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Beyond Conflict Narratives: Rethinking Iran–Arab Relations Through Blue Humanities

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Iran-Arab Relations	6
a. Sources of Mistrust between Arabs and Iran	6
b. Iran-Arab Relations Beyond Politics	9
II. Blue Humanities	10
a. Context	10
b. Definitions	10
c. Blue Humanities Methodologies	11
How Blue Humanities Can Dispel Misconceptions about Iran	13
a. Cosmopolitan Port Cities vs. Historical Isolationism	13
b. Peace and Intellectual Exchange vs. Conflict and Instability	15
From Maritime Connectivity to Hydro-Politics: From Blue Cooperation to Blue Contestation	19
Conclusion	22
Bibliography	24

Introduction

Recent research reveals a dearth of academic studies on the relationship between the Arab world and Iran, with even less work devoted to their "shared" historical and cultural links, in contrast with far more abundant research on political conflicts.¹ This "missing knowledge" has led to a significant psychological and cultural divide between Arabs and Iranians.² It has also contributed to several misconceptions about Iran. For example, many Arabs, especially in Gulf countries,³ believe that Iran is a politically and culturally isolated country, that its relations with other countries have always been conflict-ridden, and that it cannot properly manage its environment. Public and policy discourses in parts of the Arab world have often represented Iran through a framework of rivalry, mistrust, and cultural-political distance, especially in relation to Gulf geopolitics and Arab–Persian historical tensions.⁴ This perception is also reflected in the institutional growth of Arab research platforms devoted specifically to Iranian affairs.⁵ While specialists in Iranian and Middle Eastern history recognise the complexity of pre-modern Arab-Iranian relations, this nuance rarely penetrates public discourse, media narratives, or school curricula in Arab countries, where the dominant image of Iran is overwhelmingly shaped by the post-1979 period and the political conflicts it has generated.

As a scholar of postcolonial studies and environmental humanities, I respond in this paper to this lack of scholarly information and the prevalence of misconceptions about Iran. I address the subject through the emergent field of Blue Humanities, an interdisciplinary approach that studies human relations with water across time from multiple perspectives – thus bringing such fields as history, geography, philosophy, literature, film, art, politics, economy, anthropology, marine biology, marine chemistry, and marine physics in dialogue with each other.

The originality of this paper lies in its use of a very recent approach to fill gaps and extend the scope of current research, which tends to marginalize water.⁶ I argue that the traditional land-based perspectives that dominate teaching and research (such as the nation-state) reinforce boundaries and misconceptions, and Blue Humanities, in contrast, has the potential to erase such boundaries and

1 Mahjoob Zweiri, *Arab-Iranian Relations Since the Arab Uprisings* (London: Routledge, 2024), 14; The Iranian Studies Unit at the Doha Institute for Research and Policy Studies in Qatar has been established "in response to the lack of specialized academic research on Iran in the region, which has led to widespread misconceptions, built on largely ideological or politicized and sometimes contradictory opinions". See Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "The Iranian Studies Unit", at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOHV>

2 Fred Halliday, "Arabs and Persians beyond the Geopolitics of the Gulf", *Arabes et Iraniens: Dialogues et perspectives* 22 (1996), accessed 27 July 2024, at: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cemoti.143>; See also ACRPS, "The Iranian Studies Unit".

3 Mehran Kamrava and Hamideh Dorzadeh, *Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019 / 2020* (Doha: ACRPS, 22 December 2020), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOPY>. The survey, conducted across eleven Arab countries, found that majorities viewed Iranian foreign policy as a source of threat and instability, while knowledge of Iran's pre-modern history was extremely limited among respondents.

4 ACRPS, *Arab Opinion Index 2024–25* (Doha: ACRPS, 2025); see also Fatemeh Salari and Munya Thayer, *Arab Public Opinion on Iran 2022–2024* (Doha: ACRPS, 6 July 2025), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSNTX>. Earlier analyses in the Arab Opinion Index series showing persistent views of Iran as a source of regional instability (e.g., 57–68% of respondents in various rounds perceiving Iranian policies as a threat to Arab security and stability). On environmental management challenges, see reports highlighting Iran's water scarcity, drought, and governance issues, widely discussed in regional analyses.

5 ACRPS, "The Iranian Studies Unit".

6 Steve Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (Routledge, 2024); Isabel Hofmeyr, Charne Lavery, and Sarah Nuttall, eds., *Reading for Water: Materiality and Method* (Routledge, 2024); and Serpil Oppermann, *The Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2023). With Steve Mentz, Serpil Oppermann, and Sandra Young, the author of this paper is co-editing *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Blue Humanities*, forthcoming January 2027.

dispel misconceptions. Land-centric approaches lead to misconceptions about Iran-Arab relations by oversimplifying complex regional dynamics and overlooking the significance of maritime economic connections, shared historical elements, and cultural and scientific accomplishments.

To focus solely on images of isolation and conflict informed by land-based perspectives fails to acknowledge a long history of collaboration, mutual benefit, and intellectual exchange that have characterized Iran's interactions on the global stage, and which continue to have a global impact (e.g. contributions to mathematics, medicine, and astronomy; Persian literature, philosophy, and art; architectural and engineering innovations inspiring contemporary designs). Thus, I highlight more connections than contentions by drawing attention to neglected histories of collaboration. Seen from the sea, Iran no longer looks isolated or destined only for conflict, but like a close neighbour in a shared Middle Eastern seascape that has long united Iran and the Arab world. Blue Humanities offers a novel, holistic perspective. Unlike land, water currents know no borders, flowing freely across the globe and serving as a perfect metaphor for cultural fluidity and exchange, enabling us to connect histories and geographies in ways that land-based thinking does not permit.

How does Blue Humanities dispel the above misconceptions? The interdisciplinary method I use in this paper draws from multiple perspectives in the humanities, social sciences, and marine sciences, with a focus on three case studies which challenge the above misconceptions. First, Blue Humanities challenges the notion that Iran is a politically and culturally isolated nation by highlighting the historical maritime trade routes which led to the creation of cosmopolitan port cities like Bandar Abbas, Muscat, Mocha, and Aden. These cities were vibrant centres of commerce and cultural exchange, involving Arabs, Indians, and Europeans, among others. Second, the approach counters the myth of Iran's perpetually conflict-ridden relations with other nations. Intricate trade networks and the presence of diverse merchant communities underscore Iran's long-standing economic and cultural interdependence with its neighbours, revealing historical collaboration and mutual benefit. Additionally, Iran's contributions to cultural exchange and translation, as well as the significant achievements of Iranian scientists in various fields, reveal its pivotal role in the intellectual and scientific advancements of the region. Lastly, Blue Humanities addresses the misconception that Iran cannot properly manage its environment. By situating Iran within a longer history of sophisticated hydraulic stewardship – from the ancient qanat irrigation systems that sustained desert agriculture across the Iranian plateau for over two millennia to the shared fisheries and pearl-diving economies of the Gulf – Blue Humanities reveals traditions of environmental knowledge and maritime resource management that contemporary crisis narratives about Iran's water scarcity systematically occlude. It further situates contemporary water challenges within a deeper hydro-cultural tradition of adaptive knowledge and maritime resource management.⁷ When viewed through shared Gulf waterscapes, including historic pearling and fishing economies that linked Iranian and Arab coastal communities, Iran appears not as an isolated ecological failure but as part of a historically resilient

⁷ Mark Manuel, Dale Lightfoot, and Morteza Fattahi, "The Sustainability of Ancient Water Control Techniques in Iran: An Overview", *Water History* 10 (2018): 13–30, at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12685-017-0200-7>; T.J. Wilkinson et al., "From Human Niche Construction to Imperial Power: Long-Term Trends in Ancient Iranian Water Systems", *Water History* 4 (2012): 155–76, at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12685-012-0056-9>

and interdependent maritime environment.⁸ This approach challenges simplistic crisis narratives by emphasising indigenous environmental expertise and the fluidity of water-based knowledge systems that transcend modern political boundaries.⁹

The Blue Humanities approach thus presents a fresh perspective on Iran as a historically interconnected, culturally diverse, scientifically accomplished, and environmentally adept country – challenging prevailing misconceptions about Iran and the Arab World.

