Chapter 2
Kamak Worlds: "We do Business, We're not Migrants!"

Baniyas Square

Jovid was the first Tajik I met in Dubai. A 28-year-old man from Gharm, a mountainous region in northeast Tajikistan, he had been working in Dubai since 2007, mainly as a small-scale entrepreneur in the second-hand car and spare parts business he ran with his older brother between Dubai and Dushanbe. Shortly before we met, Jovid had moved into formal employment and begun working in the lower management of an Arab real estate enterprise. Jovid was chosen to pick me up from the airport because he had access to his boss's car. On a very early mid-November morning in 2013, after a long arrival procedure at the airport, he brought me to my hotel in Dubai Deira, the Emirate's historical city center where the majority of the Tajiks I would later meet worked and resided. After handing over my luggage to the porter in the hotel lobby and making sure that my room was in order, Jovid apologized, because on that day he had to carry on working. He recommended me to Fazliddin, a close friend he knew from their days studying Islam together at Cairo's al-Azhar University, suggesting I should go and see him as soon as I had recovered from my journey. "But how do I find him?" I asked, quite exhausted and somewhat confused. Jovid told me not to worry: "Just go to Baniyas Square. Many Tajiks are there, doing business with furs (Russian *shuba*). Everyone there knows him. Just ask for 'the *shaykh*'".[23]

The area around the metro station, Baniyas Square (also called al-Nasser Square[24] by Dubai residents, taxi drivers, tourists and some of the Tajik street worker I met), offers a complex ethnic and cultural mix shaped by past and pre-

23 This chapter assembles the core statements of two recently published articles: "Playing Cosmopolitan: Muslim Self-fashioning, Migration, and (Be-)Longing in Tajik Dubai business Sector", by Manja Stephan-Emmrich, *Central Asian Affairs* 4/2017: 270–291; and "Crossing Economic and Cultural Boundaries: Tajik Middlemen in the Translocal 'Dubai Business' Sector", by Manja Stephan-Emmrich and co-authored by Abdullah Mirzoev, In *Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality Beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus*, ed. by Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philipp Schröder, Open Book Publishers: Cambridge, 89–117.

24 Jamal Abd el-Nassar Square is close to the Dubai underground station of Baniyas Square.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111343518-005

sent commercial, trading, and migration circuits (Elsheshtawy 2010)[25]. After a few hours' sleep and a small breakfast in my low-budget hotel run by a middle-aged man from Pakistan, I stepped out onto one of the main roads that traverse the area around the square. I was immediately surrounded by various types of street noise and the hustle and bustle of people, voices, and smells that meshed with the growing heat of the day and a striking multicultural atmosphere, matching what has been described in recent literature on the Gulf as 'transient cosmopolitanism' (Elsheshtawy 2020) or as 'superdiversity' in recent studies on migration, social complexity, and diversification (Vertovec 2023). My entry point into the historical part of the city, Baniyas Square, became my main field site for the next two months. Immersion in the daily life of this place essentially framed how I experienced, sensed, and understood Dubai through the lens of the everyday life experiences of the Tajiks who worked and lived there in the early 2010s. Here, I arranged multiple street and lunchtime talks with Tajik street workers (*kamak*) and middlemen. From Baniyas Square, I made my explorations into other parts of the city and returned after visiting Tajik families residing in the neighboring emirate of Sharjah.

Fig. 3: Street scene at Baniyas Square. Photo: Manja Stephan, 2013.

25 See also "Baniyas Square: A Concise History", by Yasser Elsheshtawy, https://baniyas-square.tumblr.com/post/61214079728/baniyas-square-a-concise-history, last access 22 December 2023.

The cosmopolitan character of this part of the city, stretching to Dubai Creek side, developed out of transregional and transcultural commercial ties, migrant flows and trading networks spanning Iranian port cities and continental markets in and across the Indian Ocean (Vora 2013; Osella and Osella 2012; Elsheshtawy 2010). Accordingly, large numbers of international trading, cargo, and shipping companies have set up their offices in Dubai Deira. With their eye-catching, multilingual advertising signs, these companies shape Deira's cityscape. Labor migrants mainly from South Asia working in nearby construction sites filled the square in the evening, relaxing from their work as the heat gave way to a pleasant nighttime coolness. By day, in contrast, plenty of street brokers, traders, shopkeepers and porters from South and Central Asia, Africa and the Caucasus, as well Arab, Afghan, and Iranian businesspeople and merchants would be seen filling the streets or eating in the dozens of ethnic food stalls and cafés that dotted the square and led the tourists to the invitingly polished facades of McDonalds and KFC.[26]

Following the literature on Dubai, the area around Baniyas Square is representative of the transformations that have altered Dubai from a small fishing village to an international business and tourist city (Elsheshtawy 2020; Elsheshtawy 2010, 90). Historically, Deira district was the major commercial center of Dubai. However, as revenues from the oil industry and tourist sectors soared since the late 1990s, Dubai expanded from a mere two square kilometers in 1950 to the 1,000 or so square kilometers of today. In 2015, the official city center moved to Sheikh Zayed Road and the Business Bay districts, with their high storied commercial buildings and spectacular tourist sites. Deira however remained one of the main business centers, catering to low- and middle-income groups, and became a major dwelling area for migrant workers and other foreign residents from Asia and Africa. The latter work on construction sites, in hotels, in the care sector, the sex industry, and the city's many malls and markets, or as street vendors.

The area around Baniyas Square is also a popular destination for Gulf tourists. Here, among other visitors, well-off Russians, Eastern Europeans and Central Asia's new urban middle-classes, mostly from Kazakhstan, had access to a wide variety of shopping malls, traditional markets, popular fashion shops, brands, and restaurants. Additionally, there was an extensive selection of electronic, cosmetic, jewelry, and toy stores. Most of Dubai's fur coat shops were also situated here and attracted tourists with their sparkling modern showrooms. As the meeting place of Dubai's vibrant trading and tourism sectors, Baniyas Square formed the spatial center of Dubai's fur business when I did my fieldwork there in 2013 and 2014.

26 For more information on Dubai Deira see Yasser Elsheshtawy (2008, 978 ff.) and Michaela Pelican (2014, 255 – 309).

Thus, most Tajiks worked in the Russian-speaking tourism sector, where they favored engaging in the fur business together with other Central Asians, Caucasians, and people from Sub-Saharan Africa. The fur coat market began to flourish in Dubai Deira in the 1990s, when Russia's new urban middle class discovered the United Arab Emirates as a luxury holiday site and a place for conspicuous consumption.[27] Equipped with Russian language skills and the shared historical experience of being part of the former Soviet Union (*shakhrvandhoi shūravī*), many Tajiks followed the influx of new tourism and engaged in the fur business tailored to the needs of Russian-speaking tourists. While some Tajiks became traders, purchasing fur coats in China and bringing them to Dubai, others found work as shop vendors selling Chinese fur coats in Dubai Deira as faked Greek products.[28] Most Tajiks in Dubai, however, found their way into street work and became *kamak*[29]. The Greek term *kamak* originally designates commissioners, who like Fazliddin and his friends introduced potential customers (here tourists from Russia and other CIS[30] countries) to a specific business (here, the fur coat shop they worked for) and in return received a commission of 10–15% of the total sale from the shop owner. Since the fur business in Dubai is historically closely connected to Greek's fur business in the Byzantine and Ottoman empire as well as later in post-Soviet Russia[31], the term *kamak* only refers to commissioners working in the fur coat trade.

Due to the high density of hotels frequented by Russian visitors and the presence of many Central Asian and Caucasian dealers, Tajiks jokingly referred to Ba-

27 After Saudi Arabian and British tourists, the ex-Soviet Russian-speaking states provided the third-biggest group of tourists in Dubai. For instance, in 2007 about 300,000 Russian tourists visited Dubai, see https://thearabianpost.com/TAP/2015/09/dubai-hopes-to-see-return-of-russians.html and http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/dubai-s-fur-business-feeling-the-heat-1.1484942 (accessed October 9, 2016).

28 It was a common and profitable business practice for Afghan and Iranian fur shop owners to have furs imported from China and the label 'made in Greece' sewn in by Dubai-based sewing factories to attract Russian tourists in the emirates, in particular. A centuries'-old tradition, Greek furs were famous during the Byzantine and the Ottoman empires and served the Russian market, especially; see https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/02/22/387757419/a-greek-city-nervously-watches-its-fur-trade-falter, last access December 22, 2023.

29 Due to the undocumented status of *kamak* workers, there are no statistics or official figures about them. The number 300 to 500 reproduces my main Tajik interlocutors' estimation of Tajik *kamak* workers working around al-Nassar Square in Dubai Deira between 2010 and 2014.

30 Commonwealth of Independent States.

31 See https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/02/22/387757419/a-greek-city-nervously-watches-its-fur-trade-falter, last access December 22, 2023.

niyas Square as *mini Cherkiz bozor* in the style of Moscow's erstwhile biggest urban market.[32] Like those from other post-Soviet countries, Tajik *kamak* workers had their own particular gathering points. These followed the spatial allocation of the Dubai fur business along ethnic lines, which were, however, dynamic and flexible enough to be temporarily transgressed or suspended in case of a joint business deal.

At one of these gathering points I eventually found Fazliddin. He was standing with a group of other street brokers at 'their corner', where they waited for clients next to a well-attended mobile phone shop and near to the apartment in which he and the other Tajik *kamak* people surrounding him resided. Holding a rosary in one hand, he was looking for customers while simultaneously chatting with a Tajik vendor who had come out of the mobile store for a short cigarette break. At the time of that very first encounter I did not yet know that Fazliddin, with his extended *kamak* network, would become one of my main interlocutors during my fieldwork in Dubai. I also did not yet know that 'his' street corner would serve as a core meeting point with Tajik *kamak* people throughout my fieldwork. I also did not know at that time that I would visit Fazliddin and his family a year later in his natal village near Dushanbe and stay in contact with them until today.

30 years-old Fazliddin had been working in the fur business since 2010. Like his friends Jovid and Abubakr (the man standing next to him and one of his closest friends), he was married and had two children who lived with their mother on his parents' farm in a small village in the countryside near Dushanbe. Fazliddin was a sojourner, coming to Dubai during the Russian tourist season from October to March, trying to make as much money as possible to forge ahead with the construction of his own house near his father's residence. The youngest of three sons and two sisters, Fazliddin married early. He was the only son to try going to university, but he quit after a year due to a lack of motivation and his concern that a career in journalism would be hopeless in terms of being able to feed a family. While his brothers got by driving cabs and carrying out various small jobs in Dushanbe, he made it into business life in Dubai through the help of his friend Jovid, whom he met during his studies at al-Azhar University.

All three friends were former Azharites who dropped out of university early. Jovid, who studied Quran (*al-qur'ān*), Quranic exegesis (*tafsīr*), and the traditions (*ḥadīth*) between 2007 and 2009, had difficulties coping with the high learning workload. Fazliddin, who started the same subjects in 2008, had more endurance

32 Cherkiz bazaar was one of the biggest international bazaars in Moscow, where many Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Azerbaijani migrants worked, until it was closed by the city administration in 2008.

than his friend but eventually gave up his plans to get a degree in Quranic studies when, in 2010, President Rahmon launched his campaign to call back Tajiks studying Islam abroad without being registered (see chapter one). Fazliddin, who like many of his Tajik fellow students traveled to Cairo without an official registration through the State Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA, Tajik *kumitai dinī*), did not want to endanger the good social reputation of his father, who had worked in the higher public service before retiring. Abubakr, originating from Khujand, who had also traveled unregistered to study in Cairo, on the other hand, had to quit because his father had suddenly died. As the eldest son in the family, he took over his father's position and was forced to earn money. Returning home without a diploma but with basic Arabic language skills, a sound Islamic knowledge and lots of social contacts resulting from their study time, the three former Azharites eventually found their way into Dubai's fur business. How exactly they managed this is illustrated in the following sections.

Zooming in on the lifeworlds of Tajiks who, like Fazliddin and his compatriots, worked seasonally as street brokers, this chapter illustrates how former students of Islam turned into core economic agents in Dubai's fur business sector. Thus, a major focus is on how they capitalized on their study-based networks and travel knowledge to gain a foothold in Dubai's fur business. This is linked to my broader interest in understanding how Tajiks both made and experienced Dubai as a meaningful place – a Muslim place – through the work they did, the business networks they became involved in and the places they resided. Tracing the working careers of former students of Islam, this chapter sheds light on how it came about that Tajiks, as circulating narratives about Dubai migration claimed, had become more pious in Dubai's multiple business worlds. Finally, by tackling the nexus between Islamic knowledge, religious authority and piety, the chapter provides an entry point into the religious economy of Dubai business life as it was co-shaped by Tajiks, followed by a more detailed discussion about the relation between work and piety in chapter three.

Providing a particular Tajik perspective on the globalization of market, culture, and religion, and mapping migrants' multiple translocations in and across Dubai's multiple business worlds, three themes are salient: (i) middleman-ness as a cultural skill that built on as well as fostered Tajiks' economic mobility within and across multiple business fields and beyond ethnic networks; this mobility became possible through Tajiks' ability to connect Persian-speaking Muslim traders and dealers with Arab sponsors and Russian tourists; (ii) precariousness as a common migrant experience in Dubai and the way Tajiks coped with and made sense of it as part of their Islamic reform projects; and (iii) cosmopolitan sociabilities as key settings, in which Tajiks refashioned migrant identities and tried to overcome

the peripheral status they had internalized as 'illegal' economic actors in Dubai, as Central Asian migrant workers in Russia, and as deviant Muslims in Tajikistan.

