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ARTICLE

Suspension: Dust-Winds in Iran under Sanctions

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Abstract

Dust-winds across the southern Iran-Iraq borderlands in the past decade have played a crucial role in how the Iranian state invests in both maintaining its major oil sites, despite intensive sanctions, and organising cooperation with local farmers to block the transmission of dust across its sovereign territory. This paper extends the ethnographic exploration of economic sanctions to their environmental interventions, studying the everyday lives of people in Khuzestan province. Environmental historians have examined landscapes altered by military activities and sanctions, but an anthropological approach to the essential entanglement of meteorological upheaval and sanctions characterized by bad air is lacking. Drawing on critical theories of breathing, I trace the explosion of dust into Iranian geopolitics as a conundrum of how the power dynamics of sanctions and sovereignty intermingle with aerosols. Within the frame of state-sponsored projects, engineers, scientists, environmental activists, farmers, and traders cooperate and compete in atmospherically focused coalitions to stabilize soil and dust against their spread. As a voluminous entity that is dispersed across the bodies of breathers, these atmospherically focused coalitions give visibility to the sanctions and the gaps in the state's sovereignty.

Keywords: suspension; atmospheric coalition; dust-wind; Iran sanctions; breathers; resistant ecologies; Iran-Iraq borderlands

A curious condition, colored by the opacity of dust-winds and economic sanctions, shaped my first encounter with the field in Khuzestan, southwest Iran, in early 2022. In an apartment on the sixth floor of an oil-industry workers' complex, I listened to my friend, Salim, as his breath seized up in an early morning asthma attack. Salim turned in bed several times in a "self-designed breathing ritual," then pressed an oxygen mask harder against his face and kept it in place with his hand.[1] The straps of the mask were loose; they had been made in Tehran by a tailor, since the originals were no longer imported to Iran. I went to the kitchen to find his albuterol inhaler. Behind a locked, rattling door, dust-wind had dislodged the corner of an iron panel of the air channel in the patio. Caught in the wind, the panel flapped cacophonously, pushing particles of dust into the apartment from under the patio door. Outside the window, the brownish dust looked like a voluminous wall. I watched it descend smoothly, as the agitated particles that had been suspended in the air settled gradually all over the city, covering everything with a thin layer of dust.

[1] Alison Kenner calls such breathing rituals an attunement, whereby past symptoms teach the asthmatics certain practices to adjust their breath to the present atmosphere. See Kenner, "Breathtaking," 2.

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The 2012 intensification of international sanctions, which severed the Iranian economy from the global market, drastically changed the face of Khuzestan, the province of oil towers and refineries on the Iran-Iraq border and along the banks of the Shatt al-Arab.[2] Along with oil and petrochemicals, the entire energy sector, shipping and shipbuilding, port operation, and financial transactions were blacklisted. State-controlled "sanction circumvention methods," namely cross-border commodity trade, and the visible presence of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members and affiliated militia following Syria's civil conflict, empty boats, and closed shops that used to sell foreign goods all converged in years of drought, mismanagement of water sources, and the mounting crisis of land degradation and desertification.[3] In this thick air, one could spot the orange flare atop the stacks that always burned, due to technical malfunction, but also signaled Iran's "resistance" to sanctions, in tandem with Iran-Iraq war propaganda since the 1980s.

The condition of "suspension," as staged in Khuzestan, presents a meteorological and affective atmospheric, and thus material, condition rather than anthropogenic supremacy. Suspension is "a becoming atmospheric"; it is an unstable mixture of particles floating in a gas or fluid body, which is also characterized by uncertainty.[4] Moreover, as the environmental anthropologists Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee suggest, suspension underpins political formations that can be understood as an ensemble of "experimental zones and materialities."[5] An inquiry into suspension, then, is to ask what it feels to "be held in the air," breathing in politically and environmentally changed times. This paper traces the explosion of dust into Iranian geopolitics as a conundrum of the political dynamics of sanctions intermingled with aerosols.[6] All this occurs in a mixture of particles and air, earth and sky, that form, drift, and break with the course of the wind. In my inquiry, the dynamics of dust dunes, known in the formal meteorological discourse of Iran as *rīzgard* or *gard-o- ghubār*, constantly appear as a material condition that gives traction to unexpected configurations of breathing, resisting, and survival. In what follows, I explore three scenes of suspension in which people are captured by the struggle to breathe in the bad air and stabilize the dust and soil. Suspension and stabilization become tropes to describe forms of entanglement between the environmental, atmospheric, and political order. I argue that curbing the sanctions as a project internal to statecraft reproduces sovereignty in volumetric and atmospheric forms, with control measures against dust-winds at its forefront.[7] This voluminous sovereignty is dispersed across bodies and materials that blur the boundary between resistance and complicity.

Critics of sanctions have argued that there is a large gap between sanctions' severe material effects and limited political efficacy.[8] While true, this line of argument holds a rather

[2] The Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act of 2012 (IFCPA).

[3] In a brilliant ethnography of sanctions, Emrah Yildiz depicts the devaluation of the Iranian rial since 2012 and the wide impact the monetary fines and financial sanctions, such as blockage from the SWIFT banking service, had on Iranians' everyday lives. Highlighting the materiality of cash, Yildiz calls it "nuclear Rials." Vernacular terms such as "nuclear rial" and "breath sanction," as I quote it, which stem from the borderlands and peripheries, challenge the dominance of Tehran's middle class and the 2018 maximal sanctions of the scholarly literature. See Yildiz, "Of Nuclear Rials and Golden Shoes," 605.

[4] Choy and Zee, "Condition-Suspension," 212.

[5] Ibid., 212

[6] In formulating my question, I am inspired by Jerry Zee ("Continent in Dust," 14) in approaching geophysics in tandem with political formations. While Zee raises his question in relation to China's booming economy and political reform, this paper investigates detours from economic devastation amid bad weather.

[7] Stuart Elden introduced the concept of voluminous sovereignty as a discourse in geography to critique the territorial and land-based understanding of sovereignty. The term voluminous refers to the aerial, subterranean, and atmospheric exposures of power that go beyond the Westphalian mode of thinking. See Elden, "Secure the Volume," 35; Bille, "Voluminous Sovereignty," 6–12.

[8] See Bajoghli et al., "How Sanctions Work in Iran," 57.

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normative conception of materiality. Materiality, in this critique, consists of cultural artifacts with a broad range of impacts, from educational to environmental. Furthermore, an anthropocentric approach dominates this imagination of objects as lame cultural artifacts molded by human will. That might explain why, in the literature on sanctions and ecology, relations between ecocide and sanctions are secondhand and always interpellated by factors such as mismanagement and technical deficiencies.[9] Here, I try to shift away from such anthropocentrism in two ways: first, through the meteorological affordance of atmosphere to make a strange weather condition; and second, through the material propensities of air and dust as "vibrant matters" that move and mingle together, thus giving rise to new hazards.[10] Through dust-wind, the choreography of vibrant matter and the politics of sanctions come into a new vital configuration, entrained and patterned into the meteorological dynamics and around human and non-human agencies.

