

Policy Report

Special Issue

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

Synthesis Paper No. 1

Challenges to the GCC's Economic Diversification Agenda

Understanding the Structural Drivers of High-Skilled Emigration from the Gulf

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Executive Summary

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are increasingly diversifying their economies to move away from rentierism. High-skilled non-citizens are indispensable for these goals. Yet, despite the Gulf's high wages, security, and cosmopolitan lifestyles, many highly skilled migrants continue to leave the GCC. This paper investigates the reasons driving this emigration of non-citizen talent to offer policy suggestions for improved foreign labour retention.

Essentially, despite affinity to the GCC's sociocultural environment, safety, and lifestyle, high-skilled workers may nonetheless emigrate because of: (1) limited permanent residency pathways and benefits—the current longer-term sponsor-free residency permits also fall short in accessibility, welfare, and stability; (2) institutionalised passport-based hierarchies, wage differentials, and structural constraints in immigration and labour laws—many formal and informal institutions underpay Global South nationals—tie employees to employers preventing job mobility, and promote discriminatory wage-setting and promotion practices; (3) issues in labour law implementation—a lack of monitoring and bottom-up collective bargaining prohibit employer accountability; and (4) limited educational and professional development pathways—higher respect is afforded to Global North credentials while local knowledge economies remain underdeveloped, promoting short-cut policies that result in high turnover rates.

In many cases, however, emigrants later return to the Gulf with third country passports to benefit from their welfare policies and the advantages afforded to Global North credentials in the GCC. Nonetheless, this pattern of circular migration is largely informal and costs the GCC during what may be a permanent, in addition to temporary, emigration period. Such a pattern is also only available to families with certain networks and class privileges and constitutes circumvention of a discriminatory, not meritocratic, regime. The decision to return or remain in the Gulf is also highly dependent on one's disdain or unfamiliarity with the social and political life of countries of origin, factors that can pose exogenous shocks on GCC migration flows. The GCC states should internalise migration control, instead, for predictable and sustainable migration governance.

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Overall, GCC states may better attract, retain, and sustainably develop high-skilled talent by: (1) expanding longer-term residency and benefits based on experience and residency rather than salary and investment thresholds; (2) eradicating discriminatory hiring, wage-setting, and promotion practices by either improving top-down implementation or allowing bottom-up collective bargaining to assist the state in implementation; (3) formalise relations with GCC non-citizen emigrants to incentivise return migration to the GCC; and (4) improve data accessibility and bureaucratic transparency for enhanced academic and policy research and implementation.

Introduction

The GCC countries aim to transform their rentier economies into knowledge-based economies under ambitious diversification programmes, such as *Saudi Vision 2030*, *Qatar National Vision 2030*, and *UAE Centennial 2071*.¹ In these frameworks, retaining and attracting 'highly skilled' foreign labour is essential to local human capital needs and economic goals.² Yet, despite the Gulf's high wages, security, and cosmopolitan lifestyles, many highly skilled migrants continue to leave the GCC for destinations in Europe and North America.³ What drives the emigration of non-citizen talent from the GCC countries?

For the purposes of this paper, the term *highly skilled migrant* is used in a broad sense. While definitions vary across international organisations, states, and everyday discourse, here it refers mainly to middle-class and above expatriates—professionals, managers, and technical workers—whose mobility decisions are central to Gulf diversification agendas.⁴ Understanding migration longitudinally unpacks their movement better. Migration research has long treated the Gulf as an endpoint for labour migration.⁵ In practice, however, the Gulf is often a step within multi-stage migration trajectories. Families and individuals may spend decades in the Gulf before moving to Canada, Germany, or the UK, leveraging Gulf earnings and work experience to qualify for immigration programmes elsewhere. This phenomenon—often described as *stepwise migration* or *onward migration*—captures the tactical use of the Gulf as a temporary but necessary step in long-term strategies of mobility, accumulation, and belonging.⁶

Though they may eventually return to the Gulf, a core factor shaping initial emigration is the GCC's restrictive citizenship regimes. Across the region, long-term residents remain ineligible for naturalisation. Even recently expanded residency schemes are highly selective, privileging wealthy investors or individuals with exceptional skills.⁷ As a result, the children of South Asian, Arab, and Southeast Asian families often grow up in the Gulf yet remain legally excluded. This generates a condition of 'permanent temporariness'.⁸ For some, the Gulf provides relative safety and prosperity compared to their countries of origin. But for others—particularly families raising children—these limits create pressure to move elsewhere in search of stability, security, and equality in the labour market. Emigration from the Gulf is also shaped by *pull factors* from Europe and North America, such as globally recognised universities, more competitive professional environments, and permanent residency programmes with eventual access to citizenship.⁹

Stepwise migration from the Gulf is not uniform. Policy reports produced under the joint GLMM-KAS project on *Stepwise and Return Migration between the Gulf, Europe, and North America* reveal significant variation across states and migrant groups.¹⁰ While Saudi Arabia and Kuwait often function as high-turnover labour markets, the UAE has cultivated a more competitive environment for retaining high-skilled expatriates.¹¹ The factors underpinning these decisions—ranging from wage hierarchies to limited career development opportunities—will be discussed in detail later in the paper. Essentially, despite the Gulf's advantages—relative safety, strong infrastructure, and family-friendly social environments¹²—migration is driven by unresolved structural problems:

