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Aspirations and Strategies to Remain in Saudi Arabia: the Case of Middle-Class South Asians

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EXPLANATORY NOTE

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Aspirations and Strategies to Remain in Saudi Arabia: the Case of Middle-Class South Asians

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Abstract

Saudi Arabia is the third-largest international migrant-receiving country in the world (IOM, 2021). Currently, Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis together form the largest migrant group in the country (GASTAT, 2022a). So far, there is a scarcity of literature specifically focusing on the experiences of middle-class South Asians in Saudi Arabia. Despite stringent migration policies and restrictive pathways to naturalisation and permanent residency, some migrants have managed to stay in Saudi Arabia for decades. Nevertheless, migrants remain cognizant of the transient nature of their residence. Consequently, when questioned about their plans to leave Saudi Arabia, middle-class South Asians remain mindful of various strategies and plans that could enable them to either maintain their residence in the host country or relocate to their country of origin or elsewhere. Moreover, the dynamic socio-economic and political climate of Saudi Arabia entails policies such as *Saudisation* and family levies that exacerbate uncertainties for the continued residency of middle-class migrants in the country. The introduction of premium residency schemes and the naturalisation of special talent simultaneously creates a stratifying element favouring those in positions of privilege. Against this backdrop, this paper draws from qualitative interviews and primary survey data and explores the future aspirations and strategies of middle-class South Asian migrants to remain settled by extending their stay in the dynamic socio-economic climate of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords

Saudi Arabia; South Asia; Gulf; *Kafala*; Migration

1. Introduction

“Ideally, I would like to stay in Saudi Arabia (forever). Even if my parents are not here if there is a way for us to stay here longer, I would like to stay(...). Four or five years from now, given that things are changing a lot here (in Saudi Arabia), it is becoming more difficult for migrants to stay here for a long time. I am still dependent right now (sponsored by my father), so as soon as my dad’s job status changes, I must leave, regardless of whether I want to stay. Not unless I find a way to, you know, have somebody sponsor me. The entire sponsorship system has changed significantly. I would love to stay here, but there are restrictions on this. If I can find a way around it, without it being ridiculously expensive or inaccessible(...)” (Razan, second-generation, Pakistani female).

Most of the existing Gulf migration scholarship discusses restrictive pathways of citizenship and permanent residency for migrants in Gulf countries, resulting in uncertainty and transience among migrants (Kamrava and Babar, 2012; Khalaf et al., 2014). Nevertheless, empirical research has shown that some temporary migrants have managed to live in these countries for decades and have revealed ambivalent and multiple modes of belonging in their temporary status (Errichiello and Nyhagen, 2021; Vora, 2013; Yousef and Khattab, 2023). Like Razan in the above example, many long-term residents in Saudi Arabia aspire to remain in the country despite the structural and institutional constraints which render them to a ‘permanent impermanent’ status (Ali, 2011). This article captures the themes of uncertainty and temporariness in the particular social-political context of Saudi Arabia when the country is undergoing political and socio-economic transformations (Brown and Farouk, 2021; Nurunnabi, 2017). The current reforms have implications for the way middle-class South Asian migrants envision their futures in Saudi Arabia.

This paper begins by outlining the methodology of the study. It then provides a context about the structures and conditions that facilitate permanent-temporary settlement for some migrants. Subsequently, the background on the current policy and institutional environment of Saudi Arabia and its implications for middle-class South Asians is discussed. Finally, it presents key findings on the desires and aspirations to remain in Saudi Arabia and the strategies implemented by migrants to extend their residence in the country.

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2. Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative insights and quantitative data from a wider mixed-methods study. The findings of this paper are part of an ongoing PhD research focused on the identity and belonging of middle-class South Asian migrants in Saudi Arabia. The study design involved administering an online survey (n=1019) to residents of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi ethnicities. Subsequently, narrative interviews were conducted (n=46), which included 14 family units and 16 separate interviews. Specifically, the participants were first-generation migrant parents and an adult child. The first-generation migrants were those who initiated the migration journey to Saudi Arabia, while most of the second-generation migrants were born and raised in Saudi Arabia. The interviews were the primary source of data, and a survey was employed to gather contextual and background information concerning the South Asian migrant

populations in Saudi Arabia. An online survey was distributed through my network of friends and family in Saudi Arabia and through social media platforms including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. The interview participants were partly recruited through the survey, that is, participants who agreed to take part in the interview process were interviewed, while some participants were recruited from my network of friends and colleagues.

