

BOOK REVIEW

OFFSHORE CITIZENS: PERMANENT TEMPORARY STATUS IN THE GULF BY NOORA LORI (CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS) 302 PAGES. PRICE £75.00 ISBN 9781108632560

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The situation of governments saying neither ‘yes’ nor ‘no’ to requests for membership in their citizenry bodies is the lived experience for many in the Gulf region of the Middle East. With naturalisation possibilities restrictively managed, many are left to wait almost indefinitely. Indeed, a peculiar characteristic in several of the relatively newly-founded Gulf states is that non-citizens far outnumber citizens of the country. For instance, in the United Arab Emirates (‘UAE’), which became an independent state in 1971, non-citizens account for almost 90 per cent of the total resident population. Largely excluded from formal integration, guest workers and domestic minorities can thus sometimes find that temporary residency becomes a permanent legal status.

What then motivates political elites to enact policies that defer the outcomes of naturalisation and legal integration processes and leave significant sections of the population in a state of limbo? This riddle is one of the intriguing research questions of Noora Lori’s recently published book *Offshore Citizens: Permanent Temporary Status in the Gulf*.¹ Citizenship in the oil-rich Gulf, she explains, comes with significant benefits by way of access to generous social services, including health, education and housing. But then why would governments not simply reject naturalisation claims outright? Taking on the UAE as her case study, Lori argues that ‘policy-makers often find it more politically expedient to postpone the larger questions about belonging and address the more immediate issues of identity management by creating short-term, renewable legal statuses’.² Lori draws on examples of various groups affected by such policies, including the stateless *bidūn* (referencing the Arabic term for ‘without’ nationality) and those who hold a citizenship issued by one of the federal emirates but awaiting recognition by the Ministry of Interior in the capital, Abu Dhabi. She goes on to explain that these practices of deferral have the advantage of ‘placat[ing] competing factions that seek to expel or incorporate certain groups’.³ At the same time, the issuance of temporary statuses serves to police the population by incentivising good behaviour and obedience to the state in anticipation of the eventual reward of Emirati citizenship.⁴ Hence, as Lori argues throughout the work, delays to naturalisation outcomes should not be understood as the exclusive

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

² *ibid* 6.

³ *ibid* 30.

⁴ *ibid* 13.

result of inefficient bureaucracy, but rather as a conscious strategy employed by state authorities to further security, political and economic interests.

The book is structured with chapters focused on the different groups and profiles of people affected by prolonged naturalisation processes and ambiguous citizenship statuses. This approach gives a comprehensive presentation of the issue, while shedding light on the varying experiences of the affected communities over time. These empirical chapters (2–6) are woven together by threads drawn out in the first chapter, which provides a literature review and theoretical framing.

The introduction to the book opens with an absurd, Kafkaesque tale. Because he cannot trace his paternal lineage back to the Arab tribes present in 1925 on what is now the territory of the UAE,⁵ Ibrahim must go through a naturalisation application even though his family have resided on that land for generations. After years of struggling for recognition as a citizen in his country of birth, Ibrahim suddenly and mysteriously becomes a citizen. He is not, however, a citizen of the UAE, but of the Union of the Comoros without even knowing of the latter country's existence. This is the result of the UAE's unprecedented strategy to solve the status of its domestic minority groups by outsourcing their naturalisation claims to a foreign island state they are never permitted to visit.⁶ In purchasing citizenship documents on their behalf, the UAE makes unrecognised Emiratis become 'foreign' residents in their country of origin.

