

Policy Report

Special Issue

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

No.1

Qatar's Policy Landscape and its Impact on Highly Skilled Migration

Ameena Almeer, Misba Bhatti, Zahra Babar

Executive Summary

Qatar's labour market is undergoing a significant transformation, shifting focus from low-skilled to highly skilled migrants. This study examines the long-term welfare and retention of highly skilled migrants from Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, addressing a critical gap in Qatar's immigration policies.

Qatar's strategic objectives, as outlined in Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV2030), include workforce nationalisation, creating a knowledge-based economy, transitioning to high-income migrants in skilled professions, and economic diversification. However, several challenges impede these goals including Qatarisation efforts conflict with attracting highly skilled labour, lack of affordable long-term settlement pathways for skilled migrants, uncertainty in long-term employment prospects, insufficient policies supporting family cohesion for migrants, absence of standardised annual leave policies for home country visits and competition with the UAE, particularly in visa flexibility and social protection.

Despite these challenges, Qatar offers significant opportunities including high earning potential and no income tax, a wide knowledge base in AI and emerging technologies among existing skilled migrants, cultural and religious affinity, particularly for migrants from Arab states and Pakistan, family-friendly lifestyle and secure environment and potential for skilled migrants to contribute to knowledge transfer and economic development.

Qatar's Policy Landscape and its Impact on Highly Skilled Migration

To address these challenges and capitalise on opportunities, the policy brief proposes several policy recommendations:

- Facilitate entry and retention of highly skilled women through gender quotas and resources for female dependents.
- Create long-term migration pathways not linked to employment status.
- Implement clear guidelines for AI usage in the workplace.
- Develop employee welfare forums and job search portals for skilled migrants.
- Introduce unemployment insurance and longer grace periods post-employment termination.
- Monitor competing industries' human resource initiatives in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.
- Facilitate public sector coordination between the Gulf states for short-term project visas.

The policy brief also identifies future areas for policy examination, including:

- Settlement pathways for aging populations.
- Cooperation between ministries for lifestyle and integration programs.
- Easier pathways for intra-GCC migration.

Key findings emphasise the importance of embedding migrants' families into society and the labour market, with a focus on increasing opportunities for women under family sponsorships. Highly skilled migrants express a strong desire to remain in Qatar, highlighting the need for mechanisms to increase job security and ease job transitions.

The policy brief concludes that effective retention of high-quality migrants in Qatar will require responsive policymaking that addresses emerging demographics of highly skilled migrants and ensures their social and economic welfare. Particular attention should be given to the upskilling potential of Pakistani, Indian, and Filipino nationals and international students in Qatar, due to their numbers, willingness to settle, and combination of cultural awareness with highly skilled input.

Introduction

The existing literature on migration to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries predominantly emphasises low-skilled migrants. This trend also applies to Qatar, which has emerged as a hub for regional migrants from South and Southeast Asia and Arab countries. Recent immigration policies and legislative reforms in Qatar have primarily targeted low-skilled migrants, especially as Doha prepared to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. To address this policy gap, this study looks at the long-term welfare and retention of highly skilled migrants from six key countries: Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines.

Jordan, Tunisia, and Egypt, as Arab sending countries, are being actively engaged by Qatar to foster bilateral migration corridors. These nations, sharing linguistic, religious, and cultural affinities, represent a demographic that is increasingly important for Qatar's long-term settlement strategies. While nationals from India, Pakistan, and the Philippines have traditionally been employed in low-skill professions, recent manpower agreements between Qatar and Pakistan, as well as Qatar and the Philippines, suggest an evolving scenario. Additionally, the burgeoning Indian middle class and Qatar's geographic proximity to the South and Southeast Asian regions indicate a growing potential for more highly skilled migrants arriving in Qatar. As such, addressing the needs and integration of these highly skilled migrants has become increasingly critical for the well-being of Qatar's future labour market.

Qatar's Policy Landscape and its Impact on Highly Skilled Migration

The data for this report was collected through desk research and in-person interviews. In total, 11 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including research and policy centers, UN Doha offices, law firms, embassies, consulting firms, and highly skilled professionals residing in Qatar.

Qatar's strategic, economic, and labour market objectives outlined in Qatar National Vision 2030 (QNV2030) are: long-term nationalisation of the workforce (Qatarisation), creation of a knowledge-based economy, transitioning from low-income migrants to high-income migrants in highly skilled professions and diversification of the local economy, particularly hospitality, retail, and tourism.

