

Social and Cultural Relations between Nationals and Expatriates  
in the Gulf Cooperation Council

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## INTRODUCTION

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have gone through astonishing economic and social change in the past few decades. Dubai, that glittering business, trade, tourism and transportation hub, was little more than a dusty village along a meandering creek a few decades ago. Flush with petrodollars, the countries of the GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have built their nations from the ground up. Yet what is often forgotten is that much of this amazing transformation was built not by the citizens of these countries, but on the backs and minds of foreign labor. Millions of expatriate workers have streamed through here in recent decades from Palestinian teachers to Filipina maids to Bangladeshi laborers to Russian businessmen.... and many have stayed, raising families in the nations they helped build. Despite having grown dependent on these workers, the countries' rulers have remained uneasy with this arrangement, fearing the erosion of their own cultural values and rising demographic strength of the oft-abused expatriates. Many have enacted weak policies aimed at nationalizing their work forces, but with very little success, and the number of expatriates continues to rise. What does this say about the future of the GCC? For my capstone, I would like to examine an important question that is often left out of the debate: how do citizens and expatriates relate and interact with each other on social and cultural levels, and what does this interaction (or lack therefore of) imply for the future and stability of the GCC?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Considering the importance and timeliness of this topic, there is relatively little written about it. Popular media coverage of expatriates often only highlights the most extreme abuses of human rights, particularly in regards to construction and domestic laborers. The scholarly research itself

could almost be a subject of study; depending on their discipline and background, researchers often seem to be discussing entirely different situations. However, nearly all are united in agreement over one issue: that regardless of their dependence upon them, nationals are not pleased with the presence of such large numbers of foreigners in their society and fear cultural and moral erosion. Yet there is relatively little written about how these groups relate and exist in the societal sphere.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is divided into two major parts. The first part will give a brief history of modern migration to the region and an overview of the current demographics of the foreign population. I have also compiled a briefing of each Gulf country's individual policies towards reducing migrants. Through this first part, I wish to demonstrate that regardless of the lackluster policies of the GCC governments, the expatriate population is extremely unlikely to be displaced anytime soon. They have proved themselves to be an economic necessity, and many have established their lives and homes in the region. With this in hand, I would then like to explore the ways in which expatriates and nationals are adjusting (or not) to this reality. Are these groups completely separate or is there hope for a degree of conciliation? To do so, I will look at a variety of sources, including scholarly articles, interviews, and print media. I will also do a survey of university students from the Gulf, both nationals and expatriates to gain a sense of the opinions of the next generation.

As an emerging social scientist, I am firmly of the belief that the best way to study societal relations is to relocate there, and I am aware of the limits of my research. Yet despite the geographic limitations, I strongly believe this is a very timely issue. The workforce of our increasingly globalized future will likely resemble the mobile labor populations in the GCC, and

it is important to consider the ramifications involved. This is also an issue that the Gulf, regardless of the hopes of its leaders and nationals, will likely be dealing with for a long time.

## HISTORY OF MIGRATION TO THE GULF

Perhaps contradictory to the view of history in the eyes of Arabian nationals today, the coastal littoral of the Arabian Gulf has been a culturally diverse space for centuries. Centered along the strategic Indian Ocean trade routes, traders and conquerors have long-crossed and settled these lands. Their influence can be seen in the language and dress even today. One wonders if the natives of 12<sup>th</sup> century Muscat also lamented the presence of South Asians in their society—a thriving community of Chola merchants from South India had long called this area their home. For the focus of this research, however, we will confine history to the modern period, starting with perhaps the most important event of the region in centuries: the discovery of oil.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, prospects for Arabia likely looked rather bleak. It was weakly controlled by a dying Ottoman Empire and contested by British forces trying to protect their route to far more valuable India. The era of caravans and rich trading routes had ended and pearling – an industry that had sustained Gulf communities for thousands of years was dealt a sudden death with the invention of pearl culturing in 1916, a development that sent the economies of places like coastal Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE reeling. Very few likely saw the future of their region in the odd, black tar-like bitumen that often billowed through the ground and was used to seal boats water-tight. Yet with increases in transportation and energy worldwide, oil was poised to be king. Large reserves of oil were first discovered in Saudi Arabia by an American company in 1938. This was the first major discovery in the Gulf region, yet initially had little impact on the economy. It was not until the founding of the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) and further drilling that the implications of oil development

became clear. New roads, housing, power, water, and other basic service needed to be extended, and the influx of oil workers needed infrastructure plans as well. While some Saudis could be trained to do this work, their population was far too small. The development of oil in the other future Gulf states also spurred these problems. With the discovery of petroleum and resulting large-scale infrastructure development plans, the countries of the future GCC found themselves facing a severe labor shortage. Their small, relatively uneducated populations were inadequate at the time.

While the Gulf was facing the prospect of untold wealth and modernization, the situation in the rest of Arab countries was bleak. The Palestinians had been forcibly displaced from their homes, Yemen was embroiled in civil war, and Egypt and others were facing record levels of unemployment at all sectors of society. The lure of employment, peace, perhaps even prosperity lured millions of non-Gulf Arabs to the Arabian peninsula. They found employment in all sectors, from healthcare and education to construction and industrial work. Their emigration was even supported by their home governments, as it alleviated some pressure on domestic unemployment and their remittances provided an important source of wealth and investment. The largest populations were Egyptians, Palestinians, Yemenis, and Jordanians. Initially, Arab expatriates were welcomed, particularly in the face of immigrants from other places. Their cultural, linguistic, and religious similarities made it easier for them to fit in and likely seemed less threatening to Gulf Arabs. Their role in developing and modernizing these countries is difficult to overestimate; they developed their infrastructure, government administrations, health facilities, and taught their children<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrzej Kapiszewski , “Arab Labour Migration to the GCC States,” in *Arab Migration in a Globalized World*, (Geneva: International Organization for Migration and the League of Arab States, 2004), 119.

However, their similarities also made them more dangerous in some ways. Gulf Arabs feared social and political radicalization. Ideas about pan-Arabism called for the destruction of both borders and monarchies. As many scholars have pointed out, relations between Gulf Arabs and non-Gulf Arabs are not warmed by their common heritage. They socialize separately and non-Gulf Arabs are forbidden from wearing local dress. They also tended to bring their families in hopes of permanent settlement – a serious threat for nationals. Yet these issues likely pale in comparison to economic realities that would soon change the demographic face of expatriates.

Although there was some degree of development in the 1950's and 1960's, the real potential of oil wealth had not yet been realized. The West may have negative memories of the oil embargos of the 1970's, but it was a watershed moment for the Gulf. Their power was manifested for the first time, and oil revenue poured in, drastically changing ideas of what could be done with the money. It was only after 1973 that large-scale developments really took off; this was the era in which tiny fishing villages became world-class cities. Indeed, development on this scale and pace has not been seen in any other place in the world. Capital growth averaged nearly 30% a year during the 1970's in Saudi Arabia and further east, the emirs along the coast were hammering out an agreement that would create the future United Arab Emirates.

