

Expatriates and the Gulf Monarchies: Politics, Security, and the Arab Spring

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Abstract

For many years huge expatriate populations have played a much documented role in the economic development of the Gulf monarchies. But a less well told story is how expatriates have also contributed to their political stability. As non-citizens their presence in such large numbers has reinforced the elite status of most citizens in the region – an important non-pecuniary legitimacy resource for the various ruling dynasties. Moreover, the primarily employment-driven status of expatriates has meant that they have usually adopted either an apolitical or even pro-status quo stance. In some cases their perceived loyalty has led to selective naturalization or even direct co-option into security services. Disrupting this decades-old relationship, however, have been the recently changing political and economic circumstances of the Gulf monarchies. Already decisions have been made to reduce significantly expatriate populations due to accumulating pressures. Such measures are likely to threaten the historic political advantages the presence of expatriates has provided for these polities.

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For several decades the six Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman - have relied on substantial expatriate workforces. This is not only because of the small sizes of their indigenous populations relative to the enormous development opportunities that arose since the first oil booms, but also because of the benefits and privileges enjoyed by most citizens in these states and their subsequent preference for public sector or other perceived high status employment. There are now somewhere between fifteen and nineteen million foreigners employed in these states,

¹ working across all sectors, and from all parts of the world. Few can ever aspire to citizenship and most are strictly temporary guest workers, even if they are highly skilled.

This paper goes beyond the more conventional political economy discussions on the impact of these expatriate populations, most of which have focused on the need for labour nationalization strategies,² disparities between public and private sector recruitment,³

remittance flows,⁴ or the need for ‘expatriate acculturation’ in order to boost productivity.⁵ Instead the focus is on the effect of such a massive expatriate presence on the domestic politics of the Gulf monarchies. Far from being a liability, an argument is made that the expatriate presence has historically provided ruling elites with two significant political advantages in managing their relationship with indigenous populations, along with a number of other peripheral benefits.

Firstly, from the perspective of the ruling families’ social contracts with their citizens – which are frequently used to explain the resilience of these polities⁶ - the huge numbers of expatriates residing and working in the Gulf monarchies have allowed elites to gain further legitimacy from citizens beyond conventional wealth distribution strategies or more traditional legitimacy resources such as religion, heritage, and cults of personality. This is because the highly visible abundance of expatriates has effectively allowed these states to elevate their indigenous populations - the ‘locals’ - to a higher and carefully guarded social status above most expatriates, including those from more developed countries. Secondly, and more subtly, instead of presenting security threats or promoting subversive external ideas, these largely apolitical, labour migrant communities have usually formed silent constituencies that remain keen to preserve the status quo and their employment opportunities, even if they suffer from poor working conditions or apparent abuses.⁷

Nevertheless, with recently changing political and economic circumstances in most of these states, there is now compelling evidence that these advantages are being eroded and new questions about the role of expatriates must be answered. In the wake of the broader region’s ‘Arab Spring’ or ‘Arab Awakening,’ and as significant unrest has evidently begun to spread into the Gulf itself, can expatriate populations still be expected to continue to contribute to regime survival prospects? This seems likely in the smaller and wealthier Gulf monarchies where they have formed majorities but remain focused on remuneration and are

consistently reminded of their temporary status. In these circumstances would they likely favour most state measures taken to dampen potentially destabilizing dissent among citizens? And, as a more direct example, can these states be expected to harness these loyalties by either selectively naturalizing certain expatriates or recruiting an ever larger number of expatriates directly into their security services? On the other hand, if unrest continues to intensify in the larger and relatively poorer Gulf monarchies and significant pressure resulting from higher public spending and the urgent need to create employment opportunities for their younger nationals continues to build, might expatriates after all become an unnecessary and unwelcome presence?

Citizens, expatriates, and socio-economic exclusivity

Given that most of the well-documented aspects of the welfare state and the various hydrocarbon rent-financed wealth distribution mechanisms in the Gulf monarchies – including generous government housing, free education and health care, and often substantial social security payments⁸ - are geared primarily towards citizens, it has become increasingly important for these states to develop carefully a sense of distinction and exclusivity for such recipients. On a basic level, governments need to control exactly which of their residents are entitled to the many privileges and benefits of such rent-based states and, especially in the more resource-scarce monarchies, there is a need to make sure that the distribution of national wealth does not become too diluted. Moreover, the building of a clear social divide between citizens and expatriates, especially in those Gulf monarchies such as Qatar, the UAE, and Kuwait – where the vast majority of residents are expatriates – has also created a readily identifiable elite status for nationals. Put simply, in these monarchies almost any bona fide citizen, regardless of background or education, can automatically assume a

relatively high social standing, courtesy of their passport, identity papers,⁹ or ‘family card.’¹⁰ For many years – and controversially this is sometimes still the case – this meant in practice that citizens could queue-jump expatriates, win arguments with traffic police (especially if the adversary was an expatriate) and in general enjoy preferential treatment in public. While this obvious social stratification is now becoming a little blurred – notably in the UAE’s Dubai and those monarchies that have sought foreign direct investment or have established tourism industries¹¹ – there nevertheless lingers an atmosphere of favouritism and state-sponsored social inequity. Nevertheless, from a ruling family’s perspective any social discomfort or resentment that expatriates may experience is massively outweighed by the political benefits of having a national population that not only enjoys distributed wealth but also de facto higher status.

