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The impact of Covid-19 and associated mobility restrictions on Arab South Partner Countries: the case of the Middle East-Gulf States corridor

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Introduction

The outbreak of the first Covid-19 cases in the Gulf States in early February 2020, and subsequent economic downturn shed a new light on the MENA region's dependency on, and vulnerability to migration to the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Foreign workers locked up in infected labour camps, jobless, stranded foreign citizens unable to leave the Gulf back to their home states, and massive forced exits of laid-off labourers all underline the lack of freedom of movement for foreign residents enshrined in Gulf countries' legal systems. Conversely, the reluctance of some governments to organise the repatriation of their nationals, for fear of importing Covid-19 cases to their territories, poses the question of migrants' relations to their home states. Meanwhile, the economic crisis pushed hundreds of thousands of guest labourers, suddenly made redundant, back to their countries. The issue of migrants' return and, more generally, that of the future of labour migration to the Gulf States emerged. Using the crisis as an opportunity, GCC governments currently hasten migrants' replacement by nationals to curb citizens' unemployment and address the "demographic imbalance" between nationals and expatriates.

Using sending and receiving states' official statistics and press statements, the paper outlines and analyses the main consequences of mobility and travel control for migrants and migrant-sending countries of the region. Focusing on Middle Eastern SPCs (Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon) mobility corridor with the GCC as an example, the paper will discuss prominent mobility issues revealed by and arising from the crisis, from the migrants' and origin countries' perspectives. The paper then articulates a set of recommendations for national policymakers and the international community.

Middle East countries' dependency on Gulf migration

A hub for international investment, trade and tourism, the GCC region channelled its hydrocarbon-induced growth towards megaprojects, world-class events, and landmark cultural and other projects to attract a larger share of international visitors and capital. Subsequent hikes in labour needs since the 2000s aggregated about 30 million foreign citizens in the Gulf States by 2019, or 11% of the world's total migrant stock.¹ That same year, on the eve of the Covid-19 crisis, foreign migrants made up more than a half (52%) of the region's resident population, while foreign workers made up between 57% and 95% of the Gulf countries' workforces, respectively in Saudi Arabia and in Qatar.²

However, dependency on labour mobility goes both ways: the six countries polarise migration from Middle Eastern Arab states: 43% of the 885,000 Lebanese expatriates worldwide, 60% of the 4.4 million Egyptian expatriates and three-quarters of the 962,000 Jordanian expatriates were residing in the GCC region in the mid-2010s,³ mostly in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait. Due to their large numbers, Egyptians in Gulf States are found at all levels of occupation, including low-skilled. In Saudi Arabia in 2013, for instance, Egyptian ex-

1 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2019). International Migrant Stock 2019 (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2019)

2 <https://gulfmigration.org/glimm-database/demographic-and-economic-module/>.

3 Françoise De Bel-Air, Mapping ENI SPCs migrants in the Euro-Mediterranean region: An inventory of statistical sources, ICMPD, Vienna, 2020.

ed.²⁸ It is thus likely that such -directly or indirectly- forced exits contributed to spread the virus in migrants' origin countries.²⁹ Conversely, others, among whom Arab, skilled workers,³⁰ found themselves stranded with no resources in host states, as unemployed foreigners are entitled to no governmental assistance scheme.

High risk of falling into irregular administrative situation in Gulf States

The multiplication of expatriates' levies, of dependents' and other fees, like in Saudi Arabia since 2017, the diversity and number of reforms of immigration legislations, added to the dependency on the sponsors, all increase expatriates' risks of falling into irregularity. No less than six different categories of irregular migration and administrative situations may be identified in the region: (i) entering unlawfully into a country; (ii) overstaying a valid residency permit; (iii) being employed by someone who is not the sponsor; (iv) running away from an employer, or absconding; (v) being born in the Gulf to parents with an irregular status and (vi) becoming irregular due to a change in the legislation or in practices. A foreign resident may even be unaware of his/her irregular status, if the sponsor failed to complete the necessary administrative procedures, or to renew the migrant's permits, for instance. Ignoring specific procedures, such as the necessity for an expatriate willing to leave the UAE to have the sponsor cancel his/her residency visa, would categorise negligent expats as absconders. Migrant workers and residents in the Gulf are thus particularly vulnerable to falling into irregular administrative situation, a criminal offense leading to one's detention. This has aggravated migrants and their home states' exposure to the pandemic: detained persons, such as the 6,300 Egyptian nationals locked up prior to their deportation from Kuwait,³¹ were at risk of being infected; deportations by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States were decided without concertation with origin countries and may have exported infection cases to these countries.³² Amnesties and the waiving of fines for residency violators in some countries,³³ meanwhile, served the host states' purpose of accelerating and facilitating the deportation of unwanted, potentially infected foreign citizens.

