesize}
dynasty and the beginning of the Al Khalifa rule there in 1783. After the death of Nadir Shah (the ruler of Iran) in 1747, the Madhkurs ruled Bushehr without intervention from the central state in return for annual tribute paid to Fars. Demonstrating their power, from the early nineteenth century the Madhkur sheikhs referred to themselves as “daryābeigi” (lord of the sea). But their independence from the central government at Fars fluctuated. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Fars government began to insert itself more forcefully in the affairs of Bushehr by sending officers appointed in Shiraz, whom they also gave the title “daryābeigi,” to administer the city. While they did not forcibly take control of Bushehr from the Madhkurs, the sheikhs were threatened by the challenge to their power and called upon clans residing in around Bahrain and Ra’s al-Khaima to push back the Fars officials. After the death of Sheikh ʿAbd al-Rasul Madhkur as a result of this encroachment, it appears that the new daryābeigi from the central government arranged a power sharing agreement with the his son Nasir on the condition that he and his family moved temporarily to Kharg Island just off the coast of Bushehr. The Al Madhkurs never returned to Bushehr.¹⁹⁰

But not all of the semi-autonomous Arab rulers of the south disappeared in this way. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Sheikh Khazʿal, ruler of (then) Arabistan and member of the Bani Kaʿb tribe, both paid nominal taxes to the Qajars, and had independent relationships with the British and the Sheikhs of Kuwait. Although he had a great deal of autonomy, by the 1920s he was struggling to maintain his independence. It is said that he even sought recognition of his “state” at the League of Nations¹⁹¹ in addition forming alliances with

¹⁹¹ Attempts to verify this widely mentioned claim were unsuccessful.
other big tribes against the central government. Unlike the Al Madhkurs he was captured and brought to Tehran by Reza Shah in 1925 where he died shortly thereafter. Taken over by the Iranian military, his sheikhdom was abolished and the name of the province changed from Arabistan to Khuzestan.

The control over Bandar Lingeh was a more gradual process. The Qawasim sheikhs had ruled there for roughly 100 years (also in Sharjah, and Ra’s al-Khaimah) prior to the formal usurping of power from the Governor of Gulf Ports, stationed at Bushehr, in 1887. In years prior, the Al-Qasimi sheikhs had paid tribute to the Iranian central government, though rarely without confrontation. The volatile nature of their interactions with the central Iranian government and other local inland rulers regularly involved calling upon the assistance and protection of their fellow Al-Qasimi tribesmen across the Gulf who regularly came with boats to protect Qawasim rule in the town. The last sheikh, Qaḍīb bin Rashid was arrested and taken to Tehran in 1887.

The transformation of the political geography that occurred in these three microregions of the southern frontier areas give us an idea of the kind of transformations taking place in Iran at the end of the Qajar dynasty and in transition towards statehood. Such power shifts came particularly after the 1905-7 Constitutional Revolution as the central government’s power became much more pervasive in areas previously run by autonomous governors.

---


193 Ibid, 53.

194 The *Anjuman-e Baladiyya* (Municipality) which came into existence after the Constitutional Revolution was an important factor in asserting government control in the provinces. See Vanessa Martin, *Iran between Islamic Nationalism and Secularism: The Constitutional Revolution of 1906* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), Part II. Contemporary Iranian historiography mostly accepts that at the turn of the century most of the south was only nominally under the Iranian state’s control. It does however cite the newspaper *Habl al-Matin* to argue that at the very least in 1911 Bushehr, Lingeh and Abbasi (Bandar Abbas) were ruled by the central government. *Habl al-Matin*, 16 October 1911, Year 19, Issue No. 18, p. 20. Also Roxane Farmanfarmaian, *War and Peace in Qajar Persia: Implications past and Present*, *Roxane Farmanfarmaian. ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
On the other side of the Gulf, similar to Bushehr, Kuwait had been autonomously ruled since the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century by the Āl Ṣabāḥ, who are said to have migrated from central Najd in the same period. Kuwait largely remained a small fishing village with some maritime skills – until a period of unrest occurred in Basra in the late eighteenth century due to fighting between the Ottomans and Iranians. At this time much of Basra’s trade was rerouted through Kuwait. Kuwait remained an important trading center and was politically stable throughout the nineteenth century. Despite its relative autonomy, and the fact that the closest Ottoman officials were stationed at Basra, it was claimed by the Ottoman Empire.

Bahrain was also nominally under the Ottoman Empire and had on occasion Ottoman troops passing through due to Bahrain’s proximity to their base at al-Ḥasa in eastern Arabia. However, it was ruled in practice by the Al Khalifa family who had taken over in 1783 after half a century of struggles between local tribal groups and the Safavids to retain control over the island and after the fall of the Safavid dynasty there in 1722.

In none of these territories did local rulers enjoy complete local autonomy, but neither were these frontiers of the Ottoman and Persian Empires ruled over by a single imperial sovereign. Instead they existed in a space of overlapping sovereignties, where the claim of one authority did not preclude the existence of another. The overlap was both vertical, between local and imperial authorities, and horizontal given that some territories were claimed by multiple empires and often contended for by multiple local powers. These overlapping sovereignties that existed in the nineteenth century, as we will see, became less and less possible with the dissolution of the Persian and Ottoman empires and the rise of territorial nation-states in the twentieth century.

---

195 As well as the British post office, which became significant for establishing British interest there.
The British move in

The relatively autonomy enjoyed by the local rulers around the Gulf in the nineteenth century because of their position as relative backwaters to their northern-situated and northern-focused empires, was by the early twentieth century a thing of the past. Aside from the sheikhs of Bushehr and Lingeh who had been ousted by the Iranian central government, the quasi-independent sheikhs who remained signed various forms of protection treaties with the British Empire by the end of the century.

British involvement in the region began in the previous century when the East India Company (EIC) began using the trade route between Bombay and Basra. By 1763 the British had signed a treaty with the Al Madhkur sheikhs in Bushehr, giving them exclusive trading rights.197 In 1778 the EIC set up a factory there turning into a diplomatic post for the Political Resident who reported to British India.198 In the late eighteenth century their involvement became more political. When unrest threatening their trade routes began to spread in the southern part of the Gulf they began attacking ships they accused of piracy, and patrolling the routes with gunboats to secure their trade interests.199

Once the British established themselves as a military force willing and able to enforce an anti-piracy treaty they contracted with the sheikhs of the southern Gulf in 1820, other local rulers saw in the British a replacement for their land-based imperial protectors. Signing a treaty with

the British could ensure these small sheikhdoms protection from local antagonists (their most immediate threat), as well as from encroachment by Istanbul and Shiraz/Tehran. The timing was also right. In the late nineteenth century, the attention of the Ottoman and Iranian Empires was focused on the northern borders. Iran was virtually bankrupt and experiencing political turmoil in Tehran, and the Ottoman Empire was scrambling to hold on to territory in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877/8. Throughout the nineteenth century local sheikhs entered into protection treaties with the shifting and overlapping sovereignty in mind that had characterized previous decades.200

When signing the treaties with Kuwait and Bahrain, the British had a very specific idea of what they wanted. In exchange for British protection, the sheikhdoms had to turn over their external affairs to Britain and were not allowed to sell or lease any piece of their land to any foreign country.201 This meant that the sheikhs were not to meet foreign representatives unless previously given permission to do so by the British, and in Bahrain were obliged to follow the advice of the advisors that the British would set in place. Based on what each of these parties received from the deal, it is clear that while the sheikhdoms were looking for a continuation of the status quo of previous protection arrangements with other parties, the British were introducing a new quasi-sovereignty that forbade the sheikhs from interacting with outside powers.

Eager to avoid outright confrontation, the British were content to let the Ottomans and Iranians continue to think of these sheikhdoms as their territories, as long as the claims did not turn into practical measures and armed patrolling, which appears to have been outside of both the

200 In 1820 the General Treaty was contracted initially with the Qawasim and all rulers and governors of the present day United Arab Emirates. Bahrain was added in 1861 and Kuwait in 1899.
financial and political capacities of both empires. For example, without any objection from the British, the Ottoman governor at Basra in 1910 invited both the Sheikhs of Kuwait and Mohammerah to a banquet in which he referred to them both as “good Ottomans.” The British also allowed Persians to issue travel passes to Bahrain for a number of years.

British officers were particularly cautious not to provoke the Iranian Government, the Foreign Secretary telling the Iranians in 1869 that if they were willing to maintain the tranquility of the Gulf, then the British would be happy to quit themselves of such a costly effort. But, as it argued, if the Iranians were unwilling or unable to do so, Britain was obligated to take up the responsibility. The same letter included another a brief nod to the Iranian claims to Bahrain, stating that the British would at least try to inform the Iranians of “any measures of coercion that the conduct of the Sheikh of Bahrain might call forth.” Privately, the British Political Resident in Bushehr stated that the Iranian claim to sovereignty in Bahrain was groundless, but this sentiment was not shared publicly. But on other fronts they were introducing measures that would slowly chip away at Persian and Ottoman claims.

A new “foreign”

When the Sheikhs of Kuwait and Bahrain gave the British Empire control over their external affairs, they were not aware of how much of their sovereignty they were forfeiting. Lauren Benton has shown how this particular arrangement was common within the informal empire, and was referred to by colonial officials and legal scholars as quasi-sovereignty. Although it was quasi in the sense that it was shared, the way that British sovereignty mapped

202 IOR L/P&S/10/133.
onto the territory like a membrane around whatever remained of the sovereignty of the local ruler is also relevant to its impact.

In some cases, the British demands were easy to follow—such as refusing to let the Ottomans open a post office in their territory.\(^{204}\) Other demands were more difficult to comprehend. Both sheikhdoms (and especially Bahrain) were home to many migrants and sojourners from all around the Indian Ocean. It had long been established that Indians as subjects of the British Empire were entitled to British protection. However, the retroactive classification of Iranians as “foreigners residing in Bahrain” and subject to the protection of the British as a consequence of their being the body responsible for foreign relationships\(^{205}\) was not something the Sheikh of Bahrain had anticipated.\(^{206}\)

Thus, the Sheikh was perplexed when fighting erupted in 1904 between a crowd of Sunni Bahrainis and Iranian shopkeepers, at why he was not permitted to disseminate justice. The Iranians were not “foreigners.” As a part of the society he governed, they were his subjects and he should have jurisdiction over them. Possibly appealing to the language of Capitulations, he declared that as both parties were Muslim the case should be tried in the Shari’ā Court of

\(^{204}\) IOR R/15/2/92, f15.
\(^{205}\) IOR R/15/2/93, f10.
\(^{206}\) Bin Saud apparently sent word asking for Najdis and Hassawis to be treated as Bahrain subjects. See IOR R/15/2/93, f18. According to Kuwait Order in Council of 1925 and the discussion that preceded it in IOR R/15/1/303, f51-57. Newly arrived Iranians in Kuwait were not treated as subjects of the Sheikh of Kuwait, although there is evidence that being born in Kuwait and living ones entire life there was enough to be considered Kuwaiti. R/15/5/300. This is likely for three reasons: Iran did not have a longstanding claim to Kuwait, the Iranian migrants in Kuwait were fewer in proportion to the overall population, and unlike in Bahrain the major traders of Kuwait were not of Iranian heritage. In other words, Kuwait was not as important to Iran as Bahrain was, and the Iranian population there more quickly became Kuwaiti because their identity was not politicized. Furthermore, the Iranians in Kuwait seemed to have enjoyed some protection under the Iranian wazir, Mulla Saleh. It was only after he was run out of the country in 1938 that Iranian migrants turned to the British for support.
Bahrain. The Iranian government did not agree and requested the British to represent their subjects in this case.\textsuperscript{207}

One presumes that the Iranians did not intend to permanently cede jurisdiction over the people they considered their subjects, but rather intended British representation to be a temporary solution.\textsuperscript{208} The Iranians were not sovereign over the island to exercise their own jurisdiction, and if they claimed extraterritorial jurisdiction that would be tantamount to recognizing another sovereign. They likely estimated that temporarily giving the British extraterritorial jurisdiction over their subjects on the island reiterated their own claim, and at the very least the British were safer to give power to than the Sheikh whose family had ruled the island for over one hundred years.

This may have been a specific political strategy similar to the one in the 1870s when the Iranians requested the British to arbitrate for them regarding the Afghan border. Hopkins argues that they were adopting a “political strategy of using an imperial hegemon to assert its claims of authority over loosely controlled areas.” When discussing Iranian claims to parts of Sistan under Afghan suzerainty the Iranians explain that, “temporary dispossession does not invalidate a natural and universally acknowledged right…”\textsuperscript{209} Unfortunately for the Iranians, this transfer of authority was a recurring story, whereby the Iranians temporarily ceded their sovereignty to the British and eventually these periods meant to be “exceptional” extended long enough to be used later as precedent for permanent change.


\textsuperscript{208} By 1929 the British Resident at Bushehr is trying to devise ways to get the Iranians to recognize their jurisdiction over foreigners in Bahrain IOR R/15/2/138.

While it may seem puzzling that the Iranians would make such a request, it is not completely inconceivable in this period if we view it from the Iranian historical perspective. Over the centuries, territories on the borderlands of the Persian Empire-cum-Iranian state were constantly in flux. From the imperial standpoint, present lack of control over an area did not preclude its being considered a part of the empire.\textsuperscript{210} If a territory fell out of Iranian hands, it was not a major cause for concern because it was assumed that in the future it would be theirs again. And very often this was the case.\textsuperscript{211} In 1904, the Iranians could not anticipate that the transition from empire to nation states would fundamentally change both the fixedness of territory or the way that the centers of power would use jurisdiction over individuals to make claims to their sovereignty, and the particular importance of borderlands in this process.

On the basis of these cases in 1904 the British began to assume jurisdiction over all foreigners in Bahrain. This was made official in 1909 with the (coerced) agreement of the Sheikh of Bahrain.\textsuperscript{212} There considerable back and forth between the Sheikh and the British with regard to who were “foreigners,” and whom the Sheikh should have jurisdiction over. While the British insisted upon the categories “Bahraini” and “non-Bahraini,” the Sheikh used another vocabulary altogether. Instead he spoke of his raʿīya: those under his patronage/protection.\textsuperscript{213} His language was not rooted in geography and gave no importance to place of origin or belonging to territory. The only category of legal belonging that made sense to him was subjecthood. By forcing the

\begin{flushright}
\begin{tabular}{l}
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid, 251. \\
\textsuperscript{211} See for example the discussion on the town of Qusban in Ahmad Kasravi’s Tarikh-e Pansad Sal-e Khuzestan, (Tehran:Duniya-ye Ketab, 1394), Chapter 2. \\
\textsuperscript{212}IOR L/P&S/10/1043, p.58; IOR R/15/3. Bahrain Agency Court Records 1924-1948. Part 1. OIR 026.954. \\
\end{tabular}
\end{flushright}
Sheikh to agree to their jurisdiction over non-Bahrainis, the British began a process of categorizing all people living in Bahrain according to this legal notion of territorial belonging. Keeping the foreigners under their jurisdiction was an important and long-term matter for the British for several reasons. They were primarily concerned with keeping other governments from getting involved in Bahrain. This helped to maintain the territorial sovereignty of the Bahraini state, and it also ensured that the Sheikh would not collude with other states to expel the British. Second, it allowed the British more influence over Bahrainis as well because of their vast dealings with “foreigners”. Finally, there were simply a great number of non-Bahrainis whose presence alone could be used to support the Ottoman/Iraqi, Saudi or Iranian to claim to the island.

The British saw the large Iranian community in particular as a threat to their own power, probably because they believed the Iranian government had a historical claim they themselves had previously recognized, and the political will to return Bahrain to Tehran’s hands. When in 1929 a British India official suggested that given the number of Iranians in Bahrain it might make sense to have a non-official Iranian representative there, both the Political Agent at Bahrain and Political Resident in Bushehr strongly opposed the measure. They explained that if there were to be an official spokesman appointed it would be “almost impossible to prevent them from approaching the Shaikh or communicating with the Persian [Iranian] government.”

---

214 The legal definition of what made one Bahraini came later in 1938, as a result of new property laws intended to push the Iranians out. This is discussed at length in the following chapter.
215 For example, court cases between Bahrainis and non-Bahrainis were adjudicated by the Joint Court held by an appointee of the Sheikh and the British Political Agent at Bahrain. Penelope Tuson, The Records of the British Residency and Agencies in the Persian Gulf (London: India Office Library and Records, 1978), 107-108.
216 One of the reasons why the British avoid direct confrontation with the Iranians on the question of Bahrain is because they feared that, if provoked, the Iranians would make a case to the League of Nations. The anxiety suggests that the British considered the Iranians to have a strong historical claim.
Furthermore, they worried that if the Iranians got a representative then the already powerful Najdis would also want one.\(^{217}\)

The Political Agent argued that the Iranians had never had difficulty reporting their problems directly to the Agency. They surmised that one merchant Haji Abdulnabi Bushehri would almost certainly be the spokesman and that he would definitely get his community to call him “consul,” which would create unnecessary problems.

Turning the Iranians of Bahrain into “foreigners” in need of protection was the first step in the process of infusing new official and legal understandings of belonging that were bound up with the territorialization of the Gulf in the early twentieth century. It began, as we have seen, with the British Empire’s independent treaties with the Gulf sheikhs and continued by gradually eliminating all expressions of Ottoman and Iranian imperial sovereignty over the sheikhdoms. By inserting themselves as the sovereign of the sheikhdoms’ foreign affairs the British transformed overlapping sovereignty into a kind of membranal sovereignty whereby local sheikhs only retained control over internal affairs, and the British, as the outer layer, functioned as a wedge between the local rulers and their former imperial protectors.

Unlike the amorphous and fluid quality of overlapping sovereignty of the centuries prior, the British had a more rigid vision of sovereignty for its protected states in the twentieth century. The divided sovereignty they enacted through the treaties around the Gulf made the British externally sovereign and the local rulers internally sovereign. The British being the external sovereign, the territorialization of the state and the enforcing of its borders fell to their hands.

\(^{217}\) IOR R/15/2/138, f59. From Political Resident to the Government of India. If the British were to appoint an unofficial spokesman they noted that there should be several of them, and that they should be from the most diverse range of Iranians so that they would have trouble agreeing and approaching the British in a unified voice.
Critical to the defining of states borders is regulating who and what can cross them, where and when. For some historians and sociologists of the state such as John Torpey, the regulation of movement in fact “contributes to constituting the very state-ness of states.” 218 These decisions rely on the distinction of things relative to the borders (i.e. inherently inside or outside of it). In the Gulf this eventually necessitated a legal identity for each person who crossed the border. According to Torpey these “procedures and mechanisms for identifying persons are essential to [the construction of states], and that, in order to be implemented in practice, the notion of national communities must be codified in documents rather than merely “imagined.” 219 By the early twentieth century a system of marking people and property according to a territorially defined legal community had reached the Gulf. In the second half of this chapter we will explore what those measures looked like and how individuals contended with them.

Traveling papers

In 1929 Mahmoud Bushehri, the son of a famous Iranian merchant in Bahrain, Abdulnabi Bushehri, left Bahrain for Bushehr on his way to Bombay for business. Born in Bahrain, Mahmoud followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming a trader bringing goods to and from Iran and building his business on the well-established networks that connected Bahrain to Bushehr and Bushehr to Bombay. Upon his return to Bahrain the British Indian Passport Officer announced that his papers were not in order for him to land. His father visited him a few times on the ship, and complained to the passport officer that Mahmud is “ma’ruf” (well-known) in Bahrain. After a few days Mahmoud disembarked because the Chief of Police did not stop him

from doing so. He was then summoned to court, where the judge reminded him of the “Decree of Rajab 2, 1347 (15 December 1928) which stated that all Persians [Iranians] must have a passport endorsed by a British official before they can enter Bahrain and an *ilm-o-khabar* [Iranian internal travel pass] will not be accepted.” Bushehri claimed that, “on the other side,” no one will issue “us” a passport. For travel to Bahrain, the Iranian authorities would only issue *ilm-o-khabars*.

In the early twentieth century the frequent trade across the Gulf of which Bushehri was involved was hampered when Iranian officials in big ports such as Mohammerah, Bushehr and Bandar Lingeh began to require Iranian internal travel passes, called *ilm-o-khabar* to travel between these ports and Bahrain. The politics surrounding these passes became the center of the struggle between the British and Iranians to territorialize the Gulf.

