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## Migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

### Dynamics, Trends and Challenges

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# Migration Governance Beyond the West

*Historical Legacies, Contemporary Trends, and Future  
Trajectories*

*Editor: Sherzod Eraliev*

Research Report in Sociology of Law 2025:1



*Sherzod Eraliev*

# Migration Governance Beyond the West:

Historical Legacies, Contemporary Trends,  
and Future Trajectories

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# Migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Dynamics, Trends and Challenges

*Dilaver Khamzaev*<sup>62</sup>

## Introduction. The Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

In recent years, Western Asia—specifically the Arabian Peninsula—has gained increasing global attention, driven by high-profile expositions, international sporting events, sustainability initiatives, and technology summits. At the heart of this global focus is a group of nations—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—collectively known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These countries have positioned themselves as key players in regional and global affairs, drawing attention not only for their economic prowess but also for their evolving socio-political and technological landscapes.

Formed in 1981 in the wake of the 1970s oil boom, the GCC was established to facilitate economic development and regional integration. As a regional intergovernmental organisation, it plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration across economic, political, and social spheres.

The GCC member states share a deeply rooted Islamic identity and a common Arab heritage, which shape their cultural and social frameworks. Economically, these nations rank among the world's high-income countries, a status largely attributed to their vast oil and gas reserves that continue to drive their economies (Alharthi, 2023). However, one of the defining characteristics of the region is its profound dependence on migrant labour. Expatriates constitute a significant portion of the workforce, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as construction, services, and domestic

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work (Strabac, Valenta and Awad, 2018). This demographic reality creates a unique socio-economic structure in which a large expatriate workforce coexists with national citizens, shaping labour policies and societal dynamics.

Beyond economic interdependence, GCC nations grapple with shared environmental challenges, including water scarcity and food security concerns (Ahmed and Karanis, 2020; Hassen and Bilali, 2019). Given the region's arid climate and reliance on imported food supplies, resource management has emerged as a central theme in regional cooperation. At the same time, the GCC continues to serve as a platform for addressing broader regional security issues and geopolitical tensions, reinforcing its role in ensuring stability in the Middle East (Abdelkhalek, 2022; Pontes et al., 2024).

Thus, the GCC presents a compelling case study due to its unique migration patterns, growing global influence, and rapid economic transformation. This chapter aims to explore the recent migration trends and evolving migration policies in the GCC countries, focusing on labour mobility, government strategies, and socio-economic impacts. As the region navigates demographic challenges, labour reforms, and shifting migration policies, it continues to play a pivotal role in shaping global migration patterns. Understanding these trends and policy shifts is critical for assessing the broader implications of migration governance in this highly interconnected region.

## Migration Trends in the GCC Countries

According to data from the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2024), the total number of individuals residing in a country other than their country of birth or citizenship has gradually doubled, increasing from 153.9 million in 1990 to 304 million in 2024 - growing by more than 100 million in the last two decades (Figure 1).



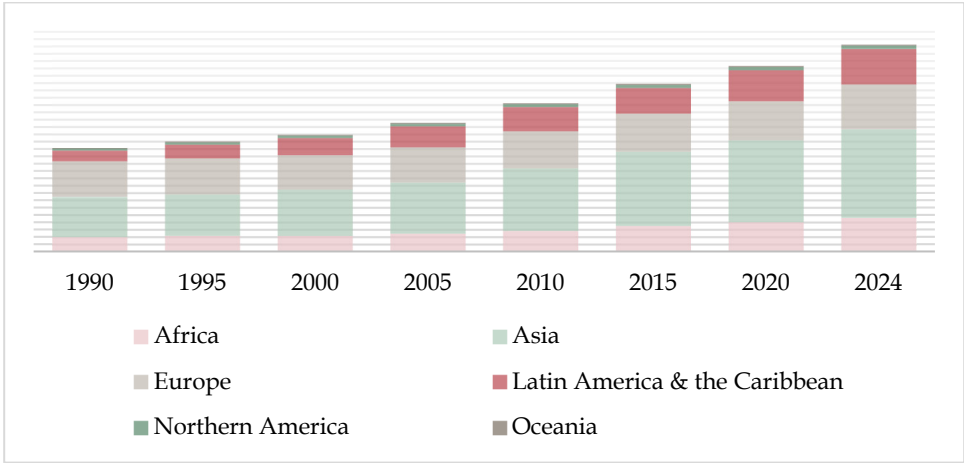


Figure 1. Global migration trend by the region of origin  
 Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

