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Governing Diversity, Realizing Authenticity: Kuwait's National Preference in a Broader Gulf Perspective

CLAIRE BEAUGRAND

Abstract: Most of the Gulf states where foreigners make up the majority of the population value positively the diversity of their societies. Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates publicly celebrate this diversity as a new form of cosmopolitanism. However, in Kuwait the official narrative, shaped partially by public figures' statements in the Parliament, represents the country's demographic composition and the presence of a wide diversity of foreign communities as impeding its social harmony and economic prosperity. This article builds on Michael Herb's work on identifying the source of the Kuwaiti idiosyncrasy in the system of political participation that gives nationals voice and precedence, and seeks to understand Kuwait's peculiar discursive governance of diversity. It contends that the official Kuwaiti understanding of authenticity has led to a political culture that emphasizes exclusiveness and cultural nationalism. In the UAE and other countries, on the contrary, this authenticity is staged and endowed with self-Orientalizing overtones so that it works, in the official discourse, as a pre-condition for a new kind of consumerist universalism based on cultural pluralism.

The article first presents the different discursive approaches to diversity in the four Gulf states with a majority of foreigners. It then compares Kuwait and the UAE, examining how the Kuwaiti political system enabled the issue of naturalisations — embodied by the handling of the *bidun* files — to be constructed as a public issue, and posits that this played a significant role in Kuwait's tenacious emphasis on exclusion and authenticity.

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1 Introduction

A report published by the International Organization for Migration in 2015 that specifically looked at the relations between migrants and cities, cited Dubai as the city with the highest percentage of “foreign-born population” (83%), adding that “the high number of migrants from many different countries adds to the global character of such cities [Dubai or Brussels] in terms of cultural outlook and social norms, although these factors are not part of the consideration in the usual global city classification systems”.¹ Dubai has become a global pole of attraction. As it hosted the World Expo 2020, it presented itself as the paragon of a world city.²

Separately, in the “Expatriate Insider Report 2017”, released by the website InterNations.org, Bahrain was ranked as “the best place to be an expat” in 2017 — with a highlighted quote by an American respondent reproducing US stereotypes to the effect that “Bahrain is a beautiful melting pot of many different cultures”.³ The “Insider Report” was published on an expat networking website, and, as such, it primarily reflects a certain type of expatriation — English-speaking, (highly) educated, and white collar. Noteworthy is the fact that it contributes to shape perceptions among targeted readers of current and would-be expatriates through its media coverage. The Report indeed triggered debate within the Kuwait National

¹ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2015: Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Mobility* (2015), pp. 38–39.

² Due to the Covid 19-pandemic, the World Expo 2020 was postponed to 1 October 2021–31 March 2022.

³ InterNations, “Expatriate Insider Report 2017: The World through Expatriate Eyes” (2017).

Assembly (*Majlis al-Umma*),⁴ as Kuwait had been ranked, at least twice in a row, among the bottom three countries surveyed, just after conflict-torn Nigeria and before crisis-hit Greece.⁵

Such rankings are fashionable and have become ubiquitous in their form, with customers and tourists leaving evaluations and comments that are then compiled into marks, grades, ranks, and other “Top 10” listings.⁶ They participate in the constructivist building of reputations and the engineering of the imaginaries surrounding cities, and, more broadly, countries, as objects of desire to visit, work or live in. Consequently, the attraction of the UAE has soared. According to the “Arab Youth Survey” conducted by a Dubai-based PR consultancy, it featured as “the top model nation”, “with two in five young Arabs saying in 2019 that they would like to live [there]” and is perceived as a “safe and secure” place with “a wide range of work opportunities” and “generous salary packages” in a region riddled with economic difficulties and violence.⁷

These rankings and reports raise important academic questions. The first is the new salience of the idea of cosmopolitanism, discussed in critical academic studies since the 1990s and retrieved in PR, communications, and media. The second is the noticeably different end results that have emerged out of potentially comparable situations of socio-cultural diversity in the countries that emerged from the British Empire in the Gulf. In other words, in the Gulf countries with a majority of foreigners,⁸ the demographic significance of foreigners, albeit

⁴ Arab Times, “Number of MPs Express Shock Over Latest Expat Insider Survey ‘Kuwait as the Worst Country for Expatriates’ – Report Contradicts Reality: Khalil Al-Saleh”, 3 September 2016.

⁵ In particular, the statement in the 2016 report mentioning that “a mere 35% of expats [said that] the locals are friendly in Kuwait” caused the anger of the Kuwaiti MPs [InterNations, “Expat Insider Report 2016: The World through Expat Eyes” (2016), p. 154].

⁶ Scherle and Jonasson, “‘1,001 Places to See Before You Die’: Constructing Oriental Holiday Worlds in European Guide Books – The Example of Dubai”, in Wippel et al., *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region* (2014), pp. 147–60.

⁷ Since 2008, the Dubai-based PR consultancy ASDA’A BCW (BCW for Burson Cohn & Wolfe) carries out the annual “Arab Youth Survey” described on its website as “one of the most widely cited pieces of public opinion research on the region by media and policymakers across the world”.

⁸ This *de facto* excludes Oman and Saudi Arabia from the scope of this article, where foreign nationals represent respectively 45.4% (April 2016) and 32.7% (mid-2014) of the

with noticeable variations, as well as their exclusion from access to citizenship, are a given. Yet, the authorities of Dubai have constructed a global reputation as an epitome of a cosmopolitan city whereas those of Kuwait have clearly not. In all these countries, state and citizens are concerned with the “demographic imbalance”, a term that refers to the situation where a large proportion of non-nationals increasingly outweigh that of nationals.⁹ This is considered as threatening the nationals’ role and identity in their own country as it blatantly contradicts the nationalist principle that “holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” on a given bounded territory.¹⁰ While the proportion of foreigners in Kuwait is not as high as it is in Qatar or the UAE, it is higher than in Bahrain.¹¹ Yet, even so, the state in Kuwait has not built a reputation of an “expat friendly”¹² country that would be deliberately celebrated in international rankings and media as a place of global outreach and mixing. The following question arises: how to account for the differences in the state-led representations and portrayals regarding the governance of diversity in these Gulf states? Why are some governments and official narratives interested in promoting the richness and diversity of the foreign presence when others are simply not?

This article builds on the argument developed by Michael Herb who identified the idiosyncrasy of Kuwait’s historical trajectory in its parliamentary system allowing citizens’

population according to the figures compiled by the Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) Programme website, “GCC: Total Population and Percentage of Nationals and Foreign Nationals in GCC Countries (National Statistics, 2010–2016) (with numbers)”.

⁹ The term is first discussed in 2004, in Zachariah, Prakash, and Rajan, “Indian Workers in UAE: Employment, Wages and Working Conditions”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 39.22 (2004), p. 2229. It gained full currency in the literature a few years later. See: Forstenlechner and Rutledge, “The GCC’s “Demographic Imbalance”: Perceptions, Realities and Policy Options”, *Middle East Policy* 18.4 (2011), pp. 25–43.

¹⁰ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), p. 1.

¹¹ According to the Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) Programme website, using the most recent national data between 2010 and 2016, the proportion of foreigners was 89.9% in Qatar (April 2015), 69.4% in Kuwait (March 2016), 88.5% in the UAE (mid-2010), and 52% in Bahrain (mid-2014).

¹² The term “expat friendly” is used by international campaigners to promote Bahrain’s image and attractivity abroad.

political participation and public debate.¹³ It is based on the observation that most discriminatory statements, circulated in the press in Kuwait are uttered in the Parliament and increasingly by public figures in the social media.¹⁴ Starting from the initial exclusionary definition of citizenship, that is common to most of the Gulf states, it adopts a political sociology approach looking into the constructedness of social problems and public issues.¹⁵ It shows that, in Kuwait as opposed to other states, the question of the foreigners' presence and naturalisation has been constructed into a social "problem". In particular, it investigates how the claims to nationality rights epitomized in the decade-long presence of the *biduns*¹⁶ were turned into the *bidun* issue (*qaḍiyya*) and consequently placed on the public agenda, notwithstanding the absence of solution. This has been possible through the launching of public debates and controversies in the Parliament and the media, and the construction of cases and scandals to foster mobilisation for or against the government's policies. The "problem" of naturalisation has thus been *framed* and *defined* in particular (negative) terms reflecting power struggles,¹⁷ that placed the onus on an individual and moral level. In other terms, the problem of the legal status was defined as the result of a suspected original fraud or irregularity.¹⁸ The public issue is thus constructed as a matter of checking the validity and

¹³ Herb, *The Wages of Oil: Parliaments and Economic Development in Kuwait and the UAE* (2014). The book is an expansion of an earlier article by the same author, Herb, "A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates", *IJMES* 41.3 (2009), pp. 375–95.

¹⁴ The analysis of this virtual public forum, requiring an additional methodological protocol, is left out of the scope of this article.

¹⁵ Best, "Constructing the Sociology of Social Problems: Spector and Kitsuse Twenty-Five Years Later", *Sociological forum* 17.4 (2002), pp. 699–706.

¹⁶ The *biduns*, short for "*bidun jinsiyya*" or without nationality, are long-term residents of the Gulf states who have been denied citizenship in their generation-long place of abode, while the State of Kuwait considers these more than 100,000 people to be "illegal residents" on its territory.

¹⁷ In which the state, defining the issue as much as devising the public responses, has an advantage.

¹⁸ Likewise, in the case of the public issue of "road fatalities", for instance, the responsibility of the problem is placed on the incivility and even criminal behaviour of some motorists. Gusfield, *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking, Driving, and the Symbolic*

authenticity of individual claims, which obscures the multifactorial and structural nature of the phenomenon and also determines the stakeholders that will be handling and instructing it, namely the authorities in charge of control and repression.

