

Policy Report

Special Issue

*Stepwise and Return Migration between the Gulf,
Europe and North America – How do GCC Countries
Fare in the Global Competition for Talent?*

No. 3

Migration Policy Reforms and Mobility Decision-Making

High-Skilled Second-Generation Residents in Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia

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Executive Summary

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, such as Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, have introduced migration policy reforms that include various residency schemes and investor programmes to attract and retain global talent. Reforms also de facto open pathways for long-term residence without sponsorship for residents born and raised in the Gulf who are socially integrated but are non-citizens. This policy report examines how these residents (hereafter referred to as second-generation residents) interpret recent policy reforms and how this determines their mobility decisions.

Based on interviews with a sample of second-generation residents of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi descent, our findings suggests that while some second-generation residents perceive the reforms as opening the doors to extended residence, others view the existing legal structures as limiting long-term belonging. Nevertheless, many are leaving their host countries to pursue education or professional security in the West, with the hope of returning later to build careers in the Gulf.

The policy report argues that while current reforms improve the Gulf's competitiveness in global labour markets, the issue of retaining those raised and educated in the region requires more attention. Future policies should include pathways for re-entry and long-term residence to ensure that the Gulf's own home-grown talent remains connected to its development.

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Introduction

GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries like Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia host one of the largest migrant populations in the Global South. Despite being home to millions of non-citizen residents, its labour policies have been critiqued for producing vulnerability and exclusion.¹ In recent years, however, a series of legal and economic reforms have been implemented under these countries' national visions to address some of the concerns and to attract and retain high-skilled migrants.²

This policy report analyses the impact of reforms on the mobility trajectory of high-skilled second-generation residents in the Gulf. It focuses on their interpretations of recent measures and on how such views guide decisions to stay, leave for the West, or return to the Gulf after having stayed in the West. Unlike their parents, second-generation residents did not actively choose to migrate, but they have inherited a legal status that pushes them to constantly negotiate their place in Gulf societies. In this report, the term 'second-generation residents' is used broadly to refer to individuals born or raised in the Gulf to migrant parents. The report draws on semi-structured interviews with twenty-five second-generation residents from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, conducted using a consistent set of guiding questions. Participants included 10 current Gulf residents, 11 who had migrated to Western countries such as Canada, the US, and the UK, and 4 returnees who had recently moved back to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE.

Regarding the changes in the policies and the overall trajectory of second-generation migration, further policy action is needed because reforms aimed at retaining high-skilled migrants risk falling short if they do not address the structural exclusions and aspirational disconnects that impact second-generation residents' futures. The policy report aims to identify the challenges of retaining second-generation talent and provide suggestions for developing a more efficient and sustainable migration governance framework.

Background, Context and Methodology

Migration in the GCC countries is organised around a fundamental distinction between citizens and non-citizens. These countries operate temporary migration regimes where long-term residence does not imply access to naturalisation. Most foreign residents, including those born or raised in the Gulf, fall outside the scope of citizenship, and their residency is tied to employment through the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.³ This is partly due to GCC countries' rentier social contract model in which citizenship is tied to welfare distribution. Extending citizenship to a large migrant population would undermine this model by diluting state benefits and challenging the demographic balance on which the system rests.⁴

Over the past decade, GCC countries have launched national development agendas, such as UAE Centennial 2071, Saudi Vision 2030, and Qatar National Vision 2030, to diversify their economies away from oil dependence in favour of knowledge and innovation sectors. These long-term plans hinge on the contribution of highly skilled foreign professionals, whose expertise is essential for building knowledge-based economies. For this reason, a range of migration reforms have been introduced to attract, retain, and integrate this workforce. In this regard, the UAE has rolled out Golden and Green Visas, Saudi Arabia has introduced the Premium Residency Program (*Iqama Mumtaza*); and Qatar has implemented Law No. 10 of 2018 on Permanent Residency, with selective eligibility.⁵

Among the three countries, the UAE has taken the lead by introducing several long-term visa categories, such as Golden, Green, retirement, and investor visas, which are open to a wider pool of professionals, students, and entrepreneurs.⁶ By comparison, Qatar's permanent residency is quite selective and limited

