



# Working Papers

Paper 131, July 2016

## **Managing migrant labour in the Gulf**

Transnational dynamics of migration  
politics since the 1930s

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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
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## Abstract

This paper looks at migration management in the Gulf monarchies since the 1930s. It describes the dynamics of labour import and immigration policies highlighting the hybrid nature of migration management. Migration trends and migrants' lives are organised by public and private actors and institutions operating transnationally, between home and host countries. The economic determinants and the exploitative dimension of migration management have often been highlighted in the literature. This paper explores the patterns and politics of migration management at the domestic, regional and international level over time to identify changes and continuity. From the colonial premises to the 1970s and the oil boom, the patterns of labour import management proved consistent, shaping immigration as temporary and denying foreign workers socio-economic rights. The politics and the economics of migration management evolved over time, accounting for instance for a shift in the geography of labour import – from Arab migration to Asian migration. Since the 1990s however States and governments have sought to increase their control in the management of migration as migrants' settlement emerged as a security concern in Gulf societies. Reforms adopted in the wake of the Arab Spring have further illustrated this trend, bringing the State back in the illiberal transnationalism of migration management and anti-immigrant policies.

**Keywords:** migration, labour, oil firms, recruitment, segregation, public policy, transnational, Arab Gulf, Middle East

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**Acknowledgements and comments:** I wish to thank Elise Trogrlic, Marius Hentea, Leila Vignal, an anonymous reviewer and Jenny Peebles for their critiques, comments and editing.

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# 1 Introduction

The Middle East is a region of intense mobility, both voluntary and forced. It hosts some of the largest and most enduring refugee populations in the world, namely Afghans in Iran and Pakistan, Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and in more or less every Arab state, and, more recently, Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. It is also home to the largest recipients of labour migrants in the world, the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC). Since the beginning of the oil era, GCC countries have been powerful magnets for both regional and international migration. Arab, Asian and European migrants have converged on the Gulf, bringing their skills but also their social, gender, cultural, religious and political identities to sparsely populated countries like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and to larger societies like Oman and Saudi Arabia. In those less-populated GCC countries, migrants have ended up representing up to 90 per cent of the local population and 98 per cent of the labour force; in Qatar, for instance, migrants make up 99.8 per cent of the private-sector labour force.

With the highest ratio of foreign residents in the world, the GCC countries share common institutions when it comes to the management of transnational migration, although Saudi Arabia stands apart due to the size of its population (28 million) and its economic and geopolitical weight when compared to micro-city states like Qatar or the UAE. Yet the variation in the practices and trends across countries and time do not undermine the coherence of the regional dynamics and regulations in migration management.

From the 1950s to the middle of the 1970s, migration was not heavily politicised in the Gulf monarchies. State actors and institutions in the early oil era were relatively powerless vis-à-vis networks of power embedded in tribal structures, prominent merchant families and foreign-owned oil and gas companies. The Gulf States were also relatively weak. Most of them were still under colonial rule until 1971. They were dominated by the political economy of oil and gas markets until the 1974 oil boom. Finally, in the regional political scene, the Gulf States were positioned as ideological and political subalterns in relation to other Arab countries.

Since the 1990s, the Gulf monarchies have tried to have a tighter grip on migration. They have been openly endorsing ‘anti-integration’ policies aimed at preventing the settlement and incorporation of migrant workers in host societies (Longva 2005; Thiollet 2010). They have cultivated a model of migration management anchored in the paradigm of ‘temporary labour import’, promoting short-term contracts and the turnover of migrants, preventing family reunification and naturalisation, limiting socio-economic rights and implementing deportation programmes for irregular migrants. This set of policies and practices in transnational migration management may be called the ‘Gulf model’.

The Gulf model is characterised by high net migration rates (see Figure 1), high societal and labour market segmentation, anti-integration policies, and connected public and private actors involved in migration management. This institutional coherence is echoed by the CCG coordination efforts with regards to migration issues in the past two decades (Winckler 1997). It is also illustrated in the convergence of the policies of Gulf States with regards to migration and migration management, including the selection of migrants by nationality since the 1980s; the ‘nationalisation’ of the domestic labour market through public support for nationals’ employment in the public and the private sector since the 1990s; common patterns of urban segregation; the reform of naturalisation and nationality law and attempts to reform the sponsorship system (*kafala*); and the limitation on the length of stay for migrants that particularly targets low-skilled workers.

This paper offers a description of the practices and rationale of migration management in the Arabian peninsula focusing on the Gulf monarchies since the 1930s<sup>1</sup>. Although its endeavour is mainly descriptive, it acknowledges theoretical assumptions usually associated with the use of the term transnationalism in migration studies. Transnationalism generally stands for ‘migrants’ transnationalism’, building on what Nina Glick Schiller, Cristina Blanc-Szanton, and Linda Basch defined as ‘the process by which immigrants, forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’ (Basch et al., 1994: 6). Migrant transnationalism thus offers a framework to analyse migrants’ lives across borders although it does not necessarily challenge State sovereignty (Portes 2001). I engage with a slightly different usage of the term ‘transnationalism’, borrowed from international politics and echoing the debates on State control over ‘transnational dynamics’ in a context of globalised flows of people and increased autonomy of networks and social fields<sup>2</sup>. Far from opposing state and non-state institutions or exploring a ‘control-gap’ between both types of actors, the core interest of this paper is to describe the transnational politics of migration management in a broad historical perspective. It emphasises the hybrid and multi-sited nature of migration management. It is multi-sited as it operates both in host and home countries, and in between both through transnational networks. Hybridity involves private and public actors, government agencies and firms, recruitment companies and migrants’ family networks, that is formal and informal institutions that shape migration flows. As researchers point to the resilience of state-led transnational practices (Fitzgerald and Waldinger 2004), I focus here on public policies and private companies to underline that both state and non-state actors are involved in the shaping of migration dynamics in the Gulf region. The historical perspective adopted in the paper allows the identification of trans-historical features and the specific characteristics of historical sequences in migration management, isolating the colonial and post colonial phases, the pan-Arab circulation sequence and the contemporary dynamics. These sequences translate into geographical patterns: in the early 1980s, intra-regional (Arab) migration shifts movements mostly involving Asian immigrants.

The management of transnational migration in the GCC can overall be characterised by a loose control of flows leading to high levels of mobility (entries and exits) and continuously rising net migration rate since the 1950s (see Figure 1). It is conversely characterised by a relatively tight control on migrants’ communities. This control is exercised through a cohesive set of policies aiming at differentiating and alienating migrants. In segmentary societies ruled by authoritarian states, the distinction between foreigners and locals, however, is embedded in the social pattern of Gulf societies, within which other categories and boundaries structure social relations and hierarchies. Alongside nationality, social relations in the Gulf context are also determined by nationality, gender, religion and tribal/ethnic differentiation. Both the regional and international dynamics of migration flow and the social and political differentiation of foreigners and locals are crucial to understanding transnational migration management in the Gulf monarchies.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is mainly descriptive and based on both historical and secondary sources as well as several ethnographic field works conducted between 2006 and 2015 among migrant communities, public officials and private sector stakeholders of migration management in Saudi Arabia. Empirical material is not directly referred to here but serves as a background for the analysis of transnational political dynamics of migration management. A shorter version of this research has been published in Vignal, L. (2017) (ed.) *The Transnational Middle East: People, Places, Borders*, Abingdon: New York.

<sup>2</sup> We refer here to the framing of transnationalism by international relations theorists Robert Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (1972). Like other IR theorists, they pinpointed the importance of interactions between state and non-state actors in the making of international politics, mentioning oil companies and the ARAMCO as example but insisted on the ‘control gap’ and the competition between state and non-state actors (Keohane and Nye, 1972:23).