Iran-Arab Relations

a. Sources of Mistrust between Arabs and Iran

Arab-Iran relations are complex. As Mahjoob Zweiri argues in his 2024 book *Arab-Iranian Relations Since the Arab Uprisings*, "Arab–Iranian relations have various layers to them: Ranging from the legacies of the past, historical memories, colonial rule, cultural rivalry, ethnic and sectarian differences, state-building and modernisation, international developments, the global political economy, and regional and international power politics".¹⁰ Zweiri adds that "the relationship is founded on rendering a shared history, which becomes a source of conflict and misunderstanding",¹¹ an issue I address by highlighting the ignored shared history of connections.

Mehran Kamrava and Hamideh Dorzadeh note that a majority of Arab citizens hold a negative view of Iran due to its foreign policy: "policies are universally seen by Arabs not just as negative but indeed as major threats and as sources of instability and insecurity".¹² Key points of contention include Iran's nuclear program, its policies toward Palestine, Syria, and Yemen, and its role in fostering regional sectarianism and ethnic separatist tendencies, all of which increase divisions and fuel tensions across the Arab world. In his book *Us and Iran (Naḥnu wa-Iran)*, the Saudi critic Abdullah Al-Ghadhami compares Iran's export of Shi'ism to the Arab world to Hitler's expansionism and argues that Iran has effectively colonized four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sanaa).¹³ Groups aligned with the so-called "Axis of Resistance", including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, several Iraqi Shi'ī militias, and Ansar Allah (Houthis) in Yemen,¹⁴ see Iran in positive terms as a key player and ally in resisting Israeli and American projects in the Arab world.

⁸ Nancy Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha: Trade and Architecture in an Indian Ocean Port* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); Beatrice Nicolini, "Oman's Maritime Activities: South Eastern Arabia and the Indian Ocean during the 18th and 19th Centuries", in *Oman: A Maritime History*, ed. Abdulrahman Al Salimi and Eric Staples, Studies on Ibadism and Oman 9 (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 2016), 141–61, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSNWY>

⁹ Nik Kowsar, "A Thirsty Reality: Iran's Dire Water Situation", *Atlantic Council*, 22 January 2024, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSO20>; Serpil Oppermann, *The Blue Humanities: Storied Seascapes in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

¹⁰ Zweiri, *Arab-Iranian Relations Since the Arab Uprisings*, 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² Kamrava and Dorzadeh, *Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019 / 2020*.

¹³ Abdullah Al-Ghadhami, *Naḥnu wa-Īrān: Al-Ḥāla al-Īrāniyya wa-l-As'ila allatī...* [Us and Iran: The Iranian Condition and the Questions that Arise], 1st ed. (Dubai: Dar Mudrik for Publishing, 2016).

¹⁴ Halliday, "Arabs and Persians beyond the Geopolitics of the Gulf". Halliday notes that Arab publics aligned with anti-imperial causes, particularly in Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen, have historically expressed solidarity with and admiration for Iran as a counterweight to US and Israeli power in the region.

Historically, the relationship between Iranians and Arabs has oscillated between moments of closeness and episodes of conflict, with the past five to six decades in particular marked by persistent tension and mistrust.¹⁵ This antagonism matters because, as Kourosh Ahmadi argues, Iranian–Arab relations significantly shape regional peace and security.¹⁶ Although this rivalry is often presented in public discourse as the main driver of regional conflicts, it is frequently reduced to a simplistic story of sectarian identity politics.¹⁷ In reality, Arab mistrust of Iran is rooted in a complex interplay of sectarian, ideological, and geopolitical divisions that cannot be reduced to religion alone but reflect overlapping struggles over power, legitimacy, and regional order.¹⁸

The sectarian divide is a key element in this dynamic, not as an automatic expression of ancient animosities but as a flexible tool that political actors mobilize in order to fuel tension and consolidate power.¹⁹ While Sunni and Shi'i Muslims have coexisted peacefully for long periods, their separation originally emerged as a political dispute over succession after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, rather than a doctrinal disagreement.²⁰ Over time, however, this rift has been reinterpreted so that Shi'ism is frequently associated with political contestation and challenges to established authority.²¹ Arab elites in the Gulf region, particularly Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, often view contemporary Iran through this lens of suspicion, drawing on historical rivalries such as the struggle for hegemony between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shi'i Safavid Empire.²² In many Sunni-led states, Shi'i communities are therefore seen less as ordinary citizens and more as potential conduits of Iranian influence, particularly in the context of Iran's perceived regional rise.²³ In this environment, sectarianism operates as a malleable political instrument: regime elites deploy it to justify foreign interventions, to police dissent at home, and to normalize a pervasive "othering" of opponents in media and official discourse.²⁴

15 Ali Adib, "Arab-Iranian Relations: A Past That Hampers the Future", *Raseef22*, 25 August 2016; Kourosh Ahmadi, "The Myth of Iranian–Arab Enmity: A Deconstructive Approach", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 2, no. 2 (November 2011): 79–103, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOa3>

16 Ahmadi, "The Myth of Iranian–Arab Enmity", 79–103.

17 Yıldırım Turan and Lan Nguyen Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics within the Middle East: The Case of Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia", *Akademik İncelemeler Dergisi* 14, no. 2 (2019): 77–120, at: <https://doi.org/10.17550/akademikincelemeler.494934>

18 Mari Luomi, *Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics? The Regional Shia-Sunni Divide in the Middle East*, Working Paper 56, Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), 2008; Datu Moden C. Talandig and Datu Al-Zahid Hanok Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry: The Iran–Saudi Conflict and the Crisis of Intra-Muslim Cooperation", *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research* 13, no. 3 (2025): 232–48, at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16920632>

19 A. Abdulmajid, "Islam and Sectarianism: The Major Split and Its Manifestations", *Journal of Humanities Insights (JH)* 6, no. 2 (2022): 11–23; Saleem F. Aljeberi, "The Conflict and Competition among Regional Powers and its Effect on the Region's Stability", *Rechtsidee* 12, no. 2 (June 2024), at: <https://doi.org/10.21070/jihr.v12i1.1023>

20 Luomi, *Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics?*; Turan and Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics", 77–120.

21 Luomi, *Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics?*

22 Guido Steinberg and Nils Wörmer, "Exploring Iran and Saudi Arabia's Interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers—A Zero Sum Game?", *SWP Comments* 15 (2013): 3; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 155–57; Adib, "Arab-Iranian Relations: A Past that Hampers the Future"; Turan and Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics", 77–120.

23 Luomi, *Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics?*

24 Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "Heightened Sectarianism in the Middle East: Causes, Dynamics and Consequences", *ISPI Analysis* No. 205 (November 2013), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSN0V>; Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48; Richard D. Parker, "Five Theses on Identity Politics", *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 29, no. 1 (2005): 53–9.

Political and ideological fault lines significantly amplify mistrust.²⁵ The 1979 Islamic Revolution fundamentally altered the regional status quo,²⁶ shifting Iran to a theocratic republic under the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) and positioning the state as the vanguard of the Shi'i world with a mission to export its revolution.²⁷ This revolutionary agenda was directly antagonistic toward the established Gulf monarchies, whom Ayatollah Khomeini famously denounced as "illegitimate".²⁸ Saudi Arabia, in contrast, bases its legitimacy on a conservative monarchy fused with Wahhabi clerical authority, casting itself as the protector of Sunni Islam and the custodian of holy sites.²⁹ The ensuing ideological confrontation was framed by Khomeini as a clash between his "Mohameddan Islam" and "American Islam", thereby challenging the political and religious legitimacy of Arab states allied with the West.³⁰ Consequently, Saudi Arabia and other Arab states view Iran's ideology as an existential threat to their internal governance and stability.³¹ The geopolitical rivalry for regional hegemony forms the third, often dominant, source of mistrust.³²

The weakening of key Arab states, most notably Iraq after the 2003 US invasion and Syria amid its civil war, fundamentally shifted the regional power balance and created a vacuum that Iran was quick to exploit.³³ Riyadh's strategic foreign policy is driven by the fear that Iran will fill any void created by US disengagement, leading to Iranian regional dominance.³⁴ Several Gulf Arab states and their allies, led by Saudi Arabia, have responded by prioritizing continued US military and political dominance and engaging in alliances, sometimes overtly, with Israel, to counter Iranian influence.³⁵ A key source of anxiety is the perceived emergence of a "Shia Crescent" – an Iranian sphere of influence stretching across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean.³⁶ In this zero-sum contest, Iran uses proxy warfare as a cost-effective strategy to project power and directly challenge Saudi-aligned interests.³⁷ Saudi Arabia, in turn, engages in proxy conflicts, such as supporting Sunni rebels in Syria

25 Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48.