As of 2024, Asia and Europe are the primary regions of migrant origin, with approximately 121 million and 61 million individuals, respectively (Figure 1). Together, they account for nearly 60% of global migrants. However, migration in both regions remains predominantly internal—around 81% of Asian migrants and 74% of European migrants relocate within their respective regions.

Unlike Europe, where internal migration is more evenly distributed across different subregions, in Asia, nearly 38 million migrants (51% of overall internal migration in Asia) have chosen Western Asia as their destination (Figure 2). Within Western Asia, around 25 million individuals, originating from other Asian countries have moved to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. From a global perspective, these six countries account for 8.2% of the global migration stock which makes them a unique case that warrants further examination.

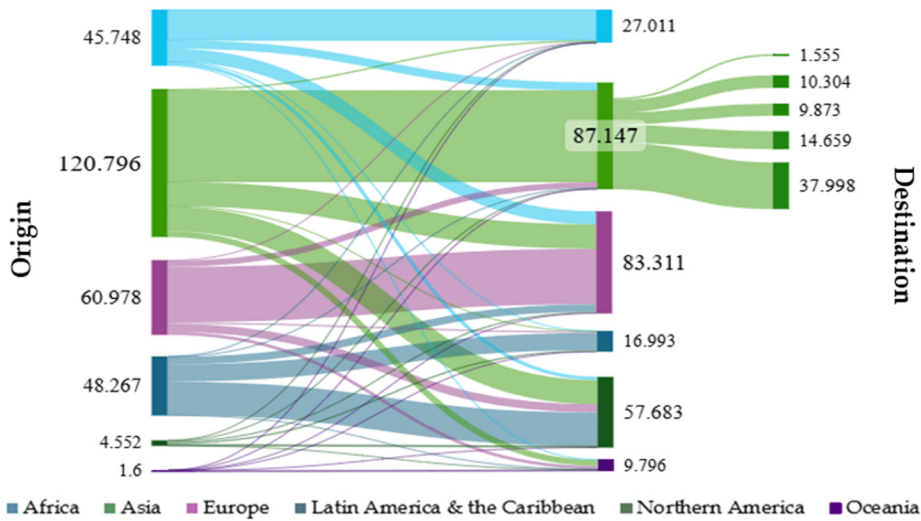


Figure 2. Global Migration Stock for 2024 (in millions)  
 Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

As of 2024, out of the 25 million individuals who have chosen GCC countries as their destination, more than 18 million originate from Southern Asia. This trend of Southern Asians, comprising a significant portion of the migration stock in GCC countries, has been consistent over the last three decades (Figure 3). During this period, all GCC countries experienced exponential growth in migrant populations, reflecting their reliance on foreign labour for economic development.

Saudi Arabia, the largest host, saw its Asian migrant population surge from 3.4 million in 1995 to 10.8 million in 2024, with Southern Asians constituting 63% of this total. Similarly, the UAE's migrant numbers grew from 1.5 million to 6.8 million, with Southern Asians making up 79% of the total in 2024. Qatar's growth was particularly striking: its Asian migrant population expanded sevenfold, from 282,557 in 1995 to 2.05 million in 2024, with Southern Asians accounting for 82% (1.7 million) of the total. Currently, more than 80% of private-sector jobs in the GCC are filled by migrants, with a significant share originating from South and Southeast Asia (Ennis and Blarel, 2022, p. 3).

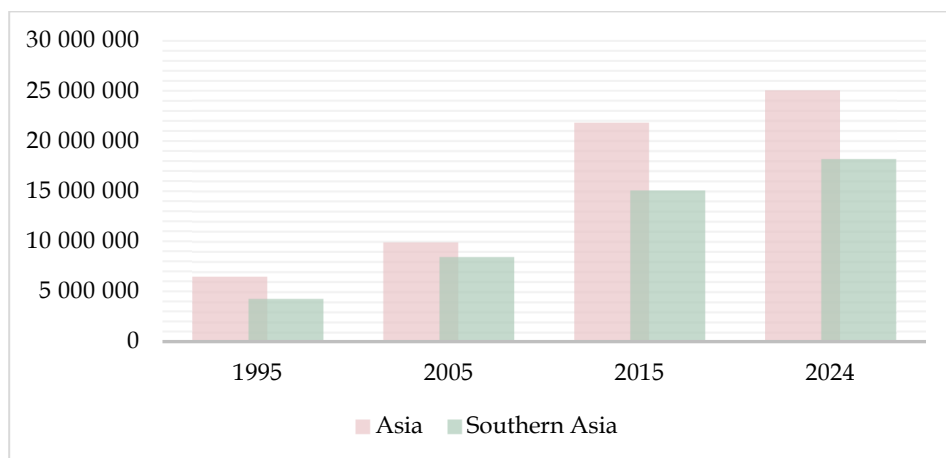


Figure 3. Proportion of Southern Asian migrants in GCC countries  
Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

These trends align with GCC nations’ economic strategies, such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and Qatar’s diversification efforts, which rely heavily on migrant labour in sectors like construction, healthcare, and domestic work. Southern Asian migrants form the backbone of the GCC labour force, representing 70–95% of all Asian migrants in the region. In particular, migrants from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan constitute the primary labour force from Southern Asia (Figure 4). India is the largest source of migrants in most GCC states, with Indians making up 60.7% of Southern Asian migrants (3.25 million out of 5.35 million) in the UAE and 59.4% (1.23 million out of 2.07 million) in Kuwait. Bangladesh stands out in Oman, where it represents 39.4% of Southern Asian migrants (737,087 out of 1.87 million).

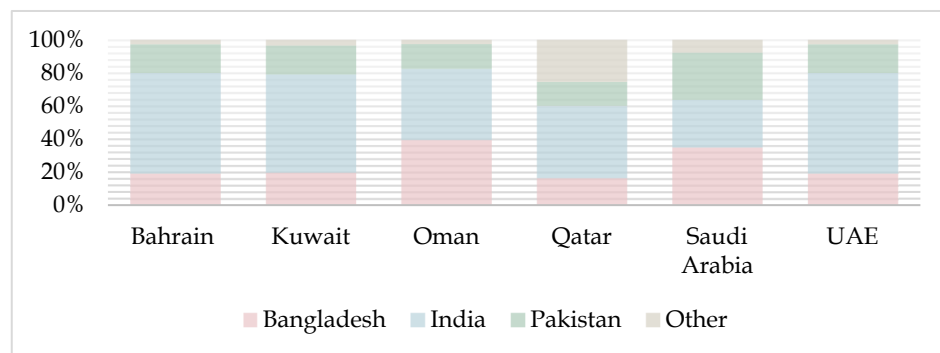


Figure 4. Migration stock in GCC for 2024: proportion of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan  
Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

The significant presence of migrants has shaped the demographic structure of GCC countries. Available and extrapolated data on the distribution of nationals and non-nationals in the total population stock from 2020 to 2024 indicate a high dependence on foreign labour. Although national populations are rising, the proportion of non-nationals has remained stable across all countries. Oman and Saudi Arabia have the highest percentage of nationals (~57–59%), indicating a relatively lower dependence on foreign labour compared to other GCC states. On the other hand, the UAE and Qatar have the lowest proportion of nationals, with non-nationals making up 73–77% of the population, demonstrating a high reliance on expatriates. In Bahrain, the proportion of nationals remains relatively stable at ~46–48%, while in Kuwait, non-nationals continue to dominate (~68%). This trend has persisted over the last five years under analysis.

