

Survey 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?*

Stepwise and Return Migration Between the Gulf, Europe, and North America

Pilot Survey Report

Nasra Shah, Areej Jamal

Introduction and Objectives

This pilot study aims to understand the complex transnational migration patterns of non-Gulf, highly skilled professionals. We included all nationals from developing countries who did not hold a Western passport. Existing studies including policy briefs published by contributors to the current GLMM-KAS project¹ show that several factors, among them the lack of naturalisation pathways in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, may lead these professionals to think of relocating to third countries in the Global North: Europe (Germany, France, and the UK) and North America (the USA and Canada). This type of move is often not a simple one-way trajectory. Diverse mobility types are emerging, such as stepwise migration, which uses the Gulf as a temporary stop. In some cases, these workers may even return to the Gulf later, sometimes as a circular or hierarchical trajectory (e.g., coming back with a 'stronger' nationality). By mapping these movements, the pilot project seeks to offer insights into the motivations, strategies, and outcomes of this stepwise skilled migration flow.

The study of highly skilled professionals migrating from Gulf states to third destinations is much needed. Gulf nations seek to diversify their economies away from oil and build competitive, knowledge-based industries to support their long-term goals. To do this, they must be able to attract and retain highly skilled workers. GCC governments have recently passed new laws, such as the Premium Residency Card (PRC) in Saudi Arabia and 'Golden Visas' in the UAE. These policies are designed to improve stability, offer long-term stays, and potentially even pathways to naturalisation, making the Gulf a more attractive place to settle.

However, despite these policy efforts, the Gulf still struggles with retention. While low-wage migrant workers are more often the focus of research (due to human rights concerns and their large numbers), much less is known about high-skilled foreign workers in the Gulf states. These professionals often experience temporality, meaning they can live there for many years but lack a secure path to staying permanently. This, among other things, encourages them to adopt smart strategies, such as using their

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Gulf experience as a financial and career stepping stone before moving to a country in the Global North to acquire citizenship, which can then be used to boost their prospects (given the stronger nationality) if they decide to return to the Gulf later.

Ultimately, onward migration is part of a global race for talent. Gulf countries compete by offering high short-term salaries but often experience challenges in retaining talent. Traditional destinations in the North win by emphasising quality of life, permanent residency options, and equal treatment with nationals during their integration within domestic economies. Given this competitive landscape and the crucial role highly skilled migrants play in the Gulf economic transformation, it is essential to understand their intentions and preferences for their future. This pilot study aims to address this knowledge gap by focusing on high-skilled migrants in two major migrant-hosting Gulf countries: Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Study Objective (Pilot Focus)

The core purpose of this exploratory pilot study, based on a small sample of 71 survey responses and 6 interviews with high-skilled migrants, is to get a first sense of the situation by assessing the aspirations, intentions, and key motivations of these workers for migrating to the five selected Global North countries (Canada, the US, the UK, Germany, and France). This pilot study is part of a cooperation between the Gulf Labour Markets and Migration (GLMM) programme and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Regional Programme Gulf States. One particular objective of the study was to investigate respondents' and interviewees' perceptions of Germany as a potential third destination. These initial results will be used to refine our research tools and design a much larger, more comprehensive study in the future.

This report first outlines the methodology used for this pilot study. It then presents the initial findings on respondents' demographics, migration intentions, destination preferences, and key motivations using qualitative data to add context. Finally, it discusses the implications of these preliminary findings and provides recommendations for a larger research project on the subject.

Methodology

Study Design and Sample

This pilot study employed a mixed methods design to meet its objectives, based on collecting two data sources: an online survey and individual in-depth interviews. Data collection was carried out during July and August 2025.

Data collection for the survey utilised a snowball sampling methodology. Initial participants were identified through the researcher's network of family members, colleagues, and acquaintances who provided the emails or phone numbers of prospective participants. These initial contacts, in turn, provided additional contacts who were requested to participate in the study.

The study sample was specifically designed to include highly skilled foreign professionals working in Saudi Arabia or the UAE who met the following criteria: they held a minimum of a bachelor's degree and did not possess the passport of a Western country. The sample included both males and females who agreed to participate. We did not weigh our sample for gender parity. Following the ILO Occupational Classification of 2008 as a guide, highly skilled persons were defined to include administrative, business, science, engineering, health, and teaching professionals and managers. Respondents were asked to self-identify their occupational group from a total of nine categories, which were later recoded into three broad groups for the analysis.

Data Collection

Quantitative Survey

Quantitative data were collected via an online survey consisting of 30 questions administered using Qualtrics. The questions were primarily closed-ended with specific, pre-coded categories to facilitate subsequent analysis. A few open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to develop any information not covered by the closed-ended questions. The full questionnaire is attached as Appendix A.

Qualitative Interviews and Profile

At the end of the structured questionnaire, respondents were asked if they would be willing to undergo a second, face-to-face and more in-depth interview. A total of six participants expressed their interest. Interviews were conducted through online platforms (Zoom and Google Meet) between August and October 2025. The interviews were guided by a few lead questions, which are attached as Appendix B. The interviews and the pilot survey were conducted simultaneously. The purpose of the interviews was to delve deeper into the reasons influencing highly skilled migrants' decisions, thereby adding essential context to the quantitative survey results. The discussion broadly covered the participants' working life and professional experiences in the UAE/Saudi Arabia, as well as their plans to move to a third country or return to their home country.

Data Analysis

The quantitative survey data were analysed through cross-tabulations. The association between respondents' background characteristics and their plans to move to a third country, or specifically to Germany, was tested by running the Chi-square test. A p-value of ≤ 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. The main themes covered in our qualitative interview discussion were focused on the participants' consideration for future migration, preferred destinations, and aspirations to remain in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or any part of the Gulf region.

Quantitative Survey Findings

Profile, Plans, Preferences, and Motivations of High-Skilled Migrants to Migrate Onwards from the Gulf

A total of 71 online survey questionnaires were received. An initial frequency analysis showed that three respondents had an education level less than a bachelor's degree. These cases were deleted from the analysis. Thus, we were able to obtain usable information from 68 respondents, analysed in this report. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of the 68 respondents, 42 of whom were working in Saudi Arabia and 26 in the UAE. A large majority (78%) were residing in the host country on an *Iqama* (residence permit), while 15% had a Golden or Premium residency visa. Our respondents included about 31% Arabs, 25% Indians, and 24% Pakistanis; the passport distribution was similar to the preceding nationality distribution. A large majority (44%) of the respondents were aged 35-44, while 35% were aged 45 or older. A majority (72%) were male, and about three-fourths of all respondents were married. More than half (53%) had completed a master's or higher degree, and the majority (66%) were business, ICT, or engineering professionals. Most (83%) were living with their family, while the rest were living alone. Close to half (47%) intended to stay in the host country for more than ten years. In terms of their future plans, 56% intended to move to a third country while 44% intended to return to their home country. A large majority (87%) were first-generation migrants, while the rest were second-generation, i.e., born in the host country and working there at the time of the survey.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristics	Total (%)	(N)
Country of Residence	100.0	68
Saudi Arabia	61.8	42
United Arab Emirates	38.2	26
Type of Visa	100.0	68
Residence Permit (<i>Iqama</i>)	77.9	53
Golden Visa or Premium Residency Visa	14.7	10
Business Visa	1.5	1
Others	5.9	4
Country of Birth	100.0	68
Arab	30.9	21
India	26.5	18
Pakistan	23.5	16
Others	19.1	13
Country of Nationality (Passport)	100.0	68
Arab	26.5	18
India	29.4	20
Pakistan	25.0	17
Others	19.1	13
Age Group	100.0	68
Under 35 Years	20.6	14
35 - 44 Years	44.1	30
45 Years and Above	35.3	24
Gender	100.0	64
Male	71.9	46
Female	28.1	18
Marital Status	100.0	64
Single	18.8	12
Married	75.0	48
Divorced/Widowed	6.3	4
Education	100.0	64
Bachelor's or Equivalent Degree/Diploma	46.9	30
Master's or Higher Degree/Diploma	53.1	34
Occupational Group	100.0	64
Administrative, Retail, and Service Managers	14.1	9
Business, ICT, and Engineering Professionals	65.6	42
Teaching, Health, and Social Professionals	20.3	13
Family Status	100.0	64
Living Alone	17.2	11
Living with Family	82.8	53
Intended Duration of Stay	100.0	64
Less than 5 Years	29.7	19
6 - 10 Years	23.4	15
More than 10 Years	46.9	30
Future Migration Plans	100.0	64
Returning to Home Country	43.8	28
Moving to a Third Country (Non-Home)	56.3	36
Generation Status	100.0	68

