



**Gulf Research Center**  
Knowledge for All



## Workshop Summary

### Highly Skilled Migration to the Gulf States

Gulf Research Center's Meeting Investigates the Future of Labour and Migration to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf

Riyadh, 1 - 2 December 2024





## Workshop Summary

### **Vision 2030 and the Socio-Economic Reform Process: The Future of Labour and Migration in Saudi Arabia**

#### **Highly Skilled Migration to the Gulf States: How Do GCC Countries Fare in the Global Competition for Talent?**

**The Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population Programme (GLMM) of the Gulf Research Center (GRC), in collaboration with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)**

Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

What is the future of labour and migration in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states? How can the region better attract and retain foreign talents to meet their labour force needs, especially within the context of their various economic transformation agendas? These are the questions that were discussed during an expert meeting held at the Gulf Research Center in Riyadh on December 1 and 2, 2024. The two-day event was organized as part of the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population Programme (GLMM) of the Gulf Research Center (GRC) in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Foundation (KAS) Regional Programme for Gulf States. The event gathered local and foreign academics, experts, and stakeholders from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, as well as from major migrant sending countries: India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tunisia, and Egypt and international organizations.

Global advancements in technology, particularly automation and artificial intelligence (AI), and economic diversification policies in the Gulf states are fundamentally reshaping labour market and migration dynamics. Saudi Arabia has responded by investing in high-value sectors such as renewable energy, healthcare, and ICT, fostering a knowledge-based economy to help diversify its economy away from oil dependence. Focusing on Vision 2030 and the socio-economic reform process in Saudi Arabia, the first day of the meeting explored the impact of these changes and reforms on the Saudi labour market and on migration dynamics, currently and in the near future. Participants further discussed the various ways to attract and retain more foreign talents and highly skilled foreign workers to better advance reform policies and generate growth in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. This included a debate on the outcomes of recent measures to streamline the labour market and grant rewarding career prospects to all workers to assess the place of Gulf states in the global competition for talents vis-à-vis other world regions.



Attracting international talent while nurturing local expertise is vital for filling immediate skill shortages and creating a sustainable workforce supply, especially in Saudi Arabia. Presentations acknowledged the speed of reforms and exceptional number and scope of measures taken to best train young citizens to seize the opportunities offered by the new economy, yet also underlined the need to anticipate the effects of future jobs automation and boost labor productivity in the Kingdom, in a context of demographic expansion and skill-biased technological change. It was suggested that adapting training systems and enhancing collaboration between education and industry to equip young citizens with the necessary “soft skills,” adaptability and on-the-job experience, better aligning skills with market demands, and fostering more gender inclusivity will help Saudi Arabia in particular, boost its labor productivity and position itself as a leader in workforce innovation and economic growth.

Recent groundbreaking measures such as the Labour Reform Initiative and the Premium Residency Programme, more flexible visa options, tax-free wages, and relative ease of securing employment are comparative incentives to choose the Gulf states over other migration hubs. Nonetheless, job insecurity and shortness of contract duration, lack of short-to middle-term visibility regarding outcomes of Saudi and other Gulf countries’ job localisation processes and labour reforms, inclusiveness issues such as the nationality-based wage differentials and uncertain prospects for sustainability of migrants’ rights and other reforms still impede the attractiveness of the Gulf region to international talents. The participants called on these issues to be further addressed to unleash foreign talents’ potential for knowledge transfer and streamlining of the reform process, thereby making the region more competitive in the global labour market.

The Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population Programme (GLMM) at the Gulf Research Center (GRC) was established in 2011. GLMM gathers statistics on labour, population, and migration on all GCC countries data which are made freely available on its website. Furthermore, GLMM organizes webinars and expert workshops, and publishes its results in the form of factsheets, policy briefs, research reports, and books. All activities aim at contributing to the improvement of the understanding and management of Gulf Labour migration, population, and labour markets, engaging with and respecting the viewpoints of all stakeholders.

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