Against the background of Ibrahim's case, Chapter 1 outlines the concept of limbo and precarious citizenship by drawing on wider literature on precarity and precariousness in the social sciences and international relations. A complementary notion is found in Rainer Bauböck's distinction between mobility and migration — the former movement is for privileged individuals (eg Western travellers) while the latter is often experienced in conjunction with precarious situations.⁷ In this chapter, Lori also draws usefully on Vora's pioneering work on the experiences of Indians in Dubai to consider the differentiated statuses within one diaspora/immigrant community: eg different generations of guest workers, some serving as non-citizen sponsors for others.⁸

Building on this understanding of the nuanced differentiation within communities (across generations, legal status and social standing), which are themselves heterogeneous, in Chapter 2 Lori provides an account of the rich history of population movements for Persians, East Africans and South Asians to the Gulf region, and specifically into the area that makes up the present-day UAE. She establishes that the region hosted a diverse ethnic population, with communities originating in parts of eastern Africa, South Asia and Persia socially and economically integrated in local life prior to the discovery of oil in 1958.⁹

Lori then introduces the critically different approaches to incorporation within the citizenry by the two main emirates, Abu Dhabi and Dubai (each associated with different tribal groupings historically). She argues that the differences in the two models are based on the emirates' respective primary economic activities.

⁵ Lori usefully draws on the concept of a 'countdown deadline' as a constructed cut-off point used to define inclusion in the state: see Elizabeth F Cohen, *The Political Value of Time: Citizenship, Duration, and Democratic Justice* (Cambridge University Press 2018).

⁶ Lori (n 1) 1–4.

⁷ Rainer Bauböck, 'Democratic Representation in Mobile Societies' in Anna Triandafyllidou (ed), *Multicultural Governance in a Mobile World* (Edinburgh University Press 2017) 283, 295–96.

⁸ Neha Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (Duke University Press 2013).

⁹ Lori (n 1) 52–77.

With the Abu Dhabi economy centred around the ‘immobile’ asset of oil, the emirate pursued a restrictive approach devised to block ‘strangers’ from accessing the benefits of oil extraction.¹⁰ In contrast, as Dubai’s primary economic engagement was through trade, which required the easy movement of people and goods, this emirate enacted far more expansive incorporation practices to facilitate the mobility involved in the commerce sector.¹¹

At independence in 1971, attempts to establish a common citizenship and immigration system for the entire state consequently had to work around these competing visions of citizenship incorporation.¹² With its superior oil wealth, Abu Dhabi assumed hegemonic status over the other six emirates within the federation of the UAE, and took on responsibility for centralised administration of the issue. The legacy of inter-emirate rivalry with respect to citizenship and naturalisation matters continues to play a role in the functioning of law and policy in contemporary UAE, with the theme of differential situations according to the emirate of residence recurring across subsequent chapters of the book. These unresolved tensions have produced liminal statuses in the UAE, and Lori presents a number of cases where individuals have been ‘incorporated at the local level [eg in Dubai], but are still waiting for the federal approval of their citizenship cases [by Abu Dhabi]’.¹³

Chapter 3 traces the evolution of a regime for ‘securitizing national boundaries at the territorial borders and inside the state’.¹⁴ It considers the historic idea among British and pre-independence Trucial State rulers that Arab migrant workers posed a particular threat given their greater inclination to engage in strike action and demands for greater rights against the backdrop of a spreading pan-Arab national ideology.¹⁵ In view of this, the newly independent UAE developed policies of reducing its Arab labourers. They were replaced with south Asian workers, many of whom could be permanently excluded from citizenship.¹⁶ This practice was extended in the 1990s when question marks were placed on migrants from neighbouring countries as infiltrators due to the tense regional politics of the Gulf War.¹⁷ Lori argues that it is this shift from Arab to south Asian labour flows that has significantly contributed to the ‘demographic imbalance’ where foreign workers far outnumber citizens.¹⁸ As such, naturalisation has itself become framed as a security issue in the UAE, with the incorporation of non-Arabs foreclosed to make significant proportions of long-term ‘guest’ workers and residents ineligible for citizenship rights.

Building on this, Chapter 4 focuses on the specificities of the *kafāla* (sponsorship) system used to bring foreign workers into the country, which turns them into permanently deportable ‘guests’.¹⁹ The issuance of renewable contracts means that those who have worked for decades in the UAE are still considered as ‘guests’ and have ‘little or no recourse to permanent settlement or citizenship’

10 *ibid* 83–88.