Another associated topic covered in this chapter is the relationship between work and (the idea of) place. Tracing how Fazliddin and his friends navigated translocal economic, social, and political realities in relation to the circulating cultural imaginaries of Dubai as an 'economic paradise', an ideal Muslim place and a trope of possibility, the chapter illuminates how Tajik *kamak* workers made sense of the striking gap between the migrant expectations of Dubai, and the lived experience of the Tajik *kamak* workers there. As I will argue, Tajiks were clearly not just passive consumers of the social and material fabric of cosmopolitan and economically vibrant places such as Dubai Deira. They actively participated in turning Dubai, the Arab Emirates, and the wider Gulf into a Muslim place by engaging in the politics and practices of relational placemaking and belonging.

I will start with a short history of Tajiks' involvement in Dubai's business worlds. The individual economic trajectories I trace in this section point to the central role of assembled religious and commercial Muslim networks, which facilitate various forms of transregional activity (economic, moral, pious) above all in the context of extended ethnic belonging. The latter manifests in notions of 'Persianness' or 'Muslimness'; and based on these identity markers Dubai's business networks integrated Tajiks from multiple backgrounds while transcending kinship and residential and ethnic affiliations. The latter significantly structure migrant networks, lifeworld references, and access to labor market sectors in Russia (see Samadov 2023; Urinboyev 2017). This is followed by two sections addressing the possibilities and constraints of attaining economic mobility and prosperity within Dubai's formal and informal business sectors. The focus here is on how Tajiks coped with precarity resulting from multiple forms of dependency, uneven power relations, and uncertain working conditions, by moving flexibly between formal and informal economic sectors. In line with this, the ethnographic case studies presented will reveal that Tajiks are by no means a homogeneous group of economic actors to be subsumed easily into the category of 'Gulf labor migrants' – one category prevalent in scholarship about Gulf economies. Instead, I will look at the performative dimension of 'Persianness' and 'Arabness'; forms of belonging by means of which Tajiks connected themselves to Dubai and the wider Gulf in multiple ways. The last part of this chapter, which deals with the fashioning of migrant selves into cosmopolitan Muslim businesspeople, illuminates Tajiks' translocal positionalities (translocations) in and across business worlds shaped by uneven participation in processes of cultural and economic globalization.

This chapter takes into account that Tajik Dubai business is not exclusively but above all a man's world. As a consequence, the focus in this and the following two chapters is on male experiences and practices.

Tajik Dubai Business: Entangled Routes, Histories, Connectivities

Given the longstanding history of trade and commerce in the Gulf region, Tajiks are newcomers in the Gulf economy. Tajiks' entry into Dubai's multiple business worlds can be traced back to socio-political and commercial cross-border ethnic networks, both established and strengthened during the country's civil war, that broke out in 1992, officially ended in 1997 but continued to smolder into the early 2000s. The developments in Tajikistan outlined in the following coincide with Dubai's post-oil boom transformation into a dynamic transregional business and tourist hub, attracting above all high-income population groups from Central Asia and wider Eurasia.

In the mid-1990s, Tajikistan's political elite – mostly civil war warlords and military commanders allied with today's President Rahmon – discovered the Arab Emirates as an exclusive tourist destination, as well as a lucrative place for trade and real estate investment. Due to historically, economically, and culturally close relations with Tajiks in neighboring Afghanistan,[33] cross-border trade of luxury cars, smartphones, flat-screen televisions, and modern kitchen appliances began to flourish between the Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, including also markets in China and wider Central Asia (Marsden 2016b). The circulation of prestigious 'Dubai goods', which were labeled by traders and consumers as *dubaiskii*, was supported significantly by the well-established transregionally active Afghan trading community, which hold close connections with the longstanding Afghan and Baluch diaspora and the local Persian-speaking population in the Gulf and wider parts of West Asia (Marsden 2021 and 2016b; Elsheshtawy 2010, 75 ff; Parsa and Keivani 2002). These transregional connectivities became a further drive, when Tajikistan's president Rahmon officially visited the United Arab Emirates for the first time in December 1995 in order to establish bilateral relations in the fields of political, economic and cultural cooperation as well as in the health and environment sector.[34]

33 Tajiks and Afghans share a long history of cohabitation, kinship relations, and exchange. Even during the Soviet era, many Tajik families continued to maintain close relationships with kin across the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the succeeding civil war in 1992, several thousand Tajiks fled to neighboring Afghanistan. Because of their Persian language, their shared history of Persian Islamic tradition, and historical border-crossing mobilities, Tajiks feel a strong cultural bond with Sunni Muslim Iranians, with the Baluch people in Iran, and with the Dari-speaking Tajik population of Afghanistan.

34 See https://mfa.tj/en/dubai/view/19/relations-of-tajikistan-with-united-arab-emirates, last checked December 21, 2023.

Facilitating social mobility and wealth, the multitude of commercial ties established with the Gulf region had accelerated the formation of a new economic elite close to the government, the 'new Tajik' (*Tojiki nav*), a new citizenry in the country, shared, like in other parts of Central Asia, by those who have found their place in the country's post-Soviet capitalist order (Trevisani 2014) as well as by those who maintained close family and other loyal relationships with the political elite. Building on the flourishing but rather exclusive Dubai business, the lifestyle of this new economic elite manifested in luxury multistory housing constructions, tourist trips to the Gulf, driving imported SUVs, and investing in the real estate market in the Emirates. In the early 2000s, many of these new rich owned urban markets and commercial centers in Tajikistan's capital city and maintained close relations with the leading Rahmon family. The new wealth in the country, along with the growing influx of prestigious consumer goods from Dubai sold in urban markets and shopping malls, led many other Tajiks to follow suit, fueling a Dubai boom that reached its apex in the mid-2010s (Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016).

Among those emulating this approach and helping to distribute Dubai's image as both an 'economic paradise' and a brand for global modernity were Tajiks like Fazliddin and his friends – mobile, well-educated, urbanly socialized young men, often equipped with degrees in international relations, law, economics, or journalism from national universities in the country. Many of them had worked in Russia before and studied Islamic subjects in universities in the Middle East. With multilingual proficiency, able to activate their study- and work-related networks in Tajikistan, Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other places in the Middle East, and getting support from relatives who fled the civil war to Afghanistan and later traveled through the Middle East as pilgrims, students, or migrant workers, this group of young, aspirational, and well-skilled mobile Tajiks turned into small-scale entrepreneurs, freelancers, or traders. As such, they significantly contributed to Tajikistan's 'bottom-up' integration into Dubai's transregional Afghan and Iranian-dominated trading and tourism business in the Arab Emirates from the early–mid-2000s on. While most of them worked seasonally in the fur business, others invested in cross-border businesses that linked Tajikistan's markets with a globalizing consumer culture, covering second-hand car and spare parts cargo business, electronics, household appliances, as well as fashionable Islamic clothing (Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018; Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016). Once businesses were firmly established, these individuals gave relatives positions as purchasing agents or local partners, thereby consolidating the transnational structure of their economic enterprises. This eventually allowed the most successful of them to save enough money to invest in translocal lifestyles that, combining work and piety in proper ways, matched their striving for reform-minded Islamic life projects abroad, even if only temporarily. Residing with their families in the

Arab Emirates, like Saidullah and his wife Mehrigul, whom we will meet in chapter five, they simultaneously remained bound to their natal home and invested in two futures, one at home, the other abroad. This relatively successful second generation of Dubai boomers have become role models for many youngsters in Tajikistan who, like themselves ten years before, hang on the grand narrative of bettering their lives and pursuing a career through traveling abroad. Co-shaping circulating stories of success, this second generation of Dubai businesspeople significantly formed the social imaginary of Dubai as an 'economic paradise'; i. e., a place of possibility for self-fulfillment that covered the realization of material well-being, social mobility, and, as we will see later, spiritual advancement; a spatial trope that became embodied in the figure of the 'big Dubai businessman'. The accompanying migration dynamics towards the Gulf experienced an institutionalization, however fragile, in the context of Dubai's fur business, but consequently led to dynamic changes in the social fabric. Around 2013, when I did fieldwork in Dubai and the third wave of Dubai boomers arrived on the street corners of Baniyas Square, the fur business had begun to undergo a process of ruralization and had started to lose its exclusive character.

Approaching Dubai business as a transregional spatiality, the configuration of entangled religious and secular networks that nourish this dynamic cross-cutting spatiality became manifest in the spatial biographies of the Tajik I talked to in Dubai. Thus, four aspects struck me most: first, the key role played by former al-Azhar students as connectors and brokers; second, the existing Cairo – Moscow – Dubai connection and the flow of people, goods, ideas, and knowledge between these three geographical sites[35]; third, the important role of relatives, above all the older brother (*barodari kalon*, *aka*), as migration channel to Dubai; and forth, the integrative nature of Dubai's business networks, which stand in sharp contrast to the ethnically, locally and regionally homogenous migrant communities in Russia.

In the second generation of Tajik Dubai boomers, who played a decisive role in shaping the various Persian-speaking business worlds in the Emirates in the early 2000s, former al-Azhar graduates in particular stand out as key nodes of connectivity. As to be illustrated below, in their quality as both economic actors and religious authorities they operated as intermediaries, brokers, or middlemen in the classical sense, as they connected people from their personal economic and reli-

35 It should be mentioned that other routes into Dubai's business worlds existed for Tajiks. Among them were travel routes to Dubai via Afghanistan, on the basis of civil war related mobilities and power networks, and via Pakistan and Iran, on the basis of Islamic study-based networks. See also Tunçer-Kılavuz (2014), Epkenhans (2016), Reetz (2017 and 2009). Since the majority of my Tajik research partners in Dubai were former al-Azhar students, the focus in this chapter is on the Cairo – Moscow – Dubai connection (see also chapter one).

gious networks. Dwelling in and crossing through multiple business worlds (tourism, fur coat, car spare parts, mobile phone) spanning Tajikistan, Dubai, Russia's Moscow, and Egypt's Cairo, they also became cultural translators connecting the Persian-speaking world with that of Arab speaking businesses in Dubai. Moreover, they recruited new *kamak* workers for the fur coat business, organized visas and accommodation, shared their travel and business knowledge and, as we shall see later, supervised newly arrived compatriots. People like Fazliddin, Abubakr, and Jovid contributed to the institutionalization of mobility flows between places in Tajikistan, Russia, Egypt, and the Arab Emirates. In this role, former students of Islam had also a great impact on the transformation of Dubai business life from an economic activity of high-skilled actors into a destination for chain migration, which has brought many inexperienced and uneducated Tajiks to Dubai, leading to social and cultural tensions and creating new economic uncertainties while simultaneously increasing the demand for flexible working careers (see more in chapter three). Eventually, the entanglement of economic and religious networks had contributed to a specific culture of Dubai migration largely based on individual positions in social hierarchies, for example within the family, the kin group, or in village or neighborhood structures (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2014, 422, 437; Roche 2014a). Apparently, older brothers (*barodari kalon*, *aka*) took over a key role in smoothing pathways into Dubai migration for younger siblings.

Jovid's entry into the world of Dubai business was down to the support of his family. After finishing secondary school, Jovid was brought by his older brother, an al-Azhar student at that time, to Cairo. The brother enrolled Jovid in an Arabic language course and later organized a place for him in a preparatory course for the study of *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth* at al-Azhar University. Two years later, Jovid took a break due to his difficulties with Arabic. Attracted by the accounts of other Tajik Azharites, who raved about Dubai as a great place to make money in a Muslim-friendly environment, Jovid decided to give Dubai a try. Again, the older brother helped him to get a visa for Dubai and a foothold in the fur and later cargo business by drawing on his own business contacts in the Arab Emirates. The brother was able to establish those contacts again with the help of Tajiks who, like Anorakhon and her family, whom we met in chapter one, had migrated to Cairo's Nasr City. In the Arabic language center where he studied in Cairo, Jovid met Fazliddin, who was preparing for the examinations for entrance into al-Azhar's study program together with other Tajiks. The two men became good friends. Later, when Jovid got used to working seasonally in Dubai, he brought Fazliddin to Baniyas Square. Fazliddin, who had previously been to Russia to work on a construction site during the university holidays, again helped Abubakr, whom he knows from Moscow, to find work in Dubai. He organized a visa, provided him with accommodation in his apartment, and integrated him into his existing *kamak* worker net-

work. Until Jovid's move to his new job in the real estate sector, these three men, all with a different regional background, were close business partners, sharing accommodation, clients, and revenues.

As this story of translocal connectivity and friendship further reveals, routes into Dubai's multiple business fields were also affected by the large flow of migrant workers from Tajikistan to Russia and the resulting vibrant diasporic life that has developed in Moscow and other cities in Russia since the early 1990s. But Russia's bazaars, construction sites, and migrant apartments not only provided a space for religious instruction and for re-negotiating Muslim identity and belonging (Oparin 2017; Roche 2014b). They also simultaneously formed hubs that fostered transcultural encounters and transregional connectivities, together with the exchange of travel and business knowledge. While Tajik Azharites draw on their social ties with fellow former students and the growing Tajik diaspora in Cairo,[36] labor migrants in Russia easily connected with Tajiks settling in Cairo through family networks. As a consequence, many Tajiks living and studying in Cairo worked seasonally in Russia too, due to the difficult working conditions in Egypt. Russia-based Tajiks in turn obtained visas for visiting or studying in Egypt through relatives in Cairo, eventually ending up working in Dubai with their support (Stephan 2013, 130–131).