Much more labor was needed, yet the pool from Arab countries was dwindling<sup>2</sup>. South Asian workers, particularly Muslims, began to flock to the region, aided by family members and recruiting agents. Their presence was supported by Gulf nationals who were eager to replace their restive non-Gulf Arab populations with a cheaper work force. Asians were also easier to layoff, considered more “obedient,” and less likely to bring their families. Once their governments realized the economic benefits of expatriation, they also aided in organizing and

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<sup>2</sup> Beatrice Knerr, “South Asian countries as competitors on the world labour market,” in *South Asians Overseas*, ed. Colin Clark, Ceri Peach and Steven Vertovec, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 176.

promoting foreign work. Pakistan in particular, under the Bhutto government, made the export of workers to the Gulf one of their key foreign policy issues, cultivating ties with these nations<sup>3</sup>.

Many Indians and Pakistanis were also highly-educated and able to serve in the professional fields the Gulf desperately needed. In 1975, 72% of the expatriate workers were from other Arab countries and 19% were Asian; in 1985, 59% were Arab and 30% were Asian<sup>4</sup>.

South Asians did not remain the only migrant group heading west to the Gulf for long. In the late 1970's and 1980's, large group of East Asians started entering the Gulf workforce. The ways in which they arrived were highly organized; workers arrived on fixed contracts without their families to complete certain projects and then leave<sup>5</sup>. This system was highly appealing to Gulf governments growing ever more wary of their population problems. Expatriate groups from South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and China frequently came this way, particularly for domestic work. Although migrants previously had been overwhelmingly young men, a trend of female domestic workers emerged among these groups as well.

The next major event in expatriate history was the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and its aftermath. Palestinians were a major component of Kuwait's expatriate population before the invasion, estimated at about 450,000 people. Many had arrived after being displaced by the creation of Israel in 1948 and had subsequently raised families there. After the Iraqis were pushed back, most of the Palestinians were forcibly expelled, arrested, or pressured to leave due to the Yasser Arafat's support of Saddam Hussein. The Gulf War gave further incentive to many GCC states to reduce the number of non-Gulf Arab expatriates, although doing so badly hurt the economies of the returnee's countries. About one million Yemenis left Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

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<sup>3</sup> Knerr, 178-180.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 181.



after the first Gulf War and another 800,000 left after the second Gulf crisis<sup>6</sup>. Saudi Arabia quickly implemented policies to discourage the continued immigration of Arabs in 1991<sup>7</sup>.

The presence of such large numbers of foreigners in their population has unnerved Gulf rulers since they first started arriving. They are feared for several reasons: cultural and moral erosion, political instability, etc. All GCC countries are basically absolute monarchies that operate on a welfare system. Citizens live well and receive payouts and subsidies from the government and in exchange have little voice or influence in their countries. Expatriates exist outside this system. Indeed, the current system is in many ways a manifestation of historic tribalism, with the members benefiting from their leaders. Outsiders must also have a sponsor (*kafalah*) as they did centuries ago.

Nearly all the GCC countries began programs in the 1990's to reduce the population of expatriates (Oman's began in 1988 and Qatar's in 2000). Perhaps the most pressing reason is not simple fear of cultural erosion, but the increasing unemployment and discontent among the younger generations. The Gulf is facing an unprecedented youth boom, and finding them jobs has become critical. Policies have been formulated both to reduce the demand and supply of foreign labor. On the demand side, job-training for nationals, along with quotas for their employment and subsidized salaries have been aimed at lessening the demand. Supply policies have included quotas, increases in costs, taxes, and amnesty programs. The GCC countries are also starting to more strongly enforce their migration laws, and crack down on schemes such as visa-swapping. The specific policies of each follow below.

### Bahrain

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<sup>6</sup> Riad al Khouri, "Arab Migration Patterns: the Mashreq," in *Arab Migration in a Globalized World*, (Geneva: International Organization for Migration and the League of Arab States, 2004), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Nasra M. Shah, "Arab Migration Patterns in the Gulf," in *Arab Migration in a Globalized World*, (Geneva: International Organization for Migration and the League of Arab States, 2004), 99.

Bahrain is one of the smallest countries in the GCC and has among the most lax laws regarding expatriates. A 2004 UN survey of government opinions regarding foreign workers found that only Bahrain and Qatar were interested in maintaining or not intervening in the population numbers<sup>8</sup>. Expatriates are allowed to join trade unions and those who have fifteen years work experience do not need a work permit to continue residing there<sup>9</sup>. However, in the wake of abuse reports, the government is currently reviewing hiring procedures for domestic workers and the conditions of this type of employment. Similar to indirect policies aimed at increasing cost of living in other GCC countries, foreign workers in Bahrain must now have their own health insurance, which employers rarely provide. Even with insurance, health fees have dramatically increased<sup>10</sup>.

### Kuwait

Kuwait has a much greater percentage of expatriates in its population and a darker history of dealing with them, as in the case of deported Palestinians and other non-Gulf Arab workers after the Iraqi invasion. Currently the government has also taken measures to reduce the presence of expatriates. Like other GCC countries, citizenship is highly restricted. Labor unions are allowed, but elections banned<sup>11</sup>. The government is attempting to realize its goal of capping expatriate participant in the public sector at 35%<sup>12</sup>. In order to lower the number of families, a salary cap has been placed on workers who can bring dependents with them<sup>13</sup>. On the legal side, Kuwait has

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<sup>8</sup> "International Migration in the Arab Region," (Beirut, Lebanon: United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities, United Nations Population Division, May 11, 2006), 13.

<sup>9</sup> N. Janardhan, "Expatriates Face a Changing Reality in Gulf Countries," *The Daily Star*, October 25, 2006, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=8333>.

<sup>10</sup> Nasra M. Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," (Tours, France: XXV IUSSP International Population Conference, 2005), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Hamid S. Attiyah, "Expatriate acculturation in Arab Gulf countries," *Journal of Management Development* 15 (2006): 39.

<sup>12</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 10.

<sup>13</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 2.

tried to encourage illegal migrants to leave without consequences during certain amnesty periods<sup>14</sup> and floated the idea of doing DNA to ensure dependents and workers are related<sup>15</sup>. Kuwait has also taken measures to increase the cost of living for expatriate workers. The government proposed an income tax for foreigners, but has yet to be realized<sup>16</sup>. Fees for all sorts of services, including resident permits, driver's licenses, registration and work papers, have been increased<sup>17</sup>. Health fees have also been dramatically increased. Instead of free healthcare, workers now have to buy insurance not only for themselves, but dependents as well. Indeed, when the law was first implemented, many dependents were sent home.

