Different Type of Refugee: Onward Journeys of Gulf-Born Migrants from Politically Volatile Countries

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is home to a sizeable Syrian community, a majority of whom have arrived there as temporary migrant workers following the oil boom in the 1970s. Many of them stayed on with their families, leading to second and third generation UAE-born Syrians living in the UAE under temporary renewable visas, due to the strict migration regimes that prevent permanent settlement and naturalisation of most migrants in the UAE. While this community's multigenerational existence in the UAE may suggest that they are temporary on paper only, the war in Syria has had significant effects on their sense of long-term security in the UAE, as well as their global mobility as Syrian passport holders. As a result, most of them have strong incentives to try and circumvent both the restrictions tied to their citizenship by birth, and their temporary status in the UAE, by pursuing 'stronger' passports from elsewhere.

My research with UAE-born Syrians between 2016 and 2020 explored their considerations and experiences of onward migration from the UAE. My respondents considered on-migration to secure a less ambiguous future for themselves than is available in the UAE, which they see as 'home', but which has not been formalised as such. My research reveals that in the context of limited options for mobility and security, alternative pathways for long term security emerge, including through asylum-seeking in a third country. Drawing on debates on strategic citizenship and complex migration journeys, this paper illustrates how the experiences of UAE-born Syrians, in the context of the ongoing political turmoil in Syria, straddle the much critiqued yet on-going dichotomies in migration studies, such as between temporary and permanent, forced and voluntary forms of migration. This contribution argues that in a context where the option to citizenship acquisition in host country is foreclosed to migrants, and migrants have very limited (or no) options for residential security elsewhere, their onward journeys for citizenship acquisition can be considered strategic, but not out of volition.

Syrians in the UAE

In the UAE, non-nationals, including those born and raised there, are typically unable to obtain local citizenship or permanent residency despite constituting 90 percent of the population. Although the UAE has introduced longer term visas and even pathways to Emirati citizenship in recent years, these reforms only target highly skilled migrants, entrepreneurs, and investors (Fattah and Abu Omar 2021). Thus, the majority of migrants in the UAE are regulated through renewable, sponsored, temporary visas, known as *kafala*.

Syrians historically constitute one of the largest groups of Arab migrants working in the Gulf States (Babar, 2017:7). Their migration trajectories to the UAE vary historically and occupationally. Some of them have arrived as early as the 1950s and 1960s to work in skilled jobs such as judges, teachers, engineers, bankers, doctors or as entrepreneurs and businessmen. In the 1970s, they were also increasingly visible in lesser-skilled and lower paying jobs, working in administrative and technical posts in the army, ports, municipality and local banks (Babar, 2017).

Currently, an estimated 242,000 Syrians live in the UAE, and the UAE government has stated that 100,000 of them have entered the UAE since the start of the conflict in 2011 (De Bel-Air, 2015: 10). Whilst political instability at home

makes the Gulf States an attractive place to settle and remain for most Arab migrants, including Syrians, they are not signatories to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and have no official framework for managing or accepting refugees or asylum seekers (Babar, 2017:9). Therefore, Syrians in the UAE, including those who have arrived since 2011, are governed through the *kafala* system, and are not offered formal provisions for more secure residency, or protection from deportation (see The National, 2018, for ad hoc resolutions for Syrians in the UAE).

Although Syrians may find strategic solutions to combat their temporary situation in the UAE, their ability to do so is ultimately determined by class, social networks, as well as their nationality (Ruhs, 2013; Vora, 2013; Valenta, 2020). Geopolitical concerns are central to migration policy making in the Gulf and they have historically shaped patterns of migration (see Babar, 2014; Kinninmonth, 2015; Jamal, 2015). Yet, we need to better understand how these concerns, such as war in origin countries, shape Gulf migrants' desire and ability to move onwards, and the complex pathways they develop to access the long-term security of an alternative passport. We also need to pay particular attention to how Gulf-born migrants experience the ripple effects of the political situation in their countries of citizenship (see Jamal, 2017; Soudy, 2017; Taylor et al. 2017). The fact that being 'permanently temporary' is intergenerational in the Gulf States, meaning that children of temporary workers inherit their parents' citizenship and immigration status by birth, is a unique case to introduce to the study of citizenship and migration.

UAE-born Syrians are a good example. Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Syrians have been subjected to tougher border controls, residency visa renewals and security checks in the Gulf and globally (Babar, 2014; Kinninmonth, 2015). As residency in the UAE is predominantly linked to work permits, not being able to renew residencies has serious implications, ranging from not being able to enrol children in schools, to not being able to work and earn a living wage (De Bel-Air, 2015:11). Moreover, in order to renew temporary visas in the UAE, migrants need to have a valid passport. However, political instability in Syria impacts the Syrian authorities' ability or desire to renew passports for their nationals living abroad, including in the UAE (Surak, 2021:177). Military service is compulsory for Syrian nationals, including those residing abroad. Failing to attend or pay the exemption fee, Syrian authorities refuse to renew passports, which has direct consequences for renewing their residencies in the UAE (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2014). Moreover, at 800$, Syrian passports are also the most expensive to issue and renew globally (Alarabiya, 2017).