26 Kenzy Dessouki, "Sectarianism and Geopolitics: The Saudi-Iran Rivalry in Proxy Conflicts", *IE International Policy Review (IPR)* 6, no. 1 (2025); Turan and Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics", 77–120.

27 Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48; Mehran Kamrava, *How Islam Rules in Iran: Theology and Theocracy in the Islamic Republic* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

28 Meltem F. Demircan, *Factionalism Over Foreign Policy in Post-Khomeini Iran: A Case Study on the Clash Between the Forces of Continuity and Change Over the Gulf Crisis of 1990–1991* (MA thesis, Middle East Technical University, 1997); Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48.

29 Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48; Abdullah F. Alrebh, "A Wahhabi Ethic in Saudi Arabia: Power, Authority, and Religion in a Muslim Society", *Sociology of Islam* 5, no. 4 (2017): 278–302, at: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22131418-00504001>

30 Adib, "Arab-Iranian Relations: A Past That Hampers the Future".

31 Dessouki, "Sectarianism and Geopolitics".

32 F. Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper, no. 11 (Doha: Brookings Doha Center, July 2014); Victoria Chen, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: Sectarianism, a Quest for Regional Hegemony, and International Alignments", *Renée Crown University Honors Thesis Projects - All*, no. 1000 (2017), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSNYE>

33 Luomi, *Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics?*; Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism*.

34 Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "The Widening Saudi–Iran Divide", *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, no. 28 (Winter 2018), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOmN>

35 Ibid.

36 Dessouki, "Sectarianism and Geopolitics"; Yehuda U. Blanga, "Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War", *Middle Eastern Studies* 53, no. 4 (2017): 572–86.

37 Ronen A. Cohen, Gadi P. Shamci, "The 'Proxy Wars' Strategy in Iranian Regional Foreign Policy", *Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 13, no. 4 (2022): 385–405, at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2022.2061789>; Mikael Hibernag Naghizadeh, "Rivalry Through Proxies: How Iran and Saudi Arabia Compete

and intervening in Yemen, specifically to curtail Iran's ideological and geopolitical reach.³⁸ This intense competition, driven by both military manoeuvring and competition for oil control, is accurately framed as a "Cold War" dynamic that locks the states into protracted cycles of confrontation.³⁹

Thus, Arab mistrust of Iran is a multifaceted reality structured by modern political imperatives.⁴⁰ The historical Sunni-Shi'i divide provides a mobilizing narrative, which is then weaponized by political elites to secure their power and delegitimize rivals.⁴¹ The ideological incompatibility between Iran's revolutionary theocracy and the conservative Gulf monarchies creates an existential political threat.⁴² Finally, intense geopolitical and economic competition for regional hegemony manifests in proxy conflicts across the Middle East, confirming the perceived security threat Iran poses to the Arab state system.⁴³ The synergy between these sectarian, political, and geopolitical wellsprings ensures that deep mistrust remains the dominant feature of Arab-Iranian relations.⁴⁴

b. Iran-Arab Relations Beyond Politics

One should differentiate between Iran the government and Iran the people. Mutual perceptions among ordinary citizens in Iran and the Arab world are much brighter than the one projected in the media and politics. A very recent and interesting attempt on the part of Arab writers to understand Iranian cultural identity is the 2024 Arabic travelogue, *An Arab Woman in Iran: The Iranians as We Have Never Known Them* ('Arabiyya fī Iran: Al-Iraniyyun Kama Lam Na'rifhum) by Syrian-French writer and translator Nada Al-Azhari,⁴⁵ which seeks to understand Iranian people through Arab eyes. Al-Azhari posits that despite the array of writings about Iran, the everyday lives of ordinary Iranians often go unnoticed. She found that her identity as a French woman, due to her husband's diplomatic position, allowed her access to conversations with Iranians that might have been closed off to her had she been known as an Arab.

Similarly, the image of Arabs in Iranian media, school textbooks, and university references needs further research, perhaps requiring collaboration between Arab and Iranian scholars to overcome the language gap.

for Regional Influence", *St Antony's International Review* 14, no. 2 (February 2019): 137–53, at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27027741>; Dessouki, "Sectarianism and Geopolitics".

38 Turan and Hoang, "Beyond Sectarian Identity Politics", 77–120; Dessouki, "Sectarianism and Geopolitics".

39 Dilip Hiro, *Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism*; Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48.

40 Ahmadi, "The Myth of Iranian-Arab Enmity", 79–103.

41 Luomi, *Sectarian Identities or Geopolitics?*; Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48.

42 Talandig and Salik, "Constructed Sectarianism and Strategic Rivalry", 232–48.

43 Mousavian, "The Widening Saudi–Iran Divide"; Naghizadeh, "Rivalry through Proxies", 137–53.

44 Dessouki, "Sectarianism and Geopolitics".

45 Neda Al-Azhari, *'Arabiyya fī Irān: al-Īrāniyyūn Kamā Lam Na'rifhum* [An Arab Woman in Iran: The Iranians as We Have Never Known Them] (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 2024).

II. Blue Humanities

a. Context

The relevance of water is laid bare by the current climate crisis, manifest in sea level rise, global warming, and ocean acidification, which demands recognition of the ocean as a key force both shaping and shaped by this crisis. The separation between disciplines in today's academy also requires new interdisciplinary ways of thinking about the ocean and all other forms of water, including the water in our bodies. Ian Buchanan and Celina Jeffey argue that although the ocean covers 70% of the planet and provides more than half of the oxygen vital to all life on earth, "it figures comparatively little in global cultural production".⁴⁶ Similarly, maritime historian John Gillis argues that there is "a blue hole in the humanities", referring to the marginalization of water in the humanities.⁴⁷

Blue Humanities emerged in the early 21st century as a response to this gap, as well to as the separation of knowledge systems.⁴⁸ It drew on earlier Anglophone literary and historical studies that emphasized the significance of the ocean and other bodies of water in shaping human experiences.⁴⁹ The term "Blue Humanities" was coined by Steve Mentz, an American literary and Shakespearean scholar at St. John's University.⁵⁰ By the early 2020s, Blue Humanities had established itself as a vibrant and rapidly expanding field, and recently Bloomsbury has announced a special book series titled *Blue Humanities*.

b. Definitions

According to Gillis, Blue Humanities is a "shift in attention from land to sea [...] in several fields simultaneously" in which "the historicization of the ocean is one of the most striking trends".⁵¹ Mentz also called for re-thinking the sea in his essay "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies" (2009).⁵² He theorized the field later in his books *Ocean* (2020) and *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (2024).⁵³ Mentz defines Blue Humanities as a "cultural turn to the sea".⁵⁴ In an encyclopaedic entry for a *Critical Posthumanism*

⁴⁶ Ian Buchanan and Celina Jeffey, "Towards a Blue Humanity", *Symploke* 27, no. 1 (2019): 11–4.

⁴⁷ John R. Gillis, "Filling the Blue Hole in Environmental History", *RCC Perspectives* 3 (2011): 16–8, at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26240275>

⁴⁸ Mohammed Muharram, "Making the Invisible Visible: How the Blue Humanities Translate Climate Change to the Public", *Public Humanities* 1 (2025): 1, at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.10046>

⁴⁹ Steve Mentz, "Towards a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature", *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009): 997–1013.

⁵⁰ Mentz used the terms "blue cultural studies" and "maritime humanities" in 2009 in his article, "Towards a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature", 997.

⁵¹ John R. Gillis, "The Blue Humanities", *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities* 34, no. 3 (May/June 2013): 1, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOi6>

⁵² Mentz, "Towards a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature", 997.

⁵³ Mentz, *Ocean* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*.