Current challenges

Qatar currently faces several interrelated challenges in its labour market and migration policies. The Qatarisation of the labour force, particularly in the private sector, poses a challenge for attracting highly skilled labour, especially in the absence of comprehensive skill-sharing incentives between highly skilled migrants and the growing number of Qataris in the workplace. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of financially accessible medium or long-term settlement pathways for highly skilled migrants who prefer to stay in Qatar, and the high price of long-term residency visas and investment schemes.

Highly skilled migrants face significant uncertainty in finding their next employment prospects once their current employment arrangements lapse, as their ability to stay in the country is employment-based. Moreover, a long-term increase in the public sector retirement age and leniency in migrants' ability to change sponsorships once they reach the age of 60 would positively impact both high-skill migrant retention and Qatarisation efforts. The retirement age for citizens and migrants in public sector positions is 60 years old, with no specified retirement age for private sector employees. Expatriate workers over 60 must submit employment extensions as written requests and are not permitted to change their sponsorship.

The current system lacks policies that support long-term family cohesion of migrants, including allowing female highly skilled migrants to bring their spouses as easily as male highly skilled migrants. Additionally, there is no standardised policy on annual leave for home country visits, both in the private and public sectors.

Qatar faces strong competition from the UAE in several key areas. These include the unavailability of visas that are delinked from employment and fewer pathways to permanent residency compared to the UAE's remote work visas and investment visas. The unavailability of pension funds for migrants is a major hindrance to the retention of highly skilled migrants, as pension laws currently apply only to Qataris, GCC nationals, and those who are self-employed (Insureds) as per the Social Insurance Law (Qatar Law No. 1 of 2022). In comparison, the UAE recently introduced voluntary pensions to replace end-of-service indemnities which cover all foreign workers. Furthermore, other GCC countries provide residents visa-free access to more countries than Qatar.

University graduates previously experienced limited and unclear pathways for breaking into the Qatari job market after graduation, and a need to widely publicise new settlement pathways such as the Sahem programme to counteract traditional perceptions held by graduates.

Opportunities

The opportunities present in Qatar's labour market and migration landscape are significant and multifaceted. The high earning potential and no income tax are major pull factors. There is also currently a wide knowledge base on the use of AI and emerging technologies within existing highly skilled migrants, which demonstrates the ability to stay up to speed on developments in their field and methods for enhancing efficiency.

For highly skilled migrants, particularly those from Arab states and Pakistan, there is a strong willingness to stay in Qatar long-term, driven by an affinity for its cultural and religious values, and an inclination towards a slower-paced lifestyle. It also offers a family-friendly lifestyle and a safe and secure environment which also attracts migrants to come to Qatar.

Qatar also has the ability to improve the experience of fixed-term "target earner" migrants by moving them to mid-to-senior level positions, which incentivises fruitful return to their sending countries and positive economic impact, especially for Arab countries with whom Qatar is building relationships. This works by combating brain drain in sending countries by giving highly skilled migrants opportunities for higher earnings, titles, and skill development to eventually take home. Furthermore, they will have the ability to supervise and impart skills and knowledge to Qatari employees, simultaneously embedding that knowledge into respective organisations and sharing it with employees who will stay in the country long-term. This could potentially change the incentives of highly skilled migrants who first intend to settle short-term but may later decide to settle long-term in Qatar, thus developing its economy.

The introduction of e-services by the Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Interior and online platforms has improved migration governance, processes, and job mobility for employees. The establishment of visa centres has notably improved the efficiency of biometrics, medical examinations, and contract signing. However, for highly skilled migrants, these processes can occasionally cause delays in the migration journey, potentially deterring them from choosing Qatar as their destination.

Looking forward, Qatar's Third National Development Strategy, announced in January 2024, aims to modernise the country's work environment by introducing flexible working arrangements, including remote work options. This initiative is designed to enhance employee mobility and adapt to evolving global work trends.

Policy recommendations and intended impacts:

Section 1: Broader recommendations:

1. There is a pressing need for policies to facilitate the entry and retention of highly skilled women in key sectors. This may include gender quotas within bilateral manpower agreements between Qatar and other Arab countries including Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt.
2. Creation of resources in Arabic and English geared towards female dependents of employed men to facilitate their entry into the job market, thus leveraging their relatively limited restraints for job market entry (including not requiring new visas).
3. Creation and implementation of long-term migration pathways that are delinked from employment status for highly skilled migrants, such as the Golden Visa in UAE.
4. Creation of more policies that enable female highly skilled migrants to bring their spouses.

Qatar's Policy Landscape and its Impact on Highly Skilled Migration

5. More streamlined and transparent migration policies are required, including clear expectations on documentation, application timelines, and acceptance rates.
6. Highly skilled migrants contribute significantly to Qatar's economy through local consumption and spending. While remote work policies can boost Qatar's appeal to skilled professionals, policymakers must address the potential reduction in economic input if migrants reside outside the country for extended periods.
 - a. Implementation of remote work policies must maintain the benefits of having a skilled workforce physically present in Qatar.