## 2 Researching migration politics in the Gulf

In the field of migration studies, the Middle East hosts phenomena that are often presented as exceptional. Within refugee studies, the Palestinian diaspora has long been studied as both an exception and an epitome of diaspora politics and diasporic lives: alongside the paradigmatic Jewish and Armenian diasporas, the Palestinian diaspora stands as an ideal type marked by a liminal ‘catastrophe’, world dispersion, the imaginary of the lost mother land, as Cohen analyses (1997). Within migration studies, labour migration in the GCC has long been ignored by the literature and hardly featured as model or paradigm in migration studies from a sociological, economic or political angle concerning countries of high immigration (the United States, Canada, Australia, the European Union etc.).

In the field of Middle Eastern studies, the Gulf has long been considered an ‘exception’ and migration was hardly ever addressed in depth in authored books or edited volumes on Gulf countries<sup>3</sup>. In political sciences notably, most studies include the Gulf countries in a regional or global focus on security issues (terrorism, diplomacy), the nature of regimes and their opposition and the political economy of oil and rentierism, overlooking social endogenous and transnational dynamics of Gulf societies.

Research on migration in the Gulf monarchies is fairly recent. In the 1980s and 1990s, the limited research available devoted much attention to the macro economic determinants of migration overlooking the social and political dynamics involved in both migration management and migrants’ communities. Since the 2000s, a new avenue of research has provided empirically-grounded sociological and anthropological work which started renewing the academic stance on migration to the GCC.

The founding studies and data were provided by World Bank experts Birks and Sinclair in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in an often cited work by Serageldin (1983). Subsequent work by demographers Shah (1986) and Fargues (2011) illustrate a demographic approach to migration dynamics in the region, often embedded in a developmentalist approach as in Weiner (1982). Part of the literature available stems from international organisations’ experts and reports on the region (Kapiszewski 2006), often times ‘policy oriented’ and aligned with their perspectives. The literature from the 1980s onwards, for instance, emphasised the importance of macro/micro economic and demographic determinants – labour demand and labour shortage and ‘individual’ or private dynamics (Choucri 1986a).

The political economy and political demography of Arab intra-regional migrations in the 1970s and the 1980s have in fact echoed the narrative of oil-rich governments, who themselves posed as upholding laissez-faire policy with regards to labour import (Richards and Martin 1983). Complementary to the classical political economy of labour migration in the GCC, Marxist analyses of labour import and exploitation have highlighted the structure of power relations entrenched in migration flows (Saad Eddin 1982). Recent studies account for the embedded structures of monarchical regimes and oil economy in rentier states (Hertog 2011, Herb 2014), the making of migration politics in the Arab Spring context (Thiollet 2015), combining political economy and political sociology of the Gulf monarchies. They emphasise notably the role of social ties within bureaucracies and managerial policies accounting for the daily exercise of power and the resilience of authoritarian regimes. Contrary to the labour and

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<sup>3</sup> In a recent publication on Saudi Arabia, for instance, Haykel et al. (2015) strikingly disregard migration in their so-called ‘comprehensive’ approach to the country. Although a group of chapters are devoted to Islam and oil, the part on ‘social change’ openly ignores migration issues as if they were alien or irrelevant to the core of socio-economics and political dynamics in Gulf countries, this despite their quantitative and structural importance.

economic rationale that has dominated the perspectives on migration flows in the Gulf until the 2000s, some have argued (Seccombe 1986, Stanton Russell 1992; Thiollet 2011b) that migration dynamics to the region have always been shaped by local, regional and international politics.

Research on migration dynamics and the lives of immigrants in the Gulf has emerged since the 2000s, sometimes connected to advocacy reports of international governmental and non-governmental organisations<sup>4</sup>, which have been observing, describing and denouncing migrant exploitation and abuse. Insights on immigrants' communities and lives prior to the 2000s were rare but foundational such as the ones carried out by Myron Weiner (1982), Gilbert Beaugé (1986), Elisabeth Longuenesse (1988[2006]) and Ang Nva Longva (1999), and are echoed in today's ethnographic work. Anthropologists and geographers in particular addressed the gap in empirical research on migration to the Gulf in the late 2010s, offering empirical evidence focusing one transnational community - Indians in Bahrain (Gardner 2010) and in Dubai (Vora 2013 or Osella and Osella 2012), Indonesians (Silvey 2007) and Eritreans (Thiollet 2010) in Saudi Arabia, Nepalese in Qatar (Bruslé 2012), Egyptians in the UAE (Gruntz 2014), British in the UAE (Walsh 2014) or on a class or type of workers notably domestic workers (Gamburd 1995; Nagy 1998; Fernandez and de Regt 2014) or sex workers (Mahdavi 2011).

### **3 The colonial premises: Immigration and urban segregation in a booming oil economy**

The early years of oil exploitation until the oil boom in the 1970s illustrate several aspects of migration management in the Gulf linked to the political economy of colonial domination in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. In the British dominated city-states on the Gulf, the UAE (the former Trucial States) coast, Bahrain and Qatar, until the early 1970s the entire polity was placed under direct or indirect political supervision of the colonial power. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the influence of the United States was channelled through local political elites and ruling families. But it was through the structure of the oil companies partly owned by British or American firms that one can best understand the intimacy of the foreign or colonial rule over the social and economic life of the Gulf country, as well as the management of labour imports. Following the 'exploratory' epoch of prospection, the 1930s witnessed sharp increases in the need for labour both in the industry and around it, with a growth in the need for infrastructure, including roads, ports, housing and services. In Saudi Arabia, the first drilling camp was established in 1934 in Dhahran. Employment rose from less than 150 employees in 1935 to 3,641 in 1939 for the California Standard Oil Company (CASOC), later the Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO). Between 1933 and 1936 gas production infrastructures were set up in Bahrain, generating a surge in employment from 610 to 5,038 employees for the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) (Seccombe 1983). The Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) under Anglo-US ownership and Qatar's PDQ (Petroleum Development Qatar) started exploring and then drilling and expanding slightly later, leading to massive employment only in the post-war period (KOC went from 266 employees in 1945 to 12,705 employees in December 1949).

Between 1930 and 1937, both in the colonial coastal sheikhdoms and in the recently created state of Saudi Arabia (1932), foreign-owned companies were obliged to hire locals to compensate for the decline in the pearl-fishing sector and to secure the clientele of local sheikhs. Hiring processes were constrained by a 'nationality clause' in oil concession agreements that favoured the hiring of locals, the

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<sup>4</sup> See Human Rights Watch reports, for instance <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/11/23/gulf-countries-increase-migrant-worker-protection>

subjects of Gulf sheikhdoms, and migrants from Britain (for British dominated states), the United States or the British Empire (mostly India). The selection of migrants also corresponded to skill-based hierarchies: professional, technical and managerial expatriates were ‘imported’ from Britain or America while skilled and semi-skilled artisans and clerical workers were recruited primarily from the Indian subcontinent, while unskilled workers were recruited from the local population or were Arabs who came from neighbouring countries (Errichiello 2012). The preference for Indian (British) expatriate labourers for semi-skilled and unskilled labour in the Gulf States clearly illustrated the resilience of the former ‘indentured labour’ system (abolished in 1916) that had prevailed within the British Empire since the abolition of slavery in 1833.<sup>5</sup> Although in the Gulf the flows of indentured labourers were quantitatively less significant than in South and East Africa, the Caribbean, Asia, and Oceania (Indian diaspora in Malaysia, Singapore and Fiji), the patterns and regulations of indentured labourers were *ideal types* that subsequently influenced the management and the perception of labour immigration in the Gulf. Indentured labour as a contract-binding labour relationship, entailing housing segregation and exploitation, is perceived as temporary, whereas, in fact, many indentured workers settle in their host countries. In compliance with the Indian Emigration Act of 1922, which regulated emigration channelled through the British-owned oil companies in the Gulf, recruitment offices were established in Bombay and other Indian cities; this led to over 8,000 Indian workers in the oil sector and at least as many Indian and Pakistani workers in the service sector in the Gulf.