Both sanctions and dust-winds follow vivid material logics: a sanction is about the prohibition of certain objects and the dust-wind intervenes in mundane daily routines. However, while the predominant discourse on sanctions impinges on the access/prohibition binary, their environmental wreckages are mostly ignored. In the interplay of dust-winds and sanctions, the dust can provide a new anchor to this binary. The airborne particles transcend the materiality of sanctions against the grain of static and inhibitory movements that predominate in the access/prohibition dichotomy, highlighting how moving air hinges upon sanctions and practices to combat, refuse, or resist them.

Dust, as imagined by social theorists as the symbol par excellence of "atomism" and invisibility, is here the surface for the production of the political.[11] While it is idealized as the "revolution of the minuscule," disrupting the sovereign space, dust promotes coalitions around state projects of value extraction and soil and dust stabilization, thus making us rethink the changing relation between sovereignty and resistance under conditions of uncertainty and sanctions.[12] On the one hand, the Iranian state seeks to depopulate the shores of dried marshlands to enable excavation and memorialization projects, while on the other, it ably integrates the same displaced population in its environmental projects to stabilize the soil and dust and redistribute limited water resources for farming. Under the rubric of the "resistance economy" (*eqtesād-e moqāvemati*), the inhabitants of post-war and newly formed villages make "atmospheric coalitions" that range from the organizations of state projects to small beneficiary groups. These atmospheric coalitions highlight how dust-wind challenges volumetric sovereignty during geopolitical conflicts by reconnecting people, plants, and animals as breathers.

Merged with the wind, dust forms a material constellation that *moves* beyond a mere focus on particles. Dust-wind then has its own material existence composed of "metastable patterns."[13] In Thomas Nail's rendition of the philosophy of movement, people, things, and particles are all metastable aspects of a more primary "kinetic process" as vectors, oscillations, and circulatory patterns.[14] Air can form such a kinetic process. It folds back wind in a continuous process and throws dust into motion.[15] Dust and wind, then, are not

[9] Madani, "The Unintended Environmental Implications"; Balali et al., "Air Pollution and Economic Sanctions in Iran."

[10] Jane Bennet defines vibrant matters as a rubric of impersonal affects that stretches the concepts of agency, action, and freedom. See Bennet, "Vibrant Matters," x.

[11] Bachelard, "The Metaphysics of Dust."

[12] Amato, "Dust: The History of Small and Invisible."

[13] Nail, "Being and Motion," 30.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Gaston Bachelard, in various essays on elemental imagination and air as movement, addresses the question of water as matter, particularly in *Water and Dreams*.

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two unchanging objects nor two discrete substances, but a unique field of movement.[16] In motion, air and dust shift from discrete into interacting substances.

Here, I leverage Kusha Sefat's expansion of Latourian material agency and notion of the circulation of things to the field of motion. As Sefat indicates, the process of circulation is crucial to understanding how the binaries of access and prohibition work, in that the traveling objects can maintain and condition significant terms within the dominant political discourses.[17] While his focus lies on the circulation of certain commodities, there is still too much human force in this mode of moving. His view can then be supplemented by Nail's insight into the non-human field of dynamic movements. Attuned by the moving air within and outside respiratory bodies, and wind that moves it through atmospheric systems, I explore the materialization of international economic sanctions as "atmospheric" in the everyday lives of border-residing people.[18]

A recent paradigm shift in geography has introduced voluminous sovereignty to address haze, streams, waves, and airborne particles beyond terrestrial imagination. Particularly in borderlands, signal transmissions of foreign radios and internet access – in this case, the transmission of dust from Iraq's recurrent wars – and state practices of jamming and blocking showcase gaps in voluminous sovereignty. The failure of coverage/blockage practices makes the borderland population proactive in tapping into alternative news and interpretations from across the border – here, a sense of danger regarding exposure to toxic and polluted air – and thus symptomizes the state's weakness.[19]

Driven by this insight, I explain the state of suspension as how "being held in the air" underpins the vertical expansion of sovereignty from the land to the air, and its rearrangement in relation to the right to breathe. I investigate processes of movement and stabilization in the ongoing struggle between moving dust and the striving to stop it, between the suspension of life and the striving for sustainable development. The ongoing processes of desertification, seasonal sand winds, the extension of the toxicities of old and new wars, and the impoverishment of soil from minerals have different tempos and intensities. Conjunctures about their propensities and mediums make the air more material and more nuanced, rendering the sanctions visible.

My approach to breathers is informed by a prescient quotation from the anti-colonial thinker Franz Fanon, as he writes:

> There is not occupation of territory on the one hand and independence of persons on the other. It is the country, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a *combat breathing*.

[16] As Nail explains, "In process materialism, in contrast to the empiricist definition of matter, it is not some discrete, deterministic, or probabilistic substance. It is precisely because being is in motion that the substantial being of matter—as atoms, particles, fields, and so on—must remain a historically open and interactive process." See Nail, "Being and Motion," 47.

[17] See Sefat, "Things and Terms," 16–17. Also see Dewachi, "Ungovernable Life," Introduction, which provides a lucid image of the gradual destruction of the health system due to the impact of severe sanctions. Kali Rubaii's article also outlines the "good hiding" of medical goods, a method of circumventing sanctions in Iraq during the recent armed conflict and presence of ISIS. Rubaii focuses on pragmatic entanglements and creating trust among strangers during armed struggle and strong military sanctions to deliver medical and pharmacological aid. See Rubaii, "Moving Medicine with Dirty Hands," 214.

[18] Intriguingly, Emrah Yildiz's anthropological inquiry on economic sanctions evolves around the restriction and limitation of "movement"; he explores Iranians' land-route pilgrimage to Damascus, not through the prohibition of commodities, but as a vivid manifestation of sanctions through the limitations on the trans-local movements of pilgrims, merchants, and consumer goods. See Yildiz "Zainab's Traffic," 84.

[19] See Elden, "Secure the Volume," 35–51; Billé, "*Voluminous States,*" introduction.