In the other Gulf states with a majority of foreigners, on the contrary, the question has remained taboo and mostly invisibilised in the less vibrant public debate and among societies with restricted political rights and social mobilisation opportunities. This excepts Bahrain, where the hopes of liberalization that arose from the coming to power of Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 1999 created the conditions for mobilisation around *bidun* naturalisation that was eventually granted,¹⁹ and where the question of naturalisations has been *framed* in different terms, the responsibility for irregularity being placed on the side of the state.²⁰ Yet it is particularly true in Qatar, where the existence of *biduns* is in practice unacknowledged and thus inexistent in the restricted public debate. As per the situation in the UAE, the federal government has managed to keep framing the large presence of stateless individuals, mostly from the emirates other than Abu Dhabi, as a purely administrative or technical question, with cases left pending and “a strategy of suspending the question indefinitely”.²¹ This political tactic of discretion sharply contrasts with the Kuwaiti state being pushed, early on, to demonstrate its efforts to resolve the issue, which forced it to clearly take a stand with regard to the dialectic of exclusion and inclusion.²²

Order (1981); Gilbert and Henry, “La définition des problèmes publics: entre publicité et discrétion”, *Revue française de sociologie* 53.1 (2012), p. 44.

¹⁹ In Bahrain, some *biduns* were granted citizenship on a case by case as early as 1987, according to personal interviews carried out with three *biduns* stemming from Sunni families of South Iran (Manama, February 2006). No official figures could be found to assess the significance of these punctual naturalisations or their representativity. What is nevertheless better known is that the *biduns* (irrespective of their confession) coming mostly from Iran, were naturalized later following the détente between the Islamic Republic and the Kingdom of Bahrain embodied by the King of Bahrain's visit to Tehran in August 2002.

²⁰ Since 2006, the Shiite opposition has accused the Bahraini government to naturalise Sunni foreign members of its armed forces to change the sectarian composition of the national population (see below).

²¹ Lori, *Offshore Citizens: Permanent Temporary Status in the Gulf* (2019), p.14.

²² To be noted here that the presence of *biduns* exist also in Saudi Arabia, where individuals in administrative limbo will only express their grievances on social media. The

Methodologically, most observations are based on ethnographic and historical research into the *bidun* issue in Kuwait, an issue that played the role of a bellwether and enabled historicize the way official representations portray the foreigners' presence and social diversity as a threat. They are also based on the comparative analysis of public policy discourses that Kuwait —rocked by Iraqi irredentism, Arab nationalism, and Shiite political activism — has adopted to either downplay the “demographic imbalance” or portray it negatively in contrast to those put forward and positively branded by the UAE, celebrating its own diversity.

The article is organized into two parts. The first part analyses the discursive governance that celebrates diversity in Gulf states with a majority of foreigners. It differentiates between the Bahraini model constructed on the promotion of liberalism and the model of consumerist universalism that flourished in Dubai in the early 2000s and was soon replicated, and adapted, in Abu Dhabi or in the State of Qatar. This universalism embraces particularisms that are themselves typified in the context of globalization; it mostly concerns the upper and middle classes that are sufficiently privileged to be globally mobile and consumers of world cultures. On the contrary Kuwaiti authorities have not sought to develop this culturally universalist vision, retaining instead an economic or mercantile approach to globalization.

The second part of the article argues that Kuwait has resisted the forms of (self)-Orientalisation that accompany the turning of cities into desirable destinations, insisting on an authenticity-based exclusion. Contrary to the UAE, it has consistently depicted the presence of foreigners as a threat, and publicly framed the existence of the *biduns* in terms of (il)legal behaviours, to delegitimize persistent claims to citizenship and dissuade others to be formulated.

2 Governing diversity and engineering cosmopolitanism

2.1 Cosmopolitanism and authenticity

situation differs in Oman where the imperial legacy in Eastern Africa led to a more inclusive nationality law at the time of nationality attribution.

The concept of cosmopolitanism, diverse as it may be, has made an important comeback in contemporary political theory and cultural studies since the late 1990s.²³ The term refers to the diversity that results from people's increased mobility in a globalized world as much as an attitude that values this diversity or aptitude to feel at ease with otherness. Part of the reason for the resurgence in interest in cosmopolitanism has been the fact that globalization has provided a new historical context for rethinking cultural engagement, social affiliation, legal authority and political action beyond the nation-state. The concept has been used heuristically in contemporary International Relations and political science to explore political counterparts to economic globalization, and, optimistically and idealistically, to think about new forms of global democracy, citizenship and political belonging.²⁴

The term has also been debated in the field of cultural studies, with scholars criticizing its macro-, trans-local and de-territorialized features and advancing concepts of cosmopolitanism from below or subaltern²⁵ and critical cosmopolitanism²⁶ to account for the exclusionary identity politics that have accompanied increasing diversity. Such scholars have pointed to the fact that the idea of cosmopolitanism refers to the experience of a hegemonic and mobile global elite²⁷ and that it ignores the cosmopolitan experiences and encounters of others. To

²³ The first articles dealing with the idea were by Robbins, "Comparative cosmopolitanism", *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), pp 169–86 and Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism", *Boston Review* 19.5 (1994); See also: Cheah and Robbins (eds), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998); Beck, *World Risk Society* (1999), pp. 1–18; special issue of the journal *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000); Vertovec and Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (2002); Breckenridge, *Cosmopolitanism* (2002); Meijer (ed.) *Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Authenticity in the Middle East* (1999).

²⁴ Archibugi, Held, and Köhler (eds), *Re-Imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy* (1998); Hutchings and Dannreuther (eds), *Cosmopolitan Citizenship* (1999).

²⁵ Pollock et al., "Cosmopolitanisms", *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000), p. 577–89.

²⁶ Mignolo, "The Many Faces of Cosmo-Polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism", *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000), pp. 721–48.

²⁷ For a critique of its superficiality see Calhoun, "The Class Consciousness of Frequent Travelers: Toward a Critique of Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002), pp. 869–97.

sum up, in the words of Peter Nyers, “just as globalisation represents a diverse, uneven and unequal set of dynamics and processes, the various histories and practices associated with cosmopolitanism are also quite large and marked by their own controversies. This is an age of protean cosmopolitanisms.”²⁸

While acknowledging its protean character, this article draws on the periodization of contemporary cosmopolitanism developed by Sami Zubaida in the case of the Middle East.²⁹ Zubaida identifies the emergence of a peculiar form of cosmopolitanism in the early 20th century that he defines as networks and milieus of people freed from their “recently impermeable communal and religious boundaries” who could then relate as individuals to the “age of cultural globalism”.³⁰ Such networks and milieus have persisted into the present, Zubaida argues, despite having “been ‘routinised’ [and having] lost [their] special identit[y] and charismatic images,” while at the same time the “global communications of television, the Internet and other media [did] not necessarily breach communal and particularistic boundaries and spaces”.³¹ Zubaida then distinguishes these milieus from other “uniform milieus” created in the global context by international business and tourism at every level “that strive for standardisation from Benidorm to Bodrum.”³² According to him, “the native prosperous classes” have endeavoured to follow the taste of the up-market travellers wanting to get “a touch of exoticism and local colour, often constructed within the safe and hygienic confines of their hotels” and therefore, have been attracted to such constructions willing to “engage in *ersatz* exoticism without rubbing shoulders with their poor compatriots”.³³ Interestingly, he describes what I referred to above as the self-Orientalization of local cultures as “*ersatz* exoticism”.

²⁸ Nyers, “Abject Cosmopolitanism: The Politics of Protection in the Anti-Deportation Movement”, *Third World Quarterly* 24.6 (2003), p. 1072.

²⁹ Zubaida, “Cosmopolitanism and the Middle East”, in Meijer (ed.) *Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Authenticity in the Middle East* (1999), pp. 15–33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.29.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

This idea of *ersatz* exoticism speaks to the question of authenticity and commoditization as they have been abundantly discussed in anthropology as well as sociology of tourism.³⁴ Two uses of the term “authenticity” should be distinguished in the context of this article: first, authenticity echoes the vernacular lexicon used by the social actors themselves, and could be translated as the Arabic notion of *>aṣīl* (original) expressing the obsession with origins, be they the lineage and pedigree, the geographical origin, or the length of settlement in a location. This concern definitely lies at the heart of the original definition of all Gulf citizen bodies.³⁵

The second use pertains to an anthropological discussion of the term in relation to the attitude to modernity and commoditization and can inform the discursive difference in the projection of the self among Gulf states. The origins of this use of authenticity lie in the museums, as a modern 19th century institution, and in a special kind of expertise able to “test whether objects of art [and by extension, ethnographic objects] are what they appear to be or are claimed to be”.³⁶ Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai first cites Walter Benjamin’s theoretical work, noting that modernity or the “modern reproductive technologies” jeopardized the “aura of an authentic work of art [...] tied up with its originality”.³⁷ He goes on to underline how, citing Jean Baudrillard this time, “this mythological insistence upon authenticity that moral imperative to which modern art is dedicated” is recent, dating back to the 19th century, when “the copy of an original work [which] had its own value, [...] was a legitimate practice” became “illegitimate and inauthentic”,³⁸ a fake, a forgery seeking to

³⁴ Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value”, in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things-Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1986), pp. 3–63; Cohen, “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism”, *Annals of Tourism Research* 15.3 (1988), pp. 371–86.

³⁵ With Bahrain being somehow an outlier. Beaugrand, “Émergence de la ‘nationalité’ et institutionnalisation des clivages sociaux au Koweït et au Bahreïn”, *Chroniques yéménites* 14 (2007), pp. 89–107.

³⁶ Lionel Trilling, author of *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), as quoted in Cohen, “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism”, p. 374.

³⁷ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) as paraphrased in Appadurai, “Introduction”, p. 45.