**Table 1. Proportion of Nationals (N) and Non-Nationals (NN) in GCC Countries<sup>63</sup>**

	2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN
Bahrain <sup>a</sup>	48.5%	51.5%	47.8%	52.2%	46.4%	53.6%	46.3%	53.7%	46.6%	53.4%
Kuwait <sup>b</sup>	30.6%	69.4%	32.1%	67.9%	33.9%	66.1%	31.7%	68.3%	31.5%	68.5%
Oman <sup>c</sup>	61.1%	38.9%	61.9%	38.1%	58.1%	41.9%	56.7%	43.3%	56.6%	43.4%
Qatar <sup>d</sup>	23.0%	77.0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	26.3%	73.7%
Saudi Arabia <sup>e</sup>	57.0%	43.0%	59.7%	40.3%	58.4%	41.6%	N/A	N/A	58.8%	41.2%
UAE <sup>f</sup>	22.7%	77.3%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	23.6%	76.4%

<sup>63</sup> Table formed using available and extrapolated data from following sources:

<sup>a</sup> Data taken from: <https://bahrain.opendatasoft.com/explore/?sort=modified&refine.theme=Population>

<sup>b</sup> Data taken from: [https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics\\_en?ID=67&ParentCatID=1](https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics_en?ID=67&ParentCatID=1)

<sup>c</sup> Data taken from: <https://data.gov.om/OMPOP2016/population>

<sup>d</sup> Data taken from: <https://www.data.gov.qa/explore/dataset/qatar-monthly-statistics-total-population-of-2022/table/?sort=month> and <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

<sup>e</sup> Data taken from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> and

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2023&locations=SA&start=2019&view=chart>

<sup>f</sup> Data taken from: <https://www.data.gov.qa/explore/dataset/qatar-monthly-statistics-total-population-of-2022/table/?sort=month> and <https://fcsc.gov.ae/en-us/Pages/Statistics/Statistics-by-Subject.aspx#/3Ffolder=Demography%20and%20Social/Population/Population&subject=Demography%20and%20Social>

The continued role of GCC countries as major migration destinations confirms that their economies are structurally reliant on foreign labour. However, governments are introducing policy adjustments to balance nationalisation efforts while ensuring a sufficient foreign workforce to support economic development. These policies will be briefly described in the following section.

## Migration policies in GCC countries

### Regional and national frameworks

The GCC countries share a complex migration policy framework shaped by regional economic integration, labour market demands, and evolving legal reforms. Since the 1990s, international labour migration has been the primary source of labour for GCC states. Over this period, these countries have developed their migration policies in response to economic and demographic shifts. The Gulf economies are characterised by labour markets where foreign workers dominate, particularly in the private sector. While GCC states share foundational migration policy frameworks influenced by historical, economic, and socio-political dynamics, they also exhibit individual differences in their approaches.

At the international level, all GCC countries have committed to the principles of safe, orderly, and regular migration by signing the Global Compact for Migration, a non-binding UN agreement adopted in 2018. Additionally, most countries in the region—except Oman—have ratified the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention* (1958). However, despite these commitments, none of the GCC states have ratified the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* (1990), which has been primarily endorsed by migrant-sending countries. This reluctance reflects the prevailing approach of GCC states, which prioritise national labour policies over binding international protections for migrant workers.

Regionally, while the GCC lacks a unified migration policy, its member states share common labour market regulations and have facilitated intra-GCC mobility for nationals through visa harmonisation. The *Charter of the GCC*, the original *Unified Economic Agreement of 1981*, and the *New Economic Agreement of 2001* serve as key frameworks for regional cooperation, guaranteeing freedom of movement, residence, and employment for GCC citizens across member states. However, these benefits do not extend to non-GCC migrants, who remain subject to national sponsorship

systems (Babar, 2011). Similarly, while common visa policies—such as the proposed *GCC unified visa*—are designed to boost tourism, they maintain restrictive conditions for labour migrants.