If Syrians in the UAE lose their temporary work or residency visas, their options of moving to a third country are extremely restricted, considering that Syrian passports have lost most of their value in terms of stability and mobility due to the war, and selective border controls apply most strictly to this group (see Passport Index 2021). Moreover, due to the volatile political situation in Syria, 'return' is not a viable option. In fact, UAE-born Syrians can become refugees if they lose their temporary residency (see Babar, Ewers and Khattab 2018, 1554). In this context, a wealthy minority of Syrians in the UAE purchases passports through 'Citizenship by Investment' programmes (Maceda, 2018). For middle class Syrians, like other Gulf migrants, migrating to a Western country for higher education or work, in the hope of eventually naturalising, is also a common strategy (Ali, 2011). However, study and work visas are increasingly hard to obtain, and were never an option for the majority of Syrians in the UAE and elsewhere (Khaishgi, 2017). For Syrians with limited resources or options, asylum seeking in European Union countries also emerged as a last resort, as this study shows. Importantly, this is a result of having no acceptable alternatives to their unstable legal status in the Gulf. This brings me to briefly review the existing conceptual debates on strategic citizenship and complex onward migration journeys.

Effects of war at 'home' on temporary migrants

In the context of a global inequality, where individuals' mobility as well as residential security is determined by the passports they hold, pursuing citizenship from privileged countries is understood as compensational, strategic and pragmatic (Mavroudi, 2006; Harpaz and Mateos, 2018). Restrictive migration regimes and geopolitical concerns are prevalent globally and they are integral to the reproduction of global inequalities premised in citizenship, providing a central context to understand why an alternative passport is appealing to certain populations. For instance, residential insecurity, arising from restrictive citizenship and immigration policies, is directly linked to questions of citizenship and why it matters for those who are excluded from it in host countries (Cook-Martin, 2019; Bloemraad and Sheares, 2017). Furthermore, geopolitical concerns, such as war, or general political instability, condition the

demand for another passport, as it provides means for basic protection and a definite place to live in a global context of hostile border regimes. Thus, a liminal legal status among migrants who could otherwise be classified as refugees, such as the Syrians discussed in this paper, creates added obstacles (see Menjivar, 2006; Babar, Ewers and Khattab 2018).

In order to have a fuller picture of when, how, for whom and in what contexts citizenship matters – important questions that require further attention and investigation in citizenship studies (Bloemraad and Sheares, 2017) –, it is necessary to combine the literature on strategic citizenship with that on complex migration journeys. While strategic citizenship acknowledges international migration as a key strategy to circumvent inequalities premised on citizenship (Surak, 2021, 171), it remains largely disengaged from important conceptual discussions in migration studies, such as on volition, agency, and migrant decision-making. As a result, the experiences of people who try to access the security offered by stronger passports is often studied through a binary lens of forced migrants, e.g. asylum seekers and refugees (Kibreab, 2003; Miller, 2001; Gibney, 2014), versus strategic naturalisers, such as wealthy and middle-class individuals from non-Western countries who pursue better passports as a form of insurance policy (see Surak, 2021; Harpaz and Mateos, 2018).

In temporary migration regimes like in the UAE, migrants are at perpetual risk of losing residency rights regardless of their citizenship. But should their home countries experience sudden shifts in political circumstances, this risk grows exponentially, leading to a perceived necessity for citizenship acquisition from elsewhere. This process can be understood as circumstantial migration (see Carling and Haugen 2020), as changing circumstances result in unpredicted, complex onward migration journeys, for example asylum-seeking, which migrants would not have considered before. Complexities of their onward migration, however, cannot be captured through prevailing categories, such as between temporary/permanent and forced/voluntary forms of migration. By assuming that people move in linear fashion, these descriptive categories tend to ignore that experiences as well as motivations of individuals can change over space and time, corresponding to a number of socio-economic and political circumstances in the contexts they inhabit (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018: 55; see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011 for 'overlapping' and 'multiple' refugeehoods).

At a conceptual level, circumstances connect with the analytical discussion on volition, alternatives and options, which Erdal and Oeppen bring forward (2018). Circumstances are key in understanding volition in migration decisions, because they (re)shape the basic needs of migrants in their particular context, as well as a range of alternatives available to them if they decide not to migrate (Erdal and Oeppen, 2018:985; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018; Gibney, 2011:48). These alternatives can change along a migration journey, as Erdal and Oeppen discuss. Yet, in the case of Syrians in the UAE, their options, for example for long-term security and mobility, change whilst they reside in their host country as temporary residents, because of what is happening in Syria, the country they hold passports from. It is in the context of these changing circumstances that they consider, or experience, onward migration journeys, fundamentally questioning dichotomous migration categories, and illustrating a new example of a complex migration trajectory (see Snel, Bilgili and Staring 2020).