⁵⁴ Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, 6.

handbook, he offers another definition: the Blue Humanities is an "offshore trajectory that places human history in an oceanic rather than terrestrial context".⁵⁵ I adopt a broader definition of the blue humanities as a discourse that examines humans' mutual relationship with *all forms* of water across *all times* (the past, present, and future) from *multiple* interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives in the humanities, social sciences, and marine sciences. As Serpil Oppermann asserts in her recent book *Blue Humanities*, the field draws on "oceanography (marine sciences) and limnology (freshwater sciences), social sciences, and the environmental humanities" to "critically examine the planet's troubled seas and distressed freshwaters from various sociocultural, literary, historical, aesthetic, ethical, and theoretical perspectives".⁵⁶

This fluidity and interdisciplinarity have given rise to many hybrid discourses such as Blue Cultural Studies, Blue Media, Blue Legalities, Blue Ecocriticism, and Blue Anthropocene.⁵⁷ The forthcoming book *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Blue Humanities*, co-edited by Steve Mentz, Serpil Oppermann, Sandra Young, and myself, experiments with more hybrid discourses such as Blue History, Blue Postcolonialism, Blue Philosophy, Blue Religion, Blue Anthropology, Blue Linguistics, and Blue Law.⁵⁸ In general, Blue Humanities highlights the ocean's mortality and need for protection.⁵⁹

c. Blue Humanities Methodologies

This field utilizes its own theories and methods like "wet ontology" and "immersive/submersive methodologies". The former refers to a conceptual framework that emphasizes fluidity, change, and the interconnectedness of entities and processes, particularly through the lens of the ocean, in understanding the world.⁶⁰ This approach challenges traditional, static, and fixed notions of geography, place, and time, offering a more dynamic and material perspective that incorporates volume, materiality, and continuous reformation. In contrast to traditional land-based thinking approaches that require a vertical or horizontal approach, Blue Humanities uses a circular reading that transcends almost all boundaries by using water as a unit of analysis.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Mentz, "Blue Humanities", in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism*, ed. Stefan Herbrechter (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 949–68.

⁵⁶ Serpil Oppermann, *The Blue Humanities*, iii.

⁵⁷ Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Irus Braverman and Elizabeth R. Johnson, eds., *Blue Legalities: The Life and Laws of the Sea* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Sidney I. Dobrin, *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative*, 1st ed., Routledge Environmental Humanities (London: Routledge, 2021); Meg Samuelson, "The Blue Anthropocene and the Oceanic South: Reading Containerisation and Inundation Diffractively", in *Water Lore: Practice, Place and Poetics*, ed. Camille Roulière and Claudia Egerer, Routledge Environmental Humanities (Abingdon Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2022), 39–46.

⁵⁸ Mentz, Steve, Mohammed Muharram, Serpil Oppermann, and Sandra Young, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook to the Blue Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming January 2027).

⁵⁹ Helen M. Rozwadowski, "Ocean Literacy and Public Humanities", *Parks Stewardship Forum* 36, no. 3 (2020): 369, at: <https://doi.org/10.5070/P536349841>; Oceanic Global, "Dr. Sylvia Earle 'No Blue, No Green' Keynote at COP 27", YouTube, 17 January 2023, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOq9>

⁶⁰ Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (2015): 247–64, at: <https://doi.org/10.1068/d14148p>

⁶¹ Dilip M. Menon, Nishat Zaidi, Simi Malhotra, and Saarah Jappie, eds., *Ocean as Method: Thinking with the Maritime* (Milton: Routledge India, 2022).

Like water drops, waves, and currents, which move freely all over the planet as well as through our own bodies, this approach enables us to connect histories and geographies that cannot be grouped together with land-based thinking. For example, Africa and India in Pallavi Rastogi's *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race and National Desire in South Africa* (2008) or the Middle East, Africa, and China in Seshan and Shimada's recent book *Connecting the Indian Ocean World Across Sea and Land* (2023).⁶² In her essay "Universalizing the Indian Ocean", Isabel Hofmeyr illustrates the Indian Ocean as a global connector.⁶³ Charne Lavery, too, discusses the works of four postcolonial authors from different time periods and locations in the nineteenth, twentieth, and 21st centuries in her book *Writing Ocean Worlds: Indian Ocean Fiction in English* (2021).⁶⁴ Blue Humanities is a call for universal co-dwelling and the re-thinking of "politics" in a new positive way that acknowledges we have only one ocean shared by all. As Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis argue: We all have water in common. If we think of politics as the practice of speaking and acting together on matters of common concern, then water may be the most exemplary of political substances; it is an intimately and continuously shared "matter". This political commons includes not only those of us living here now, but also all life that is past, and all life that is still to come.⁶⁵

This way of thinking may extend to the concept of "troubled waters", which is viewed differently by scholars of politics and the environment. In his *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf*, Kamrava examines bodies of water as sites of conflict through the complex security dynamics in the Gulf. Oppermann's concept of "troubled waters" in *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* addresses the ecological, socio-cultural, and ethical crises affecting water systems. Both scholars underscore the need for comprehensive strategies that go beyond traditional approaches, whether in terms of security policies or environmental narratives.⁶⁶

Bodies of water are also granted human legal rights, agency, and personhood: rivers, waves, currents, and the Arctic are now recognized to have their own agency and legal rights akin to human beings.⁶⁷ within a broader ecological context, in which non-human entities, or the more-than-human, like bodies of water and marine animals, are seen as significant co-inhabitants, co-participants, and even co-authors. Thus, Blue Humanities is a project that, to use the words of the Indigenous Blue Humanist, poet, and critic Craig Santos Perez, "flows across disciplines; dives into submarine depths and submersions; swims into multispecies entanglements; intersects with feminist, indigenous,

62 Pallavi Rastogi, *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2008); Radhika Seshan and Ryoto Shimada, eds., *Connecting the Indian Ocean World: Across Sea and Land* (London: Routledge, 2023).

63 Isabel Hofmeyr, "Universalizing the Indian Ocean", *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 722.

64 Charne Lavery, *Writing Ocean Worlds: Indian Ocean Fiction in English*. New comparisons in world literature (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 163.

65 Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, eds., *Thinking with Water* (Montréal & Kingston, Ithaca NY: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 6.

66 Mehran Kamrava, *Troubled Waters: Insecurity in the Persian Gulf* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Serpil Oppermann, *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

67 Chloe Berge, "This Canadian River is Now Legally a Person. It's Not the Only One", *National Geographic*, 15 April 2022, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOyc>

and diasporic epistemologies; recognizes the agency of a warming, rising ocean; and transforms our critical inquiries and reading practices".⁶⁸

How Blue Humanities Can Dispel Misconceptions about Iran

a. Cosmopolitan Port Cities vs. Historical Isolationism

Iran is often represented in Arab geopolitical discourse as politically and culturally distant from the Arab world, a perception shaped by the Iran–Iraq War, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and broader Arab-Persian tensions.⁶⁹ Yet a Blue Humanities approach complicates this image by foregrounding Iran's maritime histories, port cities, and long-standing connections across the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the wider Arab world. Additionally, Iran's unique political system, which combines theocratic and democratic elements, and its distinct cultural and religious practices as a predominantly Shi'i Muslim country, often contrast with the largely Sunni Arab world. Media portrayals and political rhetoric in some Arab countries further reinforce this image, emphasizing Iran's perceived divergence from regional norms and its contentious foreign policies.

Blue Humanities highlights Iran's historical cosmopolitanism and economic interdependence through two elements: maritime trade routes and seaport cities. Active since ancient times through the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea, East Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, maritime trade routes between the Arabs and Iran flourished particularly during the Sassanian Empire, the Islamic Golden Age, and the medieval period, facilitating significant economic and cultural exchange. The circle of goods, ideas, and technologies via the Strait of Hormuz and Bab Al-Mandeb Strait – the latter serving as the Red Sea's southern gateway to the Indian Ocean and a key maritime link connecting Gulf routes from Iranian ports to Yemen, East Africa, and the wider Red Sea world⁷⁰ – challenges the misconception of historical isolationism. Both straits are crucial maritime chokepoints that significantly impact global trade and cultural exchange. The Strait of Hormuz, for instance, connects the Gulf with the Gulf of Oman; with about 20% of the world's petroleum passing through, the strait is essential for global oil supplies and heavily influences Iran's economy.⁷¹

Mordechai Chaziza describes the Strait of Hormuz as "the vital maritime artery between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean".⁷² Iran has thus played a pivotal

⁶⁸ Craig Santos Perez, "'The Ocean in Us': Navigating the Blue Humanities and Diasporic Chamoru Poetry", *Humanities* 9, no. 3 (July 2020): 2, at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030066>

⁶⁹ Kamrava and Dorzadeh, *Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019/2020*; Halliday, "Arabs and Persians Beyond the Geopolitics of the Gulf". See ACRPS, *Arab Opinion Index 2024–25*. For elite and media discourse, see also Zweiri, *Arab-Iranian Relations Since the Arab Uprisings* (London: Routledge, 2024); and Al-Ghadhami, *Nahnu wa-Iran*.

