## ROUNDTABLE

# Time and its Miscounting: Methodological Challenges in the Study of Citizenship Boundaries

Noora Lori

Pardee School of International Studies, Boston University, Boston, MA 02114
Corresponding author. E-mail: nlori@bu.edu

One would think that, after years of fieldwork and writing, I would be able to answer a pretty simple and straightforward question about who exactly I interviewed for my study of citizenship boundaries in the UAE: "Do you have any notion of the proportions [of interlocuters] of the different ethnic or descent lines that you spoke to?" This essay is about why it is so difficult to answer this question and the insights into citizenship that unfolded as I searched for an empirical answer. Spoiler alert: Answers to questions about "national" or "ethnic" origin are entirely dependent upon how we count —and miscount—time.

The question was posed to me by Devin Kenney, Amnesty International's Gulf Cooperation Council researcher, on 17 May 2020. Devin was interviewing me for a report he was writing to support an asylum case in Europe. The asylum seeker was a former UAE resident who had received a Union of Comoros passport from the UAE government (yes, you read that correctly). Devin contacted me because I recently had published a book on the subject, and he needed my testimony about who received these foreign passports and why in the world this occurred.[1] By this point in the interview, we had already spent almost an hour discussing the subject.

I had explained that, between 2008 and 2010, the UAE's Ministry of Interior partnered with the Comoros Gulf Holding Group (a private company) and the Presidency of the Union of Comoros to purchase passports for UAE residents. These Union of Comoros passports were issued to approximately 80,000 to 120,000 ethnic minorities and *bidūn* in the UAE who, in some cases, were already in possession of Emirati passports.[2] The Comoros passport recipients were not allowed to reside in the Comoros Islands. Instead, they were informed that they could continue to reside in the UAE, but now as "foreign residents." How is it possible for the same individual to oscillate between mutually exclusive legal categories—citizen and alien—without ever moving between states?

My population of study was neither the foreign residents who make up the majority (87.5%) of the UAE's population nor the citizens who are a minority in their own country. Instead, I focused on the stateless and partially incorporated minorities who are invisible in the official census categories. This work can be described as an effort to challenge the idea of the citizen/alien binary. The whole manuscript was about why binaries cannot encapsulate state strategies of boundary policing or people's experiences of those boundaries. I explored what it means to be caught in limbo, in that gray space between citizen and alien. And yet, upon reflection, it has become clear to me that both my interlocuters and I really depended upon citizenship binaries, even as we tried to militate against them. We need citizenship binaries because they allow us to make claims and tell truths.

I explained to Devin that my research involved extensive interviews ($n = 68$) with people who had an insecure citizenship status in the UAE. Why was the citizenship status of these individuals in question? The short answer is that the Comoros passport recipients are ethnic minorities who are not recognized as part of the Arab tribes that comprise the Emirati citizenry. The longer answer is these individuals either never received any citizenship documents from the UAE government, or they had documentation and

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[1]Noora Lori, *Offshore Citizens: Permanent "Temporary" Status in the Gulf* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[2]The term *bidūn* is often used to refer to stateless populations in the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula. It comes from the Arabic *bidūn jinsiyya*, which means without nationality.

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recognition at the emirate level but were never fully recognized as citizens by the federal government.[3] Some members of this ambiguously situated group were nomadic and did not get birth certificates or other forms of documentation during the early phases of identity registration and census-taking. Others were descendants of the Persian, Baluchi, and East African populations who were critical to the pre-oil economic activities of the Gulf prior to the UAE's formation in 1971. Others were the children of Emirati women who were married to *bidūn* or other non-Emirati men and were excluded from membership rights due to the country's patrilineal citizenship system. Yet another subset of this population comprised the first waves of migrants (especially from Yemen, Zanzibar, Uganda, and other parts of East Africa) who entered the UAE during the early phases of state formation, when the *kafāla* was not so consolidated or uniformly applied. The *kafāla* is a sponsorship system in the Gulf that regulates the entry, residency, and exit of every foreign resident. It makes individual citizens or company sponsors (the *kafīl*) legally and economically responsible for a foreign worker for the duration of the contract period. The heterogeneous populations I interviewed were united only in what they all lacked—the key federal nationality document known as the "family book" (*khulāṣat al-qayd*) that traces each family's lineage to the UAE's founding tribes.

