

Strategic Sectors | **Culture and Society**

Mobility and Migration from the Southern Mediterranean States to the GCC

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The Middle East is a region of complicated geography, where neighbouring states have markedly different economic resources. Ever since the middle of the last century, the discovery and subsequent exploitation of petroleum resources has acted as the catalyst to spurring dramatic variations in economic success and vitality between neighbouring Arab states. The discovery of oil had a dramatic impact in altering the economic trajectories of the six Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Within a matter of decades Bahrain, Oman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar went from being amongst the least well-off countries in the Middle East, to becoming some of the richest states in the world.

The economic health of the GCC ever since the 1970s, despite a few sluggish years following the collapse in oil prices in the 1980s, has led to an ever-increasing investment in a range of development projects requiring manpower at all levels. With small local populations unable to sustain the needs of their development agendas, the Gulf states had to begin acquiring labour from elsewhere. For decades now these countries have relied on the import of labour from other, more populous states to meet their domestic needs. These attractive employment conditions in the Gulf have been in stark contrast to the situation in the Arab non-oil countries of the Southern Mediterranean, where large, increasingly educated and young populations have had to contend with stagnant economic development, conflict, and

political instability within their own states. The wealthier GCC countries served as a natural regional draw for job seekers from within the Arab world. From about the 1960s onwards, policymakers in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon began to view labour migration of their citizenry as critical to ensure healthy economic outcomes for their citizens at an individual level, and also for the healthy remittance flows that came back home. Labour migration to the GCC by the people-rich yet resource-poor states of the Arab World and Southern Mediterranean stood at high levels from the 1970s onwards. Within the Arab world migration has occurred as a result of these economic, structural push and pull factors. However, the region has seen more than its fair share of crises, conflict and war, all of which at various times have also impacted on migration trends and patterns. For the Southern Mediterranean states, in most cases there continue to be both the economic and political push factors to send their citizens to the Gulf states, and interest in working in the Gulf has not waned over the past few decades. Yet the number of Arab migrants employed in the Gulf regions today is significantly lower than it was three decades ago.

Data issues continue to plague researchers working on interregional migration, and obtaining accurate and detailed data on the nationality of different migrants to the Gulf is no easy task. However, even in the absence of detailed data, there is general agreement that the national composition of the Gulf's foreign workforce has altered completely over the course of the past few decades. In the 1960s Arab expatriates made up the bulk of the Gulf's workforce but over time the percentage of Arabs in the workforce began to shrink significantly. During the early economic surge of the oil era, Egyptians, Palestinians, and Yemenis numerically dominated the foreign

labour force in the GCC. In 1975 the percentage of Arabs in the GCC expatriate workforce was 72%, but by 2009 this figure had dropped to 23%. Today the Gulf expatriate labour force, estimated to be about 17 million, is more Asian-based and international. Although reliable data is not readily available, recent figures suggest that there are about 2.4 million Arab foreign workers present in the GCC, and Arab migrants contribute 33 billion dollars in remittances to their homelands on an annual basis. Currently, the largest cohort amongst the foreign workforce comes from countries outside the Southern Mediterranean, mostly from South and Southeast Asia. Asians are now estimated to constitute more than double the number of Arab expatriates in the GCC's labour force.

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Scholars have argued that this transition in the national and ethnic composition of the Gulf's expatriate workforce is the result of both the economic and political interests of the host states. While the Arab labour-sending countries continued to be supportive of the out-migration of their citizens, several decades ago policymakers in the Gulf increasingly sought to move away from a workforce that was primarily non-Gulf Arab. The shift in recruitment policies which favoured Asian labourers over Arabs began in the late 1980s, and not only because Asian workers were cheaper to bring in, but also because socially and politically they were considered to be easier for the GCC states to manage.

The authoritarian monarchies of the GCC grew concerned about the potential for non-Gulf Arabs to radicalise the local population through promoting

political ideas considered to be destabilising. Arab migrants were considered to bring with them their political agendas that could potentially infect local Arab populations with revolutionary ideas. In the 1950s and 1960s pan-Arabists had hailed the new-found oil wealth in the Gulf as a natural endowment to which all Arabs ought to lay claim; an opinion which is not at all welcomed in the Gulf. Asian migrants were thus preferred over Arabs, as they were not considered to be as much of a social or political threat. Asians could not so easily integrate with or influence the local population due to barriers of language, religion, and cultural affinity. Asian migrants were also seen as being more willing to travel to the Gulf on their own for work contracts, and did so without bringing their families with them. Arab migrants preferred to bring their families, ended up staying for longer and in some cases left a diasporic footprint, which was also not aligned with GCC governments' interests.