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Half a century later, prompted by the dehumanization of black lives in the US and the pandemic inequalities of COVID-19, the philosopher Joseph-Achille Mbembe takes a similar position, calling forth the "universal right to breathe" against the long duration of suffocation and structural suppression.[20] Driven by their insights, I expand the term to encompass multispecies survival collectives and atmospheric coalitions. I propose to study the confluence of the dust-wind as a meteorological derangement and the economic sanctions as a new dimension to understanding "resistant ecologies," i.e., survival collectives of breathers, human and non-human together, that sprout around agricultural practices in frontline villages through seasons of dust-winds.[21] Through the lens of "resistant ecologies," we can see the temporal fiascos and experimental apparatuses that appear in the state of uncertainty and instability as dust-winds render visible the risks of geographical sustainment in a time of suspension.[22] I trace these fiascos in the uneventful moments of everyday life in which economic sanctions and climatic upheaval are intermingled, such as the straps on Salim's mask, the frequent changing of the make-do, deformed air filters that cannot stand up to the heat of Khuzestan, folding a face mask for later reuse, using filters on the tap to strain the larger particles from drinking water, and making use of the waste of fresh water to revive palm tree groves.

Built on ethnographical fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2023 in the Shatt-al-Arab/Arvand-kenar and across the Hawizeh/Hoor al-Azim Marshlands, in southwest Khuzestan province and across the Iran-Iraq border, I examine the extended war-scape – exotic weather, ecological wreckage, and climatic upheaval in the aftermath of massive international sanctions.[23] During intermittent visits lasting between one to three weeks, I engaged in observation and conversation with farmers and ranchers, water sellers and shopkeepers, rangers and local environmental activists who collaborate in state projects to control dust-winds.

In the current environmental crisis and within the frame of governmental projects, I argue that Khuzestan has become a laboratory for experimenting with sanctions: engineers, scientists, environmental activists, farmers, and military groups cooperate and compete to control dust by means of planting, covering sand, and transferring water. I reflect on the multiple layers of suspension-cum-resistance in and against the dust and the specific distinctions underlying their treatment and tackling of ecological crises. Dust is the vector of new modes of living that have emerged in the shadow of sanctions and climatic upheaval. By making the air visible as a hazardous element, dust hinges on respiratory subjectivities and exploratory policies as they intersect with life in the air.

Breath sanction

Within the national historical imagination of environmental derangement, the video clips and photographic sequences of the 2015 dust-wind in Khuzestan stand at the core of Iranian cultural memory of the Anthropocene Age. Photos of the suffocation of Ahwaz city, with a

[20] See Mbembe, "Universal Right to Breathe."

[21] See Khayyat, "Resistant Ecologies," 2–3. See also the term "Ecologies of War" as introduced by Bridget Guarasci and Eleane Kim in 2022 and its entry on the website of the American Association of Anthropology, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/ecologies-of-war.

[22] In the same vein, Umut Yildrim argues for a breathing methodology at sites of ongoing genocide denialism, colonial occupation, and extractivism to show the ruptures and incommensurability, rather than the harmony and mutuality, of shared breathing. Yildrim, "Resistant Breathing", 125–26.

[23] In this article, I have used both the Arabic and official names of the above regions. In the Arab-populated rural areas, people call these regions by their Arabic names, e.g., Shatt al-Arab, Rofayya, Hawiza. Also, road signs display both Arabic and Persianized names of towns and districts. In the larger cities of Khuzestan, using Arabic names is less common and might have an Arab-nationalist connotation.

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dense crème-colored haze, gained iconic status, bringing Khuzestan to the center of public attention and cultural production. In sending their SOS message to President Hassan Rohani (in office 2012–2020), the locals inscribed "Khuzestan has no air" with their fingers in the dust covering their cars. Meanwhile, the dust crippled indoor urban areas, and a set of new terms flowed into the everyday life of the dust-shocked people: tap water turned brownish and was known as "chocolate water" (*āb-e shokolāti*) and "oxygen bottles" (*kapsul-e oxygen-e hamrāh*) turned into a commercial product in drugstores.[24] Frames of choking Khuzestan on Instagram and Twitter aggregated an exotic atmospheric portrait. As air scratched the surface of the earth and became dramatically visible through its movement and color, Khuzestan rose out of marginality to become the locus of trans-local and trans-national concerns. This section interrogates this intermingling and considers how and when a "sanction" is constituted as an "atmospheric problem space."[25]

In the public imagination, different rounds of economic sanctions since the Iran-Iraq war are thematized by their focal objects, such as "coupon," "oil," "bank," and "machineries." Intriguingly, in the wake of Khuzestan's bad air, locals addressed it as a "breath sanction" (*havāy-e taḥrimī*). While severe sanctions on oil and petroleum products were imposed since 2012, the apocalyptic incidence shocked inhabitants and accommodated and furnished the circumstance. Breath sanction is a vital term; it obfuscates the boundary between "zeo and bios," as Giorgio Agamben puts it,[26] between inhalation as the biology of life and suffocation in bad air that impedes life, between inhalation as an embodiment of existence and exhalation as the negation of suffocation.[27]

Erupting in 2015, bad air has triggered widespread and recurrent protest across Khuzestan that interlace environmental and economic demands.[28] Lack of infrastructure in both rural and urban areas compounds dust incidents with electricity cuts, heavily polluted tap water, and distorted transportation on the roads. Protests repeated in 2017, 2019, and 2021 and were brutally suppressed by the police each time.

The parliament allocated 100 million US dollars of the 2016 national development budget just to controlling the dust-winds in Khuzestan.[29] The hefty budget convinced many local NGOs to put dust-wind atop their agenda as a strategic step in making corporations with the state institutions and engagin more volunteers to provoke immediate action. Along with this decision, the formal discourse of sanctions was adopted into their negotiations with the state officials.[30] Together, they framed an atmospheric problem space to address bad air and initiate various campaigns and collaborative projects. In this context, the reference to sanctions legitimizes their NGO'sactivities in the eyes of the state, while mobilizing a broader range of interests. By juxtaposing bad air and sanctions, activists and their groups of followers equate sanctions with bad air and identify living in bad air with living under

[24] Fresh air cans with different flavors were first advertised by a Chinese company as a political mocking of the air pollution (Zee, "Continent in Dust", 172). Oxygen bottles, as I observed and used, were sold regularly in drugstores. The package includes a liter of canned air and a detachable plastic inhaling mask that fixes to the lower part of the face and channels the sprayed oxygen. Each bottle contains 10 puffs of oxygen that can be used at intervals or by different users.

[25] Ahmann, "Atmospheric Coalition," 466

[26] Agamben, "Homo Sacer", 8.

[27] See Ingold, "Breath and Breathing," 159, in which Ingold examines breathing as an act of inhalation and exhalation and its connection to the body, pointing out: "in the Western world, there is a long tradition of prioritising body over breath."

[28] For a study of social unrest in Khuzestan in the past environmentally crisis-ridden decade, see Madani et al., "Muẓāhirat Selmīeh," 3; Madani, "Khuzestan's Thirst and Turmoil," 4–7.

[29] https://www.irna.ir/news/81532739/600 received October 2, 2024.