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- The absence of secure pathways to permanent residency and naturalisation¹³
- Persistent wage and mobility hierarchies based on nationality and passport strength¹⁴
- Unequal access to welfare benefits, education, and opportunities for integration
- The perception that career progression and recognition are stronger when linked to Western institutions

These constraints collectively shape expatriates' decisions to consider the Gulf as a temporary stage rather than a permanent home. This paper synthesises original, empirical policy reports, other empirical research, and secondary research to identify key variables driving emigration from the Gulf to Europe and North America. In so doing, this paper provides evidence-based policy recommendations for Gulf states and sending countries to better manage human capital.

Background and Context of Migration in the Gulf

Migration Before and After Oil

Although Gulf migration is often narrated as beginning with oil, cross-border mobility in the region predates hydrocarbons by centuries. The Gulf has long been part of the Indian Ocean world, with South Asian, East African, and Gulf Arab communities connected through maritime trade, pearl diving, and seasonal labour.¹⁵ Merchants from Gujarat, Sindh, and Malabar established commercial and kinship ties across Muscat, Bahrain, and Kuwait well before the 20th century, creating one of the oldest continuous migration corridors between South Asia and the Gulf.¹⁶

The discovery of oil in the 1930s intensified and restructured these patterns. The oil economies required large numbers of workers to build infrastructure, ports, and cities.¹⁷ Migration, once seasonal and mercantile, became organised labour migration, initially through bilateral arrangements with Arab neighbours and later expanded to South Asia, leveraging a population seen as politically inert to the Gulf context.¹⁸ From the 1970s oil boom onward, migration became a structural feature of all six Gulf economies. Non-citizens constitute the majority of the labour force across all six states:¹⁹

- **UAE:** ~87% of the total population are non-citizens
- **Qatar:** ~87%
- **Kuwait:** ~67%
- **Bahrain:** ~53%
- **Oman:** ~40%
- **Saudi Arabia:** ~40%

Comparative Migration and Visa Regimes

While the Gulf's labour systems are sometimes portrayed as exceptional, they share many similarities with global visa-based migration management frameworks, such as North America's H-1B programme or Europe's seasonal worker schemes.²⁰ What distinguishes the Gulf is the combination of scale, the near complete closure of naturalisation pathways, and a significantly heightened laissez-faire approach to migration governance, where visa sponsors sometimes play a more direct role in migration management.

Each GCC state has developed a distinct approach to managing migrant inflows, though all retain elements of a sponsorship system. In recent years, however, these sponsorship systems are undergoing various changes in different directions and different ways. These changes can broadly be grouped in two

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streams. In one stream, though often worded as if '*kafala* systems' are 'abolished', most immigration reforms involve minor rule changes and shift discursively, maintaining the sponsorship system.²¹ The second stream involves more radical changes pursued through new types of visas that do in fact remove the sponsorship requirement and have longer-term residencies, such as Golden and Permanent residencies. These longer-term, sponsor-free visas are generally the routes designed for the attraction and retention of high-skilled workers as their eligibility requirements are tailored for investors, high earners, high-skilled, or, in the case of the UAE, those with high educational and artistic achievements. Table 1 provides a broad overview of the status quo of GCC immigration regimes as of 2025.

Table 1: GCC Residency Visa and Family Reunification Routes

Country	Main Worker Visas	Residency/Long-term Options	Family Reunification
Saudi Arabia²²	Employment Visa (low-skilled & professional), Domestic Worker Visa	Permanent residency (investment or high-salary thresholds)	Restricted; salary and skill thresholds apply
UAE²³	Standard Employment Visa, Golden Visa (5–10 yrs), Green Visa, Freelance Visas, Remote Work Visa	Golden Visa (5–10 yrs) for investors, merits, Green Visa (5 yrs) for high-salaried professionals, Blue Visa (10 yrs) for established professionals in environmentalism and sustainability, and Freelance Visas for professionals	Restricted; salary and skill thresholds apply; easier for Golden Visa holders; separate 5-yr retirement visas available to high-income or investor families
Qatar²⁴	Employment Visa, Domestic Worker Visa	Permanent Residency (select investors & professionals and long-term resident Arabic speakers, since 2018); Golden Visa (5–10 yrs) for investors, entrepreneurs, and executives (since 2026)	Restricted; salary and skill thresholds apply; separate 2-yr retirement visas available to high-income or investor families
Kuwait²⁵	Work Permit (private/public sector), Domestic Worker Visa	5-year residency permits (rare); Golden Visa (10–15 yrs) for investors and property owners	Restricted; salary and skill thresholds apply
Bahrain²⁶	Work Permit, Flexi Visa (for some undocumented migrants – no new permits issued)	Limited long-term permits for investors, Golden Residencies for financially stable long-term residents, investors, and high salaried employees	Restricted; salary and skill thresholds apply; self-sponsored visas can be used for retirement among long-term residents who also have high income or investments.
Oman²⁷	Employment Visa, Domestic Worker Visa	Investor Residency programme (5 yrs) and Golden Visas (10yrs) for higher tier investors (introduced late 2025)	Restricted; salary and skill thresholds apply; separate 5-yr retirement visas available to high-income or investor families

