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# Mobility and Urban Conflict: A Study of Lyari, Karachi

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## Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Historical Background.....	3
3. The Roots of Conflict and the Rise of the Gangs.....	6
4. Local and Transregional Spatial Tactics.....	11
4.1 Contextualising Transregional Migration.....	12
4.2 Narrating the Desire to Migrate.....	13
5. Understanding Migration Trajectories.....	16
6. Conclusion.....	18

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## 1. Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Covering approximately 1800 acres of land in Karachi's South district and with a population of around 1.6 million, the densely populated, multi-ethnic and largely working class area of Lyari in Karachi,<sup>3</sup> has been the site of an on-going conflict between criminal gangs,<sup>4</sup> political parties and state security forces for over a decade. As in most parts of the city, many of the area's conflicts are rooted in the struggle for control of land and resources by various powerful groups. Due to this on-going conflict, Lyari has been labeled by state security forces and the media as one of several 'no-go areas' in the city (see Ahmed 2015). However, residents of Lyari tell a different version of this story, referring to this area as '*Karachi ki maan*' or the mother of Karachi because it is one of the oldest parts of the city. For Lyari's residents, their locality continuously shifts from being a space of protection against the hostile social and political environment of the city to a space of terror at the hands of local criminal gangs and state security forces. Caught in a turf war between political parties, gangs and the state, the residents of this area experience an urban landscape that is fraught with multiple and shifting risks.

The conflict in Lyari may seem at first glance to be a highly localized, urban conflict. However, both the causes and the repercussions of the conflict span national and regional borders and hence, defy the boundaries of 'area studies' approaches (Mielke and Hornidge 2014:18). In terms of the specific factors that fuel the conflict, cross-border smuggling in weapons and drugs in particular serves as a major source of revenue for criminal gangs. As well Lyari's major 'gangsters', like many Pakistani politicians, often conduct their activities from abroad, particularly from the Middle East and Iran. More generally, Karachi as a whole and Lyari in particular are the product of multiple waves of migration, with many residents tracing their roots across the entire Indian Ocean region into what is now India and Iran and as far as Africa

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<sup>3</sup> With a population estimated at well over 20 million, Karachi is by far the largest city in Pakistan and is the capital of the Sindh province. It is also the economic hub of the country, generating 25% of the country's GDP and handling 95% of its international trade (Gayer 2014: 5).

<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'criminal gang' with the understanding that the notion of 'crime' is itself socially constructed is often used by powerful actors as a means of justifying the oppression and control of a variety of groups (Thompson 1975; Merry 1998). 'Gang' in this paper is used to refer to those organized groups engaged in illicit activities, which include the sale of drugs, the operation of gambling dens, smuggling, extortion, robbery, and violent crime. Many individuals involved in criminal activities have become famous in Lyari's history. However, it was only in the early 2000s that these actors began to be locally referred to as 'gangs' or 'gangwar' as a result of their expansion and increased organisation. The existence of gangs has been attributed to the multiple marginalisations faced by poor urban youth (Vigil 2003), which is certainly the case in Lyari.

for those whose ancestors were brought to the Subcontinent as slaves. Many of Karachi's contemporary conflicts can also be tied to contestations over urban space and resources between various groups claiming their 'right to the city' (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1968). These contestations have created a situation of physical and economic insecurity for many of Karachi's residents including those living in Lyari. For this reason residents who can often migrate to Iran or the Gulf in pursuit of a better, more secure life in this way, Lyari in particular and Karachi as a whole are characterized by mobility. In his work on African cities, Hahn (2010:119) proposes an approach that focuses on mobility as a way of understanding cities as 'segments in networks' within a wider geographical constellation. A focus on multiple forms of mobility, across and within national and regional boundaries, is key to understanding both the causes and consequences of urban conflicts such as the one taking place in Lyari.

This paper focuses in particular on the narratives of young men who migrated from Lyari to Dubai or who aspire to do so as means of demonstrating the various ways in which urban conflicts are both a product of and productive of multiple types of mobility. Their narratives highlight the ways in which various and shifting forms of violence experienced inside and outside Lyari serve to restrict the movements of young men to certain areas within the city. The spatial tactics<sup>5</sup> utilized by these men in order to deal with multiple forms of insecurity often traverse the boundaries of the city and the nation-state itself, with many looking for an escape from the violence and social exclusion they experience in Karachi in the Gulf countries. Hence, for these men, migration to the Gulf cannot be understood purely in economic terms but rather must be understood as emerging out of multiple and intertwined insecurities and desires produced within the city.

I have been conducting research on Lyari since August 2012. During this time I conducted interviews with people belonging to various ethnic communities living in neighbourhoods across Lyari.<sup>6</sup> I also spent time engaging in participant observation in the area along with being involved personally with a community-based youth organisation in Lyari as an advisor. I also traveled to Dubai during the summer of 2014 with the purpose of interviewing men who had migrated from Lyari for work in order to understand their motivations for migration. The research presented in this paper focuses mainly on the stories of these men, all of whom are ethnically Baloch and in their twenties. However, it is also informed by interviews and participant observation conducted in Lyari itself over the course of two years. Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, I have made a great effort to protect the identities of the

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<sup>5</sup> I use 'tactics' here in the sense put forward by De Certeau (1984) to signify those actions taken by the dominated in their everyday lives to negotiate within and when possible subvert wider structures of power.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews were conducted in Urdu and translated by the author into English.

individuals involved in the research, and hence all names have been changed, and certain details have been altered to preserve the anonymity of the respondents.

This paper will begin by providing a brief historical background of Lyari, outlining the multiple waves of migration into the city and their impact on the people of Lyari as well as tracing the roots of the current conflict, some of which are also related to migration flows into the city and the competition over space and resources. It will then present the narratives of four male respondents, three of whom were based in Dubai and one who was based in Karachi, focusing in particular on their experiences of multiple forms of insecurity within the city and their motivations for migration. Finally, the paper will analyse the motivations for migration presented in these narratives, focusing on how the causes of urban insecurity and conflict along with the consequences can best be understood through the lens of multiple forms of mobility—of people, goods and ideas—which span national and regional boundaries.