The Qajar Government began issuing *ilm-o-khabars* sometime around the turn of the century, and these yellow papers were to be used as travel passes between Iranian ports in the south. It appears that they were consistently and thoroughly used as demand for them was high, and later they became the site of British antagonism. From the outset, the British saw these passes as a blatant attempt to assert Iranian sovereignty over Bahrain because the Iranians required travelers to and from Bahrain (usually by way of Bushehr) to have these passes in hand.

---

220 IOR R/15/3/7006
222 A telegraph exchange between the Iranian Agent at Arabistan and the Ministry of Finance in 1913/1332 reveals a frantic request for four hundred *ilm-o-khabars* and two hundred *tazkerehs* from Arabistan that the Ministry did not have the capacity to fill because they had run out. Bonyad-e Bushehr Shenasi, document 1144.
However, reiterating their claim over Bahrain was probably not the initial aim of these documents.

A memorandum from a government official in Bushehr in 1905 explained that there was a problem with Iranians traveling between Iranian ports on ships that came from the outside. Ships coming from Basra in the Ottoman Empire nearly always called at Mohammerah in Iran and picked up passengers before traveling further down the coast to Bushehr. The passengers aboard these foreign ships were required to produce a *tazkireh* (permission to travel), which served for travel between empires. The Iranians did not need such documents for internal Iranian travel, but they were being hassled at Bushehr because their port of origin was unknown. Many claimed to have embarked at Mohammerah, but were suspected of having boarded in Ottoman territory. Therefore, the Iranian government put in place internal traveling passes called “*ilm-o-khabar,*” which the author of the report noted was “copying the Ottomans” (*be taqlid-e Osmaniha*).\(^{224}\)

The earliest known use by the Ottomans of *ilm-o-khabar* – what they called *ilmühaber* – is 1841 the Men’i muru nizamnamesi. Here the *ilmühaber* was an initial document civil servants had to procure from the director of their departments in order to then get a *mürur tezkeresi* (internal travel permit).\(^{225}\) Such internal travel permits came about in the early nineteenth century, and were required of anyone wanting to travel outside of their town. But by 1894, the Ottoman *ilmühaber* was needed by subjects traveling abroad, and used in conjunction with an identity pass (*nüfus tezkeresi*) to acquire a passport.\(^{226}\)

\(^{224}\) IMFA GH1323-K21-P13-46
\(^{225}\) Christopher Herzog, “Migration and the state: on Ottoman regulations concerning migration since the age of Mahmud II,” in *The City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of Urban Modernity, Edited by Ulrike Freitag ... [et Al.]* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 121.
\(^{226}\) Herzog, “Migration and the state,” 129.
To procure an Iranian *ilm-o-khabar* the traveler would apply for the document with the Iranian passport agency at his or her port of exit for permission to travel to his or her destination. Travelers appear to have been approved immediately or within a day, and would pay for a stamp that was placed on the back of a *ilm-o-khabar* paper which listed the name, ports of departure and entry of the male traveler and any female relative accompanying him. Upon arriving at their destination, an Iranian passport agent would sign the document. Then once returning back to the initial port of departure it would be signed again. This incessant processing of documents at border areas was one of the primary ways that Iranians territorialized the sovereign space of the state.

But in Bahrain there were barriers due to the fact that no Iranian government apparatus existed there to (re)affirm Iranian sovereignty by signing the document on arrival. Rather than cede their sovereignty entirely, the Iranians found a temporary solution by appointing an Iranian merchant in Bahrain to act as the passport agent by issuing and signing *ilm-o-khabars*. When the British learned of this practice in 1912 they immediately forbade the merchant from continuing to do so (although they were not able to expel him from Bahrain). Then, rather than address the issue of Iranian claims, they themselves took up the responsibility of signing the documents on behalf of the Iranian Government at the British Political Agency. Again the British devised a “temporary” solution that over time became precedent. By 1914 they noted that

---

227 The letter notes that poor travelers, who are many, are not required to pay for the documents.
228 He also apparently flew the Iranian flag.
all “coolies” were coming to them to have their *ilm-o-khabars* processed, and by the early 20s they claimed to have diverted all the traffic to the Agency.\(^{230}\)

By the late 1920s the British expected that Iran would soon recognize their status as the sole protector of Bahrain and the other Arab sheikhdoms.\(^{231}\) However, they underestimated the fervor of Iranian nationalism in that period and the extent to which nationalism was built on the idea of Iran gaining her rightful territory.\(^{232}\) The Iranian claim to Bahrain became larger than life, so much that even when the Iranian government was willing to sell Bahrain, they could not afford the political fallout. Iran, it appears, could not give up its claim to Bahrain, and in fact took to making claims to Kuwait and other Gulf sheikhdoms in order to boost its bargaining chips during negotiations with the British.\(^{233}\) These claims were not simply verbal. Travelers from around the Gulf to Iranian ports often had their identity papers taken and replaced with Iranian passports.

The difference between permission to travel and identity papers in this period blurred as their functions began to overlap. While possessing an Iranian *ilm-o-khabar* was necessary for traveling between Iranian ports in the early twentieth century, its holders were not necessarily Iranian.\(^{234}\) This changed dramatically when the British announced in 1928 that they would no longer accept *ilm-o-khabars* for entry to Bahrain or supply them for travel to Iran; everyone needed passports or British-issued Certificates of Identity. Passports required being bound to a

---

\(^{230}\) All of the Bahrain-related *ilm-o-khabars* viewed in the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive were signed and stamped by the British Political Agency.

\(^{231}\) Reza Shah’s court minister ‘Abdolhossein Khan Teymurtash apparently offers to do so in exchange for 3.5 million pounds, but the British found this to be excessive. IOR R/15/2/138, f38.

\(^{232}\) See Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet’s *Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804-1946* for a detailed discussion of the role of land in Iranian nationalism.


\(^{234}\) An *ilm-o-khabar* issued in 1914 for Bahrainis traveling from Lingeh back to Bahrain. IMFA GH131-K47-P5, f4.
state, whereas *ilm-o-khabars* only listed one’s place of residence. The Iranians retaliated by refusing entry to anyone with Bahraini passports or British Certificates of Identity, which only deepened the crisis. This new policy was cumbersome to everyone who traveled frequently to the Iranian mainland - which was a significant number of people. The British noted that the Iranians in Bahrain who had previously never had a complaint were suddenly very vocal about the damage the measures did to their business, interpreting them as an effort to “turn them out of the country.” In a sense they were right. The new rules communicated that Bahrainis belonged to (and inside) Bahrain, and Iranians belonged to (and inside) Iran.

Iranians in Bahrain were not the only ones caught in between the bureaucratic wars of territorialization. Bahrainis living on the Iranian side in Mohammerah and in Iraqi Basra also suffered. They sent representatives to Bahrain (by way of Kuwait to which they could still travel) who reported that the Iranian passport agency in Basra insisted that Bahrainis there take out Iranian passports before traveling to Bahrain, whereas previously *ilm-o-khabars* were sufficient. Throughout the 1930s Bahrainis in southwestern Iran wrote letters pleading with the Sheikh of Bahrain not to abandon them and to help them get Bahraini identity papers.

The meaning of traveling inside the Gulf was completely transformed by the identity requirement. Bahrain began issuing passports in 1930 and within several years all Bahraini and Iranian travelers between those countries were required to be registered as one or another.

---

235 According to one British Political Agent report, the use of *ilm-o-khabars* by the Iranian government seems to have been discontinued around 1933. “Administration Report of the Kuwait Political Agency for the Year of 1933,” in *Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1873-1947*, vol. 9, 1931-1940 (Gerrard’s Cross: Archive Editions, 1986), 66.
236 IOR R 15/5/174, f4.
237 IOR R/15/2/138, f55b.
238 The following chapter will discuss at length nationality laws and the processes of transforming Iranians in Bahrain into Bahrainis, and likewise Bahrainis in Iran into Iranians.
239 This is expressly stated by the Iranian Foreign Minister in 1925. IOR R/15/2/486, f23-24.
240 IOR R/15/2/486
Unsure of what these changes meant for him, the Sheikh of Kuwait was reluctant to play politics and resisted instituting passports for as long as possible. In 1929, as the British were preparing to issue Bahraini passports for Bahrain, they consulted the Sheikh of Kuwait about doing the same. Their notes indicate that he was against the idea for the time being, but asked to reserve the right to revisit the issue in the future.\textsuperscript{241} He also refused to take retaliatory measures (suggested by the British) against the Iranians, which would have forbidden Iranians from entering Kuwait.

For as long as possible, the Sheikh of Kuwait attempted to depoliticize the travel of his subjects, making it personal rather than political. For those who wanted to travel to Iran, he issued letters (written in Arabic by his Iranian secretary) simply stating the travelers’ status as his subject and asking officials to make his or her journey easy.\textsuperscript{242} This he did for all of his subjects, regardless of their destination.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{241} IOR R/15/5/174, f 6.
\textsuperscript{242} IOR R/15/5/174, f16. See Figure 1, from the private collection of Hassan Ashkenani. By 1942 this procedure had changed and while the Sheikh was still not issuing his own passports, travelers to Iran were issued the British Certificates of Identity. While the Iranians did not officially accept them, it appears that they were accepted by travelers from Kuwait and Muscat, but not from Bahrain. In these circumstances the travelers were issued a \textit{shahādatnāmeh} by the Iranian authorities for the duration of their stay. IOR R/15/2/494, f38-39. From the Political Resident at Bushehr to the Political Agents at Kuwait, Bahrain and Muscat. 19 February 1942.
The Iranian authorities accepted these letters without issue. Similar letters were issued for travel to Saudi Arabia. Subjects who wished to travel to Iraq and Bahrain got a different kind of paper: a Certificate of Identity requested by the Sheikh but issued by the British in English. In contrast to the letter from the Sheikh, the Certificates of Identity included a detailed description of the holder, including a picture.
All of these papers for travel were known in Kuwait as *ilm–o-khabar*, even though none were issued by the Iranian Government. Iranians traveling from Kuwait and Bahrain to major ports of Iran had to use both. They got Certificates of Identity to go to Basra, and *ilm–o-khabars* from the Iranian Consulate there to proceed to Iran. Because of the cumbersomeness of this method, most Iranians in Bahrain opted not to travel back at all. Those in Kuwait, who were mostly traveling in the direction of Basra anyway, went back and forth more frequently.

These difficulties help to contextualize why wealthy merchants from Iran permanently settled in Bahrain. The Iranian coast and major port towns might have ended up like any of the other ports in the Indian Ocean where businesses maintained branches and local networks, but the hindrance in crossing steered the course of history in another direction.
With the institution of passport and traveling regulations and particularly the stalemate that existed between Bahrain and Iran, the gulf between either side of the Gulf began to grow. Land that once flowed into the sea was being transformed into administered territory as the hand of the central government began to extend to the water’s edge. Through this process separate lands became encircled with separate meaning and identities. Moving between them required a pledge of loyalty and belonging to one over another. Many Iranians living in the Gulf were stuck between territories where they were not supposed to belong, and a homeland that began reorienting lives and identities away from the ocean.

Figure 7: The Shatt al-Arab and the Northern Gulf (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)
Testing the waters

Territorialization extended to property as well. Like the highly mobile communities of the Gulf, ships that crossed back and forth across congealing state boundaries were prime targets for the enforcement of the law. Ships, like their captains, crews, flags and even the waters were assigned national identities. Time after time the Iranian authorities, invoked their territorial sovereignty, by seizing ships for having the wrong flag, wrong owner, wrong captain, wrong cargo, or simply in a show of force. One of the most common places for seizure of ships was in the narrow waterway of the Shatt al-ʿArab connecting the Gulf and Basra, precisely because it was there that edges of empires met, with sometimes no more than 120ft / 37m between them.

The Shatt was the final leg of the long-distance trade between Bombay and Basra. It was the preferred route of dignitaries visiting Bushehr from Tehran who wished to avoid the insecurity of the mountainous road between Shiraz and the Gulf. It was at times a backwater of the Iranian and Ottoman Empires, and at other times the front line. For Kuwait, the Shaṭṭ was a lifeline. From the early twentieth century small boats (jalbut and tshalas) left daily from Kuwait traveling to and from the Shatt, carrying back jugs of fresh water upon which the town depended.²⁴⁴ Although there was some fresh water from wells, as the town began to grow in the early twentieth century it became increasingly dependent on fresh water from outside. British officials noted that the first water supply from the Shatt was brought in 1908 and within a year forty to fifty ships were engaged in the trade. Kuwait had become so dependent on this trade that a delay of ships for only three days would cause a water famine in the entire town.

The crews of the ships frequenting the Shaṭṭ consisted of people who were not easily classifiable. They represented the deep connections between those areas of Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran

²⁴⁴ IOR R/15/5/160
that the new boundary-enforcing systems were unable to process. But the nature of the system was such that each person, and every item had to be categorized and identified and those that represented overlap had to be broken up. Throughout the early twentieth century, but especially in the 1930s when the territorialization of Iranian land was being pursued at full force, ships affiliated with Kuwait were constantly picked up, their crew and goods detained on the pretext that they had broken Iranian law.

Kuwaiti dhows often ended up on the wrong side of the water. Northern winds frequently blew some ships off course and into Iranian waters, while others got caught anchoring near the Iranian side so that the crew could visit their families. The ships were microcosms of the Gulf society. A single ship might be owned by an Iranian in Dubai, headed to Zanzibar carrying dates owned by a Kuwaiti with farms at Qusbeh, sent by an agent based at Mohammerah, operated by a crew of Bahraini Arabs from Mohammerah and former slaves from Oman residing in Kuwait, and steered by a Kuwaiti captain whose family migrated there from a Iranian island several generations prior.²⁴⁵ These were the relationships and partnerships that characterized the Gulf in the late nineteenth century that were becoming so difficult to manage in the twentieth given the unequal distribution of rights based on nationality. Unfortunately for Iranians long residing in Kuwait, in some cases national identities were even conferred retroactively.

In 1930, a Kuwaiti ship carrying goods from Basra to Yemen was blown off course and landed on an island off the coast of Bushehr. It was then apprehended by customs authorities who accused them of lacking the appropriate paperwork. When the captain was taken to Bushehr for questioning, he went to see the British Resident and appealed for his help on the grounds that

²⁴⁵ For the makeup of various crews see IOR R/15/5/170; Alan Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), Chapter 2; R.N. Colomb *Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean: A Record of Naval Experiences*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1873).
he was a subject of Kuwait and entitled to his protection. Although the man’s family had been in Kuwait for over one hundred years, the Resident said that he could not help him because he was considered Iranian, and that he should send the Kuwaiti Arab owner of the goods to sort out the problem. As the Sheikh of Kuwait regretfully described the approach of the territorializing Iranian authorities, it was “once a Persian, always a Persian.”

The people of these areas saw the borders for what they were: spots, rather than an impermeable wall, and many made efforts to manage and circumvent the changes. Kuwaiti Arab merchants began hiring lawyers of Iranian descent who could easily follow up with their cases in Iran. Others relied on business alliances with Iran-based merchants, such as the well-known Khorafi-Matrouk partnership. When an Iranian law in the 1930s forbade Iranians from owning ships built in non-Iranian ports, they entered into private joint ownership contracts with Kuwaitis in order to trade safely with Iranian ports. They also constantly switched ships names and registrations to avoid getting caught.

Switching flags was also a quick and easy way to get around the law. In fact the Kuwaiti flag itself was born of an attempt to get around the flag regime. In 1904 Kuwaiti ships were repeatedly getting caught up in border patrolling and detained by the Iranian authorities. The British asked the Iranians to stop bothering the Kuwaitis, but they responded that because

246 IOR R/15/5/170, f138-145
247 IOR R/15/5/170, f173; This is also reflected on the Iranian government’s policy towards Iranians who had migrated to or were born in India. It appears that many had been coming to Iran for business under British subject status given their residence in India. However the Iranian authorities issued a statement declaring that these people should be treated as Iranians. Letter from the First Agent of the Persian Gulf Ports to the English Consul at Bushehr, Moharram 19, 1330. IMoFA GH1330-K4-P2 from Asnad-e Kargozari-ye Bushehr, Ed. Mortaza Nouraei, (Tehran: Organization for the Study of the Modern History of Iran, 1385), 25.
248 This practice was incredibly widespread throughout the Gulf, and employed by individual captains as well as rulers. The Sheikh of Bahrain switched between the Persian and Ottoman flags depending on whose delegation was visiting. Saldanha, The Persian Gulf Precis, Volume IV Archive Editions Redwood Burn Ltd, Trowbridge, England, 1986. Chapter III, 8.
Kuwaiti ships flew the Ottoman flag, there was no way for them to distinguish between Kuwaiti and Ottoman ships. The British effort to protect the Kuwaiti ships from being mistaken for Ottoman ones also conveniently overlapped with the ancillary aim of supporting Kuwaiti sovereignty, so the British suggested to the Sheikh of Kuwait that he start using his own flag. The official then presented several different options that his team had drawn up, resembling the Ottoman flag enough to keep the Ottomans from being infuriated, but also distinct enough that the Iranians would no longer mistake Kuwaitis for Ottomans.

**Tradition as a loophole**

While the law represented a standardized route for the way things were to be done, there were infinite ways around the law. This chapter has spent considerable time looking at the ways in which people were limited by the territorializing mechanisms of developing state apparatuses, but there were a number of spaces the states could not reach. Studying territorialization mostly draws our attention to spaces where it works. As a modern phenomenon, territorialization is most effective in subjecting modern technologies (steam, print) and modern trade (bulk goods, containers, and steamships requiring specific spaces for landing) to territorial regimes. As such, territorialization primarily targets high concentrations of capital and capitalists and is less effective on smaller spaces and people. So while states were busy making changes and subjecting all things to a system of accounting and regulation, individuals were mostly trying to maintain the status quo, or at least not be trampled or squeezed out by the new system. On many occasions they were able to outsmart or simply circumvent the law. And because of the perspective of our sources, these moments were recorded as transgressions of the law. We can also interpret them as shortcomings of the territorializing project. In this section we will look
briefly at the ways individuals were able to use their traditional routes, social relationships, and labor to maintain their lifestyles.

Territorialization had a physical limit. New states created and enforced their new boundaries by policing them and restricting passage through them. Of course border officials could not be stationed everywhere along the coast of Iran, Kuwait and Bahrain. The primary means at their disposal were patrolling the waters and policing the docks. Water patrols were famously ineffective for actually enforcing the law, but were important for psychologically building new conceptions of space mostly through the semblance of force and occasionally using it to make an example of lawbreakers.

The passport regulations offices in the major trading ports were the primary points of law enforcement. This had the effect of concentrating sovereignty in areas of modern commercial and technological density. Large steamships and bulk trade came through major ports like Basra, Bushehr and Manama. Their routes traced a particular level of movement across the Gulf and into the Indian Ocean. Aboard these ships were wealthy travelers: European and local merchants and government officials.\(^{249}\) Because of the way that they traveled it was difficult for them to avoid the law. They disembarked the ships literally in front of the authorities waiting to process their papers. But just like many other instances of duality of life in the Gulf at this period, modern technologies and movement of people and goods ran alongside historical ones.\(^{250}\) The borders were still porous, and for individual migrants there were always ways to cross over.

\(^{249}\) Arnold Wilson in his diary of travels through Southwest Persia in 1907 notes that the mail steamer from Karachi to Basra carried Arab, Persian (Iranian) and Hindu merchants in second class, and British officers in first class. Arnold Talbot Wilson, *SW. Persia, a Political Officer's Diary, 1907-1914* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941) 2.

After centuries of moving back and forth, people knew that they did not need to land at the docks of Manama to get to Bahrain. Most left from the small villages on the Iranian coast like Kangoon, Asalooyeh and Genaveh crossing the water on small local craft to Qatar or Dubai and then made their way to Bahrain or Kuwait. The British officials constantly ignored or were unable to capture details about what was happening with local craft (dhow).\textsuperscript{251} Gilbert argues that the relative inattention given to the dhows was because British authorities saw them as “traditional… and to be replaced by modern steamships or at least kept out of the modern economy.”\textsuperscript{252} Trade reports for example hold detailed records of the numbers of steamships, their contents and to whom they were registered at each of the major ports around the Gulf. Everything else was listed simply as “local craft.” It is striking that although the numbers of local craft were overwhelmingly greater than steamships, so little information about them is on record.