Also contributing to the economic and social exclusivity experienced by citizens vis-à-vis expatriates has been the region’s much discussed sponsorship or ‘kafala’ system. While some of the more resource-scarce Gulf monarchies, notably Bahrain and Dubai have gone to great lengths to liberalise their economies and create a more equitable competitive environment for foreign entrepreneurs and investors – either by removing the sponsorship requirement in the free zones or by allowing ministries rather than individuals to serve as sponsors¹² – most Gulf states have shied away from abolishing the system outright, given the significant economic benefits it brings to many citizens. In the most straightforward examples, well placed nationals can essentially sell their status as a citizen to foreign partners who need to conform to existing legislation (such as having a sponsor control at least fifty-one percent of the company’s stock¹³) and seek a local partner. In these situations it is not uncommon to find that the local partner is effectively a ‘silent partner,’ with the expatriate often being responsible for the day-to-day running of the company. As such, the system has

often allowed citizens to enjoy another stream of income above and beyond any public sector salary, land, or property that they may have acquired with the help of the state.

Expatriates and the status quo

While accurate figures for the size of Gulf expatriate populations are difficult to come by, perhaps due to the sensitivities of governments admitting to full demographic breakdowns, it is still possible to make useful generalisations. Most of the region's unskilled labour force (usually housed in worker camps outside the main cities) is made up of South or East Asians, while most of the retail and service sectors are made up of South Asians, East Africans, or non-Gulf Arabs. Westerners, Australasians, and South Africans, along with educated South Asians and non-Gulf Arabs make up a significant proportion of the region's professional class and white collar private sector workforce. Saudi Arabia probably reached a peak of about eight million expatriates in early 2013 – nearly a quarter of the total population.¹⁴ In the more resource-scarce Oman, where there are fewer economic opportunities, there are unsurprisingly fewer expatriates. Nevertheless, there are probably still more than 600,000 foreigners living there, accounting for some seventeen percent of the total population.¹⁵ Meanwhile in Bahrain about 550,000 or nearly half of the island's population are thought to be expatriates – or at least were before the 2011 uprisings began.¹⁶ The most dramatic examples are, however, in the very resource-rich small monarchies. Kuwait reached a peak of over 1.1 million expatriates in early 2013 - account for nearly seventy percent of the total population,¹⁷ while in the UAE expatriates continue to make up about ninety percent of population.¹⁸ The latter figure is based on official UAE government data claiming that the total population has risen to 9 million¹⁹ – this has however been widely disputed and may be put down to the UAE's historic rivalry with the much larger Saudi

Arabia. Qatar, now the fastest growing Gulf economy with the smallest number of citizens – only 290,000 - will soon catch up with the UAE. Already the population comprises eighty percent expatriates, and with a staggering annual population growth rate of nearly sixty percent their proportion will increase dramatically.²⁰

While these figures may seem alarming, most of these millions of expatriates are undoubtedly based in the region to make money and eventually return to their home countries relatively better off. Most only stay in these states for two to five years, with very few regarding their host country as a real home or a retirement destination. In this regard they differ greatly from immigrants who arrive in ‘melting pot’ cities such as New York, London, and Paris – many of whom intend to spend a substantial part of their lives there and eventually help shape the societies and politics of their adopted nation. Gulf expatriates are thus better viewed as strictly temporary economic migrants. Although, as described, they are very rarely entitled to the full benefits enjoyed by citizens, they nevertheless enjoy a tax free salary which usually allows a higher standard of living than they would experience in their country of origin. In many cases they have no sustained interest in the politics of their host country, or if they do, it rarely feeds into indigenous opposition movements. In many ways they become a loyal, silent support base for the ruling families, as the latter usually portray themselves as the guardians of stable, fairly apolitical states where money can be made safely and smoothly and there is no requirement to integrate into the local culture or acquire the local language.

Currently it is the tiny kingdom of Bahrain that perhaps provides the best example of this phenomenon, as its ruling family is undoubtedly facing the stiffest local opposition. In summer 2013 the Bahrain Federation of Expatriate Associations began an overtly pro-government petition – aiming for 100,000 signatures – calling for ‘peace and prosperity’ and the ‘unification of citizens and expats’ under the Al-Khalifa king.²¹ Less dramatically but

more structurally significant, the UAE's has long provided a good example of expatriate integration into a 'state as a corporation' model, rather than a community, with senior ministers having claimed that 'the government emphasizes prosperity over political development... we think twenty percent politics / eighty percent development.'²² On a more micro level the ruler of the UAE's constituent emirate of Dubai goes even further than this. Styling his make-shift government as 'Dubai Incorporated' or 'Dubai Inc.', his aim has been to portray himself as the chief executive officer of a corporation, rather than as an autocrat presiding over an unelected government.²³ As the emirate's indigenous population has continued to shrink, relative to the influx of hundreds of thousands of expatriates each year, the government often announces new initiatives to hold the situation in check – seemingly an effort to appease conservatives. But in many ways spiralling expatriate numbers have suited the Dubai ruler's interests well – even if it alarms the dwindling citizenry – as he is able to govern over a city mostly made up of temporary migrants.

For the minority of expatriates who remain in the Gulf monarchies much longer, the formula needs to be a little different. There are communities of Palestinians in Kuwait, communities of Iranians and Indians in Dubai, and other substantial foreign populations in the region that have spent decades living and working there, sometimes even having been born and brought up there, as children of expatriates. Although a small minority do seek naturalisation, as discussed below, this is often controversial with indigenous populations and has become a source of grievance for some opposition movements. Instead, most of the Gulf monarchies have preferred to create an atmosphere of sanctuary or unofficial asylum for these communities, even if it is illusory and contingent on current international relations. Very often these expatriates are from underdeveloped or war-torn regions, many of whom either cannot return home or – in the case of Kuwait's hundreds of thousands of Palestinians (or at least those who were not expelled following the emirate's liberation from Iraq in

1991²⁴) – have no valid travel documentation. While most are aware that their livelihoods are at the whim of their hosts (many other nationalities apart from Palestinians also have been deported from Gulf monarchies due to state-level political disputes),²⁵ there is a general acceptance of the status quo. Thus, as with the more temporary migrants, most of these expatriates prefer to live quietly and apolitically, or try to save up enough to emigrate elsewhere.