[30] A look into the 2016 Food and Agricultural Organization ordinance for preparation and protection against the harmful impacts of dust-winds suggests narrowing down the environmental polycrises of chronic drought, climate change, loss of permanent snow caps and glaciers, and Iran and Turkey's building of major upriver water dams to a local issue. See http://faolex.fao.org

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Figure 1. Two generations: an old man and his grandson get out of the car to watch livestock on a hazy day in Ahwaz. Photo by the author (2022).

sanctions. The rubric of activism includes practices to survive in the dust and daily negotiations for water access that mark the boundaries of the problem space, demarcating victims and culprits.

I first heard the term "breath sanction" in a thinktank gathering of several local NGOs. The term aimed to index the dramatic increase in lung-related diseases and childhood asthma caused by breathing refineries' toxic gases from unstandardized, low-quality petroleum mixtures. After the disclosure about the production of low-quality fuels in 2016, discussion about health issues seemed plausible. During her trip to Khuzestan in 2016, the Minister of the Environment, Masoumeh Ebtekar, pointed to the lack of fuel as the most tangible outcome of sanctions impacting Iranians' everyday lives. This was shortly after the success of the joint agreement with the world powers over Iran's nuclear program (JCPOA), due to which some sanctions were removed. Ebtekar's emphasis was on the impact of the fuel shortage on air pollution and public health. She condemned the sanctions on Iran's oil industry that had led the state to mix standard petroleum with toxic heavy mazut and promised clean fuel for cars and better air for Khuzestan in the aftermath of relieved sanctions.[31] Five years after her promise, the local NGO gathered in concern over the immediate need to build a clinic to deal with increasing chronic lung ailments and the falling age of the onset of asthma in both industrial and farming regions (Figure 1).

In this sense, the bad air of Khuzestan is an "animating force," not only because it manifests the vulnerability of breathers, but also in that it evokes past atrocities and toxic legacies.[32] Following the state's official assertion that the dust originated in Iraq, suspicion of its toxicity grew. Local researchers and journalists shared concerns about the dust-winds' possible chemical contamination.[33] The major concern being that depleted uranium from the US attacks could have been carried by the wind from the Iraqi border province of Basra.[34] The detritus of years of sanctions and recurring wars that had been sedimented

[31] https://ana.ir/fa/news/102696 received December 20, 2023.

[32] Kenner and Ahmann, "Breathing Late Industrialism," 417.

[33] https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/11/131128_nm_khouzestan_uranium_pollution.amp (accessed January 5, 2024).

[34] Basra was first targeted with chemical weapons in 1991 during the Gulf War, and then again later during the US invasion in 2004. For war pollution in Iraq, see Wool, "All that is solid burns into smoke."

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in the earth were scratched and spreading trans-locally. Furthermore, Khuzestan's hospitals had taken in numerous ailing Iraqis seeking medical care for leukemia, birth defects, and diseases related to breathing in the past years.

Although the issue of contamination with toxic substances was securitized and swiftly silenced, the term "breath sanction" signals the extended warscape across borders and generations.[35] It evokes a hazardous atmosphere of denied pollution and an unknown future. Burned and polluted lands, impoverished earth, and contaminated bodies shape the rubric of "breathers" in the atmospheric problem-space. A Lur shopkeeper selling women's scarves described the dust-winds to me as "sifting the mountains over Khuzestanis' heads." In recounting the dust as the toppling of the mountains and their falling from the sky, he emphasized the Zagros Mountains that extend along Iran's western borders and then traced the dust incidents in their various peaks as sites of mass chemical violence over the past decades. For him, dust has turned into a mnemonic element; it evokes vague memories of displacement during the war as well as natural disasters, such as a recent earthquake in his birth village.

As I walked through the market, people mostly referred to the toxicities as "air pollution." As one of the shopkeepers said:

> The *ghubār* [haze] is so thick you do not see the greyish pollution. The smoke comes from fire incidents in the *hoor* [marshes], the greasy dust comes from the oil towers and the factories. Here the sky is never blue.

Such ubiquitous references to dust as pollution does not affect the exceptionality inhabitants see in their dust incidents. Instead, they separate Khuzestan from the rest of the country and compare their situation exclusively with their own past.

In conversation with two teenage girls in a shoe shop, I was surprised by how they connected air and life quality when comparing their generation to those of their parents and grandparents. "Look! All we do is to sit here. My aunt [she points to the shop owner], when she was young, she was riding her own bike on good, paved streets around the refinery. She could breathe!" The girl paused and added, "What will we tell our children? That our leisure activity was driving 200 meters up and down the market street with the car windows fully closed?!"

"Breath sanction" concomitantly bears contours of substantiation of the air in people's imaginary. On the one hand, air is a natural element that feeds into the glorification of the past; on the other, it is a hazardous unknown force in the vilified present. Retrospectively, Khuzestan hosted the first oil towers and refineries under the Anglo Persian Oil Company in 1912. Moreover, the sand covering the landscape acts as a mystifying halo of impenetrable resistance against the first attempts at aerial imaging.[36] While equating the first aerial views with modernity, the underpinning motif of this glorification of the colonial past, for many local groups, is the feeling of being globally connected.

In contrast to global connectivity, the breath sanction creates the feeling of having fallen out of the world. Sequences of dust-wind in Khuzestan are tied to a growing sense of despair: "being buried under dust," to cite the slogans chanted in the widespread 2017 protests. The situation brings farmers, teachers, shopkeepers, veterans, militia, and guards into a

[35] Several reports have pointed to the borderlands' contamination with smaller particles carried from Iraq to Iran by frequent dust-winds. See, for example, Daniali and Karimi "Spatiotemporal Analysis of Dust", 60.

[36] Kaplan, "Aerial Aftermath," 156–57.

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collective of breathers in a necropolitical refraction.[37] They are related by narratives of contamination, suffocation, and injured bodies. Lung deficiencies arise in the bodies of people both powerful and marginalized, spread across the social divides of Arabs and non-Arabs, military and non-military, oil company employees and farmers. This atmospheric problem space, however, does not turn trans-local; despite sharing a common past with the Iraqi Marsh Arabs, bad air on both sides of the border, and years of devastating sanctions on Iraq, locals prefer to leave Iraq out of their negotiations with Iranian state officials. Their resentment towards the neighboring country furthers the perceived connection between air and sanctions, because they imagine the coasts of the Shatt al-Arab in Iraq being relieved of sanctions.

Not all the people with whom I spent time understood their own use of techniques for mitigating dust haze incidents as political. For some, it was a moral responsibility of the Supreme Leader's call for a "resistance economy." I met members of the Basij (the volunteer offshoot of the IRGC) who believed "Khuzestan alone is able to feed the whole country in spite of the sanction destitutions."[38] I also sat in a café with a menu copied from a Gulf metropolis; none of its sandwiches or cold drinks were available. Every time I ordered an item, the man replied that one of the ingredients – such as a flavor, sauce, salad, or fruit – was no longer imported, so not available at the moment! To tease me or perhaps to prove he was not criticizing the government, he asked me to fix my scarf properly around my face. At the same shop, the entrance door was made of a huge piece of 30 mm glass to hold back the dust-winds. Familiarity with dust has taught shopkeepers how to calibrate their market and preserve good air inside.