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981) as quoted in Appadurai, “Introduction”, p. 45.

partake in the aura of the authentic work but also a reproducible commodity. As for commoditization, it is a devaluating process; the absence of commoditization is thus a crucial criterion in judging authenticity. According to the sociologist of tourism, Erik Cohen, curators, ethnographers and anthropologists alike have often had a very strict definition of authenticity seen as pristine culture and society “captured before the ‘contaminating’ contact with the Western world”³⁹. It is in this sense that, *mutatis mutandis*, Kuwaitis, via their parliament, refuse categorically to compromise on their social and cultural conservative mores and, in the words of Michael Herb “squell an overenthusiastic liberalism intended to attract foreign business and tourists”.⁴⁰ “Kuwaiti parliament simply will not take the steps necessary to attract foreign business and foreign workers, nor will Kuwaitis tolerate the geographic, political, and economic marginalization of citizens”⁴¹ for the latter to be only one component of the population among a shimmering variety of others. Defined as such, authenticity, notes Appadurai, is plagued with a set of issues that “revolves around the issues of good taste, expert knowledge, “originality” and social distinction”.⁴²

Cohen, however, makes the case for a more flexible definition of authenticity, one that, based on less rigorous criteria than those held by the above-mentioned professional groups, would reflect the understanding of more “ordinary members of the traveling public”.⁴³ Rather than opposed to fakeness, authenticity is thus better understood as negotiable. In a process similar to the “invention of tradition” studied by Hobsbawm and Ranger, the concept of “emergent authenticity” captures the idea that a product or practice seen as “nothing but a staged ‘tourist trap’ becomes over time ‘widely’ recognized as an ‘authentic’ manifestation of local culture”.⁴⁴ In the UAE, where the citizens lack the political power enjoyed by Kuwaitis, government policies pursuing economic diversification led to overwhelming levels of

³⁹ Cohen, “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism”, p. 375. Like Sami Zubaida above, Appadurai noted: “Dealing with strangers might provide contexts for the commoditization of things that are otherwise protected from commoditization” [Appadurai, “Introduction”, p. 15].

⁴⁰ Herb, “A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates”, p. 390.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁴² Appadurai, “Introduction”, p. 45.

⁴³ Cohen, “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism”, p. 375–76.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 380; Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (2012).

immigration and an identify shift that turned cosmopolitanism into an authentic manifestation of local culture. These two ways to conceptualize authenticity as either strictly defined or more evolutive help frame the different approaches to self-portraying in the communications of the Gulf states.

2.2 Managing peaceful communities co-existence along with national privileges

The *ersatz* exoticism identified by Zubaida or Cohen's "emergent authenticity" which is less negatively connotated, provide a possible framework through which to understand the governance of diversity in the Gulf states under study. This managing of diversity takes the shape of policies serving urban marketing purposes and celebrating a form of universalistic belonging that makes the national, although ubiquitous as a principle of social and state organization, less relevant as an identity marker. It also promotes tolerance as a virtue that leads to harmony and can be seen as an antidote to social conflict. This is, after all, what cosmopolitanism is about: "disregarding the particularistic logic of nationalism with its imagined spatial communities and deterritorialized identities".⁴⁵ Qatar and the UAE (as exemplified in the cases of Dubai and Abu Dhabi) have invested in new types of public policy celebrating a diversity that tones down national belonging and stresses global or universalistic aspirations. This cosmopolitan rhetoric is part of the branding of each city.

Confronted with the need for economic diversification and their new presence on the map of global cities, the Gulf cities are competing to capture global flows of tourists and business people.⁴⁶ Such strategies of economic diversification involve investments in commercial and cultural districts, where diversity is in demand and is celebrated as such, with the building of Islamic or universal museums on the model of the Louvre, for example,⁴⁷ or massive malls,⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Nyers, "Abject Cosmopolitanism", p. 1072.

⁴⁶ The organization of global events like the Universal Exhibition in Dubai 2020 or the Football World Cup 2022 in Qatar are part of this strategy.

⁴⁷ See Part III, entitled "Art Production and Exhibition: A Critical Engagement with Urban Developments", in Wippel et al. (eds) *Under Construction*, pp. 161–232.

⁴⁸ Laure Assaf and Sylvaine Camelin see in the space of the shopping mall a possible form of "cosmopolitan canopy", as theorized by Elijah Anderson, as "a setting that offers a respite from the lingering tensions of urban life and opportunities for diverse people to come together" [Anderson, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life* (2011), p. xiv]; Assaf and Camelin, "Introduction", *Ateliers d'anthropologie* 44 (2017).

as well as educational investments in the so-called “knowledge economy” through local branches of foreign universities.

All these state-led endeavours posit the presence of foreigners as tourists, visitors, consumers, and facilitators of change. According to Martin Hvidt,⁴⁹ for instance, the adoption of a knowledge-driven economy in the Gulf states is necessary to replace a redistributive model of the state. It affects the way the presence of foreigners is valued, conceptualized, and sought after. It is premised on the assumption that certain types of highly educated foreigners will be able to catalyse innovation and a performance culture. They will only be able to do so, and leave their home countries, if they are attracted by iconic projects organized in clusters and are offered a high quality of life including a friendly social environment. However, it should be emphasized that those foreigners, seen as “desirable” and wooed by public policies in order to build this innovative environment, are specifically highly qualified persons with Western educational and professional backgrounds. Special districts in the states concerned, such as the Mariah, Reem and Yas Islands in Abu Dhabi, have been built to host them, while the same states only reluctantly import the low-skilled labour needed to build them actively acting not to have this labour stay.

Bahrain is a less well-known case, although it has also promoted a liberal discourse intended to accompany plans for economic diversification by attracting foreign entrepreneurs. It has, for instance, launched a marketing campaign celebrating its “business-friendly” climate. One aspect related to the political situation of Bahrain is the presence of a tenacious domestic opposition that comes mostly, though not exclusively, from the Shiite part of the population. The authorities have engaged in policies of promoting plurality of opinions and religious tolerance as an instrument of social peace. In a clearly state-induced move, the King nominated a female member of the country’s microscopic Jewish community⁵⁰ as the Bahraini ambassador in Washington in 2008, for example, followed three years later by the appointment of another woman, Christian this time, as ambassador in London. Officially, Bahrain, host of the newly redesigned Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, has 19 registered churches, a synagogue, and a Hindu temple. It recognizes the “freedom of worship”

⁴⁹ Hvidt, “The Role of ‘Lavish Construction Schemes’ in ‘Late–Late–Late’ Developing Societies”, in Wippel et al., *Under Construction: Logics of Urbanism in the Gulf Region* (2014), pp. 31–43.

⁵⁰ The Jewish families in Bahrain migrated from Iraq to escape religious persecution in the 1950s.

of Baha'is, Buddhists, and other communities, all mostly composed of temporary foreign residents. More recently, the Kingdom has been at the forefront of policies designed to promote religious tolerance, through a noted declaration made at the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Los Angeles.⁵¹ Its signing of the Abraham Accords with the Jewish state of Israel, in August 2020, is to be analysed against this backdrop as well.

The stress laid on “tolerance and [the] centuries-old peaceful coexistence”⁵² of Bahraini society certainly contributes to the wellbeing of the country's minorities and opens up indirectly new right for foreigners. In November 2012, for example, an amendment to the trade unions law in Bahrain was passed to allow pluralism within the country's unions and put an end to the monopoly of the oppositional General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GCBTU). This resulted in the creation of a new union, the Bahrain Labour Union Free Federation (BLUFF), competitor of the GFBTU, that mostly targeted foreign subscriptions. The emphasis on tolerance and coexistence is also seen as a way of countering vocal demands for reform and shifting the focus away from the political claims of discrimination put forward by Shiites in the country. This feeling of discrimination has been exacerbated by the government's policy of naturalizing parts of the Sunni expatriates who work in the security forces — from the ranks of which Shiites are not welcomed, as a way to balance the Shiite demographic majority.⁵³ Moreover, it resurrects a golden age of immemorial cosmopolitanism in Bahrain and in the port of Manama that contradicts the alternative nativist narrative of Baharna (or Shiite Arabs), who claim to be the original inhabitants of Bahrain.⁵⁴ In particular this collective narrative recalls, as opposed to the image of a cosmopolitan port city, the abusive policies and discriminatory taxation system applied by the ruling Al Khalifa family and its tribal allies on the indigenous–Bahraini population who worked as farmers in the peripheral country's oases.

⁵¹ Simon Wiesenthal Center, “Bahraini King's Declaration of Worldwide Religious Tolerance Unveiled at Historic Simon Wiesenthal Center Interfaith Event”, 14 September 2017.

⁵² Shaikha May, Minister of Culture in May 2014, on a project to renovate the synagogue in Old Manama, quoted in Toumi, “Bahrain Moots Renovation of Manama Synagogue”, *Gulf News*, 20 February 2014.

⁵³ Salah Al-Bandar, a British strategic planning adviser and insider of the royal and ministerial circles in Bahrain made this policy public in 2006.

⁵⁴ Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (2008).

In sum, although the public rhetoric and policies celebrating diversity stop short of encouraging actual social mixing and intermarriage in the small Gulf states, they do offer spaces for the co-existence and social exchanges between diverse communities. As a result, some scholars have suggested methodologically shifting the academic focus to processes of inclusion rather than of exclusion.⁵⁵ Koch and Vora, for example, note the more inclusive language and practices around territorial belonging that relate to the non-citizen presence in the Gulf states. They emphasise the governments' endeavour and efforts to include these neoliberal non-citizens as members of the nation and to promote a geographical imaginary of the Gulf among non-citizen populations as their "second" homeland.⁵⁶ According to them, "the recent actions of the Qatari and Emirati leaderships to improve working conditions for workers of all class backgrounds also suggest that they are in fact concerned with their ability not just to entice 'temporary' labour, but to retain and garner the affective support of non-citizens, both within the borders of the state and internationally".⁵⁷ This is premised on the idea that these non-citizens have interiorized that the affective support they have for the locality they live in or have grown up in will remain detached from any systematic entitlement to nationality and political willingness to share in decision-making at any level.

