

West Asian Communities in the Philippines: an Exploratory Study of Migrant Iranians, Jews, Arabs, and Turkish

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Abstract

Although citizens of West Asian countries have lived and integrated into Philippine society since the latter part of the nineteenth century, only a handful of Filipino or foreign scholars have touched on the phenomenon. There has been much previous academic research on the study of Islam in the Philippines, but less on the migratory movements of West Asian peoples and their struggles to successfully integrate into Philippine society. To help address this gap, this paper attempts to profile the West Asian communities, most particularly of Iranians, Arabs, Jews, and Turkish, in Metro Manila and nearby areas. It seeks to chart the stages of migrations; identify successful personalities from West Asian communities; elucidate the motivations for settlement; discuss migrants' links to their countries of origin; and bring to light the challenges they face while living in the Philippines.

Keywords: West Asian migration, West-Asia, Southeast Asia

Introduction

THE HISTORY OF WEST Asian migrants in the Philippines can be said to have started with the arrival of Muslim traders from the Persian Gulf between the 12th and 14th century of the Common Era. N.M. Saleeby (1918, 2–15) speaks of “Mohammedan traders and adventurers” who came in the 14th century and visited most of the islands in the Sulu

Archipelago and other parts of Mindanao. Sharif Awliya, whose name was associated with myths and legends and was generally known as Karimul' Makhdum, was said to be the first Muslim to come to the islands. With the formal introduction (Majul 1989)¹ and institutionalization of Islam in those areas as the result of Islamic preaching and intermarriage with the local population, contacts with the Islamic world began to increase and intensify. Through these contacts, Arabs and Persians came to the Philippines to trade with the local sultanates. In time, West Asian migrants grew accustomed to and integrated into the mainstream Filipino society.

These commercial and cultural exchanges have continued into contemporary times, albeit in different contexts and forms. Today, many Iranians and Arab nationals are currently enrolled in various universities in the Philippines, and some have stayed long enough in the country and married Filipinas.

Some opted to remain in the Philippines and establish businesses while others chose to go back to their countries of origin, bringing with them their Filipina wives and children. However, after many years of being away, many half-Filipino children returned to the Philippines to earn university degrees, and in some cases, marry local Filipinos and settle in the country.

Other Filipinos found their spouses/partners in West Asian countries and or in a different region altogether while they lived and worked as Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs). After the termination of their working permits, these OFWs eventually returned to the Philippines with their Arab and Persian families—a situation that added new strands to the rich tapestry of new Filipino-Muslim communities in the country.

In spite of the deeply rooted sociocultural influences and economic contributions of West Asian migrants in the making of the Filipino nation, and given the emerging hybrid Filipino-West Asian communities in the country, only few relevant studies (Majul 1989; Saleeby 1906; Smith 2004) have profiled these communities and discovered how generations of Arabs, Iranians and Turkish nationals in the country lived, interacted, and integrated into mainstream Philippine society. Indeed, William Gervase

Clarence-Smith (2004, 425) argues that despite West Asians' contributions to the history of the Philippines, scholars have simply ignored them. In this light, and where there is a lack of documented sources in some cases, an anecdotal approach was employed.

This exploratory research aims to answer the following questions: Who are the West Asian migrants in the Philippines and what factors motivated them to move into and stay in the country? How do their identities transform during the process of integration in Philippine society? What are the challenges they have experienced while living in the Philippines?

To answer these questions, the study relied on written sources on the subject, and a survey of West Asian migrants in Metro Manila and neighboring cities, areas where majority of them reside. The survey consisted of questionnaires, which were randomly distributed, especially among students. The study also makes use of interviews of key informants such as diplomats, traders, community leaders, and students from Arab, Iranian, and Turkish communities. These respondents were carefully selected from among the most knowledgeable and authoritative personalities in diplomatic missions, trading circles, sociocultural communities, and student organizations. The study also features informal observations and experiences of the author, who lived with some of these migrants prior to the interviews, and noted how they behaved and interacted with Filipinos, especially those in Metro Manila.

West Asian Communities in the Philippines

For many Filipinos, West Asian migrants in the Philippines live in the southern, Muslim-dominated parts of the country and in Metro Manila, where many commercial and entertainment establishments are located. They tend to be stereotyped as Arab, Muslim, and affluent because of the prosperity brought about by oil wealth in West Asia. This perception parallels the common knowledge of non-Muslim Filipinos in Manila, who believe that all Muslim Filipinos practice Islam and belong to one group

of people from Mindanao. It is similar to the notion of many Filipinos who automatically think that all Caucasians are Americans or Europeans, and that Pakistanis, Indians, Nepalese, and Bangladeshis are all Indians.

Contrary to Filipino perception, West Asian communities in the Philippines do not only consist of Arabs but also of Iranians, Kurds, and Turkish nationals, all of whom comprise the West Asian communities in the country. In terms of nationality, West Asian communities include Yemenis, Palestinians, Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Libyans, Iranians, Turkish, Israelis, and Afghans.

First Wave of Migration

Arabs, especially the Lebanese and Syrians, have long resided in the Philippines; many of their ancestors came to the country centuries ago. The sea routes that connect the Arab world to India and most countries in Southeast Asia served as a conduit for maritime trading activities between Western Asia and India on the one hand, and the Philippines on the other. At the opening of the 9th century C.E. at the height of the ‘Abbasid Empire, “Arab lands became a center of empire, power, wealth, population, civilization and culture” (Majul 1989, 2). Arab merchants and sailors began to “dominate the Nanhai or Southeast Asia trade” (ibid.; Gungwu 1958, 107). They took part in the country’s early phase of political and economic formation, and assimilated into mainstream Filipino society through naturalization and intermarriage with Filipinos.² They have assumed a Filipino nationality and identify less with their Arab ancestry than their forebears who came to the Philippines. They are not only active in economic and cultural but also in local and regional political activities.