In collaboration with colonial bureaucracies, oil firms managed labour migration in British-dominated territories such as Kuwait (until 1961), Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE (until 1971). Opening recruitment offices across the world, the companies oversaw the selection of labourers locally and abroad, with the minor constraint of the nationality clause. The oil companies also managed the lives of labourers, locals and foreigners, in the host countries.

In Saudi Arabia, the absence of British imperial ties to South Asia led to hiring American as well as Italian skilled and semi-skilled workers from colonial Eritrea. But the cost of labour, together with Italian workers’ strikes in 1945 (caused by the terrible housing conditions in Ras Tannura), led to a shift towards Arab channels of recruitment in the Gulf and beyond. The opening of ARAMCO recruitment offices illustrates the waves and trends of migration policies towards Saudi Arabia: ARAMCO offices were opened in Asmara in 1944, in Khartoum and Aden between 1945 and 1947, and in Beirut and the Palestinian Territories in 1949 (Seccombe and Lawless 1987, Thiollet 2011b, Errichiello 2014). As Robert Vitalis (2006) shows, ARAMCO in Saudi Arabia directly managed the processes of labour recruitment and immigrant management in the territorial enclaves that hosted the oil and gas companies and their personnel.

The colonial model forged the ideal type of migrant labour management through a partnership between the firm and the state. The oil sector was the largest employer for both nationals and foreign workers. As Ian Seccombe details, the oil companies organised labour import and settlement, accommodation and lifestyle for both migrant workers and nationals (Seccombe 1983, 1986, and Seccombe and Lawless 1987). The housing policies implemented by oil companies in the Gulf shaped the spaces and livelihoods of residents and workers in the Gulf city-states as well as in Saudi Arabia

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<sup>5</sup> Imperial Britain had organised a system of temporary labour migration (mainly from the Indian subcontinent) to labour-intensive primary commodity producers, in agriculture, mining and manufacturing sectors, mostly plantation work and extractive industries. The British Imperial Legislative Council abolished the indenture system in 1916. By that time, more than 1.5 million Indians had been shipped to the colonies, inducing enduring socio-economic as well as political effects, among which one can count Gandhi’s political activism in South Africa in the early 1900s or the 1970s migration crises in Uganda.



(and Persia). In the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, urbanisation was entirely driven by the progressive discovery and exploitation of oil. The field camps around the oil wells were subsequently turned into permanent towns with dual urbanisation patterns (as in the case of Dhahran, Ras Tannura or Abqaiq): an ‘American city’ with commerce, bungalows and cinemas adjoined enclaves of dormitories, bunkhouses and even shanty towns. Those spaces initially housed Saudi employees, usually young males without their families. These young males were transported back to their hometowns during vacations by company buses. An ARAMCO Home Ownership Programme in 1953 supported land and housing acquisitions for Saudi employees. Along the *Tapline* (trans-Arabian pipeline), new settlements soon became towns.

In Qatar and Kuwait, the initial separation of workers according to nationality and employment status (contracted workers, month or day labourers) led to the emergence of expatriate bungalows for British employees, workers’ dormitories and mud huts or tents for contract day labourers or migrants. The temporary housing was progressively replaced by permanent buildings, together with appropriate infrastructure (water, electricity, roads), which maintained the hierarchy in access to services linked to nationality and employment status. In Kuwait, the vicinity of Kuwait city absorbed most Kuwaiti workers on the Ahmadi oil field, while non-Kuwaitis (mainly Indians and Pakistanis) resided in Ahmadi, a city designed by the KOC. In Bahrain, the geographical pattern consisted of British and American employees settled in Awali camp while Bahraini and Iranian low-skilled workers (who tended to be initially contracted on a monthly basis) resided in Manamah and were bussed in daily by BAPCO (Seccombe 1983: 62).

The urban fabric of oil towns and the geography of settlement followed the policies of oil companies, who were the main ‘policy makers’ for both local and transnational migration management. This had a direct impact on economic and social development in the Gulf States, as potent as other oft-cited ‘endogenous’ or ‘traditional’ characteristics of Gulf societies.

## 4 Regional politics through the oil boom (*tafra*): ‘Migration as diplomacy’

Largely due to the booming oil economy, between 1970 and 1975 the stock of migrants in the Middle East went from 800,000 to 1.8 million. In the 1970s foreigners made up 72 per cent of the labour force in the GCC countries. In the 1980s, the Middle East became the largest market for migrant labour ever seen. Just before the 1991 Gulf War, the oil-rich states of the Arab Gulf taken together numbered more than seven million migrants, of which five million were workers (Stanton Russell 1992). While migration management has not been overtly presented as a political and diplomatic tool, it has been one of the main instruments of integration of the GCC states in regional and global politics. The perception of *laissez-faire* policies (labour migration managed through private sector actors, whether endogenous, such as merchants or entrepreneurs, or extraneous, such as ARAMCO, foreign firms or free zones) conveys, as mentioned earlier, the image of a depoliticised migration management. Furthermore, the geopolitical weakness of GCC governments until the 1980s reinforced the idea that the Gulf monarchies were unable and unwilling to firmly manage labour immigration, thus leaving the determining input to other Arab states (sending states), such as Egypt. Both perceptions are, in fact, erroneous, as they underplay the political dimension of labour migration in the Gulf, especially concerning the selection of migrants (flows) and the management of immigration communities (stocks) (Thiollet 2011b).

Figure 1 offers a historical sketch of migration dynamics in the Middle East with a particular focus on the GCC countries. The purpose of this historical overview is to highlight the political rationale driving the sequencing of migration trends and the variation in geography and volume of migration. Two main phases of migration dynamics emerge, illustrating two political sequences in the regional

history of the Middle East and the Gulf. The first sequence involves the regional integration phase and the regionalisation of labour migration (1950s–1980s). Migration is thus conceptualised as an indirect vector of regional integration in the context of pan-Arab politics, particularly if one considers Arab labour migration in oil-producing countries. The second phrase involves the internationalisation of labour import since the 1980s and a shift in the geography of labour import to the GCC and the dominance of South–South migration from Asia. It is often understood as a process of political emancipation of the GCC from Middle Eastern politics and the emergence of bilateral and multilateral regulations and conflicts of labour migration with sending countries. Thus, Figure 1 illustrates those two historical sequences in the net migration rate in the context of the wider Middle East: the blooming and booming of the oil economy is translated into extremely high net migration amongst GCC countries while net immigration decreases and stabilises in the 1980s, although still remaining among the highest level in the world.

#### 4.1 Migration as regional integration: Pan-Arab circulation without formal integration (1950s–1980s)

Since the 1950s, the oil economy and conflict have been the main drivers of mobility within the Middle East. The two determinants are often intertwined, linking labour market dynamics and the supposedly temporary movements of refugees linked with the Arab–Israeli conflicts (1947, 1967, 1973), the first Gulf War (the Iran–Iraq conflict, 1980–1988) and the two subsequent ones (the 1991 and 2003 ‘interventions’) or the wars related to the ‘Arab Spring’ in Libya, Syria and Yemen since 2011. The most striking example of the connection between labour migration and refugeeism in the Gulf countries is the Palestinian diaspora: in Kuwait, a prosperous Palestinian community settled in the 1950s and grew with the waves of emigration and the Israeli–Palestinian wars. Palestinian refugees were hosted as labour migrants in Gulf countries, which had not signed the 1951 Geneva Convention but framed the presence of Palestinians according to the Casablanca protocol (1965) of the League of Arab States.<sup>6</sup> The Protocol simply equated the rights of Palestinians to those of locals with regards to work, residence and investment. In the case of Kuwait provisions were made to adapt the Protocol to the legal framework of the sponsorship system (*kafala*). Beyond the particular case of Palestinian refugees, which clearly entailed a diplomatic and ideological endeavour, the politics of migration management in the Gulf countries generally echoed the politics of regional integration.

Starting from the 1950s, pan-Arabism has been a vehicle for a unitary vision of Arab identity and geography. Regional integration within the ‘Arab world’ has been characterised by a sense of community based on a shared language, a set of shared values and the loose sense of collective identity linked to Arabness. Far from essentialism, the politics of identity in the Middle East is a strategic factor in the social construction of the ‘Arab world’. The cultural dimension of Arab integration was strongly represented in the Cold War literature in the region or about the region, especially since it served and illustrated the endeavour of pan-Arab politics with intellectuals like the Syrian founder of the Arab Ba’ath party Zaki al-Arsuzi evoking the possibility of an Arab regional citizenship that would unite all Arab national identities. The short-lived experiment of the United Arab Republic between Egypt and Syria from 1958 to 1961 epitomises the pan-Arab post-national political project (Beaugé and Roussillon 1988). On the other hand, the formal and economic dimensions of regional integration have yielded poor results: indicators of trade liberalisation and economic interdependence were still low despite institutional proliferation, including the 1998 Greater Arab Free Trade Agreement. Between 1985 and

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<sup>6</sup> League of Arab States, Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States (‘Casablanca Protocol’), 11 September 1965, available at <http://www.refworld.org/docid/460a2b252.html> (accessed 9 December 2015).

1990, intraregional trade accounted for only 6 and 7 per cent of total exports and imports, respectively, in the Middle East (Hudson 1999: 283).

The failure of formal economic integration has led some authors to write about the conditions of Arab ‘disintegration’ (Hudson 1999: 24), whereas others consider informal, cultural but also transnational migratory ties as strong evidence of the integration between Arab labour markets and societies. In fact, labour migration in the Middle East can serve as an indicator of regional integration beyond formal agreements and political institutions: the free circulation of labour within the Arab world was never formally institutionalised but large flows of migrants and their families circulated and settled across the region. Through the 1950s and up to the late 1980s, the Arab world was ‘practiced’ as a migration field, a space of transnational circulation, by Arab workers and their families from all social categories and all skill levels. As Michael Hudson puts it, ‘[i]n the Middle East, labour flows, and the remittances of capital associated with migration have been the most important feature of regional integration’ (1999: 292). Until the 2010s, remittances stand out as the largest capital flows in the region (ibid.: 287). Migration has therefore been understood as the main vector of redistributing wealth in the region. As opposed to the exploitation of oil that generated increasing disparities between rentier and non-rentier states (Fargues 2000), migration and migration remittances have allowed oil money to circulate in the region through the private and informal channels of migrant transfers and investments.

Yet institutions and policies officially enacting a ‘pan-Arab labour market’ were never created. As Nader Fergany notes in a militant call for more effective and institutional integration, ‘spontaneous processes of labour integration’ have emerged but ‘labour movement in the Arab region has been captive to the ups and downs of Arab politics, sometimes with devastating consequences to the welfare of embroiled migrants’ (Fergany 2001: 12). The fragile integrated labour market created in the 1960s was ‘enforced’ both by public officials and by private entrepreneurs or migrant networks generating chain migration through recruitment of kin and fellow citizens. A strong ‘ethnic economy’ has emerged in some sectors, with particular resilience when mastery of the Arabic language is a comparative advantage. The sector of secondary and higher education has therefore traditionally been largely populated with Egyptian and Jordanian/Palestinian teachers and professors. In 2011 the Abu Dhabi Education Council was led to promote English as a teaching language as of 2030 and has implemented recruitment practices in the Emirates in favour of English-speaking teachers.

Generally, the presence of Arab residents was loosely regulated through extremely liberal immigration policies (entries). Interestingly enough, though, the quasi-open border policy towards Arab migrants in the 1960s and the 1970s was not connected with massive naturalisation policies and access to permanent resident rights. Since their independence upon Britain’s withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 (although British withdrawal was earlier in Saudi Arabia [1932] and Kuwait [1962]), nationality laws in the Gulf have been based on an exclusive definition of citizenship tied to patrimonial lineage (the ruling families and tribal affiliation) based on residency in the Gulf since the nineteenth century. In the Emirates, for instance, the full benefit of citizenship and welfare benefits are granted to those who have a ‘family book’ (*khulasat al-qaid*) proving their Emirati descent through lineage. Naturalisation is theoretically possible for long-term Muslim resident who can demonstrate proficiency in Arabic and who can prove his or her particular value to the State. However, as Claire Beaugrand explains, a ‘real reluctance to naturalise’ emerges ‘as the development of the welfare state system linked the status as a national with significant material benefits’ (Beaugrand 2006: 12). For their part, ‘Gulf nationals receive their share of the country’s wealth in the form of subsidies, education stipends, free health care and other free public services, and, in some cases, land grants and government jobs – and do not pay income tax’ (Kinnimont 2012: 51). In early postcolonial times, citizenship was granted to fight sectarian or political oppositions to ruling families and external threats: in Kuwait for instance, the rulers granted

nationality to Sunni tribal men against Shia or leftist populations in Kuwait City and against the neighbouring Baathist Iraqi claims over Kuwaiti territory.

Despite migrants' circulation, a pervasive distrust against foreigners and Arab labourers in particular stems from the supposed political activism of the migrants during the early years of the oil economy. As John Chalcraft (2011) and Laurie Brand (1988) show, Arab workers were clearly identified both by colonial rulers and oil companies and by local government and ruling elites as vectors of social contestation. Transnational activism and the role of 'foreign agitators' were certainly over-emphasised by ruling institutions, whether local or foreign, to undermine the legitimacy of social activism, as Robert Vitalis (2006) details for labour strikes in Saudi Arabia from 1853 to 1956. However, Palestinian union leaders, pan-Arab unions and political activists and locals who had studied in the Mashriq in Lebanon (at the American University of Beirut, in particular) and Egypt between the 1930s and the 1950s were certainly vocal in the labour movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Examples can be found in the strikes in Bahrain in 1956, and the reformist opposition in Kuwait in the 1950s, who were meshing labour and political claims along pan-Arab and socialist-inspired ideas. The concern for the ideological impact of the massive presence of Arab-Egyptian and Iraqi teachers in secondary education, for instance, is expressed early on in Gulf public discourses, using the argument of linguistic identity and the dominance of the Egyptian dialect over Gulf (*khaleeji*) Arabic.

## 4.2 The politics of labour import: Linking external and internal dynamics

The selection of migrants according to their nationality reveals the politics behind migration management in the GCC. Explaining the shift from Arab to Asian labour migration in the 1980s requires both a reference to economics and the political context: the economic incentives favouring a shift to recruiting cheaper and supposedly more skilled (although this is contested) and generally more 'expendable' labour from Asia complemented the political change in the logics of regional integration and the emancipation of the Gulf States from regional Arab politics.

Historically, the political dimension of migration management in the Gulf is particularly visible in times of crises. In 1991 the Palestinian community in Kuwait became a target of retaliatory anti-immigration practices for the support granted by the Palestinian Liberation Organization to Saddam Hussein. Residence permits were cancelled or not renewed, Palestinians who had left the country before the invasion were forbidden to return, and visas were not granted (Zelkovitz 2014). The Yemenis in Saudi Arabia – the main expatriate community in the country, accounting for 27 per cent of the labour force in 1990 – also faced retaliation for the tacit support granted to Saddam Hussein by Ali Abdallah Saleh. Approximately one million Yemeni immigrants were sent home through a tightening of residence procedures.

In 2011 a sharp concern for the impact of political uprisings in the Middle East led the Gulf States to tighten their domestic and foreign policies with regard to migration. Saudi Arabia launched a strong 'correction campaign' to deport irregular migrants and signal the will of the state both to better control migration and eventually reduce it. Yemeni migrants were particularly targeted, as neighbouring Yemen was being shattered by an Arab-Spring-turned-civil-war. GCC States tightened their immigration policies and reinforced their position against settlement by imposing limits to the duration of visas in 2006 for the UAE (6 years) and in 2015 for Saudi Arabia (8 years). Regional politics and domestic concerns for the dependence of GCC countries upon foreign labour collided, helping to account for the GCC policy responses to the Arab Spring (Thiollet 2015).

Figure 1 Net migration rates per thousands of population in the GCC from 1950 to 2010 (estimates) (UN DESA 2010)

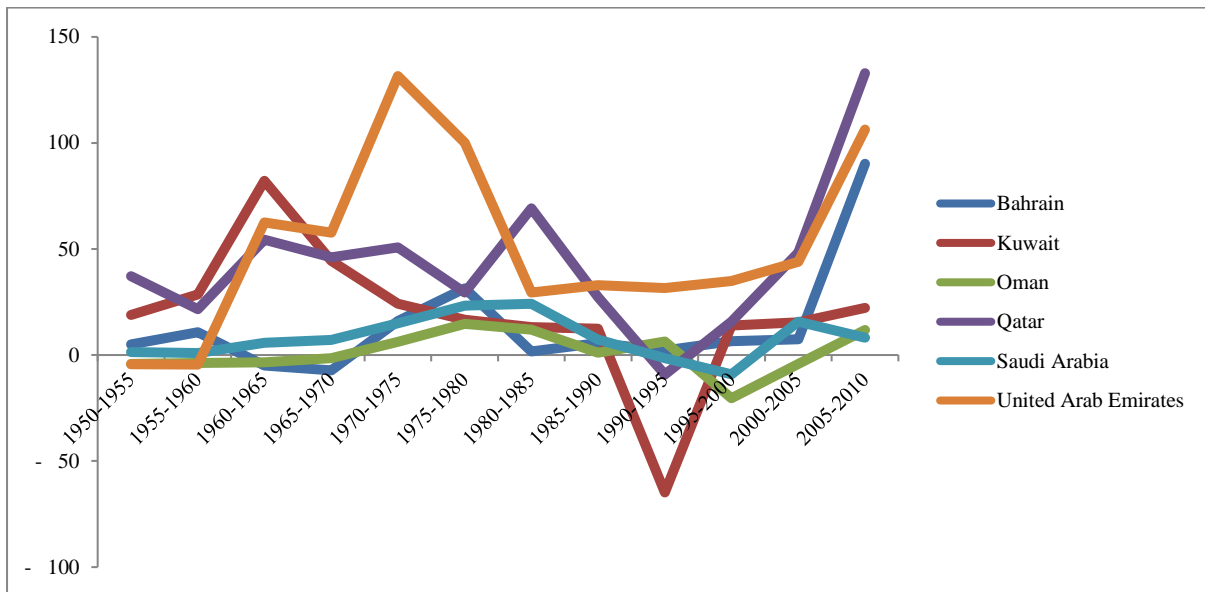


Figure 1 clearly shows the drop in net migration rates in the GCC around 1990, echoing the ‘migration crisis’ experienced by the Gulf States and their diaspora around the Gulf War. The level of migration, however, remained quite stable over the period starting in the 1980s, with constantly positive migration rates. In his widely used report on Arab versus Asian migrants in the GCC for the UN Population Division, Andrej Kapiszewski (2006: 6) has documented, the ‘De-Arabization of the Labour Market’. The political argument for replacing Arab with Asian workers converges with the economic rationale of cheaper and easily available labour. The political insecurity potentially generated by activists strongly connected to locals via cultural and political networks is increasingly feared. Gulf States therefore initiated in the early 1990s a response under the guise of defending the *khaleeji* identity and the local political, cultural, linguistic and social characteristics presented as tradition and heritage (*turath*). This political and ideological endeavour obviously sought to create further gaps between nationals and foreigners; it was anchored in several policy sectors (culture, education, labour market and migration) aiming at building the nation upon an ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992).

The domestic manifestations of these policies were the first waves of the ‘nationalisation’ of labour markets (*Emiratisation, Saudisation, Qatarisation, Kuwaitisation*, and so on) in the 1990s. The protection of nationals in labour markets became a necessary component in the management of transnational migrant labour. States massively employed locals in the public sector. In most GCC countries, the private sector ended up being almost entirely populated by foreign workers, making public employment one of the many vectors of redistribution of the oil rent to nationals. In the UAE since the late 1990s, nationals working in private companies are assured the same social security benefits available to workers in government sector companies. More recent campaigns in Saudi Arabia and Oman have tackled the issue of unemployment among nationals and the weak integration of nationals in the private sector.

## 5 Managing labour between states, sponsors and firms: The hybrid politics of workers' exploitation

Unlike many Western democracies in the 1970s, the Gulf monarchies never entered into explicit bilateral agreements on labour import and guest workers programmes with their Arab neighbours or other countries. Together with this weak institutionalisation of labour market integration, the structures and practices of migration policies help account for the dependence of labour import on regional politics and labour management on domestic politics.

The massive labour imports since the 1950s onwards have been geared and managed by private actors (colonial oil companies, mainly, private firms, chambers of commerce, recruitment companies and sponsors/*kafala*) in cooperation with public institutions (ministries of labour, ministries of foreign affairs, and so on) with little or no formal diplomatic and multilateral cooperation between sending and receiving states. As Gulf States became independent in the early 1970s, their wealth rested on nationalised oil companies and a particular capitalist class that concentrated both economic and political power in the hands of a ruling elite and merchant families. The development of Gulf capitalism relied on the accumulation of capital in sectors that become increasingly diversified (from the oil economy to financial, trade and service sectors) and on the structural alienation of the working classes, composed almost exclusively of foreigners (Hanieh 2011). In the late 1980s, the management of migration flows in the Gulf entailed a 'public-private partnership': it involves actors and institutions embedded in patrimonial networks of power<sup>7</sup> including prominent business actors, but also recruitment companies and even migrants' networks themselves both in countries of origin and in the Gulf.

The *kafala* system is often referred to as the peculiar Gulf institution in charge of managing and exploiting foreign labourers, creating captive or un-free labour (Longva 1999) and it has long been denounced as the main cause of migrant abuse and exploitation (Murray 2012). Yet, the sponsorship system provides both an exploitative framework and potential margins to manoeuvre for migrants against employers and State regulations (Beaugé 1986, Thiollet 2011a). The sponsorship system externalises State control over migrants' entry and residence in the Gulf countries, as well as business relations, investment and entrepreneurship to different kinds of '*kufala*' (sponsors). The *kafil* and the employer are often the same entity (person and institution), for instance in the case of domestic workers and small businesses. But it can also be a larger firm or a recruitment company, or an individual who extracts a rent from his 'citizenship' just selling out his sponsorship services without hiring him or her, notably in the case of prominent businessmen or monarchical elites<sup>8</sup>. Depending on social relations and contexts, the sponsorship, as any social institution, is a vector of exploitation but can also serve as emancipation for migrants as it triangulates the relation of domination between the foreign worker, its employer and the State (Beaugé 1986). As Gulf monarchies attempt to harness and better control immigration procedures, the disruptive role of the *kafala* system led States to initiate reforms against the *kafala* system – in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s and in 2011, in Bahrain in 2009 and in the UAE in

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<sup>7</sup> Understanding the practices of regulation and the structure of Gulf polity is therefore crucial to understanding the practices of transnational migration management. I argue that the rentier state theory developed by Michael Herb (2014) is, in fact, complementary to Hanieh's Marxist argument for a regionally and internationally connected *khaleeji* capitalism. The local oligopolies are meshed with global capitalist networks and the diffusion of power and rent in societies via different kinds of intertwined socio-political institutions, such as the state and welfare policies, lineage and family, work and labour relations, and so on.

<sup>8</sup> Princes and princesses enjoy more 'sponsorship' rights and prerogatives than average citizens as they can 'import' and sponsor many more workers than lay people can.

2011 – that were generally blocked by civil societies and recruitment-based interest groups (Thiollet 2015).

The domestic management of migrants was aligned with the strategies and interests of the economic elites and those of ruling families in the GCC, whereas the international politics of labour import was increasingly connected to emerging countries and migrant exporters. However, the fluctuations of oil prices and political crises, including the Gulf War and the Arab Spring, reinforced the grip of public agencies on the management of transnational migration in the GCC. In Bahrain, the Labour Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA) illustrates the hybrid nature of migration management and the renewed control by the state over labour migration regulation. Created in 2006, by King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa, the agency is a public body with a corporate identity that replaces the sponsorship system (*kafala*) with a mandate over the employment of nationals (training, placement and decreasing unemployment) and the management of transnational labour migration (issuing work visas and regulating licenses for manpower and recruiting agencies, employment offices, and overseeing the business practices of expatriates). In Saudi Arabia, the Human Resources Development Fund, created in 2000, had its mandate extended in the 2010s; it plays approximately the same role.

Using public, semi-public bodies and private companies, the Gulf monarchies engineered a new trend of migration management that one can term the ‘Gulf model’. Transnational migration management in this last historical sequence is therefore defined by two main characteristics: firstly, strengthened multilateralism and formal multilateral arrangements between sending and receiving states, together with international legal commitment in international public law; and, secondly, a tighter and tougher management of migrant labour force and labour markets by State agencies in host countries with anti-integration orientation.

## 5.1 Public-private multilateralism: Improving migration ‘management’ or improving control over migrants?

The development of bilateral agreements between Gulf States and migrants’ sending countries signalled a shift in the nature and practice of migration diplomacy. In the UAE, for instance, the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s exemplified the renewed effort to regulate labour migration through bilateral agreements involving the state and non state-business actors. In the 2000s, the UAE signed a series of agreements and memorandums of understanding in the fields of manpower and income taxation with the Philippines (2003, 2007) and Indonesia, targeting increased regulation on recruitment and employment practices, particularly for low-skilled workers. At the regional level, the multilateral transnational migration management led to the creation of the Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin and Destination in Asia (the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, 21–22 January 2008).

The pressure of labour-exporting states has been crucial in the development of bilateral and multilateral agreements on labour migration. In the 1980s, Asian states (including India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan but also Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka) seem to have been more organised in the labour exporting business than their Arab counterparts. Since the colonial era Asian countries have developed institutions to manage migrant outflows. Those new partners progressively led the Gulf countries into stronger commitments to multilateral management of transnational migration. As Kapiszewski notes, ‘efficient recruitment agencies in Asia were able to provide a constant supply of manpower, fully satisfying the needs of the Gulf employers’ (2006: 7). The cases of India and the Philippines are particularly striking.

In India, the government has promoted a temporary labour emigration scheme since the 1980s. One-fifth of the Indian diaspora, representing 4.5 million Indians, was in the Gulf in 2008; 70 per cent of them were in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Most Indians in the Gulf are unskilled or semi-skilled workers, but around 20 per cent of them are white-collar and 10 per cent are professionals, according to the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora<sup>9</sup>. In 2013 Indians were the largest expatriate community in UAE and in Qatar. Offices of the Protectorate of Emigrants oversee the implementation of the 1983 Emigration Act that forces recruitment through officially registered agencies, the regional State Manpower Export Corporations. Since 2003, a compulsory insurance system for Indian workers moving overseas (*Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana*) centralises the registration and control of migrants and their income; in 2004, the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs was established.

Migrants' money transfer (remittances) to labour-sending countries has long been considered a crucial source of income to be harnessed. According to the Central Bank of the Philippines, monitored remittances from Filipino workers have grown regularly, with Saudi Arabia (\$2.5 billion) and the UAE (\$1.7 billion) ranked second and third in terms of remittance-sending countries after the USA.<sup>10</sup> To take advantage of this source of income and promote their expatriate workers, the government created *ad hoc* ministries and agencies, a system of direct and indirect taxation of migrant labour. To answer the needs of a global labour market for unskilled labour in particular, private companies in the Philippines have developed a chain of migrant labour production from education to placement.

The 2010s have been characterised by intense bilateral negotiations between GCC States and a number of sending countries (among them the Philippines, Indonesia and India) with regards to the minimum wage for unskilled domestic labour, which accounts for a large share of the respective country's expatriate labour force.

These bilateral and multilateral agreements and other lightly binding texts are embedded in a general context of intense pressure on the Gulf States by international NGOs, who have long denounced infringement on workers' rights and assessed abuses and exploitation, particularly in the case of construction and domestic workers (Kanna 2012, Keane and McGeehan 2008). However, according to a recent International Labour Organisation report, the enforcement of these agreements, as well as the implementation of the few international treaties signed by GCC States, remains weak; additionally, these agreements are generally less guided by provisions in international instruments than is the case for other regions.<sup>11</sup> Although some improvements are acknowledged, these frameworks seem to be mainly effective in enforcing more state control from both sending and host states on migrant workers, not in enforcing better protection of workers' rights.

Asian governments' attempts to protect their most vulnerable expatriates (generally female domestic workers) has led to raised tensions between sending and host states. In 2011 Indonesia stopped the emigration of female domestic workers to protest against the beheading of a maid in Saudi Arabia.

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://indiandiaspora.nic.in/diasporapdf/chapter3.pdf> [accessed 22 Jan 2016]

<sup>10</sup> The remittances sent by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) accounts for a tenth of the GDP, amounting to \$24 billion in 2014. See website of the Central Bank of the Philippines ([www.bsp.gov.ph](http://www.bsp.gov.ph)) [accessed 10 December 2015].

<sup>11</sup> "A comprehensive country level analysis of bilateral MOUs entered into by the Government of India with destination countries in the GCC states, Jordan and Malaysia was sponsored by the Migrant Forum in Asia [...]. The study failed to find any concrete evidence that the agreements had contributed to improved governance of labour migration between India and concerned destination countries or significantly improved the protection of low-skilled Indian workers in those destinations" (ILO 2015: 11)



The Saudi government retaliated immediately, banning all labour migration from Indonesia to the kingdom. The same diplomatic confrontation pitted the Philippines against Saudi Arabia in 2012.

In the 1980s, Bangladesh banned female migration. The Nepalese government banned female workers under thirty years of age from migrating to the Gulf due to the risk of abuse. In the 2010s, the Indian government has repeatedly discussed banning the migration to the Gulf of female domestic workers under the age of forty.

More generally, the demands for more legal protection and administrative and financial accountability formulated by migrants' associations and Asian governments in the context of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue have led to sharp responses from GCC countries. In 2011, Saudi Arabia's Labour Ministry announced a ban on the issuance of work permits for domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines after those nations laid out new hiring guidelines.

Besides state-level multilateralism, the management of migration flows is embodied in a public-private cooperation in both host and sending countries. To some extent, the transnational management of migration in the Gulf epitomises 'transnationalism' as moving away from a state-centric perspective on world politics as early international relations theorists conceived it (Keohane and Nye 1972) to including private actors in the management of economic and social dynamics. An increasing number of bilateral committees in chambers of commerce and business associations, transnational agencies and recruitment companies have been operating between countries of origin and host countries. The Ministries of Labour foster bilateral committees and exchanges of 'best practices' or business ties. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the Saudi-Bangladesh Committee started up in 2013, with discussions focused on Bangladeshis in Saudi Arabia, leading to the creation of a digital database for job seekers along with security screening and a discussion of how to reduce immigration costs for foreign workers. Based on existing committees and ties formed through chambers of commerce, those private bodies accompany state-level negotiations between Gulf States and countries of origin, particularly in Asia.

Those practices whether state-led or private-based do differentiate between types and categories of migrants: both country-of-origin and host-country actors and institutions enforce a differential management of migrant labour based on class (skill level and income level) and gender as seen above. These distinctions are not unheard of in other contexts: among others, Saskia Sassen has highlighted the emergence of global classes and particularly of global working classes of 'disadvantaged' that are 'managed' by transnational institutions, corporations and transnational networks of government officials (Sassen 2006: chapter 6).

## 5.2 Controlling and alienating residents to prevent settlement?

The Gulf States have set up and implemented a regime based on denying citizenship and political and socio-economic rights. Despite a legal and political framework clearly designed to prevent the long-term settlement of foreigners and banning them from formal citizenship rights or permanent residency, migrant 'communities' have emerged in the GCC. Most GCC countries witnessed an increase in the number of 'dependents' and the emergence of second- and third-generation expatriates in the past decades, of migrant communities well-entrenched in the Gulf but missing long term statuses (Thiollet 2010, Gardner 2011). As much research showed for Western democracies, 'guestworker' programmes often end up creating diasporic communities who tend to settle in the host countries (Castles 1985).

The UAE, unlike other GCC countries, not only offer data on residents outside the labour force but also on the duration of residency for non-citizens through the 2005 census. In the UAE between 16 and 20 per cent of foreigners are outside the labour force. The census not only shows that around 20 per cent of the foreigners are below 19 years old, so likely to be the children of working age foreigners

either born in or brought young to the UAE, but also that 28 per cent of the foreign resident have stayed for over 10 years in the Emirates. Even though a majority (44 per cent) of the foreigners are listed as short-term resident (between 1 and 4 years), the phenomenon of settlement and community formation can be read in the data.

In general, official statistics in the GCC show a high level of ‘inactive’ foreign residents and dependents: in Saudi Arabia around 20 per cent of foreigners are younger than fourteen years of age.<sup>12</sup> Qatar purposely refuses to publicise data on its total foreign population, only providing data on the foreign labour force, which reinforces the political fiction of ‘temporary migration’.

As mentioned above, migration and immigrant communities are progressively constructed as a ‘security threat’ to the national identity of Gulf countries by public discourse (Longva 2005). The demographic imbalance and the dependence on foreign labour has certainly become a key issue in the GCC and in public debates in the local and regional press. However, across countries, the increased hostility to migrant labour does not lead to less ‘immigration’ (flows) as Figure 1 shows, but rather to more anti-integration politics.

Figure 1 National and foreign population in GCC States based on national statistical sources<sup>13</sup>

	Citizens	%	Non-citizens	%	Total population
Bahrain (2011 census)	584 688	49	610 332	51	1 195 020
Qatar (2010 census results for total population and ESCWA-UN report on World Migration Stocks for Migrant Population)	243 267	14	1 456 168	86	1 699 435
Oman (2013 mid year estimates)	2 172 002	56	1 683 204	44	3 855 206
Kuwait (2011)	1 258 254	31	2 781 191	69	4 039 445
United Arab Emirates (2010)	947 997	11	7 316 073	89	8 264 070
Saudi Arabia (2013 estimates)	20 271 058	68	9 723 214	32	29 994 272
Total GCC	25 477 266	52	23 570 182	48	49 047 448

<sup>12</sup> Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency, *45th Annual Report*, 2008: 240.

<sup>13</sup> Official sources concerning population and foreign labour should obviously be considered with caution. The quality and reliability of data are often lamented. I would like to emphasise the political dimension of data production and dissemination: discrepancies in data within government agencies and between government agencies and non-government sources can often be seen. The political dimension of data production is also particularly striking when countries like Qatar refuse to publicise any figure for the total foreign population, with the Qatar Statistics Authority (QSA) only providing numbers for the working-age foreigners residing in Qatar. The sources above come from: **Bahrain** (Central Informatics Organization [CIO], at [www.cio.gov.bh](http://www.cio.gov.bh)); **Kuwait** (Central Statistical Office [CSO] and Public Authority for Civil Information [PACI] at [www.paci.gov.kw](http://www.paci.gov.kw)); **Oman** (Ministry of National Economy [MONE], at [www.moneoman.gov.om/Default.aspx](http://www.moneoman.gov.om/Default.aspx) redirecting to census published by National Center for Statistics and Information, at [www.ncsi.gov.om](http://www.ncsi.gov.om)); Qatar (author’s calculations based on Qatar Statistics Authority [QSA], at [www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm](http://www.qsa.gov.qa/eng/index.htm) and UN World Migration Stocks for 2010); **Saudi Arabia** (Central Department of Statistics and Information [CDSI] at [www.cdsi.gov.sa/](http://www.cdsi.gov.sa/) and population estimates based on the results of the Population Census (1974, 1992, 2004) and preliminary results of the Population and Housing Census for 2010, at Central Department of Statistics & Information, Ministry of Economy and Planning, SAMA, annual statistics, 2014; **UAE** (National Bureau of Statistics, at [www.uaestatistics.gov.ae](http://www.uaestatistics.gov.ae)).

The concern for the ideologies or activism of foreign agitators by GCC States has slightly retreated, allowing more socio-economic and existential threats to be formulated (Thiollet 2015). Rather than political activism, migrant workers – even from the less vocal and more alienated construction sector – have increasingly formulated and pressed forward socio-economic claims. Ahmed Kanna (2012) has traced the genealogy and meaning of these often unheard mobilisations: the Dubai strikes in 2005, 2007 and 2008 saw up to 30,000 workers protesting abuse, passport confiscation, work and housing conditions, and asking for their wages from the construction company Arabtec. In the context of the Arab Spring and the struggle for recognition and political rights, these social movements went largely unnoticed but might end up being far more threatening for Gulf monarchies.

A new generation of anti-integration policies in the monarchies have been the result of the mere presence of a large majority of foreigners in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait and the dependence of the GCC economies upon foreign labour. Complementing the nationalisation of labour markets, in the 2000s major policy measures were implemented through the GCC to curtail migration, ensure the turnover of migrants and to prevent their settlement. The anti-settlement measures were class-based, particularly targeting low-skilled migrants, while professionals and highly skilled workers were offered more favourable socio-economic rights. As Neha Vora (2013) shows for foreign business elites in Dubai, the Gulf States offer a stratified access to socio-economic rights and privileges.

