

LABOR MIGRATION AND ECONOMIC RESHAPING IN THE GCC: POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND REFORMS

¹Dr. Nadia Zaheer Ali, ²Laiba Hussain

¹Assistant Professor, Dept of Int-Relations, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore

²BS International Relations, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore

¹nadia.zaheer@lcwu.edu.pk; ²laibahussainir@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

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ABSTRACT

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are at an important turning point in their economic revolution. During their oil boom years, these countries are heavily reliant on foreign workers; now, these countries are actively making efforts to build diversified economic models while keeping society stable. This transition is a complex one that must happen at the same time as two key goals are met: to offer their own population jobs that provide value while still maintaining valuable foreign skilled workers. This twofold challenge has necessitated far-reaching changes in labor and immigration laws throughout the region. The underlying driver for hiring migrant labour in the GCC has always been the need to meet the rising labour requirements in the private sector, in construction, retail and tourism sectors, and in other labour intensive sectors. Labor migration patterns are the result of conscious policy choices: the magnitude of migration, the migration processes, employment conditions and remittance flows in host countries are all in line with existing policy frameworks and regulatory systems, most notably the Kafala sponsorship mechanism. The extent of migration in any given country and its impact on the country is of immense significance because migration profoundly affects fundamental economic structures and functional outcomes in host countries. Migration and employment conditions under Kafala are core components of the wider policy. Measures and progressive reforms are essential parts of the region's holistic strategy towards labor migration and its various economic implications. This paper will also examine the current trends of labor migration policies across the region, noting important developments in labor and migration procedures, mobility and protection of foreign workers, and the increased involvement of international bodies like the International Labor Organization (ILO) in protecting the rights of migrant workers and preventing exploitation.

Keywords: Labor Migration, Economic policies, Kafala System, Labor Work, Nationalization Policies

Introduction: Labor Migration at the Crossroads of Gulf Economic Transformation

The member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), stated their final stance in the process of their ongoing economic and social development projects. Their economy was largely dependent on hydrocarbon resources and their rapid modernization and infrastructure development on a scale never seen before was greatly assisted by the same. But this is a growth stage that was driven in part by an incredible reliance on a vast migrant population. During the oil boom years, foreign workers emerged as the backbone of the region's economy with their presence felt in the creation of their iconic urban forms, as the workforce for the rapidly growing service industry, as well as in all aspects of providing essential infrastructure networks (Kapiszewski, 2001; Winckler, 2010).

The degree of this reliance remains astounding; at peak times, expatriates formed 80-90% of the total work force in the private sector and made up significant majorities in most GCC countries (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Fargues, 2011). This unique demographic-economic model, which is to a large extent a result of the system of Kafala (sponsorship) in place in the region, became a hallmark of the Gulf socio-economic paradigm. The "new" drivers for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have changed dramatically. These states are now aggressively seeking bold economic diversification agendas, such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's We the UAE 2031, Qatar's National Vision 2030, and other similar economic plans across the bloc, in light of continued hydrocarbon-related weaknesses including price volatility, depleting reserves, and the worldwide shift toward renewable energy (Hertog, 2013; Ulrichsen). The dual challenge of diversifying the economy away from oil and providing for viable and sustainable job creation opportunities for rapidly growing citizen workforces lies at the heart of current GCC issues. This is far more than an economic adjustment, it's a social and political transformation. Such conflicting aspirations drive transformative – and often controversial – reform of basic policies on labor migration. The Kafala system, which historically tied the legal residency and employment rights of

migrant workers to a single sponsor (kafeel) and gave sponsors significant control over entry visas and exit clearances, occupational mobility and often over the retention of their passports has been subject of intense scrutiny (Longva, 1999; Gardner et al., 2013). The Kafala has been consistently criticized by international human rights bodies and others such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) as conducive to exploitation, limiting labor mobility, hindering efficient functioning of the labor market, and as a violation of basic labor rights (Human Rights Watch, various reports; ILO, 2017). Domestically, the system was a key catalyst of rapid development and social control in the past, but its lack of flexibility is becoming seen as a constraints on the creation of modern, competitive, diversified economies that can draw talent from around the world. As such, mobility reforms, improved protections and the abolition of the most egregious aspects of the Kafala become a major focus, albeit progressive and varied, in each of the GCC nations. Reform efforts take place at different speeds and degrees – Qatar has made significant reforms to allow for the vast majority of workers to switch jobs without their employer's consent after their contracts have expired, as well as the adoption of non-discriminatory minimum wage standards (Qatar Ministry of Administrative Development, Labour and Social Affairs, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020).