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First Generation	86.8	59
Second Generation	13.2	9

Plans to Move to a Third Country, or Return Home

A tabulation of the future intention to move to a third country, or return to the home country, is shown in Table 2 according to the respondent's socio-demographic characteristics. About 44% of respondents mentioned that if they were to leave their current country of residence, they would return to their home country, while 56% intended to move to a third country. Several background characteristics had a statistically significant association with future intentions. In terms of the country of passport, a significantly larger percentage of Pakistanis reported an intention to move to a third country (94%) compared to Arabs or Indians (44% each) ($p < 0.007$). Further analysis is needed to understand the reasons for the above difference. A possible reason could be the fact that Pakistan allows its citizens to hold dual nationality with countries such as the USA, Canada, and the UK. The motivation to acquire a Western nationality may therefore be higher in this group.

Age was also a significant correlate of the intention to move to a third country, with all those aged less than 35 expressing this intention compared with 53% of those aged 35-44 and only 42% of those aged 45 or older ($p < 0.007$). The occupational group was also significantly associated with future intention: 78% of administrative, retail, and service managers reported an intention to move to a third country compared with only 15% of teaching, health, and social professionals. About half of those living with their family intended to return to their home country, compared to only 9% of those who lived alone. The intention to move to a third country was not significantly associated with country of residence, type of visa, educational level, gender, intended duration of stay in the host country, or generation status.

Table 2: Future Migration Plans According to Background Characteristics (Row-Wise Percentages)

Characteristics	Return to Home Country	Move to Third Country	(N)	P-Value*
Total	43.8	56.2	64	
Country of Residence				0.795
Saudi Arabia	45.0	55.0	40	
United Arab Emirates	41.7	58.3	24	
Type of Visa				0.710
Residence Permit (<i>Iqama</i>)	42.3	57.7	52	
Golden or Premium Residency Visa	55.6	44.4	9	
Business Visa	-	-	1	
Others	33.3	66.7	3	
Country of Birth				0.030
Arab	42.9	57.1	21	
India	62.5	37.5	16	
Pakistan	13.3	86.7	15	
Others	58.3	41.7	12	
Country of Nationality (Passport)				0.007
Arab	55.6	44.4	18	
India	55.6	44.4	18	
Pakistan	6.3	93.8	16	
Others	58.3	41.7	12	
Age Group				0.007

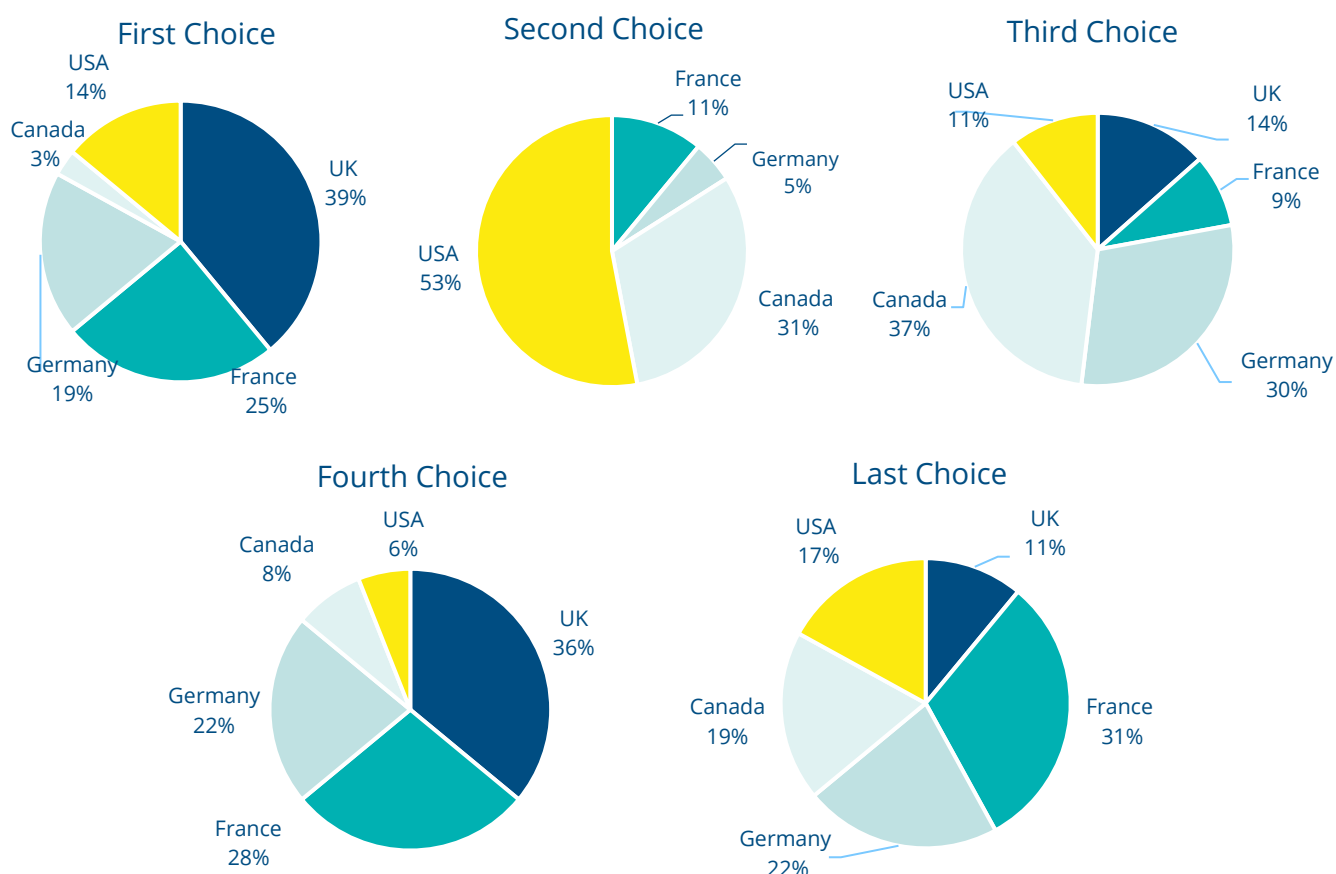
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Under 35 Years	0.0	100.0	10	
35 - 44 Years	46.7	53.3	30	
45 Years and Above	58.3	41.7	24	
Gender				0.528
Male	41.3	58.7	46	
Female	50.0	50.0	18	
Marital Status				0.002
Single	0.0	100.0	12	
Married	56.3	43.8	48	
Divorced/Widowed	25.0	75.0	4	
Education				0.659
Bachelor's or Equivalent Degree/Diploma	46.7	53.3	30	
Master's or Higher Degree/Diploma	41.1	58.8	34	
Occupational Group				0.003
Administrative, Retail, and Service Managers	22.2	77.8	9	
Business, ICT, and Engineering Professionals	35.7	64.3	42	
Teaching, Health, and Social Professionals	84.6	15.4	13	
Family Status				0.011
Living Alone	9.1	90.9	11	
Living with Family	50.9	49.1	53	
Intended Duration of Stay	S			0.309
Less than 5 Years	31.6	68.4	19	
6 - 10 Years	40.0	60.0	15	
More than 10 Years	53.3	46.7	30	
Generation Status				0.497
First Generation	45.5	54.6	55	
Second Generation	33.3	66.7	9	

*Based on chi-square test

Preferences for Moving to the Five Suggested Countries

In case the respondent indicated his/her plan to return to the home country, no further questions were applicable. Thus, 36 respondents indicated that they intended to move to a third country, while 28 planned to return to their home country. Respondents who planned to move to a third country were then asked a hypothetical question about their preferences to move to one of the five following countries: the UK, the USA, Canada, Germany, or France. The preferred destinations from 1st to 5th choice are shown in Figure 1. As their first choice, about 39% reported they would prefer the UK, followed by 25% who would pick France. The responses for the second choice of preferred country differed markedly, with 53% choosing the USA and 31% choosing Canada. Thus, a great deal of variation was expressed in terms of the ranking of the five choices offered, probably because of the small size of the sample. We also found in our interviews that some of the respondents did not pick any of the offered choices. They chose another country (e.g., Australia, Bahrain, Qatar, or would like to continue living in the UAE or Saudi Arabia). We also asked the reasons why the respondent selected their most preferred country. A variety of reasons were reported, including the presence of family members, English language, better job opportunities, a strong economy, the quickest time to get citizenship and access to quality education and healthcare. Other commonly mentioned factors included political stability, safety and security, and an overall higher quality of life.