The administrative practices ruling family reunification illustrate the class-based segmentation in access to rights: family visas are possible for workers earning more than 3,000 dirham; the UAE wanted to raise the threshold to 10,000 dirham but failed to enforce the new limit. In the UAE, as of 30 May 1999, the government decided not to renew the labour cards of private sector employees older than 60 years of age, raising the threshold to 65 years of age in 2015. A labour ban of six months has been implemented for workers who lose their jobs or end their contract before two years of service. In general, the flagship measure is the six-year limit imposed on residence permits and duration of stay in the UAE. Although a few categories of skilled professionals and wealthy entrepreneurs are exempt, the measures aim at ensuring the turnover of the vast majority of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Despite intense contestation from businesses, Saudi Arabia also imposed an eight-year residence limit for unskilled workers in 2015.

Beyond administrative limitations, the management of transnational communities also entails both structural and actual violence. The various forms of segregation and discrimination (both cultural and economic) are entrenched in the labour market, as a number of anthropologists and human rights activists have argued (among others, Longva 2005). The management of transnational migration is also characterised by routine massive deportations. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, deportations started in the 1970s and soon affected 300,000 people per year (Birks et al. 1988: 270). Deportation ends up being one of the means and techniques to ensure the circulation of foreign workers. Because of weak entry controls, workers, dependents and pilgrims can easily enter Saudi Arabia and overstay their visas. Informal practices are widely tolerated, as corruption fosters a large irregular labour market – except through the fits and starts of mass deportation campaigns. The 2013–2014 waves of mass deportations spotlighted a particularly brutal feature of the management of transnational migration, with around 2 million people deported in a 14-month period. Deportation or ‘correction’ campaigns (according to the official terminology) target the most vulnerable categories of workers in low-skilled cohorts, among them Yemenis and African (Ethiopian, Somali and Eritrean) migrant workers and their families; other categories of workers are usually able to take advantage of short amnesty periods to ‘correct their status’.

## 6 Conclusion: Illiberal transnationalism

This article has examined the institutions and practices involved in the management and control of migration and migrants in the Gulf in a historical perspective. In the general debate, transnationalism has been generally associated with migrants' transnationalism, with rather liberal values linked to individual agency across borders and beyond state control. In this article we explored transnational institutions and practices that are shaping migration flows and migrants' lives as 'broadly refer[ing] to multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states' (Vertovec 1999). In the Gulf, migrants have been strongly alienated by institutions and practices designed and generated by states and transnational companies, notably oil firms creating an illiberal transnational management of migrations and migrants' lives.

Linking the international and the national level, the article argues on the one hand political institutions, formal and informal, have shaped massive migration flows over time, structuring networks that might bring about social change through migrants' settlement in the long run. On the other hand, the lives of migrants are clearly regulated by rules that produce hierarchical and exploitative relations between nationals and foreigners and also among foreigners. Discrimination practices based on class but also gender, nationality, race, and religion are enforced through formal and formal institutions, structuring social and economic relations. However, discrimination, exploitation and segregation do not preclude the possibility of *de facto* community formation. This certainly bridges the alleged gap in the literature between the Gulf monarchies and other large immigration countries leading to question the conditions of community formation under conditions of an illiberal globalisation (Castles 2002) but this dimension of migration to the Gulf remains to be explored.

Although liberal values and agency are obviously as generally enshrined in transnationalism as in cosmopolitanism, transnationalism in the Gulf is associated with an *illiberal* context and *illiberal* practices that extend well beyond the state. Deeply rooted in colonial history and the political economy of oil exploitation, the Gulf's illiberal transnationalism certainly needs further confrontation with the political theory of globalisation and discussion around the structures of control and emancipation in a transient context.

## 7 Annex

Figure 1 Phases of migration in the Middle East, loosely inspired by Nazli Choucri (1986b: 20–21)

Period	1940s–1973	1973–1979	1980–1990	1991–end of 1990s	2003 onwards
Migration Flows	<p><b>Labour migration:</b> Arab migrants to the Gulf (from Mashreq, mainly Egyptians, Jordanians) with few numbers from Western Europe North America and the Maghreb</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> Palestinians in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt (1947, 1967); Eritreans in Sudan (1962 onwards)</p>	<p><b>Labour migration:</b> Arab immigrants (Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, Iraqis - skilled, unskilled, all sectors to the Gulf)</p> <p>Americans and British immigration, highly-skilled in Gulf petroleum industry</p> <p>Beginning of Asian migration to the Gulf (Indians and Pakistanis)</p> <p>End of labour migration programmes in Western Europe</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> Palestinians (1973)</p>	<p><b>Labour migration:</b> Asian migrants and South East Asia (Indonesia, China, South Korea, Philippines), skilled and unskilled</p> <p>African migrants (West Africa) in Libya</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> Palestinians, Iraqis</p>	<p><b>Labour migration:</b> Asian migrants, mostly to the Gulf</p> <p><b>Deported/Returnees:</b> Massive return after the 1991 war in Iraq (Yemenis, Palestinians, Egyptians)</p> <p><b>Secondary migration:</b> US, Canada for Egyptians, Morroccans</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> Somalis (1991 onwards)</p>	<p><b>Labour migration:</b> New Asian countries (Vietnam, China) in the Gulf; Arab emigration outside the region</p> <p>Ethiopians, Eritreans, Sudanese, West Africans to Libya, Egypt, Morocco (transit to Europe and settlement)</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> Somalis, Eritreans, Sudanese (South and North), Iraqis in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon (2003–2009)</p> <p>Syrians in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey (2012 onwards)</p>
Numbers	<p><b>Migrants:</b> GCC and Libya in 1970: 880,000; 1975: 1,800,000</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> From 860,000 to 962,000 Palestinians according to UNRWA</p>	<p><b>Migrants:</b> Around 2m in the GCC (national sources)</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> 1.5M Palestinians and estimated 300,000 1967 refugees and 200,000 Eritreans in Sudan</p>	<p><b>Migrants:</b> from 3,500,000 to 4,650,000</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> Palestinians, 1m Eritreans in Sudan and elsewhere</p>	<p><b>Migrants:</b> 8M in the GCC</p> <p><b>Deported/returned:</b> 1m Yemenis from Saudi Arabia, 300,000 Palestinians from Kuwait</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> 3m Palestinians</p>	<p><b>Migrants:</b> Around 21–24M foreigners (48 percent of the Gulf population) + 4.5M Indians in the Gulf</p> <p><b>Refugees:</b> 2m Iraqis ( and 2m IDPs) and 4m Syrians (7m IDPs) and 4.5/5m Palestinians</p>
Types of regulation, migration politics	<p>Regional integration and liberal circulation regimes for Arab migrants in the Middle East (visa exemption). Little control from receiving and sending states.</p> <p>Informal or formal refugee status for Palestinians (Casablanca Protocol), naturalisation in Jordan but not in other Arab states; Informal status for other refugees</p>	<p>Limited inter-state regulation of migration flows, but control of immigrant and refugee population (for example Egyptians in the Gulf, Palestinians leaving Jordan for Lebanon after Black September 1970, in Lebanon after 1982)</p> <p>Transnational networks formed</p> <p>Gulf segregation system between foreigners and nationals institutionalised in the context of formal independence of Gulf countries and creation of the GCC</p> <p>Business based regulation of migration demand in the GCC</p>	<p>Increased control of receiving Gulf States on migration flows: Progressive replacement of Arab immigrants by Asian immigrants.</p>	<p>Migration crisis and migration diplomacy of retaliation from Gulf states (Kuwait against Palestinians, Saudi Arabia against Yemenis)</p> <p>1994: Return of Palestinian leadership in the Occupied Territories</p>	<p>First bilateral agreements signed by Gulf countries with sending states (Philippines, Vietnam), first bans (Indonesians in Saudi Arabia, female migrants from India, Nepal) and 'migration bargaining' between sending and receiving countries.</p> <p>Labour market reforms and nationalisation of labour force in the GCC countries</p>

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