The Covid-19 pandemic thus strongly impacted Gulf migrants' mobility in many ways, from imprisonment to forced departure, or forced stay for lack of resources to leave. However, Gulf States' migration policies, all geared towards limiting expatriates' mobility to, from and within Gulf host states and labour markets, aggravated the vulnerability of migrants and their host states to the pandemic. The pandemic thus exposed, more aptly than ever, migrants' lack of agency and control of their mobility patterns in the Gulf.

Policies of migrants' origin countries

The crisis also unveiled migrants' situation vis-à-vis their governments, as expatriates' excess mortality was indeed compounded by origin countries' initial reluctance to repatriate possibly infected citizens.³⁴ Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon suspended passengers' flights and closed their land, sea and air borders by mid-March. Yet, repatriation schemes and registration platforms only started in May;³⁵ Some Jordanian citizens denied entry in the country after the border closure remained stranded in the border area between Jordan and Saudi Arabia for weeks.³⁶ Repatriation schemes posed restrictions to returns to the three countries.³⁷ Among these, plane tickets were not free,³⁸ and return expenditures could amount to unaffordable sums for large

28 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/23/middle-east-autocrats-south-asian-workers-nepal-qatar-coronavirus/>.
 29 <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1217342/des-centaines-de-pakistanais-rapatries-du-moyen-orient-testes-positifs.html>.
 30 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-jordanians-sacked-saudi-firms-launch-campaign-return-home>.
 31 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-egypt-security/kuwait-breaks-up-egyptian-worker-riot-over-repatriation-idUSKBN-22G0HU>.
 32 <https://qz.com/africa/1837457/ethiopians-expelled-from-saudi-arabia-uae-for-covid-19/>; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/23/middle-east-autocrats-south-asian-workers-nepal-qatar-coronavirus/>.
 33 <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/447924-uae-residency-violators-can-to-leave-uae-without-paying-penalty-ica>; <https://gulfbusiness.com/amnesty-ends-in-kuwait-30000-undocumented-expats-avail-scheme-report/>.
 34 <https://northafricapost.com/39754-gulf-crisis-egypt-objects-return-of-citizens-stranded-in-qatar.html>.
 35 On Jordan: <https://www.laprensasalatina.com/jordan-repatriates-thousands-of-nationals-stranded-abroad/>.
 36 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-jordanians-sacked-saudi-firms-launch-campaign-return-home>.
 37 On Jordan: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1679681/middle-east>. On Lebanon: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1650796/middle-east>.
 38 <https://rj.com/en/repatriation-flights-info>.

middle-class families.³⁹ Initially covered by the government,⁴⁰ the cost of mandatory quarantine venues in hotels and medical supervision proposed by Jordan's Army-run Covid-19 Crisis Management Cell, for instance, was transferred to returnees,⁴¹ which added to the financial burden of many middle-class families, prevented from returning to Jordan. Their residency permits having expired, these stranded nationals are now irregular migrants in Gulf host states.⁴² Like the other countries, Lebanon had to prioritise between various categories of stranded citizens (tourists, visitors, students, ..), with expatriates left behind until June.⁴³ Delay in repatriation flights from Kuwait to Egypt also spurred migrants' violent discontent.⁴⁴ Egyptian authorities promised to cover the costs of quarantines for returnees in collective accommodations (youth hostels, university dorms), but isolation in hotels was left to returnees' own expenses.⁴⁵

Origin countries' authorities justified such delays in repatriating expats, invoking logistical difficulties and need to organize for quarantines. However, de facto denial of returns for citizens also pose an issue linked to citizenship rights: Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights indeed recognize "the right of everyone to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his own country".⁴⁶ More generally, Middle East migrant-sending countries' policy of encouraging citizens' expatriation to alleviate unemployment, channel remittances to local households and stimulate domestic consumption goes hand in hand with a general lack of knowledge of expatriated citizens, especially their numbers and characteristics.⁴⁷ The Covid crisis thus underlined, in migrants' eyes, host states' lack of appreciation for their years-long support to their homeland.⁴⁸ Yet, the crisis could serve as an opportunity to reconceive Mashreq countries' emigration policies and dependency on receiving states.