### Oman

Oman is one of the newly wealthy GCC countries and has the lowest percentage of expatriates in its population, although they still make up a substantial percentage of its labor force. Oman has been more successful than many other GCC countries in encouraging national worker employment. New job opportunities have been created, particularly for women. The rather lucrative industry of selling the *abaya* has been reserved for Omani women only<sup>18</sup>. Oman has also had success in encouraging Omani nationals to take lower positions, such as cashiers, drivers, and security guards, that other GCC nationals usually balk at. Policies such as these often diminish the demand for foreign workers. Like other GCC countries, Oman restricts marriages between nationals and non-nationals<sup>19</sup>.

### Qatar

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<sup>14</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 6.

<sup>15</sup> Karen Leonard, "South Asian Workers in the Gulf: Jockeying for Places," in *Globalization under Construction*, ed. Richard Warren Perry and Bill Maurer, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 203.

<sup>16</sup> N. Janardhan.

<sup>17</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 5.

<sup>18</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 10.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Dresch, "Foreign Matter: the place of strangers in the Gulf Society," in *Globalization and the Gulf*, ed. John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah, and Mohammed al-Mutawa, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 203.

Unusual among GCC nations, the government of Qatar viewed its immigration level as satisfactory in 2003 and wished to maintain its current population<sup>20</sup>. Qatar has the smallest population in the GCC and likely needs expatriate workers for its development. However, like others, it also restricts marriages of its citizens<sup>21</sup>.

### Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia hosts the largest and oldest expatriate population in the region as it was the first Gulf country to develop its petroleum sector and infrastructure. However, Saudi Arabia is the only country that has significantly lowered both the overall population of foreigners and their presence in the labor force. Ironically, they have also gone the furthest in allowing foreign ownership and integration. Citizenship is certainly a difficult feat, but it is possible. Prospective citizens become eligible through a point system; points are gained by learning to read and write Arabic, long-term residence, and work and education credentials<sup>22</sup>. A 2002 law also theoretically allows foreign retail ownership and investment, also the ability for foreigners to sponsor foreign workers in some sectors if a suitable Saudi employee can not be found<sup>23</sup>. However, the Saudi government is also actively trying to reduce the number of foreign workers; they hope to cap the number for foreigners as a percentage of the population at 20% by 2013<sup>24</sup>. They have spent millions on job-training, technical schools, cash incentives, and subsidized salaries for nationals, part of the funding coming from a tax expatriate workers must pay<sup>25</sup>. Expatriates are slowly

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<sup>20</sup> "International Migration in the Arab Region," (Beirut, Lebanon: United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities, United Nations Population Division, May 11, 2006), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Dresch, 203.

<sup>22</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 2-3. and "International Migration in the Arab Region," (Beirut, Lebanon: United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities, United Nations Population Division, May 11, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Rodney Wilson, "Saudi Arabia's role in the global economy," in *Globalization and the Gulf*, edited by John. W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah, and Mohammed al-Mutawa, (New York: Routledge, 2006),167.

<sup>24</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 11.

<sup>25</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 9.

being phased out of sectors such as travel, gold, jewelry, and groceries. As seen in the other profiles, health fees are also increasing. Saudi Arabia has also drastically reduced the number of new visas, from 8.8 million to 2 million<sup>26</sup>. In order to combat illegal immigration of hajj pilgrims, the government also began requiring pilgrims to pay an \$800 bond deposit that is only returned upon their departure<sup>27</sup>.

### The United Arab Emirates

The UAE has by far the largest expatriate population as a percentage of its total population; 90% of its labor force is foreign and the private sector is at 98%. Its policies at reducing foreigners have been unsuccessful; foreigners have made up 90% of the labor force since 1985. Expatriate workers are officially viewed as “temporary guests” and therefore no integration programs are considered necessary<sup>28</sup>. Foreigners are blamed for a myriad of society’s ills – even over-fishing. The recent drop in fish stocks was blamed not on environmental changes or the creation of new islands, but on foreign hobby fishermen in small rowboats. A law was even passed to require national supervision of fishermen, although it was rarely enforced<sup>29</sup>. Unions are banned and foreigners cannot own property<sup>30</sup>. Authorities have started scrutinizing visa applicants, particularly those from Asia. A law was passed to limit the amount of time unskilled workers could stay in the Emirates to six years; rendering work economically unviable for many who would need to stay longer simply to pay back the initial investment<sup>31</sup>. As in other GCC nations, healthcare costs have increased astronomically, and fees are charged for surgery and other

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<sup>26</sup> Shah, “Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries,” 9.

<sup>27</sup> Shah, “Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries,” 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ahmed Kanna, “Diversity and Struggle in the Arabian Gulf,” *Samar* 27, November 12, 2007, <http://www.samarmagazine.org/archive/article.php?id=245>.

<sup>29</sup> Dresch, 215.

<sup>30</sup> Dresch, 215 and Kanna, 4.

<sup>31</sup> N. Janardhan.

sources even for the insured<sup>32</sup>. Employers have also stopped offered inflated salary certificates, a practice that in the past had allowed many workers, who otherwise would not have qualified, to bring their families with them<sup>33</sup>. To encourage illegal workers to leave, they have offered several amnesty periods, followed by increased inspections and checkpoint campaigns<sup>34</sup>. To decrease the demand for workers, the Emirates has tried to encourage more employment among their nationals. For example, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing tries to place female Emirati engineers among companies looking for workers<sup>35</sup>.

## CURRENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Most Kuwaitis I talked to about the immigrants...assumed they would soon be on their way. The laborers would have to return home once the construction work was finished, while young Kuwaitis now at school or in universities abroad would soon be able to take over the work of the better educated...it would not be many years before most of the population would again consist of Kuwaitis.<sup>36</sup>

This passage was written by an anthropologist over fifty years ago. Expatriates are currently estimated to make up nearly 67% of the Kuwait's population<sup>37</sup>. This sentiment is said to still hold sway in the region, but these "temporary" workers have only grown more visible in fifty years. The charts below quite clearly illustrate the utter failure of the GCC to reduce expatriate numbers. Saudi Arabia is the only country whose policies have somewhat lowered the number of foreigners in the population; the others have seen either an increase or maintenance of the numbers.

### Percentage of Expatriates in Population<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Meena Janardhan, "United Arab Emirates: Undocumented Workers Leave for Home." *Global Information Network*, New York: Apr 30, 2004, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Shah, "Restrictive Labor Policies in the Oil-Rich Gulf: Implications for sending Asian Countries," 10.

<sup>36</sup> Dresch, 201.

<sup>37</sup> "Kuwait population hits 2.992m; Citizens up in number, down in percentage," *Arab Times*, May 13, 2007, <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/arabtimes/kuwait/Viewdet.asp?ID=7168&cat=a>.