⁷⁰ "Bab el-Mandeb Strait", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed 14 May 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOGf>

⁷¹ Ahmed Khan, "Maritime Trade Routes: The Strait of Hormuz", *Journal of Global Trade* 45, no. 2 (2020): 12; see also Candace Dunn and Justine Barden, "The Strait of Hormuz is the World's most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint", *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, 21 November 2023, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOOi>

⁷² Mordechai Chaziza, "The Significant Role of Oman in China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 6, no. 1 (March 2019): 44–57, at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798918812285>

role in global trade, particularly through its strategic location along the Silk Road, an ancient network of trade routes established around 130 BCE during the Han Dynasty until the 1450s, connecting China and the Far East with Europe and the Middle East, including the regions around the Gulf. Similarly, the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and is vital for the Suez Canal shipping route, through which approximately 10 percent of global trade flows, affecting Yemen's strategic significance despite its ongoing conflict.⁷³ Both straits are historical conduits for cultural exchange and are geopolitically sensitive, with threats to their security posing global economic risks.⁷⁴

Such maritime routes created cosmopolitan cities, which often exhibit multilingualism, diverse culinary traditions, and a mix of religious practices. Seaport cities along the Arabian Sea and the Gulf like Bandar Abbas, Muscat, Mocha, and Aden were vibrant centres of commerce and cultural exchange, involving diverse groups including Arabs, Indians, and Europeans. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, these cities were melting pots of cultural diversity and exchange.⁷⁵ As Yogesh Sharma notes, "the maritime and trading ethos was so important" in shaping these port cities into major hubs of international trade and cultural exchange.⁷⁶ For Rene Jan Barendse, these cities facilitated the exchange of goods between different regions, acting as entrepôts for commodities like spices, textiles, coffee, and horses.⁷⁷ This underscores Iran's economic and cultural interdependence with its neighbours. The multicultural and multilingual dynamics of these port cities, along with their diverse architectural influences, illustrate Iran's historical acceptance and integration of various cultures and languages. Let us look closely at each one of them.

Located on the southern coast of Iran on the Strait of Hormuz, Bandar Abbas emerged as a significant port city in the Safavid era, particularly after 1615 when Shah Abbas I seized it from the Portuguese. The port became a key link connecting Iran to India and the Arabian Peninsula. In the seventeenth century, Persian Gulf trade connected Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, dictated by commercial regions rather than political boundaries.⁷⁸ By 1640, precious metals were traded from Mocha to Bandar Abbas, and by the mid-1670s gold imports from Judda, Mocha, Persia, and Bussora had caused a significant drop in its value in the Indian subcontinent.⁷⁹

The Omani seaport of Muscat has long been a key port in the Arabian Peninsula, known for its robust trade networks. Indian merchants played crucial roles in Muscat's economic life, with historical records indicating the significant influence of Banians (Indian merchants, primarily from Gujarat)

⁷³ Benjamin Smith, "The Importance of the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait in Global Trade", *International Maritime Review* 36, no. 4 (2021): 15.

⁷⁴ Charles Jones, "Geopolitical Significance of Maritime Chokepoints", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2019): 18.

⁷⁵ Theresa Howard Carter uses the name "The Arab-Iranian Gulf" for the Persian Gulf. See Carter, "The Johns Hopkins University Reconnaissance Expedition to the Arab-Iranian Gulf", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 207 (1972): 23.

⁷⁶ Yogesh Sharma, *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Pre-modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107.

⁷⁷ Rene Jan Barendse, "Portugal in the Orient: Traders and Port-Cities in the Western Indian Ocean in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Review of Culture (Revista de Cultura)*, no. 13–14 (January–June 1991), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSNSH>

⁷⁸ Rudiger Klein, *Trade in the Safavid Port City Bandar Abbas and the Persian Gulf Area (ca. 1600–1680): A Study of Selected Aspects* (PhD diss., University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994), x, 140, 147.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

as prominent moneylenders and bankers. This multicultural environment is reflected in the city's architecture, cuisine, and social practices.⁸⁰ Similarly, the Yemeni seaport of Mocha was known as a cosmopolitan hub for its association with the coffee trade that attracted traders from the Ottoman Empire, Europe, and beyond.⁸¹ Although its significance in the coffee trade was challenged by the entry of other maritime players, particularly from Surat, Muscat, and Mandvi, the city's strategic location on the Red Sea facilitated significant commercial exchanges, including trades with Iranian seaports.⁸²

Aden, too, positioned near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, has long been a critical maritime hub connecting Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.⁸³ The city's location made it a focal point for British colonial interests, leading to its development as a major port. Aden's population reflects a mix of Arab, Indian, and African influences, with the city's diverse cultural landscape evident in its language, cuisine, and social structures. The network of maritime routes that connected these cities created the basis for our interconnected global society today, where traces of these old pathways still affect our daily lives in ways we might not immediately recognize. As Eric Tagliacozzo rightly observes, when we drink coffee in the morning, it is in part because of Yemen and the old sea routes of Asia; and when a call center in Mumbai approves a credit card transaction, that too is a legacy of those same maritime networks.⁸⁴ These routes, Tagliacozzo argues, linked local places to larger global realities, shaping significant aspects of our modern world.

In addition, the built environment of port cities often reflects diverse cultural influences, with buildings incorporating design elements from various architectural traditions. This highlights the hybrid nature of port city cultures. Sandy Prita Meier describes the Kenyan city of Lamu's architecture as a blend of styles from Africans, Arabs, Europeans, and South Asians. She notes that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century verandas and arches reflect rapid cultural interchanges, making Swahili cities both modern and memorials of global connectivity, familiar and exotic to all.⁸⁵

b. Peace and Intellectual Exchange vs. Conflict and Instability

While Iran has clearly experienced periods of tension and conflict, particularly with Western powers and some neighbouring Arab states, the narrative of continuous conflict ignores the extensive history of peaceful trade and cultural exchange Iran has had with various countries. Maritime trade

⁸⁰ Joseph B. F. Osgood, *Notes of Travel; or, Recollections of Majunga, Zanzibar, Muscat, Aden, Mocha, and Other Eastern Ports* (Boston: 1854).

⁸¹ Um, *The Merchant Houses of Mocha*. See also Um, *Shipped but Not Sold: Material Culture and the Social Order of Trade during Yemen's Age of Coffee* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).

⁸² Chhaya Goswami, "Coffee Mocha: From the Highlands of Yemen to Surat, Muscat, and Mandvi", in *Transregional Trade and Traders: Situating Gujarat in the Indian Ocean from Early Times to 1900*, ed. Edward A. Alpers and Chhaya Goswami (Delhi: Oxford Academic, 2019), 239–68, at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199490684.003.0010>

⁸³ Eleni Margariti, *Aden and the Indian Ocean Trade: 150 Years in the Life of a Medieval Arabian Port* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

⁸⁴ Eric Tagliacozzo, *In Asian Waters: Oceanic Worlds from Yemen to Yokohama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 3–4.

⁸⁵ Sandy Prita Meier, "Introduction: Place In-Between", in *Swahili Port Cities: The Architecture of Elsewhere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 1–3.

also facilitated the exchange of scientific knowledge, technological innovations, and artistic styles between Iran and the Arab world.