But it was not simply that the British were uninterested in what happened on the dhows. Their limited enforcement the new laws was also due to their inability to do so. Part of this was financial. For example, in some cases the officials were aware of popular sites of smuggling, patrolling those areas was often beyond the capacity of their understaffed and under-funded offices.\textsuperscript{253}

\textsuperscript{251} Triumphant tales of the ability of local craft to evade the British patrols abound in the Gulf. See for example the story of Captain Abbas bin Nakhi in Wassim AlHosari and Shakir Abul’s \textit{Al-Hawa’ ala Niyatina}, Directed by Shakir Abul. Kuwait: The Culture Project, 2012.
\textsuperscript{253} The Agency in Bahrain knew that many of the people without passports are entering through al-Hidd, but never set up a passport control office there. The Government of India and British Foreign Office were constantly at odds about who should pay to enforce various mandates. For example IOR R/15/2/151, f 33-34 includes a discussion of how the Agency at Bahrain will pay for additional clerks to register the Iranians there in 1937. The funding of the slave patrol was also notoriously contested and is mentioned throughout R.N. Colomb’s \textit{Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean: A Record of Naval Experiences} (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1873).
However the inability to uphold the law also had to do with the detachment of those enforcing the law with the area in which they were to enforce it. Those policing the borders were typically not locals but rather Iranian government or army personnel from the interior, or in the case of Bahrain British India officials who lacked familiarity with the geography and the relationships that held the region together.\textsuperscript{254} The Customs Staff in Bahrain were all British India officials. In the south of Iran, as the central government began to expand a new practice was started whereby the government would appoint a zabīt (local ruler) for each bandar (port) who was directly under the control of the central government. Although sometimes the zabīts were chosen from local tribal leaders, they often conspired against the government appointed customs administration officials who were not locals. Even when they were able to capture local vessels, they were often unable to distinguish between what people and goods were licit and illicit because life was not organized by the categories of law imposed from the outside.\textsuperscript{255}

Writing about his experience in suppressing the slave trade, Captain Colomb succinctly explains that, “the most ordinary slave-trader… flies no flag, carries no papers, belongs to nowhere, and claims

\textsuperscript{254} ‘Ali Baharianpour, “Barresi-ye tahlīlī – Sanadi ‘alal-e muhajirat-e daste jam‘i-ye ahalī-ye banadir-e Kulat va Gurzeh az vilayat-e Shībkuh-e Lingeh be ‘Omanat 1315-1316 shamsī” Tarikh-e Ravabit-e Kharijī (Tābistān 1390), Shomāreh 47: 55-76, 62. In the case of Southwest Iran, the Bakhtiyari and Arab tribes insisted on protecting the border themselves because they did not want to be surrounded by the central government. Even in this case it appears that the tribes employed Baluch and Behbehani pilgrims who stopped in Mohammerah for a year or so on their way to or from Iraq for pilgrimage. Najm al-Mulk, ‘Abd al-Ghaffār, and Muḥammad Dabīr Siyāqī. Safarnāmah-i Khūzistān. (Tīhrān: Elmi, 1983), 95-95. It is not until after the capture of Sheik Khaz‘al in 1925 that the central government was finally able to bring in their own troops to police the borders. Mostafa Ansari, The History of Khuzistan, 1878-1925, unpublished PhD. dissertation (University of Chicago, 1974), 84.

\textsuperscript{255} Iranian authorities even as late as 1953 are confused about whether or not to charge an Iranian woman residing in Bahrain an entrance fee upon her arrival to Bushahr. INA 240-34319, f28. For more on the abstractions produced by colonial law and their disconnect with history, see Ashwini Tambe, Codes of Misconduct: Regulating Prostitution in Late Colonial Bombay (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Ranajit Guha, “Chandra’s Death,” in A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995, edited by Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
nobody’s protection.”256 While he is speaking about the slave trade, he comments capture an important aspect of the lives of ordinary people more generally.

Identities, for one, were fluid. When apprehended by British authorities for breaking the law, people would claim to be Arab or Iranian depending on their crime.257 While people knew who their kin were, living in or being born in a place did not necessarily make them of that place. Furthermore, the new system of classification of goods was incomprehensible to traders in the Gulf, and they were reticent to abide by laws that would put them out of business. The intermingling of licit and illicit goods and people, and the non-reporting and underreporting of goods were constant sources of complaint from British officials.258

Handling these cases in fact became so burdensome that they took to burning ships they determined to be in some way in breach of law.259 This happened most frequently with ships carrying weapons or slaves. The British often gave the excuse that the wooden dhows were so frail that they would not possibly remain intact if towed, and that the perpetrators could not be trusted to follow them back to shore. For British authorities, a leaky ship meant that it was “unseaworthy” and had to be destroyed. However leakiness seems to have been a characteristic

257 This was due to the fact that Arabs were subject to some laws based on the Arab sheikh’s treaties with the British Government, while the Iranians had not. See for example Colomb, Slave-Catching in the Indian Ocean, 145.
258 Colomb notes that many of the conditions spelled out by the British Government’s Instructions for the Suppression of the Slave Trade as suspect were in fact more common in a legally trading ship than in a slave trading one. Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean, 73.
259 Justification for destruction of ships is spelled out in a number of places, including in the British Government’s “Instructions for the Suppression of the Slave Trade,” discussed by Colomb in Slave Catching in the Indian Ocean, 74 and by the Vice-Admiralty Court at Zanzibar, mentioned in Peter Collister, The Last Days of Slavery: England and the East African Slave Trade 1870-1900 (Dar Es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1961), 29.
of most native craft, and writing in the 1930s Alan Villers notes that it is successfully dealt with on a regular basis by the crewmembers removing of the water with pails.\textsuperscript{260}

When individuals were caught evading or breaking the law, there was still often recourse to personal relationships. Like we saw in the case of Mahmoud Bushehri whose papers were not in order, the Indian passport official was rendered powerless to stop him from landing because he was “\textit{ma’ruf}” (well known). Being known communicated a belonging that was difficult to deny. For the Political Agent in Kuwait it was most important to save the face of the law, so the “occasional merchant who come by native craft to do a bit of business or to see a friend or relative”\textsuperscript{261} was of no concern, as long as they paid a small fine for breaking the law. Even later, in the 1940s, when restrictions were stronger, Iranian crewmembers were allowed to disembark from ships temporarily when the famous merchant Yusuf Behbehani vouched for them and promised they would return to the ship.\textsuperscript{262}

Those who were not “known” often received the sympathy of officers because they saw their movement back and forth as the continuation of a traditional way of life. Arab inhabitants of small huts on the Iranian side who came to sell fruit and vegetables were “like fisherman” and did not require paperwork because they only stayed for short periods of time.\textsuperscript{263} Even these people who were too unimportant to be bothered with had a role in keeping the borders porous and connections alive. In 1933 the Political Agent in Kuwait notes that because of passport

\textsuperscript{260} Sons of Sinbad (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 245.
\textsuperscript{261} IOR R/15/5/174, f37.
\textsuperscript{262} IOR R/15/5/174, f2.
\textsuperscript{263} IOR R/15/174, f37. The distinction between fisherman and merchants is likely a product of the categorization of ships as either fishing boats, trading dhows, or steamships, set up in the General Act of the Brussels Conference in 1889-90. See Matthews, \textit{Margins of the Market}, 25.
problems, the only trade that exists between Kuwait and Iran is carried out by these small-scale villagers for whom passports are not required.264

Although getting in to Kuwait and Bahrain was relatively easy, staying there (especially after the 1930s) was more difficult for poor Iranian migrants. If they used the right language though, they could often manage to stay.265 One of the primary ways that illegally resident Iranians were identified was when they were picked up for begging. When asked to produce their papers, it was commonly found that they had entered illegally. Begging alone was ground for expulsion, especially when compounded with illegal entry. But if beggars pleaded that all of their family was in Bahrain and that they had nowhere to go, they were almost always released. Officials might have been sticklers for enforcing the law, but they were not interested in breaking up families. For those who have family in Bahrain there are often comments on their files such as “must be discharged as all his family relatives are here.”266

Beggars had also another advantage that kept them around. Many of them swore they were not full-time beggars, but that they were day laborers and begged only when they did not have other work. And this is precisely how the economy worked. Much of the work in the Gulf was done by day laborers, especially lighterage. And the need for laborers varied from day to day. Long distance trade brought in huge cargoes that needed to be unloaded and stored or reloaded onto smaller ships for redistribution, but it was seasonal and lasted only two months of every

265 In the case shown in IOR R/15/3/7017, seventeen beggars are apprehended and only seven deported.
266 Notes about each beggar apprehended by the Customs House include information about the location of their families. IOR R/15/3/7017, f8.
year. There was also fairly regular steamship traffic, but not every day. The day laborers, who on off days were sometimes idle beggars, on other days were essential members of the economy.

**Conclusion**

Life in the Gulf was met with new challenges in the face of the new order brought about by territorialization in Kuwait, Bahrain and Iran. When the people of this area occupied the borderlands of empires, they had largely gone unnoticed. Centuries of living under overlapping sovereigns allowed for the Gulf littoral to be woven together by social connections rather than political ones (although these also existed from time to time). This did not mean that traveling from one area to another did not represent going to another place. There were political divisions and people recognized and understood the power of local authorities. Indeed over the centuries people and groups facing persecution on one side often fled to the other. Newcomers fell under the *ri‘aya* of the leader regardless of where they were from, and were only banished if they caused trouble.

These lines and the crossing of them were infused with new meaning in the early twentieth century as states sought to transform the dynamic borderlands into static borders. When these lines restricted people’s movement based on the territory they belonged to, people who had lived accustomed to crossing into and out of these spaces were confused. We uncover their voices explaining that they had a right to access certain places based on historical precedent, and particularly the voices of Iranians from the south who seemed to belong neither here nor there. They continually failed to realize that, contrary to the past, these travelers now carried a state with them. Rather than simply crossing the Gulf from any coastal village they were expected to

---

go through a major center of central government control to get papers and permission to leave the coast. In a sense they had to become Iranian in order to leave Iran. And the requirements on the other side were in fact helping to facilitate this process.

It was especially the case with Bahrain that even once people crossed the border, their country of origin remained with them in a way that it never had before the twentieth century. Unlike the Kanoo or Fakhroo families who were considered Bahraini after several generations of migrating there from Iran, the new arrivals were fixed to Iran by their legal status upon arrival in Bahrain.

However, as we have seen, not every aspect of life experienced such a tremendous break with the past. Where the structures of law were present, they were quite effective, though not always. And although the traveling regulations and new legal categories were successful at (at least discursively) creating bordered territories and nationed people, they did not keep Iranians out of Bahrain and Kuwait. They found ways forward and across through a deeper historical porousness that was not easily controlled by the state. While the numbers of new arrivals slowed, the Iranians who were already settled by the early twentieth century continued to live, work, gather, and have families on the western side. The following chapter explores how the states dealt with such significant populations of “foreigners” in their quest to build nation states from a diverse society.
Chapter 3 - Nationalizing the Periphery

On the night of November 1, 1937 a group of Iranian merchants in Bahrain huddled together in a secret meeting to discuss their uncertain fate. The Government of Bahrain had announced that within one year Iranians would no longer be able to own immovable property. The announcement fell over them like a wave. Though they had been living and doing business in Bahrain for years, and in some cases generations, the Bahraini Government was sending a clear message that their connections with Iran were a now a serious liability.

The measures of Bahrain’s 1937 Nationality and Property Law were strikingly harsh considering that Iranians probably held a majority of the property in Bahrain, but the animosity of the Bahrain Government towards Iranians did not appear overnight. Tension had been high between the Iranian and Bahraini Governments as the Iranians sought to establish that Bahrain was a part of Iran. In the early twentieth century, this competition over sovereignty resulted in an intensified regulation of people’s movements back and forth between the two territories, as we saw in Chapter 2.

As time passed, the regulation of bodies crossing borders expanded into the regulation of the identities of the people themselves. The 1920s and 30s brought about a sense of national belonging that was most often propagated by the state, but on occasion also emanated from below. Throughout these two decades both Iran and Bahrain introduced laws binding individuals legally, physically and to some extent culturally to their territory. The Iranian laws were a part of
a larger nation-building project, whereas Bahrain took reactive and defensive measures to avoid being incorporated into the Iranian state – both administratively and culturally.

As we saw in the previous chapter, from the early 1900s Iranians in the Gulf had been navigating the contradictory and confusing passport and customs regimes when traveling between Bahrain and Iran, but the 1937 announcement was the first time the Bahrain government had turned its attention to Iranians’ status inside the borders. After thirty years of straddling their lives and identities between Bahrain and Iran, it was unclear if this law too could be circumvented or if they would finally have to claim allegiance to one coast of the Gulf or the other. It did not matter that the Iranians did not represent a single ethnic, linguistic, religious or ideological community. The Iranian government claimed them all equally as its own nationals, and used their large numbers in Bahrain as proof of Iran’s claim to the island. In retaliation, Bahrain introduced the Nationality and Property Laws in order to “nationalize” these Iranians, turning them into Bahrainis.

In order to fully comprehend the context and impetus of the Bahrain nationality and property laws this chapter takes a transnational perspective of the struggle between the British and Iran for sovereignty in the Gulf with a necessary focus on the implications of internal Iranian processes and policies in that struggle. This dispute over the Iranians’ right to hold property in Bahrain was not isolated but rather part of a series of policies related to Iran’s building of a modern nation state. Building such a state required a particular process of “nationalizing” both the Iranian territory and its inhabitants. I use nationalization here to signify the process of

268 Cronin refers to the years of 1927-1929 as a “period of extraordinary legislative radicalism” aimed at radical modernization of the country. Stephanie Cronin, Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran: Opposition, Protest and Revolt, 1921-1941 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 161.

269 British reference to Iranians as “Persians” is an antiquated misnomer and does not reflect the diversity of the Iran communities in the Gulf.
unifying the state and its people under a single sovereign and a single national identity. If enforcing borders was the state’s way of projecting external sovereignty, nationalization was focused on the exercise of what Hansen and Stepputat call internal sovereignty.270 In Iran, nationalization went hand in hand with modernization, and occurred through the enforcement of central state sovereignty throughout the territory claimed by the state. This quest for sovereignty manifested itself in two principal ways: by physically connecting the territory through infrastructure and administration, and by infusing the people of this territory with a shared national identity.

This chapter begins by explaining the first steps to achieving sovereignty in the last autonomous province of Arabistan and the Iranian central government’s penetration of this area after 1924, which was then renamed Khuzestan. With the infrastructure and administration in place, we then turn to discuss the second step of nationalization, which involved the “universal” enforcement of laws intended to build an Iranian nation. Here I discuss several of the laws as they impacted a minority population in Khuzestan, the Bahranis, who claimed to be the subjects of the Sheikh of Bahrain.271 Finally we turn back to Bahrain to explain how Iran’s nationalizing policies in Khuzestan specifically reverberated in Bahrain. I argue that as the Iranian state grew stronger and its nationalizing program and rhetoric became more pervasive, the Sheikh of Bahrain and his British advisors were eager to speed up changes on the ground that pushed Bahrain further and further beyond Iran’s reach.

271 Bahrani/Baharna (pl) are Shi’a Arabs native to Bahrain and al-Hasa in coastal Saudi Arabia who inhabited these areas for centuries prior to the arrival of the Al-Khalifa in Bahrain in the eighteenth century. There were a number of historical migrations of this community from the area to other towns along the Persian Gulf coast.
Chapter 2 explored the early stages of this strategy: the 1904 decision in which Iranians in Bahrain came to be represented by the British, and their handling of Iranian travel passes. The gradual territorialization of the Iranian coast – the subject of Chapter 2 – combined with Iran’s program of nationalization and continued claims to Bahrain prompted the Bahraini government to take retaliatory measures to regulate and scale back the Iranian influence in the island. The present chapter addresses the later tactics to combat the same problem. It considers the nationalization of Iranians in Bahrain and the limitation on the expression of Iranian nationalism as additional facets of the strategy to minimize the Iranian threat to the island and secure Bahrain’s territorial sovereignty.

While Iran’s nationalization laws were intended for universal application across Iran, they particularly affected minority populations in both Iran and Bahrain who belonged to multiple places. Forcing these minorities to submit to the authority of a single central government was an assertion of that state’s territorial sovereignty. Nationalizing such populations at the periphery of the state meant cementing their legal and cultural belonging to a single place of residence; a territorialized sense of belonging that was new to the Gulf.

**Building an Iranian nation**

In Iran the transition away from empire and towards statehood began with territorial losses incurred by the Russo-Persian wars in the early years of the nineteenth century.²⁷² By the late nineteenth century the Qajars began instituting administrative and institutional reforms that emphasized the territory of the state. Specifically, the customs regime promulgated in the 1890s gave meaning to the geographical extent of the state’s sovereignty. A proto passport regime for

---

traversing spaces also helped to refine and reinforce where Iranian sovereignty began. The creation of municipalities in four cities throughout the country by 1906 also brought the central government into people’s lives in the peripheries. Still, for the majority of Iranians the state mattered very little in their everyday lives.\textsuperscript{273}

![Figure 8: Chronology of Iranian Takeover of its Present Territories in the Gulf](image)

(Removed with permission from Dr. Michael Izady)

In the early twentieth century, the border areas in the south of Iran were detached from the center in a number of facets and enjoyed a tributary relationship with Tehran. The passport and customs regimes in place at Mohammerah, Bushehr and Bandar Lingeh were only beginning to function at the turn of the century, and although officials received their pay and orders from the

\textsuperscript{273} Nader Sohrabi, \textit{Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 287.
central government, there were frequently gaps in information and execution. This was due primarily to the lack of state infrastructure. Telegraph lines for example were in constant need of repair, and when they were functioning were not always secure. More fundamentally there were very few reliable roads connecting the frontiers to the center.\textsuperscript{274}

This disconnect was very pronounced in Iran’s southwest until 1925, which I will explain in some detail as it provides insight into border building processes within the country. The province of Arabistan (since 1925 called Khuzestan) was home to the last remaining autonomous ruler in Iran.\textsuperscript{275} As the centralizing state became less willing to accept sovereignty of local rulers in exchange for yearly tribute payments, it began sending out emissaries to the borders. Eventually the central government was able to strip these rulers of their power and station their own troops in these regions. Arabistan however presented a particular challenge for several reasons: it was difficult to get to, the local rulers had their own armed forces, the people were semi-nomadic and tribal, and finally the local ruler had a protection agreement with the British. In order to bring the province fully under Iranian sovereignty, the state needed to make headway on all of these fronts.

Until the 1930s there was no easy way of getting to the southwestern coast of Iran from Tehran. The two most important cities on the coast were Mohammerah and Bushehr. While a reliable road southward existed between Tehran and Isfahan, to get to either of these cities beyond Isfahan required crossing the Zagros mountains, which was long, tiring and unsafe.\textsuperscript{276}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{274} For a more extensive discussion on the importance of roads for the burgeoning state’s economy and security see Morteza Nouraei and Vanessa Martin, “Part II: The Karguzar and Security, the Trade Routes of Iran and Foreign Subjects 1900-1921,” \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society; Cambridge} 16, no. 1 (April 2006): 32–41.
\textsuperscript{275} The province was called Arabistan because the majority of the population was Arab, as was the hereditary ruler, hailing from the Arab tribe of Bani Ka’b.
\textsuperscript{276} The road to Bushehr form Isfahan was more manageable as it was mediated by travel along the plateau to Shiraz, but the final portion of the journey was also across the mountains. Traveling between Shiraz
\end{flushleft}
For this reason, when high-ranking officials were sent to the south, they mostly traveled along the historical Hamedan highway, which proceeded westward along a centuries-old trade route from Tehran through Hamedan into Ottoman territory at Khanaqin and finally to Baghdad. They then sailed down the Tigris River to Mohammerah. A second option, considered the safer one, was to go through Azerbaijan, Turkey and Iraq. This route was still being in used in 1912.

and Bushehr is notoriously difficult in the writings and travelogues of British and Iranian men. Writing in the 1870s, Lowe discusses the British consideration of sending the British army into Iran in the late 1830s, that was deemed impossible due to the impenetrability of the terrain. Charles Rathbone Low, The Land of the Sun: Sketches of Travel, with Memoranda, Historical and Geographical, of Places of Interest in the East, Visited During Many Years’ Service in Indian Waters (Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 265.


