Introduction

"ISLANDS OF THE MOON"?

It was a humid evening in Dubai, but since it was early December it was just cool enough to sit outside and sip our tea. The occasional breeze carried the wafting scent of the jasmine plants that snaked up the walls of the outdoor coffee shop. Despite the pleasant surroundings, the interview was not going well.

Ibrahim's voice – inflected with the Emirati dialect – was laced with anger and exasperation, and now some of it was being directed at me. I knew that "but where are you *really* from?" was quite possibly the worst question to ask, but I blurted out the words without thinking. All of my training had receded into the background as I tried to process a story that seemed stranger than fiction.[1]

Dressed in a crisp white *dishdāshah*,[2] Ibrahim leaned back in his seat, crossed his legs and looked at me defiantly. Pointing at himself from head to feet, he asked, "Do I look African to you?"

"No," I thought to myself, "you do not," but I stayed silent.

"I am Emirati, where else would I be from?" He continued, "I was born here and I am not a foreigner." He pointed behind us in the direction of

[1] Interview with Ibrahim, December 11, 2010. Ibrahim is a pseudonym (as are all other interviewee names in this book). These quotes and descriptions come from transcribed and translated interview notes. Unless otherwise specified all interviews were conducted in Arabic. The quotes were transcribed from memory shortly after the original interview and translated into English. All interviews are anonymized. With the exception of one extended interview (which was filmed in the United States) none of the interviews were taped.

[2] A long (usually white) robe traditionally worn by men in the Persian Gulf.

Dubai's international airport. "Even at the airport, the border officials know that I am Emirati. They look at me like they know."

A heavy silence hung in the air between us as I tried to make sense of the story and engage him again.

"*Bas mā fahimt* [but I don't understand]," I said and asked, "*qamar mitl gumar?*" [moon like moon?]"[3]

I pointed up to the sky as I switched to English: "You got a passport from the 'Islands of the *Moon*'?"

He chuckled and admitted he had to look online to find out that *Juzur al Qamar* was "Comoros Islands" in English: a small island archipelago situated off the coast of East Africa, near Madagascar.[4]

Ibrahim now holds a passport from the Union of the Comoros, but has no connections to the country. He was born in Dubai, a bustling city-state in the United Arab Emirates,[5] to an Emirati mother and *bidūn* father.[6] His father was also born in Dubai, but unlike his mother (whose own father securely belonged to a recognized Arab tribe), Ibrahim's father comes from a family of "unknown origins." The Emirati woman who introduced me to Ibrahim referred to him as "Persian" but Ibrahim never self-identified as such. In his narrative his family lineage has always been Arab and his father's family has been in Dubai for as long as they can trace, but they don't have the crucial document that proves one is Emirati – the federally issued *khulāṣat al-qayd* or "family book."[7]

By the time I met Ibrahim in 2010, he had spent his whole life – over twenty years at that time – applying and waiting for Emirati citizenship. He explained the relief he finally felt in 2001, when he was issued an Emirati passport and was told by civil servants that it would be only a matter of time before he would receive a family book. Five years later, in 2006, he received a scholarship from the Ministry of Education to

[3] *Qamar* is moon in *fuṣḥā* Arabic and *gumar* is moon in the *khaleeji* (Gulf) dialect.

[4] The Comoros Islands (*Juzur al Qamar*) form an archipelago of four volcanic islands located on the southeast coast of Africa, just north of Madagascar. Politically, the islands are divided into two entities, the Union of the Comoros, a sovereign state, and Mayotte, an overseas department of France (and technically part of the Schengen visa zone).

[5] The UAE is a federal state that comprises seven emirates, including Abu Dhabi (the capital), Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm Al Quwain.

[6] *Bidūn* refers to stateless populations in the Gulf, particularly in Kuwait and the UAE. The term literally means "without," deriving from the Arabic *bidūn jinsiya*, which means without nationality.