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These differences highlight relative openness: the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar provide structured long-term options for skilled migrants, while Kuwait and Oman remain the most restrictive, having opened pathways only for high-value investors and property owners. Family reunification thresholds and income requirements also vary, influencing migrant decision-making around onward migration. Meanwhile, in terms of how many sponsor-free, long-term residency permits are actually granted, the currently available data suggests that the Golden Visa process is the easiest and most reliable in the UAE, with over 150,000 Golden Visas being granted per year.²⁸ Bahrain, meanwhile, had issued about 10,000 Golden Visas by 2024.²⁹ The granting rate for permanent residencies, an instrument that obviously holds greater privileges, are much lower. Until 2024, Saudi had issued about 8,000³⁰ while Qatar issues up to 100 per year.³¹

Citizenship remains largely exclusive in all six states. Exceptions—rare discretionary naturalisations or family incorporations—exist, but the majority of non-citizens remain legally temporary.³² Long-term residency reforms, such as Golden Visas in the UAE or investor permits in Oman, address security for select groups, but ‘permanent temporariness’ remains the norm.³³ This structural condition drives many middle-class South Asians and Arabs to seek onward destinations offering citizenship, welfare access, and career recognition.

National Visions and High-Skilled Migration

Gulf migration policy is increasingly tied to long-term national development plans:

- **Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030** emphasises attracting global talent in sectors critical to diversification, offering selective pathways for investors and professionals.³⁴
- **UAE Centennial 2071** and the “Projects of the 50” initiative aim to retain exceptional talent in science, technology, and culture.³⁵
- **Qatar National Vision 2030** focuses on human capital development, combining educational investments with selective retention of expatriate expertise.³⁶
- **Oman Vision 2040** balances *Omanisation* policies with targeted foreign expertise.³⁷
- **Bahrain Vision 2030** prioritises labour market flexibility and modest diversification.³⁸
- **Kuwait Vision 2035** explicitly signals a reduction in reliance on foreign labour, making it the least oriented toward high-skilled expatriate attraction.³⁹

Labour Market Policies

The Gulf states also differ in the level of federal codification and implementation of labour laws. The UAE and Bahrain lead in multicultural, anti-discrimination policy and rhetoric. They have dedicated portals for anti-discrimination information, legislation, and norms. The UAE has a broad Federal Law by Decree No. (34) of 2023 Concerning Combating Discrimination, Hatred and Extremism in addition to anti-discrimination provisions in the labour law. Bahrain prohibited workplace discrimination, with religion and ethnicity being protected classes, through Legislative Decree No. 59 (2018). Article 39 of the Bahraini Labour Law also prohibits wage discrimination based on ‘sex, ethnic origin, language, religion or belief’ (Law No. 36 2012).

Meanwhile, Qatar is the weakest in terms of anti-discrimination provisions, dubbed as ‘the only Gulf state without a workplace anti-discrimination law’,⁴⁰ though it is signatory to many international conventions⁴¹ and has anti-discrimination clauses in its Financial Centre Law. Legislation for the other Gulf countries can be found as follows: Saudi’s anti-discrimination provisions in the labour law were added in 2024 by Royal Decree No. (M/51) of 8/23/1426 AH, which went into effect in February 2025; Kuwait prohibited workplace discrimination through Ministerial Decree No. 177 of 2021, but religion and

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nationality are not codified as protected classes; Articles 12 and 23 of the Omani Labour Law prohibit workplace discrimination and identity-based firing, protecting race and religious differences as relevant classes, too. However, even this review may not itself speak to the levels of implementation across the Gulf states and how migrant workers perceive them. This paper then turns to the factors gleaned from the review of the policy reports and other data.

Methodology: Overview of GLMM -KAS Policy Reports

Methodologically, this synthesis paper draws from eight original policy reports produced under the KAS–GRM research initiative, supplemented by discussions during two GLMM- KAS workshops. Table 2 summarises these briefs and their core foci—deeper vignettes are presented in the following analytical sections.

Table 2: Overview of the GLMM-GRC-KAS Policy Reports

PR #	Authors	Title	Foci	Methods
PR1	Mouawiya Al-Awad and Froilan Malit Jr.	Beyond the Gulf: Rethinking Stepwise Migration, Citizenship Penalty, and Filipino Nurses in the UAE	Examines migrant life and migration decision-making of Filipino nurses in Dubai.	Original survey data
PR2	Gennaro Errichiello	Second Generation Highly Skilled Pakistanis in Dubai: Drivers of Secondary Migration	Examines second-generation Pakistani migrant life in the UAE vis-à-vis legal institutions and migration policies.	Interviews with second-generation Pakistanis in Dubai
PR3	Sharique Umar	Migration Policy Reforms and Mobility Decision-Making: High-Skilled Second-Generation Residents in Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia	Examines how immigration policy reforms affect the migration decisions of second-generation Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis in the GCC.	Interviews with immigrants in or emigrants from the UAE, Saudi, and Qatar.
PR4	Areej Jamal, Nasra M. Shah, and Richa Shivakoti	Retaining Talent: Strategic Pathways for Highly Skilled South Asian Migrants in Saudi Arabia's Knowledge Economy	Examines South Asian migrants' voluntary immobility and emigration decision-making in Saudi Arabia	Original survey and interviews with Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi residents in Saudi Arabia
PR5	Anurag Devkota	Regulating Stepwise Migration in the Nepal-Gulf-Europe Migration Corridor: Challenges and Recommendations	Examines stepwise migration flows among Nepali migrants in and through the GCC	Elite interviews, ordinary interviews, and review of governmental observational data
PR6	Anushka Bose	Passport-Based Wage Differentials in the Gulf:	Examines how high skilled migrant workers emigrate from the GCC	Review of observational data of salary surveys, labour