Devin asked me in detail about who I interviewed. I can categorize my 68 interviews with naturalization applicants spatially and temporally—that is, which emirates people lived in, whether they were born in the country, or how long they (or their family members) had been in the UAE. But Devin also wanted to know, of these 68 interviews, how many came from each of the ethnic groupings that I had helpfully summarized for him and for my readers—how many were of Persian, South Asian, or African descent? My instinctive response was:

> Yeah [sigh], I can't tell you . . . I would say that the largest three groups were people who had some sort of connection to southern Iran, some sort of connection to Yemen, or some sort of connection to Oman. But it is hard to tell you, um, to specify, you know, the exact ethnic origin of the interlocuters from each emirate. I should have coded that. [Pause] I think if I go back to the interviews I can probably figure it out.

Even now, even after over a decade of deeply engaging with why the classification of human beings in this region (or anywhere) is so problematic, I still instinctively feel like this is an empirical question that I should be able to answer. I need to get this story right, not just for the sake of my interlocuters, my readers, or myself. I need to get this story right for the human rights activists and lawyers who may use this work, and for the judges they need to convince. This is an empirical question, and if I do not have the answer readily available then I should still be able to find it out.

Self-identification would seem like the most straightforward path, but all of my interlocuters were staking their claim to Emirati citizenship, one that is tied to an Arab ethnic identity. I remember the first time I met someone who had received one of the Comoros Islands passports in the UAE. The person who introduced me to that individual told me he was "Iranian." But my interlocuter never self-identified as such. He was born in Dubai and did not speak any Farsi. And, understandably, he was incredibly irritated when I put my foot in my mouth and asked, "But where are you *really* from?" That is the problem with trying to categorize each interlocuter as a member of a specific ethnic group. That act was about me trying to develop a narrative about why someone was stateless rather than possibly self-identifying with any identity other than the Emirati one.

Still, my knee-jerk reaction to Devin's question was that if I went back to the interviews "I could probably figure it out." Going back through handwritten notes and fragments of memories from research conducted from 2009 to 2011, what would I be looking for? I would be ascribing from the outside which characteristics I associated with markers of otherness to identify the underlying logic and patterns of exclusion. Can I remember whose skin was darker than mine? Could those be people with African roots, people connected to the Omani Empire's expansions into East Africa prior to the 19th century, or connected to the

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[3] The UAE federation was formed in 1971 as a union of Abu Dhabi (the capital), Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Quwain (with Ras al-Khaimah joining in 1972). These territories were previously protectorates of the British Empire (Trucial States), from the mid-19th century onward.

slavery we had in the Gulf well into the 20th? What about those who were brown, but not quite the right shade of brown. After all, as a Bahraini citizen I am part of the "we" that can tell these subtle differences, right? We—shades of brown indiscernible to the white gaze—have the ability to tell who is really "Arab" or "Indian." Can't I discern whose features are more Baluchi, those who look like they are Asians mixed with Arabs or Persians? Not like the tall Pashtuns with their elongated facial features, or the darker-skinned Keralans with their rounded features, those people must clearly be Pakistanis and Indians, not possibly Emirati. Of course, if someone looked Arab but was too fair, if someone clearly looked like they were Palestinian or from the Levant, I didn't really push too much to include them in my study, did I? I accepted that non-Gulf Arabs were likely going to be excluded, I was just earnestly trying to figure out the patterns and boundaries of the "people of the Gulf" and why some were included or excluded as citizens.

By now the reader must be getting uncomfortable, I know I certainly am. Skin color is an abhorrent way of capturing information, and we would never admit that we do it. But what is the better mode of discovery? Are names a more appropriate marker of national origin? Perhaps I could discern which names were connected to tribes from Yemen, which names harkened to southern Iran, or Baluchistan, or which names sounded like they had some Bantu in them? These were connections that I subconsciously made at the time, trying to get to bottom of statelessness, trying to understand why some people's citizenship was in question whereas others were securely included or unequivocally excluded. Maybe I just didn't have the right tools at my disposal, maybe with greater resources and the elimination of any regard for ethical research standards I could have used DNA samples to "discover" real national origin. After all, this is one of the strategies that the UAE government has used, going so far as to send a committee to search for "true" Emiratis who reside outside of the UAE.[4] What DNA gives us is a genealogical tracing of a frozen snapshot of a population from a particular point in time. We trace political communities with scientific precision to turn an imagined community into a primordial truth.