The term "breath sanction" conjures what Rob Nixon described as the "occluded relationship" between transnational economic pressures and eroded national sovereignty; together, they make it easier to sustain evasive geopolitics of deferral in matters of environmental injury, remediation, and redress.[39] A breath sanction inflicts an "invisible war" by imperceptibly wreaking havoc on bodies and ecologies.[40] The dust coloring the air makes the boundary between the domestic and the foreign, home and away, impossible to maintain.[41] People experience the breath sanction more acutely as structural violence. It is both a bodily encounter experienced through mouths and lungs and a sensorially accessible material in an atmospheric presence.

Combat dust zones

It was in the wake of Achilles Mbembe's reconceptualization of biopower – in which death is enacted as sovereignty and being the prime mode of resistance – alongside broader developments of COVID-19 worldwide that the universality and mutuality of breathing and suffocation became increasingly discussed. As Mbembe writes,

[37] Compare Lenart Skaf and Peter Brandenson's critique of the Cartesian philosophy of the self, in which the path to self-knowledge is through withdrawal from the outside world and looking deep inside, while breathing and the sense of air are totally abnegated. See Skaf and Brandenson, "Atmospheres of Breathing," 4–5.

[38] For a study of the role of religious groups and the shifting landscape of belief in the aftermath of climatic upheaval in Khuzestan, see Chavoshian "Dust-winds in Iran's Landscape of War," 302–323.

[39] See Nixon, "Slow Violence" 46, and for his reflections on the sanctions in Nigeria see Ibid., 106–114; also see Osanloo, "Entangled Lives", 262–270.

[40] Gordon, "Invisible War," 20.

[41] Nixon calls this circumstance an ecological aftermath, emphasizing the toxic pollution and depleted uranium left by the US army in Iraq. My scope goes beyond military violence, however, reaching what systematic deprivations under the condition of sanctions substantiate in a despoiled environment of living. See Nixon "Slow Violence", 217–220.

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> especially in Africa, but also in many other places in the Global South, energy-intensive extraction, agricultural expansion, predatory sales of land, and the destruction of forests will continue unabated. [...] All these wars on life begin by taking away breath.[42]

For Mbembe, the right to breath eludes all forms of sovereignty, as it cannot be confiscated and hence symbolizes all sovereign principals par excellence. Yet, in a recent contribution, von Bieberstein and Evren remark that the domain opened up by value extraction could in turn animate and transform the appearance of the power of sovereignty.[43] The sanctions regime and hegemonic criteria to recognize the state effectively mobilize and securitize artisanal farming, thereby strengthening the state and its surveillance. In recent state environmental engineering programs, local collaborative attempts to rehabilitate burned and dry palm groves on the southwestern shores of Khuzestan are considered expressions of resistance. Such programs follow Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's 2012 call for a "resistance economy" in the context of sanctions and the formal scripts prescribed by the parliament to combat dust incidents. However, such forms of resistance, when turned into analytic tools, remain within the limits of romanticizing both resistance and state power, fail to identify the multifaceted, distinct modes of resistance and refusal, and fall short of creating a feeling that active resistance replaces the passive sense of being stuck.

What then would this "resistance," which locals describe literally as "beating against the wind," be?

"How much is the rate of the US dollar today?"

"39,000 tomans."

This was a routine dialogue between Shadia and her younger sister while they sat in the car behind their palm grove and counted their dollars, which they kept hidden in the car's glove compartment between the pages of their father's old Iraqi passport. The young women had already lost hope for a shopping trip to Dubai, like the ones they used to take. Even Basra would have been too expensive with the Iranian currency's accelerated devaluation due to the return of sanctions.[44] Shadia and her family were from an Arab farming tribe. Their father, Qasim, was a respected man in the village and had collaborated in several state-initiated projects of "repair" since the war. Shadia was his eldest child. She got divorced and returned to her father's grove after her husband went bankrupt but refused to take up farmwork. In the groves, she and her sisters were responsible for maintaining the purity of fresh water on its path to the palms. Their work, as Shadia explained, was part of the "Combat Dust Project" (Tarḫi Mobārezeh ba Rīzgard), i.e., anti-dust-wind programs spearheaded by the state forestry agencies and the Ministry of the Environment, particularly to protect the groves' irrigation against the salt spread by the wind.

The 2012 introduction of banking sanctions that blocked international money transfers and produced a scarcity of US dollars in the Arvand Free Zone at the Shatt al-Arab broke many small businesses in the region. Meanwhile, the building of upriver water dams in the Tigris and Euphrates decreased the Arvand river's water, causing a high level of salination at its estuary. Empty and sometimes upended fishing boats can be found abandoned on the

[42] Mbembe, "Universal Right to Breathe," 61.

[43] Von Bieberstein and Evren, "Sovereign Extractions," 234. Compare with Ronak Kapadia's theorization of the downward redistribution of breath – i.e., a way to restore the state as an apparatus of racialized disablement. Kapida, "Abolitionist Vision," 270–71.

[44] For an anthropological inquiry into the policy of maximum pressure and the return of US sanctions since 2018, see Bajoghli et al., "How Sanctions Work," 68–69.

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shores of the receded river. In the past decade, fishermen and smugglers have been integrated into state-initiated planting and irrigation projects of the newly established villages. The demarcation of various spots across the province as "combat dust zones" (*maḥdūdeh-ye tarḫi moqāabileh ba rīzgard)* and the formation of a green front against dust-winds were carried out during the civil conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

The sun was going down as we drove along the asphalted road that connected the oil-manufacturing city of Abadan and the farming villages of the southern shores of the Shatt-al-Arab or Arvand river. The yellowish haze in the sky sank into remoter shades and glooms, interrupted by black shadows of crownless palms erected in lines on the roadside. Salt crusts from drained pools shimmered as sand and salt plumes undulated before the car's windshield. As the car's tires rolled across the edge of the asphalted road, the sand on the shoulder scratched the tires and was thrown against them loudly. We drove off the road and sought our way along a low brick wall.

Shadia waved her hand to us from afar, while sheltering her eyes against the slashes of her open hairs with the other hand. We passed through dead palm trunks whose surfaces were covered with layers of salt and sand. The closer we came to the palm grove where Shadia stood, the intensity of the wind decreased while the moisture in the air increased. Under the huge umbrellas of the palms' green branches, a cool breeze mixed with the smell of jujube fruits and plenty of mosquitos. Palm leaves were bent smoothly over the bushy ziziphus trees planted sporadically to protect the palm trunks from the wind and salt crusts. Opposite the garden, a thin line of water passed through an earthen channel.