Although Muslims were already present in the Philippines since the premodern era, Christian Armenians dominated the early 20th-century migration to the country, followed by Christian and Druze Arabs from Ottoman Syria, a region that comprised what is now Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Israel.

Most Syrians in the Philippines were Maronite Uniate Catholics of the Antioch rite or Greek Orthodox Christians of the Byzantine rite (Smith 2004, 433). They married local women and their descendants have since then become Filipino citizens. Famous among these Filipinos of Syrian descent is the owner of a famous pizzeria in Manila (434). Najeeb Mitry Saleeby was also a famous Lebanese who arrived in the Philippines in 1900 from the United States. He published a study, *Moro History, Law and Religion*, in 1905, was appointed as hospital director in Manila, and became a member of the Philippine Academy. He died in Baguio in 1935. (ibid.).

Aside from Lebanese and Syrians, other Arabs also migrated to the Philippines at different times and with different purposes. To date, the famous, present-day Arab-Filipino families in the country include the Abubakars of Sulu, Bajunaids of Maguindanao, Bediris of Tawi-Tawi, Samanodens of Lanao, and Cozbari of Lanao (Panda 2013). Descendants of Palestinian and Yemeni Arabs currently reside in Marawi City and other Muslim-dominated areas in Mindanao such as General Santos City, Cotabato City, the Sulu archipelago, and the provinces of Maguindanao, Zamboanga, and Davao (Pacol 2013). In the Visayas, the Caram family of Iloilo and the Deen and Jureidini families of Cebu (Assad 2013) are also of Arab descent. Like the Arabs, Iranians also a long history of settlement in the Philippines and many of them engaged in business and intermarried with the local population.

Akiko Watanabe (2008) states that in 1910, the economic activities and residencies of these West Asians were generally recorded as part of the diverse Muslim population of Manila rather than as a separate group of Muslim immigrants. The Muslims of the capital included Filipinos, Turkish, Arabs, Persians, Indians, and Indonesians who were retailers, wholesalers, night watchmen, or vendors (2008, 7; Bernad 1974).

As for the Jewish community in the Philippines, the first permanent settlement in the Philippines emerged during Spanish colonization. Towards the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, three Levy brothers

from Alsace-Lorraine³ fled France to settle in the Philippines. They were entrepreneurs mainly in jewelry, retail, general merchandising, and the import trade in gems, pharmaceuticals, and eventually automobiles. Accompanying the brothers was a famous Jew from the same region of Alsace-Lorraine³ (Jewish Times Asia 2006), Leopold Kahn, who became the president and General Manager of La Estrella del Norte and Levy Hermanos, Inc. These companies sold expensive items such as Swiss wrist watches, gramophones, jewelries, perfumes, and imported clothing. Kahn was also the first French Consul General to the Philippines and was the president of the French Chamber of Commerce (Hoffman 2007; Jewish Times Asia 2006).

When the Suez Canal opened in 1869, contact between Jewish businessmen in Europe and the Philippines grew increasingly significant. A more direct trading route allowed the Jewish population in the country to rise and join their coreligionists from Turkey, Syria, and Egypt (ibid.), giving rise to a vibrant “multi-ethnic Jewish population of about fifty individuals” towards the end of the Spanish period in the country (ibid.). The opening of the Suez Canal and the succeeding intensification of business contacts between Europe and the Philippines provided impetus for other West Asian Jewish businessman to come to the country.

The Spanish colonial authorities in the Philippines prohibited organized Jewish religious life; thus, the Jews in the country had to practice their religion in secret (Harris 2013; Griese 1954, 21). This changed under the more liberal policies of the Americans starting in 1898, which allowed the free practice of Judaism in the country. During the American occupation of the Philippines, Jewish Americans came as soldiers, who helped introduced formal education in 1906. They were preceded by idealistic American Jewish teachers who boarded and sailed on the USS Thomas, the ship that gave them their epithet in Philippine history. The Thomasites camped in Baguio and for two years, organized themselves as the “*First US Peace Corps Volunteers in the Philippines*” (Nomadicasian 2013).

Young American-Jewish entrepreneurs were attracted to new markets for import-export businesses in the Philippines, where they set up shop. Three of these businessmen, who arrived in the early twentieth century, stand out: Emil Bachrach, Morton I. Netzorg, and Israel Konigsberg. Annette Eberly, a freelance author and Philippine resident, writes that Emil Bachrach came to Manila in 1901 and invested a substantial amount in what would become a business empire. Bachrach built Temple Emil and Bachrach Hall and was the first Jewish American to reside permanently in the country (Eberly 1975, 60).

From 1935 to 1946, during the Commonwealth Era, President Manuel Quezon, with the consent of the United States, granted visas to 1,200 Jewish refugees in Shanghai, Austria, and Germany, all of whom were fleeing Nazi persecution to live in the Philippines. This was the last major Jewish immigration to the Philippines. In recognition of this heroic act, the Israeli government in 2009 erected “*The Open Doors*” monument at the 65-hectare Holocaust Memorial Park in Rishon Le Zion in Israel to honor Philippine president Manuel Quezon (Nutbox Archives 2012). In 1936, the Jewish community in the Philippines comprised 500 members, a number that would grow to 2,500 in 1941, when the Philippine government rescued additional Jewish refugees from the Holocaust. Many of them would leave the country after the Second World War. By 2005, Jewish families in the Philippines numbered only about 500 people. And in 2011, around 70 families were residing in Metro Manila (Jewish Times Asia 2010).

