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Refugees Magazine

## Refugees Magazine Issue 147 ("The Excluded: The strange hidden world of the stateless") - The Bidoon

by Abeer Etefa and Astrid Van Genderen Stort

The Bidoon, who are scattered across the Gulf States, are sometimes confused with the Bedouin. Some of them actually are Bedouin by origin, but other Bidoon originate from

Iran, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States – and even from Zanzibar. In fact, their name – which means "Without" in Arabic – is a direct reference to their statelessness. They are the people left without a nationality when Kuwait became independent in 1961, followed by Bahrain and Qatar and the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971.

"This was a major trade route and many merchants were moving back and forth," explains a UAE expert on the Bidoon. "Some settled down and others were moving constantly. At that time there were no borders, no passport control and no system of registering and recording births. It was a tribal system."

No one knows for sure how many people became Bidoon when the various Gulf States set up their registration systems and established their country records. In the UAE, estimates range from 15,000 upwards. In Kuwait, the official number is 91,000, and there are very rough estimates of up to 70,000 stateless people in Saudi Arabia, but no official figures.

During the early years, life for the Bidoon was generally not too difficult. However, the huge number of migrant workers required to service the rapidly expanding economies of the oil-rich Gulf States, meant that the indigenous populations were soon very much in the minority – and as a result the issue of citizenship became extremely sensitive.

Matters were complicated further – especially in Kuwait – by the Iran-Iraq war and Saddam Hussein's 1991 invasion of Kuwait. The loyalties of the Bidoon were called into question. Some, indeed, ended up in Iraq after the war, and remain stateless there. The difficult situation of the Bidoon in Kuwait is the subject of continuous debate. Kuwait's government and parliament have both expressed their desire to find solutions, and efforts continue in that direction.

Although the issue remains sensitive, one state after another has started to take measures to at least alleviate the problem, if not yet to solve it fully. The pioneer was Bahrain: in 2001, the government there naturalized 2,090 Bidoon, who were of Iranian origin but no longer had any links with Iran.

Then in October 2006, the UAE issued directives aimed at finding solutions for the Bidoon. The Supreme Federal Council, which is comprised of the rulers of the seven Emirates that make up the UAE, gave the green light for the naturalization of the first group of 1,294 people. A total of around 10,000 Bidoon should benefit by the time the process is completed.

Abou Ali is 44 years old, and is employed by the UAE government. Despite being one of the better-off Bidoon in the Gulf, he was still thrilled to be among the first group who received their citizenship in January. "The day I was called in for naturalization by the authorities is a day I will never forget," he said, during a recent interview in a Sharjah cafe, "After many years of living here, and at times feeling lost, my ship has finally arrived to a port. This country is my past, present and future, and the future of my four children."

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