This exchange includes advancements in navigation, shipbuilding, astronomy, and other fields. The development of the dhow, a traditional Arab sailing vessel, for instance, exemplifies advancements in shipbuilding.⁸⁶ In Iran, dhows are known as *lenj*. They have been used for centuries for fishing, trading, and transporting goods across the Persian Gulf and beyond since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Scholars like Daniel Bradburd and Theresa Howard Carter have highlighted the significance of the *lenj* in Iranian maritime activities, documenting the utility of these vessels in the socio-economic fabric of coastal Iran. Crucially, the *lenj* was not an exclusively Iranian vessel: Arab sailors from Oman, Bahrain, and the Trucial Coast crewed and owned *lenjes* alongside their Iranian counterparts, making these craft a genuinely shared Arab-Iranian technology.⁸⁷ The same hull carried Omani dates, Iranian dried limes, and South Asian spices across the same routes, embodying in wood and sail the commercial interdependence that land-based political narratives consistently erase. UNESCO's 2011 inscription of the "Traditional Skills of Building and Sailing Iranian *Lenj* Boats in the Persian Gulf" on its list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity also recognised the shared Gulf-wide character of this tradition.⁸⁸ The *lenj* connected Arabs and Iranians because it functioned as a principal vehicle of mobility, trade, and kinship across the Gulf. Rather than separating Arabia from Iran, the Gulf historically served as a maritime corridor, and the *lenj* enabled the continuous movement of merchants, sailors, and pearl divers between its two shores. The Arab-Iranian character of the *lenj* went beyond shared design: the same shipyards, sailing routes, and often crews spanned both coasts. Boats built in Iranian ports such as Bandar-e Lengeh, Kong, and Laft were sailed, and sometimes owned, by *nakhoda* and merchants from Sharjah, Dubai, and other Trucial Coast towns, while Arab-crewed vessels regularly called at Iranian ports to trade, refit, or take on local pilots. Bandar-e Lengeh in particular became a major nineteenth-century entrepôt, its prosperity built on Qawasim and other Huwala merchant communities who maintained residences, warehouses, and business partners on both coasts, allowing goods, capital, and people to circulate with remarkable ease.⁸⁹ The *lenj* itself was a product of this shared world: a single vessel might be built in southern Iran, financed by an Arab merchant, and commanded by a *nakhoda* from Dubai or Sharjah. Through these voyages, the boat carried not only goods but also languages, customs, and social relationships, creating a shared Gulf maritime culture.⁹⁰ Similar vessels and shipbuilding traditions have long

⁸⁶ Poonam Bala, "Dhow Cultures of the Indian Ocean: Cosmopolitanism, Commerce and Islam", *African Historical Review* 44, no. 1 (2012): 138–42, at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17532523.2012.714172>

⁸⁷ UNESCO, "Traditional Skills of Building and Sailing Iranian *Lenj* Boats in the Persian Gulf", *UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists*, 2011, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSO0k>

⁸⁸ Daniel Bradburd, "Territoriality and Persian Pastoralists: Looking Out from Kerman", in *Mobility and Territoriality: Social and Spatial Boundaries among Foragers, Fishers, Pastoralists and Peripatetics*, ed. Michael Casimir and Aparna Rao (New York: Berg, 1992), 165–89; Carter, "The Johns Hopkins University Reconnaissance Expedition to the Arab-Iranian Gulf", 23–34.

⁸⁹ Willem M. Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Rise and Fall of Bandar-e Lengeh, the Distribution Center for the Arabian Coast, 1750–1930* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2010); Willem M. Floor, *The Persian Gulf: The Hula Arabs of the Shibkuh Coast of Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2014).

⁹⁰ Dionisius A. Agius, *Seafaring in the Arabian Gulf and Oman: People of the Dhow* (London: Routledge, 2005).

been shared among coastal communities in Iran, Oman, Bahrain, and the present-day United Arab Emirates, underscoring the transnational character of Gulf maritime culture.⁹¹

In addition, maritime trade routes facilitated the exchange of Chinese ceramics in Islamic and Middle Eastern markets. Schottenhammer notes that Tang kilns at Changsha produced ceramics for export to Muslim markets, and that the ninth-century Belitung shipwreck, described as an Arab-Indian or Arab-Iranian dhow, carried around sixty thousand ceramic shards, including porcelain, celadon, and Changsha stoneware with both Buddhist and Islamic motifs.⁹² The shipwreck's cargo and provenance reveal the intersection of multiple cultural and religious traditions – Chinese, Arab, Iranian, Indian, and Indonesian among them.⁹³

Furthermore, the interaction between Arab and Persian cultures resulted in a fusion of artistic styles, particularly in pottery and textiles. Persian carpets, known for their intricate designs, began incorporating motifs from Arab art, leading to unique hybrid styles that were highly sought after in trade. Dorothy Armstrong examined the term "oriental rug" to investigate questions of the Other, the Subaltern, and the colonized.⁹⁴ Ladan Abouali, Jianlin Ni, and Jake Kaner highlight how Persian rug motifs were profoundly influenced by Chinese design elements and Islamic art.⁹⁵

Additionally, maritime trade routes served as conduits for the transfer of scientific texts in astronomy, medicine, mathematics, history, etc. These sciences were translated into Arabic from Persian and Greek, enriching the intellectual landscape of the Islamic Golden Age.⁹⁶ Notable Iranian figures include Al-Tusi (1201–1274), Al-Battani (c. 858–929), Al-Khwarizmi (c. 780–850) Ibn Sina (i.e. Avicenna; c. 980–1037), Al-Razi (i.e. Rhazes; 865–925), Al-Biruni (c. 973–1048), Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), and al-Tabari (839–923). This exchange of knowledge facilitated by maritime trade routes underscores how the relations between Iran and the Arab World have thrived, thereby challenging the misconception that their relations have been defined *solely* by instability and conflict. The word "solely" is deliberate: this paper does not deny that conflict has been a real dimension of Iran–Arab relations, particularly since 1979, but challenges its status as the exclusive or timeless frame through which those relations are narrated in public, political, and media discourse. As Kamrava and Dorzadeh's survey data shows, Arab popular perceptions of Iran are overwhelmingly shaped by the post-revolutionary period, with little awareness of the longer history of maritime and cultural connection that this paper reconstructs.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Angela Schottenhammer, "China's Gate to the Indian Ocean: Iranian and Arab Long-Distance Traders", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 76, no. 1 / 2 (2016): 149, at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44478338>

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dorothy Armstrong, *What Is an 'Oriental' Carpet? Reimagining, Remaking, Repossessing the Patterned Pile Carpets of South, Central and West Asia Since 1840* (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 2020), 3.

⁹⁵ Ladan Abouali, Jianlin Ni, and Jake Kaner, "The Evolution of Iranian Carpet Designs with the Influence of Islam and Chinese Art; Ilkhanid, Timurid, Safavid", *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 9, no. 1 (March 2020), at: <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v9i1.2560>

⁹⁶ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1–18; Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 133–40.

Arabs and Iranians also enjoy a shared literary heritage and mythologies with Mesopotamian origins as Levi Thompson argues in his book. These literary exchanges were themselves inseparable from maritime connectivity: manuscripts, oral narratives, and scholars travelled the same sea routes as goods, carried between port cities such as Basra, Hormuz, Aden, and Muscat. The ocean was not merely a background to cultural exchange but its medium. This is why a Blue Humanities approach is indispensable here: it reveals how the shared literary heritage of Arabs and Iranians was produced and transmitted through aquatic corridors rather than across land borders. With that context established, Arabs and Iranians also enjoy a shared literary heritage and mythologies with Mesopotamian origins, as Levi Thompson argues in his book *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry*.⁹⁷ A notable literary example is the *One Thousand and One Nights* (*Alf Layla wa-Layla*) which contains many stories of Persian origin, although associated with Arab culture.⁹⁸ Persianate tales like Sindbad the Sailor and Aladdin have captivated audiences across the Arab world for centuries. *Kalila wa-Dimna* is another example: these stories have been integral in shaping the literary and cultural exchanges between Persian and Arab cultures, reflecting shared themes and values.