Section 2: Enhancing efficacy of technological, sustainability, and development strategies:

1. Clear guidelines in the workplace for the use of AI to avoid ambiguity within and between workplaces, considering the varying levels of openness regarding AI usage. This includes tailored guidelines for specific sectors, such as:
 - a. Guidelines on generative writing AI to avoid plagiarism in the education sector.
 - b. Guidelines on image-generating AI for creative and entertainment sectors.
 - c. Restrictions on the use of proofreading and generative AI in sectors such as consulting, law, and media which are heavily reliant on protecting clients' intellectual and private property rights. This is relevant for high-skill professions including translation, research, photography, and education.
2. On retaining existing highly skilled migrants who may be overtaken by AI: encourage employee development funds and other continuing professional development courses which:
 - a. Help existing employees hone skills directly related to using AI to avoid obsolescence and furloughing.
 - b. Develop additional high-value skills that advance their competencies into new areas and bolster their existing expertise.
3. On recruiting future highly skilled migrants trained to use AI: emphasis on organisational skill sharing, staggering recruitment of AI-trained employees, and focusing on higher-level positions to avoid wide-scale redundancies of less senior employees in the transition to highly skilled migrants.

Section 3: Enhancing efficacy of retention policies:

1. Creation of employee welfare forums organised by sector or workplace, which allow highly skilled migrants to contribute to the development of their workplace and foster a sense of embeddedness into the environment.
2. Creation of a job search portal for highly skilled migrants already employed in Qatar that allows them to search for jobs that match their skills.
3. Encourage the creation of employee or organisational welfare forums to provide highly skilled migrants with a greater degree of socio-economic integration into work communities and promote long-term affinity by bettering their respective workplaces.
4. Unemployment insurance and a longer grace period on termination of employment.
5. Creation of visa schemes that are independent of employment contracts.

Section 4: Retaining migrants in competition with the UAE and KSA:

1. Closer monitoring of competing industries' human resource management initiatives of corresponding sectors across these three states, including aviation and construction. This would allow workforce planning based on the region's adjacent mega-project construction and sector growth timelines.
2. Public sector coordination between Gulf states to facilitate the flow of highly skilled migrants, including those in oil and gas who may require work visas for short-term projects in neighboring countries.

Future areas for policy examination:

1. Settlement pathways for aging populations, including immigration pathways for parents of migrants, recruitment platforms catered to older people, and an incremental raise in retirement age.
2. Cooperation between the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Social Development and Family to ascertain suitable lifestyle, recreation, and integration programs for highly skilled migrants with families, including children attending school in Qatar.
3. Easier pathways for intra-GCC migration, especially for migrants whose employers require intra-company transfers.

Conclusions

Throughout the study, it became evident that a key factor in the long-term retention of highly skilled migrants is focusing on embedding migrants' families into society and the labour market, including increasing opportunities for women under family sponsorships as an immediate priority, and potentially for aging populations in the future.

Additionally, highly skilled migrants themselves continually reported a strong desire to remain in Qatar despite the lack of clarity on their long-term employment and promotion prospects. Further safeguarding mechanisms to increase job security or ease the transition into new jobs are essential to creating a conducive mindset for current employees. This will allow them to strategically assess their prospects for staying in the country long-term, alongside organisational initiatives that ensure skill and knowledge retention in the event employees do not remain.

Finally, the upskilling potential of Pakistani, Indian, and Filipino nationals and international students in Qatar must receive immediate focus due to their number, willingness to settle, and combination of cultural awareness with highly skilled input. Policymaking in Qatar over the coming years will result in effective high-quality migrant retention by responsively breaking new ground with emerging demographics of highly skilled migrants and ensuring their social and economic welfare early.

Contact

Philipp Dienstbier
Director
Regional Programme Gulf States
European and International Cooperation
philipp.dienstbier@kas.de

Imprint

Published by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2025,
Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany

This publication was published with financial support of
the Federal Republic of Germany.

This policy report is part of a collaborative project with the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM) Programme of the Gulf Research Centre. It has been extracted from a chapter in our comprehensive publication, "Highly Skilled Migration to the Gulf States: How do GCC Countries Fare in the Global Competition for Talent." This report is one of several policy reports derived from individual chapters from the publication, each authored by different experts. All related policy reports are available separately on the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) website [here](#).

This publication of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. is solely intended for information purposes. It may not be used by political parties or by election campaigners or supporters for the purpose of election advertising. This applies to federal, state and local elections as well as elections to the European Parliament.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Regional Programme Gulf States.