Clearly, a vibrant space of exchange and the flow of people, knowledge, and goods had evolved between Tajiks in Egypt, Russia, and the Emirates, creating a horizon of possibility, and facilitating a dynamic configuration of working opportunities, study destinations, and multiple channels for trading businesses and knowledge flows. In this context, access to (sometimes faked) visa and residence permits that were obtained through local contacts and officials played a crucial role in enabling mobility within or across these networks. Therefore, the resulting translocal livelihoods were based wholly on rather unregistered modes of travel and migration, as the channeling routes led Tajiks first into Dubai's informal economy sectors, which operated outside the *kafāla* system of migrant sponsorship and regulation. These non-formalized routes and modes of mobility resulted to precarious travel and working conditions, which were accompanied by new economic uncertainties.

Tajiks embraced the informality of their working status in Dubai as a mode of flexibility that allowed them to gain economic autonomy from state and other regulating regimes not only in Dubai itself, but also in Tajikistan and Russia. This confirms that informal travel and work patterns, together with the translocalization of families and kin groups, have become the major modus operandi in the social and

36 About the growing Tajik diaspora in Cairo in the early 2000s see Chapter One.

economic afterlife of post-Soviet development, since the care for individual livelihoods has shifted from the realm of the protective nation state to a matter of individual and collective responsibility (Pine 2014). In that context, widely dispersed, translocal family and ethnic networks have turned into a major resource to cushion economic failure, to widen the horizon of possible future trajectories by pointing out new mobility options, and to facilitate the experience of wellbeing beyond economic success in the migratory context (Urinboyev 2017). As the spatial biographies I collected from Tajiks in Dubai reveal, translocally dispersed social networks and a resulting sense of connectedness, both favored the flexibility demanded by the neoliberal capitalist order and cushioned the related experience of uncertainty and insecurity. Tajiks who sought to escape from racial discrimination and structural exploitation in Russia came to Dubai, and those who failed economically in Dubai were able to go back to Russia any time, while those who refused to return to either Russia or Tajikistan could go to Cairo or to figure out new destinations for pursuing a 'good life' elsewhere. As Fazliddin, whom I asked about his mobile way of life and that of many of his countrymen, explained: "Mobility has become our way of life. It is simply normality. Since the state is too weak to support us, we look for own ways to survive. Fortunately, we Tajiks are everywhere!"

Doing Business with *Shuba*

For Tajiks, the main channel into Dubai's business fields was through becoming a *kamak* and doing business with furs, for which Tajiks used the Russian term *shuba.* Tajik newcomers in the fur business were introduced to Fazliddin's group in the same way that I was: 'just ask for the *shaykh*'. Based on ethnic, kin, neighborhood, or former classmate (*hamsinf* bzw. *hamkurs*) networks, the group of *kamak* street workers sharing the business within a street for one or more particular fur coat showrooms, provides a culturally cozy, or nested economic space (Finke 2013; Kirmse 2011). At the same time, belonging to a particular group of *kamak* workers simultaneously opened up various pathways into other fields of business through access to coworkers' personal connections (*aloqa*, or Russian *svyazi*). On a structural level, the key role of Tajik kamak networks confirms the blocked mobility thesis, which posits that economic environments shaped by informality, regimes of exclusion, and racial barriers in the hosting society produce unfavorable and limited labor market conditions for ethnic minorities. Accordingly, migrants' economic innovation, prosperity, and entrepreneurship are secured above all through ethnic networks (Rahman 2017).

Doing business with *shuba* (Tajik *kamakkunī*) was a temporary and circular business. Following the seasonal rhythm of the Russian tourism business in

Fig. 4: Fur stores on Baniyas Square. Photo: Manja Stephan, 2013.

Dubai, Fazliddin and his friends came as bachelors in November, stayed for several months, during which they resided in one of the multiple private apartments rent to migrants, traders and other non-Emirati residents or in low-budget traveler guesthouses in Dubai Deira, and then returned to their families in March. With the influx of Russian tourists, the fur business had evolved into a lucrative economic sector in Dubai because it enabled Tajiks to make a considerable amount of money in a very short time. Tajiks therefore arrived in Dubai with the expectation to make big and fast profits (*puli kalon*) and to accumulate as much money as possible to progress to a rather indeterminate future back at home. Simultaneously, a successful *shuba* business promoted a social status upgrade that Tajik *kamak w*orkers could convert into economic and social capital both in Dubai and at home. For instance, Azim, a former drug dealer and one of the fur business pioneers at Baniyas square, had done breathtaking deals that had enabled him to buy several apartments in top locations in Dushanbe city in just a few years. In that way, he secured the livelihood of his extended family back home in Dushanbe and was at the same time able to hold a pool position for himself in Dubai business life. Thus, he became the leader of a *kamak* group that he had working for him but also hedged economically through profit shares. Boasting of his tremendous achievements in Dubai's fur business, Azim embodied the ideal image of a 'big businessman' (*biznesmeni kalon*), combining economic success with social accountability.

Economic possibilities were there, but they were contingent, volatile, and unpredictable. *Kamakkunī* therefore also marked the precarious status that Tajiks had in Dubai's business worlds. Doing street work on the back of a tourist visa, which only allowed for short-term stays but did not include work and residence

permissions, Tajiks in the fur business worked 'off the books', that is, outside the Emirati sponsorship system (Arabic *kafāla*) that regulates migration and determines residence and work status and thus governs foreign residents' inclusion and exclusion (Damir-Geilsdorf and Pelican 2019). Although informal work meant a certain degree of economic autonomy and mobility, *kamak* workers always run the risk of being arrested and deported. In sum, like Fazliddin, Abubakr, the majority of Tajiks involved in the Dubai fur business did not fit into the category of labor migrants as contract workers. Instead, they are better described as economically driven 'perpetual visitors' (Nagy 2006), or 'sojourners' (Rahman 2017, 4), who operated as freelancers or small-scale migrant entrepreneurs. Since long-term residency was hard to obtain and required integration into the *kafāla* system, *kamak* work depended on middlemen and informal sponsors. In light of this, Tajiks working in fur business often acted in the gray zone between formal and informal, documented and undocumented work.

Corresponding to Dubai's image as a lucrative place where one can make big money in a short time, the working conditions Tajiks faced while working as *kamak* revealed the fur business as a highly volatile economic field shaped by the unpredictable fluidity of capital, and in line with this, a high degree of temporariness, transitoriness, and precarity. These conditions pertained to Tajik *kamak* workers' residence status but also described the highly uncertain prospects of economic profit. An elusive future was one concern that Tajiks shared with many other migrants involved in the Gulfian (post-)oil-based economy (Schielke 2020). Therefore, the continuous search for other ways to earn money and to secure one's stay in Dubai to the greatest extent possible often run parallel to everyday street work. As Abdullah, one *kamak* I regularly met at Baniyas Square, stated:

> Dubai is perfect for making big money in a short time. But there is no future here for us. Things change too fast – politics, living conditions. You live constantly with the expectation that tomorrow everything might be over. And you should be prepared for this moment, either to go back to Tajikistan or elsewhere. This is challenging, and I am tired of this situation.

As a strategy to cope with these unpredictabilities, the future moved to the center of Tajik migrants' imagination and hope. Many Tajik *kamak* workers in Dubai therefore invested in parallel futures, both in material and non-material terms. While saving their money for a better future at home, many Tajiks simultaneously engaged in constructive works of imagination, which were mostly centered around alternative pathways to progress. A creative exercise of imagination and movement through different temporalities, and a form of agency, daydreaming together with planning was a major way for Fazliddin and his group to pass the time while waiting for customers; it served as a common strategy to cope with dislocation, home-

sickness, and idleness. Following recent studies in the anthropology of hope and the future, performing boredom may open up new perspectives and possibilities to progress, as it emerges as "a distinctive ideology (…) that informs a critique of everyday life and values" and carries "a normative tenor of (…) self-realization" (Schielke 2015a, 43–44; see also Khosravi 2017). While hanging around with Fazliddin and his friends at 'their corner', I had many chances to join in their shared daydreams that centered around a good life in the future. Thus, we talked about unfinished house construction projects at home, long-desired good marriage deals, or sorted out opportunities to establish effective trading business between Dubai and Tajikistan that would allow bypassing the high trade taxes in Tajikistan (Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018, 107–109). Other street brokers, however, dreamed of getting a work contract and formal employment in Dubai so as to live in the Emirates with their families for a longer period. Most of them were driven by their wish to enable their kids to have a good education abroad, for instance Abubakr, "I would stay here, at least until our kids are grown up". Others in turn dreamed of earning so much money in one tourist season that they would never have to come back, and instead live a good and quiet (*zinadagii khub va orom*) life at home. Finally, dreams of progressing also appeared as the wish to improve one's own work situation. Owning or getting access to a car was a popular trope with Fazliddin and his friend.[37] Although it was a rather elusive goal, a car promised economic mobility as it connected Tajiks with more clients and hotels beyond Baniyas Square. It also enabled urban mobility for increased feelings of wellbeing by allowing for multiple leisure activities (see also chapter four).

In general, the discrepancy between what might be or is imagined and what actually is in real framed how Tajiks evaluated Dubai as a good place to live and work. These ambivalent and multilayered assessments were not only framed by material and discursive representations and regimes at work in Dubai. They were also substantively filtered through Tajiks' past experiences as labor migrants in Russia. During our early meetings, Fazliddin raved about Dubai as a good place in comparison to Russia, stressing the business-friendly atmosphere and the experience of feeling safe at the workplace: "Here, I don't have to be afraid of police checks. I can easily work with my clients in the street. Nobody comes here and takes my money." His statement contrasts strikingly with the street raids, which increased significantly after Dubai won the bid for World Expo 2020. However, Fazliddin's assessment confirms the experiences of other *kamak* people, who, despite their vulnerable status as undocumented street workers, stressed the absence of

37 On the significance of owning a car in a migrant context in Russia, see Rustam Urinboyev (2017).

risk of losing one's earnings through street crime, making profit more calculable. As for Fazliddin, Dubai's appeal as a business-friendly urban environment had attracted many Tajik migrants based in Russia, who had left their well-paid jobs in Moscow for a place of more public safety, but also for the sake of greater economic autonomy. This goes particularly for those Tajiks whose regional belonging made them vulnerable to economic marginalization at home. As a *kamak* from Gharm, stated:

> Moscow is a good place to earn money, because you can work on the basis of employment contracts. But you are not safe there. The streets are full of criminals and drunks. They attack you, rob you. On my way home from work I was constantly thinking 'Okay, something's going to happen to you today. Be careful' […] A particular evil is the police. They don't protect you, but instead take your money! […] I wanted to return home (from Russia to Tajikistan), but as a person from Gharm you cannot live a good life in Tajikistan these days.[38] If you have a good business, they come and destroy everything.[39] They even find you in Russia. That's why I came to Dubai. I don't have rights here and cannot move up in my job […]. But I am safe, and autonomous (*ozod*).

Fazliddin confirmed this articulated desire for freedom, not only in economic terms, but also in relation to state politics. His father had lost a high-ranking position in the civil service, along with the good social reputation that had afforded, after being accused of political infidelity to the system. This shock, along with the lack of future prospects in the state labor market, made Fazliddin decide to engage in the private economy:

> I won't work in the state sector. Never. I want to be free (*ozod gashta mekhoham*). A little bit of business (*biznes*) here, a little bit of trading (*tijorat*) there. Or owning a small shop in the city. As long as the business runs well and I earn some dollars, then I am satisfied.

Such statements map Dubai as "a real possibility of escape" (Kathiravelu 2016, 45) from street crime, but also an option to circumvent the arbitrary grasp of state power in Tajikistan (Thibault 2018), which comes along with corruptive and nepotic economic practices, as well as an option to evade exploitative work conditions in Russia.

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38 Gharm is a city and region in the Rasht valley, i. e., an area in the northern part of Central Tajikistan that was the hotbed of the opposition forces during the civil war 1992 – 1997. Accordingly, Gharmi people are treated with mistrust by the government, which is primarily from the Kulob region in the south, where President Rahmon also comes from. They are discriminated against and systematically marginalized on the labor market and in social life.

39 Here he refers to the powerful position of the Rahmon clan and the despotic regime they established in the non-state and informal economy sector in Tajikistan, see also chapter one.

While their status as undocumented street workers offered more freedom and autonomy than a formal employment contract does, Tajiks at the same time faced precarious working conditions in Dubai, as their undocumented status made them more vulnerable to being arrested and deported by the local police. Viewing Tajik's assessment of Dubai's working conditions through the conceptual lens of relational placemaking, Dubai was sensed to be a good place in relation to the working experiences they had made elsewhere. This explains why my Tajik research partners embraced the risks inherent in Dubai's fur business simply because these risks seemed much easier to handle than the arbitrariness, unpredictability, and fear of physical harm that characterizes migration regimes and the xenophobic society in Russia.