Figure 1: Choice of Destination Country Among Respondents Intending to Move to a Third Country

We also calculated the weighted average of the preferred country following the rank assigned by the respondents to each of the five countries, as shown below:

USA	UK	Canada	Germany	France
24.6	23.0	20.8	20.0	19.6

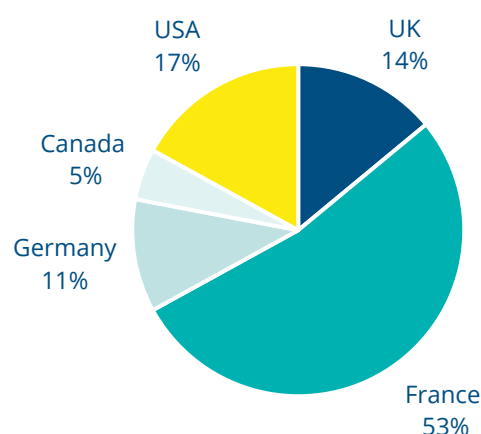
This confirms that most preferred destinations were the anglophone countries, which are also popular choices for future immigration should they decide to relocate.

Least Desired Countries

In terms of the least desired country, more than half (53%) reported France as their least desired one, followed by 17% who picked the USA (Figure 2), while only 5% picked Canada as their least desired country if they decided to move to a third country. When asked about their reasons for picking their least desired country, a large number mentioned racism and Islamophobia. The language of the host country

was also mentioned by several respondents. Other commonly cited reasons included lack of job opportunities, unsafe environments, unfriendly people, political instability, and difficulty adapting to the culture and lifestyle.

Figure 2: Least Desired Country



Considerations when Choosing One of the Five Countries

A hypothetical question was asked about the importance of specified considerations for the respondent to choose one of the five countries, namely the UK, the USA, Canada, Germany, or France. The results are shown in Table 3. Securing permanent residence was mentioned as an extremely important consideration for choosing a destination by 51% of respondents. Migrant friendly policies and ease of finding a job were also mentioned as extremely important by 49% and 43% of the respondents. Wages and allowances were reported to be very important or extremely important by 80% of the respondents. In terms of the least important considerations, a majority (76%) of the respondents mentioned the presence of a large community from the home country, and the presence of relatives or family (63%).

Table 3: Important Considerations for Choosing a Country (row-wise percentages) (N=35)

Considerations	Extremely Important	Very Important	Not Important/ Indifferent	Total (%)
Wages and Allowances	37.1	42.9	20	100.0
Taxes from Salary	17.1	45.7	37.1	100.0
Presence of Relatives or Family	17.1	20.0	62.9	100.0
Migrant Friendly Policies	48.6	37.1	14.3	100.0
Large Community from Home Country	5.9	17.7	76.5	100.0
Ease of Finding Job	42.9	54.3	2.9	100.0
Securing Permanent Residence	51.4	37.1	11.4	100.0

Most Attractive Country According to Reasons Specified in the Questionnaire

Respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions about which of the five countries was most attractive according to various reasons shown in Table 4. In terms of wages and allowance, the USA was reported by almost 40% as the most attractive country, followed by 24% who considered Germany to be most attractive. The USA was also perceived as the most attractive in terms of finding a job by about 44% of respondents. Germany and Canada were perceived to be the most attractive in terms of taxes paid on the salary (29% and 26%, respectively). In terms of the presence of relatives or family, about 30% ranked Canada, the USA, and the UK as most attractive. Canada was perceived to be most attractive in terms of its migrant friendly policies by 63% of respondents. Canada was also rated as the most attractive in terms of securing permanent residence by 47% of respondents. None of the respondents perceived France as the most attractive country with regard to wages, allowances, ease of finding a job, or securing permanent residence.

Table 4: Most Attractive Country in Terms of Specified Reasons (Percentages) (N= 33-35)

Considerations	Canada	USA	UK	Germany	France	Total (%)
Wages and Allowances	18.1	39.4	18.2	24.2	-	100.0
Taxes from Salary	26.5	20.6	17.7	29.4	5.9	100.0
Presence of Relatives or Family	31.4	31.4	28.6	5.7	2.9	100.0
Migrant Friendly Policies	62.9	2.9	14.3	17.1	2.9	100.0
Large Community from Home Country	33.3	21.2	36.4	9.1	-	100.0
Ease of Finding a Job	14.7	44.1	26.5	14.7	-	100.0

Likelihood of Choosing Germany as the Most Desirable Country

One of the secondary objectives of this pilot study was to check whether highly skilled migrants would consider relocating to Germany in the future. Accordingly, respondents were asked about the likelihood of choosing Germany as the most desirable destination. About 37% reported that they would be “somewhat likely”, while 14% said that it was “extremely likely” for them to choose Germany as their destination if they moved to a third country. When tabulated according to the respondent’s background socio-demographic characteristics, none of the associations were found to be statistically significant. However, a larger percentage of older persons aged 45+ (20%) reported that they would be “extremely likely” to choose Germany compared to only 10% of the youngest persons aged less than 35. Similarly, about 20% of those with higher education (master’s or above) said they would choose Germany compared to only 7% of those with an education up to bachelor’s level. A larger percentage of Indian nationals (29%) said they would be extremely likely to choose Germany compared to other nationalities (13% of Pakistanis and 20% of others).

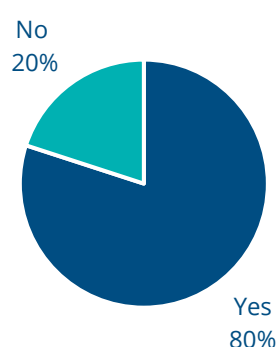
The reasons for choosing Germany as a desirable country commonly cited included a perception of a strong economy and job opportunities. Reasons mentioned that would discourage selecting Germany included language barriers, unfriendly public attitudes, and a lack of family and friends. Few also referred to difficulties related to housing and bureaucracy, limited familiarity with the culture, and

challenges in finding suitable work. However, respondents highlighted Germany's well-developed healthcare and education systems, strong social and equality laws, and overall high standard of living.

Returning to the Gulf after Securing Another Nationality

When asked about whether they would consider returning to any Gulf country once they had secured the nationality of a third country, 80% of the respondents reported they would return (Figure 3). The qualitative findings reveal that the primary motivation for this circular path is to leverage the acquired Western passport as a strategic asset upon returning to the Gulf to negotiate higher salaries and benefit from better career prospects, as often experienced by Western professionals in Gulf states.²

Figure 3: Intention to Return to the Gulf



Qualitative Findings

We conducted our interviews alongside the survey to better understand migrants' motivations for their migration decisions.

Participants' Profile

The six interview participants were highly skilled professionals residing in either the UAE or Saudi Arabia. Four lived in Saudi Arabia and two were in the UAE. These participants were recruited through the researcher's personal network of friends and family in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Participants came from different ethnic backgrounds: specifically, two from Pakistan, two from India, one from Yemen, and one from Djibouti. All the participants had at least a bachelor's degree, and three had a postgraduate specialised diploma/degree in their respective fields. A detailed breakdown of their professional roles and demographics is provided below (Table 5).

