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Workshop No. 11

Highly Skilled Migrants and the GCC countries

Drivers, Perceptions, Policies, and New Dynamics

1. Directors

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2. Abstract

Faced with the need to diversify and decarbonize their economies, Gulf states' governments are increasingly trying to attract and retain more highly skilled workers to aid their transition from labour-intensive to internationally competitive, knowledge-based, innovative economies. Several measures have recently been passed with the intention of boosting the attractiveness of Gulf labour markets for new populations of highly skilled and/or wealthy foreigners, while still retaining existing skilled workers, including skilled foreigners *born* in the Gulf but who currently lack Gulf citizenship.

This workshop seeks to understand the success and outcomes of these policies, covering the period from 2010 until the present, with a focus primarily on the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. Papers in this workshop will provide new insights into the future of highly skilled migration to, from, and within the Gulf region, adopting a transnational lens to unpack the determinants and consequences on Gulf States and as well these migrants' countries of origin. To achieve these goals, the workshop will focus on four broad areas: (1) Highly skilled migrants' origin countries, (2) Gulf destination countries, (3) Intra-GCC migrations among the high-skilled, and (4) High-skilled migrations away from the Gulf and back. Together, the papers in this workshop will contribute to the academic studies of Gulf societies and economies, while also enabling better policy planning to align with Gulf countries' as well as origin countries' development goals.

3. Context

The six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) are the third largest recipients of migrants[1] worldwide. They hosted 11 percent of the world's total migrant stock in 2020 according to the latest available from the United Nations, making the region a global migration hub. The GCC-Asia migration corridor is the largest South-South corridor worldwide. The six GCC countries also attract the bulk of migration from most Arab states in the Mashreq, especially Egyptians, as well as growing numbers of workers from North African and Sub-Saharan African countries.

Today, faced with the need to diversify and decarbonize their economies, the Gulf states' governments have set ambitious socio-economic transformation goals (Ewers et al., 2022; Ewers and Malecki 2010). The process of transition from labour-intensive to internationally competitive, knowledge-based, and innovative economies includes attracting more skilled and highly skilled workers.

To that effect, recent measures were passed—such as the Labour Market Initiative and the Premium Residency Card (PRC) scheme in Saudi Arabia, the introduction of "Golden Visas" and the amendments to the 1972 Citizenship Law in the UAE—which in theory open pathways to better social protection, career prospects, long-term stays, and even naturalisation. These measures were intended to boost the attractiveness of Gulf labour markets for new populations of foreign workers, especially those who are highly skilled and/or wealthy, while still retaining existing skilled workers, including skilled foreigners *born* in the Gulf but who currently lack Gulf citizenship.

A considerable body of academic, policy- and/or advocacy-oriented literature exists on low-wage migrants in the Gulf, due to their demographic prominence in these economies, and due to Gulf illiberal regimes' low level of compliance with international human rights standards. Much less is known about highly skilled foreign workers in the region, especially in the context of the socio-economic transition process. However, there is growing scholarly interest on skilled migrant populations in Gulf states regarding their lived experiences, given the scale of the "permanent impermanence" (Syed, 2010) in these societies. At the same time, highly skilled migrants in the Gulf may enjoy lives of "comfortable transience" (Paul and Rabel 2024), encouraging them to adopt strategies that will enable them to "stick around" (Akinçi, 2022; Vora, 2013). Among these strategies, migrating from the Gulf country of residence to a third country, most often in North America, to acquire citizenship there and come back to the Gulf with a "strong" nationality has been frequently pointed out. This underlines the many lines segmenting Gulf societies and the existing hierarchies of regional and national origins, added to those of class, ethnicity, religion and even gender, which foreign residents (as well as nationals) must engage with.

Therefore, understanding Gulf states' changing labour market and socio-demographic dynamics, Gulf countries' interaction with other major migration hubs, assessing the reasons behind the GCC region's attractivity (or lack thereof) for highly skilled professionals, as well as measuring the success and outcomes of attraction and retention measures, grasping Gulf migrants and prospective migrants' characteristics, motivations and shifting imaginaries regarding the Gulf region are of great importance for scholars and policymakers inside and outside the GCC. Understanding the dynamics of skilled migrations to and from the Gulf, and exploring the experiences and motivations underpinning such strategies, will also shed light on little-known processes and populations, and gather information useful to assess the perception, and use of reforms by foreigners "belonging" to the Gulf.

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[1] The term "migrant" here refers to foreign nationals.