<sup>38</sup> Nasra M.Shah, "Arab Migration Patterns in the Gulf," in *Arab Migration in a Globalized World*, (Geneva: International Organization for Migration and the League of Arab States, 2004), 95.

Country	1975	1980	1985	1995	2000	2005
Bahrain	23	31	37	38	40	41
Kuwait	69	72	72	64	63	67
Oman	13	18	18	27	23	24
Qatar	57	59	52	70	74	78
Saudi Arabia	13	25	31	32	25	26
UAE	63	71	64	75	76	71
GCC Total	23	33	37	39	35	37

Expatriate Percentage of Total Labor Force <sup>39</sup>						
Country	1975	1980	1985	1995	2000	2003
Bahrain	82	57	58	60	62	59
Kuwait	82	85	86	83	80	81
Oman	31	40	52	64	64	71
Qatar	83	83	77	82	82	86
Saudi Arabia	25	53	63	64	56	50
UAE	84	92	91	90	90	90
GCC Total	39	62	68	74	70	70

The next graph is even more telling, showing the date programs were introduced to reduce foreigners and the percentages after the programs were implemented. It seems clear that the expatriate population is not going anywhere anytime soon. Economic need limits the strength of reduction policies; expatriate labor has helped turn the region into an economic powerhouse with modern infrastructure and has provided a comfortable living for nationals. The economies of some host nations have improved, but the prospect of financial incentives still lures many. The current economic boom from the spike in petroleum costs is likely to encourage further development and therefore further migration.

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<sup>39</sup> Shah, "Arab Migration Patterns in the Gulf," 95.

Table 11. Trends in percentage of foreigners in the total population and in the labour force, and year of adoption of programme to reduce these percentages, Member States of the Gulf Cooperation Council

Country	Year when programme started	Foreigners as a percentage of population			Foreigners as a percentage of the labour force			
		At initial date <sup>a</sup>	2000	2005	1985	1995	2000	2003 <sup>b</sup>
Bahrain	1996	37	38	41	58	60	59	59
Kuwait	1991	72	62	62	86	83	82	81
Oman	1988	25	25	24	52	64	64	71
Qatar	2000	..	76	78	77	82	86	86
Saudi Arabia	1995	25	24	26	63	64	56	50
United Arab Emirates	1999	..	70	71	91	90	90	..

Source: *Trends in Total Migrant Stock: The 2005 Revision* (United Nations Population Division, POP/DB/MIG/Rev.2005) data in digital form, 2006; Girgis 2002; The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, Information Center, Statistical Department, (<http://www.gcc-sg.org>).

Notes:

<sup>a</sup> 1995 for Bahrain, 1990 for Kuwait and Oman

<sup>b</sup> Saudi Arabia in 2002 and Qatar in 2001.

A visit to the cities of the GCC quickly confirms these demographic finds. At times, the sights and sounds seem more like Delhi than Dubai. Yet numbers can only tell so much about the stability of this situation. Are nationals and expatriates both contributing to societal development and acting in the same space? How do they interact and see one another? And what will it mean for the future of the GCC as unemployed young nationals and young “foreigners” – often raised in the GCC – compete for jobs? The next part of this paper will examine the opportunities for interaction in a variety of settings.

## PUBLIC SPACE

National fears regarding the overwhelming presence of foreigners is strongly reinforced when one spends some time in the public sector of almost any Gulf city. As previously mentioned, the surroundings and languages one hears often seem more reminiscent of Delhi than Dubai. Indian restaurants far outnumber “Arab” ones and Bollywood posters litter the markets. It is quite possible to spend an entire day out without once running into a national or hearing Arabic. Several scholars have written on this topic with the consensus that public space has been

<sup>40</sup> “International Migration in the Arab Region,” (Beirut, Lebanon: United Nations Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities, United Nations Population Division, May 11, 2006), 16.



almost entirely claimed by expatriates. The wide streets and urban planning policies leave little room for the lively street life of most major cities. With exception of a few cafes and hotel lobbies, there is very little exclusive Arabian public space in countries like the UAE and Kuwait<sup>41</sup>. Most markets, cafes, and malls are either shared space or almost exclusively foreign. Not only is space divided between expatriates and nationals, but expatriates also tend to segregate themselves along ethnic lines, creating neighborhoods almost exclusively their own. This has likely bred resentment; in the name of “civic-ness,” many Emiratis have complained of South Asians congregating in certain cafes and groceries, making them hotbeds for “crime” and other undesirable activities<sup>42</sup>. An outlet for the lack of Arabian space has also emerged somewhat oddly in “heritage” sites, to be discussed further.

Housing patterns in the Gulf strongly reflect notions of segregated space. Historically, residents tended to cluster in family and tribal groups, maintaining a strong sense of neighborliness and traditional visiting networks. This has largely disappeared in the urbanized Gulf, a point Gulf nationals often lament and blame the foreign “strangers” in their midst for<sup>43</sup>. Nationals now live in private villas with high walls. Similar to American suburbs, these homes are often only accessible by vehicle. This type of housing has strongly increased social isolation among nationals, a fact often reported in the literature. Owning property is considered one of the key markers of Gulf Arab identity; it differentiates one from a foreigner. A walled compound provides a sense of security, status, and protects one’s family from interacting with foreigners. Indeed, it is considered quite unacceptable in the Emirates for a national family to rent a home, the strongest reason being that they would then be living amongst foreigners and subject to negative influence<sup>44</sup>. Therefore, although the size of the home varies according to wealth and

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<sup>41</sup> Dresch, 206.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 206-208.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 212.

status, nationals will always seek to own their own home, often in separate neighborhoods from expatriates.

Along with other types of public space, housing breaks down along ethnic lines. Members of certain ethnicities have a strong tendency to settle in the same location. Shops and groceries catering to these groups then build up around them, further enforcing de facto segregation. Dubai offers many examples of this: part of the city is referred to as Little Mumbai while Jumeirah, home to many European and American families is decorated for Halloween, Christmas, and Thanksgiving. A neighborhood in Sharjah has developed into Russian space, where many involved in the export business have settled and set up shops and schools for their community<sup>45</sup>.

The types of homes and apartments rented to expatriates are dependent not only on their economic standing, but ethnic origin. Sulayman Khalaf, an anthropologist in the UAE, divides expatriate housing patterns into five categories that also largely reflect the groups' standings in society<sup>46</sup>. At the bottom rung are the labor camps that house construction and industrial workers, usually for the same project. These camps often lack basic amenities and are sometimes little more than tin shacks in the desert. The second category is the old, derelict homes abandoned by wealthier nationals when they left the city for newer compounds. These homes often house at least eight men to a room and are safety hazards. The houses are also detested by nationals who view these havens of single Asians as dangerous and an affront to civic pride. The third category is lower quality apartment buildings, usually used by lower middle-class non-Gulf Arab and South Asian families. These workers are the school teachers, policemen, accountants, clerks, and

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<sup>45</sup> John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Mohammed al-Mutawa, *Globalization and the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2006), 46.