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in number. It also includes proficiency in the Arabic language as one of the requirements. This forms an added layer of challenge for many second-generation South Asians, who often grow up speaking English or their parents' languages rather than Arabic. Saudi Arabia's Premium Residency mainly targets wealthy investors or individuals with exceptional skills. Although these reforms open windows for new opportunities, they do not change the basic structure of the migration governance. They remain conditional on factors such as employment, investment, or continuous income. None of these reforms provides a pathway to citizenship, and the sense of being present but not permanently included is still a determining condition in migrants' stay. Nevertheless, the difference in these schemes is consequential for second-generation residents because obtaining a long-term resident visa in the UAE may seem easier compared to Qatar and Saudi Arabia. It must also be noted that not all residents aspire citizenship. The common concern for them is the gap between their long-term ties to the region and the temporary status they continue to hold. What they seek is secure residency and economic inclusion.

This study used a qualitative and interpretive approach to examine how second-generation residents make sense of recent policy changes. The analysis draws from semi-structured interviews with twenty-five high-skilled second-generation residents from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Some participants were identified through professional networks. However, the majority were contacted through LinkedIn outreach and snowball sampling.

The conversations were conducted online and followed a consistent set of guiding questions designed to examine how participants viewed reforms, their socio-cultural ties to the region, and their decisions on moving to or returning from the West. Due to the relatively small and dispersed population of high-skilled second-generation residents, a qualitative and interpretive design was the most appropriate way to understand their mobility decisions and ground the policy recommendations in lived experiences rather than scattered anecdotes.

Key Findings and Analysis

Reforms as Signals of Conditional Inclusion

The study observed that second-generation residents in the Gulf had mixed feelings about the recent reforms. Some felt cautiously hopeful, while others saw reforms as a change in the government's attitude. For instance, a second-generation Indian woman, born and raised in the UAE, now pursuing her MA in the UK, said that she has been thinking about applying for a Golden Visa since her cousin got one:

"Initially, when I left the UAE for studies, I did not think of immediately returning back but now I am exploring ways to apply for a Golden Visa".

A few others echoed a similar sentiment. Reforms are opening doors, even if only slightly, and are impacting how second-generation residents imagine their future in the Gulf. Although some did not view the changes as providing guaranteed stability, they, however, felt that return or long-term residence might now be possible in ways that were not considered before.

Access Impacted by Class, Nationality and Connections

Many participants felt that access to these reforms was uneven and often filtered through class position, nationality, and social connections. A Pakistani born and raised in Qatar, who is now living in Canada, shared his frustration:

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“Everyone I know who applied for Qatar’s permanent residency got rejected. Most of the people who get it are well-connected. It is not really for us”.

Others described how opportunities in the Gulf appear to be stratified, with Western or Arab professionals often perceived as more highly valued, especially when holding degrees or experience from Western institutions. For example, one participant living in Abu Dhabi noted that while he and a colleague from the UK held the same engineering role in a firm, his colleague received a higher salary package. This left him feeling that his nationality determined how he was valued at work. The same hierarchy extends to accessing long-term residency schemes. Those holding credentials from the West are often better positioned to qualify for Golden or Premium Residency programmes, which favour high incomes, global university degrees, or investor status. For instance, a graduate from a top 100 globally ranked university is eligible to apply for the UAE’s Golden Visa, and since most of these universities are in the Global West, this criterion indirectly privileges those with Western educational access.

Future Return as a Plan

Many second-generation South Asians see onward migration, particularly for education or work in Western countries, to gain recognition and credentials that might enable them to return under more favourable conditions. A Saudi-born Indian engineer who returned to Saudi Arabia after staying a few years in the US explained:

“I did not get Premium Residency or anything, but things have changed. There is more space now and more chances. I received a good job offer, so I decided to come back”.

Besides the desire to find job opportunities, there were others who spoke about family and emotional ties. A Bangladeshi man, an ex-resident in Saudi Arabia, currently living in the US with his family, said, “My father and my siblings still live in Medina. So, I feel like I should go back at some point and try to settle there”. He was confident that his work experience in the US would make it easy for him to find good opportunities. For people like him, even when family or career were the primary motivators for considering a move, recent reforms have made the prospect of returning thinkable.