Not only has the number of Arab migrants in the Gulf gone through periodic transitions, but the skills and occupational sectors of Arab expatriates present in the Gulf, has also seen changes over time. In the middle of the last century, most Arab expatriates working in the Gulf were educated and skilled, employed as engineers, doctors, and teachers. In the ensuing decades Arabs began to populate a range of other occupational sectors, including those that were less skilled and lower paying. Despite the transition in the Gulf's expatriate labour force, the continued employment opportunities provided to Arab migrants is still of vital importance, particularly so as the Middle East is once again in the throes of high levels of instability and conflict. Currently the majority of the non-Gulf Arab migrant community comes from Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, and Sudan, although we are also seeing a marginal increase in the number of migrants from the Maghreb. Remittances sent by Arab workers in the Gulf to their home states have outpaced trade-related flows, and continue to be critical sources of foreign currency for many of the countries of the Southern Mediterranean.¹ Egypt received more than 50% of its remittances in 2007 from its citizens working in the GCC.²

¹ Heba NASSAR, "Intra-regional Labour Mobility in the Arab World: An Overview," in *Intra-regional Labour Mobility in the Arab World*, VV.AA, Arab Labour Organisation, International Organisation for Migration, Partners in Development, 2012.

² Ibid., 32.

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An interesting emerging migratory pattern that we are seeing on the rise across the Arab states is student mobility. Whereas historically it was the old, traditional Arab heavyweights of Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut that boasted stellar institutions of erudition and learning that drew Arabs from other parts of the Middle East, today the tide has moved in the other direction. With its intense investment in education over the past few decades, the GCC increasingly draws Arab students from neighbouring states for the purpose of attending university. Further study is needed on the relationship between non-Gulf Arab students who are studying in the GCC, what their longer-term migration strategies are, and how they contribute to the social, economic, and political life of their host state. In many of the GCC countries there is an ongoing discussion on the need to retain skilled migrants and to ensure that those who can contribute to the knowledge economy are encouraged to stay for longer periods of time. These statements of intent, though, are not aligned with migration policies, and we have not yet seen any signs of change. Policy which promotes the flexibility of arrangements and allows Arabs who have studied in a Gulf state to stay on and contribute to the labour market could be of great benefit to both parties.

The migration of Arab women is another important phenomenon that has emerged in recent decades. Whereas, in the past, women were considered to

largely be migrating as accompanying spouses or children of male migrants, there is evidence now that Arab women are increasingly migrating independently of their male family members.³ Jordanian women, for example, are now migrating in equal proportion to their male counterparts, while the number of Lebanese women migrating is now greater than the number of men.⁴ Studies examining the mobility of women from the Maghreb shed light on this within the context of migration to Europe, but there is less data on the Gulf region. However, a few small studies indicate that the trend is also visible in the Gulf. A small study on Tunisian women migrating to the GCC through an Arab technical cooperation agreement shows that numbers have been steadily increasing over the years.⁵ 118 Tunisian women migrated to the GCC under this cooperation in 2000, and by 2008 this number had increased to 597 women.⁶ Data produced by the Office of Tunisians Abroad in 2009, which provides the numbers of Tunisians in select countries, indicate that out of a total of 5,926 Tunisian migrants in Qatar, 2,142 were female.⁷

What some of these micro studies on Arab women's migration reveal, is that the nature of migration to the Gulf may in fact differ from other potential destinations. A small qualitative study of 15 skilled women migrants from Tunisia suggests that women choose their migration destination based on particular choices and goals. Tunisian women who sought to migrate to the Gulf to take up employment were inclined to migrate for short durations (normally for no longer than a five-year period), and to meet certain specific financial and economic objectives.⁸ These women were not looking for long-term settlement in the Gulf, but rather to enhance their financial resources within a limited amount of time. This case study provides evidence that for certain categories of workers – both skilled and highly skilled – the Gulf may provide a form of limited migration which is temporary and embedded within a migrant's vision of a return to the homeland.

³ Aicha ET-TAYEB, "The Participation of Female Migrants in the Socio-Economic Development Scene of Two Maghreb Countries: Social Reading of Status and Roles," *A Study on the Dynamics of Arab Expatriate Communities: Promoting Positive Socioeconomic Development and Political Transitions in their Homelands*, IOM/League of Arab States:2012, 22.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸ Ibid., 36.