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Borders and Belonging: Everyday Responses to the Regulation of Space in the Early 20th-Century Persian Gulf

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In the 19th century, people moved around the Persian Gulf with relative ease. There was no formal regulation on movement and the primary concern was safety on the water and protection from other groups. In this atmosphere, peoples' relationship to space was related to where they were safe. The 19th century-Gulf had been a space of many layers of protecting authorities. The port towns had long existed under what historian Sugata Bose called "layered and shared sovereignty," controlled by local rulers and contested by regional actors, while simultaneously being claimed by multiple empires.

The meanings of sovereignty and protection began to shift significantly when the British started contracting protection treaties with the sheikhs of the Gulf throughout the 1800s. Although they did not outwardly make claims to the sheikhs' territory, by assuming charge of the external affairs and foreigners, the British were slowly shaping new meanings of territory and space. Along with the protection of borders came the regulation of borders. In this very fluid space that people were used to moving around freely, the regulation of space infused movement with new meaning.

This talk looked specifically at the movement of Iranians between 1900-1940. As the most visibly mobile group of people during this time, I showed how regulations attempted to connect their belonging to a specific territory, and how they responded to those regulations. One form of regulation discussed was traveling passes. I compared the language of Iranian *'ilm-o-khabar* (internal traveling passes) with British Certificates of Identity. The Iranian passes were most interested in asserting which territories were a part of Iran, while the British passes focused on the identity and subjecthood of the traveler. I also discussed how even the logistics of obtaining passes rearranged space by requiring people from villages along the coast to go to major trading centers where there were government offices in order to legally cross the water. So while the border technically existed along the entire coast, only a few spots existed where one could legally and officially cross. This meant that people became much more acquainted with the Iranian government and were forced to think about their relationship vis-a-vis different political authorities.

I gave a couple of different examples of how Iranians responded to these encroaching regulations. One man in Kuwait at times represented himself as Kuwaiti and other times as Iranian. He did this in order to appeal to different governments for help in resolving some debts

that were owed to him. I also showed how one very prominent businessman was confused by the need for a pass to enter Bahrain because he was “ma‘ruf” (well-known) there. Finally, I highlighted testimonies of men detained in 1938 for failure to produce a traveling pass to show that despite the attempts of regulations to situate individuals’ belonging in a single territory, this way of thinking hadn’t permeated everyday people. While the British evaluated their belonging on the basis of language, property, work, and documentation, they could not understand why they didn’t belong. One participant noted the similarity between the sentiments expressed by the detainees in 1938 and the current Bedoon populations (stateless population) in the region: we belong here because we are here.