## 2. Historical Background

Lyari, like the city of Karachi as a whole, has been shaped by multiple waves of migration of people from across the Indian Ocean region. Although most of my research has been conducted amongst the Baloch residents of Lyari, which makes up approximately 50% of Lyari's residents,<sup>7</sup> Lyari as a whole is multi-ethnic and includes Katchchhis (a Sindhi sub-group who migrated from the Katchchh region of what is now Indian Gujarat before Partition), various other Sindhi groups, Punjabis, Pashtuns, Bengalis, and a small number of Urdu speakers, known in Karachi as Muhajirs,<sup>8</sup> whose families migrated from India during and after Partition. It is also religiously diverse including a large number of Hindus and Christians as well as members of the Zikri community, a heterodox Sunni sect originating in Balochistan (Sabir 2008).

This area, which some believe is named for the '*lyar*' trees that grow along the banks of the river, is one of the oldest settlements in the city and began as a fishing settlement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>7</sup> Spooner (2013: 8) argues:

“What makes an inhabitant of Balochistan a Baloch is Islam, the use of the Balochi language for public purposes, and a political relationship with one of the leading families in the agricultural settlements.”

However, this is not the case for urban Baloch such as those living in Lyari. Therefore, following in the footsteps of Barth (1969) who has highlighted the constructed nature of ethnic boundaries, for the purposes of this paper, the Baloch are defined here as those people who identify as 'Baloch' and who claim ancestral ties with the area known as 'Balochistan', which covers parts of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. The Baloch comprise approximately 4.34% of Karachi's population according to the 1998 Census.

<sup>8</sup> '*Muhajir*' is an Arabic word meaning 'immigrant', which has come to be associated in Pakistan with Urdu-speaking migrants from what is now India.

The population of the area grew significantly during the period of British colonial rule, when the British began modernising Karachi’s port and people began migrating in larger numbers from what is now Balochistan, Sindh and the Katchchh (Kutch) region of Gujarat because of the employment opportunities provided by the port (Viqar 2014). Forming the largest part of ‘the native city’<sup>9</sup>, Lyari was home to the Muslim working classes before Partition and has remained largely working class in its makeup since this time. However the migration of groups from what is now India during Partition and other parts of Pakistan since then, including in particular large numbers of Pashtuns beginning in the 1960s, has meant more competition for the jobs traditionally occupied by Lyari’s pre-Partition residents, including jobs in the port. Furthermore, the mechanisation of the port in the 1990s, the decline of small industries, the closing of cinemas and nightclubs, and the diminishing use of the donkey and camel cart as a means of transporting goods—all fields in which the people of Lyari were regularly employed—have meant fewer and fewer steady sources of work for many of Lyari’s residents.



Map of Lyari Town, Karachi

Despite its geographical and historical significance in Karachi’s landscape, Lyari has been consistently neglected in terms of infrastructure and development since the city was founded during the period of British rule – a fact that surfaces in many of the narratives of the area’s residents. From its inception Lyari developed in a haphazard fashion around unplanned settlements and faced degradation during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when many of the city’s most

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<sup>9</sup> Karachi was divided into two parts during the colonial period, ‘the European city’ and ‘the native city’ (Hasan 1999), which included the old city and Lyari, which was home to the city’s proletariat even at this time.

polluting industries were located within its vicinity. This pattern of neglect continued after Pakistan was created and was made worse by the influx of migrants from India in the decades following Partition, when more than 600,000 refugees flooded into the city from India and the majority of the city's Hindu population migrated out, shifting the religious and ethnic demographics of the city dramatically (Hasan 1999: 24). The migrants from India were given priority in terms of housing by city planners because of their symbolic importance to the nation-building project to the detriment of older working class areas such as Lyari (Slimbach 1996).<sup>10</sup> This neglect only continued in the decades following Partition, as major industrial zones were developed increasingly at the peripheries of the city under the leadership of successive state administrations (Viqar 2014:6).

The founder of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who strategically utilised a form of populist socialist rhetoric to gain support, saw Lyari as a potential base for his party in Karachi. While he was a minister, he held public meetings with Lyari's residents about the mass eviction and resettlement plans being proposed by the Ayub Khan government, which led to popular resistance in the area. It was Bhutto's promise of providing residents with secure tenure that helped his party gain support in that area. The PPP followed through with this promise in 1972 when they assumed office, regularising the area of Lyari and providing residents with the option of obtaining leases on their property, which helped Lyari residents gain a greater sense of security in the city (Gazdar and Mallah 2013). Bhutto is still venerated by the area's residents for being the person who brought development to Lyari, who gave people jobs in the public sector, and who opened up employment opportunities in the Gulf. While his daughter, Benazir Bhutto, is given credit for continuing the PPP's legacy of development in the area and is also held in high esteem, the overall reputation of the party has steadily declined amongst residents in recent years. There is a general sense that the PPP has abandoned the people of Lyari, controlling the area through criminal elements rather than gaining support through development and direct patronage as it had in the past.

The 1980s witnessed a dramatic shift in the political and social climate of the city with the rise of the MQM, which was previously called the 'Muhajir Qaumi Movement' because it claimed to represent the Urdu-speaking migrants from India who formed approximately 50% of the city's population according to the 1998 Census.<sup>11</sup> Using the narrative of ethnic marginalisation and

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<sup>10</sup> As Bedford (2012:262) has argued, to complain about this neglect would be to go against the logic of the creation of the nation-state, which was premised on the notion of a unified Muslim community.