<sup>46</sup> The following descriptions all come from Sulayman Khalaf, "The Evolution of the Gulf City Type, Oil, and Globalization," in *Globalization and the Gulf*, ed. John Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Muhammed al-Mutawa (London: Routledge, 2006), 250-253.

medical technicians. The fourth category is luxury high rise apartment buildings, usually inhabited by younger bourgeois Western and Asian expatriates. These flashy apartments often feature multiple bathrooms, access to gyms and swimming pools, and maid's quarters. The final category is rental villas, usually inhabited by upper middle class expatriate families. Schools and shops are mixed in among the residential quarters, creating a suburban-like atmosphere.

Another sector of public space where one rarely sees nationals and expatriates interact is on public transportation. The Gulf is very much a car culture. Despite notoriously horrendous traffic in Dubai, nationals will almost never take public transportation, seeing it as associated with lower-class Asian and Arab workers<sup>47</sup>. Another way in which Gulf nationals distinguish themselves from expatriates is by dress. Foreigners, particularly other Arabs, are often discouraged, if not outright banned; from wearing local dress for fear that they might pass as a local<sup>48</sup>. The results of dividing public space in this manner seem to be deeply divisive and negative for social interaction between groups. The Gulf may be praised as diverse, but it appears these groups largely self-segregate along ethnic and class lines, settling in certain neighborhoods and starting shops, restaurants, and groceries that cater to their preferences. National reluctance to mix with foreigners, for reasons associated with negative influence, appears to have led to their loss of much public space and growing resentment. Nationals often speak nostalgically about the past, glorifying it as a time of greater neighborliness before the "strangers" arrived, particularly in the form of the domestic workers who inhabit their most private domains. This type of idealized social network is often recreated on television serials and in "heritage zones," such as Shindagah in Dubai and Breakwater in Abu Dhabi<sup>49</sup>. Sharjah has made an entire project of recreating its cultural past, largely as a defense against what is seen as a

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>48</sup> John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Mohammed al-Mutawa, *Globalization and the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2006), 45.

<sup>49</sup> Dresch, 208.

foreign seige. It has extensively rebuilt certain areas and buildings of its historic city, even creating a “souq,” that appears to be modeled after an Orientalist painting<sup>50</sup>. Yet in recreating such a clean, immaculately manicured, “Arabian” neighborhood, the planners have effectively whitewashed the true nature of Sharjah’s historic multicultural and hectic urban core.

## WORKPLACE INTERACTIONS

If expatriates and nationals share little public space, another sector where they could potentially socialize is the workplace. However, as the literature demonstrates, the workplace is as heavily segregated as public space and housing tendencies. Certain ethnicities tend to work in certain occupations, so much so that it is often compared to a de facto caste system<sup>51</sup>. Nearly all Gulf nationals who work do so in the heavily saturated government sector, while expatriates dominate the private sector. Because of the nature of the welfare system, many nationals feel entitled to these jobs, regardless of qualifications<sup>52</sup>. Accordingly, the heavily national government sector and expatriate-dominated private sector have developed quite different work cultures. Absenteeism and inefficiency are prevalent in government work, while those in the private sector are held to much higher standards and work longer hours<sup>53</sup>.

Before reviewing the extensive abuses and grievances voiced by expatriates regarding the workplace, the view of nationals towards the workplace will first be presented. Although there is very little written, the results of an Arab news story and of the survey later presented do show a trend on the part of young nationals entering the workplace. The Gulf is facing a youth boom, many whom are now struggling to find work in the increasingly saturated public sector.

Obtaining a job and the ability to support oneself is critical to the lives of young Gulf Arabs,

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<sup>50</sup> John W. Fox, Nada Mourtada-Sabbah and Mohammed al-Mutawa, “Heritage Revivalism in Sharjah,” in *Globalization and the Gulf* (London: Routledge, 2006), 282.

<sup>51</sup> Dresch, 208.

<sup>52</sup> Alanoud Alsharekh, *The Gulf Family* (London: SAQI, 2007), 15.

<sup>53</sup> Leonard, 140-141.

particularly men. Those unable to do so will not be able to marry or start a family; incredibly important character markers in the region. Those who do find employment in the private sector complain of constant resentment and harassment from expatriate coworkers and managers. They say they are not taken seriously or expected to show up; their presence is simply a “tax paid to the government<sup>54</sup>.” National workers say employers are often reluctant to assign them challenging work or pass on experience for fear that expatriates will be replaced. A 2004 survey taken in the UAE indicated that sixty percent of nationals believed they were discriminated against at multicultural workplaces<sup>55</sup>. Only twenty percent of private sector Gulf national workers were satisfied with their jobs. The nationals surveyed spoke of resenting the expatriates’ generalizations of nationals as lazy and unwilling to work<sup>56</sup>.

Nationals are not the only ones with grievances in the workplace; the complaints of some expatriates are far more serious than not being assigned challenging tasks and severely undermine positive interaction and the opinions of different national groups. One rather startling piece of information all the literature remarked upon was that not only is it legal to hire along ethnic lines, but salaries tend to follow an ethnic hierarchy that only slightly varies from country to country. A few examples were given from the UAE. The first gave the hierarchy as nationals, Europeans and Americans, South Africans and Australians, and finally workers from the subcontinent<sup>57</sup>. Others mentioned the UAE hierarchy as this: Emiratis, Americans and Europeans, Arabs, Filipinos, Koreans, and then those from the subcontinent. These hierarchies are unaffected by qualifications and it is the norm for workers with the same job and qualifications to be paid radically different salaries solely on the basis of nationality. In terms of the nationals’ complaints above, expatriate workers often complain of preferential treatment for

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<sup>54</sup> Meena Janardhan, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Shannon Beuthe, “Survey on Relations between Expatriates and Nationals in the GCC,” March 29-April 8, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Jonathan West, “A City on Edge.” *Management Today*. London: Dec 2007, 80.

nationals in terms of assigning tasks and lowered efficiency. Another problem at the workplace is the varying types of management styles, which often differ quite strongly from culture to culture<sup>58</sup>.