I am not suggesting that someone's national origin is simply a matter of opinion and that there are no ways of making claims or telling truths about citizenship. But I would like to reflect on my research on the UAE to explain why, in addition to being spatial, we should understand citizenship boundaries as temporal ones. Time is used to both construct and police citizenship boundaries. The counting of time is critical to making legal, moral, and political claims to citizenship. And time is used to delineate the scope of who has the right to make claims, who has the possibility of even imagining themselves as part of a national community.

## Time in the Construction and Policing of Citizenship Boundaries

First, states use time to construct citizenship boundaries. The UAE's homogeneous national community is established in its constitution, which defines the citizenry as an "Arab nation." Under the mantle of the law, claims of homogeneity are essentially temporal claims. States use "countdown deadlines" to freeze and legally codify a population at a particular point in time to delineate the "natives" from the "aliens" who arrive after that date.[5] During the negotiations for a common citizenship policy in the UAE, the date of 1925 was chosen as the cutoff for citizenship eligibility because it was before oil was discovered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the oil-rich Gulf states have created criteria that link citizenship to those who can trace their lineage to a cutoff date prior to the discovery of oil, in an effort to limit the group of beneficiaries who can profit from this resource.[6]

The UAE federation, however, was not officially formed until 1971, which means that there was a temporal gap that created a nebulous zone of inclusion for anyone who arrived prior to 1971 but cannot trace their lineage to the British census of 1925. Adding another layer of uncertainty were the political challenges that emerged between ruling elites when it came to creating a common citizenship and immigration policy

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[4]In 2010 a special committee of the Ministry of Interior was set up to use DNA tests to identify the children of Emirati men (and foreign mothers) born abroad; "Committee Examines Claims of Children Abandoned Abroad," *National* (newspaper), 16 January 2010, https://www.thenational.ae/uae/committee-examines-claims-of-children-abandoned-abroad-1.560275.

[5]Elizabeth Cohen, *The Political Value of Time: Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[6]Christian Joppke, "Citizenship in Immigration States," in *The Oxford Handbook on Citizenship*, ed. Ayelet Shachar et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 385–406.

for the federation in 1971. One key issue was that the rulers of individual emirates (known as Trucial States at the time) had been issuing their own passports based on their assessments of who were considered their subjects since the early 1950s. There was a divergence between the more expansive incorporation practices of individual emirates that predated national consolidation and what became the UAE's more restrictive federal nationality policy under the leadership of Abu Dhabi after the union was formed. Specifically, people of Persian, South Asian, and African descent played key roles in the political economies of Dubai and the northern emirates, which led the rulers of these emirates to count (the Muslim members of) these minorities as citizens. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi's rulers had a more restrictive understanding of citizenship that was tied to Arab lineage, and it even required certain groups living in other emirates to apply for visas (as in the case of some Persians). The codification of the citizenship law ignited a national dilemma between Abu Dhabi and the remaining emirates over who should be counted as a citizen. Due to the divergent accommodation practices at the local level, there were two policies at the formation of the union, one for Abu Dhabi and another for the remaining emirates. This unresolved contestation between the different rulers laid the path for the creation of liminal populations who inhabited the UAE's territory but were not part of the nation. The people I interviewed fell into this nebulous zone.

Second, states also deploy time—and its miscounting—to police citizenship boundaries. To understand this form of boundary policing we have to pay attention to the legal maneuvers that separate the chronological advancement of the clock from the counting of time under the mantle of the law. What matters is not how much time a person has actually resided in a territory, but rather how that time is counted by the state. By pegging rights to a specific legal status and counting the time of different statuses differently, states can suspend, slow down, or speed up chronological time to exclude, delay, or (conversely) hasten the inclusion of particular noncitizen residents. Temporary legal statuses allow states to delay or suspend the time of "undesirable" migrants, whereas citizenship by investment schemes speeds up time for "desirable" (wealthy) migrants. A large number of states deploy these temporal maneuvers; the two most common types of temporary status are designed for work authorization and humanitarian protection.

In the UAE, the overwhelming majority of the resident population's time is not counted toward accruing rights. Officially, the noncitizens residing in the Gulf are not "immigrants" but temporary contractual laborers with little to no recourse to citizenship. They enter the country under fixed-term employment contracts and are obliged to leave upon the termination of their work. Although the diverse migrant population in the Gulf is formally described as temporary, in reality a large segment of this population is durably settled in the region, often with families. Indeed, in some cases, family settlement occurs over generations. This permanent residency is not officially acknowledged, so that the time of long-term noncitizen residents is suspended: it never counts toward the acquisition of membership rights.

