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SYMPOSIUM: IVF - GLOBAL HISTORIES


Cosmopolitan conceptions in global Dubai? The emiratization of IVF and its consequences

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Abstract IVF in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is decidedly cosmopolitan, catering to an international clientele who are attracted to Dubai as a booming global city and an emerging medical tourism hub. Yet this Emirati state-sponsored project of medical cosmopolitanism exists in tension with another state-sponsored project, called emiratization. Emiratization is an attempt by the UAE government to prioritize the needs of Emiratis. In this article, the emiratization of the UAE's IVF sector is explored. Since the mid-2000s, the Emirati IVF sector has undergone a series of profound transformations, involving the indigenization-qua-emiratization of IVF services in the country. Two main aspects of IVF emiratization are examined. The first involves the Emirati government's brief experiment with IVF public financing, which started off as a generous IVF subsidization programme for all infertile couples, but ended up solidifying preferential treatment for local Emiratis. The second is the 2010 passage of UAE Federal Law No. 11, which now stands as one of the world's most restrictive pieces of assisted reproduction legislation. Which now stands as one of the world's most restrictive pieces of assisted reproduction legislation and has fundamentally altered the landscape of IVF in the country. 

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the new millennium, and particularly since the 2011 revolutionary uprisings, the Arab world has experienced unprecedented levels of political violence and disruption. However, against this bloody backdrop, a high-

tech reproductive revolution has quietly unfolded. Namely, by the mid-2000s, the Arab world had developed one of the most robust IVF sectors in the world (Inhorn and Patrizio, 2015; Jones et al., 2010). To be more specific, among the 48 countries performing the most assisted reproductive technology cycles per million inhabitants, eight Arab nations –

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including Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in that order – could be counted (Adamson, 2009).

Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia were the first Arab countries to introduce IVF, each opening a clinic in 1986. The first Egyptian IVF baby was born a year later, in 1987. By the mid-1990s, the Arab world was in the midst of an IVF 'boom period' (Inhorn, 2003), with private IVF clinics opening from Casablanca to Cairo. By 1995, IVF was available in all of the major Arab cities, including places such as Beirut, Damascus, Riyadh and Tunis.

As one of the seven Arab Gulf countries, located on the Arabian Peninsula immediately to the east of Saudi Arabia, the UAE (also known as the Emirates) was an early entrant into this burgeoning field of IVF globalization (Inhorn, 2004). The UAE opened its first IVF clinic in a government hospital in 1991, only 5 years after Saudi Arabia introduced the technology to the Arab Gulf. By 2005, the UAE hosted seven IVF clinics, five of them private facilities. By 2012, that number had doubled to 14, 12 of them privately owned.

Today, the Emirati IVF sector serves a global population of expatriate foreign workers in the country, as well as thousands of medical travellers seeking IVF services in Dubai (Inhorn, 2015). IVF in the UAE is decidedly cosmopolitan, catering to an international clientele who are attracted to Dubai as a booming global city and an emerging medical tourism hub. Yet this Emirati state-sponsored project of 'medical cosmopolitanism' (Inhorn, 2016) exists in tension with another state-sponsored project called 'emiratization'. Emiratization is an attempt by the UAE government to prioritize the needs of Emiratis, particularly through a formal government mandate intended to increase the participation of Emiratis in key positions in the UAE private-sector workforce (Toledo, 2013). On a broader societal level, however, emiratization is about putting Emiratis first – prioritizing the needs of the *muwatinun*, or 'nationals', over foreigners. This is partly because Emiratis now constitute a tiny fraction of the overall populace in their own country – less than one million out of a total of nine million, approximately eight million of whom are expatriate foreign workers (Davidson, 2005, 2008; Kanna, 2011; Mahdavi, 2011, 2016; Vora, 2013).

In this article, the emiratization of the IVF sector will be explored. Indeed, since the mid-2000s, the Emirati IVF sector has undergone a series of profound transformations, involving the indigenization-qua-emiratization of IVF services in the country. Two main aspects of IVF emiratization will be examined. The first involves the Emirati government's brief experiment with IVF public financing, which started off as a generous IVF subsidization programme for all infertile couples, but ended up solidifying preferential treatment for local Emiratis. The second is the 2010 passage of UAE Federal Law No. 11, which now stands as one of the world's most restrictive pieces of assisted reproduction legislation. Passage of this law resulted from a very fractious period of IVF history in the Emirates, which resulted in a clinic war and led to legal changes that have fundamentally altered the landscape of IVF in the country.

In short, within the UAE's 25-year-old IVF sector, competing discourses of cosmopolitanism and emiratization have played out, leading to an increasingly restrictive and distinctive Emirati biopolitical and legal regime. The

particular form of Emirati reprobationalism – which is characterized in this paper as the emiratization of IVF – is at odds with the UAE's distinct desire to serve as a medically cosmopolitan technohub for the rest of the world. A beacon of high-tech modernity on the one hand, and a bastion of Emirati privilege on the other, the UAE is trying to have it both ways – leading to significant paradoxes and complexities, as well as new forms of reproductive privilege and discrimination.

Cosmopolitanism in the Emirates: a brief history

Cosmopolitanism – or the bringing together of diverse constituencies from around the world (Skrbis et al., 2004) – has a long and fabled history in the UAE. Formerly called the 'Trucial States', and made up of distinct, tribally-based emirates located on the eastern shore of Saudi Arabia, the UAE existed throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries as a loose confederation of seven neighbouring provinces, including Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain. Dubai, in particular, was known as a cosmopolitan trading hub, and a place of Arab, Persian and Indian hybridity (Davidson, 2008). During its colonial period as a British protectorate – which began in 1892 and ended in 1971 – the coastal town of Dubai was the most thriving, trade-friendly, premiere free port of the lower Arab Gulf (Davidson, 2008). As a result of this early openness, large populations of South Asians and Iranians settled in Dubai, many of them middle-class and wealthy merchants.

With the founding of the Emirati nation-state on 2 December 1971, the influx of foreigners into the country was heightened by a period of hyper-development – particularly in Dubai, but also in Abu Dhabi, the largest and most petro-rich emirate, and the nation's new capital. Early infrastructural development projects in the UAE relied on the importation of 'experts' (Mitchell, 2002), as well as thousands of day labourers, mostly imported from South Asia (Ali, 2010). Since then, the UAE has become known as one of the largest migrant-receiving countries in the world (Mahdavi, 2011, 2016). Today, the nation of seven confederated emirates is decidedly multinational and multicultural. Of the 9.44 million people living in the country, according to official reports (United Nations, 2014), only 13% are Emirati (and this may be an overestimate, based on under-reporting of other nationalities). The largest single group is South Asians (Kanna, 2011; Vora, 2013) who, at 58% of the total population, are nearly equally divided between Indians and Pakistanis (the former slightly outnumbering the latter). Other Asians and Arabs from many nations make up about 17% of the country's population. The remaining 8.5% are primarily Western expatriates ('expats'), as well as a growing number of migrants from various parts of Africa (Barrett, 2010). The only continent not well represented in the Emirates today is South America.

Dubai is the largest city in the Emirates, with a population of nearly 2 million and more than 70 nationalities represented (Mahdavi, 2011). According to most commentators, Dubai has emerged in the 21st century as the Middle East's only cosmopolitan metropolis – or, as anthropologist Ahmed Kanna (2011) has described it, as a 'fashionable global city.' No longer reliant on the oil industry, Dubai's economy has significantly diversified, with main revenues coming from

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