This central point marks the difference between Qatar, the UAE and Bahrain, on the one hand and, on the other Kuwait. Kuwait has also been implementing reforms to improve conditions for foreigners, sometimes pioneering,⁵⁸ but the public narrative there remains opposed to any form of integrationist discourse or "diversity" symbols. A few instances illustrate this resistance. The Kuwaiti legislation granting foreigners the access to freehold properties made it more difficult for the latter, as it did not accompany the property rights with residence rights as it is the case in Dubai. Likewise, Kuwait has (until now) kept aside from the emerging trend towards the establishment of new schemes granting long-term

⁵⁵ Vora, *Impossible Citizens: Dubai's Indian Diaspora* (2013); Koch, "Is Nationalism Just for Nationals? Civic Nationalism for Noncitizens and Celebrating National Day in Qatar and the UAE", *Political Geography* 54 (2016), pp. 43–53.

⁵⁶ Koch and Vora, "Everyday Inclusions: Rethinking Ethnocracy, *Kafala*, and Belonging in the Arabian Peninsula", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 15.3 (2015), pp. 540–52.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 549.

⁵⁸ See Shah, "Kuwait's Revised Labor Laws: Implications for National and Foreign Workers", *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 20.3–4 (2011), pp. 339–63.

residency to highly skilled and wealthier expatriate population in the three other countries.⁵⁹ Bahrain has since at least seven years, a self-sponsorship residence permit scheme for “foreign retirees, foreign property owners and the foreign investor[s]” that grants renewable visas ranging from two to ten years and allows the sponsorship of dependents.⁶⁰ In the UAE, the Cabinet Resolution No. 56 of 2018 allows “investors, entrepreneurs, specialized talents and researchers in various fields of science and knowledge, bright students with promising scientific capabilities” to apply for a golden visa of five or ten years.⁶¹ In January 2021, the UAE launched a new citizenship allowing “investors, doctors, specialists, inventors, scientists, intellectuals, individuals with creative talents” to “be nominated for the UAE nationality.”⁶² Four months later in April 2021, it adopted the UAE Strategy for Talent Attraction and Retention.⁶³ As for Qatar, its Law No.10 of 2018 enables residents of 20 years if born outside Qatar and 10 years if born there, to apply for “permanent residency permit” subject to income, “good behaviour” and Arabic knowledge requirements. The permanent residency bestows the right to own a business without a Qatari sponsor, own a property and access to free education and healthcare. The government portal boasts that the permanent

⁵⁹ This trend also affects Oman that announced at the time of writing its intention to create a long-term residency for expatriates and Saudi Arabia. See Bsheer, “The Limits of Belonging in Saudi Arabia”, *IJMES* 52.4 (2020), pp. 748–53.

⁶⁰ See: Ministry of Interior, Nationality, Passports and Residence Affairs, Bahraini Government website, “Self-Sponsorship Residence Permit”. In January 2021, the government made the application and renewal of this permit possible online whereas before the applicant had to attend in person or through a legal representative [Bahrain News Agency, “NPR: Self-Sponsorship Residence Permit to be Processed Online”, 9 January 2021].

⁶¹ UAE Govt Portal, “Golden Visa: Long-Term Residence Visas in the UAE”.

⁶² UAE Govt Portal, “Provisions Allowing Foreigners to Acquire the Emirati Nationality, UAE Nationality”.

⁶³ Gibbon, “GCC Countries to ‘Raise the Bar’ as UAE Adopts Strategy to Attract and Retain Top Talent”, *Arabian business*, 15 April 2021. This is in addition to measures taken by Dubai and Abu Dhabi to attract remote workers during the pandemic. The advertisement [Visit Dubai website, “Work Remotely from Dubai”], offers a “one-year virtual working programme” for \$611 that grants, in addition to the visa, “access to all the standard services that residents benefit from, including telecoms, utilities, and schooling”.

residency in the State of Qatar is “an honour to residents in the country and benefiting from their competencies and expertise” and the “first of its kind in the Gulf and Arab region”.⁶⁴

To conclude, celebrating diversity and the peaceful coexistence of all, for these three states, is a way to divert criticism, including from their nationals resenting their demographic marginalization. It is also a way to prevent resentment to be felt by their foreign population whose role, significance and possibility to belong are unacknowledged. Hence the message conveyed by the UAE President, at the opening of the Emirati consultative parliament, the Federal National Council's session in 2012: “This [the Constitution protecting rights and freedom] makes the UAE a paradise for citizens and expatriates. All live in peace in a tolerant community that is free from segregation and injustice”.⁶⁵ Based on the idea that it is in, the end acceptable for nationals to be a minority within a given territorial state's boundaries, Qatar, the UAE and to a lesser extent Bahrain have indeed eventually tacitly abandoned the official ambition of reversing their “demographic imbalance” and prefer managing it and implementing selective migration schemes instead. They don't emphasize anymore the idea that their citizens should represent more than half their population, a goal that Kuwait has never given up on. In June 2020 (in the midst of the pandemic), the Kuwaiti Prime Minister, Shaikh Sabah al-Khalid Al-Sabah, reiterated this official objective: “we have a future challenge to redress this [demographic] imbalance”.⁶⁶

2.3 Uncelebrating diversity and foreigners' reduction targets

The primary focus of the Kuwaiti government has clearly remained to accelerate the nationalization of its workforce to reduce the number of expatriates and free up jobs for locals. This is not to say that this target of providing jobs to nationals first is not common to all the Gulf states; yet Kuwait is specific in the terms in which it has defined this public problem.⁶⁷ Government announcements and public declarations by MPs made employment a

⁶⁴ Ministry of Interior, Departments and Committees, Qatari Govt website, “Permanent Residency”.

⁶⁵ Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, UAE Govt website, “Mohammed bin Rashid Opens FNC's 2nd Ordinary Session”, 6 November 2012.

⁶⁶ MacDonald, “Kuwait Doesn't Want to be an Expat-Majority Nation Anymore”, *Bloomberg*, 3 June 2020.

⁶⁷ In the sense understood by Gilbert and Henry in “La définition des problèmes publics: entre publicité et discrétion”.

zero-sum game between nationals and foreigners, insisting on reducing the latter to create jobs for the former. However, the follow-up measures have not drastically reduced the share of expatriates in the population. The result has rather been, in a constructivist sense, to build the reputation of the country as unwelcoming, albeit *not* unattractive.⁶⁸

The Covid-pandemic, leading to an expat outflow in the Gulf, reinvigorated, yet again, the narrative of foreigners' replacement by nationals, which had been a decade-long leitmotiv. During the crisis, while the number of foreigners declined,⁶⁹ the Kuwaiti government announced the dismissal of expatriate workers in the public sector and the Prime Minister set a vague target of 30% foreigners in the population against the current 70%. Parliamentarians outbid it with proposals for a quota system by nationality, and a law — probably unbinding — to reach the stated objective within a year.⁷⁰

This is nothing new: a non-exhaustive review of previous government announcements and parliamentary proposals over a decade reveals a striking thematic continuity although leading to few tangible results. In June 2011 already, Kuwait officially announced that it was planning to introduce residency caps on foreigners to bring down their numbers in the country to 45% of the total population.⁷¹ A year before, a report from Kuwait's parliamentary information and research committee had called for changes to public-sector employment legislation and

⁶⁸ The diplomatic spats with the Philippines in 2018 and Egypt in 2020 (supplying respectively around 250,000 and 510,000 workers) illustrate it, if needed. Relations with the Philippines deteriorated following the discovery in a freezer of the body of a Filipina domestic worker in early February 2018 — leading, after a ban, to the conclusion of an agreement on 11 May 2018 offering more guarantees and protection to Filipino workers, which did not prevent yet another violent death of a Filipina in January 2020. The relations with Egypt, as for them, went through tensions, highly publicised, with the stopping of flights at the outset of the Covid crisis, Egypt seen as high-risk country.

⁶⁹ According to *Gulf News*, 134,000 foreigners, mainly from India and Egypt, left the country since the beginning of the pandemic, while the figure was officially estimated to reach 1.5m by the end of 2020. Al-Sherbini, "Covid-19: 134,000 Expats Left Kuwait in 2020", *Gulf News*, 21 February 2021.

⁷⁰ Gonçalves, "Kuwait to Cut Expat Numbers", *International Investment*, 2 November 2020.

⁷¹ *IndiansinKuwait.com*, "Kuwait Plans Residency Cap to Limit Foreign Presence", 12 June 2011.

suggested that around 60,000 expatriates working in the public sector could be replaced by nationals.⁷² Two years later, in March 2013, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour announced plans to deport 100,000 expatriates a year as part of a scheme to cut the country's expatriate population by one million within a decade, while Kuwaiti MP Khalid Abdullah called on the government to increase that number to 1.4 million.⁷³ When looking at the figures, these announcements have effected little changes: official estimates of the foreigners' presence were of 65.63% in 2012 and 69.42% in 2020.⁷⁴ Beside the difficulty to follow up on announcements and terminated employments, Omar Al-Shehabi interestingly notes that the impossibility of compressing figures relates also to a gradual structural change of the workforce's needs in the Gulf : while nationals are encouraged to open their own private business to reduce the size of the bloated public service, this creates a demand for foreign qualified workers as well.⁷⁵

Moreover, in addition to the government announcements pertaining to the foreign population's figures, open public debates in the media and Parliament⁷⁶ form an echo chamber greatly amplifying the theme of the precedence of nationals –as compared to other less powerful parliaments like the Emirati Federal Council. This precedence and economic advantages are largely bestowed upon nationals in all the Gulf states under study, albeit less generously in Bahrain; yet in Kuwait they are freely and unambiguously expressed.

⁷² Toumi, "Kuwait to Stop Hiring Foreigners in Public Sector", *Gulf News*, 1 March 2010.