[7] While Emirati passports identify individuals as nationals externally, internally the *khulāṣat al-qayd* or family book is the key document that identifies an individual as a citizen of the UAE.

pursue his higher education in the United States. The American embassy instructed him to renew his passport in order to apply for a student visa, but when Ibrahim attempted to renew his passport, it was withheld and never returned to him. The only explanation he received from naturalization officials was that they were following *awāmir* (orders) from higher up in the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Without his UAE passport, Ibrahim lost his scholarship, job, and bank account.

In 2008, Ibrahim became one of approximately 80,000–120,000 people impacted by the UAE federal government's identity registration drive. This national campaign was designed to "place everyone in a category," by registering all individuals who did not have a family book, regardless of whether they had been previously granted an Emirati passport or naturalization decree. The MOI encouraged all people without a family book to come forward for clemency. There was a two-month window for registration, after which time all of the people who had not registered would be considered "illegal" and would be apprehended by the authorities. Those who, like Ibrahim, followed the directions of the MOI were issued new IDs called *Biṭāqa masjīl lā yaḥmilu awrāq ṯubūtiya* (registration card for undocumented persons).

Then, in 2009, Ibrahim was called into the federal Ministry of Interior in Abu Dhabi about his citizenship case. He was instructed to go to a separate two-story villa where he was issued a new passport. This time, however, the document was not an Emirati passport but one from the Union of the Comoros. In a confused state he examined the identity document he had in front of him: a crisp new passport from a country in Africa he had never heard of, it already had his picture, biometrics, and a frenchized version of his name that now had a slightly different spelling in the Latin script. He was told that if he could identify any Emirati friend or family member who may act as his *kafīl* (national sponsor), then he would be able to apply for a valid UAE residency visa.[8] As long as he had a national sponsor, he would be able to legally reside in the UAE, but as a foreign resident under the guest worker program. He was given vague assurances from a ministry official that this was just a temporary step in the naturalization process, and that at some unidentified point in

[8] In the *kafāla* (guest worker) system that operates across the Gulf, the residency of a foreign worker is merged with and tied to their labor contract. Each noncitizen must be sponsored by a *kafīl* (national sponsor). The *kafīl* must be a citizen of the country. A company can also act as a *kafīl* if it is at least 51 percent owned by citizens.

time – contingent upon his good behavior – he would very likely be granted Emirati citizenship once again.

I refer to this passport outsourcing arrangement as creating "offshore citizens" because the UAE government transferred citizenship cases to an offshore site, while the individuals themselves never actually moved. Working with Comoros Gulf Holding (a private-public company) and the presidency of the Union of the Comoros, the UAE's federal government purchased Comoros Islands passports to effectively gerrymander its domestic minorities into "foreign residents." These outsourced passports do not entitle the recipients to any diplomatic protection or the right to reside in the Comoros Islands; on the contrary, they are explicitly banned from being able to reside there. Instead, the passport holders are expected to continue residing in the UAE, but as "guest workers." This arrangement thus invents and codifies a permanently "temporary" legal status; one that enables residents to legally reside in their country of birth, but without ever accruing any form of citizenship rights.

How is it possible for the same individual to oscillate between mutually exclusive legal categories – citizen and foreign "guest worker" – without ever moving between states? How and why did the UAE's federal government outsource naturalization cases to the Union of the Comoros? And what impact has this outsourcing of passports had on the individuals who have become citizens of a state they never applied for citizenship in? To address these questions, this book's population of study is neither the foreign residents who make up approximately 90 percent of the UAE's population nor the Emirati citizens who are now a minority in their own country – but rather those who (like Ibrahim) are suspended in an ambiguous zone in between the official categories of citizen and alien.