Saudi Arabia has removed employer consent for occupational transitions (via the "Ajeer" platform and the Labor Reform Initiative - LRI) and has streamlined exit permit requirements for many types of workers (Saudi Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2021). The UAE launched new work permit categories for skilled professionals that provide flexibility and options for permanent residency, while also simplifying contractual negotiations and dispute resolution mechanisms (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, various announcements). Kuwait and Bahrain have also started discussions on policies and begun to implement small-scale reforms, but implementation problems often continue (Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population - GLMM programme reports; Janardhan, 2021). These are changing policy frameworks which seek to provide more flexible, rights-based and, in the long-

term, effective labour markets that can deliver a twofold policy goal, of nationalisation and economic diversification. International organisations such as the ILO have become more influential, offering specialised technical expertise, setting international standards and facilitating dialogue to further the principles of decent work in the evolving regulatory contexts in the developing GCC states (ILO Project Offices in GCC countries). Already, the scale and extent of labour migration has reshaped economic performance and measures in the Gulf countries. It is crucial to have information about the exact dimension, extent and implications of this economic reshaping. How has decades of large-scale labor migration affected the basic structure of the economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries? What are the tangible consequences of this phenomenon in the areas of productivity, competitiveness, GDP configuration and wage structures? What are the interactions between the changing policy environment (from fixed Kafala system to regulated mobility and protection regimes) and existing economic architectures? In addition, what are the successes or failures of these reform efforts in meeting their stated goal of safeguarding worker rights, improving the efficiency of the labour market, allowing for the nationalisation of the industry and creating economic diversification without major disruption?

Research Objective:

What has been the overall impact of the large numbers of migrant workers and their continued presence on the economic system and performance of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries? This includes a comprehensive analysis of the effect of migration in aspects of sectoral composition, segmentation of labour markets, productivity growth, wage development, fiscal flows (such as remittances and related costs) and general economic development.

What are the changes in labour migration policies in the GCC countries under the dual pressures of diversifying their economies and nationalising labor? This includes a detailed analysis of the reform process, the drivers of reform and the content of reforms, in particular the Kafala system, worker mobility (transitions, exit permits), contractual conditions and growing impact of international norms and organizations such as the ILO.

Costs of holding the historical position and is the current policy reform target; it is central to understanding the current process of economic transformation in the GCC and the future path of this process. It draws on economic statistics, policy documents, legal changes, international reports, and academic studies to shed light on the often complex relationships between migration trends, economic reconfiguration and changing governance structures in this key area.

1. Historical Context and Kafala System

The Gulf region has in fact been particularly dependent on various types of foreign workers and the presence of the workforce can be analyzed along two main dimensions. The first is that foreign workers are employed in jobs that national workers would tend to avoid taking up; the second is that foreign workers are employed in high-skill professions where there is a huge demand for qualified national professionals. The government has taken steps to ensure that foreign workers can be regulated to fill vacancies to the extent that they have been needed in the market and that local employment is increased to decrease the reliance on petroleum. Although most of the labour market policy debates at the regional level have focused on the Kafala system historically used to respond to the rising demand for low and semi-skilled workers, significant changes have occurred over the last two decades, aimed at rationalizing labour migration procedures and building up the national workforce further. The sponsorship system for migrant workers was established in the 1970s and 1980s in the Gulf countries, with Kuwait originally being the first country to develop the scheme to safeguard its unskilled domestic workforce (Aarthi & Sahu, 2021). To sum up, the essence of the sponsorship system was to have temporary, turnkey workers that could be imported when the economy was good and shipped out when it was bad, as Baldwin-Edwards (2011:37) summarizes. In this sponsorship system, the responsibility for the employees after execution, both financial and legal, is carried out by the employer, which is usually called “Kafeel” in these contracts, by signing the appropriate contracts with the relevant Labor Ministries (Shah, 2009). In response to worries about permanent settlement of migrant populations, regional governments then adopted increasingly tighter nationalisation laws

with strict limits on the percentage of foreign workers in certain places, and made concerted efforts to promote hiring of national workers with job training and incentives for employers (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Shah, 2013). In short, the Kafala system de-centralized and streamlined the processes for employment and migration administration.