The age range of the participants was wide, spanning 23 to 50 years. Three were married with children and living with their families in Saudi Arabia, while the other three (two females and one male) were single. Their residency period in the Gulf varied significantly, from just one year to 25 years, with one individual having grown up in Saudi Arabia. Regarding residency status, only one participant in Saudi Arabia held a Premium Residency Card (PRC). The remaining five participants held standard residency permits (*Iqama*).

Table 5: Profile of Participants (Qualitative Interviews)

Pseudonym	Country of Residence	Gender	Age (Years)	Nationality	Occupation	Education	Marital Status
Aryan	UAE	Male	31	Pakistani	Regional Procurement Manager	Bachelors in economics	Unmarried
Susan	UAE	Female	23	Indian	Analyst in the finance industry	Bachelors in IT	Unmarried
Emily	Saudi	Female	46	Yemeni	Sales and Marketing Professional	Bachelors in business studies	Unmarried
Mustafa	Saudi	Male	50	Pakistani	Chief Finance Officer	Chartered accountant with specialised PG diploma in finance	Married
Shazia	Saudi	Female	30	Indian	Healthcare Professional working at a hospital	Master's in science (Biotech/Psychology)	Married
Haris	Saudi	Male	45	Djiboutian	Marketing and Research Professional	Bachelor's (IT) and PG diplomas with research specialism	Married

Plans to Move to a Third Country or Return Home

The qualitative findings indicate a strong preference among participants to avoid returning to their home countries for permanent settlement. Instead, their focus is split between remaining in the Gulf region and pursuing migration to a Global North country. None of the participants expressed an immediate intention to move back to their country of origin. The only exception was Shazia, an Indian female working as a healthcare professional in Saudi Arabia for six years. She stated that moving back to India is a long-term goal, but only after she has maximised her career goals and secured her professional footing abroad.

For Shazia, the decision to return is contingent on professional success, as she explained:

"I have given this considerable thought: once I acquire sufficient experience, professional exposure, and have established a network in the medical coding field, I intend to relocate closer to my family (in India). I will be able to continue my freelance work remotely from that location. However, before doing so, I aim to secure greater professional experience, specifically in different countries (such as Saudi, Netherlands) and cultivate excellent contacts within hospitals. These steps are necessary to ensure a steady stream of freelance opportunities."

-Shazia, Indian, resident in Saudi Arabia

For the remaining participants, returning to their home country was not considered a viable option. Even though they maintain extended family ties there, the idea of returning to settle permanently is remote. This reluctance is a two-fold decision, influenced by the perceived socio-political and economic conditions in their country of origin, and by their length of stay in the Gulf, where at least three participants are long-term residents who have grown accustomed to the local lifestyle and customs.

While participants are not planning to return permanently, they did express a desire to maintain transnational links through family ties or investment opportunities. This indicates a wish to remain professionally and economically connected to their home region. For example, Haris, who grew up in Saudi Arabia, mentioned plans to leverage Saudi Arabia's economic opening to maintain a professional connection to his home region in Djibouti:

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"I often think about establishing and investing in business between Saudi Arabia and my country. You know Saudi Arabia is open for business and investment and this could be a good chance."

-Haris, Djiboutian, resident in Saudi Arabia

Ultimately, for this group of highly skilled professionals, the Gulf states appear to function either as a long-term settlement option or a strategic 'step' on a trajectory toward countries in the West.

Preferences for Moving to the Five Suggested Countries

When asked about their willingness to move to a third country, most participants, except Mustafa, a Pakistani long-term resident in Saudi Arabia, were open to the idea. Aside from Aryan, none were actively seeking opportunities. Their decisions were complex, influenced by personal career aspirations, cultural values, religious beliefs, and future considerations for their family and children. Overwhelmingly, most of the 6 interviewees expressed a primary interest in remaining in their current country of residence for as long as possible.

The Quest for Stability and Citizenship

A fundamental factor driving interest in third-country migration is the lack of guaranteed naturalisation pathways in the Gulf, which reinforces the feeling of 'permanent impermanence'. The restricted nature of UAE and Saudi citizenship remains a critical factor in participants' strategic planning for stability. Individuals like Aryan, a Pakistani national who lived and worked in the Gulf for the past six years, actively researched citizenship and residency options in Western immigration countries. He mentioned that in countries like Australia, the US, the UK, and Canada, viable options exist for highly skilled workers and students to transition into the labour market and eventually acquire citizenship.

This quest for security extends beyond traditional destinations. Emily, a Yemeni national who has lived in Saudi Arabia for more than two decades, has siblings living in Portugal, Turkey, and Dubai. Emily noted that her sister in the UAE has researched investment-based citizenship options offered by smaller island nations, which are often marketed to Gulf residents seeking stronger passports. This is particularly appealing for those from politically unstable or conflict-affected home countries.

Referring to island nations like Dominica, Saint Kitts, and Antigua, Emily mentioned:

"They have Dominica, Saint Kitts, and Antigua, all these islands. Yes, so these are really good (citizenship) packages for people from countries like Sudan and Yemen, where we have a lot of wars happening. These countries provide options like just pay the money and get the passport. I don't have to live anywhere. I don't have to buy property. I often think about these options."

-Emily, Yemeni, resident in Saudi Arabia

As observed in other Gulf studies, acquiring a third-country nationality or citizenship is often used as a crucial form of security. It provides an escape route that avoids the necessity of returning to home countries where socio-political environments may be unstable and where there is a constant fear of downward mobility and professional decline, as observed in other studies as well.³

Strategic Migration: The Education Route and Future Plans for the Family

Consistent with previous research in the region, the education route emerged as the most sought-after path for relocation. For many, this route is seen not only as a career path but as a strategic family decision for the future of their children, often serving as the primary bridge to achieving the coveted citizenship mentioned above. Although aware of visas through highly skilled migration pathways such as

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the USA and Canada, none of the interviewees were actively seeking highly skilled migration through immediate job-based visas.

Two younger participants in the UAE, Susan, an Indian national, and Aryan, a Pakistani national, both mentioned considering an education-based migration path. Susan, who had only been in the UAE for one year, was focused on Europe for higher education due to the quality of business schools there. When prompted about the five focus countries, she selected the UK, followed by France, then Germany, while excluding the USA and Canada entirely.

She explained her choice:

"Most probably because in Europe, UK is where most of the finance or private equity jobs are or, you know, the good schools are, so the good MBA schools are in Europe... I mean in London and France. So that's one of the major reasons why, I would say."

-Susan, Indian, resident in the UAE

Similarly, Aryan, who completed his bachelor's degree in China and worked in consultancy, was well-informed about different immigration pathways. He mentioned Australia as his first choice but when forced to rank the five study countries, he chose the USA first, followed by Canada and the UK, citing the enduring appeal of the US:

"US still holds the top spot. Think of following the American dream, because there are still a lot of opportunities over there, especially considering business and professional opportunities."

-Aryan, Pakistani, resident in the UAE

Aryan's analysis also reflected a strategic awareness of immigration timelines, comparing the long 10-year path to Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK for existing residents against easier options for younger individuals starting as students. He noted that if someone is younger, it is easier to 'restart' their lives. Thus, age and life-stage have implications for migrants' decisions. For example, Haris, who spent his entire life in Saudi Arabia, recalled that he had considered the USA or UK for further education when he was younger, often influenced by friends and relatives there.

"I used to think of going to the US for my further studies, but you know personal circumstances and then I had started family here, then plans changed... But now I don't think of it."

-Haris, Djiboutian, resident in Saudi Arabia

Participants demonstrated that they consider future relocation strategically by weighing all risks and benefits, often linking migration plans to the life course of their family. While older participants may prefer to stay in the Gulf, they are open to moving if it benefits their children. Haris, for instance, mentioned that although he and his wife want to remain in Saudi Arabia permanently, he would be open to moving if it were for his children's future education or career.

"Like I said, if opportunities come our way, we can consider (going to a third country) especially for children. They are still in school but in future if there are plans, we can think about. But personally, my wife and I want to remain in Saudi Arabia."