Over the past four decades, both the Iranian state and local farmers have aimed to rehabilitate the palm groves burned during the Iran-Iraq war. However, the severe intensification of drought and receding rivers have necessitated a change in irrigation systems and stabilizing the earth through further planting. Like other families in the town, Shadia's family had returned after the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88) only to find their gardens burned and unfertile. There was nothing left of their village. Rubble, shards, and the debris of war were everywhere. Some of the families decided to uproot their remaining palms and sell them to Gulf countries for a good price. A few people decided to find a way to return and live there again, including Qasim, who commuted for thirteen years between Ahwaz, where he had settled his family, and the village to rescue the remaining trees and plant more.

"It was not an easy task," Qasim remembered. Struck by an intense drought in the early 1990s, most people lost hope for the revival of their lands. Nevertheless, state-sponsored projects drew more people to return and settle in the new villages, along the dried beds of marshland and rivers. Such strategies neutralized living in the borderlands and t "grey zones" of wartime.[45]

Young, male labor has been a scarcity in the villages of the Shatt-al-Arab. Besides Shadia, Qasim had four other daughters. In the palm groves, he divided the care work between water- and tree-related efforts. After each blow of dust-wind, Qasim, together with his brother and in-laws, cleaned the palm trucks of the remaining sand and salt, climbed the trees to separate the spathes (*ṭāriḥ*), and fertilized the female palms. His girls were responsible for cleaning the water channels as, in Qasim's view, working on palm trees is a male task. Every spring and autumn, he also called on his tribe in Ahwaz for help.

In the dust combat zones, locals and officials showed different levels of cooperation. The state promised Qasim to let fresh water flow in the branch of the river that passes through his village. In the shade of palm trees, the earth was protected from extreme evaporation on long sunny days. Their roots held the soil from being blown away by the wind.

Shadia's daily "combat" included walking along and checking the narrow water flows. She continued her walk up to the channel entries and exits, where water quickly dispersed throughout their palm grove. From there, she would drive to the low-levelled riverside. The

[45] Mohebbi, "Rangeland Management within the Combat Dust Project," 71–75.

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salt minerals from the Persian Gulf easily dissolve in the narrowed flow of fresh water. Salt crystals also whirl into the water with each gust of wind. To examine the level of salt, she soaked a piece of cloth in the channel and waited for the appearance of white sediment spots under the hot sun of the Shatt. Shadia repeated this practice at various spots while covering the dry earth on the watersides with the remains of palm leaves. On her way back home, she took her two younger sisters from another garden to go for lunch and a long afternoon nap.

Despite promises of fresh water, the channel level had dropped to half two years prior. Qasim and his family were not sure how long they would be able to maintain the water flow with their simple methods. Meanwhile, they were expected to convince younger men to stay in the village. Qasim had even arranged an early-age marriage for Shadia within their tribe to draw more men to the village and expand his family. The couple later divorced in 2018, when the husband refused to work with them despite being bankrupt. "When Trump sanctioned us again and the gasoline strikes started [November 2019], we were very depressed. My ex-husband once told me he sees nothing for our future but living in a small, abandoned village," Shadia said. As we walked among the palms, Shadia bent her head, letting her long hair fall over her face, "My hair and the palms are the only things that grow here, the rest is drying or gone with the wind!" The younger sister added cynically, "We can sell your hair to a woman who exports wigs to Dubai and will give us four million tomans (ca. 100 euros) for it, and for my hair ...." She was hushed by Shadia before finishing her sentence.

"When dust is blowing, we enclose ourselves inside the houses for four to five days," Shadia explained. Doors and windows are shut. Those who have blinds close them tightly. Cars are covered and sheltered inside houses. The use of air conditioners and ventilators is reduced to avoid sucking dust inside. Drinking water tanks on the roofs, a new accessory in the region, are wrapped in plastic tarps to protect them from the wind. Yet, sometimes the winds are followed by long electricity cuts. "It is hard to breathe here. We [she points to her younger sisters] have to tolerate it, but for men it is unbearable."

Shadia felt her life was stuck so long as there were dust incidents: no young man would set foot in their village and, as long as the wind blew, she could not move away from the village as a divorcee. Approaching the gate of the garden, I asked her what she does on dusty days. "I sleep!" she replied.

Qasim and Shadia were members of a collaborative state network aimed at sustaining rural life and resisting bad air in Khuzestan's emptying villages. Like many other collaborative environmental projects, however, they were left in un uncertain situation: they could not survive without initial funding and they had no prospects against severe drought. Like their palm trees that survive only when irrigated by fresh water, they could stay until there was no salt in the soil.

These practices can be cautiously formulated as "resistant ecology," i.e., heterogeneous survival collectives shaped around resistant practices sustaining life in frontline villages, as Munira Khayyat explains in the context of recurrent wars in southern Lebanon.[46] From this perspective, resistance can go beyond military presence to encompass various vernacular practices in which Shatt-al-Arab inhabitants engage, collaborating on different levels with the Iranian state in their attempts to revive the land and survive. Although not driven by a strong sense of refusal, what distinguishes them from dull compliance is how they continue despite the chasm of uncertainty and without any clear prospects.[47] As forms of resistance

[46] Khayyat, "A Landscape of War in Southern Lebanon," 14–36.

[47] For the problem of a thin conception of resistance and a new focus on refusal as a willful and hopeful strategy, see Susan Seymour's seminal critique "Resistance," 305; McGranahan, "Introducing Refusal," 322–323; and Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal," 78.

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Figure 2: Reviving palm trees in Arvand-kenar/Shatt al-Arab. Photo by the author (April 2022).

emerged in the commingling of human (sanctions) and non-human (wind) forces, Shatt-al-Arab inhabitants link to the state of suspension, which may explain the temporariness and haziness of their solutions (Figure 2).

In another village of the Shatt-al-Arab, old Mr. Rashid collaborated with state officials to maintain his palm trees. Lack of drinking water, excessive salt, and the invasion by dust-winds smashed and emptied neighboring villages. Mr. Rashid's tribe resided in Ahwaz, and his sons and daughter lived in the UK. In contrast with the local governors and his relatives, Mr. Rashid believed that the soil of his village was still fertile and capable of "resisting the wind."

Mr. Rashid was a landlord and a tribal sheikh. He was also the state contractor for fresh water in his village. The tanker arrived with a lorry at his place, where he distributed it in portable tanks or small containers to the households. We met him at his house's doorway as we stood in the queue of customers waiting to buy their drinking water in ten-liter plastic containers. The line in front of his door was crossed by a dozen parallel pipes that passed under the iron gate into his front yard. From where we stood, I could not see where they ended or where they came from. As I learned from the customers, they received their drinking water at a discount if they owned one of those pipes. Some of the pipes carried wastewater from neighboring houses. Other people collected their wastewater in refillable water tanks and brought them to Mr. Rashid on a weekly basis for him to revive his landscape.