While initially praising Dubai as an ideal place to realize a working career in the private economy, later, when Fazliddin had become used to my presence, he started to complain about the working conditions in Dubai, emphasizing in particular his suffering from mental strain. For him, *kamak* work was not that physically hard compared to the work he had done for several years on a Moscow construction site. But the pressure to succeed, which intensified with Dubai's last debt crisis in 2009, which made sales in the fur trade increasingly difficult to calculate and thus uncertain, together with the increase in deportations of undocumented migrant workers from Central Asia, overshadowed the alluring image of Dubai as economic paradise and had caused many Tajiks in Dubai to think about alternatives to Dubai's fur business. Against this background, *kamak* work became emotionally challenging for Fazliddin. Days of waiting in vain for a good deal together with the constant danger of street raids and worrying about his people at home, caused Fazliddin to suffer from the tension caused by the striking difference between how he imagined Dubai as a good place before he arrived and the actual everyday experience of being there.

Aside from the unpredictability of success in the fur business, the socio-economic precarity Tajik *kamak* workers faced not only in Tajikistan and Russia but also in the Emirates reveals the 'fakeness' of migratory imaginaries and stories about Dubai as an ideal work destination. These stories obscure the everyday manifestation of social difference, polarization, and the structural inequality Tajik migrants have experienced in the Gulf as well as in the wider global capitalist economy (Elsheshtawy 2010; Mahdavi 2011).

This striking gap between expectation and experience, and the need for Tajiks to cope with it, obviously limited access to Dubai's business worlds. Furthermore, not everyone involved managed to progress. As the following sections reveal, economic and social progress relied heavily on access to cultural resources, as well as

on the ability to capitalize on them.[40] These cultural resources were, above all, multilingualism, social networks, cosmopolitanism, and, as will be elaborated in later chapters, religious authority through knowledge. Drawing on these cultural resources, many religiously trained Tajiks were able to cross over ethnic networks and explore new economic fields, providing more freedom but simultaneously creating new economic dependencies.

Crossing over *Kamak* Worlds: Becoming a Middleman

Wasim, aged 32, was working as a Russian tourist guide when we ran into each other in front of the mobile phone shop where I used to hang out with Tajik *kamaks* who worked for a nearby fur coat showroom. Looking for a new mobile phone battery for one of his clients, we quickly got into a conversation and arranged to meet later by Dubai Creek. Enjoying the cool evening air during a walk along the creek, I asked Wasim to tell me what moved him to come to Dubai. He promptly replied, "Well, everything started in Egypt." His entry into the tourism business took place in the late 1990s, during his studies in Cairo, when he recognized a business opportunity in the growing enthusiasm of Russia's new middle class to travel to the Middle East. To finance his private al-Azhar stay abroad, he sold mobile phones he bought in Dubai during his semester break to Russian tourists. However, a certain entrepreneurial mindset permeates his entire biography. His father, who worked as train attendant during the Soviet times, used his trips to Odessa and Kiev to get involved in incidental business buying and selling materials, shoes, and jewelry. "That's how I became familiar with the world of business, through my father." After completing his education with the highest grade ('red diploma'), Wasim went to Moscow, where he dealt in mobile phones

40 As a good illustrative example of this serves the specific position Uzbeks from Tajikistan held in Dubai business. People from that national minority group faced difficulties to be mobile within and across ethnic networks. As Tajik *kamak* workers told me, Uzbeks from Tajikistan were not able to gain a foothold in both Persian-speaking and Turkic-speaking business networks due to their ambiguous in-between affiliation. As some of them didn't speak Uzbek or spoke a specific dialect that revealed their different Uzbekness, they were not accepted by Uzbeks from Uzbekistan. As a consequence, they were dependent on their Tajik countrymen, who preferred to do business with Bukharians and Samarkandis; i. e., Tajiks from Bukhara and Samarkand. Uzbeks from Tajikistan therefore either built their own networks or tried to hide their Uzbekistani, i. e., national, identity. Another reason why Uzbeks from Tajikistan held a peripheral position in Dubai business was their late arrival in Dubai, i. e., not before 2008. At that time, Dubai's fur coat business was already divided between Tajik *kamak* workers and those from other Central Asian regions and Azerbaijanis.

and communication technology, and later ran two shops. He was able to save enough money to take holidays. Once in Egypt, he felt in love with the country and the people's Muslim culture and decided to stay and study Islam. He took courses in Arabic (Arabic *al-lugha al-ʿarabiya*), enrolled in al-Azhar's preparatory courses for studying law (Arabic *fiqh*), recitation (Arabic *tajwīd*), and exegesis (Arabic *tafsīr*), and worked on the side. The mobile phone business was going well until the Chinese took over the market. He then turned to the tourism market, bought a car and offered private sightseeing tours for Russian visitors to the pyramids. As well as being time consuming, the guide job hardly made any money. In the end, Wasim discontinued his studies, returned to Dushanbe, got married, and three years later, in 2005, started to get involved in Dubai's fur business. Like all other Tajiks I met in Dubai, he first tried it with *kamakkunī* in the fur business. But benefitting from his business experience in Cairo, he began early on to establish himself in the tourism business, too. Eventually, he left the *kamak* business, became a small-scale entrepreneur as tourist guide, and eventually also turned into a middleman. From his savings he bought a car and used his *kamak* networks to promote his private guided tours for Russian tourists to Abu Dhabi, Dubai Jumeirah, or the Indian Ocean. Since he maintained good connections to the Tajik *kamak* community at Baniyas square, he was able to offer transport services to fur shops further away, while occasionally did some decent business in furs himself, or he brought his own sight-seeing clients for shopping to one of the fur coat showrooms he once worked for himself. Simultaneously, Wasim cultivated good ties with Tajiks working in the Iranian-owned tourism market and mobile phone shops. This gave him the opportunity to provide his Russian clients, not only with fashionable fur coats, but also with the latest communication technology, or with sought after Dubai souvenirs.

At the time we met, Wasim was enjoying his economic situation. Combining middleman activities with entrepreneurship, he experienced a high degree of economic mobility and progress. This led to Wasim praising Dubai's neoliberal and business-friendly conditions, which allowed him to work toward his dream to set up his own tourism agency and bring his family to the Emirates. However, while he had already bought a family-sized apartment in the neighboring emirate of Sharjah, he also continued with the construction of a prestigious, three-story house for his family in his natal village on the outskirts of Dushanbe, which he started building when he left the petrol station he successfully ran with his friend in the city. When I asked why he invested all his money in two different life plans simultaneously, he replied: "The apartment is for now, the house for later, when I retire and my kids are grown. Maybe I can return home one day, when the situation in our country gets better." Like Wasim, many of the Tajiks I met in Dubai had given up their well-running businesses at home due to being targeted

by the government's arbitrary surveillance and regulation regime in the private sector (see also Thibault 2018; Öczan 2010). As these biographical accounts show, Dubai's furs and tourism businesses open up avenues for pursuing alternative economic interests, which would be otherwise suppressed at home.[41]

But the economic mobility and freedom Dubai's fur business offers to middlemen and entrepreneurs in particular, was neither permanent nor unlimited. During our meetings, Wasim repeatedly complained about the volatility of entrepreneurial success in Dubai. Coupled with Tajiks' general economic dependency on Russia, this allowed him to sense his own marginal position in the global economy. Once, I asked Wasim about his alternative plans in case he had to give up his businesses in Dubai. Referring to the unequal power relations that determined how Tajiks became involved in *kamak* business, he responded:

> Honestly, I don't have a plan. Not yet. In principle, I could go anywhere, as long as there are Tajiks. And we are everywhere (laughs). At home, in my neighborhood, there are now only old men. The young and middle-aged are all in Russia, working. We have been independent for

41 In the early 2010s, many entrepreneurs suffering from adverse conditions in the non-state economy had become attracted to Dubai's business-friendly environment. To run a successful business in Tajikistan, entrepreneurs must have informal 'access' (*kanal*), or 'connections' (Russian plural *svyazi*, Tajik plural *aloqaho*) to government officials. These costly connections and the linked corruption, together with the overall economic crisis in the country, had caused difficulties for entrepreneurs struggling to cover their business expenses. In addition, the decline of migrants' remittances due to the financial crisis in Russia in 2009 (the country depends heavily on remittances from migrants in Russia, which provided an equivalent of half of the country's GDP in the year of 2013, see World Bank Group report 2015, 12) critically affected Tajikistan's economy. Consequently, the government increased taxes and thus jeopardized small- and mid-scale entrepreneurial and business enterprises (Mullojonov 2016). The informal economy was additionally hampered by constant surveillance by local authorities and elites who tried to monopolize the trading and bazaar business. Fires in the central bazaars of both Dushanbe and Kulob destroyed many vendor' properties. Mainly uninsured, these vendors were ineligible for compensation for lost property (See http://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/incidents/20120314/damage-caused-qurghon-tepppa-s-central-bazaar-fire-estimated-312000-somoni, http://www.rferl.org/a/kulob-bazaar-fire-market-sahovat-shops/25465601.html, last accessed October 17, 2016). It is important to note that the insurance system in Tajikistan is neither well developed, nor do people trust in the system. Many of the affected traders used bank loans to reopen their business. Banks in Tajikistan offer loans at extremely high interest rates (In 2016, the bank rate was 29% to 32% for Somoni, and 22% to 35% for USD. See http://fmfb.com.tj/ru/legal/loans/), and they overburden borrowers with a lot of confusing bureaucratic paperwork. Ultimately, many vendors have transferred their business to the United Arab Emirates in order to pursue their economic interests without the pressure to get involved in corruption, the need to pay bribes or the high risk of being targeted by the government's arbitrary surveillance and regulation regime in the informal economy sector (see https://www.ukessays.com/essays/economics/barriers-to-entrepreneurship-development-in-tajikistan-economics-essay.php, last accessed October 17, 2016).

> more than 20 years. But still, our country is so dependent on Russia, economically, military. Working in Russia is an option, but a pretty bad one. All of my friends working there try to come here, to escape from Russia. Russians treat us badly. But wherever you go, you end up doing business with Russians, even in Cairo (laughs again). We are dependent on them. They feed us, with their money. Therefore, we follow them wherever they go.

However, due to his successful translocal business activities and the possibility of capitalizing on his entangled study and work-related networks in Cairo, Moscow and Dubai, Wasim was financially well equipped to not only dream but also materially invest in two parallel futures: one at home, connected with the hope of return if the living conditions in the homeland improve, and the other abroad in the hope of long-term employment and residency.

As a general observation, switching from, between, or combining being street broker, middleman, freelancer, or entrepreneur, many Tajiks in Dubai accepted precarity for the sake of promoting their entrepreneurial self. Hence, precarity – understood both as socio-economic condition and ontological experience – on the one hand describes Tajiks' translocal experience of ambient insecurity, uncertain futures, and risky mobile livelihoods in the Gulf. On the other hand, the term applies to processes of subjectification that rely on self-responsibility, flexibility, creativity, and yet a certain amount of opportunism (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006), which was facilitated first of all in economic fields that ran outside the Emirati *kafāla*-system, and that built on unregistered modes of travel. My Tajik research partners in Dubai embraced both the negative and positive components of precarity, as well as engaged in a certain optimism around the opening up of a possibility for entrepreneurship, social mobility, and a different mode of subjectivity (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006). Thus, precarity was both cushioned and made meaningful in the context of what I will in the following subchapter, as well as later in chapter five, discuss as cosmopolitan sociabilities; these are contexts of social interaction, exchange, and cultural translation, as they were produced in transregional Afghan, Iranian, and sometimes also Arab business networks and neighborhood spaces in the Arab Emirates.

Persianate-Muslim Business Hubs: Migrant Apartments

The multiple transregional connectivities, relations and positionings – economically but also culturally, religiously, and morally – that shaped Dubai business life when Tajiks got a foothold in it took on a spatialized form in the migrant apartments around Baniyas Square, where the majority of Tajiks I met in Dubai temporarily resided. As places of "entanglement, the meeting up of different histories,

many of them without previous connections to others" (Massey 2006, 50), in migrant apartments, Tajiks were involved in and shaped cosmopolitan sociabilities, enabling and promoting business connections, migrant solidarities, trust, and Muslim belonging. Dubai's migrant apartments were social hubs where Tajiks met business partners, exchanged business knowledge across cultural, national, and other boundaries, and got involved in new economic activities.

The area around Dubai Deira offered different categories of accommodation for migrants, travelers, and traders. While the low-budget and poorly equipped guesthouses were an affordable residence option above all for traders and business travelers with short stay, middlemen activities or employment in a Dubai-based company allowed for longer residency and enabled Tajiks to move to better-equipped guesthouses. Although more expensive, these apartments offered more space and comfort. The majority of *kamak* workers, however, dwelled in the low-budget, rudimentarily equipped, and often overcrowded two-four bedroom privately owned apartments around Baniyas square that were managed by a caretaker who was an interim tenant and who regulated tenancy and looked after the paying migrants.

Being male-dominated bachelor spaces, staying in migrant apartments as a woman was impossible. Accordingly, visits were possible only rarely and only when invited to communal lunch or dinner.[42] The Tajik accommodations that I was allowed to get to know were owned and managed by Afghans, who have specialized in renting three- or four-bedroom apartments in Deira's residential areas situated close to the main commercial zones.[43] An apartment manager was responsible for his tenants' safety, supervised keeping the house rules, and sometimes also stored and managed the migrants' cash income. Interim tenants also paid for a cook, often an Afghan as well, who was responsible for lunch and dinner, but also operated as the room cleaner and facility manager.