Second Wave of Migration

The second massive migration to the Philippines of West Asian nationals took place between the 1970s and the late 1980s. This phase of migration primarily arose through the efforts of the Marcos administration to establish diplomatic relations between the Philippines and many countries in West Asia and North Africa.⁴ A significant development in this period was the proliferation of Iranian students who took up medicine,

dentistry, and engineering in Philippine universities such as University of the East (UE), Centro Escolar University (CEU), Far East Air Transport Incorporated University (FEATI U), Silliman University, and Cebu Doctors College, just to name a few. Records show that Iranian students began studying in these higher educational institutions as early as the 1960s. Prior to the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s, Iranian university students numbered between 2,500 and 3,500 (Yegar 2002, 320).

Iranian migration during this period ran parallel to an increasing number of Filipino doctors, midwives, engineers, mechanics, technicians and household workers in Iran, where they worked for government hospitals, airports, airline companies, telecommunications, United Nations agencies, private construction and service companies, and private homes. The arrival of the Filipinos in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s formed part of the cornerstone of strong Philippine-Iran bilateral relations. As Philippine Embassy in Tehran Chargé d'affaires Mariano Dumia (2011) observed, "the favorable pioneering entry of Filipino workers into the Iranian workforce in the 60s and early 70s has spawned the arrival of more Filipinos into the country in the mid- and late 70s." In the mid-1970s, according to the records of the Philippine embassy in Tehran, there were 15,000 Filipinos in Iran (GMA News Online 2011).

The Iranian Revolution elicited a series of political demonstrations by anti-Shah and pro-Islamic Iranians in Manila, in response to which the Marcos government instructed the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports [(MECS), now the Department of Education] to conduct an investigation and go over the files of Iranian students involved in security disturbances or protest activities in the Philippines. Thirty Iranian students were deported in 1980, and no students from Iran were admitted in the Philippines that year (Yegar 2002, 320). This deportation was paralleled by the repatriation of foreign workers in Iran, including Filipinos, under the newly installed Islamic Revolutionary government. At present, there are about 1,006 registered Filipinos in Iran, comprising 800 families (GMA News Online 2011).

Third Wave of Migration

The third wave of migration took place in the 1990s when, for security reasons, Filipinas working in Persian Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia came back to the Philippines with their Arab spouses and children. This period witnessed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, which triggered a US-led international coalition to push President Saddam Hussein's army back into Iraq. The Persian Gulf War resulted in property damage, loss of life, and gross violations of human rights inflicted by the Iraqi army on vulnerable groups such as women, the elderly, and children. Seeking to ensure their security, many Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Iraq and Kuwait, especially those with families, came to the Philippines and returned to Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia when the fighting ended. Filipinas who were also married to Arabs and Iranian nationals in other countries, such as the United States, Canada, Europe, and Japan, also went back to the Philippines, forming a new group of mixed West Asian-Filipino communities in the country.

Thus, political-military crises—arising from the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Lebanese Hezbollah and Israeli tensions, and the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—all resulted in the relocation of some Filipino-Lebanese, Filipino-Palestinian, Filipino-Iraqi and Filipino-Kuwaiti families to the Philippines. Some of them settled in Metro Manila, Cebu, and Mindanao. Many put up small businesses and sent their children to Philippine schools and universities. According to Lebanese Consul General Joseph Assad (2013), there are about 22,000 Arab migrants in the Philippines and majority of them live in Mindanao, though some Arab entrepreneurs did establish themselves in Manila.

Fourth Wave of Migration

The last group of West Asians who came to the Philippines comprise mainly of second-generation Filipino–West Asians. Like the Arab and Iranian students in the late 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, many of these newcomers are students who are either mixed-blood (Filipino and West

Asian) or full-blooded (both parents are West Asians).⁵ Either way, they are currently enrolled in Philippine universities and English-language schools.

The second-generation Iranians in the Philippines are the sons or daughters of Iranian students in the 1970s and 1980s who married Filipinas and returned to Iran. Most of the second generation took their elementary and high school education there, while some obtained a university degree in the country before joining their mother's families in the Philippines. Like their Iranian fathers who had studied in Philippine universities, many of them also take up dentistry, engineering, medicine, and, for a few, social science courses. Others became entrepreneurs while a significant number work for Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) companies and Information Technology (IT) companies in Manila.

A group of recently arrived Arab students in the Philippines—from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, Libya, and Israel—are taking up degrees in aeronautics while some enroll in short-term English language courses in language institutions like the American Language Institute in English Proficiency (ALIEP) in Makati City, Quezon City, and Baguio City.

Among universities in the country with a high percentage of West Asian enrollees are Centro Escolar University (CEU), Manila Central University (MCU), University of the East (UE) Manila and Caloocan branches, where many of them take dentistry. Other universities include Fatima University, Manuel Quezon University, Mapua University, Ocampo University, Cebu Doctors University, St. Louis University in Baguio, Silliman University in Dumaquete, Trinity University of Asia in Quezon City, Philippine Women's University, University of Santo Tomas (UST), and the University of the Philippines Diliman.

Apart from Arabs and Iranians, the number of Turkish nationals in the country has also doubled over the years (Kazkondu 2013). Some travel to Cebu to study English while others are sent to Academia, a Turkish-owned English-language institute in Manila before they go to the United States or to another English-speaking country for graduate and post-

graduate education. At any rate, Turkish nationals who graduated in Philippine universities are now at the forefront of business ties between Philippines and Turkey.