4. Workshop Focus/Objectives

The workshop will focus on new patterns of highly skilled migration to, from, and within the Gulf, covering the period from 2010 until the present, but with a focus on the post-COVID-19 pandemic period. We define highly skilled migrants as those in the three upper categories of professions in the ILO ISCO-08 classification of professions (managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals).

The goals of the workshop are to uncover new patterns of high-skilled migration to, from, and within the Gulf, and assess the shifting role and place of GCC countries in world migration systems. This requires an in-depth analysis and assessment of Gulf states' policies to attract and retain high-skilled migrants, as well as the role of origin country policies in shaping the emigration of highly skilled individuals to the Gulf. In addition, the workshop aims to comprehensively identify the full diversity of economic and non-economic drivers of highly skilled migration to and from the Gulf states, and the impact of these migrations on Gulf societies and economies. The workshop will also look forward, evaluating possible future trends of highly skilled migration to and from the Gulf states.

To achieve these goals, the workshop will focus on four broad areas: (1) Highly skilled migrants' origin countries, (2) Gulf destination countries, (3) Intra-GCC migrations among the high-skilled, and (4) High-skilled migrations away from the Gulf and back.

Regarding Gulf migrants' **origin countries**, the workshop will analyse the drivers of high-skilled migration to the Gulf. The workshop will particularly encourage contributions developing a comprehensive view of the diverse migration drivers (including economic and non-economic factors, network effects, politics, socio-economic inequalities and differential access to resources, religion, and other concerns, etc.). We will examine the economic, developmental, socio-political and other impacts of high-skilled emigration to the Gulf states on migrants' origin countries and how that has affected perceptions of the Gulf states as well as popular debates and policies in these societies on highly skilled emigration to the Gulf states.

Within **Gulf destination countries**, the workshop will examine the specific policies aimed at attracting/retaining highly skilled workers in the GCC countries' reform processes e.g. social protection, working conditions, overall livability especially for workers with family, socio-economic integration, long-term stay and naturalisations, etc. We will also study the policies targeting foreign investors and wealth producers in the GCC countries, including the structural factors influencing the design and patterns of implementation of policies directed at highly skilled workers in Gulf destination countries. The impacts of these economic reforms and policies on the foreign and native populations in Gulf societies will also be studied, with special focus on the lived experiences of second and third-generation skilled foreign residents in the Gulf. Finally, at the international level, the workshop will unpack Gulf governments' patterns of competition and diplomatic strategies vis-à-vis other world regions in their efforts to attract foreign talent to their shores.

Regarding **high-skilled intra-GCC migration,** the workshop will study the economic and non-economic drivers behind the circulation of high-skilled migrant workers within the Gulf, particularly how these migrants rate and rank different countries within the Gulf, and how these shifting destination hierarchies influence their initial and subsequent migration decisions.

Finally, the workshop will also explore **skilled migrations away from the Gulf, as well as return migrations to the Gulf.** Through this focus, we seek to highlight the role of Gulf states in skilled migrants' long-term migration aspirations, and whether or not these migrants see Gulf states as a stepping stone to life elsewhere. In addition, we unpack the scale of return migrations to the Gulf and the factors that drive such returns, particularly skilled migrants' strategies of obtaining third country citizenship before their return to the Gulf.

5. Paper Focus/Topics

Papers on any of the following topics are welcomed for the workshop:

Gulf migrants' origin countries
- Policies encouraging/discouraging emigration of highly skilled workers (or specific sectors of such workers) to the Gulf states vs. other regions
- Structural drivers of skilled migration to the Gulf e.g. the role of politics, socio-economic inequalities, differential access to resources, cultural/religious concerns, etc.
- Skilled migrants' changing perceptions of the Gulf states and economies
- Relevance and gaps of origin countries' policies pertaining to highly skilled migration to the Gulf
- Economic/developmental/socio-political impacts of emigration of highly skilled nationals to the Gulf states e.g. brain drain vs. brain gain; knowledge transfers; ideational, social and other remittances)

Gulf destination countries
- Numbers and characteristics of highly skilled migrants to/in the Gulf states
- Analysis of policies targeting highly skilled workers and high-net-worth individuals in GCC countries' reform processes, for example long-term residency visas, naturalization pathways, etc.
- Impact of technological and other changes (development of AI, "knowledge-based economies"; decarbonization and greening of economies) on highly skilled migration flows to the Gulf
- Impact of recent economic and policy reforms on the attraction/retention of highly skilled workers
- Patterns of competition with other world regions to attract highly skilled workers
- Experiences of second- and third-generation skilled foreign residents in the Gulf and their attitudes towards remaining in the Gulf