This study focused on middle-class South Asians living with their families in Saudi Arabia. The online survey was open to all Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis living in Saudi Arabia. However, for the qualitative interviews, the main criterion was to recruit South Asian individuals living with their families in the country. The eligibility to keep their families in the country is usually determined by migrants' income and profession (Ameen, 2023; De Bel-Air, 2018). The study participants were differentiated from their low-wage counterparts by their ability to re-unify and live with their families in Saudi Arabia. Low-wage migrant labour men are characterised by low-skilled and manual labour jobs and mobility restrictions in the country. Participants were also different from the affluent or privileged class of migrants, who enjoy a relatively high level of security and mobility because of their nationality, income, and preferential treatment in the job market.

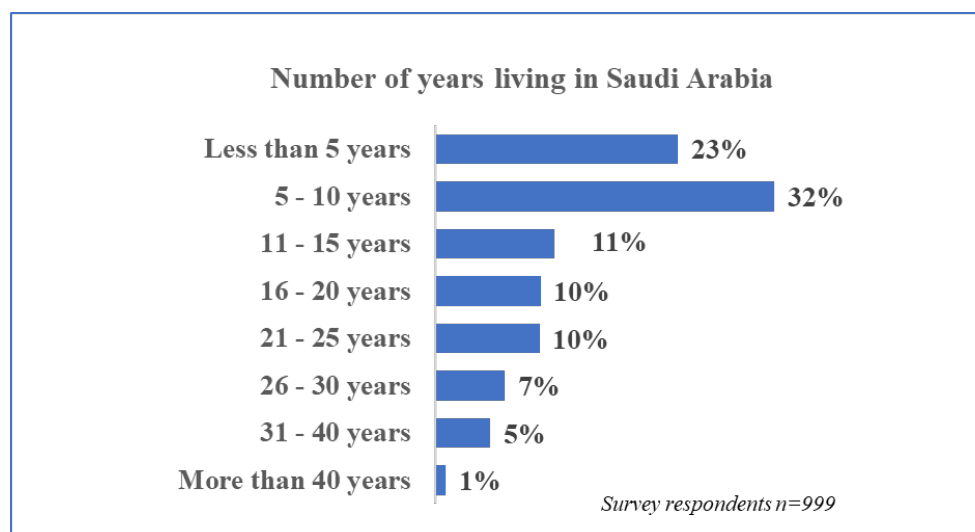
Considering my positionality in this research, as a second-generation South Asian born and raised in Saudi Arabia and having lived most of my life in the country, I acknowledge the challenges and benefits of my role as an insider to the participant groups I had access to. My position varied throughout the development of this study, depending on the generation, gender, and ethnic group I interacted with.

3. Permanent-Temporary Settlements in Gulf States

As in most of the other Gulf states, the '*Kafala*' (sponsorship) system is a key instrument for controlling migration in Saudi Arabia where migrants are tied to a '*Kafeel*' (sponsor) and can remain in the country as long as they have working visas or are sponsored by a *Kafeel* (Akzahrani, 2014; Rahman, 2018). A '*Kafeel*' can be a Saudi entity, citizen, or individual owning a business. A non-Saudi individual can also be a *Kafeel* for domestic workers provided they meet the conditions to hire them¹ (Alakeel, 2021; Shaker, 2019b). In the case of family migration, the primary migrant can sponsor family members as dependents (i.e., their spouses and children). Gulf countries allow temporary migration based on a working sponsor visa, and migrants are supposed to leave after the termination of the employment contract or retirement.

However, some migrants manage to live in these Gulf states for longer (Akıncı, 2019; AlMutawa, 2022; Lori, 2012). Such long-term settlements of migrants are facilitated by higher wages, better employment opportunities, and education and health facilities compared to their countries of origin. Socio-cultural and particularly religious similarities between locals (Gulf citizens) and Muslim migrants also incentivise migration to the region and the desire to remain in the country for longer periods (Errichiello, 2023; Fargues, 2011; Ishii et al., 2019).

There are no official published data reflecting the length of residence of migrants in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, empirical findings in the Gulf attest to the multi-generational presence of migrants in these states (Fargues, 2011; Shaker, 2019a). In the online survey, among n999 respondents, more than half (55%) of them had been living in Saudi Arabia for 10 years or less. Among these respondents, many first-generation migrants were relatively new. A third (33%) of South Asians had spent more than 15 years in the country (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Length of Residence in Saudi Arabia

Similar to most Gulf states, Saudi Arabia has developed policies that restrict permanent settlement of migrants in the country. Nevertheless, the country is home to many long-term migrants who have resided there for decades.

4. Socio-Economic Policies and Reforms Impacting Migrants in Saudi Arabia

“Changes like Saudisation are affecting many people. Many people have lost their jobs. I know quite a few people who are not young but are in their 40s or 50s and are losing their jobs. Some people do not have anything or anywhere to go. Like they never stayed in India or Pakistan, and they are forced to either go back or many people are jobless(...).Currently, it is very difficult to grow in companies because most higher positions, such as managerial roles, require Saudis. They (state authorities) are comparing salaries and so all highly paid positions should be Saudis now” (Yasir, second-generation, Pakistani man).