<sup>11</sup> The Muhajir share of Karachi's population has been steadily declining in recent years, with the number of Pashtuns in particular rapidly increasing in the city. However, no census has been conducted since 1998 largely because of political sensitivity. The decline in Muhajir population relative to other groups along with the desire of the party to gain broader-based support are likely reasons for the shift from 'Muhajir' to 'Muttahida' (united) in the party's name.

following a series of ethnic riots throughout the 1980s, the MQM has become the most powerful political party in Karachi utilising a form of hyper-masculine politics characterised by a celebration of 'virility, prowess and physical aggression' in order to gain support particularly amongst the Urdu-speaking middle and working classes (Khan 2010b:235; Khan 2010a; Anwar 2014; Gayer 2014). The MQM's domination of the city's administrative structure has fuelled the sense of neglect in Lyari. For example, under the previous devolution plan introduced during the Musharraf regime in 2001, the city's South District, of which Lyari is a part, was divided in such a way that the lucrative wholesale markets, the central business district, and the port were separated from Lyari, divesting the area of economically lucrative spaces (Viqar 2014:4). Although this system has since been dissolved, no new system of local governance has been introduced in its place, thus continuing the structural marginalisation of Lyari from the rest of the city. Many residents of Lyari complain that the MQM's political and economic domination has not only led to marginalisation in terms of state funds but has also led to discrimination in employment, education as well as to violence. The current conflict must be understood within this wider context of political, economic, and social marginalisation.

### **3. The Roots of Conflict and the Rise of the Gangs**

The current conflicts in Lyari in particular and in Karachi in general must be understood in the context of changing configurations of power within the city and the region as a whole.

These conflicts are also deeply tied to the struggle for the control of land in a city with one of the world's fastest growing populations, with each new wave of migrants competing for their own share of Karachi's economic and political pie. The struggle for land has intensified due to the spread of extortion, or *bhatta*,<sup>12</sup> which was popularized by the Muttahida Quami Movement in the 90s but has since been adopted by a variety of political and criminal groups operating across the city, often working in tandem with each other and with the collusion of state actors such as the police. This struggle is often expressed in ethnicised terms, which masks the structural inequalities that have historically marked the city's development (Viqar 2014:6; Gayer 2007). Because Lyari is located near some of the most economically lucrative areas of the city including the port and the wholesale markets, all of which represent opportunities for the collection of *bhatta*, the land it occupies is highly contested amongst a variety of groups. The growing strength of criminal actors within Lyari must be understood within this context.

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<sup>12</sup> *Bhatta* is generally extracted by political parties and criminal groups from business owners and residents under the guise of 'protection'. The extraction of *bhatta* generally involves the use of coercion, with the refusal to pay often leading to violence.



Lyari has been host to a variety of criminal groups who have become increasingly powerful since the 1980s when the city as a whole was transformed as a result of the massive inflow of arms and drugs in the region because of the Afghan War (Gayer 2007). The early generation of Lyari's criminals, including the infamous Sheru and Dadal, served as strongmen for local and national politicians, particularly for Lyari's powerful Haroon family during the 1960s (Gayer 2014). However, it was not until the appearance of Rehman Dakait (Rehman 'the Bandit'), in the late 1990s that these groups started expanding and becoming more organised into what could be called 'gangs', developing a wider presence in Lyari. This is also when criminality and politics became more explicitly intertwined in the area. This must be understood against the backdrop of the rise of violent politics in Karachi more generally during this period accompanying the ascendancy to power of the MQM.

Rehman, who began his career by purely engaging in criminal activities, grew gradually closer to the PPP, particularly towards the end of his life. He and his men were central to the security apparatus of both Benazir Bhutto and later on of Asif Ali Zardari (Imtiaz 2010), and they were also instrumental in the 2008 election campaigning in Karachi, which the PPP won. His group was also involved in a gang war – a violent battle over the control of criminal activities within Lyari – which raged in the area from 2004-2008 with a rival group headed by Arshad Pappu. This conflict, which many believe was a proxy turf war between the MQM and the PPP with Rehman's group receiving support from the PPP and Arshad Pappu's group from the MQM, ravaged Lyari, creating widespread insecurity amongst its residents and hampering social and political activities in the process.

The gang war officially ended in 2008 when Rehman Dakait called for a truce between the two rival groups and created the People's Aman Committee (PAC) with the support of the PPP. However, the creation of the PAC did not mean the end of the gangs. On the contrary, its creation in many ways formalized the power of the gangs in Lyari with PAC offices set up throughout the area in a style similar to the MQM's extensive system of unit and sector offices in much of the rest of the city. Residents were urged to go to the PAC offices in order to resolve local disputes and with any complaints they might have related to the civic administration. In this sense, the PAC began operating as part of a 'hybrid state' within Lyari with the PPP unofficially treating this body as their local representative.<sup>13</sup>

Towards the end of his life, Rehman shifted from simply supporting the PPP to fashioning himself as a leader in his own right, transforming from 'Rehman Dakait' to the more respectable 'Sardar Rehman Baloch'. He built his reputation as the 'Robin Hood' of Lyari, engaging in large-

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<sup>13</sup> Jaffe (2013) describes a similar situation in Kingston, Jamaica where the state acts in a 'hybrid' manner, sub-contracting many of their responsibilities to local 'dons' or gang leaders.

scale charitable works in his community, distributing rations to families, setting up medical clinics, and supporting educational and sports-related activities in Lyari.<sup>14</sup> After his death in 2009 in a police encounter, many speculated that it was his increasing moves towards becoming a political leader himself rather than simply taking orders from the official party heads, which led to his demise. Uzair Baloch, whose own father was killed by Arshad Pappu's group, stepped in to take Rehman's seat as the head of the PAC.