Another well-known Persian work in the Arab world is the *Shahnameh* (The Book of Kings) by the Persian poet Ferdowsi (d. 1025). This epic poem recounts the history of Persia from its mythical beginnings until the Islamic conquest. It has been influential not only in Persian literature but also in the broader Middle Eastern literary tradition. The *Shahnameh* has influenced Arabic literature and storytelling traditions, becoming a "world literature" as Hamid Dabashi argues. Composed around 1010 CE, it is widely credited with consolidating Persian language and identity after the Arab conquest by preserving pre-Islamic myths and royal histories in elevated New Persian verse, and modern scholarship reads it as a key text in the formation of Iranian national consciousness.⁹⁹

Safavid and later dynasties (especially the Safavids and Qajars) commissioned sumptuous illustrated *Shahnameh* manuscripts (e.g. the famous Shah Tahmasp *Shahnameh*) as political spectacles that staged ideal kingship and linked new rulers to an ancient Iranian past, turning the epic into a visual and textual instrument of dynastic legitimacy.¹⁰⁰ In Ottoman lands, the poem was translated, adapted and paraphrased; court poets produced *Shahnameh*-style epics and "truncated *Shahnamehs*" about sultans, and a special office of *shahnameh-chi* (royal chronicler in verse) emerged to celebrate Ottoman rulers in Ferdowsian fashion.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Levi Thompson, *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

⁹⁸ See the following five resources: Muhsin J. Al-Musawi, *The Islamic Context of The Thousand and One Nights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Ulrich Marzolph, "In and Out of the Nights: The Thousand and One Nights as an Introduction to Middle Eastern Narrative Culture", in *Endless Inspiration: One Thousand and One Nights in Comparative Perspective* (2020): 215–42; Muhsin S. Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights* (Leiden: Brill, 2023); Jorge Luis Borges and Eliot Weinberger, "The Thousand and One Nights", *The Georgia Review* 38, no. 3 (1984): 564–74; Sima Aghazadeh, "One Thousand and One Nights at the Transnational Crossroads", *Cultural Intertexts* 12, no. 12 (2022): 9–18.

⁹⁹ Hamid Dabashi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); Ali Mohammadi, "The Unparalleled Literary and Historical Role of Ferdowsi's *Shahname* in Shaping and Consolidating Persian National Identity over the Centuries", *International Journal of Innovation Scientific Research and Review* 3, no. 8 (2021): 1656–664.

¹⁰⁰ "Ferdowsi: The Voice of Persian Identity and His Enduring Legacy", *Surfiran*, has a special section on Safavid and Qajar rulers commissioning lavish illustrated *Shahnameh* manuscripts; "The *Shahnama* of Shah Tahmasp", Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, discusses the monumental Safavid manuscript as a statement of royal power and legitimacy.

¹⁰¹ Hasan Javadi, "Translations and Imitations of the *Shahnama* in Turkish Lands", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, details Ottoman-era abridgements, adaptations, and the institution of the *shahnameh-chi* at court.

Beyond Iran and Anatolia, *Shahnameh* narratives travelled into Turkic, Georgian, and Armenian literary cultures, where rulers and communities appropriated figures such as Afrasiyab and Siyavush in order to anchor territorial and communal identities and to negotiate their place within a broader "Persianate" ecumene.¹⁰² The Alexander cycle in the *Shahnameh* also reshaped regional understandings of Alexander the Great, transforming him from a purely "accursed" conqueror into a legitimate and even exemplary king of Iran; this Iranianized Alexander then became the template for later Persian and Indo-Persian Alexander romances, most notably Nezami's *Eskandar-nama* and Amir Khusrau's *A'ina-ye Eskandari*, which continued to circulate across the Middle East and South Asia.¹⁰³

From Maritime Connectivity to Hydro-Politics: From Blue Cooperation to Blue Contestation

The historical episodes examined in this paper foreground a time when maritime routes in the Gulf and Indian Ocean operated primarily as corridors of connectivity: spaces where Arab and Iranian merchants, pilgrims, scholars, and sailors circulated goods, ideas, and aesthetic forms across shared waters. In that earlier configuration, sea-lanes functioned as what Blue Humanities scholars would call infrastructures of relation, enabling entangled histories rather than hardened frontiers. Recent decades, however, have witnessed a marked transformation. The same bodies of water that once underwrote commercial and cultural cohabitation have become central to regional hydro-politics, where access, control, and denial of maritime passage are explicitly weaponized as tools of statecraft and coercion.

The Strait of Hormuz is the most striking example of this shift. International energy analyses repeatedly stress that it remains the single most important oil transit chokepoint in the world, with a substantial share of global petroleum liquids passing through its narrow channel between Iran and Oman.¹⁰⁴ Because there are few practical alternatives that can fully absorb this volume, even the threat of disruption can trigger price spikes, force slowdowns in tanker traffic, and prompt complex re-routing of vessels and insurance practices. Iranian officials have repeatedly invoked the closure of Hormuz as a possible response to external pressure or military confrontation, and naval strategists routinely model scenarios in which traffic through the strait is interrupted or diverted. In this context, water is no longer a neutral medium through which trade simply passes; it becomes a bargaining chip, a site of vulnerability and leverage in a regional security game that is always already global.

A similar dynamic has emerged further south along the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb. Since late 2023, Houthi forces in Yemen have mounted sustained attacks on commercial shipping, targeting tankers

¹⁰² Gabrielle van den Berg, ed., *Shahnama Studies III: The Reception of the Shahnama* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), esp. essays on Turkic, Georgian and Armenian receptions; see also the overview of this volume in *Bibliographia Iranica*, "Shahnameh – Bibliographia Iranica".

¹⁰³ "Eskandar-Nāma", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, esp. discussion of Ferdowsi's Iranianisation of Alexander and the later romances by Nezami and Amir Khusrau; Josef Wiesehöfer, "The 'Accursed' and the 'Adventurer': Alexander the Great in Iranian Tradition", in *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*, ed. Richard Stoneman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

¹⁰⁴ Dunn and Barden, "The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint".

and container vessels in what they portray as solidarity actions over Gaza, and which function in practice as a form of maritime coercion with direct consequences for global trade.¹⁰⁵ Analyses by legal scholars, policy institutes and shipping industry bodies show sharp declines in container traffic and significant rerouting of vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, with attendant increases in transit times, freight rates and insurance costs.¹⁰⁶ Naval coalitions have responded with airstrikes and maritime patrols, yet major shipping companies remain cautious about returning to pre-crisis routes. The Red Sea, like Hormuz, thus becomes a stage on which non-state actors and their backers can apply pressure far beyond their immediate geography, transforming sea-lanes into instruments of asymmetric warfare and symbolic politics.

Blue Humanities perspectives help to clarify what is at stake in these transformations. Rather than treating oceans and straits as empty backdrops, writers such as Steve Mentz and Serpil Oppermann insist that seas are dynamic environments whose material flows, legal regimes, and cultural imaginaries shape human history as profoundly as any terrestrial border.¹⁰⁷ Their work on oceanic infrastructures, storied waterscapes, and Blue Humanities frames the sea as a medium in which environmental crisis, empire, labour, migration, and cultural imagination are deeply entangled rather than separate domains.

Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters go further in their account of "wet ontologies", arguing that water's fluid, mobile properties unsettle land-based assumptions about fixed territory and stable sovereignty.¹⁰⁸ When Hormuz or Bab al-Mandeb are described as "chokepoints", this is not simply a technical term; it signals the way in which these watery corridors have been reconceived as pinch-points of planetary circulation where power can be asserted or withdrawn. From a Blue Humanities angle, the region's hydro-politics are not external to the sea but emerge from the ways in which states and movements imagine, narrate and regulate maritime space.

Crucially, this does not erase the earlier histories of cooperation that this paper reconstructs. Instead, it reveals a layered maritime palimpsest. The same routes that once connected port cities such as Basra, Muscat, Bandar Abbas, Aden, and Mocha through coffee, textiles, and pilgrimage now carry oil, liquefied gas, containerized goods, and naval fleets. The sea thus holds multiple, sometimes contradictory temporalities at once: memories of trading cosmopolitanism, episodes of colonial and imperial violence, and contemporary regimes of securitization. Work on blue legalities, oceanic infrastructure and maritime labour underscores that seas are sites where law, violence and vulnerability converge, not just surfaces for ships to cross.¹⁰⁹ Reading the Gulf and Red Sea through

¹⁰⁵ Magne Frostad, "Houthi Attacks on Merchant Vessels in the Red Sea", *Articles of War* (Lieber Institute, West Point), 10 June 2024, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSO8n>

¹⁰⁶ Victoria Sainz, "The Red Sea Shipping Crisis (2024–2025): Houthi Attacks and Global Trade Disruption", *Atlas Institute for International Affairs*, 27 March 2025, at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOgq>

¹⁰⁷ Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*; Serpil Oppermann, *Blue Humanities: Storied Waterscapes in the Anthropocene*.