Like Yasir, several other study participants expressed concerns about their future jobs and career prospects in Saudi Arabia. The nationalisation of jobs has resulted in limited economic opportunities for professional migrants. Historically, the Saudi labour market, and more so, the private sector, is dominated by the migrant workforce (Adham, 2021; De Bel-Air, 2018; Hertog, 2013). As part of its ongoing Saudi Vision 2030 diversification plan announced in 2016 (Saudi Vision 2030, 2016), Saudi Arabia has rigorously implemented new labour market reforms. These reforms are aimed at employing more Saudis in the private sector to tackle the unemployment rates thereby reducing dependence on foreign migrant labour (Abdulkarim and Khalid, 2018; Badawood, 2018; Varshney, 2018) comprising around 90% of its employment, with regulated pay differences between nationals and foreigners. In 2011, the Saudi Ministry of Labor introduced the ‘*Nitaqat*’ program, which imposes an industry quota of national employment on private firms. The policy’s main aim is to raise the employment levels of nationals in the private sector. With strict sanctions imposed on non-compliant firms, the policy has a high compliance rate, but imposes significant costs on firms. Using a dataset from the Ministry of Labor covering the whole population of firms subject to *Nitaqat*, this thesis uses an econometric approach to study the impact of *Nitaqat* on Saudi employment, foreign employment and the exit rate of firms. This builds on existing literature by analysing the policy using a difference-in-differences approach. The results suggest that the policy has improved *Saudization* (the ratio of Saudis to total employment).

Policies aimed at the localisation of jobs for Saudi citizens (*Saudisation* policies) have been in place for years (Basahal et al., 2021; Kattan, 2015). However, since the introduction of the *Nitaqat* programme in 2011 (De Bel-Air, 2018), the implementation of such policies has intensified in scope and magnitude thereby restricting the entry of foreign workers into the labour market. Employers are obliged to follow nationality-based quotas limiting the number of workers of certain nationalities including Indians and Bangladeshis (Khaleej Times, 2021; Saudi Gazette, 2021). *Saudisation* policies impact migrants differently based on the professions and the sectors in which they are employed.

The state simultaneously introduced levies for migrant workers and their families (Ernst & Young, 2017) in line with the country's vision of diversifying its sources of income while also controlling the remittances sent to migrants' home countries (Badawood, 2019).

"In the last 3-4 years most (migrants) sent their families back to their home countries. They had to pay 400 riyals for each family member every month. I must also pay health insurance for my family members. Now, my apartment building is 80% empty, because most (migrant) families have left. They (the state authorities) have increased the price of everything. There is (VAT) tax and everything is currently expensive" (Zubayr, first-generation Bangladeshi man).

The residence permit (*Iqama*) serves as legal proof for migrants to reside and work in Saudi Arabia. Every year, sponsors or employers renew permits. According to the Saudi Labour Law, the associated fees and costs of renewing the residence permit are the employer's responsibility towards the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (Argaam, 2021; Qiwa, 2022). However, in practice, this is discretionary and varies based on migrants' experiences with sponsors/employers. For instance, some study participants had employers who covered the expenses of their residence permits, whereas others had to personally bear the costs of maintaining their residence permits. In the latter scenario, the cost of retaining one's family in Saudi Arabia is exceedingly high compared to their income. Many participants cited family levies and the implementation of VAT taxes as the main reasons forcing some families to leave the country (Al-Holayan, 2019; Faheem, 2019). It is noteworthy that the majority of the interviews in this study were conducted within the timeframe 2020–2022. This period coincided with the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a profound influence on a vast portion of the population (Alsharif, 2022; Castelier, 2020; Jamal, 2020). Consequently, a substantial number of migrants left Saudi Arabia during this period.

"Before 2016, everyone was stable and living in peace. However, after 2016, and mainly in 2017, they (the Saudi state) started introducing new laws (regarding family levies and VAT taxes) which started impacting us. Many people have begun to leave. People started pulling out their money from the country...They're (Saudi state) talking about citizenship and they're giving this premium residency to the VIP and things like that. And they are planning to roll out some more plans encouraging investors, especially" (Sulaiman, second-generation Indian man).

In its endeavour to generate revenues from diverse sources and to encourage foreign investment, granting the '*Special Privilege Iqama*' (premium residency permit) to foreigners intending to reside in the country for a longer-term was one of the major reforms announced under the Saudi Vision 2030. Additionally, as a part of its diversification strategy to attract special talent and highly-skilled individuals in the country, in 2021 a royal decree by the King of Saudi Arabia conferred citizenship to selected individuals² - an unprecedented step alluding to a more diversified and inclusive society (Alathari, 2021; Arab News, 2021).