When he opened the door to let us into his house, I could see the wrinkles on his face and hands. His brown skin contrasted with his short white hair. His body was covered from neck to ankle in a grey worn thobe (*dashdasha*). In his mid-seventies, Mr. Rashid lived alone and took care of his palm grove and fruit gardens on his own. In his living room, designed in local Arab style with brown cushions against the walls and several layers of carpets from corner to corner, the only vertically erected object was a small stand with a framed photo from his youth. He served us glasses of water with ice cubes, the most precious gift in his household. "My palm trees are also persons; they [state officials] do not count them when they distribute drinkable water. Here we share ours with our palms."

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The house connected to the garden through several metal arches. The customers outside spoke of grapes and wisteria flowers that used to spin around them in the old days. Later, striped plastic tarp cast its bluish shadow within a tunnel that protected us against the dust-winds. Mr. Rashid moved stubbornly with a bucket over the new cracks the wind had opened in the earth and, using his hands, wetted the roots that had appeared out of the soil. He hastened his steps, passed through his palm trees, climbed the tallest one with remarkable agility, and cut us fresh blossoms to taste. By redirecting his neighborhood's wastewater, he was able to maintain 300 palms, an orange, and an apple tree.

Maintaining palm trees to stabilize the soil is a very costly method for the state. Few landlords with sufficient knowledge and craft have remained. Regional air-polluting industries – such as oil and metal companies, officially obliged to invest in dust-reducing projects – relied on imported and economic species that were easy to plant and grew relatively swiftly. Mr. Rashid referred to them as "invasive trees": "If they bring them, they would also confiscate the land where they have planted them." Terms of war resonate in daily life over the Shatt al-Arab: invasive species, resistance, combat zone, and tactics for reusing fresh water. These terms are remnants of the Iran-Iraq war in the language of Shatt al-Arab inhabitants, as well as cross-reference the ways in which state projects reinvoke the war. Resistance remains an empirically and morally illuminating description of the ways life carries on under economic sanctions at the borders of Iran and Iraq.

Mulched dust

"Black, sticky, and gummy" were the three words that Tariq, a local environmental activist from the Hoor al-Azim region, used to describe oil mulch for me. Tariq and his environmentalist friends were against the state program attempting to stabilize the dust over the dried Khuzestan landscape by spraying it with oil mulch. "It is not a desert here, there are still lives hidden in the cracks and under the dust," Tariq said, enraged by those who compare the marshlands and its surrounding sandy hills to the deserts of central Iran and the dust-wind to the sandy wind. Since 2016, a year after the dust-wind incidents and during the presidential campaign in which Rohani was re-elected, using oil mulch to stick the dust to the earth was the most widespread state policy for controlling the dust-winds in Khuzestan. For the state, stickiness meant subduing the dust, but for environmentalists and local activists, it is a means of "suffocating" the breathers and biosphere of the marshlands.

The Hoor al-Azim/Hawizeh marshlands once straddled northwest Khuzestan, from Bostan, Rofayya, and Howeyzeh to Talaeiah. In the past decades, however, its quadrant angle borderline with Iraq has been shrinking drastically. While the southern part has dried, the remaining spots in the north are cut through by private roads of oil companies and a dyke dividing the Iranian and Iraqi marshes. As the water recedes and the reeds dry out, the crusts turn to powder and are swept up with each wind. The wetlands' drying up, however, is not ascribed to combat dust zones. Instead, the sand hills that mark the boundaries of the northwestern Hoor al-Azim coasts have been designated as the source of dust and, in 2018, were buried under a layer of sprayed oil mulch.

The air was not the same in the town, at least not on an unseasonably warm early December afternoon. While I felt it with each inhalation, people seemed to have a normal day: school kids were running around in the alleys; shopkeepers were standing outside, smoking cigarettes and chatting with one another; a group of women in black veils entered the mosque where a man passed with his motorbike, a shovel strapped to his back. He had wrapped his head and neck, except his eyes, in a green kufiyah. Over the roofs of the one- and two-story houses of the small town, a thick brownish haze obscured the line between the earth and sky. Windows were covered with hand-woven straw (*buriya*) from the marshes. A woman pulled the arm of her toddler son and covered his head fully with her chador as she hastened home.

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It was hard to find the right words to open a conversation in the supermarket. Unlike the Shatt al-Arab residents, people here knew where the dust came from; they were living in it. The atmosphere was heavy, not only with airborne particles but also a sense of mistrust.[48] At an Arab café at the corner of the street, I found a man who pulled the scarf from his mouth and took his coffee in one sip. I commented cautiously about the weather. He had seen me around with Tariq, he said. Of course, I had not been able to recognize him with his face covered. "What can we do?" he asked with a sigh, "If we talk too much, they will come and mummify us in their oil mulch and use us as part of their war memorials!" Then he added cynically, "But do not talk about it with anybody. Many have turned to state agents here. We do not buy from them." He pointed with his head to the supermarket I had entered earlier.

While waiting for Tariq in front of a water vending machine, a man in a khaki uniform passed with his motorbike three times, overtly showing that I was under his acute observation. By the last round, he stopped and, without coming down from his motorbike, asked: "Are you going to the Hoor?" Then, without pausing for my answer, he added: "You must have a letter of permission!" The shopkeepers, who seemed to be curious about our conversation, came to their doorways. They stared at us in silence. He did not exchange a word with them, either. The burning sensation caused by the particles in my nose made me hyperconscious of my breathing. "Yes," I replied briefly, to hide my coughing. His swank fur hat made me feel even more uncomfortable, since I doubted his identity as a park ranger. While pushing his motorbike to the fore with one leg, he turned his head toward me, dialed a number, and started talking on his mobile phone. When Tariq finally arrived with his four-wheel-drive car to pick me up, the man was already on his fourth call. At a short distance, he started following us with his motorcycle.