Much international media attention focuses on the plight of the huge population of unskilled expatriates. In particular, the appalling living conditions in some of the workers' camps – some of which have no basic facilities or even sewerage – are routinely portrayed as a manifestation of evil, immoral, slave-based economies.²⁶ There is certainly much truth to this, with 'workers' often viewed as somehow sub-human by citizens and skilled expatriates alike, and usually discriminated against by apartheid-like regulations (for example, not being allowed to enter shopping malls, parks, museums, and in some cases even 'public' squares). But in many ways this outrage is primarily the result of having what appears to be a first world society occupying the same uncomfortably small spaces as a developing world society. Very few of the workers can be considered slaves, and most have not made a step into the unknown. In many cases these men have followed their fathers, brothers, or other male relatives who have worked there before, usually with the same bad conditions. Most are still separated from their passports upon arrival, driven around on cattle trucks, and work punishingly long hours in very high temperatures. Sometimes they do not return home for two or three years at a time. But this unpleasant set-up is usually expected and known to the new arrivals, and most are there – just like the skilled expatriates – to make more money than they could at home.²⁷

In this light the unskilled workers are best viewed as the dark side of a tragic, remittance-based economic system where poor but manpower-rich countries sell their labour

in exchange for remittances and investments from the Gulf states into their impoverished communities. When riots do break out in the labour camps the roots causes are only very occasionally political,²⁸ and the disturbances have yet to pose any real threat to the survival of the Gulf monarchies. Usually, they are the result of workers not having been paid by an unscrupulous employer or perhaps an unsafe workplace or some other labour-specific complaint. Sometimes governments will move fast to address the problem and deport a few of the ringleaders. But in many cases there is no need for fast action as the workers' embassies usually remain silent – unwilling to champion the interests of their countrymen lest they jeopardise the flow of remittance wealth. According to a study conducted by Saudi economists, the kingdom now is ranked third in the world for foreign labour cash transfers, behind only the United States and Switzerland, with approximately \$28.5 billion per year being remitted. The other Gulf monarchies, notably Kuwait and the UAE are thought to be close behind.²⁹ A noteworthy exception to ambassadorial silence came in September 2013 when the Nepalese ambassador to Qatar claimed that her countrymen were effectively living in an 'open jail.' She was, however, promptly recalled to Kathmandu within days of her remarks being reported in the British press.³⁰

Expatriates and the Arab Spring

Since the beginning of 2011, and especially in the wake of the North African, Syrian, and Yemeni revolutions, most of the Gulf monarchies have experienced significant turbulence of their own as the region-wide, ongoing Arab Spring appears to have emboldened opposition groups throughout their territories. This resistance has ranged from almost full-blown revolution in Bahrain to mass street protests in Kuwait, and demonstrations in various parts of Saudi Arabia and Oman. Even in the UAE over a

hundred political prisoners have been put on trial with several dozen being jailed, most of whom have been calling for an elected parliament.³¹ In Qatar there have also been a small number of arrests and imprisonments for those who have criticised the ruler or the region's autocratic system.³² In line with the arguments put forward earlier in this paper, almost all of those involved in the 'Gulf Spring' thus far have been citizens.³³ Only a tiny fraction of the several hundred political arrests that have taken place in the monarchies over the past two years have been expatriates, and none of the protestors that have thus far died in Bahrain,³⁴ Saudi Arabia,³⁵ and Oman³⁶ have been expatriates. Most of this resistance has been contained, thus far, by well documented strategies of ramping up public spending – in other words extending the aforementioned wealth distribution strategies – or, if necessary, intensifying repression. There have, however, also been parallel containment strategies that have involved the co-opting of expatriates and other foreign nationals.

Among these, and most apparent in Bahrain, has been the recent escalation of a long-running 'selective naturalization' process. Notably, a sectarian imbalance that has historically placed the Sunni Muslim ruling family and its closest allies in a minority vis-à-vis the much bigger indigenous Shia population continues to be tackled by offering large numbers of Sunni Arab expatriates full Bahraini citizenship. This is significant as the Shia community has for many years complained of unfair treatment by the government and, understandably, has usually been at the forefront of any opposition. In particular, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Bahrain ruling family's claims in 1981 that they had uncovered a pro-Iran plot,³⁷ the persecution of Bahrain's Shia increased. The resulting tensions, along with a widespread belief that Shia were being discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities and state benefits, eventually led to a full scale intifada in the 1990s which claimed the lives of over forty protestors and led to the jailing and exiling of several major opposition figures. Moreover, in 1996 the

government claimed to have uncovered a fresh Shia plot, this time by an Iran-backed offshoot of Hezbollah in Bahrain.³⁸ By the end of the intifada and the launch of a ‘national action charter’ in 2001, approximately seventy to seventy-five percent of Bahrain’s national population were still believed to be Shia – mostly indigenous Shia Arabs³⁹ or ethnically Persian Arabs who had long been settled on the island.⁴⁰