The issue of labor abuse and human rights violations in the Gulf has been extensively documented by international human rights organizations and thus will only be briefly discussed, with an emphasis on the situation of domestic workers. Before poorer expatriate workers even arrive in the region, they face exploitation by abusive labor agents who overcharge for fees and papers. Women are more susceptible to corrupt agents; in 2006, a Bangladeshi woman was killed for refusing to prostitute herself to labor agents<sup>59</sup>. There are very few labor laws in the region; those that do exist are rarely enforced and do not apply to domestic workers. Labor conditions, particularly for construction workers are notoriously difficult. Laborers toil in extreme heat for long hours, with their pay often docked for taking a break to pray or use the restroom. Wages are often withheld for months at a time. In recent years, non-payment and other abuses have led workers to strike numerous times; in 2005, Bangladeshis stormed their own embassy in protest<sup>60</sup>. Sponsors routinely confiscate the permits and passports of workers, a move that leads to more abuse. Workers are not free to move about the country without their papers and can be more easily arrested and held in detention without them. Workers also can not obtain an exit visa without their sponsor's approval, leading quite often to forced labor as the worker can not leave nor be paid<sup>61</sup>. Abuse is so pervasive it even featured in a South Asian children's book, *The Case*

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<sup>58</sup> Attiyah, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Kanna.

<sup>60</sup> Simon Henderson, "High Rises and Low Wages: Expatriate Labor in Gulf Arab States." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. PolicyWatch #1090. March 27, 2006, [http://www.ciaonet.org/pbei/winep/policy\\_2006/2006\\_1091.html](http://www.ciaonet.org/pbei/winep/policy_2006/2006_1091.html).

<sup>61</sup> "Saudi Arabia/GCC States: Ratify Migrant Rights Treaty." *Human Rights Watch*. New York: April 11, 2003, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2003/04/11/saudia5596.htm>.

of the *Shady Sheikh and Other Stories*, about a villainous Gulf sheikh who cheats poor Indian men and steals their papers<sup>62</sup>.

Although construction and other manual laborers face abuse at the hands of nationals, their lives remain largely separate from nationals and other expatriates. One expatriate labor group that has been at the front of both abuse and central to the intimate lives of nationals is domestic workers. In many ways, domestic workers epitomize the relations between expatriates and nationals: expatriates are abused, resented, and feared, yet necessary for the lifestyle desired by Gulf nationals. The oil boom drastically increased living standards in the Gulf. Previously, wealthy families had often hired slaves, or the descendents of slaves. With slavery outlawed and few nationals willing to do domestic work, they turned to foreign labor. Having a domestic worker (or many) quickly became a key status symbol; indeed, housework has come to be seen as somewhat shameful in Saudi Arabia<sup>63</sup>. Domestic workers gave national women free time for socializing, shopping, coaching children, or – more rarely – employment. Female domestic workers are perhaps the largest labor group in the region. More women than men now migrate from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines<sup>64</sup>.

However, while employing a domestic worker is often seen as a necessity, domestic workers mark the introduction of a stranger from an alien culture into the private family world, a thoroughly disturbing concept for many Gulf Arabs. She becomes a vivid, daily reminder of the moral danger of expatriates, threats to tradition, and more importantly, the loss of privacy. Indeed, for this reason, families will almost never hire an Arab maid, as she would be more

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<sup>62</sup> Leonard, 129.

<sup>63</sup> Salwa al-Khateeb, "The Oil Boom and its Impact on Women and Families in Saudi Arabia," in *The Gulf Family: Kinship Policies and Modernity*, ed. Alanoud Alsharekh, (London: SOAS, 2007), 101.

<sup>64</sup> Gloria Moreno-Fontes Chammartin, "Domestic Workers: Little Protection for the Underpaid," International Labor Organization, April 1, 2005, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=300>.

capable of understanding the family's communication and secrets<sup>65</sup>. However, cultural and linguistic differences and miscommunications often lead to situations where domestics can not defend themselves, particularly from charges stemming from a cultural misunderstanding<sup>66</sup>. Most of these misunderstandings revolve around sexuality and the role of women. Domestics are seen as a threat to morality because they often do not understand the culture's view of sexuality; even being behind closed doors with an unrelated man can lead to charges of adultery. Their status as unaccompanied women also likely diminishes respect in the eyes of their Arab employers<sup>67</sup>. In order to control the domestic and the foreign threat she represents, domestic workers are often submitted to round the clock surveillance and abuse<sup>68</sup>.

The combination of resentful employers and ill-informed domestic workers creates a situation rife for abuse. Domestic workers are afforded none of the few labor protections that exist because they work in private households; labor inspectors are entirely banned from entering the private family home<sup>69</sup>. Workers often work without contracts and when they do have them, they are often in Arabic and therefore incomprehensible. Yet the system is full of abuse complaints. Wages are frequently withheld and domestic workers work an average of over 100 hours a week, with zero to two days off a month<sup>70</sup>. Physical, psychological, and verbal abuse is incredibly prevalent. In a study by the ILO, over half of domestic workers surveyed in Kuwait said they had been subjected to these abuses<sup>71</sup>. Sexual abuse, including rape is also commonly reported, often at the hands of the woman's sponsor, friends, and male relatives. Abused

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<sup>65</sup> Anh Nga Longva, "Neither Autocracy nor Democracy but Ethnocracy: citizens, expatriates and the socio-political system in Kuwait," in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, ed. Paul Dresch and James Piscatori, (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 124.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>69</sup> Chammartin

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



domestic workers have limited options and are often unaware of the one they do have. Running away is technically illegal and women have been abused in detention facilities<sup>72</sup>. Some embassies run safe houses for abused maids, but there is little chance of the women recovering her wages or papers<sup>73</sup>. The situation is so bad that Pakistan and India actually banned the migration of women from their countries for domestic work in the Gulf. This is the state between the groups of expatriates and nationals who interact most closely.

#### PRIVATE SPHERE INTERACTIONS

The original intent of this project was to analyze private sphere interactions; to see if emerging friendships between expatriates and nationals were helping to foster a new type of climate of acculturation, where expatriates began to adopt some aspects of a Gulf identity and nationals made space for them to share in the country's success. Far from finding anything of the sort, all sources have been essentially unanimous in one thing: there is no interaction. Unofficial relationships and friendships between expatriate and nationals are extremely rare; even between non-Gulf Arabs and nationals. Indeed, even expatriates overwhelmingly choose to socialize only among their national-origin group. Considering the often hostile workplace attitudes and separate public space arguments discussed earlier, the lack of unofficial relationships is not surprising. Nationals are said to rarely invite non-nationals to their homes and in a study of Kuwaitis, 60% described their relationships with non-Kuwaitis as superficial and admitted to treating them with condescension<sup>74</sup>. More evidence on this issue will emerge in the following section which describes the survey and its results.

Considering the political sensitivity of the subject matter (acquaintances from region had told me earlier they were worried about taking such a survey online, fearing that what they said

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Leonard, 155.

<sup>74</sup> Attiyah, 41.

could be traced back to them), this survey was passed around informally, among the author's acquaintances in the region, who then sent it electronically to others they knew. The sample size is then quite small, seventeen responded, and respondents were skewed towards recent graduates and college students, but their remarks regarding the subject were still highly informative and relevant<sup>75</sup>. The first two questions on the survey asked the informants for their nationality and to describe their identity however they saw fit. Citizenship broke down in the following: one Saudi, one Omani, four Indians, seven Americans, two Tanzanians, and one Lebanese. Many described themselves as multicultural, although the majority gave their religion as an identifying marker. Ten of the informants were Muslim, two were Hindu, one was Christian, and four did not account for a religious background. Participants came from all countries in the GCC, with the exception of Qatar, although Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai (UAE) were listed with the most frequency.

When asked whether they hoped to return to the Gulf and raise a family there, the majority (nine) said yes, citing its Islamic surrounding and family environment as the strongest incentives. Interestingly, when asked where their "home" was, about half the participants admitted having difficulty answering the question, saying they did not really know. The next question asked what they considered the benefits and consequences about living in the region. By far, the strongest criticism of the region was the prevalent attitude of racism, intolerance and disrespect for foreigners. Restrictions for women and human rights were also frequently cited. The most frequently cited positive factors were diversity, weather, tax-free, and location. The next question asked about the participant's familiarity with Arabic and local culture. Interestingly, despite the facts that only one non-Arab had attained fluency in Arabic and there

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<sup>75</sup> The following discussion derives from the survey: Shannon Beuthe, "Survey on Relations between Expatriates and Nationals in the GCC," March 29-April 8, 2007.

was little interaction between the groups, nearly all recipients said they were very familiar with local culture and customs.

The rest of the questions dealt with relations between expatriates and nationals and began with a basic question: do you think expatriates should have access to citizenship or greater rights in the GCC. Fourteen respondents said yes and three (including both Gulf nationals) said no.

Participants were then asked if they thought there was much interaction and socialization between expatriates and nationals. The majority resoundingly said no, saying that the little interaction that existed was related to work and did not translate into socialization. Participants said nationals tended to be highly introverted and private, preferring to socialize only within larger family circle and with other nationals. People were said to largely stick to their own national-origin group, although the Saudi participant strongly defended the way socialization worked, saying it was a rich contact culture. Participants seemed to agree that interaction was not supported by the social system and hindered by stereotypes on both sides. One Tanzanian participant answered by saying, “I did not have any Emarati friends while living in Dubai. We used to see them in malls, or behind visa counters or other bureaucratic positions when they know they have power over us.” There was one exception mentioned in both the survey and interview: schools. The few schools and universities with mixed populations, such as the University of Sharjah, are said to witness more interaction and socialization among the groups.

The next question dealt with how expatriates and nationals “saw” each other. Again, several themes ran through the responses. Expatriates were said to be highly resentful of the way they were treated, saying nationals looked down upon them, were racist, and treated them without any respect. Mistrust and suspicion clearly reign on both sides, with expatriates often viewing the nationals as lazy, spoiled, and cold while nationals resent the presence of strange

foreigners taking money from their country. Two responses in particular captured these emotions well. The first came from a self-described Indian Muslim:

I feel the expatriates see the nationals very warily. The nationals can get away with the most horrible crimes while the expatriates are punished for even the smallest crimes. The nationals on the other hand view the expatriates from the subcontinent as bugs they need to crush and the expatriates from the UK and the US as living Gods! Everything that these people say or do has to be right! The nationals do not believe in schooling and are mostly uneducated people who do not appreciate the fact that the people from the subcontinent have actually built their city. If all the laborers were to leave in this instant, they would be so lost. Nationals cannot work to save their lives but still get paid double for the same job as a person from the subcontinent. A national does not have to give any of the ministry exams in pharmacy while a person from the subcontinent as myself who has passed from a local college has to train for two years before giving the exam.

While clearly not an objective account, the frustration and resentment this participant expressed was not unique, and highlights another important issue: the status of South Asians (particularly Indians) in the region. They are by far the most numerous group, yet also seem to be subjected to the greatest amount of racism. Racism towards Indians appeared often in the research, and came from both nationals and other expatriates. In a separate interview, a professor who had studied and lived in the region contrasted stereotypes of Indians in the United States and the Gulf. In the United States, Indians are often considered a “model minority” and assumed by other Americans to be highly educated, skilled, and competent. In the Gulf, it is the opposite<sup>76</sup>. Bias towards Indians is based in race and religion. Although a great many Indians in the Gulf are Muslim, Hinduism exists outside of “acceptable” religions and its connotations with polytheism and idol worship (whether correct or not) taint the views of many nationals. Indians are also thought to have brought an increase in crime. The state of relations between the largest expatriate group and nationals is highly indicative of the problems in the region.

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<sup>76</sup> John Willoughby, Professor and Department of Economics Chair at American University, Interview by author, April 10, 2008, Washington, DC.

However, the Omani participant brought up an important point ignored by the other participants, saying:

I think that until these countries treat their own citizens in a favorable manner and promote the interaction between the different tribes within their people, it will be hard to integrate expatriates in. Also, the expatriates do not care to learn the language or the culture of the country, so unlike the US where everyone learns English, allowing expatriates to have more rights and access to citizenship might dissolve the culture of the country itself.

Knowledge of Arabic is not prevalent among expatriates as discussed earlier. When seen in the light of self-segregation and national insistence that they are temporary workers, the reluctance of nationals to embrace them as fellow-citizens is made more understandable.

The last question was rather open-ended, asking the participants their opinions on the future of expatriate workers in the region and the effectiveness of nationalization policies. Nearly all said the nationalization plans were failing for a simple reason: expatriates are willingly to work harder and for less money to build the region and support the lifestyles of nationals. As one participant said:

The relationship between nationals and expatriates is symbiotic. The expatriates have a great, successful life in the gulf and should be grateful for that but Nationals need to realize that economic development and growth in the Gulf (especially cities like Dubai) would not be possible without the contribution of expatriates. Both groups need each other to be successful in the Gulf.

Regardless of discrimination, labor abuse, and self-segregation, it seems to boil down to this: the system allows many people to make a good deal of money and is therefore unlikely to change, unless there is a shock. Considering political turmoil in the region and the eventual end of oil, this shock will happen.

I think the region is in for a big shock. There's a youth boom taking place in the MENA and especially in the Gulf, youth lack technical skills and basic professional socialization training. Government policies are catching up but are band-aid solutions. Gulf youth will be surprised to find themselves increasingly competing for jobs and resources and lacking the necessary skills to survive. No one wants to hire them now,

not even their own people because they're not well-trained and their attitudes don't help them compete against a troupe of foreigners who are willing to work for peanuts and to work hard. The government can only open the door to nationals for jobs but the citizens must take on the responsibilities to build their own countries and their own futures or they will continue to lose their opportunities to foreigners or be put into jobs where they don't know what they're doing.