⁷³ Dickinson, "Kuwait Plans to Cut 100,000 Foreign Workers a Year for 10 Years", *The National*, 21 March 2013. Toumi, "Kuwait MP Calls for Deportation of 1.4 Million Expats", *Gulf News*, 23 February 2014.

⁷⁴ Central Statistical Bureau, Kuwaiti Govt, "Population Estimates in Kuwait by Age, Nationality and Sex at 1L1L2020" (2020); Central Statistical Bureau, Kuwaiti Govt, "Population Estimate for the Years 2012 to 2015".

⁷⁵ AlShehabi, "Histories of Migration to the Gulf", in Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh (eds), *Transit States: Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf* (2015), pp. 3–38, p.35.

⁷⁶ MP Safa al-Hashem, elected in 2012 but failed to be re-elected in 2020, has become notorious for her anti-foreigner stances in the Kuwaiti Parliament. It is important to note however that these parliamentary statements and debates do not represent the whole spectrum of more tolerant attitudes towards non-citizens, but they are made highly visible and widely publicised, because they are uttered in Parliament precisely.

The implementation of targeted austerity measures against the backdrop of low oil prices since 2014 offers interesting examples. First, the gradual phasing out of price subsidies or the reform of health care provision is telling about the different ways of managing the presence of foreigners in the various countries. Electricity and water bills are indexed to nationality in Kuwait as well as the UAE and Qatar, with preferential tariffs going to nationals:⁷⁷ in both Kuwait and the UAE, foreigners have borne the brunt of the price hikes. Yet while the Abu Dhabi Regulation and Supervision Bureau decided quietly the increase in 2014,⁷⁸ the measures were bitterly debated in the Kuwaiti National Assembly in April 2016 and phrased in terms of preserving the nationals' purchasing power.⁷⁹ Second, the issue of health care reserved for nationals and the separate compulsory medical insurances scheme are considered and planned everywhere. In Kuwait however, since a 2013 pilot plan and under popular pressure, health care segregation is actually implemented, in some hospitals where time slots are reserved for nationals.⁸⁰ Finally, traffic congestion is a concern in all cities: Kuwait punishes severe traffic offences, in particular driving without a valid driving license by deportation, since an amendment to the country's traffic laws in April 2013. It is, by comparison, punishable by a fine and jail term of up to three months in Dubai.

To sum up, the various reforms in Kuwait are often formulated in terms of the "foreigners must pay" rather than nationals. Elsewhere they co-exist with a discourse on "inclusiveness" and are not presented as a zero-sum-game, even though the differential in treatment prevails absolutely. The question remains of how to account for such different ways of framing the issue of the presence of foreigners in the different Gulf states since anyway the actual policies

⁷⁷ AlGhamdi, "GCC Residential Electricity Tariffs", *King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Centre*, 13 August 2020. Tariffs are the same no matter the nationality in Bahrain (but also Saudi Arabia and Oman).

⁷⁸ Todorova, "A Tariff Increase was Announced on Wednesday, with Some Costs for Expatriates Doubling", *The National*, 13 November 2014. The differentiated price hike is presented in the English-speaking press directed at expatriates as a measure towards "reducing the carbon footprint" — along with the fiscal burden.

⁷⁹ This resulted in multiplying the water and electricity bills of foreigners by between four and seven times, respectively, in 2016.

⁸⁰ Migrants-Rights.org, "What's the Real Deal Behind Kuwait's Segregated Health Care?", 30 September 2016.

are more often than not comparable, or in other words, actually discriminate between nationals and foreigners.

3 Realizing one's own authenticity: self-promotion to others vs. others' exclusion

What accounts for the different outcomes in these countries? What are the reasons for the variations in *formulating* policy choices regarding the foreign majorities in these countries? Why is the national preference or priority accorded to nationals compatible with the promotion of an inclusive discourse in certain Gulf states and not in others?

3.1 Accepting foreigners' majority: making a virtue of necessity (UAE) or going against the grain (Kuwait)

Comparing the UAE and Kuwait, Michael Herb sums up the difference in the following words: “foreigners in Kuwait generate convenience; in Dubai, foreigners generate foreign exchange”.⁸¹ He explains the differences in attitude and representations towards foreigners by invoking the difference in parliamentary prerogatives. The Kuwaiti National Assembly voices the view of nationals, in particular, the populist view of the majority of this “nation of bureaucrats”. It co-produce policies together with the government through its members' right of proposing law (article 109 of the Constitution), although the parliament's majority does not form the government. Herb hints that were the Emiratis allowed to translate their opinions more concretely in law, they might do so in the same way as Kuwaitis.⁸² Topics discussed at the Federal National Council (FNC) reported in the media, like the government-sponsored promotion of Emirati-only marriages, corroborate further Herb's counterfactual scenario. Yet the FNC has far less power than the Kuwaiti National Assembly in so far as it can only discuss, pass, amend or reject the bills submitted to it by the government (Art. 89 of the UAE Constitution).

According to Herb, the presence of the Parliament in Kuwait results from the country's particular circumstances, among which were the Iraqi irredentist claims in 1961 and the

⁸¹ Herb, “A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates”, p. 387.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p 388–90.

personality of Shaikh Abdullah al-Salim Al-Sabah, the ruler of Kuwait between 1950 and 1965. Despite one attempt in 1990, Kuwaiti rulers never came back on the National Assembly's powers. Kuwait's Parliament is thus able to reflect the national preference for citizens over foreigners and stymie government action, especially when it comes to the development of large-scale projects. In particular, since the 1990s it has monitored the use of state-owned land that cannot be ceded, which explains why Kuwait has been less prone to grand projects by developers directed at expatriate residents, and possibly foreign property owners, than are the other Gulf states. The role played by the Parliament in Kuwait also explains, in Herb's view, why Kuwait, given the strong Islamist voices within the Parliament, has made virtually no efforts towards relaxing its customs to attract foreign tourists and why it has kept its strict prohibition on alcohol.⁸³

Dubai's model of diversification, by contrast, in which government revenues are almost completely derived from the non-oil economy, is based on trade, logistical efficiency, a conducive business climate, and easy access to cheap labour and capital. This model has cemented the dependence of the Emirate on foreign businesses and the consumerism of foreign residents. In other words, the interests of Dubai rulers are aligned with those of investors and developers and assume a significant presence of foreigners in the Emirate. By emulation, the model, seen as diversifying away from hydrocarbons, has also been adopted by the oil — or gas-rich emirates of Abu Dhabi and Qatar. Herb further argues that this system can accommodate and even welcome a large majority of foreigners because the Emiratis themselves have little or no say in the shaping of the economic policies and hence demographic composition of their country. This economic diversification model strengthens the authoritarian status quo. As Michael Herb argues,

The dilemma [of democratic development or say rights equality] is not solved, for citizens at least, by a democracy that includes those who are now non-citizens because this would finalize the citizenry's loss of control of the country and could even bring an end to the Arab identity of the UAE. In the end, the most obvious beneficiaries of this dilemma are the ruling families, which provide each group with the second preference.

⁸³ Herb, *The Wages of Oil*, pp. 162–65.

The ruling families protect citizens from a democracy of the non-citizen majority and protect non-citizens from a democracy of the citizen minority.⁸⁴

To sum up, the rhetoric valuing the presence of expatriates, diversity and tolerance, and the policies creating purportedly universalistic spaces and places of consumerist cosmopolitanism, are not mere propaganda but are consubstantial with the development model chosen by Dubai and in its wake the UAE more broadly. Cultivating this positive rhetoric on diversity is even a matter of survival. “Sowing seeds of division and violating principles of tolerance and equality” is a legal charge in the UAE. Amélie Le Renard and Neha Vora mentions how the charge was directed at an Emirati online celebrity, Tariq Al-Mehyas, who was arrested after posting “a video arguing that the term ‘migrant workers’ refers only to Asians (Indians and Bengalis) and not Arabs (Egyptians and Sudanese) who should be treated like ‘brothers’”.⁸⁵ Ironically, this video was posted in defence of a Kuwaiti actress, Hayat Al-Fahad, who made an earlier comment that migrants should be sent out and “put in the desert” to make room in hospitals for citizens who may get infected with the Covid-19, which did not, comparatively, trigger any legal action in Kuwait. In the tolerant Emirati society, privileged citizens must conform to their authentic national culture that is constructed as simply *one among others* and promoted as such, within a larger consumerist universalism as well as abide by the injunctions of cultural pluralism and individual self-fulfilment.⁸⁶ On the contrary, in Kuwait, citizens assert the upper hand they have above foreigners, refusing to mould their cultural image at the same level with others leading them to express their authenticity through a certain form of xenophobia.⁸⁷

Yet, the “diversity model” that makes virtue of a necessity is premised on a core assumption. It requires that the idea of inclusiveness based on affective support will not

⁸⁴ Herb, “A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates”, p. 392.

⁸⁵ Vora and Le Renard “Who Is ‘Indian’ in the Gulf? Race, Labor and Citizenship”, *Middle East Report*, 16 June 2021.

⁸⁶ As represented, for instance, in the focus on innovation and creativity promoted by the Museum of the Future in Dubai.