Famous Filipinos with West Asian Lineage

There are a number of successful Filipino-Arabs, Filipino-Iranians, and Filipino-Israelis who have made their mark in different fields in the Philippines, including but not limited to the following: entertainment, modeling, beauty pageantry, and sports. In regard to the first three, the unique mestizo features of Filipino-West Asians are perceived to be attractive, and thus seen to be suitable as actors, actresses, and models. Some well-known personages are:

Amir Carlos Damaso Vahidi Agassi (Filipino-Iranian Actor,
TV Host, rap artist, and model)

Kian Reza Kazemi (Filipino-Iranian actor, model, and
businessman)

Toni Rose Gayda (Actress of Egyptian, French, Polish and
American descent)

Mona al-Alawi (Filipino-Bahraini child actress)

Yasmien Yuson Kurdi (Filipino-Lebanese singer and actress)

Prince Stephan (Filipino-Arab actor)

Kuh Ledesma (Filipino-Arab actress)

Charlie Davao (Filipino-Spanish-Arab actor)

Dawn Zulueta (Filipino-Lebanese actress)

Sam Ajdani (Filipino-Iranian model)

Uma Barum Khouny (Filipino-Israeli actor)

Jessy Mendiola (Filipino-British-Lebanese actress)

Anna Roces (Filipino-Lebanese actress)

Marie-Ann Bonquin Umali (Filipino-Lebanese beauty queen)

Famous sports personalities are:

Misagh Medina Bahadoran (Filipino-Iranian football
player)

Jasmine Alkhaldi (Filipino-Saudi swimmer)

Rabeh Ahmed Al-Hussaini (Filipino-Arab PBA player)

Representation in other fields is also rising. For instance, Mostafa Lee Mehrafshah, Filipino-Iranian, placed 6th in the 2013 National Dentistry Examination.

At present, many Iranians live in Wack-Wack Subdivision in Mandaluyong City, Gilmore Street in Quezon City, and Legarda Street in Manila. Turkish nationals are concentrated more in San Juan while Arabs are spread in Quezon City, Pasay City, Makati City, and Manila. Jewish nationals live primarily in Makati. Though most Middle-easterners chose Manila as their place of residence, some of them also opted to live with their Filipino families in cities and towns outside of Metro Manila, such as Laguna, Bulacan, Antipolo, Rizal, and Cavite.

Motivations for Visiting and Settlement in the Philippines

The motivations of West Asians to reside in the Philippines can be classified into five: business interests, education opportunities, tourist activities, family linkages, and diplomatic duty.

Business Interests

The Philippines' economic relations with countries in West Asia have not improved much over the years as trade and commercial activities did not receive high priority in the past. For both the Philippines and West Asian nations, this is partly because of the lack of initiatives to promote import-export activities outside crude oil. As it is, Philippine interests in

West Asia revolve around the security and welfare of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs); the security of oil supply; and the strategic role of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in mediating conflict in Mindanao. Similarly, West Asian businesses in the Philippines are rather limited to restaurants, carpet shops, coffee shops, construction companies, and recruiting agencies. Table 1 provides a list of some establishments.

One reason for the nonimprovement of commercial relations is the inability of businessmen from both the Philippines and West Asia to appreciate other available resources they have for each other. Three factors may help explain this situation: their limited knowledge of each other's business landscape, including relevant investment policies; second are the tight visa requirements by the Philippines; and lastly, which is connected to the first factor, is the lack of initiatives from both sides to improve and strengthen business transactions.

The Turkish business community, through The Turkish Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines, has been recently active in "business matching" (Turkish Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines 2014b). Through exchange visits,⁶ Filipino and Turkish companies and businessmen seek to connect industries in the Philippines—construction, renewable energy, mining, tourism, food and beverage, furniture, textiles, chemicals, aviation, logistics, and finance—to those in Turkey, but these projects are still works in progress. At present, three Turkish organizations in the Philippines are working hand in hand to promote bilateral relations between the two countries: The Turkish Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines with branches in San Juan, Zamboanga, and Davao; Turkish-owned schools in Sinunok, Zamboanga and Santolan in San Juan City; and the Pacific Dialogue Foundation, Inc., which is based in Annapolis Street, San Juan City.

Some Filipino and Arab businessmen also organized bilateral economic and business summits both in the Philippines and in various countries around the Persian Gulf. These included the Arab-Philippine Business Summit Road Show held in Cebu, where the Cebu Business

TABLE 1: Famous Filipino-Arab and Persian Business Establishments
in the Philippines

Name of Establishments	Addresses
Jerusalem Restaurant Hossein's Persian Kebab	1533 M.H. Del Pilar Street, Malate, Manila LKV Building, 7857 Makati Avenue., Makati City
Kabab Grille and Persian Cuisine	Ground Level, Prince Jun Condominium, 42 Timog Avenue, Quezon City
Aryan Persian Restaurant	Promenade Mall, Greenhills; Podium Mall, Mandaluyong City; Robinson Place, Manila
Mister Kebab	UP Ayala TechnoHub, Commonwealth Avenue, Quezon City
Prince of Persia	Eastwood City Walk 1, Libis, Quezon City
Behrouz	G/F Metrowalk Commercial Complex, Ortigas Center, Pasig City
Persia Grill	2nd Avenue corner 30th Street, Blue Sapphire, near Burgos Circle, Bonifacio Global City, Taguig City
Kebab Turki	De la Rosa 1 Car Park, De La Rosa Access Road 1, Legazpi Village, Makati City; Robinson Place Manila
Sofreh Persian Fusion Cuisine	G-Strip, Greenhills Shopping Center, Ortigas Avenue, San Juan City
M&M Mana-ish and More	20 Jupiter Street, Barangay Bel-Air, Makati City
The Kazemi Persian Carpet	1000 Pasay Road corner Makati Avenue, Makati City
Sina Persian Carpet Incorporated	Julia Vargas Avenue, Mandaluyong City

Club, Cebu Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), and the Confederation of Philippines Exporters Foundation (Cebu) Inc., or PhilExport-Cebu, expressed interest to forge linkages with West Asian traders (Dagooc 2013).

Kuwait Fund for Development has financed four development projects in the Philippines. The project cost around \$US43.7 million and is centered on some remote areas in the Philippines. These projects include The Zamboanga Electrification Project, which aims to supply the Zamboanga region with electricity by constructing transmission lines amounting to \$9.3 million; the Two Mindanao Roads Improvement (Molave-Oroquita, Pagadian-Tacuran) Projects, which cost US\$15 million, are designed to solve and facilitate traffic and trade between the cities and villages of these areas; and the Mindanao Second Road Improvement Project (Kuwait Fund for Development 2011, 40–41).