First, the dichotomy between forced versus voluntary migration fails to account for the temporal and circumstantial aspects of Gulf migrants' onward journeys to Western countries. The experiences of Syrians holding temporary residencies in the UAE may not be considered as volatile to the same extent as those fleeing war in Syria. However, a sudden shift in political circumstances, such as war in Syria, may intensify their sense of temporariness in the UAE, and instigate a necessity for citizenship acquisition from elsewhere. Yet, the alternatives for citizenship acquisition for these groups are doubly restricted, as they have no access to permanency in their host countries, and their ability to move onward is constrained by strict border regimes targeting citizens of politically volatile countries (Shaheen, 2017). Since their decision for onward migration is to a large degree motivated by accessing long-term residential security that is not offered in the UAE, their experiences are better understood as 'being forced to leave', even if they migrate onwards under so called voluntary categories, such as for education or work.

Second, thinking of migrants in the UAE and the Gulf in terms of either permanent or temporary limits our understanding of the meaning of these places for them and their decision for onward migration. Even though a body of literature illustrates the difficulties of framing migrant experiences and categories as either temporary or permanent

(see Bailey, 2002, Rajkumar et.al, 2012), there is an ongoing, Eurocentric notion that perceives all temporary residencies of migrants as transit places, or in other words 'meaningless temporary refuges before migrants reach their final destination' (Snel, Bilgili and Staring 2020, 4). This might be the case for stepwise migrants in the Gulf, who have pre-determined objectives of onward migration to Western countries, and who take specific actions to achieve that (Valenta, 2020). However, this perception ignores the unique situation of Gulf-born migrants, who despite being labelled as temporary, are *de facto* from the Gulf, and perceive these places as their primary home. In fact, for most of them, migrating to a third country is seen as a temporary step to acquire citizenship and eventually return to the Gulf with a 'stronger passport' (see Akinci, 2019; Jamal, 2017; Ali, 2011; Surak, 2021, 177). This shows that restricting paths to citizenship in the Gulf has important effects on the way migrants perceive the value and meaning of citizenship in general.

Conclusion and Outlook

Through the experiences of UAE born Syrians, I illustrated how in restrictive migration contexts such as in the UAE, a sudden shift in political circumstances in origin countries, such as the on-going war in Syria, directly affects the options and alternatives migrants have for long term security and stability.

It is in this context that UAE-born Syrians find citizenship acquisition elsewhere increasingly appealing, yet their ability to move onwards is constrained by strict border regimes, even for those with adequate financial assets. This paper argues that when migrants have no way of obtaining citizenship in a host country, and have limited (or no) options for residential security elsewhere, their onward journeys to acquire passports can be framed as strategic, but not voluntary. This is particularly the case for migrants who were born and raised in host states, but who inherited a lack of basic rights to residency and protection from deportation as second- or third-generation migrants. Consequently, asylum seeking in a third country emerges as an option for those who have limited resources, as this paper shows. Even if these populations have adequate resources to move onwards under 'voluntary categories', such as for work, higher education, or family unification, their motivations to undertake a journey to access long-term residential security place them in migration categories that could be rendered as "being forced to leave". Moreover, their onward journeys are often described by migrants as a temporary step that allows them to acquire a (Western) passport to return 'home' – to the UAE – 'permanently'. In so doing, this contribution provides an example of complex migration journeys, and contributes to analytical discussions on voluntariness, choice and alternatives when onward migration is considered in pursuit of an alternative citizenship.

The focus of future academic inquiry should not be on whether to categorise migrants such as those who were the subject of this text as temporary or permanent, voluntary or forced, but to understand what pushes them to seek alternative permanencies elsewhere, and under what conditions. This also requires us to bring debates on strategic citizenship and complex migration journeys closer together, as changing circumstances can directly shape why and how citizenship matters, and what options and pathways are there to access it. Considering the prevalence of both restrictive immigration policies globally and geopolitical concerns that inform border policy making, similar complex journeys can be foreseen among other migrant groups in the UAE, and wider Gulf, as well as in other temporary migration contexts. Most recently, as we witness the Taliban take over Afghanistan, and subsequent stories of former President Ashraf Ghani and Afghan civilians taking 'refuge' or temporary protection in the UAE, we should turn our attention to Afghans who settled in the UAE for decades and across generations, and understand how the sudden political shift in Afghanistan impacts their future security and mobility, either in the UAE or elsewhere.

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