Efforts to enhance regional collaboration on migration governance are evident in various initiatives. The ILO's *Regional Fair Migration Project* and its ongoing partnership with the *GCC Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs* signal a commitment to improving labour standards. Despite these efforts, no formal, binding migration framework has been established at the regional level.

A defining characteristic of labour migration across all GCC states is the *Kafala system*, a legal framework that binds migrant workers to their employers, or sponsors. This system governs key aspects of residency, employment, and mobility, granting significant power to employers. Sponsors control work permits, visa renewals, and exit permissions, creating a dependency that often restricts labour mobility. As a result, migrant workers are unable to change jobs without their sponsor's consent, a limitation that frequently traps them in exploitative working conditions (Wagle, 2024).

The transnational recruitment process further entrenches these vulnerabilities. Labour brokerage networks in South and Southeast Asia facilitate the migration of low-wage workers to the GCC under standardised contracts, reinforcing systemic dependencies (Wagle, 2024). While some reforms have been introduced—such as Qatar's 2020 labour law, which allows job changes without employer approval—the core mechanisms of the Kafala system remain intact (Bel-Air, 2024; Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022).

The foundation of this system rests on the role of the Kafeel (sponsor-employer), who assumes financial and legal responsibility for the worker. By signing binding agreements with the respective country's Ministry of Labour, the Kafeel maintains control over the worker's legal status, including their ability to reside and work in the country (Shah, 2009). Originally conceived in the 1950s to protect unskilled national workers in Kuwait, the system expanded and became institutionalised across the Gulf during the 1970s and 1980s (Aarthi and Sahu, 2021). It was designed to facilitate a temporary and rotating labour force, allowing workers to be rapidly recruited during economic booms and expelled during downturns (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011).

Beyond its legal and administrative dimensions, the Kafala system is deeply intertwined with socio-cultural practices. Unlike other global labour migration schemes, where an employer sponsors a worker's initial entry into the host country, the Kafala system extends control over crucial aspects of a worker's life. Residency

renewals, contract terminations, job transfers, and even the ability to leave the country often hinge on the sponsor's approval (Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022). This dependency structure exacerbates the precarity of migrant workers, limiting their autonomy and legal protections.

Over the past two decades, the Kafala system has faced increasing scrutiny from civil society and international organisations. Reform efforts have aimed at streamlining labour migration and increasing national workforce participation. However, despite these changes, the fundamental structures of sponsorship-based migration remain deeply entrenched, continuing to shape the experiences of millions of migrant workers in the GCC (Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022).

### **Workforce Nationalisation**

All GCC countries prioritise workforce nationalisation as a strategy to reduce dependence on foreign labour. Programmes such as *Saudisation* in Saudi Arabia, *Emiratisation* in the UAE, and *Kuwaitisation* in Kuwait impose quotas requiring private-sector employers to hire a certain percentage of nationals. Non-compliance often results in penalties, incentivising businesses to meet these targets (Fargues et al., 2018). However, despite these policies, the labour market remains deeply segmented. Nationals predominantly occupy well-compensated government positions, while low-skilled jobs in the private sector continue to be filled by migrant workers, reinforcing a dual labour market structure (Sherman, 2022).

A key challenge of nationalisation efforts lies in the mismatch between the skills of local workers and private-sector demands. Many businesses comply with nationalisation quotas in a tokenistic manner rather than fostering genuine workforce integration. This gap persists as private-sector employers favour the cost-efficiency and specialised skill sets of migrant labour over the often higher wage expectations of nationals (Diop et al., 2018).