5. Perceptions about the Current Premium Residency Options and Citizenship for Special Talents

The recently introduced reforms regarding citizenship for special talents and permanent residency options may seem to be a step towards inclusivity; however, in practice, they perpetuate existing inequalities (Akıncı, 2022; Ellermann, 2020) and remain out of reach for most long-term middle-class migrants in the country. The process of naturalisation in Saudi Arabia is perceived as rigid (Alsabeehg, 2022) and hardly accessible by most migrants, who express the opinion that the amendments in policies of naturalisation of special talent or highly-skilled migrants favour a privileged segment of the population.

“These citizenship and residency schemes in Saudi Arabia, if someone wants to get it, they need to have something to give to the country. Either you have a lot of money to buy it, or you have some special talent and invent something, maybe for the country, and give it to the country like a scientist. You must be of benefit to the country” (Sonia, second-generation Bangladeshi woman).

Most of the study participants discussed the premium residency options more than the citizenship amendments as they regarded naturalisation in Saudi Arabia as highly inaccessible given the exclusionary nature of its boundaries which are ethnocentric (comprising one dominant ethnic group) (Alsabeehg, 2022; Sater, 2014) and gendered (Altorki, 2000; Jamal, 2015; Joseph, 2000) where for instance, patrilineal descent remains the primary mode of obtaining Saudi citizenship. Furthermore, the naturalisation process in the country remains discretionary (decided by those in power)³ (Jamal, 2015; Saikali, 2023; Saudi Gazette, 2023a). The premium residency options are classed (Akıncı, 2022; Osmandzovic, 2023) which favour a certain segment of society as we shall see in the discussion below.

The premium permanent residency option is designed for people with high-income levels and economic resources that are inaccessible to the vast majority of migrants living in the country, including middle-class South Asians. The proposed fee for the *Special privilege iqama* is set at SR800,000 (\$213,333) for one time while the one-year temporary *iqama* (resident permit) costs SR100,000 (\$26,666) (Abbas, 2019; Saudi Gazette, 2019). The granting of *privileged iqama* is still in the pilot stages of implementation, and the implications of such a residency permit remain understudied. Most of the study participants viewed the introduction of residency schemes as opening future possibilities for longer and more stable settlements, which could have varied options for middle-class residents. Yet, in its present offer, the scheme was seen as unachievable and out of reach due to its high cost and so none of the participants pursued it.

“I think they (Saudi state) are doing it like Dubai is doing it. They are giving premium residency too for high-class people. They are also trying to do it here (in Saudi Arabia). I do not know anyone in my family or even my extended family who is remotely interested in that, because the amount which is required to set up all that is huge. If they (Saudi state) could have made it accessible, it would be nicer. By giving them (migrants) a chance to buy property and treat them as equals to Saudi nationals, these things could have a huge impact on someone’s decision to stay in a country” (Aamir, second-generation Indian man).

Aamir, like several others, wondered whether he would be granted the same rights and treated as an equal citizen and whether or not migrants would be immune to deportation if they were to acquire permanent residency in the country. Furthermore, while considering the economic investment associated with permanent residency options, some second-generation migrants felt they have the right to long-term settlement in Saudi Arabia considering it is their birthplace and questioned the justifiability of needing to pay for permanent residence in the country.

6. Neoliberal Options in a Global Economy

Some participants compared premium residency options in Saudi Arabia with similar investment options offered by other countries. They assess the benefits that other countries offer given the economic capital required.

“That’s not for working (professionals) like me. You know, I mean if I had that kind of money to spare (to invest) I would not have been living in Saudi Arabia. I would rather go somewhere else like in Europe or somewhere (in the West)” (Tauseef, a first-generation Indian man).

Tauseef’s consideration of investment elsewhere than Saudi Arabia alluded to the economic resources required to access residency schemes and his need for stability. Like Tauseef, some migrant men spoke about the fast-changing socio-economic climate where they often expressed concerns that ‘the rules in Saudi Arabia keep changing’, thus creating a sense of uncertainty. In their comparison of countries, some interviewees referred to residency and investment schemes in the UAE (which they considered more reliable in terms of stability) or spoke about other countries in the West (with more stable pathways to citizenship rights).

“We could pursue the (Saudi premium residency) if we see that there are proper plans in place. If I see something certain. For example, in the UAE they have very clear rules. They have very clear guidelines, and it has been established for a couple of years now. Also, expatriates can own properties (registered in their name) in the UAE which gives some sense of stability” (Razan, second-generation Pakistani woman).