Uzair continued along the same lines as Rehman Dakait, perhaps even more explicitly framing himself as the leader of Lyari and similarly engaging in social work within the area (Temple-Raston 2013). The image that Rehman Dakait and Uzair Baloch fashioned of themselves as champions of the common people can be linked to Hobsbawm's (1959) idea of the 'social bandit'. Several people I encountered, particularly in the early days of my fieldwork in the summer of 2012, spoke of Rehman and Uzair as local heroes, often explicitly referring to them as 'Robin Hoods'. However, most were also realistic about the motivations of the gangsters as a means of softening their image and allowing them to continue to run their operations from Lyari with little or no resistance or opposition from the people. Many also felt that the gangs not only served the PPP but were also supported by state agencies in order to curtail any Baloch nationalist activities in Lyari. As Blok (1972) points out, it is often the case that bandits serve the interests of the ruling classes, which allows them to remain protected. This was the case in Lyari, where most residents I spoke to were well aware that the gangs were protected and supported by powerful members of the state. However, as Blok also points out, it is the myths and legends surrounding the bandit that deserve attention in terms of what they represent. The veneration of Uzair and Rehman, while ambivalent and difficult to gauge, expressed the sense of disillusionment and betrayal on the part of Lyari residents towards the state and the PPP along with feelings of marginalisation from the wider city.

The People's Aman Committee, which was officially banned by the government in 2011, but which continued to function in an ad hoc manner even after the ban, was clearly the most powerful force in Lyari, at least until the summer of 2013. There were two sets of events that occurred between 2010 and 2011, which considerably increased the support for Uzair Baloch and the PAC in Lyari, at least temporarily. The first was the wave of violence between the MQM and the PPP that swept through the city, with the PAC acting as the PPP's armed wing. Several hundred people were killed during this period, with violence peaking in the summer of 2011, including many on both sides who had no affiliation with a political group or gang (Yusuf

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<sup>14</sup> This is similar to the 'social banditry' practiced by the groups engaged in illicit trade in Balochistan (Boedeker 2012).

2012).<sup>15</sup> Stories of men being targeted based on their ethnicity were reported across the city, including in Lyari, where the MQM was blamed for picking up, torturing and killing innocent Baloch men. For many in Lyari, who had witnessed the violence first-hand, the PAC was seen as their only defence at this time in a context in which the state security forces were seen as non-functional at best and threatening at worst.

The second key event that allowed the gangs to consolidate their support in Lyari during this period relates to residents' alienation from the state. In April-May 2012, the police led a seven-day operation in the area, which took place after a PPP worker was killed allegedly by members of the PAC, demonstrating the unstable nature of the relationship between the state, the PPP and the gangs. Residents of those areas near where the operation took place faced severe difficulties during this period, with water and electricity cut off to their homes and their movement severely curtailed. Forty-five people were killed in the crossfire between the police and the PAC workers including innocent bystanders (Hashim 2012). This operation was a turning point in many of the narratives of Lyari's residents in terms of heightening the sense of marginalisation felt by Lyari's residents along with contributing to the fear and distrust of state security forces, which many felt had moved from abandoning the people of Lyari to actively targeting them. The anger that resulted from this operation served to increase the support of Uzair Baloch and the PAC, who capitalised on residents' fears of both state security forces and the MQM, framing themselves as the only true protectors of the people of Lyari. The PAC reinforced the notion that Lyari's people, and the Baloch in particular, were an oppressed minority targeted by the MQM and the state, which mirrored the discourse of the MQM who used similar strategies in relation to the Urdu-speaking population (Khan 2010a).

However, the idea of 'support' itself must be qualified and understood in the wider context of fear and insecurity that permeates the area. In many senses the people of Lyari had no other choice but to support the gangs, as they controlled their neighbourhoods economically, socially and politically and were clearly receiving support from at least some branches of the state. While it was relatively easy to speak openly about the violence committed by outside actors including the MQM, the PPP as well as the police and the Rangers,<sup>16</sup> at least within Lyari, the gangs were much closer to home; they were in many senses the enemy 'within'. It was only after I had spent a significant amount of time in Lyari and gained people's trust that stories started to emerge about the gangs' involvement in extortion and various acts of violence in the area. However, by

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<sup>15</sup> After the bloody events of the summer, in September, Zulfiqar Mirza, the former Home Minister of Sindh, boasted that he had issued 300,000 weapons licenses in order for people to be able to defend themselves at a public rally held in Lyari.

<sup>16</sup> The Rangers are the paramilitary state security forces in Pakistan, which operate independently from the police and fall under the Ministry of the Interior of the central government.

and large there was a kind of 'code of silence' operating within Lyari with regards to the gangs, which many people in Lyari acknowledged after I had gained their trust. As Green's (1994:239) research on Guatemala reveals, silence often works as a survival strategy, but 'silencing is a powerful mechanism of control enforced through fear'.<sup>17</sup>

By the summer of 2013, major cracks in the PAC edifice began to appear, leading to further divisions and violent conflicts between the gangs. In September 2013, a formal rift occurred between Baba Ladla, one of the most powerful commanders in the area, and Uzair Baloch following the murder of Zafar Baloch, who was the spokesperson of the PAC and the supposed political mastermind behind the group. This led to a bloody conflict between gangs which supported Uzair and those which supported Baba Ladla, dividing Lyari's neighbourhoods between the two groups and leading to hundreds of deaths within the area due to bomb blasts and firing between groups, along with a heightened sense of fear and insecurity for its residents. Furthermore, the state launched a major security operation in Karachi led by their paramilitary forces, the Rangers, targeting various violent groups in the city including the Lyari gangs. Although some in Lyari were relieved that the Rangers had intervened, some also felt that they were acting in a similar manner to the gangs in terms of their violent behavior towards citizens. This demonstrates the mimetic nature of state and non-state actors in their perpetration of violence in the city (Khan 2007). Many of the more powerful gangsters fled and were conducting their activities from the Gulf during this period including Uzair Baloch who at the time of writing was reported to be in Dubai, further demonstrating the transregional dynamics of the conflict.