¹⁰⁸ Steinberg and Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces".

¹⁰⁹ Braverman and Johnson, eds., *Blue Legalities*.

this lens demonstrates how Arab–Iranian relations are routed through water: through the channels, cables and chokepoints that bind their fates together even as political discourses insist on separation.

These layered temporalities also extend into the twentieth century through human movement. The pre-oil pearl diving economy of the Gulf was a genuinely shared maritime world: Iranian, Arab, South Asian, and African divers and merchants worked side by side in seasonal fleets that traversed the same waters as earlier trading dhows, long before the political ruptures of 1979 redrew the map of allegiances. Well into the twentieth century, cross-Gulf migration sustained living communities that defied land-based political boundaries: Iranians settled in significant numbers in Bahrain, Kuwait, and the towns of what would become the UAE, while Arab merchants maintained presences in Iran's coastal cities such as Bandar Abbas and Bushehr. These diasporas – the Huwala communities of Arab origin on the Iranian coast and the communities of Iranian origin across the Arab Gulf littoral – are rarely visible in either nationalist historiography or geopolitical analysis, yet they represent a modern continuation of the port-city cosmopolitanism examined earlier in this paper. Recovering them is not merely an exercise in historical recovery; it challenges the assumption, implicit in much contemporary commentary, that the maritime connections between Iran and the Arab world are an exclusively pre-modern or pre-revolutionary phenomenon.

Integrating this hydro-political dimension into the analysis therefore deepens the central argument of the article. It shows that Arab-Iranian relations cannot be understood solely through sectarian or ideological lenses, nor solely in terms of land boundaries and territorial disputes. Maritime space plays a constitutive role in the rivalry: it is where energy dependence is negotiated, where global shipping feels the shock of regional conflict, and where the memory of older forms of connectivity continues to haunt present-day strategies of contestation. A Blue Humanities approach, attentive to both the historical lifeworlds of seafaring and the contemporary militarisation of sea-lanes, invites us to see the Gulf and Red Sea not as static backdrops to politics but as volatile, living infrastructures whose currents, depths and bottlenecks continually reshape what is possible between Iran and the Arab world.

Recent US–Iran–Arab Gulf developments further confirm this shift from blue cooperation to blue contestation. Doha Institute analyses of the 2025–26 escalation describe Hormuz disruption, attacks connected to US military infrastructure in the Gulf, and renewed ceasefire negotiations as moments in which maritime chokepoints turned a regional confrontation into a global risk event. For this paper, the significance of these events is methodological as much as political: they show that Iran–Arab–US relations play out not only through ideology, sectarianism, or land-based alliances, but also through shared waters, bases, shipping lanes, energy routes, and vulnerable coastal infrastructures. A Blue Humanities reading therefore helps explain why de-escalation in the region repeatedly returns to the same aquatic question: who controls passage, safety, and mobility in the Gulf?¹¹⁰

110 Xueling Cheng, *Risk Politics and the US-Israeli War on Iran: Emotion Governance, Security Mosaic and Risk Management* (Doha: ACRPS, 9 April 2026), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOkN>; Maryam Al Kuwari, *US Military Bases in the Gulf: Better Upset than Sorry?* (Doha: ACRPS, 15 September 2025), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOot>; Unit for Political Studies, *The Ceasefire in the War on Iran: Determinants and Prospects* (Doha: ACRPS, 12 April 2026), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOWw>

Conclusion

"Connections" has been the most recurrent theme in this paper. It is the motto of Blue Humanities – people, animals, places, and ideas are connected in ways we often do not recognize. The paper uses water to highlight such connections, including those between Iran and Arabs. These Iranian-Arab connections, rooted in centuries of trade, scientific collaboration, and mutual cultural enrichment, remain relevant today despite often being marginalized in contemporary discourse. They have not vanished but continue in various forms, albeit less prominently (like Iran's contributions to mathematics, medicine, and astronomy; cultural and intellectual influence through Persian literature, philosophy, and art; and architectural and engineering innovations inspiring contemporary designs). Acknowledging this more balanced history can help dispel the myth of perpetual conflict and highlight the potential for renewed cooperation and understanding in the present day. Indeed, Blue Humanities is a project that aims to centre the peripheries and the marginalized.

Thus, working "towards dispelling such misconceptions between Arabs and Iran" is a significant contribution of this paper to Iranian Studies and the broader geopolitical narratives. By redefining how we perceive cultural and historical interactions between Iran and the Arab world, this research can inform policy making practices. This work falls within the significant contributions of the centres established in the Arab world about the Iran-Arab relations – i.e. centres that can hopefully inform and change policy making. Examples include the Iranian Studies Unit, established in March 2020 by the ACRPS at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies; the International Institute for Iranian Studies (known as Rasanah IIIS) established in 2016 in Riyadh; and AlKhaleej/Gulf Center for Iranian Studies, established in 2021 in Cairo.

The urgency of this paper's argument has only intensified since its initial drafting. As of early 2026, the United States and Israel have launched sustained military strikes against Iran – an escalation the ACRPS describes as potentially the most consequential rupture in the regional order since 1979.¹¹¹ The Arab states, for their part, have largely declined to endorse the strikes, with key Gulf governments signalling that they will not allow their territory to be used as a base for military operations against Iran: a position that reflects, however reluctantly, the enduring entanglement of Arab and Iranian fates that this paper traces to shared maritime history. Meanwhile, Arab public opinion, as tracked in the ACRPS's longitudinal surveys, remains divided and shifting: Israel and the United States are now ranked as greater threats than Iran in several Arab countries, complicating the simple "Arabs versus Iran" framing that land-based political narratives have long sustained. The sea – the Gulf, the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz – is once again at the centre of this crisis, as chokepoints become flashpoints. A Blue Humanities perspective, attuned to both the long history of maritime connection and the present militarisation of those same waters, offers perhaps the most honest account of what is at stake: not a clash between two civilisational blocs, but a shared seascape in acute danger.

¹¹¹ Unit for Political Studies, *Trump and Netanyahu's Iran Gambit: The Strategic Calculations behind Epic Fury* (Doha: ACRPS, 5 March 2026), at: <https://acr.ps/hBxSOEz>; Salari and Thayer, *Arab Public Opinion on Iran 2022–2024*.

Recent developments further illustrate the fluidity that Blue Humanities seeks to highlight. The 2025–2026 period of heightened US–Iran tensions, including direct military exchanges and subsequent diplomatic efforts, has reinforced Arab public perceptions of external powers as primary threats. According to the Arab Opinion Index 2025, Israel (44%) and the United States (21%) continue to be viewed as the greatest threats to Arab security, while Iran ranks significantly lower.¹¹² This data suggests that despite ongoing geopolitical frictions, Arab public opinion increasingly contextualises Iran within a broader regional landscape shaped by great-power competition rather than viewing it in isolation. A Blue Humanities lens helps us see these contemporary maritime chokepoints (Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb) not merely as sites of conflict but as shared spaces whose future governance will require new forms of regional cooperation.

A first step towards this change should start from us, the academics of the Arab world, and of course, Iranian academics as well. There is ample scope for further exploration within the Blue Humanities framework. Future research could delve deeper into other regions and historical periods, examining additional case studies to broaden the understanding of water's role in cultural and historical exchanges. Yemen-Iran relations suffer greatly from the lack of academic references. With the Blue Humanities approach, I will conduct more research on such relations beyond sweeping generalizations and political and religious tensions regarding Iran's support for the Houthi faction. More research could also be conducted on media and political rhetoric in Iran and Arab countries and local and indigenous needs and methods in climate adaptation. This paper thus represents a call to action. Given the rich history of Arab-Iranian connections and the current shifts in global politics, such as Iran's evolving relations with China and Saudi Arabia, the need for this action becomes more pressing than ever – towards a better future.

¹¹² ACRPS, *Arab Opinion Index 2024–25*; see also ACRPS, *Arab Opinion Index 2024–25 In Brief* (Doha: ACRPS, 2026).

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Endnotes