Thus, for most study participants permanent residency should guarantee a sense of stability and security concerning the rights it entails. Notably, the introduction of reforms such as foreign investments and permanent residency options exhibited the cosmopolitan and inclusive image of Saudi Arabia as part of the neo-liberal finanscape (Appadurai, 1990), which aims to invite a diversity of individuals. However, it simultaneously reinforced the persisting social hierarchies for migrants in the country, by creating residency schemes which could be accessed by only a niche segment of individuals based on their privileged social class status.

7. Cultural Aspects

Despite the inaccessibility of the premium residency by a majority of the study participants, some of them spoke about the cultural aspects of Saudi Arabia (Errichiello, 2023) which could encourage some individuals to consider it in the future. For example, they considered religious motivations associated with Saudi Arabia’s position in the Islamic world (Kibria and Zakaria, 2022; Mandaville, 2022; Shams, 2021) that could encourage some Muslims to pursue the latest residency options offered by the country.

“I’m sure many people will come over here (in Saudi Arabia). They will like it, especially Muslim families. You know if they are getting residency options. I say the Muslim family because when people go to Western countries, many Muslim families struggle with the lifestyle of the Western world. Therefore, if Muslim families have the chance to live in the Middle East, they feel it is safer for their children. The environment is better than the Western countries in terms of exposure and the culture that we have in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East” (Salwa, second-generation Bangladeshi woman).

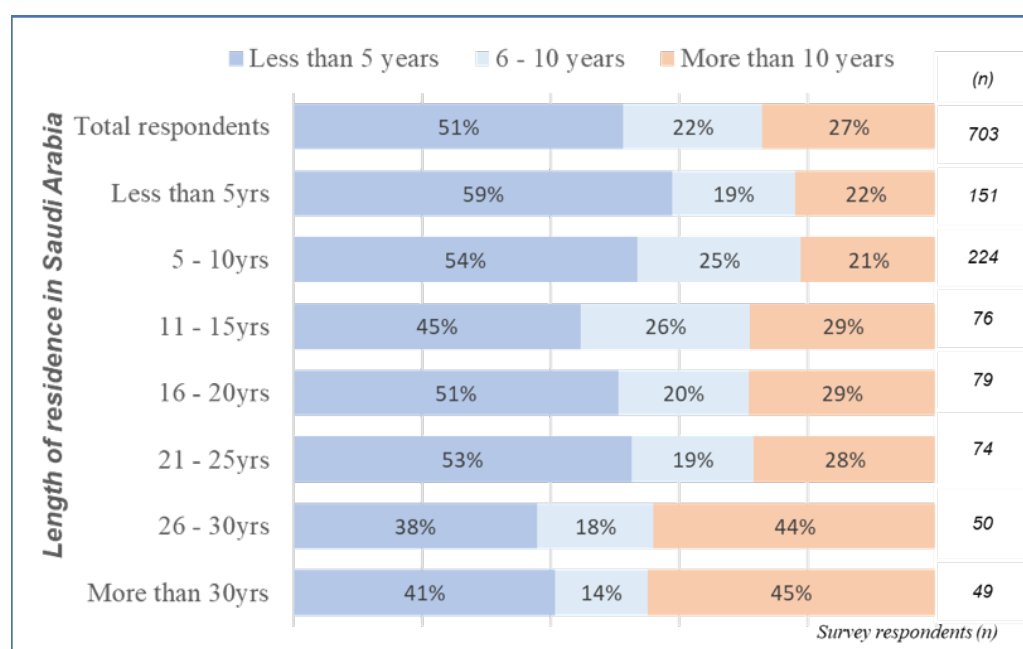
Salwa's reflections reiterate the religious belonging experienced by Muslim communities in Islamic societies (Hoque, 2019; Johnson, 2011; Phoenix, 2019; Shams, 2021). Most middle-class South Asian Muslim participants attached significance to living and keeping their families in an Islamic environment as an important consideration throughout their plans and strategies.

8. Middle-Class South Asians' Decisions and Strategies to Remain in Saudi Arabia

Despite structural constraints discouraging migrants' long-term residence and the inability to access existing premium residency schemes, the South Asians in this study desired to remain in Saudi Arabia. These aspirations resemble what Schewel (2020) refers to as 'embeddedness'- alluding to a sense of attachment to the place where individuals have lived most of their lives. Their embeddedness and sense of belonging to Saudi Arabia had both economic and social dimensions. The main aspirations remain related to the length of migrants' residence; familiarity with the place (Antonsich, 2010); the achieved standards of living (accumulate material prosperity); and the building of social community networks in the resident society (Akıncı, 2022; Ishii et al., 2019). The concept of belonging and attachment to places where one has lived for a long time is well-documented in the Gulf migration literature (AlMutawa, 2022; Errichiello and Nyhagen, 2021; Vora, 2013). South Asian migrants who expressed a desire to remain in Saudi Arabia for a longer period were motivated by economic, social, and emotional factors.

