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The Iran War and the Noncitizen Question in the GCC: Policy Lessons and Reform Pathways Beyond Talent Attraction

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Executive Summary

- **Context:** The 2026 US-Israel war on Iran dragged the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries into a conflict that they did not start nor did they support. Consequently, the UAE emerged as the most affected, bearing the brunt of Iranian attacks. In addition, Saudi Arabia was the target of Iranian retaliation, as well as Bahrain, Qatar, and Kuwait, which were strongly affected due to their small geographic area relative to the scale of the strikes.
- **Challenge:** Considering that 40 to 90 percent of Gulf populations are noncitizens, the war has greatly affected noncitizens' lives in the region. Sustained dynamics, alongside reform failures, threaten to stymie the region's economic diversification plans that heavily rely on attracting and retaining high-skilled noncitizen workers. While the war, as of April 2026, does not seem to pose the challenge of mass exodus or crippling capital flight, the crisis offers several points for reflection that strengthen the case for further immigration and integration reforms to pivot from short-term attraction to long-term retention, achieving the desired sustained growth and resilience.
- **Findings and Analysis:** Many wartime reflective essays, investigative news reports, and interviews reveal that large numbers of the region's long-term residents have chosen to remain in the Gulf, including in the UAE, which they consider "home," contrary to exaggerated Western-origin articles claiming that the Gulf is facing mass exodus. Meanwhile, noncitizens who traveled amid the war and could not return to their homes in the Gulf also depicted a strong connection to the Gulf, describing feeling "stuck" in their countries of nationality. However, apart from the psychological impacts of war, two material challenges emerged. First, many noncitizen workers face heightened insecurity stemming from salary cuts, looming unemployment, and restricted mobility amid the war. Secondly, noncitizens who wished to temporarily leave did not have access to any consular support. Overall, these patterns highlight a series of precarities exacerbated by war and a strengthening sense of belonging among long-term residents to the Gulf—a form of de facto naturalization through which noncitizens come to hold citizen-like feelings of belonging despite the absence of formal citizenship—alongside weakening formal and informal ties to their countries of nationality.
- **Recommendations:** Evidence from qualitative interviews and secondary sources offers a series of policy suggestions to improve immigrant retention and alleviate individuals' economic hardships. First, GCC states can institute longer post-visa grace periods and social security for holders of recent skilled-worker permits, granting residents time to find meaningful employment while coping with wartime salary cuts or job loss, without the specter of emigration. These measures will also provide data regarding the benefits of more generously issued sponsor-free pathways by acting as pilot programs for long-term immigration reforms. Secondly, migrant-sending states should expand consular support targeting their most vulnerable citizens. Collectively, these measures enable GCC and sending states to address the critical needs of many lower and middle-class families residing in the region.

1. Introduction and Objectives

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched their war on Iran, disregarding international law and the effects it might have on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The conduct of the war invariably drew the Gulf states into a conflict they were not party to. Consequently, continued American and Israeli aggression and Iranian strikes sparked many important conversations about regional military, social, economic, and political dynamics. As 40 to 90 percent of the Gulf population is constituted of noncitizens,[1] the current situation requires urgent discussions on migration, citizenship, and residency. As "Gulf economies remain deeply dependent on migrant labor," the ensuing conditions, instability, and unpredictability of war can be detrimental for national economies depending on changes in "the size, composition, and mobility of migrant populations."[2] Thus, this brief unpacks key challenges facing Gulf noncitizen residents and argues that the current moment further underscores the need for residency-based immigration reform. Beyond the ethical dimensions of such reforms, the Gulf states stand to gain socially, economically, and politically.

To demonstrate this, this brief draws on 10 interviews conducted in March and April 2026 with 8 noncitizens residing in the Gulf and 1 citizen in the United Arab Emirates, the GCC state that has been the most heavily targeted by Iranian strikes throughout this war, as well as other secondary material. Additionally, an interview was conducted with a noncitizen in Qatar who was "stuck" outside Qatar for two weeks. All interviewees are at least middle-class, live in the Gulf with their families, and work in skilled professions. Reflecting the demographic make-up of the region, most of the interviewees were South Asians, and three were Arab. Though the sample size of the interviews is small, the goal of this brief is to provide thick insights into how the war has created new issues for noncitizens while exacerbating existing, well-documented ones. Essentially, the interviews and secondary material elucidate how noncitizens experience shifting labour market conditions and, inadvertently, the challenges relating to immigration pathways and mobilities.