-(Haris)

As strategic individuals, highly skilled migrants clearly assess opportunities and different pathways they could consider for the future. Participants like Aryan also showed a clear understanding of visa options, citing knowledge of the various visa types in the USA and Canada's lenient admission rules and 4-year path to citizenship, confirming that these highly skilled workers are actively researching and strategically comparing the pros and cons of different national immigration systems.

Influence of Social Networks and Specialised Careers

While most participants generally preferred English-speaking countries (especially the UK, Canada, or the US), several participants mentioned other destinations, often influenced by their social networks and professional fields.

Shazia, a healthcare professional, mentioned actively considering the Netherlands as her first option because she has friends working there. Her decision was practical, based on better packages, lower duty hours, and the relative ease of having her qualifications recognised, as well as the proximity of Europe compared to North America.

She detailed her plan:

"So, my plan is basically once I get 3-4 years' work experience, I will change. I will migrate to either UAE or other country like Netherlands. Netherlands is my first option. Because medical coders have very good salary there and Netherlands is a very good country. My friend is working there. She's working there in a hospital. So, my friend mentioned that they have shorter working hours and a better (pay) package and once we go there, we might have a lot of opportunities in my field. There are also many other courses, small courses. Once we complete those courses, it will open up more chances [for] career growth and better position. So, all the facilities are there. I am thinking about that. Also, we can learn Dutch while working. But English is also accepted in most workplaces."

-Shazia, Indian, resident in Saudi Arabia

The Role of Religion and Working Environments

All our interview participants were Muslim, and religion emerged as an important consideration in their calculation of preferred destinations. Previous studies confirm religion as a key determinant, with many Muslims preferring to stay in the Gulf countries due to the Islamic environment. Emily, who is Yemeni and a long-term resident of Saudi Arabia, highlighted the need for a welcoming environment. While she had previously considered immigrating to Canada and could consider Italy (as her father holds an Italian passport), her choice is mainly driven by religious acceptance.

She noted her concerns:

"You know I wear hijab; I would want to be in a country where my hijab, my religious beliefs are accepted. I did not have a good experience in France so I will not consider that country. I am open to the idea of settling elsewhere provided I have a job, same standard of living that I am used to (in Saudi) and a place where my religious beliefs are welcomed. I would prefer Spain, or Italy or even the Czech Republic, I visited these places (and they) are nice."

-Emily, Yemeni, resident in Saudi Arabia

Mustafa, a Pakistani national who had previous work experience in both the UK and Germany, mentioned that he had a very good experience in the UK because of the large Islamic and South Asian community there, which was important to him and his family.

The migration aspirations of these highly skilled professionals are strategic and conditional, centred on the search for long-term stability and citizenship that the Gulf currently does not offer. This planning is closely linked to life course and family planning, with the education route serving as the preferred mechanism to secure better futures for children. Personal factors like religious freedom and social networks ultimately refine their complex calculation, which balances career, security, and cultural belonging.

Likelihood of Choosing Germany as the Most Desirable Country

When prompted specifically about Germany and other non-English speaking destinations, a consensus emerged among participants to reject the idea initially. The main barrier was language, coupled with a lack of detailed information and a smaller social network compared to the US, Canada, or the UK, where English is spoken, and most participants have relatives or friends. Although generally reluctant, some were open to considering Germany if they knew more about the country and depending on the opportunities available.

Reluctance and Lack of Information about Destination Countries

Germany was not part of the initial consideration set for most respondents and only emerged when prompted. Susan, who plans to pursue an MBA, acknowledged that Germany is known to have good companies and education, even in her field of work. However, her lack of personal knowledge about the country and the absence of anyone in her network who had lived there meant she had not seriously considered it. She expressed a strong preference for staying in the UAE over moving to Germany:

"I don't know about Germany, I don't know if a lot of people go there. I would rather, if I had an option to either go to Germany or stay in Dubai...continue to stay in Dubai because I don't know or think about Germany."

-Susan, Indian, resident in the UAE

Emily had a perception of Germany being potentially 'Islamically racist' and culturally distant. It is important to note that Emily has never visited Germany; her idea, like that of many others, was based purely on perception and what she had heard. Her concerns centred on the acceptance of her religious attire and cultural differences, contrasting it with the perceived softness and family-oriented nature of the Gulf/Arab societies:

"I've never been there, but I know that people from my family who went there [and] told me that it's a beautiful place. But then I feel like hijab could be an issue in Germany. I don't know why. And I've been hearing they're very tough people there, so I don't know if I'll be able to handle it. We in Saudi or the Arabs, we're a bit soft-hearted and very family-oriented people, while they may be tough and rough. For example: If we say good morning and they (Germans) will say, why are you talking to me?"

- Emily, Yemeni, resident in Saudi Arabia

There was a general perception of unwelcoming cultural norms and potential religious bias regarding Germany and other non-anglophone countries.

Germany's Appeal

Despite the general lack of information among many respondents, Aryan demonstrated a high level of strategic awareness regarding Germany's policy changes and economic standing, which he ranked above France. He noted the government's efforts to become more attractive to international talent:

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"Germany has recently opened up job seeking visas. Germany is trying to be lenient towards people coming in, and they are giving a bit of flexibility...Germany economically, is still better than France. I would rank it better than France. And you know a lot of big organisations who require international talent. People who can learn their language, speak other languages, you know they're trying to. They've always been at the forefront of trying to employ students, people like that based on my own personal experience as well, when initially, when I wanted to try to go to Germany for studies I learnt the language as well, so I have a personal likeness towards the Germans. And technology and the companies that the big organisations that they have."

-Aryan, Pakistani, resident of the UAE

Similarly, Susan, who was working at a finance company in the UAE, also mentioned the existence of good companies in her working field in Germany, though her knowledge remained limited:

"I think Germany too has some good investment focused companies, for example private equity firms and companies in my field of work. But I do not know much about the place."

-Susan, Indian, resident of the UAE

Despite the prevailing lack of information among the group, some respondents, like Aryan and Susan, possess some awareness of Germany's strong economic standing and need for international talent, with Aryan specifically noting active policy efforts and positioning it favourably and specifically above France due to its perceived progressive approach to attracting skilled migrants.

Germany: Work-Life Balance and Quality of Life

"So, Germany, Germany has good work-life balance. Quality of food, and the kind of place it is, there are lots of green spaces. Germany has its own issues such as fairness at workplace, there are equal opportunities, and you're free to hire as per your skill level but obviously prefer Germans (over immigrants)."

-Mustafa, Pakistani, resident in Saudi Arabia

Mustafa, a first-generation Pakistani, had previously lived and worked in Germany and, with friends still there, held a mixed but informed perception of the country. Despite his reluctance to leave Saudi Arabia, he highlighted several significant strengths. He praised Germany's family-friendly policies and high quality of life, detailing attributes such as family-friendly office leave policies, generous sick leave and parental leave policies, excellent food and nutrition standards (with organic produce readily available), and a pollution-free environment. He ultimately saw it as a place offering a healthy work-life balance where one is "not overworked" and receives proper weekends and annual leaves, noting the green spaces and preservation of the country.

However, even Mustafa's positive analysis was balanced by significant structural concerns that he believes impede Germany's competitiveness, specifically at the workplace and governmental level. He pointed to issues of "fairness at the workplace" for non-Germans, arguing that equal opportunities often favour German citizens.

Mustafa was highly critical of German bureaucracy, describing it as "extremely bureaucratic" and "very, very primitive and rigid". He stated this rigidity leads to struggles that last "not just for days but for months", citing the fact that "digital transformation is almost non-existent in the government sector". Economically, he argued that Germany, as Europe's biggest economy, has focused "too far towards the social welfare" and has become "less corporatised", harming its economic vitality. He noted the lack of new 'unicorn' companies in the past two decades and the struggles faced by major manufacturing sectors, including the closure of some major car manufacturing plants. He emphasised the need for

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policies that promote startup culture, ease of doing business, and a more investor-friendly atmosphere, concluding that it is currently difficult to invest in Germany from abroad due to its rigid processes, unlike the UK or the US. He also pointed to demographic issues, such as fertility decline and the uncertainty surrounding the rise of right-wing parties, as factors making Germany's future look less promising.