11 *ibid*.

12 *ibid* 88–89.

13 *ibid* 131.

14 *ibid* 97.

15 *ibid* 106–111.

16 *ibid* 114–15.

17 *ibid* 115–16.

18 *ibid* 114–18.

19 *ibid* 140–44.

rights.²⁰ While the costs of bringing, and potentially deporting, the migrant workers are externalised from the state to the private sector (companies, individual citizens or in some cases non-citizens), the system is centrally administered, regulated and policed through the Ministry of Interior.²¹ This leaves the migrant worker vulnerable to the whims of the sponsor and ultimately the Ministry.

In addition to underlining the formal structural violence of the *kafāla* system, as has been largely covered in existing literature, Lori advocates for consideration to be given to the ‘complexity of the multidimensional power relations between citizens and noncitizens that the *kafāla* produces’.²² Beyond seeing this only as a hierarchy of citizens over non-citizens, she points out that ‘as one *kafil* [sponsor] vouches for another and one migrant vouches for another they create an added informal layer of social trust and protection against crimes like migrant abuse or theft from the *kafil*’.²³ While effectively demonstrating how the signifier ‘temporary’ in fact relates more to legal status than duration of time, it would have been interesting for this chapter to perhaps bring out greater discussion of the gendered dimensions of such experiences (especially for female domestic migrant workers).

Chapter 5 uses the colloquial Arabic expression ‘*Ta’āl Bachir*’ (Come Tomorrow)²⁴ to further explore the politics of deferral and policies intended to make naturalisation applicants wait — perhaps indefinitely. It shows how this tactic is used at all levels of the authorities, both by individual desk officers in the directorates and by high-level decision makers in the Ministry of Interior in Abu Dhabi who have the power to resolve the issues. The chapter draws on interview material with naturalisation applicants to show how the intersection of application location and ethnic origin has largely determined citizenship outcomes.

As a case study, Lori focuses on the experiences of a small number of South Asian families who were resettled in the UAE in 1972 after being expelled from their homes in Uganda. Again, the Abu Dhabi–Dubai distinction is of central importance, with the separate caseloads who settled in each city at the same time having strikingly different experiences.²⁵ As per its historically more inclusive incorporation model, those in Dubai were initially issued identity documents (including passports) by the emirate, but these were not confirmed by the central authorities in the capital. Those in Abu Dhabi were excluded from the start. Ironically, as time has passed, these two communities have arguably undergone a reversal of fortunes. Following the clear rejection of their naturalisation cases, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees intervened to initiate resettlement to the west for the Abu Dhabi community, while those in Dubai have been relegated to temporary ‘foreign’ residents based on their having been processed for Comoros passports by the UAE government.

Chapter 6 returns to the outsourcing of passports in the context of the identity regularisation drive motivated by security considerations in the mid-2000s. It highlights how the digitalisation of identification has further excluded domestic minorities from society due to the increased level of daily checks.²⁶ This chapter

²⁰ *ibid* 135.

²¹ *ibid* 144–45.

²² *ibid* 155 (emphasis in original).

²³ *ibid* 157 (emphasis in original).

²⁴ *ibid* 160 (emphasis in original).

²⁵ *ibid* 167–69.

²⁶ *ibid* 222–25.

leads well into the conclusion, by emphasising that such experiences of limbo are not so much the result of falling between the cracks of the legal–bureaucratic system, but are rather a deliberate strategy of exclusion by the UAE government.²⁷

Lori's book is a well-researched and polished work. With a richness of data, she certainly succeeds in achieving the 'fine-grained account' she set out to write.²⁸ Her extensive close reading of archival references (especially British collections) is combined with interviews conducted in the UAE with individuals affected by the policies she is studying. Lori skilfully weaves these in with an apposite selection of secondary literature. The latter includes both works geographically focused on the UAE/wider Gulf region, and wide-ranging theoretical contributions dealing with relevant thematic areas (eg temporality and precarity). Further, she draws on insights and anonymised information acquired through involvement in legal clinic work with cases from the UAE and personal communications. These multiple sources of data ensure that the book's claims are well triangulated as well as appropriately situated and integrated within the existing clusters of literature she brings together.