The designated kargozar of Khuzestan in 1912 went from Tehran first to Baku, then via the Black Sea to Istanbul and Baghdad then down the Tigris to Mohammerah. In 1885 the Governor of Bandar ‘Abbas traveled to his post from Tehran via Basra. Willem M. Floor, The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-E Lengeh, the Distribution Center for the Arabian Coast, 1750-1930. (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2010), 49.
Figure 9: Route from Tehran to Mohammerah and the Persian Gulf, via the Hamedan Highway

The infrastructural connection between Tehran and the province of Arabistan across Iranian territory only began to take shape in the late nineteenth century, and only with the help of foreign capital and technology. The first major step was the opening of the Karun River in 1888 to foreign trade, which began to introduce major outside economic interest into the region. While Mohammerah had already been connected to Indian Ocean trade routes through its relationship with Basra which was discussed in Chapter 1, the penetration of global capitalist markets to the interior of Iran via the Karun river which terminated at Mohammerah increased its importance at a major trading center. The Sheikh of Mohammerah capitalized on this opportunity, opening a river steam company called the Nasseri Company. Nasseri steamboats brought a wealth of goods
from towns upstream like Dizful and Shushtar through Mohammerah. The river lanes to the interior, the Ahwaz-Isfahan (Lynch/Bakhtiyari) road was completed in 1900.

These important infrastructural changes strengthened local trade relationships between Dizful, Shushtar and Mohammerah, but still did not mean significantly easier movement of central government troops from Tehran to the area. For several decades Lor tribes (especially the Bakhtiyari) maintained a stronghold around Dizful and refused to allow the government army to cross the Zagros Mountains from Isfahan. In fact through the early 1920s there was a treaty (if unstable) in place between the Arab and Lor tribes of the area to protect one another against such encroachment.

The strengthening of the relationships between local groups in the province cannot be detached from the growth of British influence in Arabistan. The British built infrastructure that made the province more attractive to the central government, but they also brought weapons that armed the tribes against it. The British supplied these weapons under the pretext of the tribes being responsible for defense of the borders and the rule of law, but they knew that the tribes were also using them to keep the central government at arm’s length.

Roads were the most essential element in physically tying the state of Iran together. Without the ability to physically send troops to the provinces, there was no way for the state to achieve sovereignty over the territory it claimed. It is no surprise, then, that when the Lor tribesman

---

allowed the central government troops to pass through their land to Dizful, it marked the beginning of the end of autonomy for Arabistan.283

The Lor tribesmen’s change of heart also signaled to the British that their policy of supporting local rulers was dated, and that the territorializing state could not be turned back. Although they had supported and given assurances to the Sheikh of Mohammerah, particularly after his support of their campaign in Mesopotamia during World War 1, the face of British policy was changing. In 1923, the new officers within the Government of India suggested to reformulate British policy to increase ties with the central government and to cut local ones. The Foreign Office in London made one last attempt to sway Reza Shah to stay out of Arabistan as long as the Sheikh resumed paying tribute.284 When it threatened to stop subsidizing the Iranian government, Reza Shah countered by threatening to resign - a move that everyone involved assumed would cause a complete breakdown of the central government.285 The British realized that a stable central government was more important than maintaining their promises of loyalty to Khaz’al. Within months the Sheikh of Mohammerah surrendered and was replaced by a Governor from Tehran.

**Legal status and the nationalizing process**

Connecting the state through infrastructure was ultimately important for the way it empowered the modern state administration. Similar to the goals of infrastructural sovereignty, the state also vigorously pursued administrative and legal sovereignty to build the nation. With new roads through remote areas the state could now fully assert its authority, not only through

283 FO 371/9044 British Military Attache, Tehran to the War Office.
284 Sheikh Khaz’al had not made such payments since WW1.
the military and policing, but by accounting for its citizens through legal registration. When the state began requiring people under their control to register themselves with local governments, they also gave them nationality papers (sejel). These papers turned subjects into citizens through legal recognition of their individual status vis-à-vis the state. This process “nationalized” subjects through the apparatus of the state, producing citizens beholden to its legal sovereignty. It is important to note however that citizenship was involuntary, and many citizens were created forcibly through violence, imprisonment, and threats.

Creating citizens cannot be decoupled from the implications of such a status. In modern Iran the law was supposed to apply universally to all citizens. This broke down previous social hierarchies and placed the state directly in charge of each individual without the intervening of other authorities, such as tribes, confessions, or guilds. It was through the attempt to enforce the obligations of each citizen that the state began to push its modernizing and nationalizing reforms.

The Qajar state-building measures were generally more concerned with universalizing the legal status of those it considered to be under its jurisdiction. Put more simply, during the Qajar period, emphasis was on making sure people’s papers were in order; that their legal relationship vis-à-vis the state was formalized. Reza Shah’s nationalization program however was much more pervasive. When he seized power in 1921 he and the newly empowered nationalist elites set out to infuse the people within the borders of Iran with a national consciousness and culture. For many of those people, and especially those in border areas, this required a complete refashioning of their relationship to the state and a reorienting of their lives and identities inward, towards the center of power.

Reza Shah nationalized the state in two main ways: first, through continuing the Qajar territorialization process by extending continuous state infrastructure and power from the center
in Tehran to the borders or Iran, and second by attempting to transform identities into a unified national one through the language of rights and obligations.

Reza Shah’s vision for the Iranian state was a modern one defined by the territory of the state and the proliferation of a single national identity connected amongst those living on the national land, “Iran zamin.” He recognized the diversity of the people inside the territory and set out on a program to construct a national unity between them through a variety of different means. One of the most apparent ways was through his changing of the foreign name of the country from “Persia” to “Iran.” Such a change was intended to emphasize a great diversity of people tied to the land, rather than give the sense that it was a land ruled over by a dynasty of ethnic Persians. The nationalizing/modernizing program of course went much deeper than a name. There were a number of ceremonies throughout Iran in the 1930s commemorating Iran’s ancient history and culture. However participation in such events was passive. The aspect of nationalization that I will address here was aggressively enforced through a wide range of policies pushed through Parliament between 1927-1929, intending to forcibly transition Iranians into a modern nation bound to a territorial nation-state.

While a number of new policies and laws were taken up during this period, and their impact was felt around the country, the scope of this chapter is limited to the ones whose reverberations were most felt in Bahrain: clothing laws, mandatory conscription, and property laws. We must keep in mind that none of these laws was an entirely new invention, but had basis in earlier laws circulating in the region, often in the Ottoman context. As we saw in the context of traveling passes in the previous chapter, Qajar Iran often looked to its western neighbor for direction, and Reza Shah was no different. Following Ataturk’s sartorial laws designed to transform provincial-

---

looking Ottomans into modern Turkish citizens, in August 1927 Iranian men were also required by law to replace their Iranian-style hats and turbans with a modern, brimmed hat designed on the French military kepi. This “Pahlavi hat,” was the beginning of the Shah’s sartorial reforms to modernize his subjects. Two years later in March 1929 ethnic costumes were banned and people were required to wear a Western-style suit in addition to the Pahlavi hat. Not only was the European style hat unfamiliar and expensive, it forced Iranians to remove the various headgear that was their cultural custom.

Although the clothing laws sparked outrage, they were not protested quite as vehemently as the enforcement of mandatory military conscription. The institution of universal military service was from the late nineteenth century seen as an integral aspect of building a modern state, and for nationalist ideologues of the early twentieth century was just as important for building the Iranian nation. After consolidating his power in the Majlis (Parliament) in 1923, (then) Reza Khan immediately set about pushing through the law for mandatory military conscription. Although a similar law previously existed, enforcement was lax and most recruits came from northern areas of the country. A much larger army would be needed to fully police the borders and establish sovereignty across Iran. In addition to the formal task of policing, the conscription act itself mentioned the additional goals of an army being a nationalizing force, both in terms of creating a shared national culture but also with conscription being mandatory and universal, which demonstrated the equality of all citizens before the law.

---

287 Houchang E. Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3/4 (1993): 212-4. Some exceptions to the clothing laws were religious leaders, teachers and students. Those who wished to be exempt from the regulations had to obtain a special permit from the government.
288 Cronin, *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran*, 171.
289 When the conscription law was passed in 1925, the Shah’s goal was to build an army of 10,000 men.
290 Cronin, *Soldiers, Shahs and Subalterns in Iran*, 172.
One of the primary difficulties of enforcing such laws in the border regions was determining to whom the law applied. Given both the fluidity across borderlands and the historical overlapping nature of sovereignty, many people who new states thought should be subject to the laws claimed to belong to another state, particularly in the case of conscription.

The case of Iraq is instructive for helping us understand the widespread nature of this difficulty in former Imperial territories. Looking to enforce their conscription laws in 1933, the Iraqis were struggling to define who their citizens were given that the Nationality Law of 1924 stated that former Ottoman subjects habitually living in Iraq acquired Iraqi nationality on August 6, 1924. This required them to determine who their citizens were, and for this they needed to retroactively identify those who were Ottoman subjects.

Both Kuwaitis and Bahrainis seemed to be obvious answers. The Ottoman claim to Kuwait was well known. With regard to Bahrain, the Iraqi government maintained that the mention of Bahrain in the Anglo-Turkish convention of 1913 proved that Bahrain was under Turkish sovereignty until the Treaty of Lausanne. The British refuted their claims stating that the Kuwaitis and Bahrainis had their own nationality. In response, 1933 the Iraqis had begun enquiring to the British Resident about the exact date of the institution of nationality in Kuwait and Bahrain given that by their calculations they were formerly Ottoman territories and their residents should now be considered Iraqi nationals. Although there was in fact no nationality law in either place, and in private dispatches British officials recognized the legitimacy of the Iraqi claim, the British developed a weightier historical trump card circumventing the necessity of proving the pre-existence of a nationality law. They argued that the sheikhs of the Gulf were independent from the Ottomans as far back as the 1820s (and 1899 in the case of Kuwait) by virtue of their independent treaty relations with the British - though the treaties were in fact
secret at the time. With help from the British, Kuwaitis and Bahrainis in this borderland area were able to avoid Iraqi conscription, but the borderland people of Arabistan/Khuzestan were not so fortunate.

**Enforcing rights and obligations in the periphery: Bahrainis in Iran**

The central Iranian government having taken charge of Arabistan/Khuzestan only in 1925, faced a real challenge in fully implementing of the nationalizing laws in this province. While many locals resisted the laws because they were unpopular, one group resisted on the basis that they were not Iranian, and thus not obliged to comply. In the late 1920s and early 1930s letters and delegations of people from that district who presented themselves as “Bahrani” (pl. Baharna, referring to their origins belonging to the settled Arab Shia of Bahrain) began to turn up at the British Political Agency in Bahrain, requesting protection from the new laws in Iran. Their claim to British protection was not unfounded. As they considered themselves subjects of the Sheikh of Bahrain, the claimed the right of British protection, just as any other Bahraini subject would.

A number of British reports explained that the Bahranis from Mohammerah were complaining about being forced to wear a “certain kind of hat,” a “foreign headdress” that was humiliating to them. For the Bahranis, it was a mark of being conquered. And for the Iranian government it was a mark of its sovereignty. Down the Shatt from Mohammerah, one Bahrani from the town of Qusbeh wrote that when forced to take out an Iranian passport, the authorities had recorded his description in the passport as “an Irani with a Pahlavi cap on,” even though he was not wearing one.

---

291 Passport Officer, Bahrain to Adviser to Bahrain Government. 24 October 1933. IOR R/15/2/486 f24.
Refusal to wear the Pahlavi hats often came hand in hand with the backlash against conscription throughout the country. From Tabriz to Kirman, sedentary people as well as many ulema fought what they saw as the encroachment of the (secularizing) state. They organized boycotts and protests and were subjected to imprisonment and floggings. 292

The delegations and letters of the Bahranis also emphasized their determination to resist forced conscription in Mohammera. They told stories of men being rounded up, imprisoned, beaten and prohibited from traveling until they agreed to take up Iranian nationality – which would then lead directly to conscription for those men of eligible age. 293 One letter pleading with the Sheikh was particularly illuminating as to why the Bahrani community feared conscription. The author begs the Sheikh of Bahrain to “not leave [them] scattered everywhere.” 294 Though there were communities of Bahranis in Mohammerah, Basra and Qusbah, they remained clustered along the Shatt al-Arab and mostly occupied in trades related to that specific geography. 295 Conscription would send them throughout the vast territory of Iran.

The majority of the letters from Bahranis to the Sheikh of Bahrain came from Qusbah, the southernmost Bahrani community, situated on the Shatt al-Arab near the mouth of the river and home to an estimated 4,000 Bahranis in the 1920s. Given their relatively large numbers there, Qusbah was the site of some of the most severe enforcement of the modernization policies. The Iranian amniah (police) often forcibly confiscated their Bahraini nationality papers, causing

293 IOR R/15/2/486 f4 Petition dated 29 August 1932 from Baharna residents of Persia now at Busrah, addressed to the Adviser, Bahrain Government. Also f16-17, f24, f46.
294 Translation of petition from Bahranis at Basra to the Sheikh of Bahrain. IOR R/15/2/486 f4. 29 August 1932.
295 Bahranis throughout the Gulf were known as the master shipbuilders, and this trade was almost exclusively in their hands. Shipbuilding was the major industry of Mohammerah at the turn of the century. Najm al-Mulk, *Safarnamah*, 97.
severe injury and on several occasions death. Qusbah was also likely a target because of its very porous nature and deep connections to Iraq and Kuwait. The daily activities of the people there involved crossing into Kuwait and Basra, and many worked on boats that ran daily between them - trips which were so common and frequent that the authorities did not (and likely could not) require traveling passes. It was for exactly this reason that the Bahranis were able to send delegations through Kuwait to Bahrain without obtaining necessary travel passes.

What was unique about the experience of Bahranis in Khuzestan was that their struggle with the encroaching state was twofold. Like many other communities inside Iran they resisted nationalizing reforms. However, unlike those communities, their struggles were always tied up with the emerging concept of citizenship and belonging in the region. This was partially due to the fact that if Iran considered the Bahranis to be foreigners, then it was tacitly abandoning its claim over Bahrain. But it also had much to do with the fluidity of this particular group who lived across opaque borderlands and belonged in multiple spaces.

**Iran Nationality Law**

Bahranis in the province of Khuzestan argued that they should not be subjected to the sartorial and conscription laws because they were subjects of Bahrain and not Iranian citizens. In one petition to the Sheikh of Bahrain, the Bahranis urged the Sheikh that “you must know that if any Bahrani has a sejl [registration as an Iranian subject], it was forced on him.”

The Bahrani population in Khuzestan comprised migrants from several generations prior, and had established livelihoods primarily along the entrance to the Shatt al-Arab, which over the

---

296 IOR 15/2/486, f51. From the Adviser to the Government, Bahrain to the Political Agent, Bahrain, March 14, 1934.
297 Petition from Bahranis residents at Qusbah, 33 Rabi al-Thani 1351. IOR R/15/2/486, f5. “Sejl” here refers to the “sejel-e ahlwal” papers issued by the Iranian government noting individuals’ status as subjects.
years remained in the control of the local sheikhs of the area. Amongst the various tribes in the region, the Bahranis were known to be under the protection of their sheikh, even though they did not constitute a tribe. The new central authority would not accept such a position because it saw the Bahranis just as it did the other Arabs in Khuzestan: as one of the many ethnic minorities that made up the Iranian nation. Furthermore, their claim to be “foreigners” was always considered unfounded given that Iran still claimed Bahrain, even though it had not ruled the island for over a century. The nationality law of September 1929 stated that Iranian subjects were “all residents of Persia [sic] with the exception of those whose foreign nationality is established.” It further clarified that “established” meant “not objected to by the Persian Government.”

The stipulation in the Nationality Law that if one was born in Iran, they automatically became Iranian at the age of eighteen gave some Bahranis hope that if they could produce proof of their birth in Bahrain that they would not have to become Iranians. As they were forbidden from traveling without taking up Iranian passports, many Bahranis were forced to secretly make their way to Bahrain to get nationality papers. The only way open was by traveling first through Kuwait. Because travel between Qusbah and Kuwait was so frequent and inconsequential to the Iranian authorities, they did not require travel documents of simple fisherman or water carriers. Among those who came to Bahrain through Kuwait were delegations sent to ask the Sheikh of Bahrain (and the British) to intervene in the crisis. By 1934 British reports noted that many hundreds of people had come to get papers proving their birth in Bahrain, but there were still two thousand more in Qusbah alone who wanted them.

299 IOR R/15/2/486, f16-17.
300 IOR R/15/2/486 f4, f16 f26, f32.
The power of these documents was tenuous. Although it appears at some points the British were able to intervene in the sporadic rounds of violence against the Bahranis, there were also occurrences where the Iranian authorities would forcibly seize and destroy documents claiming that they “were now of no use.”

The Bahranis’ claim to be “foreigners” might have helped them make a case to avoid the cumbersome obligations of being an Iranian citizen (i.e. conscription and clothing laws), but it also deprived them of an important right exclusive to Iranian citizens: the right to hold property. This was spelled out in a 1930 Act passed as an addendum to the Nationality Law, which made it clear that no foreigners had the right to own immovable property, save that of their residence. The connectedness of property and citizenship, although not specifically stated in the original Nationality Law itself is, alluded to in section fourteen:

Any Iranian who … takes on a foreign citizenship will be treated as though that citizenship never existed and will be known as an Iranian. However, their immovable property will be confiscated by the public prosecutor and be sold. After compensating for the overhead the remaining amount will be remunerated to the individual.

While the property law did not affect all Bahranis in Khuzestan, the British estimated that about one third of them were property owners. “Property holders,” of agricultural land in particular, was an important category of distinction because the British considered their case to be closed, and that they should and could do nothing to prevent them from becoming Iranian citizens. The British consular officials in Khuzestan also reported to their colleagues in Bahrain that they had told property-holding Bahranis that they would be much better off acquiescing their

---

301 Adviser to Bahrain Government to Political Agent, Bahrain. 14 March 1934. IOR R/15/2/286 f50
302 IOR R/15/2/1460 f
303 IOR R/15/2/1460 f14.
304 Political Resident, Bushehr to Foreign Secretary of the Government of India. R/15/2/486 f56
claim to Bahraini nationality in order to be able to keep their property. While this might have been the case, it was also true that the British were trying to diffuse as many complaints as possible because they were not interested in taking matters to the highest diplomatic levels.

Collateral damage

Between 1929 and 1934 the British Political Agent at Bahrain received a number of requests from Sheikh Hamad of Bahrain and his British Adviser, Charles Belgrave to take action in response to the poor treatment of Bahraini subjects in the Khuzestan area of Iran. However, protection of Bahrainis in Iran was a difficult issue to navigate. The British no longer had any say in the affairs of Khuzestan after it was taken by the central government in 1923, and were interested in maintaining what they saw as the status quo. Although the British acknowledged that they were “bound by treaty to protect the territory of Bahrain and equally its subjects overseas,” doing so threatened their position that, “on political grounds it [was] of great importance to avoid any action which would result in the re-awakening of the controversy as to the sovereignty of Bahrein [sic].” They feared that pressing the Iranian government too far would result in their taking the status of Bahrain to the League of Nations - a situation that the British government expressly wanted to avoid for fear of losing their influence there.