Since then it is believed that the proportion of Sunni Bahraini citizens has increased, mostly due to government manipulations and ‘demographic engineering.’ In 2006 details unexpectedly came into the public domain following the publication of a lengthy report by Salah Al-Bandar – a British citizen of Sudanese origin who had been working for Bahrain’s Ministry for Cabinet Affairs. The report – soon dubbed ‘Bandargate’ - claimed to have uncovered a secret plot by a group within the government to ‘deprive an essential part of the population [the Shia] of their rights.’⁴¹ Moreover, it inferred that the group was trying to turn the Shia into a minority within just a few years and was busy working on ways to gerrymander electoral constituencies so as to reduce the clout of Shia members of parliament. Although Al-Bandar was promptly deported and the state-backed media was banned from reporting on the story, a popular protest took place demanding a thorough investigation.⁴² In 2008, following the publication of official figures indicating that Bahrain’s total population had increased by more than forty percent between 2002 and 2007, tensions increased further, as it was deemed unlikely that all of the increase was due to natural growth or the naturalisation of stateless persons. Analysts have claimed that the natural rate of growth for the national population would have only yielded an increase of 47,000 persons, thus more than 72,000 were probably granted citizenship during this period.⁴³ Indeed, in summer 2010 opposition groups in Bahrain estimated that between 65,000 and 100,000 Sunni nationals had been added to the country’s voter rolls over the previous decade. Most of the newcomers⁴⁴ seem to have been housed in brand new villages in Bahrain’s

hinterland, suitably distanced from the older, predominantly Shia villages. Moreover, many seem to be working for the state security services, the police, or the royal court, likely due to their unswerving loyalty to the government. Interviewed by the *New York Times* in summer 2010, a resident of one such village – a settlement specifically for Sunnis employed in the security sector – stated that he and his two brothers worked for the police and that ‘...if the Shia took control of the country, they would pop out one eye of every Sunni in the country.’⁴⁵ In the period since Bahrain’s ‘Pearl Revolution’ mass uprisings that began on 14 February 2011 the demographic engineering policy seems to have been further accelerated, with government officials now often claiming that Bahrain’s population is more or less balanced ‘fifty-fifty’ between Sunni and Shia, and with reports that new Sunni settlements are being physically ring-fenced to separate them from existing Shia communities.

Also very evident in Bahrain and increasingly apparent in the UAE – has been the direct hiring of foreign nationals into the security services without any specific promise of naturalization. Mercenaries are nothing new for these monarchies,⁴⁶ nor is the hiring of senior western expatriates into executive security positions. Very recent examples of the latter include former London Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner John Yates who continues to work for Bahrain, and Ronald Flanagan, a former Northern Ireland chief constable who worked for the UAE’s ministry for interior for two years, during which he served as an expert witness in British courts presenting evidence in favour of the UAE government. But mass rank and file expatriate recruitment in this sector has become demonstrably far more visible in the wake of the Arab Spring. Notably, in the days and weeks after the 14 February protests in Bahrain, reports began to circulate that the government was trying to bolster its security services with fresh mercenaries from Pakistan and elsewhere. Having always had a substantial contingent of Pakistani nationals serving in its security sector, along with many Jordanian and Yemeni soldiers, it appears that the

authorities were trying rapidly to increase rapidly the number of non-Arabs in their employment, presumably on the grounds that such foreigners would be more willing to open fire on Bahraini nationals. A Pakistani conglomerate with close links to the Pakistani military was understood to have been recruiting and airlifting thousands of soldiers to Bahrain, while adverts for the 'Urgent Need of the Bahraini National Guard' had begun to appear in Pakistani newspapers soon after the first protests in Bahrain.⁴⁷ Later in 2011 reports began circulating that Bahrain was also trying to recruit from Indonesia and Malaysia, with a noted Saudi scholar claiming that the 'Bahraini monarchy was at the end of its rope' and that 'they [the monarchy] do not trust even the loyalists in Bahrain so they need to seek mercenaries from elsewhere — and these mercenaries will one day be captured and tried in public.'⁴⁸ Since then, it appears that the strategy has continued unabated, with a common grievance among many Bahraini opposition activists being that the men confronting their demonstrations are often not even Bahraini, and sometimes not even Arab.

Meanwhile in the UAE, as revealed by the *New York Times* in an extensive May 2011 report based on documentary evidence, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi had been employing the founder of Blackwater, a private military company, to create a secret 800-strong force made up of Colombian and South African fighters. At a cost of over \$500 million, a base had been constructed in Abu Dhabi's interior and the men brought into the UAE posing as construction workers. According to the documents associated with the project, the force's *raison d'être* was to conduct special operations missions inside and outside the country, defend oil pipelines and skyscrapers from terrorist attacks, and - crucially - 'put down internal revolts.' Further to this latter objective, the report also stated that the Blackwater founder was under strict instructions to hire no Muslim mercenaries as 'Muslim soldiers... could not be counted on to kill fellow Muslims,' while another document associated with the project described possible 'crowd-control operations where the crowd is not armed with firearms but

does pose a risk using improvised weapons such as clubs and stones.⁴⁹ As with Bahrain it appears that the UAE's mercenary recruitment programme is very much ongoing. Notably, in June 2013 the *Financial Times* reported on the Colombian government's frustration over the 'exodus' of hundreds of its 'highly trained' security sector professionals to the UAE.⁵⁰ While the South African contingent is understood to be focused on anti-pirate training, the Colombians are thought to be focused on the other, internal security issues.⁵¹

Evidence of foreign nationals being recruited into security services of the other Gulf monarchies has been patchier. Nonetheless in 2011 a number of reports claimed that the Saudi authorities were seeking foreign mercenaries to join their security forces. In June 2011 a report claimed that 'the Saudis are doing the same [as Bahrain], trying to invite Indonesia and Malaysia to send military troops to protect the monarchy, and we see that from Jordan as well.'⁵² Similarly it was reported by Al-Jazeera that the chairman of the Saudi National Security Council⁵³ had made 'two quiet trips to Pakistan to seek their support in case protests erupted at home.' With the Pakistani media claiming that the Pakistani prime minister had told the Saudi visitor that '...his country supported the Saudi stance in the Gulf and the Middle East and would stand by Riyadh for regional peace,' one observer remarked that 'the potential need for foreign troops in case protests spiral out of control has forced the Saudis to work with the current Pakistani civilian government for whom they have nothing but utter contempt.'⁵⁴

In Kuwait, the issue has become similarly contentious, with one of prominent opposition figure Mussallam Al-Barrak's most controversial statements being that he feared the authorities were planning on hiring or had already begun hiring Jordanian nationals into the security services.⁵⁵ While there is no evidence this has taken place or has been discussed in Kuwait, it is likely that the increasing cooperation, including

massive financial aid, between the Gulf monarchies and the manpower-rich surviving Arab monarchies of Jordan and Morocco has fuelled these fears. Indeed, following announcements in late 2011 that the Gulf Cooperation Council would provide both of these states with \$2.5 billion as part of a five year development plan, the deal was viewed by some analysts as being a ‘...consolidation of monarchies that are solidly Sunni’ and with the ‘...attraction [for the Gulf monarchies] being assistance... from [Jordan’s] well-trained military.’⁵⁶ Similarly *Reuters* reported that the deal reflected the Gulf monarchies’ need for ‘...closer ties with Arab kingdoms outside the Gulf as part of efforts to contain the pro-democracy unrest that is buffeting autocratic ruling elites throughout the Arab world.’⁵⁷ And in June 2013, ahead of expected protests, the official Kuwait government news agency reported that the minister for the interior’s undersecretary had received Jordan’s director general of national security. At their meeting the Kuwaiti official expressed his admiration for Jordan’s ‘experience in security’, called for greater ties, and stressed that Kuwait’s relations with Jordan were ‘strong in terms of coordination and cooperation in the security field.’⁵⁸

After 2013: expatriates in question

As a consequence of the post-2011 increases in public spending, and in particular the need to create even more public sector jobs in an effort to maintain political acquiescence from increasingly vocal citizens, there is now a very visible trend in some of the Gulf monarchies to ‘crack down’ on expatriate numbers, seemingly in an effort to free up immediately jobs for nationals and rapidly cut government costs. The urgency behind this is now palpable in a number of these states, with *Bloomberg* reporting in December 2012 that Saudi Arabia had pledged \$500 billion over the previous year on social welfare and on ‘projects that would ensure that the country remained unscathed by the kind of political

unrest that swept through other Arab countries... [the king] is using oil money to fight high unemployment – about a quarter of Saudis aged twenty to thirty don't have jobs – and to build schools and hospitals... the budget has more than doubled since 2006.’⁵⁹ Meanwhile, with regards Oman, where ‘steep government hiring’ and a raising of the minimum wage for private sector Omani employees has been introduced since protests in 2011, the International Monetary Fund warned in June 2013 that the budget was becoming unsustainable.⁶⁰ Equally alarmingly, World Bank officials have warned that even ostensibly oil-rich Kuwait would ‘probably soon find it hard to sustain its level of government spending in the medium term’ due to a series of large public sector pay increases intended to stave off pressures from ‘increased union activities since last year’s Arab uprisings in the region.’⁶¹

These conditions have already led to large numbers being deported in most of the Gulf monarchies over the course of 2013. Historically there have been many amnesties for illegal residents in the region, allowing such expatriates to leave without penalty, and this trend has continued, albeit with some considerable intensification. In Oman, for example, it is thought that 400 to 600 expatriates are being deported each month, being described as ‘infiltrators,’⁶² while in the UAE about 12,000 were deported over the few months following the end of a visa amnesty in February 2013.⁶³ But in some of the Gulf monarchies this current phenomenon has gone much further than merely targeting illegal residents, with even large numbers of long-serving, legally employed expatriates having their contracts abruptly terminated and with what have been described as ‘trivial reasons’ being given for the immediate deportation of many other expatriates. This has led to a palpable culture of fear developing in some expatriate communities, with many having witnessed their colleagues or relatives being rounded up or struggling to finalize their affairs and vacate.

The deportations in Kuwait have attracted considerable attention, due to the scale and speed with which they have taken place. Government spokespersons have stated that the

number of foreigners in Kuwait will be reduced by 100,000 each year for the next decade on the grounds that ‘it is the right of any state to take appropriate legal action to ensure stability and security of the country.’ A large number of expatriates are already thought to have been deported, with reports that many small businesses run by South Asians have closed and entire residential districts feel empty.⁶⁴ Several Kuwaiti government departments and agencies appear to be involved in the deportations and other associated cutbacks, with a reported 12,000 expatriates having been deported over the past year for traffic violations alone,⁶⁵ and with the contracts of several hundred expatriate teachers being terminated as they reached the age of sixty – despite a law having earlier been introduced that raised the age of retirement in the public sector to sixty-five.⁶⁶ Other restrictions have been imposed on expatriates, seemingly in an effort to cut costs and make Kuwait a less hospitable environment for foreign workers. These include the limiting of access to government hospitals to only nationals in the mornings, and a considerable tightening of the requirements for expatriates to gain a driving licence. Overall, the situation has been described in the tabloid press as being like a ‘scary movie’ for expatriates, with some even being fearful to take lifts in other people’s cars or even step outside their accommodation.⁶⁷ In June 2013 jails were reported to be overcrowded, as more than 25,000 arrested in various raids were awaiting decisions on possible deportation.⁶⁸ Even the usually compliant embassies and governments of the labour supplying countries have begun to take action, either issuing explanations to their nationals, or offering practical advice on how to avoid arbitrary deportation. The Malawi minister for labour, for example, announced that her administration had been ‘thrown off balance by the last minute indefinite suspension of Malawi labour in Kuwait.’ He complained of the scenario that ‘this is what happens when you are a beggar.’⁶⁹ Meanwhile the Indian and Bangladeshi embassies called on Kuwait to introduce an amnesty period to allow their nationals to leave before deportation and ‘conveyed their concern that legal peoples should