My main criticism of the work relates to its title. At once it is both too broad and too narrow a framing to accurately reflect the content covered. First, the editorial decision to reference 'the Gulf' as a whole in the title of the monograph appears somewhat misplaced given that the vast majority of the work is focused on the example of the UAE. Chapter 4, which claims to take more of a region-wide approach, includes some comparative quantitative data for different Gulf states. Even this section, however, relies primarily on the UAE for its most interesting insights and interview findings.

On the other hand, the title also fails to do justice to the scope of the subject matter treated since the term 'Offshore Citizens' refers only to one recent — arguably the most fragrant — twist in the tale of exclusion and instrumentalised postponement for citizenship claimants of the UAE. As defined by Lori, offshore citizens are those who, since the late 2000s, have been issued a Comoros passport and subsequently granted a foreign resident visa in the UAE.²⁹ The book's lengthy presentation of the preceding history of differential treatment according to location and demographic profile is far more than simply a prelude to provide background context to the Comoros issue. Rather, Lori gives extensive exposure to ambiguities in statuses of belonging within the federation prior to the ultimate practice of outsourcing documentation to a foreign state. Her study adeptly traces examples from the first three decades following independence, as well as the reception of migrants within the Trucial States during the earlier period of British control.

To conclude, Lori's work is of far-reaching relevance beyond its obvious interest to scholars — and indeed historians — of the Gulf. Theorists of citizenship should read the book for the unique form of 'rentier citizenship' it outlines.³⁰ As Lori herself argues:

While the UAE case is in many ways unique due to its demographic composition and its outsourcing of citizenship cases, the adoption of limbo statuses to suspend

²⁷ *ibid* 212–16.

²⁸ *ibid* 18.

²⁹ *ibid* 10–11.

³⁰ *ibid* 18–19.

the question of national incorporation is a much wider state practice that extends far beyond this case.³¹

Indeed, temporary citizenship statuses have become increasingly widespread for refugees in Europe over recent years.³² Legal status rather than time residing in the country, it follows, is what counts for purposes of naturalisation. Elsewhere, as Lori establishes, ‘heightened state efforts to enforce citizen/noncitizen distinctions [are] increasing the risks of precarious citizenship ... to create a proliferation of statelessness globally’.³³ Although the UAE is an extreme example, it reflects the growing threat of ambiguous citizenship, where individuals affected may find themselves on vulnerable legal ground. The case of the Indian state producing potential non-citizens out of 1.9 million people in its eastern Assam province is another prime example, where a form of statelessness is arguably experienced even before it officially comes into effect.³⁴ With her book, Lori thus convincingly challenges the neat binary of citizens and aliens, highlighting the ambiguities and ambivalences that can exist within the grey area — or areas — between the two.

³¹ *ibid* 19–20.

³² Jason Tucker, ‘The Indefinite Statelessness of Refugees in Denmark and Sweden: Comparing the Impacts of the Temporary Asylum Laws’ (2017) 17(8) *MIM Working Paper Series* 1, 13–14, 18–20
<<https://www.mah.se/upload/Forskningscentrum/MIM/Publications/WPS%2017.8%20-%20Jason%20Tucker.pdf>>.

³³ Lori (n 1) 38.

³⁴ Anubhav Dutt Tiwari, ‘Experiencing the Anticipation of Statelessness — A South Asian Perspective of Mass Exclusion from Citizenship’, *Critical Statelessness Studies Blog* (Blog Post, August 2020) <<https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/statelessness/critical-statelessness-studies-blog/experiencing-the-anticipation-of-statelessness-a-south-asian-perspective-of-mass-exclusion-from-citizenship>>.