2. Findings and Analysis

The war has not caused all-encompassing catastrophes. Instead, outcomes differ across industry, class, nationality, residency, and mobility. First, the findings are in line with local publications noting that "large-scale withdrawals have not materialized" and "the prevailing sentiment is not withdrawal" among noncitizens.[3] However, if a sustained peace agreement is not reached, the GCC's ability to attract and retain high-skilled workers and capital may be challenged in the long-run.[4] Notably, this risk can also increase as other countries aim to capitalize on the instability by instituting market reforms and presenting themselves as alternatives to the GCC. Turkish officials, for example, have expressed a "desire to capitalise" on current instabilities to promote Turkey as a regional financial and business hub alongside Dubai, Doha, and Riyadh.[5] The UK is also attempting to make "an opportunity" out of the current "geopolitical upheaval," seeking to re-attract its citizens residing in the Gulf back to the UK.[6]

Second, the material impacts of the war affect noncitizens disproportionately. They increasingly face unemployment or salary cuts.[7] Constricted mobility and lack of consular support also affect the many workers and families for whom mobility is a key aspect of life.[8] These challenges compound the issues faced by the lack of formal long-term residency options and safety nets. In recent years, the GCC countries have instituted reforms to enable longer-term stay through citizenship law reforms and golden visa (GV) or premium residency pathways.[9] Aside from the UAE, however, all GCC states' GV programs are only attainable through investment. In terms of citizenship, the UAE has made it theoretically possible for the highest-skilled noncitizens to become citizens. However, the lack of transparency and the highly restrictive nature of these reforms are noted as a continuing challenge to retention goals by scholars,[10] think tanks,[11] and commentators.[12]

The qualitative interviews and review of secondary material highlight a series of wartime precarities and the strength of long-term residents' belonging to the UAE. In the global competition for labour and capital amid the war, as well as in its aftermath, this suggests that the GCC's long-term economic diversification goals may be better sustained through retention policies rather than attraction policies.

2.1. Voluntary Immobility and Being "Stranded" in Countries of Nationality

While the risks of war generally drive emigration, it is important to understand those who remain. In the GCC, many long-term residents have chosen not to leave—though for many in the lower classes, leaving was financially out of the question. Several middle and upper-class families found it better to stay rather than pay peak-flight prices to leave, even if they could afford it. This consideration was bolstered by a predominant sense of material safety. Many interviewees noted that they trusted the government to protect them and did not consider the risks high enough to abandon "home." This consideration that the GCC is "the home," not a "second home," is significant. Noncitizen residents in the GCC have virtually no access to formal naturalization pathways. However, such an environment has persisted for so long that many noncitizen families feel de facto naturalized, i.e., they have come to hold a citizen-like sense of belonging to the state through long-term residency, despite the absence of formal, juridical naturalization.[13] Many of the region's residents are hardly even "migrants," as many are second and third-generation immigrants born there and have never lived anywhere else. The decision to stay even in times of war strengthens this connection.

This affective connection to the Gulf also emerges in other ways, such as through how residents frame being stranded abroad due to flight cancellations. Three interviewees were traveling when the war began, and others were away from family who could not return. Two of them were in their countries of nationality and noted feeling "stuck" there, sad that they were away from "home." Noncitizens with standard visas simply had to wait it out until flights resumed. Meanwhile, UAE GV holders were able to access consular services. While all the GCC states now offer GVs, citizen-like consular services, it is a benefit that only GV holders in the UAE are afforded.[14] But the demand for such services was also strong among other long-term residents who were not eligible for the investment, salary, or merit-based routes required to attain a GV.

Inter-generational differences have also impacted how younger cohorts have experienced the war and their families' dilemmas. On one hand, families who were in the Gulf during the 1990s Iraqi invasion of Kuwait were not too shocked by the current situation. Two interlocutors noted that though they need to exercise additional precautions for their safety, the feeling is not so unfamiliar, as they went through worse during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. However, younger immigrants who were brought up in the Gulf and have not lived in their countries of nationality lack such reference points.

Although brought up as de facto citizens, families experiencing instability due to salary cuts, job loss, and other economic challenges find material realizations of the conditionality of their visas.[15] Those experiencing such instabilities and who do not have the legal security of a GV have had a moment of realization that the place they call home is only there for them conditionally and based on economic goals.