The irony that the British with their absolute control over Bahrain and cruising warships could do nothing for the Bahrainis whom they claimed to “protect” was not lost on the people of

---

305 British Vice-Consul, Mohammerah to Political Resident, Bushehr. 12 February 1934, f46.
306 The “status quo” was a highly objective sense of the order of things, which they were constantly criticized for by the Iranian government, particularly with the British changes of protocol with traveling passes and their refusal to accept ilm-o-khabars in Bahrain after 1928. IOR R 15/5/174, f4.
307 Political Agent, Bahrain to Political Resident, Bushehr. 29 October 1932. IOR R/15/2/486, f10.
308 Letter to India Office from G. R. Warner at Foreign Office. 31 December 1926. IOR/R/15/1/321, f97.
309 British Legation, Tehran to the Foreign Office, 5 March 1934, R/15/2/487 f64-66
Bahrain. As the British Political Resident in the Persian Gulf observed in a letter to the British Legation in Tehran in August 1929,

“it strikes the residents of Bahrain as remarkable that while Britain’s protection of their island runs to dethroning their ruler, carrying out a series of reforms and arranging to establish flying boat and aeroplane bases for herself, it is not of the least value in alleviating the lot of the [Bahranis] in Persia.”\textsuperscript{310}

The myth of British protection was amusing to the Iranian authorities who teased the Bahranis as they arrested them, asking them “whether they thought they were English and therefore should be protected by the British.”\textsuperscript{311}

In Bahrain the late 1930s the situation seemed to be reaching a boiling point as the continued mistreatment of his subjects in Iran was causing the Sheikh of Bahrain to become increasingly frustrated and prone to making threats of retaliation against Iran. Even amongst the local population the treatment of Shi’i Arabs at Mohammerah was beginning to have a negative impact on Shi’i Arab and Shi’i Persian relations in Bahrain.\textsuperscript{312}

Complaints from the Sheikh, the locals, and even the British amongst themselves invariably contrasted the position of the Bahranis in Iran to the Iranians in Bahrain, remarking that the Iranians in Bahrain are in a much better position with regards to religious freedom and nationality. The comparisons often mentioned the freedom of dress that Iranians in Bahrain had, whereas the Bahranis in Iran were compelled to wear the Pahlavi hat. They also mentioned the

\textsuperscript{310} From Cyril Charles Johnson Barrett, the British Political Resident in the Persian Gulf, to the British Legation in Tehran, 21 August 1929. IOR/R/15/1/216/321, f259.
\textsuperscript{311} Adviser to Bahrain Government to Political Agent, Bahrain, 14 March 1934, IOR R/2/486 f52.
\textsuperscript{312} Political Agent at Bahrain to Political Resident, Bushehr, IOR R/15/2/138 f43-44.
Persian schools, the freedom to hold Muharram processions,\(^{313}\) and that there were no restrictions on Iranians holding property in Bahrain.

Throughout the 1930s the British considered a number of different solutions to this problem. But given their unwillingness to intervene in the internal affairs of Iran in defense of the Bahranis, the “solutions” were in fact only retaliatory measures directed at the large number of Iranians in Bahrain. The proposed retaliatory measures primarily revolved around a key few issues: removing British jurisdiction over Iranians in Bahrain and letting them be subject to Bahrain courts\(^ {314}\); disallowing Persians from being appointed or elected to public bodies; bringing their schools under the Bahrain Department of Education; discouraging the wearing of Pahlavi hats; and taking measures “to prevent the permanent alienation of property into the hands of the Persians [sic].”\(^ {315}\)

Some British officials in Bahrain initially resisted the temptation to retaliate against local Iranians, arguing that their wealth was keeping the economy afloat, and encouraged the British Foreign Office in Tehran to try to reach a diplomatic solution dealing with the persecution of the Bahranis. Eventually, however, it became clear that if the government were to treat the Bahranis differently than other Iranians, such a position would be akin to renouncing their claim to Bahrain altogether. If the British wanted the Iranians to accept the status quo of their authority in Bahrain, they would have to accept the status quo of Iranian authority over the Bahranis in Iran.

\(^{313}\) IOR R/15/2/138 p. 125, f44.
\(^{314}\) Political Resident, Bushehr to Political Agent, Bahrain. 20 March 1934. IOR R/15/2/486 f57.
\(^{315}\) Political Resident, Bushehr to Political Agent, Bahrain. 3 November 1932. IOR R/15/2/486 f13.
Retaliatory measures were first proposed in May of 1931 by Sir Hugh Biscoe, then Political Resident in Bushehr, whom the Iranians snidely referred to as “Sir Biscuit.” He argued that Iranians in Bahrain should be subjected to the local courts in Bahrain rather than the British courts, just as the British were subject to local courts in Iran. Copy of note from C.C. Prior. 11 July 1934. IOR R/15/2/486, f137.

Al-Rashoud notes in his discussion of the implications of the power shift between the ruler and the National Assembly that the nationality law proposed in Kuwait was also aimed at Iranian migrants. Talal Al-Rashoud, “Modern Education and Arab Nationalism in Kuwait, 1911-1961,” (Ph.D. diss, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2016), 135.
Iranians of every class were working and living in Bahrain by the late 1930s. Some were recent migrants working as day laborers, while others were also major businessmen and property holders whose families had been living there for several generations and had established trading networks across the Gulf and in India. One might imagine that the guiding line for articulating who was a Bahraini national would have been the jurisdictional distinction imposed in 1904 by the British distinguishing “foreigners” versus “locals.” This was not the case.

The law allowed for a broader understanding of what it meant to be Bahraini, accepting the principle of *jus soli* and recognizing that time spent living in Bahrain gave one some kind of claim to belonging there. It seems that although the law decreed that one had to have been born in Bahrain or the child of a father born in Bahrain, most Iranian residents of Bahrain were in fact eligible for naturalization. Those whose eligibility the British were most unsure about were those Iranian property holders who were not continuously resident in Bahrain. As stated by the British Advisor to the Bahrain Government, “the policy of the Government [was] to grant Bahrain nationality to Iranians living and working in Bahrain but not to persons residing elsewhere.”

When the Bahrain Property Law went into effect November 1, 1937, the Iranians were given three months to decide whether to take out Bahraini nationality or to submit a list of their property to be sold to the Bahraini government in a year’s time. In the months following the

---

318 The notice issued by Sheikh Isa in 1913 that no landed property was to be sold or transferred to foreigners without his notice appears to not to have applied to the Iranians resident in Bahrain as the British Political Agent reports in 1929 that it is perfectly legal for “Persians” to own property. IOR R/15/2/93, 19 and IOR R/15/2/138.

319 IOR R/15/2/151, f71.

announcement of the Bahrain Property and Nationality Laws, this diverse group of Iranian
Sunnis, Shiʿas, Laris, Arabs and Persians met frequently, discussing their options. Many believed
the Bahrain government was bluffing and would not follow through on its threat to seize
Iranians’ property. Some argued that they should neither take up Bahraini nationality nor submit
lists of their property, but maintain a neutral position, especially given that the original law did
not mention how noncompliance would be dealt with.321

On the eve of the three-month deadline, only a single Iranian (albeit an important merchant)
had come forward with a list of his property.322 The British had not anticipated such a scenario,
having three months prior held discussions about who would pay for the additional clerk that
would be needed to register all Iranians whom they anticipated would come forward.323 Rather
than give up their property in acquiescence of the new order, which intended to make the
Iranians become Bahraini or lose their status, a number of people registered their property in the
names of their minor children at the Land Department (Daʿirat Tapu). They did so because minor
children were an exception to the law, and would have to wait until age eighteen to register as a
foreign subject if they so choose. They were buying time until the situation settled down. The
British understood that the Iranians were deliberately evading the Property Law, but were doing
so by legal means and therefore could not be stopped.324

While the Nationality and Property Laws in Bahrain closely mirrored those in Iran, they
lacked a similar context. The Sheikh of Bahrain did not have a grand modernizing project for

321 Political Agent Weightman to Bahrain Government Advisor Belgrave IOR R/15/2/151 f70.
322 Muhammad Tayyeb Khunji came on January 14, 1938 to register 10 properties, including his house,
land of residence, the land of businesses, buildings, a garden and a date garden, among others. IOR
R/15/2/151, f60.
323 IOR R/15/2/151, f72-73.
324 Exchange between Adviser to Bahrain Government and Political Agent, Bahrain. IOR R/15/2/151,
f194-196
Bahrain in which he wished to create a national unity or national culture. Given Bahrain’s diversity, his weak government and the only nascent modernizing institutions run by the British, it would have been impossible for him to do so. Rather, in the small state of Bahrain, there was yet no formal language of rights or national culture. Belonging was based on a symbiotic relationship between the various minority communities and the ruler.

The Sheikh’s goal was not to build a nation of citizens with rights and obligations to the state. Although some of the previous Sheikh’s supporters, who established the Bahrain National Congress in 1923, began to adopt that language, Sheikh Hamad’s priority was security and stability for his small monarchical state. He could not afford to get involved in post-colonial politics. His dependence on the British for security and stability probably contributed to his decision to allow Iranians to become Bahraini, since the British saw their wealth and labor as critical to the success of the Bahrain economy.

Though Iranians were involved in several outbreaks of violence, for instance in 1904 and 1923, the Sheikh took little interest in their daily activities as long as they did not threaten his authority. The merchant-class Iranians had planted roots in Bahrain. They were major property holders and had opened many religious and civic institutions, such as a modern school as early as 1913. As I mentioned earlier, they were members of the municipality and active participants in the social life of Bahrain who mediated between their communities and the Sheikh.

But some members of the Bahraini polity thought that these Iranian “outsiders” had gained too much control. Violence between Najdi (Saudi) rioters and native Iranian policemen in Bahrain in 1923 ignited serious anti-colonial fervor that saw the presence and power of the Iranians in Bahrain as a direct result of British rule.\footnote{For details on disturbances of 1923 see IOR R/15/2/86.} Arab nationalists claimed that the British...
and Iranians were foreigners and that neither belonged in Bahrain. It is difficult to determine exactly what impact the Arab nationalist protests had on the Iranians’ sense of belonging to Bahrain, but it is certain that as the years progressed many of them began aligning themselves with Iranian nationalism.\textsuperscript{326}

The rise of Reza Shah in Iran and his modernizing program was a source of pride for many Iranians in Bahrain who were connected to a cosmopolitan web of merchants throughout the Indian Ocean interested in modernization and reform of their societies. Towards the late 1920s the British noted a new sense of national unity that was forming amongst diverse Iranian groups. Pupils of the Iranian school began marching in the streets in military uniforms with bugles and Iranian flags. These processions, which were put to rest in 1928 after complaints of the Sheikh, mirrored the practices of schools inside Iran.\textsuperscript{327} As the school was financed by both local merchants and the Iranian government, it is difficult to determine whether or not the parades were voluntary. But in 1931 the school finances were taken over by the Education Department of the Government of the Persian Gulf Ports from Bushehr (Iran) and renamed the National Unity School.\textsuperscript{328} It is at this point that they began requiring the students to wear the Pahlavi hats as a part of the official school uniform of Iran.\textsuperscript{329}

The Pahlavi hat became not only a sign of pride in the Iranian state, but a symbol of its sovereignty. In Iran, one had to wear the hat to be received by government administrators; failing to do so provoked suspicions of loyalty in addition to a fine or imprisonment. In 1929


\textsuperscript{327} Political Agent, Bahrain to Political Resident, Bushehr. 4 November 1929. IOR R/15/2/138 f45.

\textsuperscript{328} Ali Akbar Bushehri, “Ajam School in Bahrain,” typescript, accessed August 1, 2016, Bushehri family archive.

\textsuperscript{329} Interview with Ali Akbar Bushehri, Manama August 1, 2016.
Mohammad Yateem, a well-known Bahraini merchant, came to Bushehr wearing an Iranian dress and a Pahlavi hat. When asked at the British Residency why he discarded his Arab dress he said that he could not get any document from Bahrain authorities that would allow him to land at Bushehr, so the only way he could get into the country was by looking like an Iranian.\textsuperscript{330}

So while the Pahlavi hats in the streets Bahrain were probably more an annoyance than they were a threat from the Iranians living there, it was dangerous as a symbol insofar as it invigorated Iranian nationalist aspirations towards Bahrain. In this period Bahrain was frequently mentioned in the Iranian newspapers, complete with dispatches from Iranians living in Bahrain about their treatment there. One article lamented that the employees of the government of Bahrain had to wear Arab clothes and “the police who used to have Persian hats and coats” have changed their clothes to Arab clothes as well.\textsuperscript{331} Although Pahlavi hats were never banned outright in Bahrain, wearing it was discouraged through governmental policies that both put high taxes on its import and disallowed its manufacture in Bahrain.\textsuperscript{332} A clear sense of Bahraini identity was still forming, but at the very least, one could not be both an Iranian nationalist and belong to Bahrain.

The Nationality and Property Laws achieved the desired effect of making Bahrainis out of the wealthiest Iranians merchants, but had far less compliance than the British were expecting. When the Bahrain Property Law went into effect November 1, 1937, the Iranians were given three months to decide: either take out Bahraini nationality or submit a list of their property to be sold to the Bahraini government in a year’s time. In the months following the announcement of the Bahrain Property and Nationality Laws, this diverse group of Sunnis, Shi’as, Laris, Arabs

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{330} Political Resident, Bushehr to H.M’s Minister at Tehran, August 12, 1929, L/P&S/10/1040, f 315.
\textsuperscript{331} Shafaq-e Sorkh, December 27, 1928. In IOR L/P&S/10/1040 f 382-383.
\textsuperscript{332} Advisor to Bahrain Government to British Political Agent, 26 October 1933. IOR R/15/2/486 f22.
\end{footnotesize}
and Persians met together frequently, discussing all of their options. Many believed the Bahrain government was bluffing and that they would not follow through on their promise to seize Iranians’ property. Some argued that they should neither take up Bahraini nationality nor submit lists of their property, but maintain a neutral position, especially given that the original law did not mention how noncompliance was to be dealt with.\textsuperscript{333}

In the weeks leading up to the issuance of the laws, there had been serious concern about how the vast numbers of cases would be processed.\textsuperscript{334} However, at the end of the three-month deadline, only one Iranian had come forward with a list of his properties.\textsuperscript{335} After one year, the British records report only twenty-two cases of men and women who submit lists of their properties to be sold. The majority of those who came forward clustered around a few different markers: they were mostly from wealthy Sunni families from the southeast of Iran, and many were living in the Awadhi neighborhood of Manama, which was at the time one of the most affluent areas.\textsuperscript{336}

At least one family was split with the older members staying in Bahrain and a younger son moving with his wife and children to Tehran in 1939. Among those children, one became a prolific geographer, another an attorney and member of the Tudeh Party, and another a translator in the Persian Language section of the British Broadcasting Company.\textsuperscript{337}

It is telling that the wealthy family that left Bahrain to return to Iran did not return to their native region in the southeast, but rather made their way to the center. Tehran with its

\textsuperscript{333} Political Agent Weightman to Bahrain Government Advisor Belgrave, IOR R/15/2/151 f70
\textsuperscript{334} IOR R/15/2/151 f72-73.
\textsuperscript{335} Muhammad Tayyeb Khunji came on January 14, 1938 to register 10 properties, including his house, land of residence, land of businesses, buildings, a garden and a date garden, among others. IOR R/15/2/151 f60.
\textsuperscript{336} IOR R/15/2/151.
modernizing ambitions promised to be at the forefront of modernity in the region. Many wealthy Iranians in Bahrain were believers in the nationalist project, and were convinced of its ability to transform Iran into a powerful industrialized state. The territorial ambitions of Iran however had an adverse effect when it came to Bahrain. Rather than drawing it nearer, the avarice of the Iranian state inspired movement on the ground to distance the small British protectorates from its reach.

**Conclusion**

As nationalizing forces worked within Iran to build a modern Iranian citizenry, none predicted the way that these policies would reverberate outside of Iran. In Bahrain, Iran’s policies had a two-pronged negative effect: first, through the public outcry against what were seen as atrocities against the Bahrani population in Khuzestan, and second through growing anti-Iranian sentiment fueled by the increased visibility of Iranian migrants and Iranian nationalism in the Arab-majority state. These two factors ironically prevented Iran from accomplishing one of its important territorial goals: achieving sovereignty over Bahrain.

In fact, the nationalizing policies of Iran invigorated British action in Bahrain, further solidifying the need for their protection and their willingness to take stronger measures to assert their own sovereignty over the country. As a consequence, Bahrain experienced the very early institution of passports, and perhaps more fundamentally the birth of a national identity that was consciously defined against Iran.338

---

338 This can be contrasted with the experience of Kuwait, which had roughly 10,000 Iranian residents in the 1930s and did not take similar measures distancing Iran. And unlike Bahrain, when the Sheikh of Kuwait finally succumbed to the British pressure to institute passports it was in 1948 the circumstances were not related anxieties about Iran. Col. Dickson, Political Agent, Kuwait, “Notes on Kuwait in 1933.” IOR R/15/5/179 f19.
Chapter 4 - Building a New Homeland

“Persians seemed to do the porterage, the water deliveries, and most of the coolie work of the port, as well as the labor in the dockyards … They were sawing planks out of huge Malabar logs, frightful work in that hot climate; they were unloading the water booms, driving their asses into the sea to take their dripping loads of waterskins: they carried the firewood, the bags of rice, the packages of dates, and everything else which was being taken to the warehouses of the merchants. Persians and pack horses were doing the work of the town: the Kuwaitis were doing the work of the sea.”  

-Alan Villiers, 1939

Introduction

By the late nineteenth century, the global capitalist economy had found its way to the Gulf, and quickly began changing many aspects of life in the region. New sources of capital and connections to European trade and governance brought new systems and commodities to the region. They also brought Gulf society into different social, economic, and patronage networks. Like the border regulations we saw in Chapter 2, these new systems, commodities and networks did not sweep in and replace old ones overnight, but they did fundamentally alter the way that the people of the Gulf interacted with historical institutions and patterns. Still, traditional ways of life proved to be infinitely flexible and for many decades people adjusted their behavior to accommodate the demands of the new economic and bureaucratic world that was developing around them. In some cases, mechanization and new technologies - both most often imported from Europe - eased these demands. Steamships for example could carry more goods further and

339 Alan Villiers, Sons of Sinbad (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 331.
faster than could the wooden sailing ships. As we have seen in previous chapters however, people of the Gulf also found local solutions and loopholes to the new demands of the global market and its overseers.

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing well into the twentieth, the Gulf found itself in possession of two commodities for which there seemed to be insatiable European and American demand: pearls and dates. While satisfactory technology existed to bring these products across the world, procuring both pearls and dates required an intense amount of human labor for which there was no technological shortcut. The demand for these products vastly outweighed the labor force that was available to meet it. Though the western Gulf littoral itself consisted of sparsely populated villages, through the more populated hinterlands of other littorals around the western Indian Ocean, it was connected to substantial sources of labor.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the shortage of labor was remedied through the forced removal of populations in East Africa, primarily between Pemba and Zanzibar and shipping them to Oman, from whence they were sold as slaves and were distributed throughout the rest of the Gulf to be put to work in pearling and date farming. Slave labor then became the backbone of the exploding markets of dates and pearls and the means through which the Gulf became enriched with global capital in the early twentieth century.340

Having acquired wealth from the global market in addition to elevated importance due to their new status as protectorates of the British Empire, the small port towns of the western Gulf began to grow tremendously in the first decades of the twentieth century. And with this growth came further labor demands. With a majority of the men working at sea (pearling in the summer

months and long-distance trading the remainder of the year), there was a need for workers who would build the towns and distribute the newly affordable luxuries. Technology alone could not meet the needs of these growing cities, and particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, laboring bodies were needed to temper a number of imbalances between prosperity from the global capitalist market and the towns’ premodern infrastructure and organization. By this time slave labor was becoming less of an option. In 1873 an anti-slavery treaty was signed between the British Empire and the Sultan of Oman, and although it initially did little to quell the trade, by the turn of the century, the slave trade had seriously begun to wane.

However, at the same time another major source of labor began to open up. In this chapter, I argue that the increased flows of tens of thousands of migrant laborers from southern Iran to Kuwait and Bahrain in the early twentieth century must be understood in light of these economic changes in the Gulf, in addition to conditions internal to Iran addressed in Chapter 1. Here we will explore how the migrants from Iran in the 20th century were a part of these transformations, both as laborers whose lives were directed by economic demands and as agents -entrepreneurs and artisans - who shaped society and the physical environment of the towns of Kuwait, Manama and Muharraq. I will explain how the trades they were employed in were tied to changing economic life, as well as their family and social networks. Finally, I will uncover the ways in which the networks of laborers were a part of a larger system of patronage due to concentrations of capital and power, and how those concentrations also influenced how migrants settled in the port towns.