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		A Driver for Onward Migration	due to issues in job recruitment, the employment experience, and retirement.	statistics, media and firm reports, and policy papers
PR7	Ayat Nashwan and Sadia Khan	Long-Term Residency Policies and the Retention of Healthcare Professionals: A Case Study of the UAE's Golden Visa Program in the Gulf Context	Examines the impact of long-term residency pathways on the migration decision-making of healthcare professionals in the UAE.	Original survey and interviews
PR8	Froilan Malit Jr.	A National Security Turn? Stepwise Migration of Skilled Labour and National Security Dilemmas in the Gulf	Examines the changing nature of the state-society social contract and emigration as a national security issue.	Elite interviews, ethnographic reflections, and review of Gulf-based governmental and think tank reports

Factors Driving Emigration from the Gulf States

Research across the policy reports identifies a set of recurring drivers prompting migrant families to consider emigration from Gulf states to secondary or tertiary destinations. These drivers operate across legal, economic, social, and professional domains, often reinforcing one another. While some factors relate directly to structural constraints in the Gulf, others reflect individual aspirations, career trajectories, or family planning considerations.

Limited Citizenship and Permanent Residency Pathways

A core driver of emigration is the near-total exclusion of non-citizens from permanent political and legal membership in Gulf states. Although migrants may reside in the Gulf for decades, formal naturalisation is extremely rare, and permanent residency schemes remain highly selective, often tied to substantial investments or specialised skills. In PR7, Nashwan and Khan compare the long-term residency pathways in the UAE, Saudi, and Qatar, noting that despite the latter two having permanent residency programmes, their accessibility and data regarding how many have been issued are both scarce.⁴² This structural exclusion produces what scholars call 'permanent temporariness', wherein long-term residents cannot access the rights, welfare, or security that citizens enjoy.⁴³ This includes limited access to state-provided healthcare, public education for children without significant fees, and restrictions on property ownership or entrepreneurial activity. A study on why young Pakistani women often move out of Qatar despite having a strong affinity to local culture, religiosity, and safety comes down to the lack of stable family settlement and transparent employment opportunities and benefits.⁴⁴ For many families, the lack of secure long-term residence generates anxiety about the future, motivating them to consider countries that offer a clear path to citizenship or long-term residency.⁴⁵

Family reunification policies further exacerbate the sense of insecurity. Non-citizens often face restrictions on bringing spouses, children, or elderly parents into the country, or must meet high salary and housing thresholds to sponsor dependents.⁴⁶ In practical terms, this means that even highly skilled

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professionals face significant barriers to establishing family life in the Gulf. The combination of restricted rights, limited welfare access, and family constraints is frequently cited in the policy reports as a key factor prompting onward migration.

Passport-Based Hierarchies and Wage Differentials

Another persistent driver of emigration relates to nationality-based wage differentials. Gulf employers often pay workers differentially based on the migrant's country of origin. In PR1, Al-Awad and Malit term this experience as a 'citizenship penalty' that migrants with weak passports face.⁴⁷ Essentially, non-citizens who still hold their citizenships in such disadvantaged countries, predominantly African and South and Southeast Asian, typically receive wages above domestic standards in their home country but significantly below peers with passports from richer countries, such as Western Europeans or North Americans.⁴⁸

This dynamic is often reinforced in labour recruitment practices, where intermediaries and sponsors work off assumed workers' 'reservation wages'. Under such logic, the minimum wage that workers are assumed to accept is calculated based on their wage opportunities in countries of origin. This operates on the assumptions that the worker seeks to remit money 'back home' and would either move back eventually or necessarily if they do not get employed in the host state. However, these assumptions have three problems. Firstly, by over-stressing 'home country' economics, they create financial hardship in host countries as the high local cost of living gets neglected. Secondly, the PBs provide evidence that when people take issue with the Gulf labour market, they may move to a third country, not their country of origin. Finally, a large proportion of non-citizens in the Gulf are now second/third-generation migrants—this population lacks connection to 'countries of origin' and sees the Gulf as their home.⁴⁹

Even when formal anti-discrimination labour laws exist, enforcement is limited, and informal norms sustain long-standing hierarchies. Multiple PBs note that these wage disparities reduce perceived career progression and financial growth opportunities, motivating skilled and middle-class families to seek destinations with merit-based remuneration structures.⁵⁰ Passport hierarchies also intersect with professional reputation. Degrees and experience acquired in the Gulf may be undervalued abroad unless they are complemented by a Western qualification or citizenship in a recognized country. This also drives families seeking wage parity and career recognition to migrate to third countries.⁵¹

Employment Regulation, Job Security, and Labour Mobility

Legal and institutional frameworks governing migrant labour in the Gulf vary widely across countries. PR4 crucially highlights that while reforms in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have eased certain mobility restrictions, most migrants remain tied to a specific employer for visa and residency purposes.⁵² This creates vulnerability to dismissal, delayed wage payments, and bureaucratic obstacles in changing jobs, particularly in the private sector.

Job insecurity and weak enforcement of labour protections are especially acute in sectors dominated by non-citizens, with further industry and skill-based stratification. Focused on worker's rights regimes, PR5 highlights that even highly skilled professionals may experience inconsistent contract enforcement, limited grievance mechanisms, and slow dispute resolution processes, while such challenges are near certain for disenfranchised communities—understood as such based on citizenship penalty and the nature of Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) that—in lower skilled work.⁵³

According to Sharique Umar in PR3, much of the labour market reforms are ultimately discursive, with systemic racism persisting.⁵⁴ noted in PR8.⁵⁵ These systemic uncertainties are cited as key motivators for

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seeking labour markets with more predictable rights and protections, including onward destinations in North America and Europe.⁵⁶

Educational and Professional Development Limitations

For younger migrants and families with children, the quality and recognition of education in the Gulf is another factor driving emigration. While some Gulf states have invested heavily in higher education, including branch campuses of Western universities, overall access remains uneven and often stratified by nationality, partly as a function of class.⁵⁷ With education, skill development, employment, and immigration pathways being highly individualised and rendered 'skill-based' without government support, PR2 highlights how they commodify and marketise the right to stay rather than conferring it upon long-term residents based on rootedness and belonging.⁵⁸

Consequently, many young migrants choose to pursue degrees abroad to gain globally recognised credentials or to enter knowledge-intensive sectors such as technology, finance, research, or the arts. The PBs note that migrants aspiring to careers in creative industries, academia, or specialised professional fields often leave the Gulf because domestic opportunities are either limited or do not confer internationally competitive experience.⁵⁹

This factor intersects with long-term career planning. Migrants who seek to maximise earning potential and professional reputation often view the Gulf as a temporary staging ground—an environment to accumulate experience before moving to a tertiary destination that provides both recognition and security. The persistence of the sponsorship system that ties residents to current employers, PR6 argues, also prevents career planning as it hinders any kind of job mobility.⁶⁰

Gulf Emigrants' Long-Term Migration Plans: Return or Permanent Exit

Understanding the long-term intentions of Gulf emigrants is central for policy discussions on talent retention, circular migration, and labour market planning. Migrants' decisions after leaving the Gulf reflect the cumulative influence of factors outlined in Sections 4 and 5, including structural constraints in the Gulf, limited citizenship pathways, passport-based wage hierarchies, political and social conditions in countries of origin, and professional aspirations.

Strategic Onward Migration

Many migrants leaving the Gulf pursue what scholars call *stepwise* or onward migration, whereby initial Gulf residency serves as a staging ground for eventual relocation to North America or Europe. This trajectory is often instrumental: migrants aim to gain internationally recognised credentials, accumulate savings, or secure citizenship and welfare protections unavailable in the Gulf or in their countries of origin. For example, a 2019 survey found that over 60% of UAE residents of various nationalities expressed a preference to relocate abroad, citing better education for children, improved quality of life, and visa/citizenship benefits as key motivations, suggesting that Golden Visa pathways, albeit an improvement, still fall short of guaranteeing "security and stability of permanent residency and citizenship".⁶¹

The policy reports note that while Gulf countries rank highly in terms of safety, religious tolerance, and family cohesion, these factors are frequently outweighed by concerns over insecure residency and limited career mobility. Though there are also many families for whom this is not the case, as revealed by several vignettes in and beyond the policy reports.⁶² Migrants often prefer tertiary destinations that

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provide permanent settlement opportunities, which can later enable a more secure return to the Gulf if desired.

Conditional Return to the Gulf

Some Gulf emigrants plan to return after achieving specific goals abroad. While precise statistics are limited, surveys of expatriates from Saudi Arabia and the wider GCC indicate that a notable minority maintain intentions to return, often conditional on improving their legal security through foreign citizenship or permanent residency elsewhere.⁶³ Common goals include gaining permanent residency or citizenship in a tertiary destination and completing children's education or professional certifications.⁶⁴

This return is often partial or conditional, rather than permanent. Many families aim to leverage the higher wages and enhanced social protections of tertiary destinations while maintaining connections to the Gulf. Policy reports describe this as a circular migration strategy: Gulf emigrants use foreign experience as a stepping stone to reintegrate into Gulf labour markets under more favourable conditions or exercise a form of 'half-way return' that renders the Gulf as close to countries of origin because of cultural similarities, religious inclusion, and geographic proximity to countries of origin.⁶⁵

Changing Horizons and Long-Term Settlement

While some Gulf emigrants maintain plans to return, extended residence abroad can shift intentions. The process of migration and its decision-making is a long-term, multi-stage process. The complexities of these stages are higher in this context, where the time horizon is large, ranging from before the emigration period to a moment of potential return or non-return.⁶⁶ This process is much like the shift experienced by South Asian families who earlier imagined their move to the Gulf as temporary but eventually end up *de facto* immigrating, falling short only of *de jure* naturalisation.

Social networks and professional ties in tertiary destinations create inertia, increasing the likelihood of permanent settlement outside the Gulf. Over time, migrants' intentions may evolve due to various factors, such as shifting residency requirements for naturalisation in Western countries, newfound social and professional networks abroad leading to greater integration, changing family priorities based on children's educational and career prospects, and experiences of cultural integration and lifestyle preferences in host countries.

These dynamics illustrate that Gulf emigrants' long-term plans are not fixed; they evolve in response to opportunities and constraints in both the Gulf and tertiary destinations. Understanding these decisions requires recognising migration as a dynamic, iterative process influenced by ongoing social interactions and changing circumstances.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this report point to a series of interlocking challenges that require a multi-stakeholder approach. The following policy recommendations are designed to address the root causes of onward migration by creating a more stable, secure, and mutually beneficial migration ecosystem, drawn from the PBs (see Table 3) and additional secondary research. For Gulf states, these policies constitute strategic investments in retaining high-skilled talent, many of which are trained in the Gulf, and thus, their long-term economic resilience and global competitiveness.

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Table 3: GLMM-GRC-KAS Policy Reports' Policy Recommendations

PR #	Authors	Key Issues Identified	Summary of Policy Recommendations
PR1	Mouawiya Al-Awad and Froilan Malit Jr.	'Citizenship penalty'—migrant workers from Global South countries are disadvantaged in hiring, wage-setting, and promotion decisions; lack of government regulation over working conditions coupled with prohibition of unionisation and collective bargaining; longer-term residency reforms and wage reforms are inadequate for immigrant retention amid increasing human geopolitics	Institute labour market reforms to eliminate class and race-based stratifications; afford distinct recognition and human capital relations based on industry needs rather than investment; expand human capital development programmes with formal relationships and support for long-term non-citizen resident talent; onward destination states should streamline healthcare credential recognition and curtail brain drain by adopting WHO's Global Code of Practice on the Intl Recruitment of Health Personnel; sending states (of nationality) should develop retention programmes for healthcare professionals, engage in ethical bilateral recruitment agreements, and enhance migration monitoring.
PR2	Gennaro Errichiello	Closed naturalisation pathways; lack of residency pathways based on residence time and belonging	Expand and clarify pathways to long-term residencies via social and emotional ties; Afford distinct recognition and human capital relations with 'second-generation residents' versus "newly-arrived immigrants"; strengthen data collection and bilateral coordination.
PR3	Sharique Umar	Current long-term residency pathways have mixed reception; Citizenship penalty; persisting systemic racism despite discursive reform	Afford distinct recognition and human capital relations with 'second-generation residents' versus 'newly-arrived immigrants'; expand and clarify pathways to long-term residencies; create incentives for high-skilled Gulf emigrants to return-migrate; institute labour market reforms to eliminate class and race-based stratifications.
PR4	Areej Jamal, Nasra M. Shah, and	Lack of long-term residency pathways; brain drain due to	Expand and clarify pathways to long-term residencies; expand human capital development

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	Richa Shivakoti	onward migration; citizenship penalty	programmes with formal relationships and support for long-term non-citizen resident talent; institute labour market reforms to eliminate class and race-based stratifications; expand local investment opportunities for current, not new residents; institutionalise circular migration.
PR5	Anurag Devkota	Brain drain due to onward migration for both the Nepali government and GCC states; Nepali state's "strategic ignorance" of low-skill migration perpetuates migrant worker exploitation abroad; limited Nepali migration and diaspora management; human capital development and upskilling programmes absent	The government of Nepal should amend its emigration management and data collection frameworks and enhance bilateral diplomacy with European onward destination sites.
PR6	Anushka Bose	Citizenship penalty; limited job mobility due to residency being tied to employment; lack of retirement welfare	Institute labour market reforms to eliminate class and race-based stratifications; immigration policy reform to promote further job mobility within a GCC country; institute noncitizen-oriented retirement policies.
PR7	Ayat Nashwan and Sadia Khan	Other GCC states lose immigrants to the UAE because of the latter's Golden Visa; lack of automatic and guaranteed longer-term residency pathways; inaccessible (expensive) higher and continuing education; lack of family benefits; citizenship penalty	Replace long-term residency visas' salary thresholds with experience and residency thresholds; expand family benefits for long-term visa holders; clarify and simplify long-term visa application processes.
PR8	Froilan Malit Jr.	Gulf states face increasing competition over immigrant retention; laissez-faire migration management; structural dependence over a transient migrant labour population	Expand labour market data to maintain a reliable database with skill and industry-based stratification and synergise digital tools with countries involved in circular and irregular migration flows; introduce non-citizen-targeted public opinion studies under the Abu Dhabi Dialogue; institute labour market reforms to eliminate class and race-based stratifications.