Overall, based on our preliminary survey and small-scale sample, Germany faces significant hurdles in attracting highly skilled non-GCC professionals from the Gulf. While the country offers an attractive work-life balance and high quality of life, these benefits are overshadowed by a lack of information about the country and concerns about the language barrier, perceived cultural rigidity, or potential bias (often based on hearsay), and especially, the country's reputation for cumbersome bureaucracy and a lack of ease for non-German professionals and investors. Ultimately, for this group, Germany remains a country they would consider only conditionally, primarily for their children's future education rather than for their own immediate career-motivated migration.

Remaining in the Gulf States or Returning After Having Lived Elsewhere

The majority of interview participants expressed a strong desire to prolong their stay in their current country of residence and were actively seeking ways to do so. This inclination is especially strong for those with deep roots in the region, as at least four respondents lived there for a longer period of time. For these long-term residents, the goal is often to avoid leaving the country at all.⁴

Commitment to Long-Term Settlement

Participants, particularly those in Saudi Arabia, are focused on investment and leveraging the current policy landscape to achieve permanence. Mustafa, who already holds a Premium Residency Card, plans to continue prolonging his stay. Haris, a long-term resident, sees investment opportunities in Saudi Arabia as the best way to secure his family's future and remain in the country, noting the rapid improvement in local standards.

"Based on the situation if we are still having our careers going and growing, and our kids getting the benefits that we are setting as a goal for them. So, I don't think there is a reason to think about other options rather than investing more to...get established and live a better life here."

-Haris, Djiboutian, resident in Saudi Arabia

Haris emphasised the competitive quality of life and business environment:

"We are planning to invest more and stay here (in Saudi Arabia) because there are more options to stay and quality of life here is comparable with Europe or US. It's much more up to that standard... I'm looking for something besides my personal career. I'm also working in trying to find opportunities which are aplenty in the country, and everyone is trying to come to the country to get the benefits and take advantage of the government facilities and business opportunities in Saudi. The government itself is investing a lot in infrastructure and the quality of life as I said, they are running a lot of programmes, so they are trying to, or they are becoming global."

-(Haris)

For Arab-speaking residents like Emily and Haris, who have lived in the Gulf for a longer period, cultural and social proximity to the national population further increases their desire to stay, as their extended families are also based there. For Indian and Pakistani residents, religion, economic factors, and geographical proximity to their home country are important considerations for remaining in the Gulf.

Pilot Survey Report**The Residency Paradox: Status vs. Security**

Despite the strong desire to stay in the Gulf, the lack of full citizenship remains a sticking point, even with the new residency options (Premium Residency, Golden Visas). Participants view these options as necessary to stay permanently, but they recognise a financial and status trade-off.

Emily noted that while she would welcome a permanent residency option that offered “all the rights [of] Saudis”, she questioned the value of paying the high costs for a Premium Residency if it did not provide the stability and recognition of citizenship.

“Being equal to Saudi, even if it’s a permanent residency that says I’m a foreigner, but I’m permanently in Saudi Arabia, but I have other rights like Saudis, then that’s good.”

-Emily, Yemeni, resident in Saudi Arabia

She compared this directly to investment migration elsewhere:

“But if I would still be treated as an expat and I would be paying a lot of expenses and up and down, then that doesn’t even make it equal to if I’m going to compare it to any other country, if I plan to buy a property and get the nationality... The 4 million riyal, I can go anywhere in the world and buy a property with half that money and get the nationality, not the permanent residency.”

-(Emily)

Migrants strategically evaluate all aspects of their decision, and if the existing residency options are not competitive with alternatives available globally, they will remain cautious about committing.

The Reverse Flow: Returning with a Strong Passport

While some participants, like Susan who has been in the UAE for only a year, are focused on staying until their career goals are met, others, like Aryan, see a strategic role in the third-country move. Aryan’s research into acquiring a third-country nationality revealed a planned circular migration trajectory: acquiring a foreign passport for security and status and then returning to the Gulf to capitalise on the economic benefits there.

He noted that the trend of highly skilled professionals returning to or moving to the Gulf is already underway, including talent from the Global North:

“I would be very much interested in getting another nationality passport and then coming back to the Gulf. And I see that happening now more than ever, across the countries even listed in this survey. Primarily a lot of people are coming in from UK, from Europe as well, and people from the US, too.”

-Aryan, Pakistani, resident in the UAE

The main driving factor for this reverse flow is tax advantages in the Gulf:

“The taxes! Well, they’re not no taxes in most of Gulf. Oman, maybe right now, is going to implement some personal income tax. However, there’s 0 tax on your income. As opposed to, you know, 40% taxes, let’s say, in Canada or the UK.”

-(Aryan)

Aryan highlighted that a ‘stronger’ nationality significantly enhances one’s professional standing and earning potential in the Gulf, where employment prospects, salary brackets, and networking opportunities all change once a foreign passport is secured. This advantage is crucial for new arrivals, as professionals from developing countries who arrived long ago already “made their mark”, while it is now

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“getting difficult” for new entrants to reach a level of career progression without such a strategic asset. He concluded:

“It would reach a stage where there would be no further progression...a point where one does not wish to be stuck for the rest of their career. That is where it becomes important or necessary to have another nationality or a passport.”

- (Aryan)

The perception of preferential treatment in wages and hiring is a widely held narrative among migrants across the Gulf countries, as evidenced by regional scholarship. Participants such as Aryan and Shazia articulated this perceived differential:

“I have noticed if people... come from any country other than India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, they get better pay. Also, in my medical profession, we need a license to get a job, but if they have employees from other foreign Western countries, they give them the job and let them get the license while they work. We don't get the job until we get the license. There is still different treatment.”

-Shazia, Indian, resident in Saudi Arabia

In sum, the qualitative findings demonstrate that for these highly skilled professionals, the desire to stay in the Gulf is robust, rooted in long-term residency, cultural proximity, and the region's economic appeal (particularly the lack of taxes). While the new residency options (PRC, Golden Visas) are viewed as crucial tools to prolong their stay, they fall short of providing the ultimate security of citizenship. This lack of naturalisation pathways compels many to adopt a circular migration strategy: acquiring a strong passport from a third country purely to enhance their professional status and security and then returning to the tax-free Gulf where their career prospects would be significantly improved by their new nationality.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this pilot study, based on a structured survey of 68 highly skilled professionals and six in-depth interviews in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, provide initial insights into the motivations, intentions, and strategic choices of non-Gulf, highly skilled migrants contemplating a move to a third country in the Global North. The results confirm a complex pattern of stepwise and circular migration driven by the fundamental pursuit of long-term security.

Summary of Quantitative Results

The online survey respondents included 27% Arabs, 29% Indians, 25% Pakistanis, and 19% other nationals. A majority (72%) were males, and three-fourths were married. The main findings of the survey are as follows:

- Among the 68 respondents, **44%** said they would return to their home country, while **56%** would move to a **third country** if they were to leave Saudi Arabia or the UAE.
- Age and marital status were strongly associated with the intention to move to a third country, with all those who were aged below 35 or were unmarried stating this intention. Older persons accompanied by their family were more ‘settled’ in the Gulf country.
- A significantly larger percentage of **Pakistani nationals (94%)** stated they would move to a third country compared to 44% of Indians or Arabs.
- **The UK** was chosen as the most desirable first-choice destination among the five choices offered, preferred by **39%** of all respondents.

