The Iran War and the Noncitizen Question in the GCC: Policy Lessons and Reform Pathways Beyond Talent Attraction

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Executive Summary

- **Context:** The 2026 US-Israel war on Iran dragged the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries into a conflict that they did not start nor did they support. Consequently, the UAE emerged as the most affected, bearing the brunt of Iranian attacks. In addition, Saudi Arabia was the target of Iranian retaliation, as well as Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, which were strongly affected due to their small geographic area relative to the scale of the strikes.
- **Challenge:** Considering that 40 to 90 percent of Gulf populations are noncitizens, the war has greatly affected noncitizens' lives in the region. Sustained dynamics, alongside reform failures, threaten to stymie the region's economic diversification plans that heavily rely on attracting and retaining high-skilled noncitizen workers. While the war, as of April 2026, does not seem to pose the challenge of mass exodus or crippling capital flight, the crisis offers several points for reflection that strengthen the case for further immigration and integration reforms to pivot from short-term attraction to long-term retention, achieving the desired sustained growth and resilience.
- **Findings and Analysis:** Many wartime reflective essays, investigative news reports, and interviews reveal that large numbers of the region's long-term residents have chosen to remain in the Gulf, including in the UAE, which they consider "home," contrary to exaggerated Western-origin articles claiming that the Gulf is facing mass exodus. Meanwhile, noncitizens who traveled amid the war and could not return to their homes in the Gulf also depicted a strong connection to the Gulf, describing feeling "stuck" in their countries of nationality. However, apart from the psychological impacts of war, two material challenges emerged. First, many noncitizen workers face heightened insecurity stemming from salary cuts, looming unemployment, and restricted mobility amid the war. Secondly, noncitizens who wished to temporarily leave did not have access to any consular support. Overall, these patterns highlight a series of precarities exacerbated by war and a strengthening sense of belonging among long-term residents to the Gulf—a form of de facto naturalization through which noncitizens come to hold citizen-like feelings of belonging despite the absence of formal citizenship—alongside weakening formal and informal ties to their countries of nationality.
- **Recommendations:** Evidence from qualitative interviews and secondary sources offers a series of policy suggestions to improve immigrant retention and alleviate individuals' economic hardships. First, GCC states can institute longer post-visa grace periods and social security for holders of recent skilled-worker permits, granting residents time to find meaningful employment while coping with wartime salary cuts or job loss, without the specter of emigration. These measures will also provide data regarding the benefits of more generously issued sponsor-free pathways by acting as pilot programs for long-term immigration reforms. Secondly, migrant-sending states should expand consular support targeting their most vulnerable citizens. Collectively, these measures enable GCC and sending states to address the critical needs of many lower and middle-class families residing in the region.