ARGUMENT: LIMBO STATUSES AND THE SUSPENSION OF NATIONAL INCORPORATION

By outsourcing national passports, the UAE's federal government may have taken a novel approach to issuing national identity documents, but the problem it faced – how to incorporate domestic minorities – is an old and common one. The "imagined communities" of the world's peoples are not exhaustively encompassed by, or aligned with, the current configuration of internationally recognized sovereign states. Ruling political elites have traditionally held three options when responding to internal others: incorporate as citizens, expel, or ignore. This case shows how national governments have used outsourcing to create a fourth option in

national incorporation: the power to transform domestic minorities into documented "foreign" residents.

I argue that this passport outsourcing arrangement was not designed for the purposes of incorporation (citizenship and secure residency) nor expulsion (deportation and nonresidency), but rather to codify the *conditional* inclusion of a population with contingent and revocable residency rights. This citizenship status codifies a form of exclusion that falls short of expulsion. The agreement creates a population that is suspended in a limbo state – they have been rendered readily deportable, but instead of being deported, they inhabit an ambiguous legal position under the guise of renewable "temporary" residency. This represents the first (and at the time of publication only) case of one state purchasing citizenship documents en masse from another state in order to document its own internal minorities. Through this arrangement, minority groups can be documented, accounted for, and issued working visas, but will be, regardless of duration or location, perennial guests.

While the UAE's outsourcing of passports to the Union of the Comoros is novel and puzzling, I use the subsequent chapters to show that this use of outsourcing represents the formalization of a strategy that was already occurring informally. Even before receiving Union of Comoros passports, people like Ibrahim inhabited an informal limbo status due to bureaucratic delays in their citizenship cases. By constantly postponing naturalization cases, the federal authorities have stalled the entry of internal minorities into the national citizenry since the state was formed in 1971. Instead of following the written naturalization laws that identify duration of residency as a path to citizenship, delays are used to evade and suspend the question of national incorporation. Meanwhile, as these internal minorities have been suspended in limbo, the UAE's federal authorities have had to respond to massive influxes of migrant workers and one of the fastest demographic growth rates of the twentieth century. Again, the way the UAE government counts time is critical to its ability to exclude this migrant population from becoming citizens. Regardless of the length of their duration in the UAE, foreign residents are treated as temporary workers who are not eligible for citizenship. Even though economic and social practices make it so that foreign residents are far from temporary in practice, on paper they are on temporary residency visas and their time spent does not enable them to accrue permanent rights. People can thus fall into a limbo status in one of two ways in the UAE – when naturalization cases are constantly deferred or temporary residency visas are

continually renewed without ever translating into any possibility for citizenship.

The innovation of offshore citizens is an extension of these practices, codifying "temporary" residency into a permanent citizenship status. I argue that the use of limbo statuses should not be seen as an intermediate step in the implementation of a larger policy design, but as a policy and practice in its own right: the practice of making people wait. A key component of conditional inclusion is the deployment of time as a strategy of exclusion; limbo legal statuses enable states to place certain populations at the cusp of both entry and exit for extended time periods. The populations who inhabit limbo statuses experience a form of residency that is structured by the contradictions of conditional inclusion: an ever-present possibility of deportation intertwined with a constant hope for inclusion.

Though a variety of alternative explanations have been provided for explaining settled citizenship outcomes (inclusion or exclusion), much less attention has gone into explaining limbo legal statuses – the suspension of any settled citizenship outcome. The UAE case illustrates why limbo legal statuses are a useful political strategy – limbo statuses provide political elites with a means of evading larger impasses about the boundaries of the national body politic. Such national dilemmas emerge when there is a contestation among competing domestic political actors over the incorporation of ethnic minorities, refugees, or labor. In such cases, policy-makers often find it more politically expedient to postpone the larger questions about belonging and address the more immediate issues of identity management by creating short-term, renewable legal statuses.