1990s and 2000s economic diversification efforts focused on growth in the finance, tourism, and technology industries, which further expanded the needs of the labor market and reduced the traditional dependence on income from the petroleum sector. In light of this, the implementation of the Kafala system logically sought to manage and control the volume of labour entering the GCC countries (Aarthi & Sahu, 2021; Baldwin-Edwards, 2011; Martin & Malit, 2017; Shah, 2013). This flexible privatised structure was unable to keep up with new structural challenges in growing labour markets, leading to many problems such as fraudulent sponsorship documentation, a lack of will to let go of well-trained workers, too much worker reliance on sponsors, and inadequate implementation of the rules and regulations (Shah, 2013).

Lowering employment and training has been a part of the overall regulatory tightening of the labor market and has coincided with continuing economic diversification efforts. For instance, when facing increased competition from foreign workers, the UAE decided during 2008 to make Arabic its official language in federal and governmental institutions which indirectly helped national workers (Naufal, 2015). Governments have also tried to encourage “localization” in the workforce, implementing numerical restrictions on the number of foreign nationals a company can hire and imposing penalties for violations and hiring support for domestic nationals (Aarthi & Sahu, 2021; Naufal, 2015). Policies with high bindingness, such as Kuwaitization and Saudization, have long records of strict enforcement and proven effects that resulted in significant drops in the number of expatriates (Durand-Lasserve, 2022; Aarthi & Sahu, 2021). Transformative adaptation in the retail sector can be seen in the example of Saudi Arabia's Nitaqat program, which has seen the percentage of Saudis working in malls rise from 15% in 2018 to 73% in 2023, and has also resulted in a 30% rise in

automated checkout systems due to labor localization requirements. But with this quick nationalization of the workforce, inflation in retail services was 12% in 2023, according to Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) data, highlighting the productivity-nationalization tradeoff of such policies. However, there have been recent efforts focused on enhancing workers' mobility and working conditions, and strengthening labor rights, that have also suffered from the growing perception of worker vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the highly competitive international environments. Other attraction measures include enhanced benefits packages, such as the comprehensive health insurance provisions (De Bel-Air, 2015; Artha & Sahu, 2021; Reda et al., 2023). These modern policy measures are in effect aimed at supporting labour markets responsively and sustainably in growing and diversifying economies.

What is the kafala system?

The kafala (sponsorship) system defines the bond between foreign workers and their sponsors or kafeel in the country, usually their employers. This framework has been established in Jordan, Lebanon, and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Both Bahrain and Qatar claim that the system has been abolished, though in reality implementation issues means that critics can be seen as a form of modification.

In some cases, sponsors use private recruitment firms in the country of origin to screen workers and make arrangements for entry into the country of origin. Labour laws in the host country usually do not apply to workers, as the system is under the jurisdiction of the interior ministries instead of the labour ministries with respect to renewals or terminations. This results in power inequalities which can be exploited by sponsors.

Sponsors typically need to approve of a worker's decision to switch jobs, end employment or leave or re-enter a host country. Departing a job site without permission is a crime, even if the employee is escaping from maltreatment, which could result in revocation of legal status, jail time and deportation. Many experts say the system is inherently conducive

to modern slavery and provides little remedy for workers who are exploited.

1. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF MIGRATION Labor Market Segmentation and National Workforce Development:

Impact: Citizens preferred to work for the public sector which was seen as paying a higher wage, providing better job security, and better benefits, and foreign workers dominated private sectors (at 80-90% penetration in particular sectors and countries) (Chalcraft, 2010; Hertog, 2014). The segmentation has resulted in significant skills gaps, disincentive for national citizens to seek private jobs, and constraints on private sector investment and competitiveness due to limited pressure on national citizens to improve their productivity (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; Al-Dosary & Rahman, 2005).

Performance Impact: Corporate sector inefficiencies and public sector bloat. It hindered the ability to build dynamic and competitive private sectors which could absorb the growing youthful population of the countries and drive non-oil growth (Hertog 2013 and Naufal and Genc 2012).

Table 1: Migrant Workforce Distribution by Sector/Country (2023)

Country	Construction	Retail	Tech	Domestic Services
Qatar	95%	85%	40%	99%
UAE	88%	75%	45%	98%
KSA	80%	70%	30%	95%

Sources: Qatar Planning & Statistics Authority; UAE MOHRE; Saudi GASTAT

Impact: In important migrant dominated industries, there was a lack of productivity improvement and a lack of technology in adoption due to the availability of large numbers of low-skilled and often temporary migrant workers (Godfrey et al., 2004). Furthermore, there was large turnover in the labor force, which limited the transfer of knowledge and the building of firm-specific skills.