The economic crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the drop in oil prices in Gulf States: what's next?

Exact figures of Egyptian, Jordanian, and Lebanese expatriate returnees from Gulf States are not known to date (November 2020). Jordan's repatriation schemes returned about 20,000 citizens from all destinations, of whom tourists and visitors, as well as students,⁴⁹ while entry and exit figures suggest that around 50,000 Jordanian citizens returned to Jordan between February and August 2020 (see figure 1). Based on previous crises, scenarios initially forecasted the possible return of up to 1 million Egyptian workers from abroad, mostly from the Gulf region and Jordan, making up 3% of Egypt's active population.⁵⁰ Returns' previsions later increased to 1.5 to 2 million, while above 500,000 expatriates had reportedly come back to Egypt by late August 2020, mostly from the Gulf states.⁵¹

39 <https://alghad.com/%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B-9%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%80-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%84/>.
 40 <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/five-star-coronavirus-quarantine-jordan-s-dead-sea-isolated-describe-lock-down-1.993814>.
 41 <https://s.alwakeelnews.com/441698>.
 42 <https://alghad.com/%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B-9%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%80-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%84>
 43 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/lebanese-stranded-abroad-due-coronavirus-expected-pay-exorbitant-fees-flights-home>; <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1689581/middle-east>.
 44 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kuwait-egypt-security/kuwait-breaks-up-egyptian-worker-riot-over-repatriation-idUSKBN-22G0HU>.
 45 <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/DefaultAr/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?ArtID=764>.
 46 UN Commission on Human Rights, The right of everyone to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country, 6 March 1989, E/CN.4/RES/1989/39, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f0c414.html>
 47 Françoise De Bel-Air, Mapping ENI SPCs migrants in the Euro-Mediterranean region: An inventory of statistical sources, ICMPD, Vienna, 2020.
 48 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-jordanians-sacked-saudi-firms-launch-campaign-return-home>.
 49 <https://www.albawaba.com/news/jordan-will-resume-repatriation-its-stranded-nationals-july-10-1366705>.
 50 <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/123201>.
 51 <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/143531>.

Challenges created by migrants' returns

Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon are negatively affected by migrants' returns, which decreased remittances inflows, and increased domestic unemployment. These are compounded by the decline in oil prices, likely to decrease financing and investments by Gulf States, the largest investor in the Arab region.

The three countries' economies were already fragile before the crisis. Egypt's unemployment rates are expected to swell from around 8-10% before the crisis to 11%, or even 16%, depending on the economic crisis scenario faced by the country, according to governmental estimates. Around 1.2 to 2.9 million Egyptian citizens could lose their jobs, 824,000 of whom being already unemployed as of June 2020.⁵²

Returned expatriates would thus add to the figures of unemployed, especially among rural, low-skilled citizens. However, authorities promote the reintegration of Egyptians returning from abroad into Egypt's development process.⁵³ The Egyptian Ministry for Immigration and Egyptians Abroad launched several initiatives, among which the project "Enlighten your country" in June 2020. The ministry circulated a form to be filled by all returnees to set up a database of their profiles, locations, and competences, available on the Ministry's website.⁵⁴ In cooperation with several other ministries and public bodies, the Ministry aims to identify job opportunities compatible with returnees' capabilities, which would contribute to the sustainability of development in the region of residence.⁵⁵ Other initiatives aim to place returnees in existing projects,⁵⁶ to help them starting small projects and to invest their savings, with the technical assistance of the Enterprises Development Agency (MSMDEA). The Ministry also supports returnees' attempts at returning abroad, especially Saudi Arabia.⁵⁷

Remittances sent by Egyptians abroad to their families in Egypt stood at an estimated \$27 billion for 2019, or 8.9% of the country's GDP, according to the World Bank.⁵⁸ Based on 2020 first quarter's figures, expatriates' remittances were expected to contract by 10 to 15% for 2020.⁵⁹ However, remittances increased by the end of 2020. Total transfers amounted to about \$79 billion in the third quarter of the fiscal year 2019/20, compared to \$6.2 billion, year-on-year, with an increase of about \$1.7 billion.⁶⁰ Reasons for such a move may be "temporary factors" such as migrant workers transferring their savings in preparation to return home, the impact of lockdown restrictions on transferring funds and a shift to formal remittance channels, which are picked up in the official data.⁶¹