2.2. Safety Nets and Residency Pathways

More generally, the economic concern also persists in the longer-term residency options offered throughout the GCC. Even in the UAE, the only GCC state to systematically and generously offer GVs by merit, including high school and university honors graduations, no economic safety nets accompany the visas. Consequently, the practical exercise of affording to live remains conditional on high-paying work or struggle.[16] The lack of more secure long-term residency and safety nets is a major cause of

emigration from the Gulf. And such emigration is strongest among high-skilled labour, the class that the Gulf needs the most as it seeks to diversify its economies.[17]

One South Asian worker noted that employers were looking to cut costs amid the war. Given the unpredictable nature of the crisis, employers did not want to conduct mass layoffs but instead compelled employees to accept pay cuts, which required employee consent. Workers, South Asians particularly, coercively consent to pay cuts. Such compliance helps maintain good ties with the employer, which is necessary for contract renewals, the key to continued residency for the standard work visa. South Asians also hold weak passports, which already places them low in employer preferences. Where the war may not have impacted businesses, employees across the GCC find that companies may also be cutting salaries with "the excuse" of war.[18] Where a mass exodus is well prevented and, so far, highly improbable,[19] such other forms of insecurities have crept up instead.

The war and the narrative contests surrounding it also impact the global competition for people and investment. Many writers exaggerate the claim that the GCC's attractive environment has been shattered entirely.[20] In reality, many investors note continued long-term trust in the GCC.[21] While catastrophic capital flight is not expected in the short run, the specter of prolonged war risks billions of dollars in deposit flight[22] and stock market instabilities.[23] With the war and its uncertainty moving beyond April, the International Monetary Fund has also scaled down GDP growth estimates.[24] What emerges now for Gulf states is greater potential for investment in long-term residents who consider the Gulf to be their home, to the extent that they do not want to leave, even amid war.[25] Indeed, noncitizens also increasingly articulate this demand. Consider, for example, a campaign in the UAE through which all UAE residents, citizen and noncitizen alike, were described as "Emirati through love for [the] UAE."[26] Understanding this as a campaign to foster unity and express gratitude to noncitizen loyalty, my interviewees also wished that this discursive campaign was accompanied by material safeguards that would actually allow them to continue "being Emirati." Though they were grateful to the UAE for creating a safe and inclusive environment, such inclusion was seen as materially insufficient. Extending the logic of labour nationalization programs, long-term migrants should also be viewed as key stakeholders alongside formal citizens. Here, longer-term residencies, training, and consequently, retention can ensure that long-term resident and formal citizen human capital is developed concurrently, avoiding reliance on new immigration.[27]

2.3.Sending-States and Diaspora Relations

As the war ensued, different states enacted different policies toward their citizens in the Gulf. Western countries like the U.S. facilitated evacuation flights for their Gulf residents, while others did not.[28] Notably, India, the largest migrant sending state to the Gulf, did not provide such services. While the scale of demand for such services is unclear, the lack of systematic application procedures was noteworthy, unlike previous events such as the 1990 Gulf War and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21. One interlocutor with connections to South Asian diplomatic staff noted that individuals wishing to arrange immediate evacuation could do so via personal connections. Yet, even where such support existed, residents had to cover 100% of the costs, which were unaffordable in most cases. For the region's low-wage workers, this exacerbates the problem as migrants are losing pay while simultaneously facing a rising cost of living.

Indian diplomatic missions in the Gulf broadly continue lacking "emergency communication systems, expanded insurance and health coverage for conflict-related events, and mental health support for expatriates dealing with trauma."[29] While India aims to strengthen its bilateral ties and diaspora relations in the Global North, it continues a legacy of negligence toward its citizens residing in the Gulf.[30] Reflecting on India's diaspora-oriented data and planning gaps, scholars describe the country as "winging" its evacuation programs in a "reactive" manner that does not prioritize those who face the greatest risks.[31] Middle-class residents who can afford to live in the Gulf with their families might

often find this a nonissue, but the same is not true for the more precarious workers in short-term jobs classified as low-skilled.