In the survey, respondents were asked for how long they intended to stay in Saudi Arabia. It was found that the intention to stay for less than five years was higher among most respondents (Figure 2). Upon further exploration in the interviews regarding the participants' plans to stay in Saudi Arabia, many of them expressed concerns regarding *Saudisation* policies, the family levies, and the increasing cost of living as factors influencing their decisions to remain in the country. In the survey, it was noted that those who had been living in Saudi Arabia for a longer period (more than 25 years) had a slightly higher tendency to extend their stay than relatively new migrants (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of Years of Stay in Saudi Arabia Planned, by Duration of Residence



The qualitative findings shed light on some of the strategies deployed by the South Asian middle class in Saudi Arabia to extend their stay in the country, which was dependent on their possession of and ability to mobilise their social and economic resources (Carling and Schewel, 2018; Van Hear, 2014).

The first strategy involved first-generation migrants, where some of them managed to extend their sponsorship beyond the end of their employment contract thanks to the good relations they built with their sponsor. The findings suggest that some South Asian interviewees extended their stay despite reaching their retirement age of 60 years (EOI, 2022; Refworld, 2016). In practice curtailment of work visa at a retirement age of 60+ years is discretionary - in the sense that it varies by individual firms and is not monitored or regulated by state authorities in Saudi Arabia as *Iqama* renewal is not dependent on an individual's age (Arab News, 2017; MLSD, 2005). Moreover, due to the lack of pension schemes or post-retirement security benefits for migrants in Saudi Arabia, they must rely on their individual economic and social resources to remain in the country (Akıncı, 2022). Sameer's account refers to his relationship with his sponsor: Sameer had been living in Saudi Arabia with his family for more than 40 years. He was part of a small private business in which he was involved in a decision-making role. Sameer mentioned that having a good '*Kafeel*' (sponsor) was a blessing.

"I will stay here as long as my work goes on. I have very good and peaceful relations with my Kafeel (sponsor). I am a free man. I am not bound to anyone. Alhamdulillah (Thank God) I have had a peaceful life here, living in the Holy City (Makkah)" (Sameer, first-generation Pakistani man).

Like Sameer, some other migrant men in the study spoke about their cordial social relations with their Saudi citizen-sponsors, who facilitated their long-term stay in the country. An arrangement between a Saudi citizen-sponsor and some skilled long-term migrants highlighted ambiguities in the *Kafala* institution (Lori, 2012; Thiollet, 2022). These arrangements usually underscored the interdependence of the migrants and sponsors. The sponsor benefited from the skills and knowledge the migrant needed for their work/business, and the migrant benefited from the assurance of the job and the economic security needed to stay in the country. By emphasising that he was a 'free man', Sameer implied his freedom of mobility (unlike low-wage migrant labour) in the country and his ability to make decisions in his job. Sameer spoke about his long-term presence and familiarity in Saudi Arabia and staying close to the holy sites of Islam as major determinants of his desire to extend his stay. However, like some migrants with families, Sameer and his son Asad highlighted the uncertainty attached to such aspirations. Asad had been living in Saudi Arabia for more than 20 years and decided to cancel his *iqama* (resident permit) because of the high fees attached to retaining it. He switched to temporary visit visas and kept travelling back and forth between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to keep in touch with his family in Saudi Arabia while also completing his university education in Pakistan. Asad, like many other migrants in the study, emphasised the volatility of changes in the socio-economic landscape of Saudi Arabia which had implications for middle-class migrants such as limiting market opportunities.

"Many expatriates have left in the last few years because many businesses were shut down. I also had to cancel my iqama (resident permit) after more than 20 years and switch to a temporary visit visa. We wanted to try and stay longer (in Saudi Arabia) however, this was not easy. Nowadays my father also talks about having difficulties in his business. Life is not as easy as it used to be three to four years ago. Business is not stable. Many rules and regulations have changed, thus impacting businesses" (Asad, Sameer's son, Pakistani second-generation).

Despite considering the uncertainties of staying for a long-term stay in Saudi Arabia, Asad also expressed his desire to return to Saudi Arabia after finishing university. At the time, Asad was actively looking for jobs through his social networks in Saudi Arabia.

“I think I want to come back here. It is a place with which I am familiar, and I have childhood memories here. I have some cousins here and I have asked them to help me look for job opportunities (in Saudi)...Basically, the lifestyle over there is good, there is peace. Pays and salaries are better. Our elders have spent time in the country. My father as well, and even before him, my grandfather was in Madinah; they had hotels in Madinah. So, not just my grandfather but also before him, many of my relatives have stayed in Saudi Arabia. That is why we feel like staying (in Saudi), and secondly, there is also Haram (holy site in Makkah) over there, that is why I think I should come here” (Asad).