In Jordan, unemployment rates are very high, at 19% of the Jordanian labour force according to official statistics.⁶² Since the onset of the crisis, 150,000 Jordanian private sector employees had lost their job in the Kingdom as of early July,⁶³ and Jordan's economy is expected to contract by 3.5% in the coming year, as compared to the 2% growth of 2019. Remittances' inflows to the country reached \$4,510 million in 2019, or 10.2% of the country's GDP according to the World Bank. Remittances from expatriates make up the largest financial inflow to the country's economy, surpassing at times FDIs and development aid inflows. Yet, Central Bank's figures for the first quarter of 2020 indicated a 6% decrease in remittances' inflows, when compared to the same period in 2019.

52 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/egypt-working-gulf-return-economy-coronavirus.html>.
 53 <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/05/09/we-look-to-integrate-egyptians-returning-from-abroad-into-egypts-economy-minister/>.
 54 <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/DefaultAr/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?ArtID=789>. See also the publication of the Ministry Masr Ma'ak, n°18, p. 1.
 55 <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/DefaultAr/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?ArtID=787>.
 56 <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/DefaultAr/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?ArtID=848>; <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/DefaultAr/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?ArtID=833>.
 57 <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/DefaultAr/Pages/newsdetails.aspx?ArtID=828>.
 58 <https://www.knomad.org/>
 59 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-egypt-lebanon-jordan-remittance-economy>.
 60 <https://see.news/remittances-from-egyptians-abroad-record-7-9-billion/>.
 61 This was witnessed in some Asian countries (<https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/apac-remittances-to-decline-amid-coronavirus-shock-08-09-2020>).
 62 <http://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/>.
 63 <https://www.aljazeera.net/ebusiness/2020/7/11/%D8%AA%D8%AE%D9%88%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%87%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%83%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9>

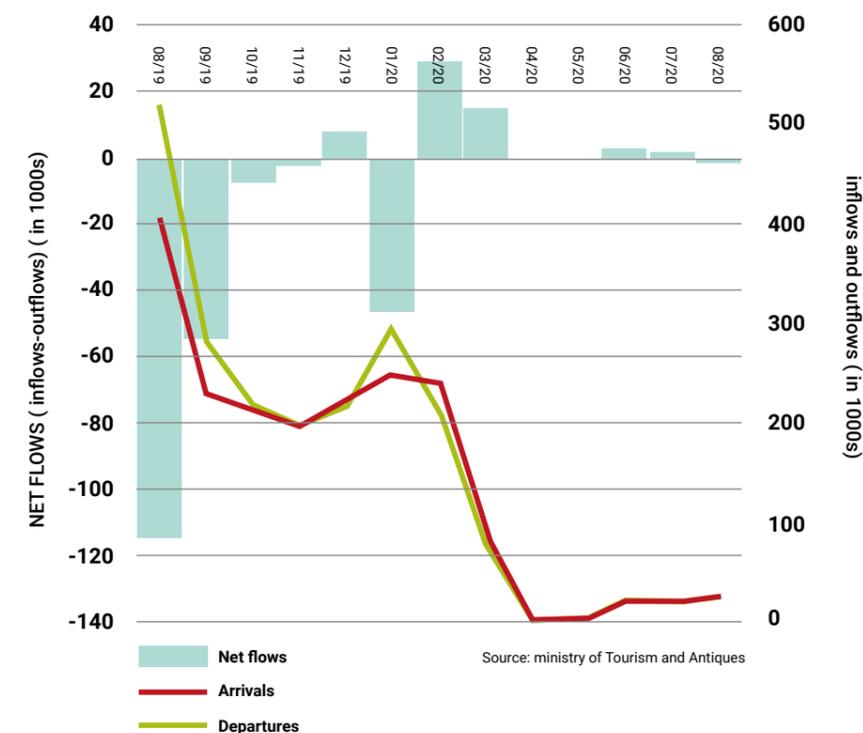


Figure 1. Monthly arrivals, departures and net flows of Jordanians to Jordan (August 2019-August 2020)