The strict security measures in the marshlands were mostly to prevent smuggling, which had become popular after the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The eradication of long-term sanctions against Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 and their counter-intensification against Iran by 2006 had made smuggling small goods a well-paid second source of income for the Iranian marsh inhabitants. Not far from the town, narrow steel and wooden boats (*balam*) sat outside the houses. Along with fishing and keeping buffalos, most boat owners had previously brought small electric devices from Iraq, with air conditioners and mobile phones being among the most luring devices for import. By the construction of the sixty-five-kilometer earthen dyke in 2009, and under the long shadow of surveillance, most were forced to stop or change their shops.[49]

Oil extraction sites built over the marshes in the past years were weaponized with the strictest security measures. "No way!" Tariq shouted at me. "They have guards on all sides. Drones to keep places miles away from their sites under constant surveillance. Their own special cars and drivers. I can also assure you they would not like us there!" he excitedly raged against my idea of taking a trip to the industrialized sites in the marshland. Tariq and other local NGOs had turned down dialogue with the oil companies after the Iranian state signed an agreement with a Chinese company to build oil extraction infrastructure in the region in exchange for drying the majority of the marshlands. Inspired by Iraq's internationally celebrated projects of marshland rehabilitation in the post-2003 reconstruction era, Tariq and his friends wished to revive the reeds and preserve the natural marsh biosphere.[50] Instead, Iran undertook a different policy, relying on more extraction

[48] See the author's article on the disbelief and mistrust caused by the dust-winds: Chavoshian, "Secular Atmosphere: Dust-winds in Iran's Landscape of War," 310.

[49] See Rubec and Young, "Report of the Ramsar Team Visit to Hawizeh Marshes," section 3.1.3.

[50] "The Central and Al Hammar marshlands have completely collapsed with respectively 97% and 94% of their land cover transformed into bare land and salt crusts, while less than a third of the transboundary Hawr Al Hawizeh/Al Azim remains." The rehabilitation measures enacted in Iraq between 2006–2012 could barely stop expanding desertification in the Hawizeh marshes. For a detailed and brilliant study on the rehabilitation of the

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and reducing preservation measures. To fill the gap of the sanctioned global markets, petrochemical products were sold stealthily on the cheap. The locals were left with seasonal draughts that hindered the bathing of their buffalos and small lagoons that were too shallow for their boats to float.

We departed the marshes to drive toward the sandy hills on their northwest coast. The barrier between the two sides of the road we drove on, between traffic heading in opposite directions, was fifty meters across. Young men were busy in the seemingly endless task of sweeping the margins of the asphalt. Against the low visibility after an already descending haze, the workers were protected solely by a fluorescent jacket. Each man was working with a natural broom made of the dried remnants of palms and reeds. An oil factory was paying them a daily wage to clean the road so that cars would not stray on a gloomy December day.

Not far from them, the sands were darkened by oil mulch. Tariq estimated the mulched area to be around 10,000 hectares. Mulch, a rather cheap and heavy oil-extracted residue, became a massive product on Iran's sanctioned oil market. The surplus was then offered as a smooth and swift way to settle whipped-up dust from the sky over Khuzestan. Already applied to stabilize the moving sands of central deserts, it was said that the temporary layer would vanish by itself within three to five years. At the time, the oil companies mandated with controlling the dust regarded this as a win-win solution: selling their surplus product with the lowest transportation costs.

The thin layer of mulch veils the sand and keeps it in place. Its capacity to stick to the dunes makes oil mulch infrastructural as an emplacement, a new layer over the earth. When sprayed, it lays a distinct surface on the earth and comes into immediate contact with the layers already existing beneath it. Its power of stabilization constitutes what Nikhil Anand calls "accretion," i.e., layers in proximity to one another that sediment one infrastructure on top of another.[51] Sticking to the earth, mulch promises to separate dust from the air above it. However, this surface is not as smooth as planned and originally carried out. Rather, it is a flaky, crusty, and deteriorating layer that, made by means of sanction-profiting, peels and crumbles into rubble.

Soon after its spread, the black oily veil turned to a dark shadow over the lands as it absorbed and cracked from the heat of the sun. The heat trapped under the mulch had a devastating effect on the indigenous flora and fauna and a toxic effect on the animals grazing in the region. The heated sands became drier than ever, and new dust-releasing cracks appeared on the surface. The mulch impacted the regional ecosystem, hindering the regeneration of and inflicting damage on the region's soil. The cracks in the surface of the new crusts became a new source of toxic dust-winds mixed with the powdered mulch. Its pervasion on the land revoked the sanctions under a robe of sticky black gum, eating away at and suffocating otherwise revivable lands.

Conclusion

If economic sanctions are supposed to weaken and subdue a state's sovereignty, as lawmakers claim, could they trigger volumetric sovereignty over injured environments? How would material elements, such as dust, wind, salt, and water, change our imagination of power and sovereignty over borderlands? In this article, I brought together the politics of voluminous states and moving materials to show how the Iranian state constructs its web of power while cut off from the global market. Drawing on the growing anthropological literature on ecologies of war, I examined the interminglement of sanctions and aerosols from the vantagepoint of breathers.

Hawizeh Marshlands by the Iraqi diaspora in the US and transnational companies, see Guarasci, "Reconstructing Life in Iraq's Marshes"; Guarasci, "Investigating Imperial Formations," 254–256.

[51] Anand, "Accretion."

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In Khuzestan, the juxtaposition of economic sanctions and dust-winds highlights the opening of suspension, which I explain as an atmospheric and affective state of being held in the air for those who live and breathe it. I have approached dust-wind as both atmospheric matter and a meteorological process that reconfigures the problem of severe drought and conditions the state's ecological governance. The dust-winds are perceived through their speed, distance, and meteorological intensity, over which the inhabitants and local officials maintain different levels of control. Under the flagship of "combating" and "resistance," the local inhabitants engage in the state's temporal environmental interventions, which in turn make them vanguards of its voluminous sovereignty.

I examined two modes of environmental cooperation. First, citing the revival of palm groves and the making of a green front line in combat dust zones, I showed how watering the farmlands revolves around the statist notion of a sanction-resistance economy and fear of ecological resettlement. Second, discussing the program of spraying oil mulch as a blanket to separate the earth from the sky, I showed how the increased extraction of oil from beneath the marshlands and using the surplus from sanctioned oil markets to stabilize sands securitizes the region and threatens biodiversity.

Spurred by dust, inhabitants and local officials collaborate, negotiate, and conflict. Yet these fields of practice are incomplete, exploratory, risky, and without a clear prospect. Sanctions are experienced through contours of exposure: hazardous breathing, resisting, and suffocation. The dust-winds bring large groups of people into coalition and action as breathers. In this sense, dust-winds achieve far more than the predominant scholarship suggests, as such locates ecological impacts as secondary to the influence of economic sanctions. Breathers also go beyond the everyday entanglements of specific groups, social milieu, or class in response to sanctions. Instead of showing how the lack of access to commodities and technologies shapes the living environment under sanctions, this paper shows processes of movement and stabilization in the ongoing struggle between moving sands and the efforts to stop them, between the suspension of life and the striving for sustainable development. Dust-winds characterize lives in Khuzestan from the time of aerial surveillance to the exudation of smoke from oil rigs, the sanctions that hinder selling oil products, and the sticky oil mulch that suffocates the former farming lands. The blowing of dust-winds blasts material conditions and sustenance of life, thus capturing atmospheric, political breathing.

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