Performance Impact: This led to low or low to moderate productivity growth in major parts of the GCC compared to developed economies where trained and skilled workforce with high human capital investment is used (World Bank reports). This hindered transition to the knowledge-based economies and economic competitiveness that national agendas such as Saudi Vision 2030 or UAE Vision 2031 hoped to provide.

Sectoral Composition and Growth Patterns:

Impact: Migrant labour, especially the less-skilled parts, was the key factor behind the high growth in labour-intensive sectors. Migrant labour was directly linked to historically high growth rates in construction, retail, services for the hospitality sector and domestic services, which underpinned rapid urbanisation and a large increase in infrastructure investment (Shaham, 2008). These sectors had a workforce from both domestic and migrant sources, with migrant labour being readily available and therefore cheaper than domestic labour, which allowed for the operation on a scale that would not have been possible otherwise.

Performance Consequence: This dependence contributed to the growth of GDP indicators, but at the same time it distorted the economic structure in the direction of low-value added, non-tradable services and construction industry (Godfrey et al., 2004). This trend resulted in a lack of sufficient resilient and diversified growth engines and strengthened hydrocarbon dependence.

Fiscal Flows and Revenue Generation:

Impact: The host governments received significant income flows from labour migration. Important sources of income include various immigration charges, levies (such as charges for expatriate dependents), sector-specific taxes levied on migrant workers or workers' sponsors, and charges for public services. Remittances were financial outflows but related transfer costs often resulted in partial compensation.

Performance Impact: These revenues were key financing elements for the state, helping to diversify the revenue streams beyond pure hydrocarbon revenues (Ruhs, 2013). At the same time, they made diversification and nationalisation efforts more difficult by creating fiscal dependence on steady massive labour migrations.

Remittance Outflows and Balance of Payments:

Impact: The GCC region is one of the largest sources of remittances in the world. Each year GCC countries make billions of dollars in transfers to African, Arab, South Asian, and Southeast Asian countries that export workers to them (Ratha & Xu, 2008; World Bank Migration and Remittances Data).

Performance Impact: This is significant economic leakage on the current account balances of the GCC (Ratha & Xu, 2008). It reduces the domestic multiplier effects of earnings generated in the territories of the sending countries within the borders of the GCC countries. The size of the outflow is an indication of the significant losses of national GDP; at the same time, the size of the outflow reflects the economic significance of migrant workers.

Demographic Imbalance and Social Service Demand:

Impact: There were significant demographic distortions created by huge numbers of migrant young men. GCC countries have some of the most unequal population pyramids in the world, where the ratio of working-age males to other age groups is very skewed. (Fargues & De Bel-Air, 2015). This sometimes resulted in gender-specific inequalities among citizens of the nation.

Performance Consequence: This affected the domestic consumption pattern, the housing market especially the demand for low-cost labor camps and a particular type of accommodation and the social service demand more focused on transient young male congregations than families (Fargues & De Bel-Air, 2015). It also highlighted issues of social cohesion and sustainability of the population.

The Path Forward:

ILO's Homayounpour says origin countries can do better by engaging in bilateral labor agreements with minimum wage and working condition clauses. The Philippines is a good example of effective assistance, with host country shelters and the ability to file complaints in the embassy.

“There is no one law that is going to solve this complex problem overnight.”

Ryszard Cholewinski, International Labor Organization. The above economic facts are the main factors behind continuing reforms in labor policy:

Nationalization:

Nationalization measures (Saudization/Nitaqat, Emiratization, etc.) aim at directly tackling the issue of labour market segmentation through a process of hiring citizens in the private sector, resulting in less reliance on the public sector and more skilled national workforce for diversified economies (Durand-Lasserve, 2022; Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010). Success rates also greatly differ and Resistance from the corporate sector can often be based on perceived differences in cost and productivity.