The deficit is likely to deepen if flows of return migration reach the anticipated 100,000 returns (20% of an estimated 500,000 Jordanians workers abroad).⁶⁴ So far, movements recorded at the country's borders⁶⁵ from February to July 2020 indicated a net return migration of 50,000 citizens (Figure). Figures for August (last available data as of November 2020) were slightly negative, possibly suggesting the start of new departures. Meanwhile, Jordanian authorities plan to integrate expatriates' expertise in the local economy. In May 2020, the Jordanian Chamber of Commerce launched an online platform to link employers to job seekers.⁶⁶ The Investment Promotion Authority oversees opening investment opportunities to returnees. However, according to returnees' accounts published in the press, Jordan's finances may not benefit from much of returnees' savings. Salary cuts, unpaid leaves, and lay-offs, as well as travel and quarantine costs, were said to have dried out many expats' assets. Many mentioned difficulties to even retrieve their end-of-service benefits.⁶⁷

As for Lebanon, the country's financial crisis that erupted since October 2019's popular demonstrations, added to the economic downturn due to the pandemic, can only be exacerbated by the return of expatriates and the drop in remittances. These made up 12.7% of the country's GDP and amounted to 7,467 million for 2019 (World Bank figures). From 43% in 2017, the share of remittances coming from the Gulf to Lebanon had been decreasing.⁶⁸ This global remittances figure is likely to be underestimated, as expatriates increasingly used money transfer services like Western Union, or even physical transfer, due to their lack of trust in Lebanese banks. These inputs to families were interrupted for months, during the lockdown and the halt of international flights. Unemployment figures are not available for the country, but it is unlikely that the current economic climate will conduce returnees to stay in Lebanon and invest their savings. The deterioration of the socio-political climate and deepening recession indeed compelled increasing numbers of despaired citizens to emigrate from Lebanon,⁶⁹ a trend reinforced by the August 2020 blast in Beirut.

64 https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/JCC_online_jobs_platform_to_help_returning_Jordanians-SNG_174786261/.
 65 Records of arrivals and departures. These figures may be underestimated.
 66 https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/economy/story/JCC_online_jobs_platform_to_help_returning_Jordanians-SNG_174786261/.
 67 <https://alghad.com/%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%B7%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B-9%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%80-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%84/>.
 68 <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-egypt-lebanon-jordan-remittance-economy>.
 69 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/7/21/a-new-wave-of-emigration-looms-over-lebanon>.

Prospects for future migration to the GCC

The current crisis, likely to deepen in the coming years, also puts a question mark on future employment opportunities in the oil monarchies for Arab labourers.

Economic downturn in Gulf states

Across the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states, some experts forecast that employment “could fall by around 13%, with peak-to-trough job losses of some 900,000 in the UAE and 1.7m in Saudi Arabia”.⁷⁰ In Dubai alone, 70% of business owners expect their companies to close before the end of 2020.⁷¹

As Gulf states condition foreigners’ residence to employment, the return from Gulf countries of expatriates made redundant could exceed 3.5 million people. The numbers of residents could decline by between 4% (in Saudi Arabia and Oman) and around 10% (in the UAE and Qatar).⁷² By mid-July 2020, Kuwait claimed that over 158,000 expat workers had already left the country since March, among whom a majority of Indians and Egyptians, and a total of 1.5 million expats are expected to leave by the end of year.⁷³ Meanwhile, 250,000 foreign labourers had lost their jobs already by April.⁷⁴ In Saudi Arabia, Jadwa Investment estimated that around 323,000 workers had left the Kingdom during the first semester of the year, with 178,000 successful applications for Awdah, the government scheme to facilitate the departure of expat workers to their countries of origin during the covid-19 pandemic, processed between April 22 and June 3.⁷⁵ A total of around 1.2 million expats is expected to leave the Saudi labour market, mostly from the accommodation and food services, administrative and support activities (which includes rental and leasing activities, travel agencies, security and building services).⁷⁶ However, the suspension or delay in mega-projects or world-class events such as Dubai Expo 2020 is also likely to affect other sectors, such as construction and logistics, which may hit the many engineers, architects and other skilled and highly-skilled technicians from the three countries. The aviation industry, another major employer of expatriates, is expected to lay off as many as 800,000 employees from the six Gulf States’ national companies.⁷⁷