Despite the constant flow of people, most Tajiks working around Baniyas Square had a fixed place in one particular apartment, where they would stay during their trips to Dubai, often with other Afghan and Baluch traders and businessmen, or sometimes also Arab migrants (as we will see in chapter four), whom they had known for many years. Once, I was invited to lunch in Azim's apartment. When we arrived, about a dozen men were sitting relaxing around the *dastur-*

42 Otherwise, I stayed in hotels nearby or lived with the families of Tajiks residing longterm in apartments in the emirate of Sharjah.

43 Access to migrant apartments, where Tajik *kamak* workers resided in, was only possible thanks to the mediation and accompaniment of my doctoral student and research assistant Abdullah Mirzoev.

khon[44]; while carrying on their conversation, they waited for me – their guest – and the chef to serve the food. After doing business during the daytime, the roommates met in their apartment to share lunch and dinner. Eating and relaxing together, this time off from work created a social space for debating politics, economics, and religion-related issues. After we had Afghani *palow* with salad together, the chef served tea and heralded the gradual end of the communal meal. Some tenants left to retire or watch TV, others stayed with me at the dining table. After talking for a while about business opportunities and life in Germany, they switched to discussing trading conditions, prices, business contacts, and visa regulations, all more daily concerns. Later, they shared their latest family stories before we started talking about the living conditions for Tajiks in Dubai.

Access to guesthouses, as I learned from the person sitting next to me, a Baluch dealer who did business in expensive cars, requires trust. Relying on 'the right connections' (Tajik plural *aloqaho,* Russian plural *svyazi*), the Baluch man explained, may work as a gateway to favorable apartments. Even more, having access to financial resources, and bringing personal qualities such as reliability and a good social reputation, Tajiks were involved in a system of informal sponsorship that institutionalized the overlap between dwelling and doing business in Dubai. As a Tajik tenant from Dushanbe explained, to get permission to stay in the apartment, he needed to find someone to take responsibility for paying the monthly rent on his behalf in case he was not able to pay himself. Ideally, the informal sponsor would be running a sustainable business on the basis of long-term residency or a work contract with a Dubai-based company. Besides, gateways into an apartment-based residency in Deira were often business partners or relatives of the apartment owner. Capitalizing on their roommates', the apartment owner's, or the interim tenant's own contacts, Tajiks in Dubai engaged in networks of trusted familiars who might even share their business profits and their clients.

Preferences for Afghan-owned guesthouses were overwhelmingly articulated in cultural and religious terms. Thus, a sense of 'Persianness' Tajiks shared with Afghan landlords and traders, Baluch dealers, and Sunni-Iranian businessmen promoted a sense of belonging to an ethnically extended business community. 'We trade with whom we trust' was a core principle, ruling not only the Tajiks' Dubai business life. This principle first of all points to the importance of ethnicity- and kin-based business networks and the leading role family members played as ideal business partners because 'they would never cheat you'. However, the cultural proximity of Iranians from Baluchistan and Dari-Farsi-speaking Afghans rendered them "trusted familiars" instead of strangers (Osella and Osella 2012, 128).

44 A traditional Central Asian tablecloth spread on the floor and where food is served.

Belonging to the Sunni-Hanafi branch of Islam and possessing a shared Persian culture, literature, and history, Tajiks perceived Afghans, Baluch, and other Sunni Iranians as brothers (*barodar*) and claimed to belong to 'one people' (*yak millat*) sharing one historical-cultural identity. It was therefore no surprise that Tajiks considered Sunni Iranians and Dari-Farsi-speaking Afghans as closer (*nazdik*) than Turkish-speaking Central Asians or Uzbeks from Tajikistan. A shared sense of religious and cultural belonging and the related sense of cultural connectedness had a great impact on how Tajiks adapted to and felt they belonged to the city, integrated into Dubai's multiple business fields, and articulated unity, sameness, and constructed difference (see also Landa 2013).

In such a culturally nested economic environment, migrant apartment-based spaces of connectivity and connectedness with Dubai's Persianate-Muslim business world opened up a real possibility for Tajiks to progress both economically and socially, as well as to feel a sense of Muslim belonging. Cultivating relations with the established Afghan or Iranian diaspora community in Dubai, Afghans had an influential position in the Emirates' transregional trading business, but also in the real estate business and the growing middle- and upper-class tourism sector (see Elsheshtawy 2008; Parsa and Keivani 2002). For Tajiks, Afghans were therefore potential gateways to relations (Arabic *wasta*) around potential Arab sponsors (*kafil*) and, as such, an important prerequisite to upgrade one's status as an unregistered 'migrant' to a 'businessman' through moving within and across the informal and formal economy.

The well-established Persian-speaking business community in Dubai benefited from the Tajiks' role as social mediators, economic middlemen, and cultural translators. Based on their multiple language capacities, Tajiks connected their Persian-speaking business partners with Russian clients and Arab sponsors, as they recruited and expanded established trading businesses into new economic fields, as well as into new markets in Central Asia, Eurasia, Europe, and the United States.

However, when integrating into Persian-speaking business networks, Tajiks had to cope with existing business hierarchies, economic dependencies, and multiple other constraints they were faced with in their everyday life in the migrant apartments. Tajiks clearly dwelled in Dubai's business worlds as newcomers. In this position, they accepted, yet subordinated themselves to the often-claimed cultural superiority, business expertise, and religious leadership of Iranian business partners and room-mates. It was above all Iranian business partners who treated Tajiks like 'little Soviet brothers', who, due to their isolation from the wider Muslim community during the Soviet period, had a profound lack of cultural and religious knowledge. Accordingly, Tajik *kamak* workers sometimes complained of being the frequent targets of an aggressive religious and cultural proselytization. This is consistent with an incident I observed during a communal lunch in a mi-

grant apartment. Azim, the *kamak* worker who invited me into his apartment, and who had spent some years studying Islamic subjects in Riyadh, left the room when, in one of the numerous discussions after lunch, his Iranian room-mate boasted extensively of the cultural sophistication of Iranian people and their crucial role in shaping Islamic civilization. Later, when I asked him about his reaction, Azim explained: "Iranians always boast about their culture. I don't like it. (…) Also, I don't share his religious conviction (Arabic *'aqīda*). What he says about women in Islam, for example, is not right. But he's the best friend of my employer. So, I keep quiet, or leave if it gets too much for me."

While difference in Dubai's Persian-speaking business worlds clearly existed and were articulated through cultural and religious superiority and hierarchical business relations, Dubai business life did not create real ruptures with previous economic activities, Tajiks has been involved before in Tajikistan, Russia, or even Egypt. Instead, Dubai's vibrant furs, tourism and trading sector formed a pivotal spatial knot within a larger socio-spatial configuration, which was shaped by transregionally extended ethnic business networks. This allowed Tajiks to cross-over one's own kin- or ethnicity-based network's natural boundaries, as it enabled Tajiks to involve in the production of what Finke, in his study on the Kazakh minority in Mongolia, terms 'institutional coziness'. In other words, Tajiks co-shaped the institutional production of ideas about appropriatedness that included the longing for "a geographical and social environment with which one is familiar, knows the rules of the game, and feels at home" (Finke 2003, 178). This institutional, or cultural, coziness provided crucial channels into the Persianate-Islamic business world in the Gulf, as it allowed Tajiks to create new fields of economic activity, in which they realized economic mobility (see Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018, 102–103). In this capacity, Wasim and his friends made the interregional history of Dubai's merchant cosmopolitanism their own (Osella and Osella 2012; Ahmad 2012b), while they simultaneously became creative agents of economic and cultural globalization, when connecting hitherto separated business fields on the basis of their multilingual skills and study- and work-based transregional networks.

Working with Arabs

In a striking contrast to the everyday work realities as they were formed through Tajiks' involvement in Persian-speaking business worlds, Dubai was imagined, and desired, by my interlocutors above all as part of *Arabiston*, the 'Arab world', as described in chapter one. Based on Dubai's proximity to both the holy sites of Mecca and Medina in the Hejaz, and to the al-Azhar University in Cairo – this prox-

imity was nourished by multiple Muslim mobilities and connectivities across these places– the attributed Arab identity of Dubai reveals how Tajiks positioned themselves as Muslims in relation to the Middle East as the perceived center of Islam. This relational placemaking as a form of Muslim world-making simultaneously got inspiration from circulating media representations of Dubai's version of global Muslim modernity and political leadership that contributed to the branding of the Emirate as part of an emerging Arabian Gulf (Bromber et al. 2014, see also in the Introduction). Such media representations shaped migrant imaginaries in Tajikistan, Russia, and elsewhere. Meshing with the trope of an economic paradise, Dubai's image as an ideal migrant destination formed a crucial landmark in geographies of Muslim piety and belonging, in which mobile Tajiks located their Islamic reform projects.

To understand this paradox relation between migratory imagination and experience, we have to look at the role of cultural-geographical imagined Otherness that Arabs in Dubai were adhered to. In their narratives, Tajiks did not always differentiate between Emirati (Arabic *khalyji*) and other Arabs. Persianness was strategically cultivated as a form of cultural rootedness, or a historically-deep rooting Muslim belonging to a widely dispersed community of 'Persian-speakers' (*farsizabonho*), that provided economic mobility. Arabness, in contrast, appeared to be a multilayered notion condensing a wide range of religious and moral ideals, rather elusive, and was therefore highly desired to accumulate as symbolic capital in multilayered form, but nothing 'naturally' given or easily accessible. Regarded as equivalent with Islam, being Arab connoted *islomī* 'Islamic' (as similar to the case in Indonesia, see Lücking 2014, 37, 38) in terms of religious authenticity and origin as articulated in often used formulations like 'real' (*haqiqī*, *durust*) or 'pure Islam' (*islomi toza*). Following the conceptual link between spatial co-presence or proximity and *baraka*, the latter terms designates god's blessing Muslims hope to receive during their spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage, Arabness could be translated by Tajik Dubai migrants into social capital at home, as the respectful treatment of the Arab-educated young Dubai businessmen at a wedding in Dushanbe described in the Introduction to this book as shown (see also Lücking 2014, 39–40). But the symbolic capital adhered to Arabness also worked because doing business with Arabs provided channels into prestigious economic fields. Moreover, due to Emiratis' leading position in the social hierarchy of the Gulf, collaborations with Arabs promised access to the state and its legal(izing) bureaucratic institutions itself. This eventually allowed Tajiks to convert their status as undocumented migrants into that of legal residents. Finally, in terms of political utopia, Arabness was linked with an ethnocratic model of national statehood and ideal Muslim governance, which warranted wealth and elite status to a single ethnic – here Arab – group (Longva 2005). In spite of the reconstruction of Arabness as a national cate-

gory that excluded Tajiks, like any other foreign residents in the Gulf, from citizenship, Emirati leadership stood for development, esteem, and wellbeing in a Muslim-friendly environment, as to be discussed in detail in chapter four. As Karim in the introduction of this book confirmed, Emirati leadership and governance served Tajiks as a moral antidote to the governments' 'virtual policies' and its 'faked democracy' in Tajikistan (Epkenhans 2016; Heathershaw 2009).

As we can see, the symbolic capital inherent to Arabness as a rather elusive form of Muslim belonging worked in multiple ways to increase economic, social as well as religious status in the context of migration. In the sum of all these qualities, access to Arabs' business worlds was a desired way to get beyond ethnic networks and the power relations producing and underpinning them, and to traverse national and ethnic boundaries and therewith realize social mobility. However, while Arabs were at the core of Tajiks' work of imagination, hope, and desire, economic collaborations with them are seemingly rare, since the majority of Tajiks operated as economic actors outside of the *kafāla* system. A bureaucratic sponsorship system that regulates migration flows and residence status in the Emirates, *kafāla* is led by both protectionism and the absence of any attempts to integrate foreign residents into Gulfian society. Instead, it subordinates foreign residents to Emirati citizens, who often act as sponsors for economic enterprises initiated by foreign residents, in the process gaining a fixed share of their profits (Rahman 2017, 13 ff). Immigration, though, is not exclusively a state project, as often suggested in scholarship. As recent studies reveal, *kafāla* is an assemblage of diverse people and transnational practices, including state agents, institutions, and a wide range of private actors that manage migration and benefit from it. Accordingly, Gulf migration, and in particular working in the informal economy, is not experienced uniformly. The same goes for the formal work sector (Vora and Koch 2015; Rahman 2017; Osella and Osella 2012; Ahmad 2012b).

As former Tajik *kamak* trajectories into formal employment show, access to Arab-led business sectors was dependent on both Arabic language proficiency and the 'right connections' (Russian plural *svyazi*, Tajik plural *aloqaho*) or 'channel' (Russian *kanal*). The latter were often provided by networks formed in the course of studying Islam in the Middle East. Access to formal employment therefore confirmed a sense of exclusiveness, which was cultivated by Tajiks working in Arab-dominated business fields, but also by those who did not have access to but longed for it. Appreciative statements such as "He has become a really great businessman" point to the capability to achieve social advancement and status improvement in a system, which encompasses advantage via social relationships (Arabic *wasta*) at a high level, in domains such as Arab-led enterprises in the tourism or real estate sector, international entrepreneurship in the Islamic economy, or where the state itself works, for example through *kafāla* (Osella and Osella 2012, 132).