⁸⁷ See the discussion of the xenophobic political culture in Kuwait in Al-Sabah, *Blood and Soil: To What Extent Has Xenophobia Permeated Political Culture in Kuwait? The Case of the Bidoon*, MSc diss. (2017).

translate into political claims. In other words, there must be no prospect of eventual full integration or automatic right to naturalisation for resident foreigners. Several factors have contributed to securing this taken-for-granted idea of the “impossible citizenship” to paraphrase Neha Vora. As shown by Fahad Bishara, the multicultural past of the Gulf countries built on port cities has been erased in nation-building narratives as a way of thwarting any attempt by large expatriate populations to demand fuller inclusion and stake claims to state resources — what he calls the “discourses of nativism”.⁸⁸ Miriam Cooke further shows that histories of transnational marriages, for example, have been replaced by idealized and continuous “uncontaminated” tribal lineages that help to bolster “myths of millennial isolation”.⁸⁹ As a result, while it underlines the rights of indigenous tribes to make historically and geographically anchored claims to the nation-state, this amnesia about the multi-cultural past helps to create the “*tabula rasa* on which the mass migrations can be projected as new”⁹⁰ and made ineligible or illegitimate in staking claim on the state resources or politics. The diversity that is thus celebrated in certain countries of the Gulf today is one that is mostly cut off from the pre-national period and is instead moored in the present migration situation — apart maybe from the atypical official narrative of the Bahraini Ministry of Culture that hails a pre-national cosmopolitan past tinged with nostalgia that, in return, denies the specific place that Shiites claim for themselves.⁹¹

The risk of seeing foreigners staking political claims in and on their host countries has also been lessened by the dissociation between territory and citizenship or the “deterritorialization of citizenship”, making it acceptable to live permanently in a country where one is not a national. Francesco Ragazzi has demonstrated that the territorialization of citizenship, or the principle of the exclusivity of territorial citizenship, only held sway during a brief historical period in the 20th century.⁹² It was a principle that resulted from the need to regulate

⁸⁸ Bishara, “The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr: Unfurling the Gulf in the Age of Oceanic History”, *IJMES* 52.3 (2020), pp. 397–412.

⁸⁹ Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (2014), p. 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁹¹ The official narratives are to be contrasted with scholarly historian works. See Bishara, “The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr: Unfurling the Gulf in the Age of Oceanic History”; Al-Nakib, *Kuwait Transformed: A History of Oil and Urban Life* (2016), pp. 71–90.

⁹² Ragazzi, “Post-Territorial Citizenship”, in Gupta and Padmanabhan (eds), *Politics and Cosmopolitanism in a Global Age* (2015), pp. 489–97.

emigration from Europe to North America⁹³ and took the form of state endeavours to build *homogeneous* nations either through the assimilation of naturalized citizens in civic nations or the transfer of populations in ethnic ones. Arguably, the states of the Arabian Peninsula have rarely abided by the principle that associates a state's territory with a homogeneous citizenry, since they went straight from a system of group-based allegiance to a sovereign, a shaikh, or a tribal chief to a hierarchical society based on nationality, the "plural society" used by Anh Nga Longva to understand Kuwait society.⁹⁴ For a while, and in an effort to conceal a reality that was at odds with the normative language of the international community (on which international recognition of sovereignty depends), the official narrative in these states was that foreign labour would be only temporary and ultimately replaced by nationals, especially in Kuwait which was granted independence ten years earlier than the other Gulf states.

New practices undermining the territorially exclusive citizenship have since allowed the pretence to balance the demography or be a majority of nationals in one's own territory to be dropped in the Gulf. First, since the 1990s there has been a worldwide trend whereby states have increasingly tried to maintain links with their nationals abroad by institutionalizing forms of diasporic citizenship, for example.⁹⁵ In the Gulf, diasporic policies of states transnationalizing their control over and rekindling links with overseas citizens have rendered acceptable the idea that the national communities in the Gulf states ought also to be taken care of by their states of origin.⁹⁶ Second, in countries of immigration, the model of integration or assimilation as a way of reducing the threat of internal aliens has also ceded ground to new modes of governing an increasing flux of migrants. The level of loyalty or threat represented by a given individual is now no longer calculated depending on his or her nationality but is instead based on a bundle of criteria making up a system of profiling (travel patterns, single persons, etc.). The border has become portable.

⁹³ Inscribed at an international level in the Convention on Certain Questions Relating to the Conflict of Nationality Laws of 12 April 1930.

⁹⁴ Longva, *Walls Built on Sands: Migration, Exclusion and Society in Kuwait* (1999).

⁹⁵ See the new legal categories of Non-Resident Indians (NRI) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO) created to rekindle links with ethnically defined Indians living abroad, the PIO being granted visa and investment advantages without political rights.

⁹⁶ For instance, India sent humanitarian aid to stranded workers laid off by building companies in austerity-hit Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2016.

3.2 Opening the Pandora box: debating the entitlement to naturalisation and the biduns as a public issue

These trends contribute to explaining why celebrating the presence of foreigners in some of the Gulf states is possible and somehow politically inconsequential.⁹⁷ It does not encourage foreigners to stake claims on national wealth or request equality of rights. Yet this does not hold true in Kuwait, where the issue of naturalisation has been continuously on the table or at the agenda of the Assembly's debate, because of the endless controversy surrounding the naturalisation claims of the *biduns*. Historically, no debate surrounding the entitlement to naturalisation has ever taken place as openly in the UAE, let alone Qatar (and to a lesser extent Bahrain) as it has in Kuwait since the early years of its independence. In the UAE, the question of naturalisation files has been framed in technical terms "an informal limbo status due to bureaucratic delays in [the] citizenship cases"⁹⁸ whereas in Kuwait it has been fully politicised, early on and turned into a "public issue" defined by sociologist Erik Neveu, as "the conversion of a social fact into an object of concern and debate, possibly of public action".⁹⁹

In Kuwait, misunderstandings surrounding inclusion in the citizen body can be traced back to the inconsistent construction of administrative criteria, playing a role in blurring citizenship entitlements, especially when compounded with the differentiation between Northern and Southern tribes whose territories straddled Iraq and Saudi Arabia respectively, the latter being naturalised whereas the former were mostly not.¹⁰⁰ In the case of the UAE, Lori shows how the federal organisation of the country played a fundamental role with "all the stalled cases originating from outside the capitol of Abu Dhabi".¹⁰¹ She sums up: "With Abu Dhabi at the helm of state-building in the 1970s, the

⁹⁷ The issue of sovereignty recognition has also become irrelevant with time.

⁹⁸ Lori, *Offshore Citizens*, p. 5.

⁹⁹ Neveu, *Sociologie politique des problèmes publics* (2015), p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ See: Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait* (2018), pp. 50–53 on the Northern and Southern tribes, pp. 108–110 on their differential naturalisations, and pp. 101–102 on administrative inconsistencies (the census authorities would register as "nationals" persons whom the institution in charge of resettling shanty residents in nationals-only housing schemes would not).

¹⁰¹ Lori, *Offshore Citizens*, p. 12. See also chap. 2: "Making the Nation: Citizens, "Guests" and Ambiguous Legal Statuses", pp. 50–96.

consolidation of the UAE as a nation-state led to the retrenchment of citizenship boundaries and the eventual disenfranchisement of those who had benefited from the more expansive incorporation policies of the Trucial States in the 1950s and early 1960s".¹⁰²

Yet, in Kuwait, the question of whether to integrate or not (part of) the large population of non-Kuwaitis, mixing at the time *biduns* and Arab migrants, has been constructed as a "public issue" early on, since at least the beginning of the 1980s.¹⁰³ During this decade, the massive presence of foreigners as compared to the restricted number of nationals is *identified* as problematic and worth debating and calling for public action, because it is *framed* as possibly threatening the security or sovereignty of the country (through the foreigners' supposedly absence of loyalty to the country or their outnumbering contravening the nationalist principle).¹⁰⁴ The possible solutions to the "issue"-engineered as such by parliamentarians and spread in the national press, opposed two competing lines of argument: one focused on the need for security, control and policing aliens, and advocated the reduction of their number. The other, more interested in the economic aspect, underlined the imperative of growth in which foreigners play a role as consumers, workers, tenants, business partners, and favoured the latter's integration. In the face of national security concerns expressed by the Kuwaiti royal family, some MPs in Kuwait advocated a policy of integrating foreigners since, so went their argument, the naturalisation of long-term Arab residents would secure their loyalty to the country. For them, this option seemed preferable to reducing the number of foreigners.

Hesitations between the integration and non-integration of foreigners in Kuwait divided the government which affected the design of the public policy: in 1984, in a context of regional instability (Shiite violent activism, Iran-Iraq war), the Ministry of the Interior, acting on security concerns, proposed to raise the threshold for foreigners to bring in their families in order to reduce the number of Arab migrants into Kuwait. On the contrary, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs rebuffed this proposal, promoting a more integrative approach

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁰³ Al-Moosa and McLachlan, *Immigrant Labour in Kuwait* (1985).

¹⁰⁴ The italic refers to the concepts used by Neveu, *Sociologie politique des problèmes publics*, p.18; by 1985, 30% of the 1.02 million expatriates in Kuwait had been born in the country [Shah, "Second-Generation Non-Nationals in Kuwait: Achievements, Aspirations and Plans", *LSE Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalization in the Gulf States* 32 (2013)].

instead that furthered the rooting of existing migrants and their role as consumers in the economy.¹⁰⁵ The stand-off was settled at the end of the 1980s in the context of record low world oil prices and a wave of violent attacks in Kuwait. From 1986 onwards and in the face of continuing demand for foreign labour, Asian migrants gradually replaced Arabs, along with more rigid regulation policy for work permits, issued for shorter periods which prevented the bringing of migrants' family as much as possible.¹⁰⁶

Against the background of this public issue of foreigners' integration, the *biduns* confusedly emerged as a distinct issue. MP Ahmad Sa<un was among the first deputies to attack the government for its inconsistent nationality policy in the 1980s. As I have noted elsewhere,

As of 1981, he asked for the official number of people who had acquired nationality (first- and second-degree) since independence. During the electoral campaign for the 1985 parliament, of which he was elected speaker, he became famous for his speech warning the government that it was sitting on a time bomb because of the way it handled the granting of nationality. This famous "time bomb" expression referred to the "65,000 persons consider[ing] themselves Kuwaitis and 46,000 [who] appl[ied] for the nationality", and the fact that nationality was granted to a lot of ineligible people, while it was denied to some others who were qualified to become Kuwaiti citizens.¹⁰⁷

Just like the debate around integration of foreigners, the then emerging "public issue" of the *biduns* took a new direction in 1986 when a decree labelled them as "illegal residents" and even more after the Iraqi invasion when the decree's full consequences (loss of all rights enjoyed so far) were compounded with accusations of "treason".