Migration policies, new and old

Some migration specialists showed confidence that migration will resume with the receding of the crisis and oil prices’ correction. Massive return migration back to home states is feared but did not happen yet; figures of job losses are also larger than figures of departures, so far. Some, especially low-skilled expats could also stay in the Gulf irregularly.⁷⁸

Gulf states also seek to become more attractive for skilled foreign labourers.⁷⁹ Reforms of the kafala system were decided to that effect. Bahrain had led the way for reforming the sponsorship system in 2009, by transferring the monitoring of migrants’ flows from sponsors to a new public body, the Labour Market Regulation Authority. Reforms of the system were conducted in almost every country in the region over the past decade, such as the lifting of sponsor’s mandatory No Objection Certificate (NOC) on entrance into and exit, and change of job, passed in Bahrain and the UAE.⁸⁰ Recently, Qatar issued Law No. 19 of 2020, that removes

all exit permit requirements and allows workers to change jobs before the end of their contract without No Objection Certificate from their employer. Saudi Arabia’s Labour Market Initiative, set to enter into force in March 2021, claims to have cancelled the sponsorship system in the Kingdom. The measure introduces a contractual relationship between the employer and the employee. Workers can apply directly for posts in Saudi Arabia via an e-government portal. Workers’ residency will cease being tied to a specific employer or employment status, while the work contract must be certified by the government. Exit, re-entry and final exit should also be free and not conditional on employer’s consent. These measures intending to improve job mobility, flexibility, and competition, allegedly aim to boost the productivity of the private sector, in line with international labour regulations.⁸¹

Despite such moves, essential elements of the kafala system remain everywhere in the Gulf, such as the mandatory sponsorship of the employer to eventually obtain a visa. The terms of the labour contracts may include abusive clauses, such as the obligation to inform the employer in advance to leave the Saudi Arabia. In Qatar, workers are actually still required to give the employer a 72 hours’ advance notice before departing from the country. Moreover, the Saudi labour reform excludes those employed in the domestic sector (drivers, guards, domestic workers, shepherds and gardeners), who are particularly subject to exploitation.⁸² These factors put a question mark on Gulf labour markets’ attractiveness in the future.

On a shorter term, new health guarantees now requested from foreign immigrants pose additional constraints to returning to the Gulf. New migrants and valid visa holders are required to produce recent certificates of non-contamination for COVID-19 using a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test. Other guarantees are also requested, such as mandatory self-isolation for 7 to 14 days upon arrival, or a proof of health insurance (in Oman). These measures could make migrants’ health status a new criteria for migrants’ selection and entry.

However, long-term changes in Gulf States’ hiring policies may have a decisive impact on future migration trends from the Arab region. Using the crisis as an opportunity, GCC governments indeed currently hasten pre-crisis policies of migrants’ replacement by nationals, to curb citizens’ unemployment and address the “demographic imbalance” between nationals and expatriates. For example, the Nitaqat programme ongoing in Saudi Arabia since 2011, bars an increasing number of employment sectors to foreign employees, to the benefit of nationals. A steep hike in expatriates’ levies and dependents’ and other fees since 2017 made foreigners more expensive to employ; as a result, Jadwa Investment estimated that about 2 million expatriates left Saudi Arabia since 2017.⁸³ Job nationalisation, especially in the public sector,⁸⁴ has accelerated everywhere. In Qatar and the UAE, the two wealthiest and less populated Gulf States, nationals enjoyed quasi-full employment, while foreigners made up the bulk of the labourers, including in the governmental sector (45% in Qatar in 2018, for instance).⁸⁵ Yet, since the advent of the Covid crisis, even the two countries now advocate for cuts in foreign staff in government entities.⁸⁶ Hiring agencies in sending states such as Egypt experienced the dwindling of opportunities for their nationals in the Gulf since 2017,⁸⁷ especially for low-skilled labourers. Ongoing ambitious reforms and masterplans aiming to make Gulf states “knowledge societies”, less dependent on oil revenues, indeed prioritise the hiring of highly skilled expatriates.⁸⁸ At the same time, specific opportunities and posts are carved in for Gulf nationals, even at the expense of some skilled foreign employees, among whom Arabs.⁸⁹ Figure 2 confirms that labour permits issued to Egyptian labourers to work in the Gulf states have been steadily decreasing since 2015, especially for Egyptians’ main