This is because when it comes to issuing documents to resident populations, ruling political elites face two (often competing) dilemmas or pressures. The first is the national dilemma, or the question of who should be considered a citizen. The second is the security dilemma, or the question of effective identity management that allows authorities to fortify their territorial borders and control which populations should gain access to particular services and rights within the territory. On the one hand, liminal and ambiguous citizenship statuses are politically strategic because they allow decision-makers to address the national dilemma through deferral. This strategy allows ruling elites to ignore minority groups and placate competing factions that seek to expel or incorporate a specific population by postponing rather than resolving the issue. On the other hand, irregular legal statuses produce identity

management challenges for a growing bureaucracy – as the UAE has developed as a federal state, private and public institutions do not know how to process people who are not citizens nor guest workers. The innovation of offshore citizenship addresses both of these dilemmas by continuing to postpone the national inclusion of this domestic population, while artificially documenting them as "foreign residents" who can fit into the UAE's extant binary population categories of citizens and guest workers.

Conditional inclusion has advantages for the state over full inclusion or expulsion. In the UAE case, incorporation would make this indigenous population eligible for the robust monetary and social benefits of Emirati citizenship. There are different levels of incorporation experienced by the local resident population in the UAE. At the formation of the federal state in 1971, some resident populations became full Emirati citizens, with access to not only a passport but also the more important *khulāṣat al-qayd* (family book) document, whereas others only had a passport or local forms of identification (including birth certificates or driver's licenses issued by individual emirates). Only the Emirati citizens who have family books issued by the federal government can have access to the robust resources associated with citizenship. This includes free healthcare (including specialized treatment abroad) and education (including higher education locally and abroad for specific degrees). The government subsidizes housing for citizens through housing projects, land grants, and zero-interest home loans. Citizens are exempt from taxes, including income taxes, property taxes, or the "housing fee" that noncitizens must pay. Citizens are also eligible for free or discounted utilities (gasoline, electricity, and water), as well as social security/retirement funds, unemployment benefits, child support, marriage grants (to supplement wedding costs), and single-parent financial assistance. Citizens may also apply for food subsidies, earnings from food co-ops, and free parking permits. It is difficult to calculate the exact amount that each citizen costs the state because costs vary between male and female citizens, the costs of different benefits vary greatly, and some benefits are recurring (such as subsidized utilities) whereas others are sporadic (such as land and marriage grants).[9] Citizens also benefit from national quotas and nationalization policies in the private sector, as well as the right to work in the public sector. Indeed,

[9] According to one estimate calculated by Kenneth Wilson from Zayed University in 2007, the average male Emirati receives benefits worth about 204,000 dirhams ($55,500) per year (*Economic Times* 2007).

government employment is a key rent-sharing tool and material entitlement that can lead to over-bloated bureaucracies and underemployment. As Joppke aptly describes, "a better description of Gulf State social citizenship would be the 'right *not* to work,' because work is what migrants do" (2017: 389). Citizens also benefit from sporadic influxes of increased income or cash "gifts."[10]

It should be noted that citizenship in the UAE is highly stratified, and even before the creation of offshore citizens, not all citizens had equal access to these benefits. There were (and continue to be) important internal hierarchies among UAE citizens (Jamal 2015). As Dresch and Piscatori (2005) explain, "there are three strata: Abu Dhabi citizens, the citizens of other emirates and citizens by naturalisation (*mutajannasīn*)" (143). Abu Dhabi citizens are routinely privileged over the citizens of the other emirates when it comes to the material benefits of Emirati citizenship and access to superior jobs. And all naturalized Emiratis, even those who now have family books, are lower on the totem pole. A naturalized citizen carries evidence of this change of status on their family book and passport, and this status is transmitted over generations. In other words, "not only are wives of a naturalized citizen (*muwāṭin b-il-tajannus*) themselves naturalized citizens unless Emirati by male descent, but the children of a naturalized citizen are naturalized citizens (*mutajannasīn)* in turn, and so on, presumably through the generations. They never become fully Emirati" (Dresch and Piscatori 2005: 143). Naturalized citizens can never be appointed to office, and they may also have their status revoked if they are considered to be a security threat.[11] This stratification of citizenship is not unique to the UAE; Longva's (1997) work on citizenship in Kuwait, for example, highlights how important such degrees of citizenship are to the redistributive politics of rentier states.