**New trades of the 20th century**

As explained in previous chapters, in the early twentieth century, rising numbers of migrants began to arrive on the western shores of the Gulf from the eastern side. The sudden increase in
Iranian migrants is noted by the British political agents stationed in Kuwait, Dubai, Bahrain and Qatar.\(^\text{341}\) Although these new numbers were unprecedented, it is important to keep in mind that Iranians were not strangers to the area. Persian was widely spoken alongside and often intertwined with Arabic and Hindi. Some of the new settlers from Iran were Arabs, others Lari and others Fars - communities that were all previously represented by earlier generations of migrants. Prior to the early twentieth century the Kanoos, Fakhroos and Khunjis were all well-established merchants in Bahrain, as were the Ma’rafis and Behbahanis in Kuwait.\(^\text{342}\) Though they had all come from the Iranian side of the Gulf, they were an integral part of their respective societies on the western side, and were considered permanently settled there.\(^\text{343}\) And these earlier migrants from Iran in the early and mid-nineteenth century formed the basis for many subsequent migrants in the twentieth. As individuals and families found opportunity on the western side and reported back, more people began to come. Thus, although we will primarily focus on the Iranians who came to Kuwait and Bahrain during the intense period of migration roughly between 1910-1950, we must keep in mind that there was a significant population of Iranians present in those areas before this period whose arrival was not connected to the same economic forces that shaped later migration.

I have suggested that these migrants of the early twentieth century filled very specific labor needs as the demands of the growing populations and projects of the towns increased with the


\(^{342}\) This is not an inclusive list, as there were other families as well. Here I mention only a couple of the most well-known families.

\(^{343}\) On December 4, 1921 a report from the Political Agent in Kuwait to the High Commissioner for Baghdad notes that there are about 10,000 persons of Persian origin in Kuwait, but that many have been there for two or three generations, and only about half are “actual Persian subjects” and could prove their nationality if they wanted to. IOR R/15/1/303
influx of wealth. It is important then that we take a moment to consider how it is that certain
groups of people came to perform certain kinds of jobs. There exists a tendency within Gulf and
Indian Ocean studies to group people of diverse backgrounds into general categories based on
what are seen as historical divisions of labor dictated by assumed ethnic and sometimes sectarian
lines. Broadly speaking, histories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century portray
people like the Baluch as mercenaries, Gujaratis as financiers, East Africans as slaves and pearl
divers, Qawasimi Arabs as pirates, Persians as laborers, Baharna as shipbuilders and Najdis as
merchants, and bedouins as an unruly bunch who were only able to be tamed by the oil industry
and welfare state. With regard to Persians in Bahrain, British reports also attempt to break down
divisions of labor. The Sunnis, they report,

“are smaller in number but more influential. They make up most of the wealthy
merchants, traders, skilled artisans, boat builders, masons and carpenters…The Shia’s are
petty shop-keepers, coffee and tea-shop keepers, motor drivers, also in the minor professions,
but by far the largest number is that of dock and other day-labourers…The Shi’ahs may also
be said to comprise the larger number of beggars, rif-rafs, and habitual criminals in Bahrain,
thes (sic) crime in their case seldom goes beyond pilfering on steamers, boats and customs,
petty thefts or house-breaking and assaults.”

While such generalizations may illuminate concentrations of particular peoples within certain
labor fields, these names of these groupings were often not the ones that people used for
themselves, making them subjective, reductive and tending towards obfuscating more than they
reveal. They steer historians to develop ethno-sectarian based understandings of “communities”

---

344 Crystal noted for example that there was a “sectarian division of labor” in Kuwait, and that “the local
water-carrying trade, for example was exclusively in Shia hands,” Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and
Merchants In Kuwait and Qatar (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40.
345 IOR R/15/2/138 f48b
centered around shared labor practices before pausing to consider a number of relevant historical questions about the extent to which such groups were in fact “communities,” and furthermore their historical formation.

On one hand, they deter us from exploring the historical cohesiveness of these so-called communities and can cover up important cleavages and diverse networks. For example, the well-known (and erroneous) claim that in early twentieth-century Kuwait there was a “sectarian division of labor” and that “the local water-carrying trade…was exclusively in Shia hands,” was built upon the assumption that all “Persians” were also Shi’as.\(^\text{346}\) In fact, the water carrying trade was mostly concentrated in the hands of Sunni migrants from Iran. While asserting that there was a sectarian division of labor was a misunderstanding of the secondary author, the primary report it referred to also assumed that all migrants from Iran were Persian. Unquestioning reliance upon British archival sources is problematic because it often leads to conclusions built upon the privileging of the languages and categories that the British (and sometimes their Indian employees) thought were relevant.

Furthermore, while it may have been the case that labor was often divided along these lines, we cannot conclude that it was divided in such a way \textit{because} of sect. Rather, I argue that clustering of similarities around trades must be understood as a product of the familial, social and geographical networks that people were a part of. Their networks were chains of information about where to go, who to see, and what to do. They were sources of financial support and shelter in a new place. Networks brought people from similar geographical areas of Iran to do

\(^{346}\) Jill Crystal, \textit{Oil and Politics in the Gulf}, 40; Aḥmad Maḥmūd, \textit{The Neighbors}, Translated by Nastaran Kherad. Modern Middle East Literatures in Translation Series (Austin, Texas: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 2013), 49.
similar jobs in Bahrain and Kuwait, and inversely also connected patrons to pools of labor concentrated around particular regions of Southern Iran.

**Expanding old networks**

One of the most pervasive connections between the eastern and western coasts of the Gulf at the turn of the twentieth century was through the trade in dry goods, more specifically grains and legumes. Produced just inside the coastal areas from the northern district of Behbehan southward to Dashtistan and Tangestan, grains and legumes were easily accessible for trade across the Gulf to populations in need of these staples. While it is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of these trading relationships, the wealthy merchant families in Kuwait most active in this trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth century arrived there from Behbehan in the early-mid 1800s. The Jamal family for example opened their first *karkah* (from Persian *kargah*, meaning “workshop”) in 1848.

As Bahrain had local wheat production, it did not rely as heavily on the import of these staples initially. However, at the turn of the century local production was not enough to sustain the growing population in Bahrain given its new role as the pearling center and primary entrepôt of the Indian Ocean trade in the Gulf. This led to an upswing in the import of grain and legumes from Dashtistan and Tangestan to Bahrain although unlike Kuwait there are no specific families on record who monopolized this trade.

The majority of these traders sailed directly from smaller coastal villages, avoiding customs at the larger ports of Mohammerah and Bushehr. Daily these traders crossed back and forth

---

347 Imports to Iran from Kuwait consisted mostly of goods re-exported from India, such as tea, sugar and gold thread.
bringing grain from small ports on the Iranian coast to the growing towns on the western side. Because of the scale and their departure from towns outside of the realm of the customs authorities, their movement is largely undiscoverable in official trade reports. Still, when there is a traceable record, the customs reports from Bushehr often lists Kuwait and Bahrain as the top recipients of wheat and barley exported from Bushehr. The great demand within Kuwait for these imported staples meant that a majority of the migrants who arrived there from Iran in the nineteenth century, and even well into the twentieth made a living importing grains and legumes. Given the close proximity, these migrants came predominantly from Bushehr northwards, such as Dashti and Behbehan. Having cemented the relationship between Iran and Kuwait through this trade in the nineteenth century, these trading families would form the bases of migrant networks from Iran to Kuwait in the twentieth century.

Bahrain had a similar relationship with the Iranian coastal district of Tangistan from Bushehr southward to Bandar Lingeh, although for reasons I have previously mentioned it is less well documented. Only when there is a glitch in day to day trading activities do the functioning of these networks fully appear. For example, from the Bahrain Administration Report of 1905-1906 we learn of a cargo ship from Iran laden with wheat that was driven ashore by bad weather on the northwestern coast of Qatar and subsequently pirated by villagers. Reporting an attack on his boat in 1907, one elderly trader mentioned that he often sailed from his village in Iran called Mubaraki, on which he carried onions, melons, grains and sometimes sheep for Bahrain. In this instance he had been carrying about forty maunds (roughly 82lbs) of wheat and eighty-four sheep, belonging to another man who sailed with him. Although the scale was relatively small and unimportant to governmental authorities, it was the livelihood of many families who settled

---

in Kuwait and Bahrain in the nineteenth century. Kuwait in particular depended on outside foodstuffs. One dates importer from Behbehan, Abdulnabi Maʿrafi, is credited with saving Kuwait from starvation during “Senat al-Haylig” (year of the famine) in 1861.\footnote{Abdulhadi Saleh, “Lamḥa min Tārikh al-Shiʿa wa-al-Sunna fil Difāʿ an al-Kuwait Jamīʿan,” Al-Anbaʿ Newspaper, April 25, 2011; J.R.L Carter, Merchant Families of Kuwait, (London: Scorpion Books, 1984), 57.} The profits these traders made importing foodstuffs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries allowed them to build up the capital to grow their businesses with the greatly expanded market and arrival of new technologies in the 1930s.

Those who built early fortunes (relative to their compatriots) importing grains did not simply sell off all their goods upon arrival in the port. They expanded on their market in a number of different ways. After importing the raw materials, some traders built up large family networks by continuing the distribution of those goods through grocers who were their relatives. Others added layers of production by owning bakeries, making sweets, or operating flour mills. As bread had previously been made in the home, both in Kuwait and Bahrain, the rise of commercial bakeries bears witness to the increased capital and changing economy as the twentieth century progressed. Merchants and travelers were initially the frequent patrons of bakeries, which were located in central souq areas. With the influx of laborers, the demand for bread increased, and bakeries spread out into the residential areas. Indeed it was only in the late 1930s that the Kuwaiti government permitted their opening in these areas.\footnote{Mohammad Abdulhadi Jamal, The Old Crafts, Trades, 270.} When the opportunity arose, Iranians who were already importing the raw materials seized on this advantage and opened bakeries throughout the towns which were more often than not staffed by newly arrived migrants. Even

\begin{quote}
\noalign{\vspace{0.5em}}
\end{quote}
the operation of the bakeries was tied to trade with Iran as prior to the proliferation of kerosene in the mid-1940s, bakers purchased dried kindling plants (known as \textit{gorm} and \textit{karab}) from boats coming from Abadan and Basra.\footnote{Mohammad Abdulhadi Jamal, \textit{The Old Crafts, Trades}, 270. Muhammad Ali Khubbaz was one such trader of gorm and karab between Basra and Bahrain who lived in Kuwait and owned a bakery in which his father worked. Interview with Zahra Muhammad Ali al-Khubbaz in Jasim Abbas Ashkenani, \textit{Ṣafahāt Men Al-Dhākira}, vol. 3 (Kuwait: al-Qabas Newspaper, 2009), 93.}

Livestock is another example of a raw good imported by merchants from southern Iran that would be processed in Kuwait. Iranian women from Bayram worked for Jasim Ma’rafi in his warehouse (\textit{ʿamāra}) separating and spinning wool from the livestock he imported for half a rupee per day in the early 1900s.\footnote{Ashkenani, \textit{Ṣafahāt Men Al-Dhākira}, vol. 4 (Kuwait: al-Qabas Newspaper, 2009), 88.}

By the 1930s dozens of bakeries throughout Muharraq and Manama were staffed by migrants from Bastak and Herang in Iran.\footnote{See court records from IOR R/15/3} While in Kuwait the exact origin of the migrants working in bakeries has not been preserved, in the historical memory, this trade was categorically in the hands of the Iranians.\footnote{All anecdotal evidence that the author has gathered from interviews cites Iranians as the breadmakers in neighborhoods throughout Kuwait. For example see Jasim Ashkenani’s interview with Bibi Abbas Farman in Jasim Abbas Ashkenani, \textit{Ṣafahāt Min Al-Dhākira}, vol. 4 (Kuwait: al-Qabas Newspaper, 2009), 90.} The traditional Kuwaiti bread is still known as \textit{“khubz Irani”} and is a staple of every household. Another example of the additional layer of production that entrepreneurial migrants added to the import of grains is Aga Ali bin Muhammad Reda Behbehani’s mill. He began his career in the early twentieth century imported foodstuffs to Kuwait, and bought a mill in 1932 that became very popular amongst the people of Sharq and Maydan.\footnote{Ahmed Shamsuddin, Al-Qabas, January 2008. http://www.kuwait-history.net/vb/showthread.php?t=2252} It became known as \textit{“mākinat Aga Ali”} and continued to run until 1950, around the time of Aga Ali’s death.
In addition to supplying staples like wheat and barley, Iranians also made their mark on Kuwaiti food culture by importing and preparing *nakhi* and *bajella* (chickpeas and beans) which also originated in Behbehan and/or were shipped through Abadan.\textsuperscript{358} As liquid income increased, the Kuwaiti population developed a taste for the savory snacks to the extent that they were eaten at both breakfast and dinner. Sellers spread throughout neighborhoods, selling their home-cooked legumes on street corners throughout the city. Sweets too were made at home and distributed for sale throughout town. The area of Sharq, where many Iranian migrants lived, became the most popular area for buying a kind of sweets called “lugaimat.” While there were a variety of local and regional Gulf sweets that were available, Iranian migrants made their mark on the local market by popularizing Iranian sweets like *kalīcha* and *khānfarūsh*.\textsuperscript{359}

Many women like Fatmah Ali Usta Ahmad bin Mahmoud became well known for the sweets that they prepared at home and sold to shops or circulating salesmen in the souqs. Fatmah ran one of the larger businesses and had several women working with her. She gained so much fame that Kuwaitis began to refer to her (married) family, the Abulhasans, as “beit zulabiyya” (the house of zulabiyya - one of her best-selling sweets).\textsuperscript{360} The Abulhasans and the Ustas along with the Shishter family, Nasser A’wad Behbehani, Ibrahim Mohammad Jamal, and others became some of the most well-known in Kuwait for their sweets. It is probably no coincidence that all of these families also originally migrated from and had business ties with southwest Iran, a region whose major exports were the exact materials used to produce these sweets.

Home confectionaries were a source of income for many Iranian migrant women in Bahrain as well, and especially during major holidays like Ramadan. Fatmah al-Gabandi, for example, in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{358} Mohammad Abdulhadi Jamal, *The Old Crafts, Trades*, 279.
\item \textsuperscript{359} Mohammad Abdulhadi Jamal, *The Old Crafts, Trades*, 278-9.
\item \textsuperscript{360} Muhammad Yusuf Ya’qoub Abulhasan, ‘\textit{Āilat Abulhasan* (Kuwait: 2014), 13.}
\end{itemize}
1944 worked in the home of another Fatmah, a Qatari, making sweets for the entire month of Ramadan. Although the two Fatmaha were from distant places, they both lived in Fariq al-Fadel in Manama and exchanged food preparation practices. Such relationships give us a sense of the intermingling of peoples and intersection of cultures around food. It was not the case that Iranian migrants were ghettoized and only interacting with one another. They lived and worked amongst other people. Still, hierarchies and disadvantages existed as the Iranian Fatmah worked for a meager salary, and we only learn of her relationship with the Qatari Fatmah when she sought help from the British court after being beaten and not compensated for her work at the end of the month.\footnote{IOR R/15/3/2394}

Having been so deeply involved in the trade and distribution of food, it is perhaps not surprising that Iranian migrants were also frequently running grocery stores - as is suggested by the Persian origin of the name for these stores, “baqqāla.” Again, their success in the grocery business was aided by the advantage Iranians had as the importers of these goods from the areas from which they had emigrated. The demand for these small stores throughout the towns also facilitated the distribution of Iranians throughout the city, rather than their concentration in a single area. Working in a shop also often entailed the benefit of living on the premises.\footnote{This information is corroborated through a number of Bahrain Court records whereby the place of residence and place of work for various defendants and plaintiffs are at the same address. One case also involved a deceased shop owner whose entire possessions were locked inside the shop.} For those who had a bit of capital, owning a shop appears to have been a respectable and relatively stable business.\footnote{The wealthy orphan of Mirza Hassan Shirazi for example wanted to use his inheritance to open a small grocery shop. IOR R/15/3/6557}

Coffeehouse workers also often lived on the premises of the shop, and as such they were often staffed by single migrant men. Though their monthly wages rarely amounted to more than
eight Rupees per month, they did not incur the expense of rent, and they were privileged to information that passed between the customers, which was helpful for business deals on the side.  

364 In Kuwait a migrant from Ashkenan (by way of Bahrain) owned the Bu Taqi coffeehouse, the most prominent in the farda (port) and established around 1903, and employed many fellow Ashkenanis there over the years.365 With the boom in the pearl trade, coffeehouses proliferated as a gathering space for merchants to do business and gather news about prices of goods in Basra, Bombay and other ports in the Gulf-Indian Ocean trading network.366 Iranians were not the inventors of coffeehouses, nor were they the only ones operating them. They did however expand on their initial offerings by adding tea and gidoo (hookah) – a trend which quickly caught on in other coffeehouses as well.

**Carrying the burdens of global capitalism**

Though initially the primary connection to the western Gulf was through the trading of foodstuffs, new migrants were not only filling the bellies of those prospering from the expanding Gulf economy. Like the pearl divers diving continuously through the hottest summer months, the laborers of the town too endured the weight of global capitalism on their bodies. Having stable employment at a shop or as a petty merchant was not the fortune of most of those newly arrived from Iran. The majority of migrants from Iran were laborers, ʿummāl, who found work on a daily basis. In both Kuwait and Bahrain these day laborers were the dock workers/porters (hammālis), builders (bannāis), rock breakers, fish cleaners (jazzāfis), water carriers (kandaris). Because they

---

364 They were often only paid three to five Rupees per month as attested by court records from Bahrain. The Indian Rupee was the standard currency in circulation in the Gulf until the countries gained independence in the 1960s.


366 For more of a sense of the life of coffeehouses/teahouses in the region in this period, see Ahmad Mahmoud’s *The Neighbors*, 64-69.
worked depending on what was needed, the same person might work as a *hammāli* one day, a rock breaker the next, and a *bannāi* the following day.

In Bahrain, dock working was organized from the early 1900s under the auspices of the Port Landing Contractor, who was an employee of the state. Until 1907 this position belonged to Haji Abdulnabi Kal Awadh Kazeruni, and was later transferred to syndicate of Awadhi Sunni Iranians, including Abdulaziz Khunji and Abdul Karim bin Muhammad Khadim. The port landing contractors then purchased boats and secured laborers for lighterage. The fact that all of these men were Iranians and maintained ties to Iran through trade probably played an important role in making the majority of dock workers Iranian migrants.

Several observers noted that Iranians made up the majority of dock workers and porters in Kuwait as well. Until the 1920s these *hammālis* originated from southcentral Iran around Laristan, and later they were joined by migrants from other parts of Iran. As the number of *hammālis* began to rise, the Kuwaiti Baladiyya in the 1930s instituted a registration and permit system. All workers around the souq and port were required to wear an iron arm patch displaying their occupation and registration number.

---

368 Villiers, *Sons of Sinbad; an Account of Sailing with the Arabs in Their Dhows, in the Red Sea, around the Coasts of Arabia, and to Zanzibar and Tanganyika*, 331.
369 People of Najdi origin did not work as *hammālis*. Later in the 1940s there was a large contingent of Palestinian immigrants who worked as *hammalis*. Interview with Jasim Ashkenani, Kuwait, February 11, 2015.
In 1935 the *hammālis* who unloaded goods from steamships to bring back to the port were even more formally regulated through contracts with the Hammal Bashi Company (also called *Sharikat al-Naql wa-l-Tanzil*, the Transport and Discharge Company).\(^{370}\) This private Kuwaiti-owned company had a monopoly on lighterage until it was closed by Sheikh Abdullah Salem in 1952, supposedly for bringing alcohol into Kuwait. The building of a modern port at Shuwaikh in 1959 drastically reduced the number of lighterage vessels and men needed as large ships could finally sail all the way up to the newly dredged port.\(^{371}\)

The historical arc of water transport is well aligned with that of lighterage. As the town had essentially run out of fresh water by 1908, several new occupations emerged to bring water from the Shatt al-Arab to Kuwait and distribute it throughout the rapidly growing town. For transporting water, the people used the same coasting boats, *tashalas*, which were used for

---

\(^{370}\) *Ya‘qūb Yūsuf Ḥijji*, *Kuwait and the Sea*, 99–100. The term “Hammal Bashi” has a deeper history in the Gulf, as it was used as the title of the person working under the Customs authorities who managed the lighterage and distribution of goods in Bandar Abbas as early as 1906. “Administration Report for Bunder Abbas for the Year 1906-1907,” in *Persian Gulf Administration Reports 1873–1947*, vol. 6, 1905–1911 (Gerrard’s Cross: Archive Editions, 1986), 49.