Asad’s account indicates the second strategy that was commonly discussed by many second-generation participants which involved mobilizing their social and cultural capital (such as employability skills; and education) (Carling and Schewel, 2018; Van Hear, 2014) often acquired abroad (in countries of origin or elsewhere) while studying or working (Ali, 2011). Furthermore, Asad’s decision to return to and remain in Saudi Arabia reflected on economic rationale as well as the social and cultural dimensions of his belonging (Dakkak, 2022; Gardner, 2010; Vora, 2008; Yousef and Khattab, 2023).

The third strategy was least accessible as it entailed the aspirations of some South Asian middle-class migrants to obtain citizenship of countries in the West and then return to Saudi Arabia as holders of a Western country passport. As Zayn suggests:

“My older brothers are in Australia, so I’ll move there. I’ll take the (Australian) passport and come back to Saudi Arabia I think...I will consider getting either a normal passport or a diplomatic passport...Because to be honest, with anyone who is from India and Pakistan, or Bangladesh, when they go for a job interview, they’re getting 8,000 riyals and 20 days leave in one year. And when people with the same qualifications but with different passports such as UK or American, they get 20 to 35,000 riyals and with every six months they’re getting 20 days leave” (Zayn, a second-generation Bangladeshi man).

Gulf scholarship has evidenced the perceived benefits of possessing Western countries’ passports and residing in these countries could seemingly surpass the structural hierarchies experienced by migrants (Akıncı, 2019; Bristol Rhys, 2010; Gardner, 2008; Vora and Le Renard, 2021). Their Western passports could help them find better job opportunities, better wages (GASTAT, 2022b; GLMM, 2017; Le Renard, 2020), and relatively less racialisation towards their often-stereotyped ethnicities in these Gulf states (Bristol Rhys, 2010; Vora and Le Renard, 2021). Labour and migration systems in Gulf countries are differentiated and hierarchised based on their nationalities, as exemplified in Zayn’s account, where individuals with American, Canadian, or British nationalities were perceived to have higher socio-cultural status (thus received higher wages) compared to individuals holding passports from South Asian countries.

The fourth strategy to extend stay in Saudi Arabia involved second-generation migrants sponsoring their first-generation parents through various visa options. This is exemplified in Shahid’s account, who had been living in Saudi Arabia for more than four decades.

“Now the rules are so relaxed for the parents. About two years ago, retired parents could go under the sponsorship of their son if he was working in Saudi Arabia. Now that the system has been removed, they have replaced it with what is called a visit visa or family visa where you can get a multiple entry visa for a year. You know now that it has become cheaper than maintaining an iqama (residency permit) here (in Saudi Arabia). Now, I have a very good chance to live in Saudi Arabia for a longer time because my elder son prefers to live in Saudi Arabia. And he will somehow manage to live here. If he lives here, I can live here now” (Shahid, first-generation Indian father).

For ageing migrants like Shahid, it is essential to stay closely connected emotionally and geographically, with their families - children and grandchildren (Bolzman et al., 2017; Ganga, 2006; Palladino, 2019). Shahid's son, Nihal grew up in Saudi Arabia and travelled to several countries (in the West) for his education after which he decided to return and stay in the country. He now lives in Saudi Arabia with his wife and intends to keep his father close to the family.

“There is no way I will let my father live alone anywhere. He will stay here (in Saudi) with us... This is a place unfortunately we cannot settle down in (forever). I wish we could. I wish that we had the option of settling down here. If we had done so, we would have planned for it differently. We would have set ourselves up financially. And you know, in other aspects and socially as well to live for the rest of our lives... So, there is always that limbo that you are always living in. That state of flux, where you need to plan for your future. But at the same time, you would like to stay here as long as you can” (Nihal, second-generation Indian, Shahid's son).

Nihal described his desire to stay in Saudi Arabia for a longer term, while also underlining the significance of staying close to family (Akıncı, 2022). But just like his father (Shahid), Nihal reflected on their temporal and liminal status in Saudi Arabia and reiterated the importance of possessing economic and social resources (Kofman, 2018; Van Hear, 2014) in strategising their plans to stay longer in the country.

Finally, the findings concerning the participants' decisions and strategies to remain in Saudi Arabia revealed gendered aspects. In the survey, South Asian migrant women in Saudi Arabia mostly aspired to stay longer in the country compared to their male counterparts (Chi-square = 16.864a; P value = 0.002) (Table 1).