not be deported, and that those deported should be paid their salaries.⁷⁰ The Indian embassy believed that around 3600 of their nationals had been deported over the first half of 2013, and of these more than two thirds held legal passports.⁷¹ The Philippines embassy has also been active, telling their nationals ‘these events will pass, use your common sense, adapt’ and ‘not to panic.’ One leaflet, describing the embassy’s ‘roving teams’ that were ready to help Filipinos on the brink of deportation, even told its frightened nationals that ‘in the words of Winston Churchill... this is our finest hour.’⁷²

But it is in Saudi Arabia that the most dramatic developments have taken place, with over a million deportations having taken place over the past year, often with accompanying riots and violence. Rooted in a pre-Arab Spring plan to gradually ease out expatriates in favour of nationals, the ‘nitaqat’ or ‘ranges’ system (which rewards sectors with higher ratios of nationals to expatriates) is beginning to come into effect.⁷³ A deadline was initially set for July 2013, with all employers warned that if they had not met their designated ratios they would be penalized, while expatriates who remained in the country beyond their termination date and without valid residency papers would be jailed and deported. Although the deadline was then extended to 4 November 2013, already the Indian embassy had issued over 90,000 emergency exit visas to its nationals in the country, while dozens of thousands of other foreign nationals had already returned home due to the scheme.⁷⁴ Meanwhile Pakistan repatriated 50,000 of its nationals ahead of the revised deadline, with a consequent impact on the flow of remittances between the two countries. It was estimated that monthly remittances from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan dropped by \$23 million in May 2013 and by over \$50 million in June 2013.⁷⁵ The impact on Egypt and Yemen’s economies is likely to have been even more significant, with reports that up to 300,000 Egyptians left the kingdom over the summer period,⁷⁶ while expulsions to Yemen thought to have taken place at a rate of about 2000 per day,⁷⁷ with a total of 210,000 expected to return.⁷⁸

In the days and weeks following the expiration of the 4 November deadline, violent clashes broke out in several Saudi cities, with large communities of expatriates – many of whom had reportedly lived and worked in the country for many years - violently resisting arrest. In some cases pitched street battles took place between ‘illegal expatriates’, security forces, and vigilante citizens. In January 2014 the Ministry for the Interior nonetheless confirmed that quarter of a million had been rounded up and deported in the space of just three months.⁷⁹ Predictably, perhaps, jobs that had been vacated by expatriates were not assumed by Saudi citizens, especially in manual labour. Major investments houses in the kingdom have claimed that nearly \$27 billion in construction, transport, and retail projects have been cancelled or delayed.⁸⁰ As with Kuwait, despite these inevitable problems that Saudi Arabia’s economy will face as a result of such a rapidly shrinking expatriate labour force, it seems unlikely that the trend will be reversed, with influential pro-government commentators now claiming that ‘these foreigners are a huge elephant in the room despite the country’s amplexness, the financial ability of its residents, and their vast experience’ and arguing that the kingdom’s crumbling cities will be ‘relieved’ if foreigners leave and the ‘parasite economy’ comes to an end.⁸¹

Conclusion

For many years large expatriate populations have played not only a key role in the economic development of the Gulf monarchies but, as this article has demonstrated, have also contributed to the stability of their political systems. Their presence as non-citizens, in such large numbers, has helped reinforce the elite status of most citizens in the region – an important and sometimes overlooked non-pecuniary legitimacy resource for the monarchies. Moreover, their employment-driven status has usually meant that they have adopted either an

apolitical or even pro-status quo stance. This has become particularly notable in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. In some cases the perceived acquiescence and loyalty of expatriates to their host government has led to their selective naturalization in efforts to tip the balance against rebellious sections of the indigenous populations or, in more extreme cases, their outright co-option into security services. Complicating the issue, however, have been the recently changing political and economic circumstances of the Gulf monarchies, especially since 2011. Already in at least two of these states top-level decisions have been made to limit significantly and even immediately reduce expatriate populations due to accumulating pressures, especially related to urgent job creation schemes for nationals and strains resulting from increased government spending. Such measures inevitably threaten to undo many of the historic political advantages the presence of expatriates has provided for these regimes and will likely exacerbate the growing uncertainties concerning the future of the Gulf monarchies.

¹ Author's estimate based on below-mentioned US government and official Gulf government sources, where available.

² See, for example I. Forstenlechner and E. Rutledge, 'Unemployment in the Gulf: Time to Update the Social Contract,' *Middle East Policy*, Vol.17, No.2 (2010).

³ See, for example S. Al-Lamki, 'Barriers to Omanization in the Private Sector: The Perceptions of Omani Graduates,' *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol.9, No.2 (1998).

⁴ A World Bank study from 2012, for example, claimed that annual remittances from the Gulf monarchies was \$61 billion. See *Arabian Business*, 13 May 2013 'Revealed: where Gulf expats sent remittances in 2012.'

⁵ See, for example H.S. Atiyyah, 'Expatriate Acculturation in Gulf Arab Countries,' *Journal of Management Development*, Vol.15, No.5 (1996).