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- A large amount of variability was found in terms of the ranking of destination choice among the five suggested countries.
- The weighted average of the ranking awarded to the five countries was highest for the USA, followed by the UK, Canada, Germany, and France.
- **France** was the least desired country for **53%** of all respondents.
- **Language familiarity**, ability to obtain **permanent residency/nationality**, and **job opportunities** were identified as incentives for choosing a destination, while perceived **Islamophobia** and **racism** were mentioned as important disincentives.
- Securing **permanent residence** was mentioned as an **extremely important consideration** for choosing a destination by **51%** of respondents.
- A majority (**76%**) of the respondents mentioned that the presence of a large community from the home country, or the presence of relatives or family (**63%**), was an **unimportant** consideration for choosing a destination country.
- About **40%** considered the **USA** as the most attractive country in terms of wages, while **63%** considered **Canada** to have the most migrant friendly policies.
- In terms of choosing Germany as a destination, about 37% reported that they would be somewhat likely, while 14% said that they would be extremely likely to choose it.
- When asked whether the respondents would return to a Gulf country after obtaining nationality or permanent residency in another country, **80% mentioned that they would consider it.**

Summary of Qualitative Findings

The six in-depth interviews add critical context to the quantitative findings, revealing the strategic decision-making process behind migration intentions.

- I. **Driving Force Out of the Gulf: The Quest for Security and Citizenship.** The core motivation for considering a move to the Global North is the lack of guaranteed naturalisation pathways in the Gulf, which fuels a pervasive feeling of 'permanent impermanence'. Acquiring a third-country nationality is viewed as a crucial form of security, preventing a forced return to politically or economically unstable home countries.
- II. **Reluctance to Return to the Country of Origin and Strategic Use of the Gulf.** Participants are overwhelmingly reluctant to the idea of permanently resettling in their home countries due to concerns over socio-political and economic stability. Instead, they view the Gulf either as a preferred long-term residence or a strategic 'step' on a path toward securing citizenship elsewhere. Even long-term residents, while focused on investing and prolonging their stay in the Gulf, are compelled by the citizenship void to consider outward migration.
- III. **Pathways to Future Relocation: The Education Route.** The education route (for the professionals themselves or their children) emerged as the most favoured and actively researched pathway to citizenship in third countries. This route is seen as the primary bridge to transition into the job market and achieve security, and it is often tied to long-term family planning and securing better futures for their families. None of the interviewees spoke about seeking highly skilled migration through immediate job-based visas.
- IV. **Strategic Destination Calculus.** While English-speaking countries (the USA, Canada, the UK) hold a strong, enduring appeal (e.g. the 'American dream'), ultimate destination choices are complex and conditional. Personal factors are key differentiators, including:

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- Social Networks and Specialised Careers: Preferences are often shaped by friends already established abroad (e.g. considering the Netherlands or the USA due to professional networks and better packages).
 - Religion and Welcoming Environment: All our interview participants were Muslims; the acceptance of their religious beliefs and cultural practices is an important consideration, with concerns over potential Islamophobia or perceived rigidity influencing the rejection of some destinations (e.g., France).
- V. **Germany: High Quality of Life vs. Bureaucratic Hurdles.** When specifically prompted about Germany, the main barriers were perceived language issues and a lack of information/social network compared to anglophone countries. The country is viewed conditionally, primarily for future children's education. While informed respondents acknowledged Germany's strong economy, high quality of life, and family-friendly policies, these benefits were overshadowed by concerns about cumbersome bureaucracy ('primitive and rigid' processes) and structural issues regarding the ease of doing business and investment for non-Germans.
- VI. **The Reverse Flow: Returning with a Strong Passport.** A significant qualitative finding confirms the quantitative result: A majority of professionals are interested in a circular migration trajectory. They plan to acquire a 'stronger' third-country passport for security and status and then return to the tax-free Gulf region to enhance their professional standing and earning potential. Participants noted that a foreign [Western] passport would serve as a critical asset, greatly improving career progression, salary brackets, and networking opportunities upon their return to the Gulf.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this pilot study clearly show that highly skilled professionals in the UAE and Saudi Arabia are making strategic and conditional mobility plans. Their planning is driven by structural constraints. The Gulf countries offer high salaries but fail to provide the most important asset: long-term security. The finding that over half of respondents (56%) plan to move from the Gulf to a third country and the quantitative priority given to securing permanent residency or nationality (51%) underlines that the current residency policies, such as Golden Visas, may simply not be enough to fix the underlying issue of 'permanent impermanence'.

The most significant takeaway is that moving to the West is often not the final goal; it's a calculated, strategic step. A large majority of respondents (80%) would consider returning to the Gulf after acquiring a 'stronger' nationality. The interviews confirmed this circular migration strategy: these professionals are using countries in the West as a safe, reliable path to gain citizenship, status, and security. They then plan to use that new passport as a valuable career and professional asset when they return to the Gulf.

When choosing a destination, preferences are highly practical. While anglophone countries (the UK, Canada, the USA) are favoured for familiarity and opportunity, the ultimate choice depends on the clarity of the citizenship path and a good cultural fit. Non-anglophone countries like Germany face significant barriers, including language issues, a lack of information, and the perception of difficult bureaucracy. However, for many, Germany is still conditionally attractive for their or their children's future education due to its high quality of life. The fact that a large home-country community is generally seen as unimportant (76%) suggests that the pursuit is focused on individual and family stability, not social proximity.

These findings carry major implications for talent management globally. For the Gulf states, retention efforts that rely solely on high salaries won't fully succeed; to keep this talent, they must address the core issue of talent retention by offering a path to security and integration that is truly equivalent to holding permanent residency and social recognition. For immigration countries like Germany that want to effectively attract and retain this talent, they must promote communication about the ease, timeline,

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and flexibility between different migration routes. Furthermore, they should not limit their focus only to those with existing highly skilled segments but actively consider attracting students and entrepreneurs, as the data shows that migrants often prefer entry through these alternative, flexible pathways as a bridge to future citizenship.

Research Limitations and Pilot Methodology Evaluation

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this pilot study. The quantitative results are based on a small survey sample of only 68 respondents, and the qualitative findings are drawn from just 6 interviews. This sample size is not large enough to be statistically generalisable to the entire population of highly skilled, migrant professionals in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the intricacies and complexities of migrant decision-making, where various social circumstances have a bearing, cannot be fully covered with such a small sample. Therefore, these results should be interpreted as initial insights and directional findings used to refine the research questions and methodology for a future, larger-scale study. The conclusions drawn here reflect the patterns observed within this small group but cannot be used to make broad claims about all skilled migrants in the region.

Evaluation of the Pilot Methodology

The pilot study successfully tested the research instruments and provided initial data, but it also highlighted critical areas for refinement.

Positive Takeaways

Overall, the survey instrument performed well. There were very few missing data cases, with only three responses needing exclusion, suggesting the questions were clear and easy to follow. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the questions successfully elicited a wide range of responses on both the incentives and disincentives for choosing a destination country. This confirms the tool's ability to capture the nuance needed for the larger study.

Challenges and Refinements

The primary challenge was the questionnaire design flow, specifically regarding Question 17 (Q.17), which asked about the intention to return home or move to a third country. Since the survey design allowed respondents who indicated they would return home to exit immediately, we lost 28 out of 68 valid respondents. Consequently, the majority of the subsequent findings on destination preferences and motivations are based on a significantly smaller effective sample of about 35 cases. A secondary challenge was qualitative data collection, as it took several reminders and extensive effort to secure the desired number of interviews (only 6 were completed). This suggests that a more robust approach to recruitment will be essential for the main study.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Pilot Survey Questionnaire

1. Participation in Survey (Y/N)

Q2 Can you please specify your current country of residence/employment?