Furthermore, although most are now operating underground, the area has historically been home to various Baloch nationalist organisations. Many in the area believe that one of the reasons the gangs have become so powerful is because they are being used by certain branches of the state in order to counter any nationalist activity in the area as Lyari has the largest concentration of members of the Baloch community in the city. In recent years, several Islamist groups have also been believed to be operating from the area who some suspect have forged alliances with the gangs, although very little is known about these groups. Therefore, the conflict in Lyari is complex and involves multiple state and non-state actors working both in tandem and against each other and operating across local, national and regional boundaries. The opacity of the conflict only compounds the sense of insecurity experienced by the area's residents.

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<sup>17</sup> Penglase (2014) documents a similar phenomenon in the favelas of Rio where residents rarely spoke out against the gangs that were operating in their neighbourhoods. This is also similar to Elwert's (2004) concept of avoidance, which Ismailbekova (2012) applies to her analysis of the strategies used by Uzbeks to deal with conflict in Osh.

#### 4. Local and Transregional Spatial Tactics

Like most residents of Karachi, the residents of Lyari live in what Gayer has termed a 'chronic state of fear' (2014:250), affecting all aspects of their everyday lives. For the people of Lyari, this fear is perhaps even greater than in many other areas of the city because of the high levels of violence experienced in the area particularly in the last ten years. In order to avoid potential risks, people living in 'no-go areas' such as Lyari restrict their movements to particular routes within the city, limiting their exposure to public spaces both within and outside of their immediate locality. These 'bystander tactics' (Ahmad 2011) are intended to create a sense of security within an otherwise insecure environment. However, the unintended consequence of such tactics is the shrinking space of where people feel comfortable in the city, or what they think of as 'home' (Verkaaik 2009), thus reinforcing social and spatial boundaries and restricting individual mobility. In such a scenario, the power of local strongmen is reinforced, which includes representatives of political parties and criminal gangs (with the boundaries between both often blurring) to act as protectors of their locality against rival parties and state security forces.

As Simone (2010:45) points out, spatial mobility is a key aspect of the survival strategies of those residing in the peripheries of cities particularly in terms of securing their livelihoods.<sup>18</sup> However, for people living in the context of violent urban conflict such as those living in Lyari, their ability to move freely around various parts of the city is severely restricted. Although all residents of Lyari experience these restrictions, for young Baloch men, who are often targeted by state security forces, rival political parties, and local gangs, these restrictions are felt relatively more greatly perhaps because it is expected that men's movements should otherwise be unrestricted within the city (Ali 2009).<sup>19</sup> This is not to argue that members of other ethnic groups, older men, or women<sup>20</sup> do not face restrictions on their mobility or that they are unaffected by violence. Rather, the way that violence and fear are experienced must be situated (Pettigrew and Adhikari 2009) according to one's particular social location. For young Baloch men, this situation of fear and insecurity has led to the employment of multiple spatial tactics as a means of avoiding risk. These tactics can both lead to the restriction of movement to one's

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<sup>18</sup> While Lyari is spatially located within the centre of the city, it is very much peripheral to economic and political structures of power.

<sup>19</sup> While there is a great deal of diversity amongst the Baloch in terms of their physical appearance, many Baloch in Lyari have ancestors who were brought to the Subcontinent as slaves from Africa. For this reason, some Baloch men are identified because of their darker complexion and African features. Others are identified because of their accents. However, ethnic identification is often not clear or obvious, particularly for those unfamiliar with Lyari.

<sup>20</sup> For young women in particular, restrictions on their movement within the city are considered to be part of the norm. However, these restrictions and the ways in which women negotiate within and around them are also affected by the constantly shifting rhythms of violence within the city.

immediate locality, where most men felt relatively less threatened by local gang members who were often known to them as opposed to unknown members of gangs in other localities or of the MQM,<sup>21</sup> or to particular areas of the city dominated by members of the same or allied ethnic groups. For some, including the young men featured in this paper, multiple forms of insecurity in Karachi led them to search for employment outside in other countries, particularly in Iran and the Gulf.<sup>22</sup> Hence the spatial impacts of the conflict have led to a constant shifting and general shrinking of safe spaces within the city for young Baloch men along with an expansion of imaginary or real frontiers of possibility beyond national borders, thus simultaneously restricting and expanding individual mobility.

#### **4.1 Contextualising Transregional Migration**

The migration of men to the Gulf countries has a long history in Pakistan in general and Lyari in particular with many Pakistani migrants traveling mostly to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq and Oman in the 1970s, with numbers peaking in 1981 (Addleton 1992:58).<sup>23</sup> Addleton (*ibid.*: 40) traces the history of migration from the Subcontinent to the Gulf region with different groups of people migrating to different regions of the Gulf at various times. Hence, he argues that the migration boom of the 1970s was part of a longer historical relationship between the regions and cannot be explained by the economic laws of supply and demand alone. For example, the Baloch have had historical ties with Oman stretching back several generations (*ibid.*:42), and many of the Baloch in Lyari also spoke about having worked in Oman previously or of having family that was still settled there. The research for this paper, however, focuses largely on the actual and desired migration to the U.A.E., which has a more recent history. The increased demand for Pakistani labour in the U.A.E. began in the early 1970s and is tied to the construction boom following the rise in oil prices.<sup>24</sup> This was accompanied by a closer political relationship between Pakistan and the countries of the Gulf forged originally by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and strengthened by subsequent Pakistani leaders (*ibid.*:46-47).

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<sup>21</sup> In fact, many young men spoke about how local gangs operating under the umbrella of the People's Aman Committee actually served as protection from the MQM during the period of heightened violence between the PPP and the MQM.

<sup>22</sup> However, it is also important to note that the ability to migrate is not available to the vast majority of people living in Lyari and is dependent both on one's contacts and resources.

<sup>23</sup> Addleton (1992) also points to the long history of migration from the Subcontinent to the Gulf region going back centuries to the time of the Indus and Sumerian civilisations.