Tajik narratives of working with Arabs were therefore often surrounded by an aura of unattainability. This is in line with my own futile efforts to approach Tajiks working in Arab-led or -dominated international enterprises. While Jovid always kept apologizing for having a lack of time, other Tajiks refused to cooperate because they feared that my presence would bring them in an unfavorable position in relation to their business channels. Yusuf, a newcomer, was brought to Dubai by his older brother, a former Azharite who had been working in Dubai since the early 2000s, and who arranged a job contract for his younger brother in an Arab tourism enterprise. When asking him to meet his brother, Yusuf replied dismissively: "He wouldn't want to meet because he is a really important person." When I asked him for clarification, he referred to the big business (*biznesi kalon*) in which his brother was involved.[45]

Yusuf's restraint corresponds with my observations that Tajiks prefer to avoid talking freely about important contacts in order to not jeopardize the resulting benefits, such as legal work status and long-term residence permission. Arguably, narratives about Arab business worlds confirm the image of the formal work sector as a highly prestigious, exclusive and therefore rather elusive business field. At the same time, such narratives reproduced orientalized images of Arabs as ideal business partners, which were consolidated through a transfiguration of distance and unattainability.

Switching from the power of imagination to everyday realities, the following case studies give insight into how Tajiks experienced working with Arabs, and how they talk about it in front of me. Tackling these narratives as a way into how Tajiks refashioned their migrant status in the Gulf, they also offer insights into the unpredictable and unexpected consequences – above all, disenchantments – that integration into Dubai's formal labor market brought.

Saidullah, a former student of Islam with expertise in the fields of Islamic law (*fiqh*), Quran exegesis (*tafsīr*) and philosophy (*falsafa*) and holder of a degree from the University of Sana'a in Yemen, worked for several years as a dealer in a Tajik car spare parts business that ran between Dubai and Dushanbe before he was hired as manager for a fur coat showroom near to Baniyas Square, owned by a Tajik businessman and sponsored by an Arab *kafīl.* With the new job, Saidullah took over responsibility for sales, customer contact, and fur coat imports from Turkey and China, and for the whole accounting. On the basis of a renewable three-year employment contract and a salary depending on the profit the store made, he was able to rent a family apartment in neighboring emirate of Sharjah,

45 This ties in directly with the problem of field access in the anthropology of elites (see Abbink and Salverda 2013).

where he lived with wife and three children at the time we met. Both his degree in Islamic studies and his good reputation as a man of Islamic knowledge within the Tajik *kamak* community were important credentials for fulfilling three important preconditions for the job – namely, credibility, sincerity, and trust. The door opener into formal employment however was Saidullah's good Arabic language skills, which he acquired in Yemen. As he explained:

> In Dubai you need either English or Arabic to get connected with Arabs, or at least with people who know Arabs. Otherwise you can't get anywhere here. My boss (the Tajik shop owner) himself, because of he does not speak Arabic recommended me to his *kafil*, who needed a translator to communicate with him. And so, he took me on.

Able to capitalize on a broad repertoire of cultural skills, eventually Saidullah was to become himself both a key and successful player in the fur business. He spoke Arabic with the sponsor, Russian with the clients, Tajik or Farsi with dealers and middlemen. Called *shaykh* by other Tajiks, which confirmed his religious authority, he also supervised the Tajik *kamak* street brokers working for his fur showroom, as will be shown in more detail in chapter three. Thus, Saidullah turned his rather peripheral position as a broker working unregistered on a freelance basis into a comfortable role as an employed shop manager, cultivating a wide range of contacts into different business networks and therewith acting as hub, or "redistribution point" (Osella and Osella 2012, 128; see also Mirzoev and Stephan-Emmrich 2018).

Due to his language abilities, he overturned the exotic image Tajiks have as poor and ignorant ex-Soviet Muslims among Arabs in Dubai. Saidullah's story was a small glimpse into a world that was otherwise rather closed to me, the ethnographer, namely the ways in which Arabs perceive Central Asian migrants in the Gulf:

> When the *kafil* heard that I speak Arabic he was amazed. Arabs don't expect Tajiks to be fluent in Arabic. When my boss told him about me and praised my Arabic skills, and also that I have studied in Yemen, the *kafil* became curious and wanted to get to know me.

Saidullah is a good example of what 'progressing' in Dubai's fur business could mean, namely when Tajiks were able to operate as middlemen. Crossing the boundaries of his ethnic networks, Saidullah demonstrated his ability to take advantage of his Islamic university education via his informal social connections to reach the status of official employment. Even more, his work trajectory led him to a certain degree of economic autonomy and flexibility, which definitely broadened his horizons of possibility. Based on a relatively stable income and a residence permission he was able to invest in a future in the Gulf and in bringing his family to the

Emirates. Additionally, the possession of a residence card together with an employment arrangement allowed him to circumvent the restrictive regulations and long waiting lists back home for the pilgrimage to Mecca (see more on this in chapter five). Like Saidullah himself, Tajiks in Dubai tried to perform *ḥajj* and *'umrah* through the help of their employers, often several times. This is rather difficult to realize for compatriots still based in Tajikistan.

Simultaneously, the integration into the *kafāla* system is accompanied by a number of constraints, which clearly affected Tajiks' economic wellbeing in Dubai. Instead of overcoming the precarious working conditions in the informal sector, formal employment created new forms of economic uncertainty and vulnerability. Enhancing social prestige and offering financial security not provided by the *kamak* business, the bond to an Arab sponsor could at the same time compound the restriction of economic freedom and mobility made possible in the context of informal work. This fueled a heightened sense of dependency and inferiority, which was reinforced by the neoliberal atmosphere of unfettered entrepreneurship, as pushed by Dubai's transformation into a capitalist enterprise (Smith 2014).

When we met in November 2013, Saidullah's business was going badly. During the tourism boom, more and more fur coat shops had opened in the area around Baniyas Square. This intensified the competition for Russian tourists, whose number dramatically decreased after Dubai's last crisis in 2009. When Dubai won the bid to host World Expo 2020, the first to be held in the MENA region, the local police station ramped up their street raids around Baniyas Square and started to deport Tajik and other *kamak* workers in large numbers to polish up the clean image the emirate wanted to hold in the global public eye. Moreover, unforeseeable trends in the housing markets rapidly pushed up cost of living in neighboring Sharjah, where Saidullah resided with his family. As confirmed also by other Tajiks who resided in neighboring emirates in Sharjah, in winter 2013 the annual rent for his three-room apartment in Sharjah had increased from 37,000 to 40,000 dollars. This depressing assemblage made Saidullah realize how dependent he was both on his *kafīl* and on global dynamics, which define work and life in Dubai and force foreign residents into the position of being "temporary labor migrants" (Ahmad 2012b: 22, Kathiravelu 2016: 94 ff). The desired economic paradise, where Saidullah tried to build a future with his family, turned out to be a highly unpredictable beast. Mehrigul, his wife, whom we will meet later in chapter five, had her own thoughts about it, which she shared with me during one of the many chats we had while I was staying in the family's apartment.

Mehrigul: We used to have happy times here. But now, when he comes home, he's often depressed. He has been worried since the *kafil* suggested to him recently that he better returns to Tajikistan until business picks up again.
Manja: How did he react?
Mehrigul: Life has become hard compared to when we first got here. But we shall never go back to Tajikistan, he says. Also, we cannot. The children go to school here. We've paid school fees for the whole year. Our *kafil* helped us to get a place in a school nearby. They get a good education there. So how can he push us to leave now? He should understand our situation.
Manja: Does Saidullah know his *kafil* personally?
Mehrigul: Yes. The two met via Saidullah's Egyptian friends in the mosque. Sometimes they go together to Friday prayers. He has an assistant, a Syrian, a very approachable man. But rules here are very hard. As long as the business runs well you are welcome. If not, it's "please go home, bye bye!" But we shall try to stay here until our sons finish school.
Manja: But how will you manage that?
Mehrigul: My husband negotiated with his *kafil* to wait for another half year to see.

Investing in a medium-term future in the Emirates was a risky endeavor, particularly when families were involved and migration to Dubai was driven by aspirations such as proper education for the offspring and family life in a Muslim-friendly environment. In this context, dependency on the Arab sponsor has weighed more heavily, and economic vulnerability has increased since Dubai is no longer perceived as a transitory place. This goes in particular for Tajiks like Saidullah, who linked a moral activism to their Dubai migration and fashioned their move to Dubai as *hijra* to a country reigned by Islamic rules, accompanied with the intention of not returning to Tajikistan (see chapter one). Against this background, official employment and the associated dependence on both the Arabic sponsor and unpredictable global market dynamics could prove a trap.

Drawing on his extended *kamak*, middleman, and student networks as well as on his social reputation as a *shaykh*, Saidullah was eventually able to negotiate his precarious economic situation by reactivating old channels into the former car spare parts business he worked in before. Reinvesting more in sideline business activities, he simultaneously mobilized close relatives to open a branch of his trading business at home, while looking for further Muslim-friendly destinations in the Middle East in which to work and live with his family (more in chapter five). In so doing, he reconnected himself to the realm of the informal economy and became flexible enough to cushion both the dependency and unpredictability of his current employment arrangement, and to regain economic flexibility and autonomy.

But not all of the Tajiks I met in Dubai were able to connect in this way, or move flexibly between the formal and informal economy, just as not everyone was able to capitalize on social networks, university and travel knowledge, and

other skills to pursue economic mobility as well as material and immaterial progress. As a pattern of shared experience, formal employment relationships increased a sense of security for the price of giving up economic flexibility and freedom, but also, as the following case study illustrates, personal development prospects.

When I met Ikrom, he was employed as a low-level manager in a tourist shop in Dubai Deira. This was actually the dream of many *kamak* workers I met, but Ikrom complained about the absence of any career prospects and options for economic mobility in his job. In short, he felt stuck, a feeling that he, like many other Tajiks in Dubai, was already familiar with from his time as a recent university graduate and later as a migrant worker in Russia (see chapter one). Thus, realizing that "I am fully dependent on my boss" was at the heart of his frustrations about the pitfalls of the expected economic paradise he hoped to find in Dubai. His initial plan, which entailed investment in a long-term future at home and a medium-term future in Dubai, was to get a good job that would allow him to bring his family and have a good life and good education for the kids in Dubai, while simultaneously building a house in his natal village, where the family could live later, on returning home.

But the increase in economic and physical safety went hand in hand with the decrease in his wages. While in Russia, he had earned more money than in Dubai but was not safe from racist assaults, robbery, and fraudulent employers, who cheated him out of his salary. In Dubai, he knew that he would get his salary on time and could take it home without being attacked on the street. However, his major concern, which he shared with many other Tajiks working in the tourism industry, was the lack of recognition for his educational qualifications, as well as the limited possibility to transform his language skills into economic and social capital, or in other words: to progress (*peshraftan, inkishof yoftan*). Besides his mother tongue, Ikrom was fluent in Farsi, Russian, English, Arabic, and know some Urdu, having learned the latter of these languages during his studies at the International Islamic University in Islamabad in the early 1990s. Although, for this reason, he was hired for the customer contact area of a flourishing souvenir center at Baniyas square, Ikrom suffered in his service job, losing himself over and over again in nostalgic memories of his dream of becoming a teacher. In the following, I summarize the main points of a larger conversation we had about his sense of incompatibility of his aspirations and future plans and the limited opportunities his job in Dubai offered for realizing them.

> Ikrom came to Dubai in his late thirties in the hope of investing his university knowledge and combined language proficiencies in a good job. In Tajikistan, he had worked as teacher for some years, but since the salary was too low to feed his family, he went to Moscow and St Pe-

tersburg, where he worked on a construction site and later as shop vendor. In Dubai, he found himself in an employment situation that again did not pay enough to build a stable future either at home or abroad. In addition, Ikrom suffered from the lack of personal development in intellectual terms: "I am not making any progress (*heche inkishof nayoftan*). I love books, I want to learn and pass on my knowledge. Instead, I spend all day talking to tourists about prices and shelf numbers." Overall, things did not go as he had hoped. Troubled by the feeling that he was underpaid and his qualifications and skills were not appreciated, he wrote several letters to his French boss, the owner of the souvenir market, with the help of an Iranian and an Arab *kafīl*. But he never got any answer. Unlike many Tajik *kamak* workers I met, Ikrom articulated a very critical position on the low status that foreigners like himself hold in the *kafāla* system: "I don't have any rights here," and "Human rights here do not work for people like me." Besides, having no direct contact with the senior management of the shop where he worked, he missed out on social connections that might help him to find another job: "If you don't have a direct channel to your boss, or to the *kafīl*, you don't have a chance to progress." After sending dozens of applications and making phone calls to get information about the status of his application or to try and get an interview somewhere, he became frustrated and started looking for other destinations where he might work. But where to go? Besides Saudi Arabia, he had Bahrain and Kuwait on his wish list, while sensing Qatar as even worse than Dubai due to the harsh neoliberal working conditions and salaries there.

