Nasra M. Shah and Areej Jamal: Stepwise and Return Migration Between the Gulf, Europe, and North America – Pilot Survey Report

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Pilot Survey Report

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Introduction and Objectives

This pilot study aims to understand the complex transnational migration patterns of non-Gulf, highly skilled professionals. We included all nationals from developing countries who did not hold a Western passport. Existing studies including policy briefs published by contributors to the current GLMM-KAS project[1] show that several factors, among them the lack of naturalisation pathways in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, may lead these professionals to think of relocating to third countries in the Global North: Europe (Germany, France, and the UK) and North America (the USA and Canada). This type of move is often not a simple one-way trajectory. Diverse mobility types are emerging, such as stepwise migration, which uses the Gulf as a temporary stop. In some cases, these workers may even return to the Gulf later, sometimes as a circular or hierarchical trajectory (e.g., coming back with a 'stronger' nationality). By mapping these movements, the pilot project seeks to offer insights into the motivations, strategies, and outcomes of this stepwise skilled migration flow.

The study of highly skilled professionals migrating from Gulf states to third destinations is much needed. Gulf nations seek to diversify their economies away from oil and build competitive, knowledge-based industries to support their long-term goals. To do this, they must be able to attract and retain highly skilled workers. GCC governments have recently passed new laws, such as the Premium Residency Card (PRC) in Saudi Arabia and 'Golden Visas' in the UAE. These policies are designed to improve stability, offer long-term stays, and potentially even pathways to naturalisation, making the Gulf a more attractive place to settle.

However, despite these policy efforts, the Gulf still struggles with retention. While low-wage migrant workers are more often the focus of research (due to human rights concerns and their large numbers), much less is known about high-skilled foreign workers in the Gulf states. These professionals often experience temporality, meaning they can live there for many years but lack a secure path to staying permanently. This, among other things, encourages them to adopt smart strategies, such as using their