Gregory Domingo of the Philippines' Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) observed that “the Philippines needs to get on radar screen of Middle East investors because they have so much investible funds. They need to get comfortable that they will get reasonable protection when they invest” (Manila Bulletin 2011). In doing so, the Philippine government created a “selling Mission to the Middle East” to help draw investments into the country. Indeed, business deals with countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait were signed (PR Log 2012). Qatar and Kuwait in particular want to invest in the country's various sectors, including food security, property, tourism, energy, and public-private partnership projects (Maierbrugger 2012). Food security will be part of the strategic equations, hydrogeopolitics, and international relations in West Asia for decades to come.

Education Opportunities

Education is the second reason why West Asian nationals—Iranians and recently, Turkish students—migrate to the Philippines. The Philippines, like Malaysia, is a major destination in Southeast Asia for such students, who choose Philippine universities because tuition fees therein are lower

than those in their own countries and in European and American universities. Moreover, students have little problems adjusting to the medium of communication since English is the language of instruction used in all Philippine universities, unlike in Malaysia where Bahasa Melayu is the lingua franca. In addition, Philippine universities offer quality education in dentistry, medicine, engineering, and aeronautics.

Available data from the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) indicate that of all foreign students enrolled in Philippine universities from Academic Year (AY) 2010 to 2013, Iranian students were the most numerous, followed only by Koreans (CHED 2013).

In a survey conducted by the author among West Asian and North African students in the Philippines (Table 3), the percentage of Iranians between 2005 and 2013 is higher than that of other West Asians. This was especially the case in 2011 to 2012, when Iranian students numbered 1,053, way ahead of Nigerian, Sudanese, Kuwaiti, and Turkish students (CHED 2013).

Other factors—one of which pertain to the nature of the Iranian educational system—help explain why Iranians study abroad. In Iran, students who plan to study in public universities must pass a centralized national university entrance examination, which Iranians call *konkoor*. Because of the stringent selection process and limited resources and slots, not all talented students get a chance to pursue higher education in public universities in Iran. And applicants who cannot pass the *konkoor* are forced to enroll in private universities, where tuition fees are much more expensive. As a result, Iranian students prefer to study abroad.

The second reason for studying abroad has to do with eschewing military service, which is required of male Iranian once they reach eighteen. The constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran requires that every male citizen of the country serve in the military for up to 24 months. Because of this, some parents of either Iranians or mixed-blooded Iranians in Iran send their children abroad before they turn 18, who can thus skirt compulsory military service.

It is, however, noticeable that the number of Iranian students in the Academic Year 2012–2013 dropped from 1053 to 575. The decrease is partly attributed to the negative impact of US economic sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear program. Parents of Iranian students had difficulty sending money to their children studying abroad such as the Philippines because the sanctions affected banking transactions. Indeed, in a summary report of foreign student enrolment at the University of the East (UE) Manila Campus, the number of Iranians in the second semester of Academic Year 2012 to 2013 declined significantly.⁷

In general, Iranian students are more likely to stay in the Philippines than Turkish or Arab students because of two reasons: the nature of the courses they are taking, and the preference of male Iranian students⁸ to marry Filipinas. As a result, many Iranians would stay longer in the Philippines than their Turkish and Arab counterparts (Gharacheh 2013; Francisco 2013).

Although the enrollment of Iranian students in the University of the East declined, they still comprised the highest number of the foreign students enrolled in that university for the second semester of Academic Year 2012–2013. Out of 436 Iranian students in UE, 354 study dentistry, 20 studied arts and sciences, and 40 are in graduate school.⁹ In comparison,

TABLE 2: Number of Select Foreign Students enrolled in Philippine universities (AY 2010-2013)

Nationality	2010–2011	2011–2012	2012–2013
Americans	499	590	249
Chinese	1298	1042	297
Indians	224	529	187
Iranians	876	1053	575
Koreans	2134	2158	n/a

Source: CHED 2013. Data available as of February 2013.

TABLE 3: Number of foreign students (AY 2005-2006 to AY 2012-2013)

Nationality	2005– 2006	2006– 2007	2007– 2008	2008– 2009	2009– 2010	2010– 2011	2011– 2012	2012– 2013
Bahraini	4	3	4	2	2	3	0	0
Egyptian	6	5	4	5	4	3	1	2
Eritrean	10	11	11	24	27	26	14	9
Iranian	531	612	750	1002	673	876	1053	575
Iraqi	0	3	3	4	5	3	5	0
Israeli	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Jordanian	9	3	6	2	3	5	8	1
Kuwaiti	27	12	101	196	7	3	43	1
Lebanese	0	3	2	3	4	4	1	1
Libyan	0	2	no record	7	13	16	no record	1
Nigerian	48	32	57	43	63	45	90	44
Palestinian	5	5	5	5	4	4	6	0
Saudi Arabian	8	5	12	20	6	5	18	10
Sudanese	124	81	114	103	28	51	53	21
Turkish	17	15	35	25	33	39	20	0
United Arab Emirates	5	2	3	no record	no record	no record	2	1
Yemeni	8	6	1	5	4	3	7	4
Nationality not indicated	0	1	6	98	16	24	119	0
Total	802	801	1,114	1,544	892	1,110	1,440	670

Source: CHED 2013. Data available as of February 2013.

there were only 78 Korean students, 50 Indian students, 45 Chinese students and 16 Nepalese enrolled in that academic year.¹⁰

Apart from the Iranians, Turkish students studying in Philippine language institutes in the country have also noticeably increased from 2012 to 2013. Of around 250 Turkish nationals in the Philippines, 50 are students who are enrolled in Philippine schools and universities (Kazkondou 2013). Even so, although the number of Turkish students have gradually increased over time, it is still premature to predict their length of stay in the country since their presence is minimal compared to their Iranian counterparts.