Belonging Through Transnational Ties

The reforms have also reshaped how some people perceive belonging. As GCC governments’ stance on long-term settlement began to shift, participants described a new sense of possibility. Living abroad, for some, no longer felt like a final break with the Gulf but part of a larger, ongoing relationship with the region. As one participant put it, “Leaving does not mean I cut off from the Gulf”. Even while abroad, many felt they could stay connected and keep open pathways to move back and forth as opportunities and family needs arose.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

While current reforms provide opportunities for extended residence and professional inclusion, they do not identify second-generation residents as a distinct category. Instead, they are focused on broad groups of high-skilled migrants such as investors, executives, or global professionals. Given that birthright citizenship is off the table in the GCC, there is still room for practical fixes that ease the barriers pushing second-generation residents abroad. This report proposes four pragmatic steps to strengthen future reforms aimed at retaining and (re)attracting Gulf-born high-skilled professionals.

- **Recognise second-generation residents as part of national human capital.** Second-generation residents are already socialised in Gulf societies and bring assets such as cultural fluency, local knowledge, and familiarity with Gulf institutions. These are advantages that reduce adjustment costs for employers compared to first-generation hires. Governments could formally acknowledge these residents' contribution within labour and development projects rather than treating them under the same umbrella as newly arrived expatriates. This could include tailored career development schemes, partnerships with employers to highlight the value of Gulf-educated professionals, or integration into national skills databases. Such recognition goes in line with national visions and can be advanced without entering debates on citizenship.
- **Establish clear and transparent pathways to long-term residency.** While existing reforms include partial criteria such as rewarding local education, long-term residence, or professional contribution, none of the schemes coherently combine them. Governments could consider developing a dedicated track for second-generation residents that integrates these elements. This would make access to schemes more predictable and fairer and would acknowledge the long-term social and economic contribution of second-generation residents.
- **Create economic and professional incentives for returnees.** There could be economic or professional incentives for those who want to come back after having migrated abroad and acquired internationally acknowledged skills useful to the GCC states' socioeconomic reform process. This could mean initiatives such as priority in hiring or faster work permits for people returning with advanced degrees or valuable work experience. Public and private actors could work together to make sure these people are integrated into key sectors like technology, healthcare, or education.
- **Address classed and racialised disparities in the labour market.** Persistent wage and career gaps discourage the retention of second-generation South Asian residents, as compared to high-skilled migrants from the Global North, as indicated earlier. Labour ministries can promote wage transparency and enforce non-discrimination. Employers should be incentivised through corporate governance frameworks to adopt fairer practices. Such measures would improve equity and help retain Gulf-born professionals who already understand the region's work culture and contribute to its long-term economic and social goals.

Conclusion

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, have brought reforms that promise flexibility and opportunity for high-skilled migrants. Second-generation residents see these reforms from a cautious, optimistic approach. On one hand, the changes open up possibilities for staying longer or even returning for those who have already left the Gulf for the West; on the other hand, they leave key structural exclusions in place.

This policy report has shown that second-generation residents who are moving onwards to countries in the West, especially the U.S., the U.K., and Canada, are engaging in what can be called circular mobility. They are leaving to pursue education, professional credentials, or permanent residency abroad, with the hope of coming back under better conditions. This increasing propensity to engage in this pattern of mobility is a result of how Gulf countries manage migration. On one hand, they want to attract skilled workers to build knowledge-based economies. On the other hand, they continue to limit migrants' long-term presence to protect citizens' advantages and keep demographic control. Consequently, even as the Gulf appears more open to global talent, the core system of temporary residency still stays in place.

To fully realise the ambitions set out in their national visions, policymakers in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE should consider recognising second-generation residents as part of their countries' human capital. These individuals are culturally embedded and possess an insider understanding of the region's socio-economic needs. Therefore, reforms should include provisions that facilitate their retention and re-entry to the region. Without concrete steps, the region risks losing a generation of skilled professionals who remain tied to a cycle of departure and return, which ultimately weakens the reforms' objectives.

About the Author

Sharique Umar is a PhD candidate at Qatar University's Gulf Studies Program and Center. He holds an MA in International and Area Studies. His research focuses on the intersections of international politics, migration, and economics, with particular attention to South–South migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. His current work explores migrant entrepreneurship, and the socio-economic dimension of migration flows in the region. Sharique has collaborated on projects with institutions such as Qatar Foundation, the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C., and the Schumacher Society in New Delhi. He is also co-editor of the *Handbook of Families in the Arab Gulf States*.

Endnotes

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