- ☐ Saudi Arabia (1)
- ☐ UAE (2)

Q3 Can you please specify which kind of Visa do you have in \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}

- ☐ Residence permit (*Iqama*) (1)
 - ☐ Golden visa or Premium Residency Visa (2)
 - ☐ Business Visa (3)
 - ☐ Other visa. Please specify in the space provided (4)
-

Q4 Can you please specify your country of birth? *Please select your option from the list below*

- ☐ Afghanistan (1)
- ☐ Bangladesh (2)
- ☐ Egypt (3)
- ☐ Ethiopia (4)
- ☐ Ghana (5)
- ☐ India (6)
- ☐ Indonesia (7)
- ☐ Jordan (8)
- ☐ Kenya (9)
- ☐ Lebanon (10)
- ☐ Malaysia (11)
- ☐ Nepal (12)
- ☐ Nigeria (13)
- ☐ Pakistan (14)
- ☐ Philippines (15)
- ☐ Saudi Arabia (16)
- ☐ Sri Lanka (17)
- ☐ Sudan (18)
- ☐ Syria (19)
- ☐ United Arab Emirates (20)
- ☐ Yemen (21)
- ☐ Other? Please specify here... (22) _____

Q5 Can you please specify your country of nationality (Passport country): *Please select your option from the list below*

- ☐ Afghanistan (1)
- ☐ Bangladesh (2)
- ☐ Egypt (3)
- ☐ Ethiopia (4)
- ☐ Ghana (5)
- ☐ India (6)
- ☐ Indonesia (7)
- ☐ Jordan (8)
- ☐ Kenya (9)

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- ☐ Lebanon (10)
- ☐ Malaysia (11)
- ☐ Nepal (12)
- ☐ Nigeria (13)
- ☐ Pakistan (14)
- ☐ Philippines (15)
- ☐ Sri Lanka (16)
- ☐ Sudan (17)
- ☐ Syria (18)
- ☐ Yemen (19)
- ☐ Other? Please specify here... (20) _____

Q6 Please specify which age group you belong to

- ☐ 18 years – 24 years (1)
- ☐ 25-34 years (2)
- ☐ 35- 44 years (3)
- ☐ 45 – 54 years (4)
- ☐ 55years or more (5)

Skip To: End of Survey if: Please specify which age group you belong to = 18years – 24years

Q7 Please specify your gender:

- ☐ Male (1)
- ☐ Female (2)

Q8 Can you please specify your marital status

- ☐ Single (1)
- ☐ Married (2)
- ☐ Divorced/widowed (3)

Q9 Can you please specify your educational qualification? (If you have more than one degree, then please specify the last educational degree/diploma you received)

- ☐ 1) Less than a Bachelor's degree/diploma (1)
- ☐ 2) Bachelor's or equivalent degree/ diploma (2)
- ☐ 3) Master's or higher degree/diploma (3)

Skip To: End of Survey If: Can you please specify your education qualification? (If you have more than one degree, then ple... = 1) Less than a bachelor's degree/ diploma

Q10 Can you please specify your exact occupation in the space below? *(Please include your specialisation, job title, etc.)*

Q11 Please select the option below that most closely matches your current occupation in \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}

- ☐ Administrative and Commercial Manager (1)
- ☐ Business and Administration Professional/Manager/Executive (2)
- ☐ Information and Communications Technology Professional (3)
- ☐ Science and Engineering Professional (4)
- ☐ Production and Specialized Services Manager (5)
- ☐ Hospitality, Retail and Other Services Manager (6)
- ☐ Health Professional (Doctor, dentist, nurse, etc.) (7)
- ☐ Teaching Professional (University, school) (8)
- ☐ Legal, Social and Cultural Professionals (9)

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Q12 Can you please specify which religion you identify with? *(You can mention in the space provided the name of the religion you follow.)*

End of Block: Demographics**Start of Block: Country of Residence Circumstances**

Q13 For how many years have you been living in \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}. *Please specify the number of years.*

Q14 How long have you been working in \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}? Please specify the number of years.

Q15 Are you living together with your family or alone in \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}

- ☐ I live alone (1)
- ☐ I live with my family (2)

Q16 How many more years do you plan to stay in \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}? *Please choose an option from below.*

- ☐ Less than 5 years (1)
- ☐ 6 - 10 years (2)
- ☐ More than 10 years (3)

End of Block: Country of Residence Circumstances**Start of Block: Third Country Migration**

Q17 If you ever have to leave \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices}, which of the following options are you most likely going to consider?

- ☐ Returning back to the home country (1)
- ☐ Moving to a third country (a country which is not your home country or your present country) (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If you ever have to leave \${q://QID1/ChoiceGroup/SelectedChoices}, which of the following options... = Returning back to the home country

Q18 If you ever have to move to a third country, which country would you most probably consider moving to in the future? *Please specify the country name in the space provided below.*

Q19 Assuming that you would consider moving to one of the below 5 countries, which would be your first, second, third, fourth, and last choice? (You can drag and drop each country option based on rank 1,2,3, 4, or 5)

- _____ UK (1)
- _____ France (2)
- _____ Germany (3)
- _____ Canada (4)
- _____ USA (5)

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Q20 How would you describe your most important reason for choosing your most desired country?
Please write your answer in the box provided below. *(Please provide more than one reason. With reason 1 being the most important reason, and so on.)*

- ☐ Reason 1 (1) _____
- ☐ Reason 2 (2) _____
- ☐ Reason 3 (3) _____
- ☐ Reason 4 (4) _____

Q21 Of the five countries listed above, which would be your least desired country?

- ☐ UK (1)
- ☐ France (2)
- ☐ Germany (3)
- ☐ Canada (4)
- ☐ USA (5)

Q22 How would you describe your most important reason for your least desired country?

Q23 How important would each of the following considerations be for you to choose one of the five countries (i.e., the UK, the USA, Canada, Germany, or France)?

Not at all important (1) Slightly important (2) Indifferent (3) Very important (4) Extremely important (5)

Net wages and allowances (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Percentage of taxes paid from salary (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Presence of other relatives and family (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Migrant friendly policies (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A large community from the home country (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ease of finding a job (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Securing a permanent residence status (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q24 Among the five countries, which one would be the most attractive for you in terms of each of the following reasons? (SELECT 1 country for each of the following statements. You may pick the same country for more than one reason.)

Canada (1) USA (2) United Kingdom (3) Germany (4) France (5)

Good wages and allowances (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A low percentage of taxes (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Presence of friends and relatives (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Migrant friendly policies (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A large community from the home country (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Ease of finding a job (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Securing a permanent residence status (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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Q25 If you get a citizenship or permanent residency in any of the other countries (which is not your home country), would you consider returning to \${Q2/Choice Group/Selected Choices} or any other country in the Gulf in the future?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q26 How likely would you be to choose Germany as your most desirable country if you were to move to another country?

- ☐ Extremely unlikely (1)
- ☐ Somewhat unlikely (2)
- ☐ Neither likely nor unlikely (3)
- ☐ Somewhat likely (4)
- ☐ Extremely likely (5)

Q27 Describe your most important reason for why you would choose or not choose Germany. (Please provide more than one reason. With reason 1 being the most important reason, and so on.)

- ☐ Reason 1 (1) _____
- ☐ Reason 2 (2) _____
- ☐ Reason 3 (3) _____

Q28 Have you ever made any plans or made any inquiries/applications about moving to another country (other than your home country)?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)

Q29 If YES, please describe what you did in the space provided below:

Q30 Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview? If so, please share your preferred email address (or a phone number) for contact.

Appendix B

Interview Discussion

Interviews were conducted in a flexible, conversational style, moving beyond a strict question order. The sequence and focus were primarily determined by the natural flow of the discussion and the themes introduced by the participant, aligning with the principles of a narrative interview approach, where in-depth probing on emergent topics is key.

Themes covered:

- ☐ Have you ever considered moving to another country for employment or settlement?
- ☐ Which countries do you think of when considering moving to another country?
- ☐ Have you ever considered moving to any of the following 5 countries UK____ France____ Germany____ Canada____ USA____ None of the above_
- ☐ Assuming that you would consider moving to one of the above 5 countries, which would be your first, second, third, fourth, and last choice? UK____ France____ Germany____ Canada____ USA____
- ☐ How would you describe your most important reason for choosing your most desired country?
- ☐ Of the five countries listed above, which would be your least desired country?

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- How would you describe your most important reason for your least desired country?
- Have you ever made any plans, or made any inquiries/applications about moving to another country?
- Are there any other thoughts or comments you would like to share about your residency in (present country) and future plans?

About the Author(s)

Nasra M. Shah is a Professor of Migration and Development at the Lahore School of Economics, Pakistan and the Scientific Director of the Gulf Labor Markets and Migration Program of the Gulf Research Center.

Areej Jamal is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Alberta and has formerly completed her doctoral research in the Sociology of Migration at the Social Research Institute, University College London in the UK. Her research interests focus on South Asian migrant families and themes pertaining to inequality and intersectionality.

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Contact

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

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