Arab students, especially from rich Gulf countries, usually stay in the country only for a short while; they are in the Philippines mainly for language and technical training programs after which they continue their studies in Europe and North America. Yemeni, Libyan, and Saudi students are also among those groups interested in learning English in the country (Mabasa 2013).

Tourist Activities

Tourism is another reason why West Asian nationals come to visit the Philippines, especially with the recent “It’s More Fun in the Philippines” campaign spearheaded by the Department of Tourism. In 2011, there were about 55,829 tourists from West Asia, a 14.6-percent increase from 2010 arrivals. During the first three months of 2012, arrivals from the region continued to increase by 12.4 percent. Many of these tourists are mainly from Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, and Qatar (Travel and Tourism News Middle East 2012). Among West Asian countries in 2013, Saudi Arabia ranked first and was followed by nationals of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In the first three months of 2013, the number of Middle Eastern tourists reached 16,423, a 20-percent increase from the previous year’s figures during the same period (AME info 2013). Ibrahim Masri, director for the Middle East Representative, Department of Tourism, said that the Philippines launched campaigns and participated

at various trade shows in West Asia. These include the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) [Travel and Tourism News Middle East 2012]. The Philippines also hosted the 2012 PATA (Pacific Asia Travel Association) Travel Mart in Manila (PTM) [ibid.].

Family Linkages

Arab, Iranian, and Turkish nationals who marry Filipinas tend to stay in the Philippines for some time. And even if these Filipinas eventually migrate to their spouse's home countries, they still come back to the Philippines to visit their relatives. Also, second-generation Iranians and Arabs prefer to study, live, and work in the Philippines rather than in Iran or in Arab countries. It is quite interesting to note that of West Asians who have lived in the Philippines, Iranians have registered the highest number of intermarriages with Filipinas. Although some Arabs have Filipina spouses, many of them still prefer to marry their countrymen or nationals of other Arab nationalities, as do Turkish migrants, only a handful of whom have married Filipinas. In this sense, the marriage of Yilmaz Bektas, a Turkish businessman, and Ruffa Gutierrez, a Filipino actress, is thus an exception.

Ashraf Zahedi (2010), an Iranian-American researcher from Stanford University, pointed out that in many cases, a university environment offers great opportunities for people from different nationalities to establish friendships, some of which blossom into romantic relationships. Many Iranian male students in the late 1970 and 1980s married and had children with their Filipino girlfriends. In contrast, only few Filipino men married West Asian nationals.

Diplomatic Duty

Official or diplomatic assignment is another reason for West Asian nationals to stay in the Philippines. Many of these diplomats send their children to private schools or universities in Metro Manila. In some rare cases, they themselves enroll in local universities to pursue graduate studies

in education and business management. And to maintain their cultural and religious connections to their homelands while in the Philippines, Arab families of these West Asian diplomats meet with each other to celebrate Islamic and cultural activities together.

Migrants' Links with Country of Origin

Migration necessitates a certain degree of sociocultural adjustment, especially when it leads to intercultural marriages. In many cases, majority of migrants to West Asia from developing countries such as the Philippines are females, for whom marriage is a means to a comfortable life and financial and emotional security. This trend has led to the increase in transnational marriages between Filipinos and non-Filipinos. Some Filipinos in such unions live in the Philippines while others have moved to their husbands' country of origin, or another country altogether.

In the Philippines, West Asians in these transnational marriages struggle to adjust socially and culturally and to integrate into Philippine society as they adapt with the practices of their Filipina spouses. At any rate, their unions create biracial, bicultural or bilingual communities, which help them preserve and transfer their respective cultures to their children. In addition, since many of the West Asian migrants are Muslims, these transnational marriages demonstrate a condition by which "Filipinas have crossed not only ethnic and racial barriers but also religions" (Zahedi 2009, 78).

One may ask whether these part-Filipino, part-West Asian families maintain contacts with their country of origin. Descendants of the Lebanese or Syrians who came to the Philippines in the early twentieth century have lost touch with their relatives in Lebanon and Syria. Today, about 2,000 to 3,000 Filipinos of Lebanese origin do not have Lebanese identity cards (Assad 2013). These Lebanese-Filipinos have neither visited Lebanon nor contacted their relatives there. Despite this, they themselves keep in touch through Lebanese associations or through the Lebanese Consulate in Manila. Many of them reside in Alabang while a few are scattered around Metro Manila, the Visayas, and Mindanao (ibid). Doña Magdalena

Hemady, after whom Hemady Street in New Manila is named, and Kuh Ledesma (a.k.a. Maria Socorro Ledesma),¹¹ a Filipino pop diva, are just two famous examples from this group (ibid.).

In contrast, recent Lebanese migrants in the Philippines have either maintained contacts with and have visited their families in Lebanon. After Typhoon Yolanda (internationally known as Haiyan) struck the country, Abdul Kader Jadid, president of the Philippine-Lebanon Friendship Community in the Philippines, and the Lebanese Consul General, Joseph Assad, donated PhP351,572 for the victims in the Visayas through the Sagip Kapamilya Foundation (Bauzon 2013).

Unlike the first generation of Lebanese and Syrians in the Philippines, Jews who came to the Philippines have retained contacts with their relatives in Europe, America, and Israel. The efforts of the Israeli Embassy in Manila have facilitated these linkages. According to the estimate provided by the *Jewish Virtual Group*, there are roughly 100 Jews in the country but many of them are transient businessmen or American soldiers.