<sup>24</sup> Rana (2011:12-13) connects the labour migration from Pakistan to the Gulf during the 1970s with the links of both Pakistan and the Gulf countries with the U.S. economy and its neoliberal agenda along with the crisis faced by the Pakistani state, which was squeezing peasants out of the countryside and busting unions as part of their programme of capitalist industrialisation.

The number of jobs available to Pakistanis in the Gulf has declined steadily since the 1980s. However, many people continue to migrate for work and many more dream of doing so, reflecting the ‘mobile lives’ and mobile imaginaries of many of those who live in the city (Marsden 2011). Similar to Schetter’s (2012) characterisation of Afghan society, the lives of people in Lyari have been profoundly shaped by translocality long before the advent of the area’s conflicts. The narratives of young men in Lyari and in Dubai reflect the complexity of their desires to migrate—desires which cannot be understood within the boundaries of simple economic rationality alone. While material advancement certainly plays a significant role in shaping young men’s aspirations to migrate out of Pakistan, other factors also come into play, particularly the desire for security.

#### **4.2 Narrating the Desire to Migrate**

I had been hearing about men who had moved to Dubai in search of work since I began conducting fieldwork in Lyari. During the summer of 2014, I had the opportunity to travel to Dubai and meet some of these men. My initial contact, who I was connected with by friends in Lyari, was a young man called Faheem who was from an Irani Baloch<sup>25</sup> family, which migrated to Lyari in the early part of the twentieth century. He was the only person from his family living in Dubai, although his father had migrated there temporarily for work several years ago. I knew some of Faheem’s family in Lyari, and I wanted to understand what his motivations were for moving to Dubai and how he found life there as compared with Karachi. We met for the first time in a park near one of the metro stations in the city, which was one of the few places we could comfortably meet in a city that is so profoundly divided along class lines. Because Faheem lived in all-male quarters, which housed the employees of the company he worked for, it was also impossible for me to meet him at his residence as a woman. He told me about his life in Karachi before he moved to Dubai about a year and a half before.

Faheem spent several years moving between different areas of the Karachi in search of stable employment—an experience common to many young men in a city where full-time, salaried employment is a rare commodity. However, for Faheem the fear of violence further restricted his employment options. After trying several jobs in a variety of fields, Faheem finally found relatively stable and well-paid employment working as a porter in a hospital. However, he was forced to leave this job when they shifted his schedule from the day to the night shift. This was during the period in 2011 when the MQM and the PPP were engaged in a turf war across the city during which time young Baloch men felt particularly insecure leaving Lyari. Because Faheem

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<sup>25</sup> Balochistan spans the Iranian, Pakistani and Afghan borders, and many of the Baloch living in Lyari migrated to Karachi from Iran beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing to the present day (Gayer 2014:128).

knew several young men personally who had been killed during this period, his fears were further heightened. He then opened a small shop, which sold *paan* (betel leaves) and *chaliya* (betel nuts) in his own neighbourhood in Lyari, where he thought he would be safe from violence. However, soon after he opened the shop, the local gangs started asking for *bhatta*, which he could not afford to pay out of his meager earnings. Although Faheem felt that the local gangs were not particularly dangerous as compared to the outside threat of the MQM, he still chose to close down his business because of the increasing pressure on his finances. Faheem also told me how he travelled to Iran at one point in search of employment. He was offered a job working as a sales person in a shopping mall, but the pay was very low, so he decided to come back to Karachi. After he had exhausted his available options in Karachi and Iran, Faheem asked his older brother to use his contacts to help him get a job in Dubai. He told me how desperate he was to leave Karachi at this time:

“I said however hard it is, the difficulty I am facing here now, only I know that. I want to get out of here. I want peace. The kinds of things I am seeing here are making me feel more suffocated. Now I want to get out of here. I don’t care what happens, how hot it is, if I have to work all day in the sun, I will do it.” [June 2014]

Faheem secured a job in a company that installs air conditioning ducts in the high-rise buildings of Dubai, and he lives in the accommodation provided by the company for its workers. Although he was not particularly happy with his pay or working conditions and complained about the loneliness and impersonal nature of life in Dubai, Faheem felt that it was still better than living in a state of constant fear in Karachi.

I also spoke to two of Faheem’s friends in Dubai who had migrated from Lyari for work and who prioritized different reasons for migrating in their narratives. Ali had moved to Dubai a year and a half earlier and was working as a clerk in a post office. However, he was born in Dubai and spent the first ten years of his life there as his father had been working in Dubai since the early 1970s, when large numbers of men had migrated from Pakistan to work. He and his family left in the 1980s when the visa regulations were changed, and he had recently rejoined his father who was living in the suburbs of Dubai. For Ali, the fact that he earned more in Dubai was his main motivation for migrating. In Karachi he worked in the garment industry and in a factory earning as little as 300 rupees per week (\$ 3 USD), while in Dubai he was earning significantly more. He also mentioned the fact that the Baloch were discriminated against in employment in Karachi, but this mainly affected ‘educated’ people and not labourers like him.

However, while physical security was not highlighted in our initial conversation, we were later joined by Faheem, and he spoke about the fact that many people migrated out of the country during the period when there was fighting between the MQM and the PPP. He said those people’s parents were happy that “at least they were alive” and added that “studying and



working in Karachi is like fighting a war” because of the constant fear of target killing and suicide bombers. Despite all of this, he felt that Lyari was a better place to live than Dubai, where the only thing people cared about was work.