But disappointments about shattered dreams of investing in several, i. e., translocal, futures were not only rooted in unfulfilled educational aspirations thwarted by the restrictive Emirati *kafāla* system. The experience of precarity within formal employment may also intersect with and be fueled by the structural minoritization of members of particular regional groups within Tajikistani society due to the socio-political afterlife of the country's bloody civil war in the early 1990s. In short, Ikrom's spatial biography was shaped by experiences of displacement, not only in the present, but also in the past. Ikrom comes from a family with Gharmi roots living in Kurghonteppa, the region that provided the basis for the opposition groups against the forces of current President Rahmon during the civil war (Epkenhans 2016; Dudoignon 2011). Ikrom's complaint that people from Gharm region cannot get a good job anywhere in Tajikistan reflects the politics of regional identity (*mahallagaroī*) in post-civil war Tajikistan which up to now regulates access to economic sectors, not only at home, but also in the various migrant destinations abroad. Thus, related personal and communal experiences of social exclusion and economic marginalization travel with the migrants even to the Gulf and framed how Tajiks made sense of their experiences with Dubai's *kafāla* system. Hence, Ikrom's lack of access to social networks in the fur trade and middlemen business linked back to the specific history of Tajiks' involvement in Dubai's business worlds, which advantaged urbanly socialized and well-educated mobile Tajiks from the central region around the capital city of Dushanbe. While Gharmi families and sometimes even whole villages dominated large parts of Russia's bazaar

businesses, they were not able to invest the same resources to get a foothold in Dubai's tourist and trading sectors. As a consequence, Ikrom drew on his inferior role as a Gharmi as a common, yet accepted narrative to come to terms with his negative working experiences in Dubai. It helped to justify the lack of success and progress and to make sense of the double peripherality of his position as a Tajik from Gharm, he experienced in Dubai's formal economy sector.

This sensed impossibility to cross-over boundaries set by regional belonging, however, turned out as an experience characteristic for Dubai's formal employment sector but were not shared by other Tajiks with Gharmi origin in the informal furs and tourism business. Even more, as Jovid's career from migrant entrepreneur to employee in the real estate business exemplifies, moving into formal employment may indeed open up alternative avenues to progress also for Gharmi people in economic niches outside of ethnic networks dominated by Tajiks from the central region of Tajikistan. Dubai's business worlds clearly provide quite different options for pursuing economic and social progress and to experience wellbeing abroad: the option of safety at the price of blocked economic mobility, together with the danger of being trapped in a low-wage occupation (Rahman 2017, 10), as provided by formal employment on the one hand, and the option of economic autonomy and the possibility of economic prosperity provided by the informal work sector, which was however always coupled with a heightened risk of arrest and deportation, on the other. The case studies presented above show that Tajiks were able to choose, oscillate between, or combine these options in different, yet uneven ways.

Everyday working experiences in Arab-led companies also led to cracks in the circulating imaginaries about Dubai as an ideal Muslim place. Moved by orientalist imaginaries, Tajiks associated Arab-dominated business sectors with Dubai's growing Islamic economy and aspired to them as Sharīʿa-compliant workplaces (Wilson 2012, 146 ff). Thus, Arabness was translated into a high morality of employers and therefore often articulated as an antidote to the arbitrary and corrupt behavior of employers in both Russia and Tajikistan. But while the narrative of Dubai as both economic paradise and ideal Muslim place continued to spread when Tajiks traveled home, or when they fashioned themselves as proper Muslim businessmen in Dubai (see Introduction of this book), in intimate moments my research partners harshly criticized the fact that capitalist interests and neoliberal sentiments have gained hegemony in Arab-led enterprises, swallowing Islamic values such as modesty, moderation, and piety.

Mahyar was an acquaintance of Saidullah. The two knew each other through their wives, who lived in close proximity in Sharjah and regularly met in the neighborhood mosque (see chapter five). Working in a clothing shop in a mall in Sharjah, Mahyar described his work experiences as morally disenchanting, complain-

ing above all about the neoliberal working conditions to which he was exposed. Meeting him several times during his lunch break or directly after work for a shared dinner, he vented his current frustrations about the conditions at his workplace without being prompted. Thus, Arabs' interest in money and profit was at the core of his criticism. Once he arrived late and excused himself: "My boss even monitors my lunch break with his stopwatch," and continued: "Really, here is no happiness. Everywhere is only money, money." The morality of greed at his workplace continued while he described looking for a more affordable apartment for his family, which he was pushed to do due to rapidly rising rent in Sharjah. The rule of money in the Emirates resonated with earlier encounters with the corrupt environment in his university at home, which led him to give up his studies in International Relations. Eventually, Mahyar was forced to learn that greed is not primarily the moral project of postsoviet capitalism (Bandelj 2016, 95ff) but also ruled a neoliberalizing Gulf economy. Hence, the ignorance of religious duties at the Muslim workplace reflected badly on established images of Dubai as a hub of a new, Islam-inspired neoliberalism (Nasr 2010). Ultimately, the following summary of our lunch talks reveals the disenchantment of the younger generation of well-educated Tajiks, who were driven to the Gulf (and sometimes to drop out of university) by the success stories of their older brothers or other relatives, who represent the generation of the Dubai boomers in the early 2000s.

Mahyar dreamed of going to Dubai since he was studying at the Turkish language center. He wrote essays in English about the emirate as a trope of Islamic modernity, lured by media images and the successful Dubai career of his older brother. When he later broke off his studies in Dushanbe, his older brother organized him a job in Sharjah. Working as a low-level manager of three clothing shops led by Arabs, just like Saidullah, Mahyar was highly mobile, had an average income, and was able to use his good English. He could be satisfied, but was struggling with the cracks in the ideal image of Dubai that his working experience had left him with: "Arabs are hot for money. They are first and foremost capitalists, not Muslims. I can't even get time to pray here. They don't let me because I have to work on Fridays. Money rules." Again and again, Mahyar struggled with his naïve illusions that brought him to the Emirates, just like many of his compatriots:

> Work is hard here. Also, not everyone is able to live here. In Tajikistan, people think in Dubai money grows in the palms, like a paradise. Just as I did then. When my brother came here, life went well. But now the situation has changed. We work harder than they used to do.

But not with the same success. Mahyar went on to make a common observation, saying "It seems we only feed Arabs instead our families". Mahyar's disenchantment increased when his younger brother, who also came to the Emirates to

work in Sharjah, was kicked out of his job after six months. Asking him what he intended to do now, he listed the three options he had: first, either looking for a better place to work somewhere else in the Middle East, or returning home. In order to successfully realize the latter option, he had started to research how to buy a university degree, something he saw to be needed to somehow move forward in Tajikistan. The third option he discussed was to give the *kamak* business another try. Since it took a lot of paperwork to get his manager job off the ground, Mahyar filled in time with *kamak* business, but did not perform well: "If I liked it, I'd go back to *kamakkunī.* But that's not for me."

Mahyar's consideration to switch back from paid to self-employment due to blocked economic prosperity was shared by many other Tajiks with employment contracts. This corresponds with the attitude of those *kamak* workers who sought to avoid the formal economy due to the risk of abuse and dependency. But this avoidance got another twist through a sensed morality of greed in the Muslim business community. In the words of Osella and Osella (2012, 114), the pausing in, or switching back to ethnic networks undermines "a dualism between the alleged morality of socially embedded economic practices and the assumed amorality (or immorality) of impersonal market exchange". I see here a clear link to what Richard Sennett in his book about the personal consequences of work in the new, flexible capitalism describes as "emotional, inner life adrift" people experienced due to a perceived loss of predictability in work biographies and social relations fueled by working conditions that made social and economic life increasingly episodically and fragmented (Sennett 1998, 20, 26). And further, being a "morality of opportunity for the poor", giving preference to informal employment relationships also confirms that economic mobility, social advancement, and self-realization were offered within the realm of informal, yet illicit economies flourishing across the Gulf (Osella and Osella 2012, 123).

Depending on their translocal work experiences, Tajiks sensed, and evaluated, formal employment arrangements very differently. There is nevertheless a shared pattern. The bond to an Arab sponsor appears to be seen in highly ambivalent terms, as it provided both a wide range of advantages and a lot of new constraints. This confirms the common image of *kafāla* as an oppressive system but simultaneously reveals the privileges and perks it could produce for foreign residents (Vora and Koch 2015, 546; Rahman 2017). This draws a more nuanced picture of *kafāla* worlds in the Arab Emirates from the perspective of migrants and other residents from Central and other parts of Asia. Paying attention to how working experiences were narrated, I contend, helps to understand how Tajiks navigated their strong wish for economic autonomy and self-realization through the material but also the moral conditions set by both the formal and informal labor market in Dubai. This also confirms studies pointing to the centrality of personalized net-

works to various forms of transnational social formations in the working of contemporary global capitalism (Vertovec 2009).

Moreover, the symbiotic interactions, the overlapping, as well as the flexible switching between formal and informal work complicate any attempt to detect a consistent 'Tajik' experience of Gulf migration. The trajectories into Dubai's fur business, and the associated individual work experiences the spatial biographies assembled in this book entail are too heterogenous and uneven. Finally, the presented narratives challenge the majority of studies, which consider migrant experiences in the Gulf in a rather unbalanced manner through the concepts of ethnocracy and *kafāla.* As Vora and Koch (2015, 541) argue, such narrow perspectives overdetermine the framing effect of related mechanisms of migrant labor abuse, exclusion, and citizenship on how foreign residents experience the Gulf. Moreover, they obfuscate the individual capacities Tajiks possessed, worked for, or they lacked to flexibly move between formal and informal economies. This runs counter to the prevailing academic category of 'the Gulf migrant worker' as a docile, passive, and subordinated subject driven only by economic rationales, which the Tajiks I met in Dubai obviously did not fit into. This observation is also confirmed in the performative practices of Tajiks' self-fashioning as Muslim businesspeople but not migrants, which draws attention to emic categories of work, but also to alternative forms of socio-political belonging to the Gulf. This will be the focus of the following section.

Peripheral Cosmopolitans

When talking about their work and employment status in Dubai, Tajiks repeatedly emphasized that they are not migrants but do business.[46] Stressing therewith the level of economic mobility and autonomy (*ozodī*) they experienced as *kamak* workers, middlemen, or small-scale entrepreneurs, such statements simultaneously revealed that Tajiks were highly aware of the circulating discourses on Asian labor migrants in the Gulf, and of the discriminating and exploitative working conditions many Gulf migrants face.[47] However, and to support one central argument in this book, Tajiks' refusal to accept being migrants as a category of self-identification was integral part of a relational placemaking in Dubai as a Muslim place, which based on racial discrimination, marginalization, and social exclusion Tajiks experienced elsewhere, above all in Tajikistan and Russia. Related feelings of dis-

46 In Tajik "Mo biznes (or *tijorat*) mekunem, migranty nestem".

47 I will expand on this argument in the following two chapters.

location and estrangement intersected with other aspects such as regional origin and religious belonging. In that sense, the statement "We do business, we're not migrants!" did more than just mark an economic position. The statement at the same time underlined Tajiks claim for a moral as well as a socio-political position.

As Ahmad (2012b, 23) notes critically, migrant activities are "obfuscated by hegemonic discourses that reduce their presence in the Gulf to their labor". Moreover, scholars often discuss migrant experiences in the Gulf as fundamentally shaped through the *kafāla* sponsorship system. Thus, the latter in turn is mainly reduced to its functions as structuring labor laws, regulating migrant flows, and reproducing exclusionary citizenship regimes (Ahmad 2012b, 22; see also Gardner 2012). In a contrasting way, the multiple work trajectories and stories presented in this chapter reveal the need for more nuanced ethnographies that do justice to the complex and multilayered experiences of Tajiks, and other foreign residents, working in the Gulf's formal and informal economy. Finally, embracing both their marginality and precarity for the sake of a remaking of the entrepreneurial self, the narratives of my Tajik research partners debunk the limits of 'labor migrant' as an analytical concept to adequately grasp and understand Tajiks' agency, their striving for and experience of dignity, esteem, and autonomy, and finally their contribution to both Dubai's old transregional trading work and its economic growth.

Inspired by recent works that study migrant experiences and identifications in the Gulf *beyond* labor migration (Rahman 2017; Ahmad 2012b), the following discussion takes the conceptual limitation of labor as a starting point. In her work on foreign residency and cosmopolitanism in the Gulf, Ahmad (2012b), following Hannah Arendt in her political theory laid out in *The Human Condition* (1958), links *work*, as the realm of social reproduction, with *action*, the realm of political activity, to examine foreign residents' experiences in the Gulf (Ahmad 2012b, 23). In that reading, working in the Dubai business world is more than simply an economic activity to secure subsistence; it is in line with Ahmad also a socio-political practice. Fashioning themselves as businesspeople rather than migrants, Tajiks engaged in practices of translocation and politics of placemaking, through which they created, articulated, and legitimized projects and concerns of socio-political belonging. These projects and concerns extended beyond traditional notions of ethnic and national identity, and formed an alternative to excluding regimes of restrictive citizenship in the Gulf (Vora and Koch 2015, see also chapter four). Cultivating and intermingling notions of Persianness, Arabness, and Muslimness, Tajiks engaged in a peripheral cosmopolitanism, which I will grasp as a situated socio-spatial practice through which they connected themselves to and located themselves within Dubai's and the wider Gulf's multiple Muslim business worlds.