In Manila, the Jewish Association of the Philippines serves as a communal organization for Jewish people. There are few Israelis working at call centers, the diplomatic corps, as well as business sectors.¹² Many of them are concentrated in Makati but some are in Subic and Angeles City in Pampanga, a province north of Manila, where there is also a Jewish club called “The Bagel Boys” (Jewish Times Asia 2006). To maintain contact with other Jewish people in the world, the Beth Yacouv synagogue in the Philippines, erected in the heart of Manila, serves as their meeting place where they hold weekly services, including a Sunday school in Hebrew and Torah (Scheib n.d.), Bar Mitzvah and Bar Mitzvah classes, weekly Tuesday lessons for women with a rabbanit (wife of a rabbi), and musical and other religious events (Jewish Association of the Philippines n.d.).

For their part, Turkish nationals in the Philippines do have sustained contacts with their families in Turkey. Iranian nationals who married Filipinas in the 1970s and 1980s keep in touch with their families in Iran

and/or the Philippines. Many of them have returned to Iran for quite some time after getting married and flew back to the Philippines when their children began their university education.

While there are only two existing Filipino groups in Iran, The Filipino–Irano Community Association and the Pinay-Irano Family Community, there are at least five Iranian organizations in the Philippines. Three are duly registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC): The Philippine-Iran Friendship group, which promotes trade links with Iran; the Philippine-Iran Cultural and Scientific Society, Inc. (PICSS), which fosters cultural, academic, and research collaboration between Filipino and Iranian scholars; and the Global Half Filipino-Iranian Association, Inc., which aims to address the immediate concerns of mixed Filipino-Iranian students and spearheads cultural and sports activities. The first organization is no longer active, whereas the remaining two were recently formed. In addition, two other informal groups such as the Filipino-Persian Friends and the UN Futsal were created. The former is a Facebook group of Iranian-Filipino friends and the latter was organized mainly by enthusiasts of sports like futsal and football.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Cultural Section offers an avenue where Iranian cultural and religious activities can be practiced or observed. It is also active in setting up exhibitions of Persian culture in various universities and public areas in Manila. Moreover, Iran operates Al-Mustafa International College in Makati City where Filipino and Iranian students may enroll.

In a questionnaire disseminated to West Asian nationals in Metro Manila regarding their ties to the Philippines and their countries of origin, four questions were asked: 1. Do you visit your embassy in Manila? 2. Do you still maintain contact/communication with your family in your country of origin? 3. Do you participate in Philippine festivals/activities in the community or university? 4. What particular activities in the Philippines do you prefer to join in your community/university?

There were a total of 55 respondents (32 Iranians,¹³ 15 Turkish nationals, and 7 Arabs,¹³ and one Israeli). For the first question, seven out

of 32 Iranians visit their embassy constantly while 24 said they seldom do so, one abstained from answering. Out of 15 Turkish respondents only one has constantly visited the embassy while nine rarely do, and five provided no answer. Only two out of seven Arab respondents were frequent visitors while five abstained from answering the question.

For the second question, 22 out of 32 Iranians and six out of seven Arabs said that they maintain contact with their families and relatives in their countries of origin through the internet, social media, and other information communication technologies. Ten Iranians and one Arab abstained from answering this question.

For Turkish nationals, only six out of 15 respondents maintain constant contact, eight rarely keep in touch with their relatives in Turkey, while one did not provide an answer.

In regard to the third question, only six out of 32 Iranian respondents participate in Philippine festivals; 17 seldom take part, and nine never do so. Six out of seven Arab respondents always join Filipino activities; the lone outlier refrained from providing answers.

In regard to the last question, 21 out of 32 Iranians and ten out of 15 Turkish respondents join sports festivals instead of academic, beauty and modeling contests, as well as environment and civic activities in the Philippines. Eleven of these Iranians did not join at all while five Turkish nationals abstained from answering.

The data indicate that Iranians are better integrated in Philippine society. This may be partly explained by the fact that many of them have already stayed longer in the Philippines and more likely to marry Filipinas than their Arab and Turkish counterparts. Another factor could be multicultural composition of Iranian society (such as Turks, Kurds, Persian, etc.), which helps explain why Iranians are more inclusive and welcoming than other peoples in West Asia. Iran's civilizational history demonstrated its cultural vibrancy and has allowed its people to easily adopt foreign values without giving up its own culture and identity.

Challenges West Asians Encounter in the Philippines

Many West Asian nationals residing in and visiting the country encounter problems arising from visa renewal, bureaucratic corruption at the Bureau of Immigration, corruption among police officers, “indiscriminate” collection of donation at universities, discrimination in public transportation, and overcharging in markets, just to name a few. They also have a problem adjusting to Filipino cuisine, Filipino language, and the Filipino way of life. They are also shocked by the way Filipino women dress; by Filipino women’s role in the family, society, and government, since most women in their countries engage in traditional roles like taking care of the children; by Filipino men who walk in the streets with their torsos exposed; Filipinos who spit and urinate in public walls and corners; and Filipinos who drink beer in the street and eat food such as *balut*.¹⁵

In the same survey, respondents were asked the following questions: 1. What is the most pressing problem you have encountered while in the Philippines? 2. Do you think it is safe in the Philippines? 3. How do authorities (police, airport officials) deal with foreigners? 4. Which agency (ies) in the Philippines do you consider the most corrupt? 5. Do you think government agencies are effective in processing your immigration documents?

Out of 55 respondents, 28 said that the most pressing problem they have encountered in the country pertains to finance. This is especially true of Iranian students who are affected by the economic sanctions on Iran. Eleven respondents cited the traffic jam as the second most serious problem while government bureaucracy ranks third. In regard to the second question on whether it is safe to live in the Philippines, 37 out of 55 respondents said that some areas are safe but other areas are not. Only nine said that it is very safe to live in the country, whereas eight of them said otherwise.

In regard to the third question, 25 out of 55 respondents said that authorities deal with foreigners well, while 20 percent commented that

such dealings are just satisfactory. Only a minority think that authorities mistreat foreigners.