Table 1. South Asian Men and Women's Intentions to Stay in Saudi Arabia

How many more years do you plan to stay in Saudi Arabia?				
	Total		Men	Women
(Figures in %) N=703 survey respondents				
Less than 5 years	51		53	42
6 – 10 years	22		23	17
More than 10 years	27		24	41

The tendency to aspire for a long-term stay in Saudi Arabia was common among first and second-generation South Asian women. Findings from this study corroborate the existing research (Leonard, 2002; Vora, 2008) which emphasized how South Asian migrant women in the Gulf revealed transformation in ideas of selfhood and upbringing of families in these countries - which influence their sense of belonging and aspirations to remain in the Gulf states. However, their options and choices to remain in or leave Saudi Arabia were mostly influenced by their male relatives whom they accompanied as dependents on their migratory journey. As illustrated in Razan's account at the beginning of this paper, almost all women participants lived with their families in Saudi Arabia; thus, their decisions and strategies to remain were usually dependent on their spouses' or fathers' plans.

“If I leave this country (Saudi Arabia) I would want to marry someone who plans to come to Saudi Arabia so I can come back to this country. Perhaps, if not this country, then I would prefer any other Muslim country. It is important to stay in a Muslim country” (Sonia, second-generation Bangladeshi woman).

Sonia was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. She had just completed her university education in Saudi Arabia. Sonia mentioned that it was very unlikely for her father to return to Bangladesh as he had a good and secure job and that her father’s *Kafeel* was very supportive. However, her father was planning to send their family to Bangladesh because of the family levies and the rising cost of living in Saudi Arabia. Sonia expressed her desire to marry someone in Saudi Arabia as her strategy to continue staying in the country. Some second-generation women participants also aspired to pursue careers in the globalising economy of Saudi Arabia, where they could continue to stay through work visas, unlike their first-generation mothers, who were not working and were usually confined to domestic roles. Moreover, the recent societal changes concerning the female population in Saudi Arabia have significant implications in terms of their understanding of societal roles and future opportunities within the country (Eum, 2019). For instance, previously most employment opportunities for women in Saudi Arabia were confined to traditionally feminised sectors, such as healthcare and education. However, the current socio-economic landscape provides broader career options for women in the country (Al Madani, 2018; Saudi Gazette, 2023b). Nonetheless, as previously discussed, these opportunities remain restricted for migrant women due to various policy and structural constraints, such as *Saudisation*.

9. Conclusions

Drawing from a mixed-methods study, this paper captures middle-class South Asian migrants’ aspirations and strategies to remain in the fast-changing political and socio-economic climate of Saudi Arabia. Research shows that existing policies such as *Saudisation* and family levies exacerbate the vulnerabilities and uncertainties faced by migrants, discouraging long-term family settlements in the country. Furthermore, the recently introduced residency reforms, such as *Special Privilege Iqama* schemes in Saudi Arabia, have a stratifying element that favours individuals in positions of privileged social class, thus making it inaccessible to a majority of middle-class South Asians. Despite structural and institutional constraints, the middle-class migrants in this study expressed a desire to remain in Saudi Arabia. The findings illustrated how middle-class South Asian migrants navigate through the socio-economic situation and policies and actively seek strategies to remain in Saudi Arabia. These strategies reflect how the *Kafala* (sponsorship) institution is both a factor of insecurity and security, depending on the migrant’s relations and mutual interdependence with their *Kafeel* (sponsor). In addition to the emotional aspects of belonging and familiarity, strategies employed by migrants to remain in Saudi Arabia are determined by their economic, social, and cultural resources as well as their ability and potential to leverage these resources to prolong their stay in Saudi Arabia.

End Notes

¹ The domestic labour recruitment website Musaned, developed by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, outlines rules and regulations for recruiting domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. See for example: Shaker, Annas, 2019 and Alakeel, 2021 (linked in bibliography).

² There is no official statistics available publicly about the number of naturalised citizens in Saudi Arabia. But in November 2021, several media reports provided profiles of some of the individuals who were naturalised under a royal decree. See for example below links:

- <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1966746/saudi-arabia>
- <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/11/13/Saudi-Arabia-naturalizes-five-prominent-citizens>
- <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/11/15/In-pictures-27-academics-and-religious-scholars-granted-Saudi-Arabian-citizenship>
- <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/11/14/In-pictures-The-latest-four-distinguished-professionals-to-receive-Saudi-citizenship>

³ In the beginning of January 2023, Saudi Arabia announced a royal decree that modified Article 8 of their citizenship law. This amendment transferred the ultimate power to grant citizenship from the Minister of Interior to the Prime Minister, who is currently Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. See for example: Saikali, Sussan, 2023 and Saudi Gazette, 2023a (linked in bibliography).

Disclosure

The views in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author. The data presented in the paper is part of a wider PhD research focusing on South Asian migrant families in Saudi Arabia.

The results in the study are not representative of the entire South Asian population in Saudi Arabia; they are restricted to the sample that was selected using non-random sampling techniques.

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