The other friend who Faheem introduced me to was Irfan who had moved to Dubai only a few months earlier from Lyari. Irfan was employed fitting carpets in Dubai and was invited there by his brother-in-law who had a job working at the airport. However, Irfan was not happy with the pay he was receiving in Dubai, which was less than he was told he would be earning, particularly as he was not provided accommodation by his employer. He was sharing a small flat with five of his male family members who had all come to Dubai for work. He had been working as a tailor in Lyari, but the work did not pay well and was unsteady depending on the season. However, because he did not have to travel outside of Lyari for work, he was relatively unaffected by the violence outside of his neighbourhood. Irfan said that he was actually more worried and insecure in Dubai as compared to Karachi despite the fact that he made relatively more money there than he did as a tailor at home. This was because his expenses were greater in Dubai, and because he worried about violating this new and unfamiliar set of rules and regulations he encountered in the UAE. I asked why he migrated in the first place considering he seemed relatively content in Karachi, and he replied simply that he was curious to see what it was like, using the Urdu word *shauq*, which combines the ideas of interest, curiosity and fun. He now wants to save up enough money to take his mother for *hajj* before he returns to Pakistan.

Interestingly neither Ali nor Irfan mentioned the gangs in their narratives. When I asked Ali about the gangs, he said that the gangs do not bother anyone or compel anyone to join them. Rather, he spoke about the ‘social work’ undertaken by Uzair Baloch in terms of money he spent on education. He quickly steered the conversation to the police operation mentioned earlier and focused on the violence inflicted on the people of Lyari by the state. Similarly, when I was speaking to Ali, I mentioned that I had heard the local gangs were using the government school to recruit new members, and he replied that the gangs were actually improving the education system by providing students with free notebooks.<sup>26</sup>

However, these reactions must be understood in context. A week earlier a prominent young doctor and social worker, Dr. Feroz, from their neighbourhood had been killed by the gangs in Lyari reportedly for speaking out against them. They had heard about it in Dubai, and even though they were very far from Lyari, Faheem told me that they were afraid to talk to anyone who might be asking questions about the gangs, and it took a considerable amount of convincing on his part to get them to agree to speak to me. Hence, the code of silence surrounding the gangs

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<sup>26</sup> The PAC had in fact distributed large numbers of notebooks to students in Lyari, which featured a photo of Uzair Baloch on the cover.

spanned national boundaries. In fact, their physical distance from the conflict might have actually increased their fear of speaking because of their lack of familiarity with the local situation and their inability to place me within a familiar social network. While Faheem and Irfan knew me through their family, Ali and Murtaza did not, and hence they were less likely to trust me.

When I returned to Karachi, I spoke to Faheem's brother, Murtaza, who I met in the food court of one of the many new shopping malls that have opened up in the city during the past few years. Murtaza lays barbed wire for a living, a skill that is in high demand considering Karachi's tumultuous security situation. However, despite this fact, steady work was still hard to come by, and he spent most of his time traveling between Karachi and various parts of Balochistan in search of stable employment. He also travelled to Iran to work as a labourer there but had to leave eventually because he did not have an Iranian identity card. In Karachi he said when he travelled to work "I am scared while I am going and scared while I am coming back" although he says the fear had been decreasing steadily since the period of violent confrontation between the PPP and the MQM had ended. He said the people who worked as labourers were most insecure in Lyari as compared to those who ran their own businesses or who were involved with the gangs, particularly as they were the ones who had to travel the most in the city for work. He also wanted to follow his brother Faheem to Dubai because he thought work would be steady there and better paid. I told him that I met Faheem, and he told me that life was not easy in Dubai, particularly because of the loneliness, but Murtaza responded "But there is peace there. It is *tension*<sup>27</sup> free." One of Murtaza's greatest sources of 'tension' in the city came from the frequent strikes called by political parties generally in response to violence. Because Murtaza worked for daily wages, a strike in a neighbouring area meant that he would lose a day's work and perhaps his job altogether. Hence, Murtaza's reasons for wanting to migrate to Dubai were manifold and included the pursuit of better pay and job security along with a desire to escape the violence and insecurity that came along with it living in Karachi.

## **5. Understanding Migration Trajectories**

The narratives of these young men, though perhaps not generalisable, reflect the complex nature of people's motivations to migrate to the Gulf along with the far-reaching impacts of what may appear at first glance to be localised conflicts. Generally, studies of migration privilege economic motivations in their analyses. Economics certainly played a role in the above narratives.

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<sup>27</sup> Here Murtaza used the English word 'tension', which has been adopted in Urdu and is often used in Karachi to describe people's states of insecurity.

However, as Ahmad (2008) has argued, the decision to migrate is dependent on a variety of factors that go far beyond rational, economic choice. On the other hand, studies of migration in conflict-affected regions focus mainly on conflict as the primary impetus for migration. This too is an oversimplification as pointed out by Bakewell and Bonfiglio (2013) in their study of the African Great Lakes region. Rather, the desire to migrate must be analysed in a complex manner within the context of local conflicts and insecurities and multiple, transregional flows.

One of the key determinants of one's ability to migrate or not was one's available social networks, a point that Ahmad (2008) stresses in his work along with others such as Arango (2004), Foner (2001) and Tilly (1990). Marsden (2011:11) stresses the importance of understanding the choices of people living in Pakistan's Frontier region within a context of 'particular constellations of networks and circumstances' rather than as the outcome of one or another set of unified factors. Similarly, Schetter's (2012) research highlights the historically mobile nature of Afghan society, with translocal networks playing a key role in the lives of Afghans well before the conflicts of recent decades. My research also demonstrates how the ability of men in Lyari to navigate across transnational borders was dependent on their existing networks. For Faheem, his brother's contacts allowed him to migrate, and Irfan was hoping to use the same networks in order to migrate himself. For Ali, it was his father's move in the 1970s that allowed him to migrate later on, and his brothers were expected to follow in his footsteps. Finally, for Murtaza, his brother-in-law who had migrated some years before was able to facilitate his migration.