This day is likely not far off in the future, but participants did not seem to think the system would change as long as it was economically viable. Expatriate workers will continue to be abused and for those who would like to stay permanently (ironically, likely the ones fondest of the culture and region), the “only retirement plan is an exit visa.”

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The current climate of suspicion and mistrust among ethnic groups is contrary to the region's long history of being a transnational space. For over five thousand years, beginning when the first traders from the Indus Valley stopped in Bahrain to exchange simple goods, the Gulf littoral has hosted constant interaction and exchange among diverse multitudes. Even in recent decades, this was so. Before the 1970's, wealthy Gulf merchant families had businesses and residences in India, Iran, and Africa and vice-versa. Many of their children received educations in India and elite men married Indian, Persian, and African women. Their children were cross-cultural and spoke Hindi, Farsi, Urdu, Baluchi, and Swahili. Clothing and other cultural signposts passed from India into the Gulf. Even in the early 1990's, before the arrival of Western cinemas in Dubai, many nationals and South Asians said the most popular theater was the Bollywood theater in Deira, which drew a mixed crowd capable of following the plot without Arabic subtitles<sup>77</sup>.

What then, has changed? There are numerous answers: oil, Western influence, nationalism. Nationalism was artificially applied to the region at the same time that the benefits

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<sup>77</sup> All from Kanna.

of being a national in the terms of oil revenue became apparent. Therefore, citizenship became not just an identity, but an entitlement and ticket to a comfortable life. It is somewhat understandable then, that nationals do not wish to increase the number of citizens. But there is more to it than that. Tensions between the groups are built into the very foundations of the state. As Alanoud Alsharekh states: “All the GCC countries are welfare states that at their core re-enact the tribal system of allegiance for economic support”<sup>78</sup>. The tribal system is built on lineage and family *‘asil*. Concerns about foreign “strangers” echo the idea that these populations simply do not belong, and will never be embraced into the state system as it is. Both cultural and practical (not enough wealth to be distributed) concerns lock expatriates out of further involvement with the state and its nationals.

Then there is the very real fear of culture loss, particularly considering that foreigners currently make up nearly forty percent of the total GCC population and dwarf the number of nationals in some of the countries. This is a unique situation in the modern world. Considering the level of controversy immigration receives in countries where migrants not only assimilate to an extent, but also constitute less than ten percent of the population, the concern in the Gulf is certainly understandable. Yet, the strong desire to not mix with “strangers” and the negative influence they are believed to have on the part of nationals point to much stronger sentiments that are unlikely to diminish soon. Added to these feelings is the resentment many nationals voiced regarding expatriates. They take jobs that could theoretically be filled by the younger generation of unemployed nationals and treat them with contempt in the workplace. The idea of the typical carpetbagger is also prevalent; expatriate workers come only to make some quick money and then leave, caring little for the culture and traditions of the place.

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<sup>78</sup> Alsharekh, 15.

On the expatriates' side, things are equally difficult. In an article on expatriate acculturation in the region, management consultant Hamid Atiyyah listed the factors researchers had determined necessary to successful acculturation in any new place: friendships with locals, fair and comprehensible laws on residency and labor, satisfactory work climates, and adequate housing and services<sup>79</sup>. As we have learned from the previous sections, the GCC fails in nearly every one of these categories. Atiyyah also mentions that cultural similarities with the local population may aid the process, but that "closed cultures" can be difficult to penetrate. As we have seen, linguistic, cultural, and religious similarities seem not to have helped expatriates penetrate this closed culture. However, we must resist the urge to compare this system with Western systems of migration. In the United States, one calls such newcomers "immigrants," not expatriates. The majority comes with the understanding that they will take on aspects of an American identity; accordingly, they can be granted the rights and privileges that come with citizenship. This is simply not the system in the Gulf; it is a new time and place. Expatriates come to work, to socialize with their own national origin group, and to eventually leave. While there are certainly exceptions to this, it could easily be argued that many of these migrants do not want, nor should be granted citizenship. Increased protection and rights should certainly be extended, but more accessible citizenship simple does not seem practical nor pragmatic. When fortunes change for the region, how many expatriates would truly stay behind to pick up the pieces after a political coup, violent revolution, or decline in oil revenue? It may be an unfair question to ask, but in thinking about the future, it is necessary. Despite efforts to diversify their economies, the Gulf still depends heavily upon petroleum. The young population is restive and the governments are achingly autocratic. Whether it is economic or political, shocks will come to

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<sup>79</sup> Atiyyah, 39-40.



the region, and the problems between expatriates and nationals – ignored while everyone was making money – will rise to the surface.

Even without a drastic event, challenges loom in the near future. The most pressing is unemployment among young nationals. Government jobs are growing scarcer and many young nationals simply do not have the educational qualifications and skills to compete with more-qualified expatriates who will work harder and for less pay. Not only is this unlikely to resolve unemployment, it also increases hostility and resentment on the part of the young nationals. Another challenge comes with the rise of India. Indians form the largest expatriate group in the region, represented all at levels of employment. However, as India's economy grows stronger and more jobs are created, the chance to work at a construction site in an autocratic country where one is treated with condescension and abuse will likely prove less appealing. The bigoted attitudes of many nationals and expatriates towards Indians may make the decision to return home even easier. Although another group will eventually rise to take their place, the loss of a significant percent of this group – particular the educated and skilled members – will certainly take a toll on the economy. Another challenge is the rise of women, many of whom are also attempting to enter the workforce. The introduction of expatriates into the workforce negatively affected the lives of national women in some ways that might not readily be apparent. First, they took positions that otherwise in a severe labor shortage may have proved an incentive for women to enter the labor force. Domestic workers and drivers may have freed a woman from many of her chores, but they also freed her of some of her agency and responsibility in the household. With a driver, there was no “need” for women to be allowed to drive and domestic workers could interact with any possible male strangers. The new walled compounds restricted women's traditional access to neighbors and visiting networks<sup>80</sup>. The presence of so many foreigners in the

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<sup>80</sup> Al-Khateeb, 87.

population has also spurred more initiative on the part of national men to “protect” their women from foreign danger or influence. At the same time, many of the nationalization policies have been aimed at putting more national women into the workforce. As the role of women evolves and shifts, it will be interesting to see what part expatriates play.

Another question to ponder is whether or not this is the workforce of the future. In a globalized age, where one can easily cross borders for work, yet shop at stores selling their goods and chat with their families a world away, does the idea of permanent immigration lose its appeal? Will it become possible for “global citizens” to change countries as easily as one changes jobs, yet still retain a core loyalty and identity with a motherland? The young expatriates in the survey easily described their identities in terms of ethnicity and religion, yet still did not know where “home” was. If this system is becoming more prevalent, it would be wise to study the problems brewing in the Gulf. While on the surface, it may seem the glowing picture of diversity, tranquility, and co-existence, one need only scratch the surface to see the tension underneath.

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