⁶ For a discussion of social contracts and 'ruling bargains', as applied to the Gulf monarchies, see C.M. Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.49-75. For a more general discussion of social contracts and legitimacy in the wider region see M. Kamrava, 'Non-democratic States and Political Liberalization in the Middle East: A Structural Analysis,' *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.19, No.1 (1998).

⁷ A substantial body of academic literature exists on the rights and conditions of migrant labour in the region. See, most recently M. Kamrava and Z. Babar (eds.), *Migrant Labour in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2012). Specifically on Qatar see A. Gardner (et al), 'A portrait of low-income migrants in contemporary Qatar,' *Journal of Arabian Studies*, Vol.3, No.1 (2013), pp.1-17.

⁸ On the Qatar case, for example, see M. Kamrava, 'Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization in Qatar,' *Middle East Journal*, Vol.63, No 3 (2009), p.406. On the UAE case see F. Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (London: Longman, 1996), p.397. On the Saudi Arabia case see S. Hertog, *Princes, Brokers, and Bureaucrats: Oil and State in Saudi Arabia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p.3.

⁹ For a full discussion see R.E. Lucas, 'Monarchical Authoritarianism: Survival and Political Liberalization in a Middle Eastern Regime Type,' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.36, No.4 (2004).

¹⁰ The 'family card' or 'khulsat al-qaid,' was used in some Gulf monarchies to prove ancestry or identify lineage.

¹¹ Most obviously Dubai – the most foreign direct investment and tourism-oriented of the UAE’s constituent emirates.

¹² In Bahrain’s case, the sponsorship system was transferred to ministerial control in 2006. See M. Dito, ‘What can we learn from Bahrain’s labour market reform?’ in C. Kuptsch (ed.), *Merchants of Labour* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2006), p.109. For a discussion of the workings of Dubai’s free zones and the implications for labour see M. Hvidt, ‘The Dubai model: an outline of key development-process elements in Dubai,’ *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol.41, No.1 (2009), pp.397-418.

¹³ For example the UAE Federal Commercial Companies Law of 1984, article 22.

¹⁴ US Department of State, “Background Note: Saudi Arabia,” <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/saudiarabia/192423.htm> (accessed 7 August 2013).

¹⁵ US Department of State, “Background Note: Oman,” <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/oman/180260.htm> (accessed 7 August 2013).

¹⁶ *Gulf Daily News*, 7 February 2011. Based on official population figures.

¹⁷ US Department of State, “Background Note: Kuwait,” <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/kuwait/185818.htm> (accessed 7 August 2013).

¹⁸ US Department of State, “Background Note: United Arab Emirates,” <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/unitedarabemirates/192347.htm> (accessed 7 August 2013).

¹⁹ Referring to official UAE Census (Tedad) April 2010 results, <http://www.uaestatistics.gov.ae/EnglishHome/ReportDetailsEnglish/tabid/121/Default.aspx?Itemid=1914&PTID=104&MenuId=1> (accessed 7 August 2013).

²⁰ US Department of State, “Background Note: Qatar,”

<http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/qatar/181549.htm> (accessed 7 August 2013).

²¹ *Trade Arabia*, 26 July 2013 “Thousands in Bahrain sign petition for peace.”

²² Quoting Anwar Gargash, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. *New York Times*, 8 June 2013.

²³ For further discussion on the Dubai government see A. Kanna, *Dubai, City as a Corporation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

²⁴ The Palestinian Liberation Organization nominally backed Iraq during the Kuwait crisis, thus placing the Kuwaiti Palestinian population in a difficult situation after liberation.

²⁵ For example Lebanese Shia, given their supposed support of the Iran-backed Hezbollah, or Jordanians in Qatar, given a long-running political dispute between the Qatari and Jordanian ruling families.

²⁶ Over the course of 2013 several detailed investigative reports on Abu Dhabi and Qatar by the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers have cast further light on the contemporary conditions of migrant labour in these states. See, for example, *Guardian*, 25 September 2013 ‘Revealed: Qatar’s World Cup Slaves’, and *Observer*, 22 December 2013 ‘Conditions for Abu Dhabi’s Migrant Workers Shame the West.’

²⁷ *Voice of America*, 11 October 2009. As reported, an independent survey published in 2009 claimed that the majority of foreign construction workers in the Gulf monarchies considered their current conditions to be better than those in their native countries.

²⁸ There has been one notable exception, when in 2008 groups of Bangladeshi leftist ‘Naxalites’ were reportedly stirring hatred against the Gulf monarchies in Kuwait worker camps. The Kuwait Ministry for the Interior claimed that the Naxalites viewed the Gulf

monarchies as their ‘number two enemy after India’ on the grounds of their capitalist exploitation of South Asian labour. *Outlook India*, 5 June 2008.

²⁹ Study conducted by F. Al-Ajaji. *Arab News*, 4 August 2013 ‘KSA ranked second in expat remittances.’

³⁰ *Reuters*, 26 September 2013 ‘Nepal Envoy Recalled After Qatar “Open Jail” Remarks.’

³¹ *Reuters*, 1 July 2013 ‘UAE to issue verdicts for defendants seeking to seize power.’

³² Most notably the Qatari poet M. Al-Ajami, who was sentenced to life imprisonment (later reduced to fifteen years) for poems that criticised the former ruler of Qatar and praised the Tunisian revolution. *BBC News*, 21 October 2013 ‘Qatar Court Upholds Poet Mohammed Al-Ajami’s Sentence.’

³³ Exceptions include the UAE, where in June 2013 a few dozen Egyptian expatriates with supposed ties to the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested in parallel to the large number of UAE nationals with purported Brotherhood links. *Reuters*, 13 June 2013.

³⁴ It is unclear how many protestors have died in Bahrain since 2011, but it is likely to now be several dozen.