\(^{371}\) Ibid, 132.
lighterage, trading short distances, and navigating shallow waters, especially in the Shatt.\footnote{Tashalas are mostly associated with Kuwait and the Shatt al-Arab and were not used as much in the central and lower Gulf.} They also used the opportunity of going to the Shatt to bring back fruit, vegetables and passengers. Although a strong trading relationship already existed between Kuwait and villages and towns along the river (Qusbah, Abadan, Basra), the routinization of the water trade strengthened the connections between Kuwait and southwest Iran as it provided a constant means of traveling back and forth, and many people from both the Iranian side of the river began specializing in the trade as \textit{tarrāhs} (people who carried fruit and vegetables between the Shatt and Kuwait by boat). Many \textit{tarrāhs} from southwest Iran eventually settled in Kuwait by the 1930s and 40s.\footnote{Interview with Jasim Abbas Ashkenani, Kuwait, February 11, 2015. There were also people originally from the Iraqi side of the Shatt who specialized in this trade, such as Ya’qoub al-Wazzan. Ashkenani, \textit{Ṣafaḥāt Min Al-Dhākira (Pages from Memory)}, 2009, 3:90.}

While al-Hijji sees the immigration of Iranians in the early twentieth century as a cause of the water shortage in Kuwait, they also played a major role in alleviating the crisis.\footnote{Ya‘qūb Yūsuf Ḥijjī, \textit{Kuwait and the Sea: A Brief Social and Economic History}, Translated by Fahad Ahmad ‘Isa Bishara. (London: Arabian Publishing, 2010), 104.} By 1933 over forty boats were constantly making this trip to the Shatt, with four arriving daily.\footnote{“Note on Kuwait in 1933,” Political Agent, Kuwait. IOR R/15/5/179 f25.} In 1939 the work of carrying water had been institutionalized through the creation of the Kuwait Water Company, which set up three areas along the coast where water could be collected.\footnote{Khalid Yusuf Rabī‘ al-Shaṭṭī, \textit{Juhūd abna‘ al-Kuwait al-TaṬou ‘iyya fi Saqayat al-Ma‘ Qadīman wa Ḥadīthan}. Kuwait: 2013, 46.}

Once the water arrived, it would then be carried on the shoulders of laborers or donkeys and distributed throughout the town. The people who did this work were called “kandaris,” and their backbreaking labor has come to be memorialized as a great service to the country. It was several decades before technology of the twentieth century would solve the water shortage in Kuwait. Although the first desalinization plant was running by 1919, the quality was poor and the
government continued to explore alternative sources of water. Thus the manual transport of water by small local boats was the primary source of the country’s fresh water and simultaneously a source of income for new migrants until the completion of a major desalinization plant in the early 1950s.\textsuperscript{377}

![Figure 11: Ships carrying fresh water from the Shatt al-Arab](From al-Nishāṭat al-Bahriyya al-Qadima fi-l, Kuwait: CRSK, 2007)

The migrants use of small local boats was also important in maintaining the trading relationship and migrant networks between Bahrain the central coast of Iran.\textsuperscript{378} I previously mentioned their use for shipping grains and dry foodstuffs, but they also helped the traders and migrants to navigate the new circumstances of modernity. While the states of Bahrain and Iran busied themselves setting up administrative and customs hurdles to weaken connections between

\textsuperscript{377} Ḥijjī, Kuwait and the Sea, 106–7. This trade also maintained the dhow-building industry in a time when they might otherwise have become obsolete.  
\textsuperscript{378} These people were mostly from Tangasir, Bayram and Gerash. Interview with Azim Akbari, Bahrain, August 2, 2016.
the two countries, the smuggling trade opened up and perhaps further deepened connections between the littoral port towns. For example, in 1910-11 when the duty on tea imports to Iran was one-hundred percent, very little tea passed through Customs at Bushehr and Bandar Lingeh. However, in the same year the import of tea to Bahrain and Dubai increased dramatically, and the price of tea in Iran remained stable. Although they did not have the resources to prove what was happening, the British Political Agents themselves realized that the tea was being smuggled by smaller boats to minor village ports in Iran.\textsuperscript{379} Iranians also came to dominate the short-distance carrying to Kuwait, and al-Hijji notes that by the 1930s Kuwaitis dhows only rarely visited the Iranian ports because Iranian captains had taken over the shipping of goods to and from Kuwait.\textsuperscript{380}

Though frustrated by their inability to control movement back and forth, the British administrations in Kuwait and Bahrain were also not (at least before the late 1930s) trying to prevent migrants from coming, and in fact employed them in many jobs that helped to transition these port towns towards modern governance and infrastructure. For one, under the influence of the British, the Sheikhs of both Kuwait and Bahrain hired night watchmen for the souqs and police forces from Iranian and Baluchi migrants.\textsuperscript{381} In Bahrain, in the early 1900s the fact that the police force was predominantly Iranian was a major point of contention for tribal leaders who did not appreciate that they were not allowed to carry weapons but that the Iranian police were.\textsuperscript{382} The Iranian migrants’ lack of connections to local tribes enabled them to more easily work under the direction of the British.

\textsuperscript{380} Hijji, \textit{Kuwait and the Sea}, 94.
\textsuperscript{381} IOR R/15/2/86;
\textsuperscript{382} See Qusaibi quote R/15/2/138
They also relied on the migrants as builders of the new infrastructure projects sponsored both directly and indirectly by the British government such as the Agency building itself, the Victoria Hospital, and the *baladiyya* (municipality). Charles Belgrave, a private British citizen working as Advisor to the Bahrain Government from (1926-1957) recalled hearing, from dawn to dusk, “the monotonous song of the Persian [sic] masons” building his house in 1925 when he first arrived.\(^3\) These kinds of day workers tended not to be hired directly through the British Agency, but rather through their contracts with local partners who were connected to labor networks extending across the Gulf.

**British Patronage**

The new migrants’ networks were vital in both bringing them to and rooting them in their new home. Most new migrants from Iran were supported by someone within their family networks or with ties to their town of origin.\(^4\) Very few individuals threw themselves to the wind with no connections, and the ones who did were often the poorest of the poor.\(^5\) Although personal networks were equally important for migrants in Kuwait and Bahrain, in many other regards the systems of support that they encountered in the respective countries differed greatly. Three major factors contribute to their differences. Bahrain both had many more Iranian migrants, and a much more vibrant economy than did Kuwait. The British were also fully

---

\(^3\) Belgrave, *Personal Column*, 19.

\(^4\) Interview with Hajj Mubarak Dasthi, Kuwait, January 28, 2016; See also Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of city and state in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800*, 100-104.

\(^5\) Criminal court cases involving passport regulations in Bahrain show that the vast majority of violators either had relatives living in Bahrain, or had been traveling back and forth between Iran and Bahrain for a number of years. Estate cases of deceased Iranians who have no relations come forth to claim their possessions rarely had more than a few rupees to their name. See Bahrain Political Agency Court files IOR/R/15/3.
entrenched in economic life in Bahrain as well as Bahraini government decision making, and thus wielded much more power there.

The third factor, British involvement, played an important role in the lives of migrants because they steered capital in particular directions, making themselves sometimes direct and sometimes indirect patrons. As they were both the largest national group and were under British protection, the Iranians were easier to work with. Partnering with Bahrainis would have necessarily involved the Sheikh and local tribal networks, whereas the British themselves were the highest authority over the Iranians. Directly, they funded major projects like the building of the Agency and the Victoria Mission Hospital. The Political Agent also had a say in infrastructural projects that were technically funded by the Bahrain Government.

The Bushehri and Kazeruni families were some of the recipients of these large building contracts as they were hired to build the Political Agency and the Victoria Mission Hospital respectively both built in the first years of the 1900s. Such lucrative contracts put the Bushehri in a position to be major patrons of laborers in Bahrain, and through their networks they supported a number of newly arrived migrants who worked in construction. The Agency contracted the Bushehri for smaller jobs as well. For example, in the Agency’s management of an estate case for the minor orphan of Mirza Hassan Shirazi, over the years various Iranian masons were contracted through Bushehri and Sons Ltd. to make repairs to Shiraz’s house. This direct relationship with the British Agency enabled the Bushehri to employ large numbers of migrants, and through that power turn them into leaders within that community, as we will see in more detail later.

387 IOR R/15/3/6557
The British Agency also directly employed and worked closely with a number of Iranian merchants who no doubt benefitted indirectly from information and connections they gained through ties to British and other European firms. Onley has discussed at length the British tactic of employing locals who were adept at navigating the business and social world in the Gulf, and it is clear that these native informants were an important asset. When in 1911 the relationship between the wealthy merchant Yusuf Kanoo and the Agency was strained, the Agent regretted their deficiency of “local and mainland news” as Kanoo had been their “chief supplier of information.”

While it is unclear how exactly relationships with specific families were formed, it was often the case that coordination would continue over generations. The Safar family who worked as Native Agents for the British Agency in Bahrain also served British India in Bushehr and Mocha, Yemen. While a portion of the family migrated to Bahrain, those who stayed behind still maintained a relationship with the Residency in Bushehr. Onley addresses in detail the numerous posts that the Safar family held under the British in Bahrain and how “the family’s business operations seem to have been intertwined with the family’s operation of the British agencies in Bahrain and Mocha.”

The Germanys are another example of family ties with the British on either side of the Gulf. The grandson of the once Chief of Police in Bahrain (Ahmad Germany), was working in the Residency in Bushehr as the farrash bashi (footman). Others benefitted from the knowledge and connections they gained working for the British and capitalized on them through work with

390 Ibid., 162–63.
391 R/15/3/6808 f16
private firms. The successful merchant Yusuf Ahmed Kanoo was a long-time munshi for the Political Agency in Bahrain (1898-1923) and later in the 1930s became the agent of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company there.\(^{392}\) Haji Abdulnabi Kal Awadh Kazeruni was the port landing contractor in Manama until 1907 and was at the same time the local Agent of the Bombay Persia Steam Navigation Company. The job of port landing contractor was then passed to the already wealthy merchant Abdulaziz bin Haji Lutf Ali Khunji as part of a syndicate of (Sunni) “Ewazi (Sunni) Persians” and a major patron of migrants from around Bandar Lingeh in Iran.\(^{393}\)

Though each of the families had already been successful businessmen and traders in their own right, connections to the British administration around the Gulf reinforced their economic power and social standing. A number of them had previously been (and some continued to be) merchants in Bandar Lingeh and Bombay and had recently moved their headquarters to Bahrain after the 5 percent customs duty mandated by the central government began to be applied in 1903. Because Lingeh’s role was primarily as a distribution center importing from India and exporting to the Arab Coast, it was easily replaced by Bahrain (and to some extent Dubai) which had friendlier customs for traders.\(^{394}\)

By connecting the men and their family members to British and European trading networks, the families who had become wealthy in the nineteenth century trade with India began operating on a global scale and in global commodities in the twentieth: Yusuf Kanoo’s son was employed by Grey MacKenzie (the firm representing the British & India Steam Navigation Company);

---

\(^{392}\) Apparently Yusuf Kanoo took too much advantage of his employment under the British in his personal business dealings, which resulted in them calling upon him much less after 1920. Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj*, 172.
Yusuf Kanoo himself opened one of the largest multinational shipping companies in the Middle East; and Abdullah Germany, son of the Chief of Police, acquired his name from their extensive trade in shells with Germany, and had established extensive lines of credits with the wealthiest merchants of Bahrain.

The wealth that these particular families sustained in part due to their dealings with the British placed them in control of large labor networks of Iranian migrants. But these merchants and entrepreneurs were more than employers. The British Agents also considered and treated the men of these families as heads of communities, which gave them additional social capital and political power. From the Agents reports and the court cases we learn that the Bushehris and Kazerunis were the leaders of the Shi’a Iranians mostly from around Bushehr and Dasht, while Muhammad Sharif and the Kanoos led the long-resident Arabized Sunni Iranians, and the Khunjis the more recent Sunni migrants from southcentral Iran. The Agents reinforced these positions by routinely supporting their appointment to the municipality council, Majlis al-Urfi, and commercial court. Furthermore, within the British Political Agents Court, which oversaw all cases involving Iranians, there were often arbiters appointed by the court or chosen by the parties. With few exceptions, the arbiters were always from among the small group of powerful merchants who were close to the British.

In Kuwait extant British Agency-merchant relationships were less formal. Several factors contributed to this stark contrast. The British were far less imbedded in the daily running of the Kuwaiti government than in Bahrain; Kuwait was a smaller port commanding less business

---

395 Recognizing Kanoo’s reliance on British protection for the success of his business, the British Political Agent in 1920 commented that Kanoo would undoubtedly “get into serious trouble” with the Sheikh if the British ever left Bahrain. “Note on the Political Situation Bahrain” in Political Agent, Bahrain to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad and Political Resident, Bushehr, 5 January 1920, IOR R/15/2/785.

396 R/15/3/6808

397 Political Agent, Bahrain to Political Resident, Bushehr. November 4, 1929. IOR/R/15/2/138
interest; and the Iranian population was smaller, more intertwined with the rest of society, and less subject to politicization by the Iranian government. The Political Agents kept track of the Iranian businessmen and their sentiments towards Britain, but did so to the same degree that they did for all personalities of substantial economic and political standing regardless of their background. In Kuwait, proximity to the Sheikh was a more important factor in securing lucrative contracts from the government and European firms.

Mulla Saleh, the secretary of Sheikh Mubarak in the early twentieth century was one such powerful figure. Hailing from the southwest of Iran, he began working as the Kuwait Trade Agent at Mohammerah and was later brought by the Sheikh to be his personal secretary. From this position he gained influence over the Sheikh and according to British reports became very wealthy in his position. He was known locally as “Raʾīs al-Kitāb.” While very few records of Mulla Saleh’s activities exist among Kuwaiti records, the British saw him as a major patron of the Iranian migrants. During the political turbulence of 1938 that led to the creation of the first elected Majlis in Kuwait, the Political Agent was convinced that the Iranians had the patronage of Mulla Saleh who made requests to the Sheikh on their behalf. Indeed when he was banished to Iraq by the Majlis, thousands of Iranian Shia’s came to ask for protection from the Political Agency. Inspired by nationalist politics in Iraq, the Majlis accused Saleh and his son Abdullah of encouraging Iranian migrants to come to Kuwait. As Sheikh’s representative with Kuwait

---

398 IOR R/15/5/179
399 Ashkenani, Ṣafahāt Min Al-Dhākira (Pages from Memory), 2009, 4:18.
400 IOR R/15/5/205. This request was apparently orchestrated by Sayid Jawwad Qazwini, the most prominent Shi’a cleric in Kuwait who was brought there from Najaf by the Iranian Shi’as around 1906. The historical role of Sayid Jawwad had not been explored in any detailed study, but it is generally understood that his leadership was religious and sometimes political in nature, but not do to his economic standing vis-à-vis Iranian migrants.
Oil Company, the official representative of the Sulpher Company; a director of the Electric Light Company and a board member of the Water Company, it was probably the case that Abdullah Saleh was employing a number of low wage workers from within his family’s networks in southwest Iran. British reports confirmed as much, noting that he supported his children and a “large family of poor relations.”

Because of the way that patronage worked, this support of large numbers of migrants in the early twentieth century by some of the wealthier, more established earlier migrants helped shape the settlement of the towns of Kuwait and Manama: migrants tended to live in close proximity to their patrons. Nelida Fuccaro documented several individual stories that, she argues, “can be taken as representative” of the experience of thousands of migrants who arrived in Bahrain the late nineteenth century. In these narratives, we find patrons who assisted new migrants upon their arrival, giving them shelter, work, and sometimes loans, as well as other patrons who drew migrants out of Iran and brought them to Bahrain. She argues that approximately thirty percent of the Persian population of Dashti was brought to Manama under the protection of the Bushehri and Kazeruni families around the turn of the century. While it is difficult to document the active recruitment of migrants, identifying their networks makes clear the interconnectedness of the region of their origin with the nature of their work, and whose support they received once they arrived in Bahrain and Kuwait.

---

402 IOR/15/5/179 f196.
404 Ibid.
Transforming the port towns

In Bahrain, where there were far more Iranian migrants, patronage was often more formalized and larger in scale. But what did this mean for the development of the port town of Manama in the early twentieth century? And how did the smaller family scale networks shape Kuwait? Fuccaro has discussed the patronage of new migrants at some length, specifically with regards to the Bushehri family’s role in the spiritual fulfilment and the building of religious spaces, but that story is to some extent unique. We need a more general understanding of the impact of different kinds of patronage on the development of neighborhoods in Kuwait and Manama, from the perspective of both demography and the built environment.  

Because of the depth and scale of involvement of patrons in Bahrain, there were specific neighborhoods where Iranian migrants clustered. Most were in Manama; some in Muharraq. They largely populated the area east and southeast of the port and souq and included the neighborhoods of Kanoo, al-Faḍel, Ra’s al-Rumman, al-‘Awadiyya, bin Aswar, al-Telgraph, al-Ḥoora, and Sangeki. Al-‘Awadiyya neighborhood was located just east of the port and was home to some of the wealthiest Iranian merchants from southcentral Iran and Lingeh and was located to the south and west of the Ra’s Rumman neighborhood, where the British Political Agency was located as well as many houṭas and khans where Iranian migrants lived.

While living in different types of spaces, almost all migrants were connected to a patron. Very few lived under a roof that they owned. Court records attest to migrants living in several “hotels” in the area, such as those of Amin Bastaki, and Sheikh Hassan al-Bastaki; “ʿamaras” of

---

405 Fuccaro, Histories of City and State, 100-104.
406 Referenced throughout Bahrain Agency Court records IOR R/15/3.
407 A houṭa (pl. ḥawat) is a walled off area that barástīs were built inside.
408 A khan was an enclosed area owned by a patron where his workers lived.
Haj Abd al-Nabi, “mahals” of Abdulrahman al-Wazzan and Abdalaziz Khunji, “khans” of Ali Abdullah Abul and Yusuf Kanoo. Many others lived in shops, bakeries, and houses of someone under whom they were employed.

British maps of Bahrain from 1933s highlight the filling out of the neighborhoods to the east and southeast of the port. By the 1930s, merchants were building large stone houses in the area (represented in the map below with a solid line), and were surrounded by clusters of houses built of palm fronds called barastsīs (shown as dotted lines). Roughly thirty years prior to this 1933 map, the same area only had one stone house, that of the merchant Mohammad Tayyeb Khunji.409

Section of Manama, 1933. Bahrain Historical and Archaeological Society

409 Interview with Ali Akbar Bushehri, Manama, September 1, 2016.
The clustering of migrants in these areas was also related to protection. While the proximity of the Political Agency to ʿAwadhiyya was strategic because of the relationship of the Agency to many merchants who lived in that area, the Agency on occasion protected the migrants those merchants patronized who lacked a tribal safety net. In 1923 during one of the periods of “Najdi-Persian conflict,” Najdis tried to land five armed boats at Raʿs Rumman to attack the Iranian migrants there. They sailed three boats from Muharraq, located across the water to the east, and two boats from Hidd in the southeast. Only after the Political Agent positioned soldiers outside the sea wall of the Agency to defend the neighborhood did the Najdis turn back.\(^{410}\)

The fact that many migrants lived clustered together may have also been a source of protection. During this same period, a statement by J.B. Mackie of the Anglo Persian Oil Company related that the Najdis felt threatened by the rumor that the Persians were “mobilising in the khans of Abdun Nabi [Bushehri] and Abul Qasim.” He also mentions visiting Yusuf Kanoo’s khān “where his Persian [sic] coolies live,” and that they had “closed and bolted” the door for protection against the riots outside.\(^{411}\)

Such compounds are not attested to in Kuwait in this period. While there were fenced houṭas, these seem to have been primarily for keeping livestock. After senat al-hadāma (the year of the flood) however, some more fortunate Kuwaitis did offer for their neighbors whose homes had been destroyed by rain to live in their houṭas temporarily.\(^{412}\) Unlike in Bahrain, in the first half of the twentieth century, Kuwait did not have merchants actively bringing in labor from outside. Perhaps one of the reasons was that as the town was booming in the early 1900s it attracted many migrants from lands nearby.