I am aware of the pitfalls inherent to the combination of the two analytical concepts 'cosmopolitanism' and 'peripherality' and the normative voices embed-

ded in the related philosophical, cultural, and political discourses that entwine around these concepts. Accordingly, and in line with the many critical responses to postcolonial and Eurocentric notions of the term, I shall use 'peripheral cosmopolitanism' to point to moments of hierarchical relatedness arising from a certain marginal status Tajiks in Dubai experienced and that they articulated and referred to in their self-perception as deviant Muslims at home, Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, economic actors in the Emirates, as well as former-Soviet Muslims located peripheral to the sacred centers of Islam in the Arab Muslim world. This peripheral status was constantly attempted to be overcome, but also emphasized and strategically displayed. Such moments of ambivalence, multiplicity and simultaneity confirm recent studies that situate migrant cosmopolitan identifications within the realm of possible sociabilities, as they arise from a general human competency to create social relations of situated openness and inclusiveness in transnational networks, lifestyles, and new environments, and which are no longer merely elitist but shaped by the all-encompassing consequence of globalization (Freitag 2014; Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic 2011, see also in chapter five). The concept of sociability, just as that of conviviality, not only shifts the focus from political and normative discussions around cosmopolitanism to more "quotidian practices of social interaction between (…) similar and different historical actors" (Freitag 2014, 380). The concept also helps to see cosmopolitan orientations no longer as in opposition to cultural and other forms of rootedness, but instead to reflect the simultaneous and dynamically entangled relationship between moments of openness and closure as well as people's engagement in "overlapping and multiple identities and socialities and the intersectionality of diverse representations" (Freitag 2014, 402). This also covers the engagement in alternative (political) identifications and forms of belonging rooted in post-national sentiments (Robbins 1998, Appadurai 1996).

In this view, the proposed concept is close to what has established itself in migration and diaspora studies as 'vernacular' (Werbner 2006; Bhabha 1996), 'everyday/tactical/migrant' (Landau and Freemantle 2010), or 'global cosmopolitanism' (Darieva 2016), and what serves as an argument in the postcolonial condition on citizenship, unequal dignity, social rights, and the rule of law (Appiah 2006). On the other hand, cosmopolitanism has a long historical tradition in Central Asia due to the region's position at the crossroads of empires (Khalid 2021; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012). Even more, cosmopolitanism is a sensibility, a certain positionality, and way of relating to the wider world based on Central Asian Muslims' mobility and other forms of connectedness within and beyond Central Asia (Marsden 2016b; Crews 2015; Grant 2010). In this quality, and turning to my ethnographic data, peripheral cosmopolitanism means many different things, which are all closely related: an economic strategy, an orientation, a social location and related

forms of social positioning, and finally a religiously-connotated imaginary. The overlaps and interplays of these different aspects are best illustrated by the following example.

Arabness as Capital

On a Friday morning in November 2013 I ran into Jamal, a middle-aged *kamak* working for a fur salon near Baniyas Square. Wearing a white *ʿabāya* combined with a red and white plaid scarf wrapped around his head, I would have taken him for an Arab if he had not approached me to share some news. On my complimenting him "You look like a real Arab," he smiled and explained that he liked to wear the traditional Gulf dress on Fridays since he had performed the *ḥajj* to Mecca. Together with his beard, he was hardly recognizable as a Tajik, and he stressed that this was the intention:

> I don't want to be recognized as a Tajik. Russians don't like us, really. Once, I invited a Russian tourist to visit our shop. But he became very angry and ranted: 'Fuck off, you damn Tajik. I didn't come (to Dubai) to get things from you guys. So, get off my back.' Therefore, some of us wear Arab clothing (Arabic *ʿabāya, jilbāb*) (when at work) to hide ourselves. Further, some wear their *ḥajj* dress they brought from (pilgrimage to) Mecca. [...] In such a dress you are invisible for the local police as well. They have become very clever and conduct their raids in plain clothes. So, we cannot escape quickly enough.

This small episode is telling in several ways. As a general note, displaying Arabness was part of a broad cultural repertoire Tajiks use to adapt to various economic and social ends in the Emirates (see Stephan-Emmrich 2018b). Clearly, selective clothing was also a practice of camouflage done to be publicly invisible to the local police, aiming to secure economic prosperity despite an informal work status which increased Tajiks' vulnerability to deportation. As a strategy to obscure ethnic identity, the practice of donning Arab clothing simultaneously points to the interdependencies in the *kamak* business, which characterize Tajiks' ambivalent relationship with Russian clients. The informal status of *kamak* work coincides with the precarious conditions Tajiks faced as undocumented, low-skill, and as stigmatized 'black' migrant workers in Russia and which they attempted to escape. However, as a crucial marker for collective self-identity, Tajiks' marginalized, racialized, and discriminated migrant subjectivities traveled with them on their back to Dubai. In this reading, Arabness was a performative way to obscure Tajikness. This confirms narratives such as that of Wasim, which stressed a rather unwanted dependency on Russian clients. Dealing daily with Russian tourists and profiting from their conspicuous consumption, Wasim nevertheless would rather avoid being with them.

The story is further complicated when Russian language skills are involved. A precondition to be successful in Dubai's tourism business, when Tajiks proudly enumerated their multiple language skills to me, the importance of speaking Russian reveals the vivid afterlife of Soviet internationalism as a political idea, and an ideal, in the social imaginary of Tajiks.[48] Under advanced socialism, which promoted social pluralism and cultural diversity as desired ideals, Russian language turned into a core signifier of an elitist, urban sophisticatedness and modernity (Grant 2010). In Dubai, Tajiks still worked with these Soviet imaginaries and their elitist meaning when they fashioned themselves as Dubai businesspeople. This is an important finding, as it expands the current discussion on the continuation of Soviet policies in the post-Soviet Tajikistani society (Thibault 2018). Moreover, it shows that the social afterlife of Soviet political imaginaries was not limited to the political narratives of post-Soviet state nationalism, but also shaped migrant cosmopolitanism and identities in the Gulf.

Likewise, the episode demonstrates how Tajiks actively involved themselves in the symbolic work of embodied placemaking and therewith created Dubai as a meaningful locale within the moral geography of their migration. When displaying *Arabness* through specific clothing styles, a certain attachment to Dubai as a place in *Arabiston*, the sacred center of Muslim spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage, was articulated. But as we shall see in the following chapters, such a converting of cosmopolitan orientations into a sense of urban elitism allowed Tajiks, as businesspeople, to differentiate themselves from other, non-Muslim Asian or African migrant groups, but also from rural newcomers in Tajik's Dubai business world (see chapter five). Obviously, both Dubai's Persianate and Arab business worlds, together with the vibrant and cross-cultural living spaces of migrant accommodations, challenged as well as at the same time promoted Tajiks' capacity to deal with difference, to maneuver through different systems of meaning, and to utilize various cultural registers in order to become economically successful (Vertovec 2010). In that reading, Tajiks became cosmopolitans in Ulf Hannerz's (1990) sense. Thus, their flexible yet creative switching between being Tajik, Persian, Arab, or Muslim, or between being migrant, middleman and businessman, was built on a broad cultural repertoire that stressed "the simultaneity of rootedness and openness, and of ethnic local attachments with cosmopolitan attitudes" (Darieva 2016, 2). Accordingly, when Tajiks engaged in cosmopolitan orientations, they did not simply celebrate cultural sophistication. They also produced as well as coped with the boundaries

48 Following Humphrey (2004, 141–142), it is necessary to distinguish Soviet internationalism, and also cosmopolitanism as an idea, from the historically particular construction of *kosmopolitizm* as an ideological product of the Soviet regime. As the 'rootless' Other, the latter played a crucial role for legitimizing control, surveillance and regulation of mobility during Soviet times.

and exclusions that accompanied their dwelling in Dubai's multiple business worlds, which draw from a wide range of meaning-producing structures and experiences. While integrating into Dubai's business worlds through Persian-speaking networks, Tajiks simultaneously longed for belonging in the corporate and elitist world of Arab business, which was difficult to access. While a rather 'natural' belonging was performed in multiple ways through the notion of a shared Persianness, a desired belonging, or longing, was cultivated and set in relation to orientalist notions of Arabness. Thus, Tajiks aspired, imitated, and consumed habits, lifestyle products, and discursive references to Arabs' business worlds. Through this, they articulated belonging to the Gulf outside the structurally limited framework of citizenship.

In reference to Vertovec (2010, 66), the production of new arrangements through cosmopolitan practices does not occur in an "unbridled horizon of cultural appropriation and enactment," since social actors are always "embedded in a constellation of relations and structures," and moreover since their actions are multiply embedded. In other words, the cosmopolitanism Tajiks engaged in Dubai was not necessarily only a lived experience, but above all the reflection of an imagination – an imagined ideal and the related longing – that reveals a lot about the limitations and constraints placed on them not only in the United Arab Emirates, but also in Russia and in their Tajikistani home (Schielke 2012; Grant 2010, 134). This mutual conditionality of longing and belonging resembles with how young Egyptians aspired to make global modernity their own by migrating to Europe. Anthropologist Samuli Schielke, in his work on migratory expectations in Egypt, links cosmopolitanism with longing and emphasizes that Egyptian youngsters' horizon of possibility was not unfettered but strikingly limited and restricted. Following his notion of cosmopolitanism as "a modality of both action and imagination" (Schielke 2012, 178), I argued elsewhere that Tajik *kamak* workers, middlemen and entrepreneurs in Dubai engaged "in a world evoked by the spatial representations and realities of Dubai's multi-cosmopolitan business spaces", which in actuality was not without borders, but full of them and "inhabited by people who try to cross them" (Stephan-Emmrich 2018b, 205).

Engaging in cosmopolitanism, Tajik migrants in Dubai did not preserve but re-evaluated and reformulated identity and therewith became deeply involved in ethics of obligation or local engagement. This goes beyond what has been termed in migration studies as "tactical cosmopolitanism", that is, a migrant strategy to capitalize on cosmopolitanism's power without being bounded to its spatial responsibilities (Landau and Freemantle 2010). Such an understanding of vernacular cosmopolitanism runs the risk of narrowing down the complexity of Tajik lifeworlds in Dubai to concerns with economic benefits only, and thus obscuring the fact that political, social, moral and other regimes mattered and formed the

context in which Tajiks in Dubai acted, dreamed, and strove to become cosmopolitan.

Embracing Precarity in the Economic Paradise

Switching eventually the spatial lens from abroad to home again and more concretely to the translocally circulating imaginaries of Dubai as economic paradise as described in the books' introduction,[49] how then did this master narrative influenced how Tajiks experienced Dubai as the place in which they worked and resided? And related to that question, how did Tajiks made sense of the gap between desire and reality in the ways they embraced the precarious realities they faced in the Dubai business world?

Merging investigations on Gulf urbanity that focus on how people incorporate Dubai's urban vision as a simulation of reality into processes of world-making (Elsheshtawy 2010) with the realm of low-wage labor migration, Kathiravelu's (2016) recent study on migrant Dubai provides a fine-tuned ethnography of how Asian migrant workers frame their precarious and marginalized work experiences in the context of exploitative work regimes, neoliberal principles and mass media representations, which produce alluring imaginaries of economic and social possibility in the region. But what this excellent analysis shares with many other related studies is the lack of a translocal livelihood approach that goes beyond the dual relation between home and host society, but instead situates migratory spatial imaginaries of and experiences in the Gulf – as well their formation, reframing, and revaluation – in the context of more extensive travel itineraries and spatial biographies. Recalling that both ideas and senses of place are relational and always situated as discussed at length in the introduction to this book, the various ways in which Tajiks experienced and coped with their precarious working conditions in Dubai have their specific spatial history, connecting the present with how Tajiks experienced places they have worked or lived in before.

My argument here, and in the following chapters, is that Dubai's assessment as a good Muslim place to work and live forms part of a larger moral geography that evolved from translocally assembled experiences of precarity, marginality, and the peripheral status that Tajiks experienced, cultivated, and tried to overcome in their everyday working life in Dubai. Reversing the hegemonial gaze in Edward Said's imagined geographies, which attaches imaginative power to the colonizers' carto-

49 A clear definition of how I use the concept of precarity, together with a related discussion on Tajiks' precarious mobilities, is given in chapter one.

graphic techniques of what he calls the orientalizing process, here, subaltern, yet post-Soviet Muslims – with their imaginaries and related hopes and desires – endow the material dimension of Dubai as a place with specific imaginative values and cultural meanings. These were further reproduced in migrant narratives, although reality as we have seen was often different one. Thus, the related notions of Muslimness, Persianness, and Arabness conflated religious, moral, and economic ideals. These ideals tell us more about the present conditions in which they were articulated and evoked than about the ideals themselves, as they intensified Tajiks' "own sense of their self by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close and far away" (Said 1978, 55). Drawing on orientalist narratives of Dubai as an ideal Muslim place, Tajiks articulated experiences of discrimination and racial exclusion and the related sense of peripherality, which, I argue, go beyond the biopolitics working through the Emirati *kafāla* system. In line with critical evaluations of Gulf studies, migrants' experiences of the Gulf are largely determined by seemingly constraining working conditions. Accordingly, focus is fixed on either *kafāla* practices and their hegemonic power to construct and discipline foreign residents into being "temporary labor migrants" (Ahmad 2012b, 22), or on notions of informal work that frame illegality, vulnerability, and abuse as the dominant working experiences in what is actually a highly diverse and dynamic economic sector (Mahdavi 2011 and 2012). Following the religion-economy-mobility nexus in Dubai's fur business, Tajiks' working experiences in the Emirates are clearly as much diverse and dynamic than the conditions offered by both the *kafāla* system (Rahman 2017; Vora and Koch 2015) and informal networks for Tajiks' economic integration (Osella and Osella 2012). Moreover, depending on in what and where Tajiks worked, as well as on the divergent trajectories of their urban careers as well as on their different social locations, Tajiks conceived of Dubai as a Muslim place to work in all manner of ways. But as a common pattern in the ways they talked about progress and the 'good Muslim life' in their position as fur coat dealers, middlemen, freelancers, or salaried employees, the relation between cultural imaginaries and sensed realities in Dubai emerged as a highly ambivalent matter.