Intra-GCC migration
- Scale and characteristics of intra-GCC skilled migrations and circulations
- Drivers of intra-GCC skilled migrations, including attempts at stepwise migration within the Gulf
- Patterns of competition between GCC states to attract foreign talents

Migrating from the Gulf and back
- The role of the Gulf in long-term stepwise migration strategies of highly skilled migrants, including shifting hierarchies of world destinations
- Drivers of high-skilled emigration away from the Gulf (for both nationals and non-nationals)
- High-skilled return migration patterns to the Gulf and the motivations behind return

6. Paper Structure, Referencing, and Format

The workshop welcomes contributions from all disciplines of the social sciences, theoretically grounded and empirically based on evidence (interviews, field surveys, statistical datasets, policy analysis, etc.).

Authors should make sure that their submitted paper is clearly structured and is as close to being ready for publication as possible. An abstract (approx. 250 words) and keywords must be provided.

Papers should clearly state the methodology applied in their research and indicate preliminary results.

In terms of referencing, authors should follow as closely as possible the indications given in the GRM Paper Guidelines.

7. Publication Plans

Selected papers from the workshop will be compiled into a journal special issue around the theme of "High-skilled Migration to the Gulf." Journals that specialize in international migration or Middle East research will be approached to assess their interest in such a special issue.

Papers that cannot fit in with the joint publication will be considered for publication individually in a journal or as a GRC paper, under the guidance of the workshop directors.

8. References

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9. Workshop Directors

Françoise De Bel-Air (Ph.D.) is a researcher and consultant based in Paris, France. A socio-demographer by training, she specializes in the demography of Arab countries, especially in

the Middle East and the Gulf region. Currently a Senior Fellow with the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population programme (GLMM) of the Gulf Research Center Foundation since 2013, she was a Senior Fellow at the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Amman, Jordan for several years and a part-time Professor at the Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, Florence, Italy. Her research focusses on population and socio-political dynamics in the region: youth, family structures, migration dynamics and policies, migration data. Her publications on migration issues and Gulf states include: "'Blocked Youth': The Politics of Migration from the SEM Countries before and after the Arab Uprisings." The International Spectator (53): 2018; "Youth Unemployment and Alienation in the Middle East: A Critical View". In Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of the Middle East, A. Salvatore et al. (Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022; "New Profiles of Demand in the Gulf Cooperation Council and Possible Impact on Labor Migration from Asia", in: ADBI/ILO/OECD (Eds.). Labor Migration in Asia: Changing Profiles and Processes, Tokyo/ Bangkok/ Paris: ADBI/ ILO/ OECD, June 2023, pp. 27-56, "The Politics of Migration in the Gulf States". In Introduction to Gulf Politics, Kh. Almezaini and K. Alexander (Eds). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (forth.); "As the Gulf Region Plots a Major Socio-Economic Transition, Its Highly Scrutinized Immigration Policies Are Yet to Yield Concrete Outcomes", Migration Information Source (forth.). She co-edited with Nasra Shah a special issue on "Recent Labour and Migration Policy Reforms in the Gulf States: Winners and Losers", Asia and Pacific Migration Journal (Forth., first quarter 2025).

Anju Mary Paul is Professor of Social Research and Public Policy at New York University Abu Dhabi. She holds a Bachelor's in Business Administration (First Class Honours) from the National University of Singapore, a Master's in Journalism from New York University, and a Ph.D. in Sociology and Public Policy from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is an international migration scholar with research interests that include emergent migration patterns, particularly to, from, and within Asia and the Middle East, gender and labor, globalization, and care policy. She is the award-winning author of *Multinational Maids: Stepwise Migration in a Global Labor Market* (Cambridge University Press 2017) and *Asian Scientists on the Move: Changing Science in a Changing Asia* (Cambridge University Press 2021). She is also the editor of *Local Encounters in a Global City* (Ethos Books 2017). Her research has been published in top journals in sociology and migration studies, including the *American Journal of Sociology; Social Forces; Migration Studies; the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies; Gender, Place & Culture; Global Networks; and Ethnic and Racial Studies*. She created the Global Care Policy Index, which quantitatively scores countries on the degree of social and labor policy protections they provide unpaid family caregivers and paid domestic workers. She has won numerous awards for her teaching and research, including the 2018 Thomas and Znaniecki Best Book Award from the International Migration Section of the American Sociological Association (ASA) and the 2018 Max Weber Award for Distinguished Scholarship from the Organizations, Occupations, and Work Section of the ASA.