### **Exclusionary Social and Legal Protections**

Migrant workers in the GCC face systemic exclusion from social welfare and legal protections, contributing to their precarious status. Citizenship remains largely inaccessible, as naturalisation laws favour individuals with ethnic or tribal affiliations, making long-term settlement for migrants nearly impossible (Beaugrand and Thiollet, 2023). Beyond legal and economic barriers, social segregation further marginalises migrant communities. Many reside in designated labour camps or separate neighbourhoods, limiting their interaction with local populations and

reducing opportunities for integration (Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024). Even recent reforms—such as Qatar’s introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage in 2020—have failed to eliminate the structural inequalities embedded within the system (Sherman, 2022).

Migration policies in the GCC are closely tied to state security and political stability, leading to strict enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, GCC states enforce stringent measures against irregular migration, codifying severe penalties for visa overstays and illegal entry. In Oman, for instance, the *Foreigners’ Residence Law* (1995) mandates deportation and bans on re-entry for undocumented migrants. Saudi Arabia takes an even stricter approach, imposing indefinite detention on those who enter the country illegally ‘until s/he is deported from the country’ (Zahra, 2018, p. 5).

## The Necessity of Migrants

Despite strict enforcement mechanisms, periodic amnesty programmes are introduced across the region, allowing irregular migrants to either regularise their status or leave without facing penalties. This seemingly contradictory approach—restricting rights while continuing to attract foreign labour—reflects the GCC countries’ ongoing dependence on migrant workers to sustain economic growth. These workers play a crucial role across various sectors, from construction and domestic work to high-skilled industries, ensuring the continued development of the region.

Recognising this dependence, GCC states have actively partnered with the ILO to promote decent work and sustainable development. One key initiative was a series of regional workshops on *End-of-Service Indemnity* (EOSI) reforms, reflecting a growing commitment to enhancing social protection systems for migrant workers. This effort is part of a broader project aimed at improving labour conditions across the region (ILO, 2023).

Further strengthening this collaboration, the ILO and the Executive Bureau of the Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs of the GCC have launched a comprehensive Plan of Joint Activities for 2025-2029. This initiative is designed to enhance cooperation and advance the Decent Work Agenda within GCC countries. By addressing key workplace concerns, such as fair wage systems, gender equality, environmental sustainability in employment, and stronger worker protections, this partnership underscores the region’s increasing engagement in labour reforms (ILO, 2024).



## Conclusion

Migrants make up a significant majority of the population in many GCC states, in some cases even outnumbering nationals. The region's economic structure is heavily dependent on foreign labour, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and services, making migration an essential pillar of its development. Despite restrictive legal frameworks and the rigid sponsorship system, GCC states have maintained an open migration policy, continuously attracting workers from Asia, Africa, and beyond.

However, this reliance on foreign labour exists within a complex and often contradictory policy environment. On one hand, governments impose strict nationalisation programmes aimed at increasing the participation of citizens in the workforce. On the other hand, the continued preference for migrant workers—due to their lower cost and specialised skills—ensures that foreign labour remains indispensable. Amnesty programmes, periodic labour law reforms, and collaborations with international organisations, such as the ILO, reflect an ongoing attempt to strike a balance between economic necessity and workforce regulation.

At the same time, migration in the GCC is not solely an economic phenomenon; it is deeply intertwined with social and cultural dynamics. The presence of large expatriate communities has transformed urban landscapes, influenced consumer markets, and introduced new social norms. Yet, despite decades of settlement, migrant workers remain structurally excluded from long-term residency rights and citizenship, reinforcing a system of transitory labour rather than permanent migration.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of the region's migration model will depend on how well the GCC states manage workforce nationalisation while maintaining economic growth. The ongoing diversification of Gulf economies—driven by initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030 and Qatar National Vision 2030—suggests that labour markets will continue to evolve, potentially creating new opportunities for skilled migrants while maintaining a reliance on lower-wage workers.

Ultimately, migration will remain at the heart of the GCC's socio-economic fabric. While recent reforms signal a gradual shift in policies towards improving worker rights and labour mobility, structural inequalities persist. The future trajectory of migration governance in the Gulf will be shaped by economic shifts, geopolitical developments, and the ability of policymakers to balance national interests with the realities of a globally interconnected labour market.

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