The nature of one's connections also determined available job options and one's quality of life once reaching Dubai. All three of the men who migrated had attained similarly low levels of education in Pakistan, dropping out of government schools relatively early on. However, Ali was able to secure a better-paid job and was living in his father's house (rather than in a cramped work hostel or shared apartment) because his father was relatively well-settled in Dubai. Faheem's position was slightly worse in that he was living in employee quarters and was not earning as much as he wished, and Murtaza was in the worst position spending most of his earnings on food and cramped accommodation because his own contact, his brother-in-law, was not as well connected as he was also a recent migrant. It is perhaps because of this that there was little residential clustering of people who had migrated from Lyari.

In terms of the motivations for migration, these again could not be reduced to one set of factors. Security, both physical and economic, was foregrounded in the narratives of the two brothers, Faheem and Irfan, with both types of security presented as being inter-related. This echoes Ismailbekova's (2012) observations of the Uzbek community in Osh who use migration as a strategy for avoiding conflict. For residents of Lyari, violence in the city meant that traveling to work was both physically dangerous and logistically difficult or impossible. Also, the frequency

of strikes as a result of violence often jeopardized one's employment. However, for the other two respondents, Ali and Murtaza, physical security was not highlighted as a motivation for migrating. For Ali, his own migration was linked to his father's earlier migration and the expectation that all of the men in his family would eventually move to Dubai. While ethnic discrimination was something he had heard about in Karachi, he did not feel effected by it because he was not employed in 'professional' field. Hence, a combination of economic factors and family expectations seemed to determine his choice. For Murtaza, it seemed that curiosity/interest/fun were the main factors that drove him to seek employment in the Gulf, but now that he was there, he felt that he needed to meet some material (and spiritual?) goals by earning enough to take his mother for the *hajj*. This echoes the notion of the 'romantic appeal of migration' described by Ahmad (2008) in his interviews with Pakistani male migrants who often migrated to experience the excitement of travel. The desire for material advancement was articulated by all of the respondents. However, this desire is itself complex and includes the desire for increased status as well as the fulfillment of a particular notion of masculinity based on the ability to afford certain things such as consumer goods and the ability to travel to Mecca (Ahmad 2009).

## **6. Conclusion**

The research with young, Baloch men about their desires to migrate to the Dubai highlights the necessity to understand local conflicts outside of the confines of national or regional boundaries. The conflicts in Karachi in general and Lyari in particular are the product of multiple forms of mobilities – of people, goods and ideas – across various parts of the world and of contestations over 'the right to the city' by various groups of migrants. The roots of Lyari's conflict can be traced back at least partially to the multiple waves of migration into Karachi beginning with the Partition, which displaced many of those who were already living in the city particularly Sindhi and Baloch residents, who had themselves migrated to the area earlier from across the region. This was compounded by subsequent waves of migration in the decades following the formation of the Pakistani nation-state. The power of local criminals and the general level of violence in the city was significantly increased as a result of transnational flows of arms and drugs during the period of the Afghan War, and the ability of criminal and political actors to continuously feed the flames of urban conflict are also dependent on their ability to traverse national boundaries when necessary in order to escape enemies and hostile elements of the state.

This paper, however, focuses more closely on the transregional impacts of conflicts on local residents, most of whom are not themselves personally involved in these conflicts. For young Baloch men struggling to survive within Karachi, urban conflicts make their everyday lives all

the more difficult. Faced with multiple forms of insecurity including physical, economic and social insecurity, these young men must tactically navigate multiple social and spatial boundaries in their everyday lives. For some of these men, migration to Iran or the Gulf presents itself as the best possible option in order to escape a city that they feel has become hostile to them. Therefore, urban conflicts had contradictory impacts on men's mobility. While the conflict restricted the mobility of young, Baloch men within the city in a variety of ways, it also increased mobility, at least for some, across national borders. Therefore, in order to be properly understood, both the causes and consequences of urban conflicts such as those taking place in Lyari should be viewed through a transregional lens as the product of multiple forms of mobility.

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia was established in 2011 to generate novel perspectives on interdisciplinary Area Studies research. Comprised of six research institutions with regional expertise covering Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Northern India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, the network aims to further an understanding of the interactions of individuals with a connection to places from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. In doing so, it intends to contribute to overcoming the neglect of non-‘Western’ epistemologies, insights and forms of knowledge generation, as well as to close certain gaps between systematic disciplines and Area Studies.

The research within the network has centered on figurations, defined as specific causal and functional connections making up constellations (e.g., familial, religious, or economic networks). During the first funding phase of the project (2011-14), micro-level empirical research focused on figurations related to three thematic concepts: conflict, migration and development. Since early 2015, the network has begun a second funding phase in which there is a synthesizing of earlier research. We are beginning in-depth analyses of how spatial realities are constructed by the movement of people, goods and ideas, as well as how these emerging constructions – with their limiting borders and boundaries – enable and constrain mobility. Physical and social mobility, as well as imagined/mental mobility, are all considered in this context. Our overarching research questions include: What, in particular movement, makes borders and boundaries take on significance? In turn, what causes their meaning to be altered or even lost? Within and across limiting components (e.g., geographic, political, socio-cultural and/or ethnic borders and boundaries), which factors contribute to im(mobility)?

Based on this extensive research and diverse analyses thereof, we are aiming to collectively elaborate a Crossroads Perspective for understanding complex webs of ties and their spatial dimensions. This non-prescriptive selection of conceptual and methodological tools for rethinking how to conduct research on fluid, dynamic and complex phenomena will be articulated at our conferences and workshops, in publications including an Area Studies textbook, and in teaching, including at the new ‘Global and Area Studies’ graduate program at the Humboldt Universität Berlin, one of the network institutes. The Crossroads Perspective will consist of a methodological approach (‘Follow the Figuration’), as well as an ethical component, to guide Area Studies researchers in reflecting on their position in relation to their subjects, as well as the tangible impacts of the research they conduct. The Crossroads Perspective will also contain a tool-kit of concepts which have proven resilient in our empirical analysis of, for example, bordering processes in Kashmir; cross-border bazaar trade between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China; and Baloch networks rooted in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).

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