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For Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States

- **Enhance Residency and Immigration Pathways:** A primary recommendation is the expansion of migration regimes beyond frameworks tied solely to high-net-worth investment.
 - **The Policy:** Create merit-based and residency-based permanent residency programmes for skilled professionals and long-term residents, streamline family reunification, establish dedicated visa streams for graduates of local universities, and create more formal upskilling and retention programmes for “long-term residents” versus “newly arrived immigrants.”
 - **Benefit to the State:** This directly addresses the core driver of onward migration, transforming transient residents into long-term stakeholders who invest, consume, and innovate locally. It secures the retention of skills, the return on the Gulf's significant investments in education and creates a more stable, rooted society, which is essential for a post-oil knowledge economy.
 - **Case Summary:** Canada's Express Entry system uses a comprehensive points-based model to select skilled immigrants, granting them permanent residency based on factors like education, work experience, and language skills. This system has been highly effective in attracting and retaining global talent, directly fuelling Canada's economic growth and innovation sectors. Canada's naturalisation system also grants points for years of residency, encouraging aspiring residents to stay, work, and invest in the country independent of capital or skills, which in turn boosts skill-development. Outside economic logic, the German context is also illuminating as it highlights the social and ethical necessity of formally including second/third generation *de facto* immigrants in the long run as ‘guest’ worker models eventually give birth to children who are no longer ‘guests’.⁶⁷
- **Implement Robust Labour Market and Recruitment Reforms:** Moving beyond legal frameworks to active enforcement is critical to address the persistent issue of “passport-based” wage hierarchies.
 - **The Policy:** Strengthen enforcement by creating independent labour tribunals, mandate wage transparency in job advertisements, and strictly regulate third-party recruitment agencies to prohibit nationality-based salary scales. Alternatively, maintaining laissez-faire labour and immigration policy can be complemented by greater allowances for collective bargaining across industry and skill level to hold employers accountable to extant state legislation and discourse.
 - **Benefit to the State:** Tying wages to productivity rather than nationality boosts overall economic efficiency and ensures that the most qualified individuals are retained, directly benefiting Gulf employers and the diversification agenda. This enhances the Gulf's “soft power” and global reputation as a fair and competitive place to work. Implementation and collective bargaining-oriented reforms can also solve the current issue that the Gulf states face—that most reforms end up being discursive, lacking implementation—and further enhance and formalise state-society relations.⁶⁸
 - **Case Summary:** Outside collective bargaining routes, the European Union's 2023 Pay Transparency Directive mandates that companies disclose salary ranges and prohibits them from asking candidates about pay history. While aimed at the gender pay gap, its

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principles provide a powerful model for combating all forms of wage discrimination, fostering a labour market where skill, not origin, determines value.⁶⁹

- **Cultivate Longer-Term Relations with GCC Non-Citizen Emigrants (Serial Diaspora Relations):** Rather than letting emigration occur as a complete loss, GCC states can officially work with noncitizen emigrants to set up formal channels for retained ties and return migration to the Gulf, creating a form of brain circulation, rather than brain drain, leveraging 'serial diasporic' ties that already exist in practice.⁷⁰
 - **The Policy:** Formally recognise and engage with expatriate 'alumni' by creating a 'Gulf Diaspora' network—defined in PR4 as a network of all emigrants from a GCC country—to foster knowledge sharing, targeted investment channels, and pathways for return.⁷¹ For example, at the level of education, Gulf states can set up scholarship opportunities for their long-term resident non-citizens who can earn degrees and skills abroad to return to the Gulf, extending the conditional sponsorship systems that are currently limited to citizens to long-term resident non-citizens.
 - **Benefit to the State:** As highlighted in the study of the Gulf's serial diaspora, older emigrants already facilitate further emigration for Western higher education and work through informal networks in the Gulf.⁷² A formal pipeline would turn this 'brain drain' into a global network of ambassadors and investors. Former residents possess invaluable institutional knowledge and can facilitate market access, technology transfer, and capital investment back into the Gulf, providing a significant long-term economic advantage.
 - **Case Summary:** Ireland's highly successful diaspora engagement strategy, managed by its Department of Foreign Affairs, includes the 'Global Irish' network and targeted investment initiatives. This has been instrumental in driving foreign direct investment, boosting tourism, and enhancing Ireland's political influence far beyond its size.⁷³ The UAE's Golden Visa benefits also recently expanded to include citizen-like consular support to its Golden Visa holders abroad, highlighting the possibilities of formalising state-emigrant relations beyond formal citizens.⁷⁴
- **Improve Data Accessibility and Bureaucratic Transparency:** Effective, evidence-based policy requires robust data and clear administrative processes.
 - **The Policy:** Publish anonymised extensive data for scholarly use as sub-national-level survey format or by complementing aggregate data with detailed visa-type, demographic, sector, skill, salary, and income breakdowns.
 - **Benefit to the State:** High-quality data enables efficient, evidence-based policymaking, allowing governments to anticipate labour market needs and plan infrastructure more effectively. Bureaucratic transparency reduces uncertainty for residents and businesses, fostering a more stable and predictable environment that is attractive to long-term investment. Detailed and survey-format data will also support academics in publishing in globally renowned data-driven journals, bringing growth and prestige to Gulf academia.
 - **Case Summary:** Singapore's Department of Statistics (SingStat) provides world-class, publicly accessible data that underpins its government's renowned long-term planning on everything from housing to labour. This transparency and data-driven governance is a cornerstone of Singapore's success in attracting and managing global talent. Singapore's data-driven approach also led it to a 'skills-first' approach, coupling this