70 <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/my-oxford/publications/561739>.
71 <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/coronavirus/2020/05/22/Around-70-of-Dubai-companies-expect-closure-within-6-months-amid-coronavirus-Survey>
72 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-22/oxford-economics-sees-exodus-of-expat-workers-from-across-gcc>.
73 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1703066/middle-east>
74 <https://www.kuwaitup2date.com/over-250000-expats-lost-their-jobs-in-kuwait/>
75 <https://www.internationalinvestment.net/news/4016744/million-expats-forecast-leave-saudi-arabia>
76 Jadwa Investment. Saudi Labour Market, June 2020 <https://www.sustg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Saudi-labor-market-June-2020.pdf>.
77 <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2020-04-23-01/>.
78 CMRS Webinar: Covid-19 and International Labor Migration in the Middle East, 24 June 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD7Uh5S8C1w>.
79 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pandemic-prompts-gulf-countries-to-adopt-more-western-norms-11605103200>.
80 Zahra, M. “The Legal Framework of the Sponsorship Systems of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: A Comparative Examination,” Explanatory Note No. 4/2019, Gulf Labour Market and Migration (GLMM) programme of the Migration Policy Center (MPC) and the Gulf Research Center (GRC), [http:// gulfmigration.org](http://gulfmigration.org).

81 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1758456/saudi-arabia>.
82 <https://www.dw.com/ar/a-55524124>
83 <https://www.internationalinvestment.net/news/4005152/-million-expats-quit-saudi-arabia-citing-fees-s sluggish-growth>.
84 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/oman-contracts-spending-coronavirus-economy-oil-royal-court.html>;
<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1666981/middle-east>.
85 <https://gulfmigration.org/qatar-economically-active-population-aged-15-and-above-by-nationality-qatari-non-qatari-sex-and-activity-sector-2018/>
86 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1688281/middle-east>.
87 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/job-nationalization-gulf-countries-affect-work-egyptians.html>.
88 <https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>; https://www.psa.gov.qa/en/qnv1/Documents/QNV2030_English_v2.pdf.
89 <https://www.gulf-insider.com/kuwait-nearly-2000-expat-teachers-to-be-sacked/>.

destination, Saudi Arabia. As stated by the Egyptian Chamber of Commerce, 55,000 work permits were issued per month to Egyptians for the 6 GCC countries on the eve of the Covid-19 crisis.⁹⁰ These figures mark a drop of 33% in the number of permits issued, as compared to 2017.

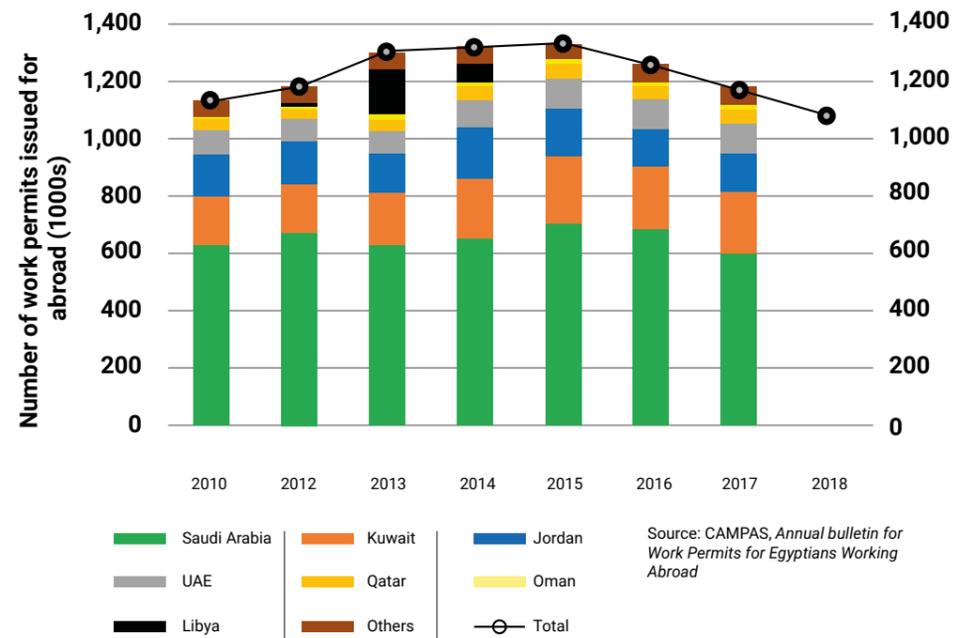


Figure 2. Work permits issued to Egyptians working abroad (main emigration countries, 2011-2018)