\(^{410}\) IOR R/15/2/85 f5 Political Agent, Bahrain to Political Resident, Bushire. May 13, 1923.
\(^{411}\) IOR R/15/2/86 f10 Statement of J.B. Mackie, 12 May 1923.
The old town of Kuwait had three areas: Sharq, Wasaṭ, and Jibla (Qibla). In many, but not all cases, the area in which a family settled tells us about their background and profession. Broadly speaking, the oldest residents of Kuwait town settled in Wasaṭ because as its name suggests, it was the center; those who inhabited al-Jibla were more recent migrants by land from the north and east, or were involved with overland trade with Bedouins and the outlying areas beyond the town, such as Jahra or Zubayr; and those who settled in Sharq had migrated from the south and east, usually by water, or were involved in the sea trade between Basra, Zanzibar and Bombay.

The majority of migrants from Iran came to Kuwait came by water, either directly from southwest Iran between Mohammerah and Bushehr or by way of Bahrain. Bahrain was a common stopping point or transit zone for people from the southcentral coast and hinterlands of Bandar Lingeh in Iran, including the regions of Shibkuh, Bastak and Larestan. While many of those migrants stayed in Bahrain, for others it was a stepping stone before moving to other towns on the western side of the Gulf like Kuwait and Dubai.413 For others from around Lingeh, their journey was mediated by short stays in other Indian Ocean trading ports such as Muscat and even Bombay. The migration of some earlier generations of the Bastakis, Ashkenanis, Kandaris and Awadhis to Kuwait involved a number of smaller migrations before finally settling down.414 Many Bahraini Arab families, such as the Ustad, Gallaf and one branch of the ‘Asfour family, also migrated to Kuwait around the same time.

Many migrants who came from the south by water lived in Sharq, the area to the east of the initial town and the closest part of the harbor to the Gulf. There were so many in fact that even

413 This was in fact a deeply historical role for Bahrain, which was a stopover point for many migrating groups over the centuries, including Arab tribes migrating from the Arabian Peninsula to the south of Iran.
people of Sharq who did not speak it at home understood some Persian. They likely lived in this area due to the fact that many of the trading houses (ʿamārāt) of the wealthy merchants were located there. For the Iranian migrants working as porters, this was conveniently located to their employers and the water. It also made Sharq a convenient location for the Bahraini Arabs who were primarily shipbuilders. While they stayed near the shipyards in Sharq, the Iranian migrants performed many different jobs; in result, they spread out across the three areas.

Although probably a majority of migrants from Iran, especially those working in the lighterage and carrying trade, settled in Sharq, many families settled in Wasat and Jibla, too. Many Ashkhenanis lived in Jibla and were involved in trades more suited to that area: rock-breaking to the north, in ʿAshairij, and the fish market closer to the port. Wealthy merchant families involved in the long-distance sea trade lived between the port and souq. One large conglomerate of water-carrying Kandaris rented a large property from Sheikh Abdullah Jaber in Wasat, very close to the port. Iranian baqqāla (grocery shop) owners lived in most neighborhoods throughout the three areas. So while there was a tendency for families to live in places convenient to their work and their patrons, it was not the case that migrants lived in ghettos according to their origins. To the contrary, the neighborhoods were incredibly diverse. The clusters of migrants that did form did so around families in neighborhoods (farjān sing. farīj) which were smaller units within the three main areas (manātiq).

People clustered by families because the primary support for new migrants was previously settled family members. Nearly every family has a story of uncles and cousins who helped them to find work when they first arrived. Hajj Mubarak Dashti, who himself arrived with his family

---

415 Interview with Abdulhamid al-Awadhi, Kuwait, March 14, 2017.
in the early 1900s, recalled that he always had newly arrived relatives staying in his house as a young boy. Then, once they found work and a living space of their own, they would bring the rest of their families from Iran.417 In short, patronage in Kuwait was primarily on a small, informal, and personal scale. Furthermore, given that the relatively few labor contractors who did exist, such as the Hammal Bashi Company, contracted laborers who were already in Kuwait and were not also actively involved in procuring those laborers from outside, they were not as deeply involved in the migrants’ social and communal lives as the Bushehrs in Bahrain.

**Shaping the Built Environment**

As the Iranian migrants filled in the coastal areas of these port towns and lent their labor to the towns’ development, they also helped shape the built environment. In 1933 Colonel Dickson, the Political Agent in Kuwait, reported that although the pearl market was in shambles, trade to India was alive and well and the town bustling with building activity. He noted that everyone in Kuwait seemed to be trying to improve their housing situation, although it was primarily merchants who were commissioning an “extraordinary number of new houses.”418 In fact, carpenters were in such high demand in the town that many ships sailed that year without bringing a carpenter along, which was uncustomary. The entrenchment of Iranian migrants in the building trade in the early twentieth century as the construction of permanent structures was flourishing brought craftsmen from Iran who were responsible for the transfer of particular architectural forms from one side of the Gulf to the other.

There were new waves, from the late 1920s to the 1930s, of migrants particularly involved in the construction industry because Iranian contractors had already established a stronghold over

---

417 Interview, Kuwait, January 28, 2016.
418 Political Agent, Kuwait IOR R/15/5/179 f199.
that industry, and particularly in Bahrain, because the wealthiest merchants who were building houses were the selfsame ones who had for decades been patronizing networks of builders.\textsuperscript{419} It was these migrants from the hinterlands of Lingeh, in particular from a region called Bastak, that the British had in mind when they noted that most of the builders and skilled artisans in Bahrain were Sunni Iranians.

The Bastaki builders transferred architectural styles from southcentral Iran across the Gulf into Bahrain and all around the Gulf. Historic neighborhoods like al-Awadhiyya in Bahrain and al-Bastakiyya in Dubai boast the most prominent example of their vernacular architecture: the \textit{bādgīrs} (windtowers) that jutted upwards above the roofs of houses pulling cool breezes down into the interior of the house. The \textit{bādgīrs} are a prominent feature of architecture throughout southcentral Iran and in particular the desert city of Yazd, but are also found throughout smaller towns such as Kuhij, buried in the Zagros mountains.\textsuperscript{420} In Bahrain these cooling systems were a feature of the homes of wealthier merchants hailing from the hinterlands of Lingeh around Bastak and the Sheikhs. By contrast, in Kuwait where fewer of the Iranian migrants came from that region in the early twentieth century, there are only a couple of attested windtowers from historical buildings, and only the one in Sheikh Khaz’al’s palace remains standing.\textsuperscript{421}

The building industry in Bahrain was by no means completely dominated by these Sunni Bastakis. Indeed, as we have seen, British building contracts with the Bushehris were extensive and resulted in the migrations of a number of builders from the hinterlands of Bushehr as well as carpenters from Bushehr and Shiraz. Evidence of the transfer of their skills to Bahrain is

\textsuperscript{419} It was of course not the case that every new structure was built by Iranians. For example when the merchant Abdullah Marzook returned to Kuwait from India, he brought Indian materials and artisans with him to construct a new house for himself. R/15/5/179 f154


\textsuperscript{421} Windtowers were a feature of Sheikh Khazal’s other palaces in Iran.
apparent in the similarities between the wooden verandas, windows and doors that wrapped around buildings there and in Bushehr.\textsuperscript{422}

These wooden door and window frames from Iran and Bushehr in particular are also found throughout the historical buildings in Kuwait that remain standing, such as those of the Behbehani House Complex commissioned by the famous merchant Yusuf Shireen Behbehani in 1940. Yusuf Shireen, as he was called, is remembered to have brought in Iranian architects and builders to complete the project. He then settled there with his family and many of his relatives.\textsuperscript{423} Because of the development of Kuwait city, the vast majority of the historical structures from the first half of the twentieth century have been destroyed, but older Kuwaitis recall the Iranian builders and ordering wood from Bushehr for their windows.\textsuperscript{424} The narrow wooden \textit{liwāns} (interior balconies), abundance of arched wooden windows, and stained glass panels are all trademarks of Bushehri architecture that are found in the Behbehani Complex in Kuwait and throughout the early twentieth century structures in Bahrain as well.

In Bahrain, construction projects were often collaborative efforts, and not necessarily dominated by one regional network of builders. Beit Farooq, one of the most impressive family houses built in the ‘Awadhiyya quarter in the early twentieth century was built by Mohammad Amin, a master builder from Bastak, with the help of Zar Haider, a master builder from Bushehr. This relationship between the two migrants from completely different parts of Iran and from two different sects continued throughout several projects. Together they also built Sheikh Khalaf Al-

\textsuperscript{422} Exports of wood for building went exclusively to Bahrain, Kuwait, Turkey and India between 1907-1909.
\textsuperscript{424} Interview with Abdulhamid al-Awadi, Kuwait 2017.
Asfoor’s house in the Hamam district. Zar Haidar completed the first floor while Mohammad Amin the second, and finally a wooden balcony was added by a carpenter from Basra.  

One of the most apparent results of this interregional cooperation amongst Iranian builders were architectural structures that boasted the combined cooling systems from the humid coast of Bushehr (numerous windows, doors and balconies) with the dryer areas of southcentral Iran (windtowers). There are very few attested windtowers in Bushehr and Lingeh is similarly lacking in wooden balconies and stained glass windows. Only in Bahrain where migrants of diverse backgrounds and skillsets worked together do we find the combined styles that have come to epitomize twentieth century Gulf architecture. Technological transfers also appeared at a micro level inside the houses. Ali Akbar Bushehri remembers one Bastaki man working under Zar Haider who built a chute from the roof of house to the ground floor so that after the flour was ground on the roof it could be easily poured down the tunnel and used for baking.

Such kinds of collaborations reveal the shortcomings of writing about the lives in migrants only in terms of labor networks, and imagining that they surrounded themselves with other migrants of the same sect or geographical origins. The practicalities of life did not allow for the Bastakis to recreate their own Bastak in Manama or for the Behbehanis to do the same in Kuwait. Instead they were pieces of a transforming puzzle of Gulf society in the first half of the twentieth century.

---

426 Interview with Ali Akbar Bushehri, Manama, August 31, 2016.
Conclusion

The booming Gulf towns of Kuwait and Bahrain, among others, in the early twentieth century attracted tens of thousands of merchants, artisans, and villagers from the entire southern coast of Iran. Economic mismanagement and political instability throughout Iran led many to seek out new lives on the other side of the Gulf. They did so precisely at a time when, and as, those port towns reacted to economic demands by the global capital market, of which they were quickly becoming a part. Although few Iranians worked in the specific trades whose products were connected to global demand (pearling and date farming), the wealth generated by those markets created a demand for labor in the towns. The Iranian migrants were put to work building roads, government buildings, and other major infrastructure projects that the modernizing governments demanded. But they were also entrepreneurs who were able to capitalize on the new (if limited) liquid income available to the town dwellers, investing in shops and technologies that facilitated the changing social world. They fashioned tastes and industries, leaving the mark of cultures from across the Gulf on the culinary preferences and architectural styles that became common on the western shores.

The ability of those twentieth-century migrants from Iran to become a part of a new society depended in no small part on profound connections that had existed across the Gulf for decades. Under the patronage of well-established merchants and family members, they were for the most part able to smoothly transition to their new home. The nature of that transition was often tied to the involvement of the British Agency in the respective towns, as well as the scale of European involvement in the local economy. As Iranian merchants were more tied to, and profited from, the global economy, they also became able to extend their patronage networks to more migrants. Migrants from Iran successfully built a new home for themselves, and at the same time built
themselves into the modern towns and social fabric of the Gulf in the first half of the twentieth century.
Conclusion

*Ish lak bi-l-bahr wa aḥwalah, wa rizq Allah ‘ala-l-sīf?*

(What do you want with the sea and its woes, when God’s bounty is on the shore?)\(^{427}\)

By 1940 life in the port towns of Bahrain and Kuwait had completely transformed. The pearling revenue that invigorated life at sea and built up clusters of capital in the towns had passed, but left in its wake societies transformed demographically, economically, and even culturally. Participation in the capitalist global economy had put tremendous stress on the Gulf’s historical connectivities and reordered old networks by turning them into routes of labor migration. Coinciding with the economic transformation that produced increased movement of people were political transformations that prioritized the regulation of their movement.

This study has looked at how these often competing forces of the early twentieth century impacted the interconnected life of the Persian Gulf. By following Iranian migrants across the water and into the cities of Kuwait and Bahrain, we have witnessed the ways in which these broad processes affected the everyday, and the importance of individual actors in these processes. States gave new meaning to spaces, and as such new identities to the individuals who inhabited them. As opposed to earlier polities of the nineteenth century that stretched across the Gulf, the modern states of the twentieth century congealed at the water’s edge. Still the people living in this area attempted to maintain what Schayegh identified in the case of the Levant, a

“single socioeconomically integrated border zone.” 428 However the idea of the border itself turned everyday connections between microregions into “transnational” ones, provoking an awareness of space beyond the geographical and navigational. The meaning of being in spaces became personal as one’s national belonging and related legal status conferred the right to be in a specific space.

The meaning of space was transformed by new conceptions of sovereignty as both unitary and territorially-based. The process of extending the state to the edges of the territory it claimed, territorialization, placed particular emphasis on enforcing and invoking borders. In the Iranian case this was an offensive move to extend central government control. By contrast, for the small states of the Gulf, enforcing borders was a defensive strategy to protect them from being incorporated into larger states around them. Such territorializing measures were carried out by the British authorities exercising membranal sovereignty over foreign affairs, which encapsulated the internal sovereignty of local rulers. By emphasizing territory and territorial belonging, the British attempted to regulate movement of people (and Iranians in particular) according to their national identity.

But the state could not be everywhere at all times. Through their use of local knowledge and local technology, individual migrants regularly rerouted and reinvented their networks to avoid state regulations. They did so physically by crossing in areas where the state was not present, discursively by invoking family connections, socially by attaching themselves to patrons close to state power, legally by representing themselves as Arab and not Iranian, and economically by

expanding from trade to production. These tactics allowed Iranians to continue migrating well into the 1940s and 50s.

Although this dissertation is primarily concerned with Iranians as they cross the water and settle on the western shores of the Gulf, it does not portray Iran as simply hemorrhaging migrants. It has illuminated, as one transnational historian put it, that stories of processes often have “their tentacles in distant regions.” This study has shown how emigration from Iran was tied up in the challenges of state formation and modernization there, but that immigration to Bahrain and Kuwait was also contingent upon the historical connections between the coasts. Furthermore I have demonstrated that processes on the western side of the Gulf were intimately connected to politics and culture in Iran. The nationalization of identities, as we have seen, reverberated around the Gulf, producing backlash that further limited migrants’ abilities to be at home on both shores.

By around 1940 Iranians made up the largest “foreign” population in both Kuwait and Bahrain, estimated at roughly 10,000 in both places. The increased presence of new migrants combined with panic about the crash of the pearling industry, and frustration with the British interference in local affairs to color Arab Nationalism in Kuwait and Bahrain with specifically anti-Iranian rhetoric. In Bahrain in particular, the Bahraini Shi’as were frustrated with their lack of opportunities in government jobs and lower pay than the Iranians in British-paid oil sector jobs.


IOR R/15/5/205 f258 Political Resident, Bushehr to J.P Gibson, The India Office, London. October 19, 1938.; IOR/R/15/2/1289 f89. British Residency, Bahrain to the Principle Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Foreign Office. May 1, 1950. The 1940 census in Bahrain recoded 7,547 Iranians, but the authorities themselves noted that many of the Iranians likely passed themselves off as Bahraini and in recent years many Iranians had actually acquired Bahraini citizenship. Native speakers of Persian at the time of the report were estimated at around 10,000.
While they were not well-off, the Iranians were disproportionately represented in new industries like electricity, postal and telegram services, and oil companies. The early skilled employees of BAPCO (Bahrain Petroleum Company) were predominantly Iranians. Despite the fact that there was active resistance on the part of the Bahraini government against the hiring of Iranians and the acceptance of new Iranian migrants, they were the most readily available laborers in the late 30s. Given that government jobs were mostly off limits to Iranians, they often joined the Technical School which prepared them to work in skilled jobs for BAPCO. Iranians in Kuwait also encouraged their relatives to come, citing the opportunities in the oil industry. Many relatives of the water-carriers for example were employed by Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) when they first arrived from Iran in the 1940s.

Bose argues that his research “from about 1800 to 1950 suggests that pre-existing inter-regional networks were utilized, molded, reordered, and rendered subservient by Western capital and the more powerful colonial states, but never torn apart until these came under severe strain during the 1930s.” Though this dissertation recognizes and illuminates the severe strain caused by increased state regulations and intense political backlash in the 1930s, the migrants’ networks were still functioning through this period and even continued beyond 1940s where our story concludes.

A final anecdote from a modern Iranian novel, The Neighbors, by Ahmad Mahmoud illustrates the continued migration from Iran to Kuwait. In this story of life in 1950s Khuzestan,
many characters search for solutions to increasing poverty. One character who has gone to Kuwait and successfully gained employment as a mason for the Kuwait Oil Company, upon a return visit to Ahwaz encourages others to go as well. In great detail he retraces the same route of the Mohammerah network that we saw in Chapter 1. He explains how the men should travel by car from a teahouse on the banks of the Shatt al-Arab near Ahvaz down to Qusbeh, and walk to the end of the Shatt. From there they must take a boat to Kuwait. He explains that if they manage to avoid being shot by the Iranian border patrol they have made it. “All the trouble is in crossing the border. Other than that, once you get to Kuwait you can be sure that there’s always plenty of work… any kind of work.”

435 Maḥmūd, The Neighbors, (Austin, Texas: The Center for Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Texas at Austin, 2013), pp. 48-49. This sentiment was echoed in an interview with Jasem Ashkenani who stated multiple times, “No Kuwaiti was without work. People might have been poor, but everyone had work.” Kuwait, February 11, 2015.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Archives

Great Britain
British Library, London.
   India Office Records (IOR)
      R/15/1: Political Resident, Bushire
      R/15/2: Political Agency, Bahrain
      R/15/3: Political Agency, Bahrain: Court Records
      R/15/5: Political Agency, Kuwait
      R/15/6: Political Agency, Muscat

   L/Political and Secret (L/P&S)

Public Record Office, Kew.
   Foreign Office Records (FO)

Iran
   National Archives (INA) Sazman-e Asnad-e Melli-ye Iran
   Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (IMFA)
   Bushehr Shenasi Library and Archive (BSLA)

Kuwait
   Center for Manuscripts, Heritage and Documents
   Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait
   Private Collections
      Hassan Ashkenani
      Jassem Ashkenani
      Aslan bin Matrouk
      Saleh al-Misbah
      Abdullah bin Naser
      Ali Ghulum al-Ra’is

Bahrain
   Bahrain National Library
   Private Collections
      Ali Akbar Bushehri

---

436 The IOR records are often long and difficult to trace sources in. For ease of finding the exact source page, I have used “f” to indicate the approximate folio number.
Published primary sources

English


Persian

Secondary Sources

Unpublished sources

Alhabib, Mohammad E. “The Shia Migration from Southwestern Iran to Kuwait: Push-Pull Factors During the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries.” Master’s Thesis, Georgia State University, 2010.


Published sources

Arabic


English


Atabaki, Touraj. “From ’Amaleh (Labor) to Kargar (Worker): Recruitment, Work Discipline and Making of the Working Class in the Persian/Iranian Oil Industry.” *International Labor and Working Class History; Cambridge* 84 (Fall 2013): 159-175.


Herzog, Christopher. “Migration and the state: on Ottoman regulations concerning migration since the age of Mahmud II,” in *The City in the Ottoman Empire: Migration and the Making of Urban Modernity, Edited by Ulrike Freitag ... [et Al.]* New York, NY: Routledge, 2011.


Ives, Edward. A Voyage from England to India in the Year MDCCLIV. London: Printed for E. & C. Dilly, 1773,


Persian