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policy suggestion with the previous.⁷⁵ Within the Gulf, Qatar publicises the largest corpus of survey-format data and has a public-facing research infrastructure that frequently includes non-citizens, contributing to Qatari academia's local and international achievements.⁷⁶

For Sending Countries (South Asia, Southeast Asia, MENA)

- **Enhance Bi/Multi-lateral Migrant Governance:** Sending states must become active advocates for their citizens' welfare.
 - **The Policy:** Proactively negotiate stronger BLAs that standardise contracts and wage protections, while strictly regulating domestic recruitment agencies, especially for lower-skilled workers. However, BLAs expanding on skill recognition, training, and wage-setting for higher-skilled workers, especially those in professional industries like nursing, also achieves similar goals. Where BLAs remain asymmetrically negotiated, engage in multilateral collective bargaining.
 - **Benefit to the State:** This ensures the protection and well-being of a country's most valuable export—its human capital. It also professionalises the migration process, enhancing the reputation of its workforce and leading to better-quality jobs and higher remittances in the long run. Multilateral negotiations with other sending-states can prevent races to the bottom on wage-setting and labour rights when countries send workers in non-critical areas and concede in BLAs for quicker, short-term gains.
 - **Case Summary:** The Philippines' Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) serves as a comprehensive model for proactive governance. It vets foreign employers, enforces minimum standards for employment contracts, and provides extensive support services, significantly improving outcomes for its overseas workers and ensuring a more stable remittance flow.⁷⁷
- **Foster Inclusive Governance and Domestic Resilience:** The decision to avoid returning home is often rooted in adverse conditions in the country of origin.⁷⁸
 - **The Policy:** Promote inclusive civic nationalism over exclusive ideologies and pursue long-term economic strategies that build domestic resilience and create attractive opportunities for returnees.
 - **Benefit to the State:** This addresses the root causes of 'brain drain'. By creating a more stable, tolerant, and opportunity-rich domestic environment, states can encourage their highly skilled diaspora to return with capital and knowledge, reversing emigration flows and fostering sustainable, homegrown development. It also reduces emigrant supply, enhancing negotiation abilities in BLAs.
 - **Case Summary:** The economic transformation of South Korea provides a powerful example. Initial state-led investment in education and domestic industry eventually created a dynamic economy that was attractive enough to lure back its highly skilled diaspora from the US and Europe, who became instrumental in fuelling its technology and innovation sectors.⁷⁹

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Conclusion

On the subject of migration trajectories in and out of the Gulf, we find that the Gulf is not an endpoint but a transitional staging ground in multi-stage, often cyclical, migration strategies. The synthesis of findings from the policy reports written for the GLMM-KAS project, 'Highly skilled workers' onward migration from the Gulf to the EU and North America: Trends and patterns of the global competition for talents', reveals that better wages and security in Gulf states, while attractive, are insufficient to secure long-term talent retention in the absence of a robust merit-based labour market and permanent legal and social belonging. Essentially, though the Gulf states' current economic diversification requires non-citizen talent, their migration regimes push such talent away. Importantly, this project finds, the 'push' is usually not to 'return' to countries of origin; rather, migrants evade the Gulf's structural insecurities and inequalities by pursuing legal inclusion and passport privileges in the Global North. And often, they then return to the Gulf for the region's sociocultural values, safety, and individual-level advantages of curtailing former citizenship penalties.

In response to these findings, the policy recommendations in Section 6 offer a strategic roadmap. They can be understood on two tiers. The most immediate and easily implemented reforms—such as enhancing bureaucratic transparency and regulating third-party recruitment agencies—are essential for addressing acute problems. However, they are ultimately 'band-aid' solutions that treat the symptoms of migrant insecurity rather than its root cause. The most beneficial, long-term structural changes lie in the more challenging reforms: the creation of merit-based permanent residency pathways and the active dismantling of passport-based wage discrimination. These policies will enable Gulf states to transition from high-turnover labour markets to sustainable knowledge economies, securing larger, sustainable returns on their vast investments in infrastructure and human capital.

Looking ahead, this research agenda opens several critical avenues for future inquiry. The identified data gaps present clear priorities:

- What are the distinct stepwise migration dynamics within the under-researched contexts of Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait?
- How do the motivations and trajectories of skilled Arab, Southeast Asian, and Western expatriates differ from those of the more frequently studied South Asian communities?
- As GCC states roll out 'Golden Visa' schemes, what is their actual impact on retention beyond a narrow class of investors, and do they create new forms of inequality?

Furthermore, future research must move beyond intention to outcome. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the professional and personal trajectories of those who migrate onward versus those who stay. Finally, a pressing question concerns the second generation—the children of expatriates raised in the Gulf. Their sense of identity, their aspirations, and their response to being 'native foreigners' will be a decisive factor in the region's social fabric and economic future. Addressing their paradoxical status is not just a matter of policy, but a question fundamental to the character of 21st-century Gulf societies.

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