³⁵ Opposition groups claim that 19 Saudi protestors have been killed since 2 March 2011. On 21 January 2011 a stateless person died after setting himself on fire. See *BBC News*, 23 January 2011 ‘Man dies after setting himself on fire in Saudi Arabia’

³⁶ *AFP*, 1 April 2011 ‘Police shot dead a protestor in Oman.’

³⁷ In 1981 the government arrested 73 people accused of plotting a coup on behalf of a pro-Iran organisation - the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain led by an Iraqi cleric, H. Modaressi. See J. Kinninmont, ‘Bahrain’ in C.M. Davidson (ed.), *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst, 2011), p.38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38.

³⁹ The Baharna.

⁴⁰ The Ajam.

⁴¹ *International Herald Tribune*, 2 October 2006.

⁴² *International Herald Tribune*, 17 November 2006.

⁴³ Kinninmont, *Bahrain*, p.61.

⁴⁴ Many Bahrainis have observed an influx of new citizens from Pakistan, Yemen, and Baluchistan. J. Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse* (London: Chatham House, 2012), p.18.

⁴⁵ *New York Times*, 26 August 2010.

⁴⁶ A good early account being F. Halliday, *Mercenaries: Counter-Insurgency in the Gulf* (London: Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, 1977).

⁴⁷ *Al-Jazeera English*, 30 July 2011 ‘Pakistani troops aid Bahrain’s crackdown.’ Also *Express Tribune Pakistan*, 11 March 2011.

⁴⁸ *Jakarta Globe*, 19 June 2011.

⁴⁹ *New York Times*, 14 May 2011.

⁵⁰ *Financial Times*, 3 June 2013 ‘Bogota alarmed by exodus of Colombian soldiers to UAE.’

⁵¹ Author’s interview with S. Mann, London, 31 July 2013.

⁵² *Jakarta Globe*, 19 June 2011. Quoting A. Al-Ahmad.

⁵³ B. bin Sultan Al-Saud.

⁵⁴ *Al-Jazeera English*, 30 July 2011 ‘Pakistani troops aid Bahrain’s crackdown.’

⁵⁵ *Ahram*, 6 November 2012 ‘Opposition figure corroborates claims of Jordanian troops in Kuwait.’

⁵⁶ *The National*, 13 September 2011; *Reuters*, 20 December 2011.

⁵⁷ *Reuters*, 20 December 2011.

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- ⁵⁸ Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), 30 June 2013 ‘Kuwait, Jordan interior officials discuss issues of mutual concern.’
- ⁵⁹ *Bloomberg*, 29 December 2012 ‘Saudi Arabia boosts spending goal by fifth in record budget.’
- ⁶⁰ *Reuters*, 12 June 2013 ‘Oman needs to slash spending to keep budget sustainable – IMF.’
- ⁶¹ *Arabian Gazette*, 27 March 2012 ‘Kuwait public spending unsustainable despite massive budget surplus – World Bank.’
- ⁶² *Gulf News*, 4 June 2013 ‘Oman police arrest 631 infiltrators.’
- ⁶³ *The National*, 5 June 2013 ‘12,000 illegal workers caught since UAE amnesty ended.’
- ⁶⁴ *Reuters*, 13 June 2013 ‘Economic, social pressures behind Kuwait’s crackdown on low-paid Asian workers.’
- ⁶⁵ *Arabian Business*, 9 June 2013 ‘Kuwait deports total of 12,000 expats for traffic violations.’
- ⁶⁶ *Kuwait Times*, 7 June 2013 ‘Now what? Retired expats in Kuwait still want to work, but laws stop them.’
- ⁶⁷ *Arab Times*, 11 July 2013 ‘Current situation of expats in Kuwait similar to scary movie.’
- ⁶⁸ *Arabian Business*, 26 June 2013 ‘Kuwait jails overcrowded with expats amid cull.’
- ⁶⁹ *Nyasa Times*, 13 June 2013 ‘Malawi labour export blues.’
- ⁷⁰ *Reuters*, 13 June 2013 ‘Economic, social pressures behind Kuwait’s crackdown on low-paid Asian workers.’
- ⁷¹ *Indo-Asian News Service*, 28 June 2013 ‘3,600 Indians return from Kuwait, India asks for time and space.’
- ⁷² *ABS-CBN News*, 27 June 2013 ‘Are you an OFW in Kuwait? Read this.’
- ⁷³ Planned before the Arab Spring began, the Nitaqat came into effect in June 2011.

⁷⁴ *Eurasia Review*, 10 July 2013 ‘Nitaqat law: will it solve Saudi Arabia’s unemployment problem? – Analysis.’ Also *The Economic Times*, 4 July 2013 ‘Nitaqat: 92,000 emergency exit certificates issued to Indians in Saudi Arabia.’

⁷⁵ *Zee News*, 14 July 2013 ‘Saudi Nitaqat law may restrict remittances to Pakistan – Report.’

⁷⁶ *Arab News*, 26 November 2013 ‘Expat remittances to Egypt nosedive.’

⁷⁷ *Guardian*, 2 April 2013 ‘Saudi Arabia expels thousands of Yemeni workers.’

⁷⁸ *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 November 2013 ‘Bread-winners return empty-handed to Yemen, Arab World’s poorest country.’

⁷⁹ *Associated Press*, 22 January 2014 ‘Saudi Arabia says it has deported more than 250,000 foreign workers.’

⁸⁰ *Construction Week*, 19 January 2014 ‘Saudi crackdown hits \$26.6bn construction projects.’

⁸¹ *Al-Arabiya*, 9 June 2013 ‘Saudi Arabia’s big elephant in the room.’