By stratifying access to identity documents, governments can strategically redistribute the robust benefits associated with citizenship in rentier

[10] The minimum wage of public sector employees was raised in the aftermath of the Arab Spring protests. It more recently increased again with a bonus payment to all public sector employees in celebration of 2018 as the "year of Zayed" (marking 100 years since the birth of the founder of the nation, Shaikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan).

[11] The federal nationality law states that no naturalized citizens would "have the right of candidature, election or appointment" – circumscribing (already limited) political rights to the individuals who were incorporated in the founding national pact and can trace their lineage to 1925. This clause comes from article 13 of Federal Law No. 17 for 1972 Concerning Nationality, Passports and Amendments Thereof.

states. While domestic minorities in the UAE could previously gain access to some benefits of Emirati citizenship when they carried local documents, the identity regularization drive and issuance of new national biometric IDs has since foreclosed that possibility. The Union of Comoros passport recipients are not eligible for any of the benefits associated with Emirati citizenship. And they also can no longer act as national sponsors for noncitizens.[12] See Table I.1 for an overview of the rights associated with citizenship statuses in the UAE.

Conditional inclusion is strategic because while denials prevent people from residing in the country, by contrast delays enable the state to legalize certain dimensions of a population's residency (such as labor) without allowing those individuals to accrue full citizenship rights. Limbo statuses thus deprive people of claimant rights – the right to state resources and social benefits, the right to own property, voting rights (when applicable), and the right to all other rights guaranteed under the country's rule of law for citizens. If, as Sadiq (2005) shows in his work on Malaysia, central governments can strategically count noncitizen residents (including "illegal" immigrants) as citizens for the purposes of political gerrymandering, then this case demonstrates how a central authority can strategically count would-be citizens as noncitizen residents for the purposes of economic gerrymandering.[13]

While the UAE's federal government can reap economic benefits by excluding domestic minorities from Emirati citizenship, the postponement rather than explicit denial of these cases is politically strategic. The outright denial of the right of these populations to gain Emirati citizenship would create several problems for the federal government in Abu Dhabi. First, since the people in this limbo zone carry local identity documents but are missing the key federal nationality document (the family book), the formal denial of these citizenship cases would mean that the rulers of Abu Dhabi do not recognize the historical right of the rulers of the

[12] Chapter 6, Section 6.6 provides a longer explanation of the differences between carrying a Union of Comoro passport versus a local ID.

[13] Sadiq's research on the region of Sabah shows how authorities from the central government in Malaysia collaborate with their regional partners to utilize census practices and documentation to incorporate an "illegal" immigrant population from the Philippines. Despite their "illegal" status, immigrants are able to use the census by giving self-reports that deny their residency status and also obtain local IDs that subsequently function as a proof of citizenship. In this way, by tempering of the boundaries of the citizenry at the subnational level, officials from the central government and ruling party are able to enfranchise "illegal" immigrants, while disenfranchising poorer minorities who are citizens (but do not have documentation), to more effectively consolidate political control.

TABLE 1.1 *Rights associated with legal status in the U*

	Citizen (with family book)	Local ID or passport (no family book)	Offshore ci (Comoros pass UAE foreign r visa)
Social	• Public primary, secondary, and higher education • Direct and indirect subsidies for families: housing, marriage, childcare • Subsidized utilities • No housing fees • Preferential employment policies (quotas) • Can sponsor noncitizens	• Public education (primary & secondary only) • Public healthcare • Some subsidies at the local level • Cannot receive a national ID card • Access to national-level subsidies foreclosed after introduction of national ID card	• No public education • No health • No longer eligible fo employme • Can no lo sponsor zens (inclu eign spous
Civil	• Freedom of speech, except against the rulers or perceived support for Islamist groups	• Freedom of speech, except against the rulers or perceived support for Islamist groups	• Freedom except ag rulers or support Islamist g