Similarly, migrant-sending states like India also lack programs to aid reintegration among return migrants.[32] If, under the extant contractual system of temporary migration, residents are expected to eventually return, the lack of such a system is a major policy gap in sending states. In contrast, it also contributes to the citizen-like sense of belonging of long-term residents in the Gulf, growing increasingly detached from their countries of nationality. While they may have first come to the Gulf with the intention of being temporary, shifting affective ties ultimately push them to exercise de facto permanence through endless visa renewals.[33]

3. Policy Recommendations

Ultimately, the interviews and review of secondary material mount further evidence for the case to expand immigration policies to long-term residents, alongside, not conditional on, investment and merit. By granting such safety nets, GCC states will be able to better retain and develop their extant human capital without worrying about importing new financial and human capital that is, as the war suggests, at risk of flight, given that they lack the affective connections to their Gulf countries of residence that long-term residents have.[34] However, these broader measures may require significant planning and policy design. Thus, this brief proposes a set of short-term measures that move in this direction and offer an opportunity for pilot testing alongside wartime-specific resilience-building measures.

3.1.Longer Grace Periods and Semi-Immigration Reforms

Under the standard work visa, with residency tied to a sponsoring employer, employees often compromise significantly on their demands to ensure their employer continues to renew their contract. Amid war, employers often exploit this tendency to coerce consent on salary cuts. Thus, GCC states may consider instituting a 12-month grace period during which residents can remain in the Gulf after a skilled worker residency visa issued in the 2023-2026 period expires to allow for meaningful employment-seeking. Additionally, long-term residents can be grandfathered in for their time in the GCC through a visa category nested between the standard work visa and the GV. This middle-category visa would be sponsor-free, renewable every 5 years contingent on sustenance rather than employer sponsorship, and be earned through continuous residency of 5-10 years under skilled visas.

Both reforms grant residents valuable time and freedom. Such freedom, in turn, grants the region's skilled residents stronger bargaining power against employers and eases the burden of a looming emigration deadline. The employment trajectories and nature of employment of individuals who use the grace period and the middle-category visa can provide valuable data in assessing the impact of sponsor-free visas in attaining full employment. Long-term immigration reform that affords noncitizens GVs based on years of residency rather than investment or salary thresholds will also increase states' return on investment on noncitizen life. Currently, many noncitizens benefit from education and early work experience in the Gulf, then emigrate to obtain Western citizenship instead.[35] Though not articulated as such, this is essentially a form of brain drain that is costing the Gulf the benefits of long-term local human capital development.

Where there are concerns about Gulf national identity, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, an Emirati educator and researcher, notes that the formal citizenry's national identity actually proves "to be more resilient and adaptive to the changing environment and times than some may believe."[36] Indeed, expats often deeply appreciate the pluralist setup in the Gulf as opposed to the assimilationist approach of the West. Thus, there is substantial evidence that threats to national identity do not significantly emerge from immigration policies.

3.2. Unemployment Security for Unpaid Leave and Jobs Lost During the War

The UAE already has an optional unemployment security service that residents can sign up for.[37] However, to continue retaining highly skilled noncitizens in the country amid war, the GCC can temporarily institute unconditional unemployment security for skilled visa holders who face pay cuts or employment losses as a result of the war. This will ensure stronger high-skilled labour retention, communicate the strongest form of inclusion through material safeguards, and save the labour market costs that are otherwise spent on bringing in and training new migrants, as well as getting them accustomed to life in a new country.

While the sponsor-free nature of GVs does not trump the financial requirements of keeping up with the region's cost of living, the war has made living even more costly. One interviewee noted that though her family has been able to stay in the UAE, unemployed, with their GVs and investments, the rising cost of living has brought discussions of emigration to the table. Thus, in the long run, the GCC may consider instituting some safety nets, such as education, healthcare, and a few months of unemployment allowances to ease the greatest economic burdens faced by noncitizens. Such measures will drive retention, enhance the countries' soft power, and further facilitate local and sustainable human capital development. The Gulf's long-term residents already prefer the social, cultural, and political climate of the region,[38] and these measures would address the final greatest barrier of feeling secure in continuing residence.

3.3. Consular Support: GCC and Migrant-Sending States

GCC states other than the UAE can also develop stronger ties with their higher-skilled noncitizens by expanding the benefits of their GVs to include consular services. Currently, the UAE offers the best balance of generously issued GVs with a range of benefits. While the Saudi and Qatari premium residencies offer greater benefits, such as healthcare, education, and permanence, they are so infrequently issued that they are ultimately less attractive compared to an Emirati or Bahraini GV.

Meanwhile, migrant-sending states, notably South Asian states, need to focus support for their citizens employed in more precarious roles. Sending states have an ethical responsibility to arrange state-funded repatriation. To prevent panic, such services can be staggered to prioritize the most vulnerable people and sectors. Workers in many precarious industries are at disproportionate risk of pay cuts and unemployment and can no longer keep up with an already high and rising cost of living.[39]

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