The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait provided a further traumatic experience that raised suspicions towards foreigners and *biduns* and cast doubts upon their loyalty, highlighting their materialistic motivations instead. Nadia Eldemerdash, who has developed this idea of

¹⁰⁵ Beaugrand, "Politiques de non-intégration dans les monarchies du Golfe: Discuter les raisons de leur pérennité", *Transcontinentales: sociétés, idéologie, système mondial* 8.9 (2010).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.; Birks, Seccombe, and Sinclair, "Migrant Workers in the Arab Gulf: The Impact of Declining Oil Revenues", *International Migration Review* 20.4 (1986), p. 810.

¹⁰⁷ Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait*, p. 176

foreigners constructed as threats in Kuwait, writes that “narratives of the perceived disloyalty of expatriates during the Iraqi occupation centre around two ideas — first, that most of Kuwait’s expatriates left the country as soon as the invasion occurred, and second, that those who did stay collaborated with the puppet regime set up by the Iraqi occupiers”.¹⁰⁸ This was particularly true in the case of the Yemeni and Palestinian communities: in the former case, the Republic of Yemen, as non-permanent member of the UNSC, abstained from voting to condemn the Iraqi invasion. In the latter case, the Palestinian leadership believed in Saddam’s rhetoric of Palestine liberation and sided with him: as a result, no matter what the personal stance, the entire communities were stigmatized and most of them expelled from Kuwait in a symbolic act of punishment for disloyalty.¹⁰⁹ *Biduns*, constituting the majority of the army, were in the same way easily stigmatized as traitors to the Kuwaiti nation and portrayed as sympathetic to the invading Iraqis. Their nationality claims, undermined on the basis of their being *tricksters* or frauds only interested in the material benefits of nationality without any real interest in or love for Kuwait, were further delegitimized. They were the target of severe repression being barred officially from all state services, any kind of employment and denied all types of official papers. These repressive policies and rights deprivation ushered into a new phase, beyond that of publicising the question of integration into a “public issue”. This new phase consisted in building the specific “cause of the *biduns*”, with its *entrepreneurs de cause* (cause entrepreneurs or claim makers) among whom, for instance, Ghanim Al-Najjar who suffered human rights violation at the hands of the Iraqi regime, but also those who could not bear the hypocrisy of disparaging soldiers who served loyally or could not stand, out of sheer moral or religious principles, the continuous repressive policies of right deprivation exerted on a population that was anyway impossible to deport.¹¹⁰ Overall, the Iraqi invasion – a trauma that no other Gulf states suffered – did play a major role in hammering the idea of foreigners as a security threat and economic opportunists as well as in constituting the *biduns* into a distinct “naturalisation” issue.

¹⁰⁸ Eldemerdash, “Being and Belonging in Kuwait: Expatriates, Stateless Peoples and the Politics of Citizenship”, *Anthropology of the Middle East* (2015), p. 91.

¹⁰⁹ See: Ghabra, “Palestinians in Kuwait: Victims of Conflict”, *Middle East International* 397 (1991), pp. 21–22.

¹¹⁰ Those included Shiite Islamist MPs, a few members of the royal family and so-called liberal figures. For more details, see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait*, pp. 152–94.

Comparatively, the Emirati Federal National Council has had far less power to actually discuss the issue of foreigners' presence or integration,¹¹¹ or what Erik Neveu calls the "constructing an argumentation" and a political — rather than social — "admissibility of the problem".¹¹² Against this background, the issue of the *biduns* has deliberately *not* been constructed into a public issue. Noora Lori shows how "the politics of waiting for identity papers" is "a political tactic in its own right".¹¹³ Parading as bureaucratic ineptitude it is a strategic and political act "which is more powerful than either acceptance or rejection"¹¹⁴ and, we can add, that avoids the logical outcome of turning a social fact into a public issue, namely "to have the case put into public policy"¹¹⁵ that requires determining clear public action. While the Kuwaiti government has been challenged to be seen as taking public action and has often committed itself to do so firmly, the UAE federal government chose the seemingly technical strategy to suspend the question indefinitely, which, as Lori shows, deceptively appears as taking no particular public action when it indeed is doing so by, to use an oxymoron, actively engaging in inaction.

In the face of the pending questions of the status of the *biduns* being identified and acknowledged as a public issue, different Kuwaiti governments have put in place open and visible public actions. Yet as Erik Neveu reminds us, all public issues are not addressed with the same type of public action.¹¹⁶ In this very case, the supporters of the *biduns* cause have had little say in the design of the policy, despite experts' suggestions.¹¹⁷ Since 1993, after the liberation of Kuwait, the Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior set up specialized committees tasked with the so-called *biduns* issue and in particular the very practical task of enumerating and counting this population whose undetermined status defies any clear and comprehensive registry. These committees established figures and collected data by exchanging information about the status of *biduns*' files with all state ministries and institutions. Officially, this

¹¹¹ Herb, *The Wages of Oil: Parliaments and Economic Development in Kuwait and the UAE*, p. 52.

¹¹² Neveu, *Sociologie politique des problèmes publics*, p. 18.

¹¹³ Lori, *Offshore Citizens*, p. 13; chap. 5: "*Ta'al Bachir* (Come Tomorrow): The Politics of Waiting for Identity Papers", pp.160–94.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹¹⁵ Neveu, *Sociologie politique des problèmes publics*, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–216.

¹¹⁷ Al-Anezi, *Al-bidūn fīl Kūwaīt* (1994).

practice of cross-checking data held by all the different government bodies seeks to “uncover the true origins” of the claimants. The latest organization in charge of the *biduns* in Kuwait since 2010, the Central System to Remedy the Status of Illegal Residents, has been working on establishing links, whether through historical genealogy or through chains of relatives, in order to ascribe this “origin” to each *bidun* or to force each to reveal a foreign origin. Renewed thrice in its mandate, the Central system’s proclaimed objective is to find an evidence-based solution that would put a final end to the issue. As said above, the sheer definition of the issue as a threat to the nation and state security, dictated the institution that dealt with it and the way it had been instructed as a check and repression of frauds, fakes and forgeries — all flouting the idea of authenticity.

The UAE handled the question of *biduns* very differently: the *biduns* have not been the subject of public debate neither have they been the particular target of repressive policies. On the contrary, *biduns* have been kept in a limbo situation, between *ad hoc* opportunities,¹¹⁸ and resort to employment and services in the private sector, which contributed to invisibilise them for a long time, when their existence was not simply denied officially. It was not until the mid-2000s and the UAE federal government’s drive for identity registration that the Emirati policy towards *biduns* became more formalised. To quote Lori, “until 2008, [the] act of postponement and bureaucratic foot dragging appears to be an *ad hoc* coping strategy of the federal government, but the outsourcing of passport turned the tactic of postponement into a deliberate strategy”.¹¹⁹ In 2008, the UAE went ahead with the “economic citizenship” scheme, an agreement with the presidency of the Union of Comoros that consisted in granting the Comorian nationality “to a person of full age, having the status of economic partner of the government of Comoros” and presenting “an application with a view to investing” in the country.¹²⁰ The programme, in other words, required the UAE to pay an amount of money

¹¹⁸ Lori, *Offshore Citizens*, p. 3. Lori mentions the case of a *bidun* granted “a scholarship from the Ministry of Education to pursue his higher education in the United States” — before the plan fell apart for want of being able to renew his passport.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹²⁰ Author’s translation. Annex I: Law Pertaining to ‘Economic Citizenship’ in the Union of the Comoros (Décret N° 08-138/PR Portant promulgation de la loi N° 08-014/AU du 27 novembre 2008 relative à la citoyenneté économiques en Union des Comores) [Beaugrand, “Torn Citizenship in Kuwait: Commodification vs. Rights-based Approaches”, in LSE Middle

contributing to the “investment programme of the Union of the Comoros” in exchange for passports giving no right to reside in the Comoros without any consultation of the individuals concerned. In 2008, the UAE thus made a down payment of \$200 million, representing slightly less than half of the Comoros’ GDP, and issued Comorian passports to its *bidun* population, forcing this measure upon them and presenting it as a step towards a hypothetical naturalisation.¹²¹ In Lori’s words, “the federal government invested time and money to go out of its way *not* to naturalize these individuals.”¹²²

Paradoxically, Kuwait, that provided the main architects of the programme,¹²³ envisioned the “offshore citizenship” option and threatened *biduns* with its application on several occasions, in 2008 and again in 2014. But it never went so far as to adopt it. The economic citizenship scheme provoked an outcry among members of the Kuwaiti Parliament,

East Centre collected papers, *Challenges to Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa Region 2* (2015), pp. 19–36, Annex p. 86.

¹²¹ Nevertheless, this alternative solution seems to be only a new way of buying time: the question of the recognition of these Comorian passports by the international community — notably in the case of asylum applications — remains unresolved. Moreover, further to the obvious irregularities in the adoption of the scheme, the Assembly of the Union of the Comoros launched a parliamentary commission of enquiry on the law on economic citizenship, which issued its report in December 2017: its conclusions highlighted not only the lack of an adequate legal framework, but also the extent of public funds’ mishandling. They recommended the cancellation of all passports issued “in the framework of this vast fraud”, and an amicable settlement with the UAE to “establish a definitive list of families who fall under the economic citizenship scheme and grant them a vested right” for fear of having to reimburse the \$200 million paid by the Emirates — which has since evaporated. The report’s conclusions also suggested that the November 2008 law be repealed and replaced by a new legal framework in the future — although this does not rule out the future use of citizenship purchases as a lever for development, even if the practice has come to a halt. *Assemblée de l’Union des Comores, Rapport de la commission d’enquête parlementaire sur la loi relative à la citoyenneté économique. Rapport de synthèse* (2017).