The demographic dominance of expatriates in resident population also spurred violent anti-expatriates' statements.⁹¹ In Kuwait, these particularly targeted Egyptians,⁹² the second largest foreign community in the country. Some Kuwaiti lawmakers proposed a draft bill suggesting a quota system as one way to redress the demographic imbalance in the country. According to the proposed quota system, non-nationals should make up a maximum of 30% of the total population. The numbers of Indian workers should not exceed 15% of the overall Kuwaiti population while those of Egyptian expatriates should stand at a maximum 10%.⁹³ If implemented, the quota system would mean that Egyptians would only number 140,000 in Kuwait, down from at least 670,000 before the Covid-19 crisis.⁹⁴ Eventually, Kuwait's National Assembly approved only parts of the law, and voted measures to decrease the share of expatriates from 70% to 30% of the resident population.⁹⁵

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 91 <https://www.courrierinternational.com/revue-de-presse/pandemie-koweit-les-immigres-na-qua-les-jeter-dans-le-desert>.
 92 <https://www.albawaba.com/node/egyptians-out-kuwait-trending-hashtag-maybe-6-years-old-1358185>.
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Conclusion

The Covid-19 thus had, and may still have in the future, a major impact on Egyptian, Jordanian and Lebanese expatriates' mobility from and back to Gulf countries. However, the paper showed that the effect of the pandemic on expatriates' mobility was also compounded by Gulf host states' legal systems and immigration policies, among which the sponsorship system. Moreover, the pandemic served as an opportunity to accelerate pre-Covid crisis reforms of Gulf migration policies. Gulf host states started streamlining job nationalisation policies and limiting the hiring of low-skilled labourers before 2020. This may particularly affect the large pools of Egyptian labourers, some of whom not skilled and trained according to Gulf States' changing hiring needs and political priorities, as well as specific professions occupied by Jordanians and Lebanese. Changes in the trends and patterns of migration to the Gulf states, especially when it concerns the millions of Egyptian migrants to the region, may have consequences on other immigration hubs, among which the EU.

Egyptian authorities' reaction to the possible return of large numbers of nationals from abroad may be in tune with such changes, and signal attempts at streamlining Egypt's emigration policies. The government claims it will diversify emigration destinations for nationals, turning for instance to the African Union's member states.⁹⁶ Economist Abdel Fattah indeed argued in an online seminar that "there are also opportunities for Egypt to look to alternative and emerging new demands for labour, such as agriculture or care work, in European countries where the need has increased during the pandemic". Experts also considered positively Manpower and Immigration Ministry's initiative to record Egyptian returnees' skills and competences, to either integrate them back into the Egyptian economy, or to prepare them for the reopening of Gulf labour markets. Abdel Fattah called for designing skills-matching initiatives and addressing the largely young and educated unemployed population by prioritizing migration policy which seeks to fill labour demand gaps in international markets.⁹⁷

Based on these results, the paper proposes three sets of recommendations.

1. Migrant-sending countries should question the sustainability of mass migration to authoritarian countries. Therefore, alleviating dependency on single destination states or regions through diversifying host states may be a good start, like is currently advocated for in Egypt. Tunisia is another example: the country works to expand placement opportunities outside the traditional European destinations, especially France, and started looking to countries such as Canada.
2. Better negotiating bilateral migration agreements to guarantee migrants' protection, as well as empower representatives of home states in destination countries (embassies and consulates, for instance), is therefore essential. Learning from the experience of other, non-Arab states (for example, the Philippines), which achieved a better degree of institutionalisation of migration policies and monitoring of migration flows would be useful.
3. Consequently, it is of utmost importance for sending states to set up tools for better knowing the numbers, location, movements and characteristics of expatriates, in order to devise sustainable migration policies and anticipate future crises.

96 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/job-nationalization-gulf-countries-affect-work-egyptians.html>.
 97 Dina Abdel Fattah, in CMRS Webinar: Covid-19 and International Labor Migration in the Middle East, 24 June 2020, "30 mn." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BD7Uh5S8C1w>.



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