These rules about time—when it should be counted, when it should be suspended—structured the scope of my study and my interlocuters' claims to citizenship. I focused on people who were born in the country or arrived before 1971, were Muslim, and Arabic speaking—these were the possible Emirati citizens. In our conversations, those who were themselves negatively impacted by the UAE's exclusionary citizenship policies nonetheless asserted citizenship boundaries to support their own sense of belonging and distinguish themselves from the "foreigners" who did not belong. My efforts to delimit the population of study to individuals who were in the naturalization process also led me to (inadvertently) join interviewees in drawing distinctions between themselves and migrant workers who had no claims to Emirati citizenship. In all our conversations about naturalization, we never discussed the incorporation of non-Muslims or anyone who had a *kafil*—people assumed to be unequivocally outside the imagined community of the Emirati nation, regardless of how long they had resided in the country.

At the same time, our conversations used time as the basis for making legal, moral, and political claims to citizenship. All of my interlocuters were naturalization applicants and most had spent years, if not decades, waiting for the federal government to approve their claims to citizenship. My book explains how and why discounting a person's time is a form of domination. Although much more attention has been paid to the more repressive tactics of states, I wanted to bring attention to waiting as a political tactic in its own right and show that the patterns of waiting are not random. The powerful do not wait, they are waited upon. For those caught in limbo between legal statuses, waiting for citizenship affects every aspect of their lives (including education, health care, social benefits, employment opportunities, and marriage prospects), generating profound material and psychological costs.

## Understanding the Stakes: Empirical Measurements of Citizenship

Any serious student of nationalism knows that nations are social constructs, not primordial communities. Citizenship is a political claim rather than an ontological reality, but (especially in jus sanguinis or genealogical citizenship regimes) it is often challenging to make that political claim without also making an ontological one. How should we account for those who reside in the margin between the state's imagined community and an individual's subversive ethnicity or bloodline? The stakes of having one's national origin questioned can be high or low. For the privileged, DNA tests of genetic ancestry may be an exciting way to reimagine oneself. I cannot count how many times I have had the following exchange:

> External observer: "You are Bahraini? But you look Indian."
> Me: "But I am Arab!"
> Them: "But you really look Indian."
> Me: "But I am really Arab."

Other times it was not my skin color but my name that led to this line of questioning: "Lori doesn't sound Arab." Scholars familiar with the history of the Gulf have suggested that my name could come from the Lar region or the Lor tribe of Iran. But my family has been in Bahrain for as long as we can trace. Often, I would find comfort in sharing my mother's last name—Alireza—to endear myself to the questioner and try to reclaim my Arab status from its prestige as the name of an important merchant family in Saudi Arabia. At the end of the day, due to my own secure citizenship status and structural position of privilege in Bahrain, these interactions were at worst annoying and often amusing. For people with formal citizenship rights who nonetheless experience interpersonal and institutional racism, this line of questioning can have much higher stakes, leading to discrimination in access to employment and other domains.

But for my interlocuters and other people who lack any secure citizenship status, the power of this line of questioning is much more devastating, shaping all aspects of their lives and livelihoods. Without the right documents, they must use every shred of evidence to prove that they are who they say they are. Although those without a secure legal status are often referred to as "undocumented," my research shows that precarious access to citizenship actually generates documentation. People with a secure legal status may travel and interact with public and private institutions by producing only one valid identity document. But my interlocuters were in many ways hyper-documented—they spent their lives collecting materials for the purposes of identity verification, including: birth certificates, school records, health records, driver's licenses, any family connections to citizens of recognized tribes, and testimonials of good character from employers, neighbors, and religious leaders.

When it comes to laying claim to Emirati citizenship and gaining access to domestic rights in the UAE, the most important task for my interlocuters was to show that they were Arab enough to be counted as part of the nation. But when it came to telling their stories, my task was the opposite: I had to make sense of the patterns of exclusion and go through the historical records to show that the UAE is not a homogenous state, and there are important groups of ethnic minorities who are rarely acknowledged.

This is especially true when it comes to supporting the work of people like Devin, or Yoana Kuzmova (a human rights lawyer I have worked closely with over the past five years). The international human rights legal framework only supports those who are persecuted because of their identity. Successful asylum cases must show that the individual has been targeted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

I conclude with no answers, only an assertion that the measurement of citizenship and the boundaries of citizenship are rife with pitfalls and double binds. Yet we must cautiously rise to challenge, because the empirical measurement of citizenship is more than an intellectual exercise. There are real stakes to the claims we make and truths we tell about national belonging.