¹²² Lori, *Offshore Citizens*, p.14.

¹²³ For more technical details on the concrete arrangement of the scheme, see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait*, pp. 131–34; or Abrahamian, *The Cosmopolites: The Coming of the Global Citizen* (2015).

supporting the cause of the *biduns* (even though they might diverge on what it means concretely in terms of the precise solution), which made the measure impossible to enact.¹²⁴ Moreover, the fact that *biduns* found supporters among the MPs to oppose the scheme also reflects the large variety of opinions towards this public issue within the Kuwaiti society itself. The issue, widely discussed in the press and more and more on social media is very divisive in Kuwait, with a wide spectrum of stances including those in favour of *biduns'* integration. Combined with the greater freedom to mobilise that exists in Kuwait as compared to the UAE, these “supporters” of the movement explains also the fact that *biduns* did mobilise in Kuwait massively in 2011 and more sporadically thereafter, as a result of the authority crackdown.¹²⁵

This difference in the handling of the so-called *bidun* issue between the two countries is very telling and explains, in part of course, the different stances in managing diversity. In Kuwait, the question of defining the limits of the citizens' body has been historically posed in the public debate, even though the size of the group(s) of the potentially eligible candidates has been reduced ever and ever from possibly some Arab migrants,¹²⁶ including *biduns* (whose case and cause were not quite distinct at the time) in the early 1980s to 34,000 *biduns* still declared eligible to naturalisation in 2014 by the Central System.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Musallam Al-Barrak, the then head of the parliamentary opposition in self-imposed exile until November 2021, is even said to have been approached by the authorities to publicly support this solution but staunchly refused. Interview with a member of the opposition, later in self-imposed exile, Kuwait, April 2014.

¹²⁵ For a sociological history of the *bidun* mobilization and its relationship with Kuwaiti nationals and societies, see Beaugrand, *Stateless in the Gulf: Migration, Nationality and Society in Kuwait*, pp. 195–220. The term “supporters” of the movement, that emphasises the fact that undocumented migrants are never alone in their mobilisation is borrowed from Siméant, *La cause des sans-papiers* (1998), p. 25.

¹²⁶ To be noted that in addition to the fact that the naturalisation provisions of the nationality have never been applied, since decrees of naturalisation are the prerogative of the Emir, they have also been made more difficult throughout the year by the National Assembly, reducing the yearly number or adding new legal requirements, like for instance to be a Muslim.

¹²⁷ On the basis of their inclusion in the 1965 census.

The tenacious claims of the *biduns*, and in particular these 34,000 officially acknowledged as *eligible* to the naturalisation process serve as a reminder of the somehow arbitrary nature of citizenship delineation. The existence of the *biduns* public issue challenges the nativist narrative that the original Kuwaiti nation has always existed within a defined territory, in turn challenging the fundamental idea that Kuwaiti nationals, as initially defined in the 1960s, are the only ones entitled to the welfare benefits made possible by the country's oil revenues to the exclusion of all others. Recognizing, even partially, the legitimacy of the *biduns*' claims, no matter how culturally close, is to admit that another group can claim social and political membership in Kuwait. Incorporating even a small portion of *biduns*, with their different identities and their peculiar history as a repressed group, into the Kuwaiti identity could open the door for migrants to claim access to this more mixed identity as well — if not even rights. On the contrary, in the UAE, where social rights to mobilise and political rights to organise and express opinions are comparatively more limited, the policy makers avoided that the issue of *biduns* and more broadly integration, turned into a public debate. According to Lori, they found it “more politically expedient to postpone the questions of belonging and address the more immediate issues of identity management by creating short-term, renewable legal statuses”.¹²⁸ Solving apparently the vexed question of identity in this way, enabled to fashion a new one, along the lines of an “emergent” authenticity. By proclaiming its clear intention to settle the issue once and for all, the Kuwaiti government got out of the ambiguity at its own expenses.

As a consequence, the issue of the *biduns* has had a large impact on the Kuwaiti society, understood as a whole, not only the nationals. First, the *biduns* have tried to distinguish themselves from other foreigners understandably to maximize their chances of integration and naturalisation. For almost two decades, they have been behaving in a way that mimics Kuwaiti citizens and outdoes their “Kuwaitiness” in order to fit into the dominant group, notably by showing loyalty to the emir and undermining their own histories in order to fit in with national ones. This logic was timidly challenged during the *biduns* mobilisation of 2011, to accommodate a more multicultural discourse. Yet the official nativist narrative remains that those outside the category of Kuwaiti citizens must be excluded by constructing them as alien threats to an imagined unity of purpose and interests. The *biduns* continue to be officially portrayed negatively as liars and fabricators and as schemers trying to force themselves into Kuwaiti society -despite their generation-long presence. Secondly, contrary to the UAE, the

¹²⁸ Lori, *Offshore Citizens*, p.6.

Kuwaiti authorities perpetuate among expatriates and nationals alike the illusion of the transience of the expatriate majority in the country,¹²⁹ accepting to be portrayed as a country cherishing authenticity in the guise of “Kuwait for Kuwaitis” and uninterested in valuing otherness.

To sum up, the Kuwaiti history presents numerous idiosyncrasies, including the country's comparatively early independence in 1961, ten years before the other Arab Gulf states, the crucial debate in the 1980s about openness that seriously envisioned the possibility of a more integrative policy in the context of the first oil boom, and the fact that Kuwait was engulfed by regional violence in the 1980s and even more so as a result of the Iraqi invasion — a form of physical violence that none of the other Gulf states under study have ever witnessed. Finally, there is the lingering issue of the *biduns* built as a never-ending public issue that testifies to the arbitrariness of the policy choices made with regard to the boundary lines of citizenship. All these factors combine to explain and complement Herb's political economy-style accounting for the options that point towards celebrating diversity in the Gulf — or not.

While the other Gulf countries are quite comfortable with the West-borrowed term “cosmopolitanism”, despite the fact that it is in contradiction with their own model of society, Kuwait does not seem to be able to accept it in the same way. This is both because of its own history and because of the “outsiders within” in the shape of the *biduns*, whose presence makes it difficult if not impossible to celebrate the diversity of the Kuwaiti population without risking giving their claims to a stake in the country's history, a legitimacy that the state does deny them staunchly.

4 Conclusion

Starting from the current academic interest in cosmopolitanism, this article set itself the target to take seriously the claims made by certain Gulf states that they govern diversity in a way that respects and values otherness. With the caveat that this conception of diversity certainly allows social interactions but does not necessarily mean social mixing. Neither does it mean allowing for the expression of historical claims or memories of the diversity that existed before the modern states — a diversity that Commins describes in the following terms: “the polyglot character of the modern Gulf cities is the historical norm, not an effect of oil wealth

¹²⁹ See Ahmad, *Everyday Conversions: Islam, Domestic Work, and South Asian Migrant Women in Kuwait* (2017), pp. 37–66.

pulling in cheap unskilled and expensive technical labour".¹³⁰ While acknowledging that such diversity is a label used for the purposes of urban marketing, the article sought to go beyond: it emphasized, first, that this form of cosmopolitan promotion goes hand-in-hand with the chosen development model in the states concerned. It is a necessity based on an idea of cultural pluralism designed to embrace globalized consumerism and promote individual self-fulfilment rather than any collective vision. Second, the article also sought to emphasize that this conception of diversity has been made possible by the fact that political belonging in the Gulf states has been gradually dissociated from territory. In other words, it has become acceptable for migrants in the Gulf, thanks to the international community's tacitly evolving norms, to be "happily"¹³¹ living in one state and to be the political subjects of some other state a long way away. Meanwhile the myth of "original" roots fuelling the discourse on national origins legitimizes the privileges of nationals. While the other Gulf countries under study are claiming to embrace normatively-loaded cosmopolitanism, Kuwait does not seem to be in a position to do so. This is so both because of its own history, and in particular the traumatic Iraqi invasion and because of the tenacious claim of the *biduns* whose legitimacy already supported by a part of the nationals could be boosted by an official stance celebrating diversity.

In fact, the deep-rooted official idea of the transience of the country's expatriates is contradicted in Kuwait by the sheer presence of the *biduns*, whose main claim is probably that they belong in the State of Kuwait and to its history. The article argued that while both Kuwait and the UAE have deliberately failed to solve the unsettled claims of naturalisation put forward by the *biduns*, the question became a "public issue" in Kuwait while it did not in the UAE. *Entrepreneurs* of the *bidun* cause have forced the Kuwaiti government to take stances and public action while the UAE has managed to prolong its initial ambiguity and strategy of postponement. As underlined by Erik Neveu, "far from bringing the word 'end' to the life of a public issue, its handling by a public policy often gives it a new lease of life".¹³² In Kuwait, the open repressive policy taken as a result of the issue being gradually framed in security but also moral individual terms, led to unexpected results: it created both empathy and feeling of exclusivity, ending up being extremely divisive if not at time polarizing, in the

¹³⁰ Commins, *The Gulf States: A Modern History* (2012), pp. 11–12.

¹³¹ A hint towards the new Ministry of Happiness in the UAE that was created to address the wellbeing of both nationals and expatriates.

¹³² Neveu, *Sociologie politique des problèmes publics*, p. 185.

Kuwaiti society. What remained a constant official narrative is the fact that foreigners in the country have been constructed as a threat and a burden, an image that the Iraqi occupation reinforced by adding a dimension of disloyalty and economic opportunism. Kuwait has approached post-invasion globalization, the return of foreigners to the country, and the growth of trade in a purely mercantile way, engaging little with cultural otherness, contrary to Dubai and other emirates in its wake. These historical factors combine to account for the different ways in which diversity is managed in the different Gulf states and explain why a certain type of discriminatory and nationalist official discourse, imbued with dogmatic culturalism rather than cosmopolitan pluralism prevails in Kuwait.

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