GLMM Factsheet

No. 14, April 2026

A Gulf Crisis Is Also a Migrant Crisis

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Impacting all Gulf residents' physical and mental safety, the US-Israel war on Iran has also had concrete effects on Gulf populations through employment channels, investments, public finances, and travel disruptions. Business shutdowns, price hikes, and the downgrading of economic growth prospects will affect all residents' future opportunities in the region. Nonetheless, migrants may be especially affected by these events.

First, the very scale of foreign presence remains important. Compared to 2022, the number and share of non-nationals in resident populations were higher in 2024 (Table 1). Any regional crisis thus has immediate demographic consequences for migrants, not just for citizens.

Table 1. Total and foreign populations in Gulf states (2022; 2024)

	Total population		Foreign nationals		% foreign nationals	
Country	**2022**	**2024**	**2022**	**2024**	**2022**	**2024**
Bahrain	**1,524,693**	**1,588,670**	810,682	848,934	53.2	53.4
Kuwait	**4,589,643**	**4,881,254**	3,086,747	3,315,086	67.3	67.9
Oman	**4,730,648**	**5,203,674**	1,894,784	2,248,503	40.1	43.2
Qatar	**2,878,202**	**3,143,491**	2,529,362*	N.A.	87.9**	N.A.
Saudi Arabia	**32,175,224**	**35,300,280**	13,382,962	15,665,022	41.6	44.4
UAE	**10,288,946**	**11,294,243**	8,957,263*	N.A.	87.1**	N.A.
Total	**56,187,356**	**61,411,612**	**30,661,800***	**N.A.**	**54.6****	**N.A.**

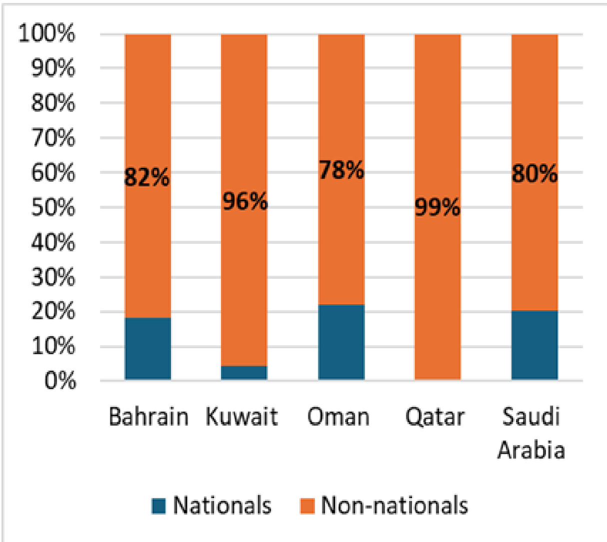
Source: National institutes of statistics and GLMM's estimates based on data published by national statistical institutes; * GLMM's estimate, based on data published by national statistical institutes (see link); ** The percentage is calculated on the basis of population estimates.

Second, this pattern is even sharper in employment, especially in the private sector where Gulf economies are most dependent on migrant labour. Non-nationals accounted for 78 and 80%, respectively, of Oman and Saudi Arabia's private-sector employed population in 2024, and up to 99.4% of Qatar's private-sector labour force that year (Figure 1).

Moreover, the sectors most exposed to war-induced market shocks are precisely those where foreign workers are concentrated. Transport and logistics, tourism and hospitality, infrastructural projects, fishing, and low-wage urban services were particularly impacted across the Gulf. Saudi data show that non-Saudis made up 75.8% of workers in transport and storage, 79.2% in accommodation and food services, 76.0% in wholesale and retail trade, and 86.2% in construction in Q2 2024. Finally, the crisis also limits migrants' remittances outflows, a crucial lifeline for families and economies in origin countries.

A Gulf crisis is thus also a migrant crisis because the population most exposed to economic disruption is built into the demographic and labour structure of the region itself, and in transnational financial support systems.

Figure 1. Share of national and foreign workers employed in private sectors (selected Gulf states, 2024)



No data available for the UAE.
Source: National institutes of statistics.

For sources of the data and technical details as well as a downloadable version of the table: https://gulfmigration.grc.net/glmm-database/demographic-and-economic-module/.

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