Twenty-one out of 55 respondents cited immigration and airport officials, and the police as the most corrupt in Philippine society. The educational sector ranked third according to eleven respondents. Although almost all of them felt that university fees are much lower than those in their country, many of them perceive that “extortion” in the form of “indiscriminate donations” imposed on new foreign students by some universities is a form of corruption. The condition, however, is applicable only to foreign students, not to mixed-Filipinos who hold Philippine passports. The business sector ranks fourth as the most corrupt, according to two respondents.

On the question regarding the efficiency of processing visas and other immigration documents, 26 of the 55 respondents believed that the process moves rather slowly. Only 13 said that agencies are efficient. Under Philippine immigration law, citizens of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Oman, Qatar, and Israel can enter the Philippines without a visa, whereas nationals from Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, and Yemen need one (Bureau of Immigration 2010).

Restaurant food in Metro Manila is another problem for West Asian migrants. Muslims normally buy and eat halal¹⁶ food as part of their religious obligations. Although halal food is already produced in Philippine markets, Iranians, Arabs, and Turkish nationals still feel that it is not up to standard. As such, they often prepare their own food at home.

They also encounter discrimination in public transport. According to them, many Filipinos think that West Asians, particularly the Arabs and Iranians, smell like sheep. Thus, whenever they ride a jeepney or a bus, fellow passengers would pinch their noses. Middle Easterners are also overcharged by taxi drivers and streetmarket vendors; thus, many of them prefer to buy from malls and established groceries where prices are fixed and they cannot be cheated.

Perhaps the most pressing issues facing these migrant communities today is the issue of citizenship. Many of them who are married to Filipinas want to be Filipino citizens, and their children are unsure whether to adopt their fathers' or mothers' nationality. Under Islamic practice, a non-Muslim woman who marries a Muslim man can automatically become a Muslim. Muslim countries in the Gulf and Iran follow this custom. In Iranian law, Filipino women who marry Iranian men may automatically become a Muslim and an Iranian citizen. This is not the case under Philippine law, for which foreign husbands who live with their Filipina wives in the Philippines must apply for residency in the Philippines and/or regularly renew his residency visa. Naturalization after years of residency in the Philippines may be possible, but only few among West Asian nationals acquired this privilege.

Conclusion

The rapid advancement of technologies and human capacities has facilitated the migration of people to and from different parts of the world. Indeed, migration because of work, family and tourism has become part of our modern life, and has produced new sets of cultures, practices, loyalties, and identities.

The case of West Asian communities in the Philippines has provided a clear example of how migration has yielded not only new hybrid communities, cultures, and values but also a new set of sociocultural, political, and legal discourses. Although West Asian migration to the Philippines is not a new phenomenon, it has not been given a thorough examination either by the academe or public policymakers. At present, there is little understanding of the origins, values and religions, and cultures and traditions of West Asian migrants, however much Filipinos praise and admire their contributions in entertainment, sports, and the economy.

This preliminary research points to a rich and untouched body of knowledge that needs to be explored further in order to draw a wider

understanding of West Asian cultures, contributions, and aspirations, especially those practiced in the Philippines. This exploration may be of great use for the Philippine government, which can generate responsive vis-à-vis “undervalued” Asian communities in the country.

Notes

- ¹ Cesar Adib Majul explains that the “introduction of Islam in the Philippines” denotes various meanings. One may refer to the coming of Muslim traders, to the arrival of Muslim with Missionary aims or to the adventures of the Muslim leaders to establish ‘principalities’ in an already established population. A second may refer to the intermarriages of Muslim traders with local population, which eventually resulted in the formation of Muslim families.
- ² Interviews with Lebanese and Syrian Consul Generals (Lebanese Consul Joseph Assad and Syrian Consul General Mohammed Issam El-Debs, 2014).
- ³ Alsace-Lorraine was the name given to the 5,067 square miles (13,123 square kilometers) of territory that was ceded by France to Germany in 1871 after the Franco-German War.
- ⁴ The opening of Philippine diplomacy to West Asian countries can be attributed to the policy of the Marcos government in diversifying its foreign policy priorities not only with Asian neighboring countries and the United States but also with communist and Muslim states. This policy was also a response to the political realities in West Asia, especially the 1973 Arab oil embargo and the adoption of a temporary solution to ease unemployment problem at home by sending Filipino workers in West Asia and North Africa.
- ⁵ Iranian-Filipinos are mixed blood, whereas Arabs and Turks are mainly pure-blooded.
- ⁶ The Turkish Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines was founded in 2008 by a group of Filipino and Turkish businessmen in Manila that aimed to promote “closer relations, understanding and cooperation between and among Turkish” in the areas of trade and commercial relations. It is the “official representative of the Confederation of Businessmen and Industrialists of Turkey (TUSKON) here in the Philippines” (Turkish Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines n.d.)
- ⁷ Summary of Foreign Students enrolled in the second semester of Academic Year 2012–2013, University of the East, Manila Campus. Accessed on 8 February 2012. Take note that this CHED data does not include foreign students whose schools have not yet submitted or updated newly enrolled foreign students.
- ⁸ Iranians in the Philippines are predominantly male.
- ⁹ Students who are enrolled at MA programs in non-dentistry and non-medical courses.
- ¹⁰ Data obtained from University of the East Manila Campus, second semester, Academic Year 2012–2013.
- ¹¹ She was the first Filipino singer to become a recipient of the Salem Music Awards in London in March 1989.

- ¹² The author interviewed some Jewish nationals in the Philippines and withheld their names and other interview details upon their request for their own personal security.
- ¹³ The author interviewed some Iranian, Arab and Turkish students in the Philippines on several occasions, and withheld their names and other interview details upon their request for their own personal security.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Balut* is commonly sold as street food in the Philippines. It is a duck embryo that is cooked in boiling water. It is also common to see *balut* in other Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.
- ¹⁶ Halal foods are foods that are permitted for Muslims.

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