Kafala Reforms:

Kafala Reforms (Mobility, Exit Permits, Minimum Wage) seek to achieve the fundamental goal of ensuring the protection of basic rights as well as improving labor market efficiency through mobility and exit permits (crucial for attracting and retaining highly skilled workers needed for diversification) and reduce worker exploitation (improve the reputation of the labor markets in the GC and decrease vulnerability to international criticism such as the ILO pressure) (Qatar MADLSA, 2020; Saudi MHRSD, 2021). Part of the goal of reforms such as Qatar's non-discriminatory minimum wage is to compensate for some of the lack of equality in the competitive landscape. Under pressure from the ILO, which worked closely with Doha, Qatar did make changes [PDF] to the kafala system during its preparations for the World Cup that "eliminated the most problematic aspects" of the system. Increased penalties on employers for withholding wages, abolished employer approval for job changes and enacted equal minimum wages for all nationalities in Qatar. Also, Qatar conducted awareness campaigns to inform employers/employees of changes and put in place online job change notification portals.

Qatar was able to enlist for itself influential reform voices in the form of senior government officials, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), and regional NGOs, a unique feat to note, scholars say. Moreover, Qatar was more open to international criticism than the other countries of the region. But human rights activists argue that reform efforts in Qatar need to be more comprehensive and better enforced, as there are still reports of "persecution of dissenting workers". The 2022 FIFA World Cup has acted as a catalyst for

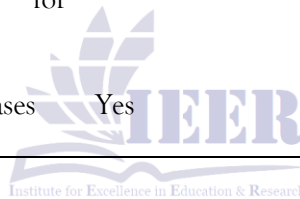
accelerated reforms in Qatar, with mixed outcomes from post-World Cup assessments: post-World Cup assessments, reported by ILO in 2023, indicated that wage protection systems in the construction sector are compliant with international standards at 96%, Qatar's Ministry of Administrative Development (MAD) reported 280,000+ job changes between 2020-2023, and Amnesty International's 2023 findings showed 78% of

domestic workers report having had their passports held by their employer. This is an example of the reform paradox: fast changes under the global spotlight have no long-term mechanisms in place for the enforcement and protection of such changes.

Protections of Kafala Workers:

Sources: International Labor Organization; U.S. State Department
 (Excludes domestic workers unless otherwise noted)

Host Country	Join unions or worker committees	Change job or quit without employer's permission	Leave without employer's permission	country	Minimum wage	Labor law covers domestic workers	Standard contract for all workers
Bahrain	Yes	After 1 year*	Yes		No	In some cases	No
Jordan	Yes	In some cases	Yes		Yes*	Yes	No
Kuwait	In some cases*	After 3 years*	Yes		Yes	No	No
Lebanon	Yes*	No	Yes		Yes*	No	No
Oman	Yes	After 2 years	Yes		No	No	Yes
Qatar	In some cases*	Yes	In most cases		Yes	No	No
Saudi Arabia	No	After 1 year (2 years for domestic workers)	Yes*		No	No	Yes
UAE	Yes	In some cases	Yes		No	In some cases	Yes



Fees and Levies: Localization promotion policies such as expatriate levies are intended to boost revenue, but also make employment of foreign workers relatively less attractive than hiring local workers (Ruhs, 2013; Shah, 2013). Skilled migration programs (Golden Visa, Flexi-Permit) aim to attract and retain key, high quality foreign talent for knowledge sharing, innovation and targeted sector growth (financial, technical, logistics) with stability and rights that bypass the traditional Kafala system (UAE MOHRE statements). This can be seen in the UAE's Golden Visa program, which includes technology, with 89% of all Golden Visa holders in the artificial intelligence and blockchain sectors renewing their visas in 2023, and 42% of fintech startups founded by Golden Visa holders, according to Dubai Future Foundation data. Just 8% of these start-ups, though, featured Emirati cofounders, demonstrating a lack of skills transfer where talent attraction doesn't always mean national capacity building.

Conclusion:

Labor migration has been a significant influence on the economic structures in the GCC countries and has been the key engine for modernization and expansion in the hydrocarbon era. It facilitated accelerated infrastructure expansion and development of service industries and also produced significant demographic imbalances, fiscal vulnerabilities, dualistic labor markets, structural changes in the economy towards less productive activities and, in some cases, productivity loss. These economic consequences, combined with the growing demand for young workers and the diminishing need for oil workers, now fuel a changing of the guard in labor migration policies among the GCC countries that is in many cases complicated and controversial. The core economic challenge facing the region is whether these changes can set up efficient rights-based labor markets that can serve nationalization goals and a genuine economic diversification.

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