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Hélène Thiollet

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Chapter 3

Illiberal Migration Governance in the Arab Gulf

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Abstract:

This chapter offers an overview of Gulf migration systems from the early 20th century to today. Mobility, motivated by trade, labor, politics or religious devotion, whether permanent or temporary, has been central to the region’s history. The first section of the chapter describes the changing geographies of immigration to the Gulf through three historical sequences. Gulf migration systems evolved from imperial geographies of colonial migration within the British Empire (1930s-1950s) to Arab regional integration during and after the oil-boom era (1960s-1991). In the 1990s and after, diplomatic interdependence with the Asian Global South unfolded in the context of the diversification of Gulf economies and the “second migration boom” of the 2000s took place.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the contemporary era and unpacks the dynamics of migration governance in Gulf countries today. It describes the role of states, markets, brokers and migrants in migration governance and illustrates the emergence of *illiberal* migration states, as a counter model to *liberal* migration states in Western contexts (Hollifield 2004).

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1. Introduction

Of the migrant-receiving regions in the world, only North America and the European Union receive more migrants than the Arab Gulf (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017a). The oil and gas-producing countries of the Gulf (Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman), in fact, host the highest proportions of foreigners in the world. Since most of these foreigners come from developing countries, the Gulf states are the epicenter of South-South migration dynamics – a quantitatively significant (Abel and Sander 2014) but largely understudied phenomenon. Gulf migration is also a blind spot in the study of migration governance. One reason for this oversight might be what Myron Weiner (1986) called the “illusion of impermanence,” the fact that foreigners in the Gulf are called “foreign workers” or “expatriates,” not “immigrants.” This labelling suggests a limited period of time in the “transit states” of the Gulf (‘Abd al-Hādī Khalaf, AlShehabi, and Hanieh 2014). Indeed, migrants have little prospects for formal integration in Gulf polities due to discriminatory citizenship regimes combined with exclusionary policies, institutions and practices. Additionally, the Gulf states – like other Middle Eastern countries – are not parties to the 1951 Geneva Convention, which offers protection to statutory refugees and the forcibly displaced. As a result, Palestinians since 1949, Eritreans in the 1980s, Iraqis after 2003 or Syrians since 2011 have migrated to the Gulf but without legal protection. Regardless of whatever rights are given to foreign residents, recent qualitative studies have revisited the importance of immigration, long-term settlement and diasporas in Gulf societies (Assaf 2017; Thiollet 2010; Thiollet and Assaf 2020; Vora 2013).

This chapter seeks to fill in existing gaps in migration-related scholarship by offering a comprehensive understanding of migration in the region. On the one hand, comparative studies on migration governance have generally failed to connect the dynamics observed in the Gulf to broader trends across the world and the GCC countries rarely feature in general discussions on migration politics or migration governance.¹ Although a few index-based comparative studies on migration policies include some Gulf monarchies (Miller and Peters 2018; Mirilovic 2010; Shin 2017), most quantitative research either does not include the

¹ Gulf countries are absent from Rosenblum and Tichenor’s handbook (2012), from the often-cited edited volume by Betts (2010), and from the main volumes on migration theories, such as Brettell and Hollifield (2008).

region in the dataset (Beine et al. 2016; Bjerre et al. 2015; Haas et al. 2019) or seems to highlight the outlier status of oil rentier monarchies (Ruhs 2017). On the other, qualitative studies focus mostly on micro-level narratives of immigrant lives (Gardner et al. 2013; Longuenesse 1985; Longva 2005; Vora 2013). While a few deal with migration politics (Stanton Russel and al-Ramadhan 1994; Thiollet 2011), most of these studies highlight the exceptionalism of Gulf migration (Fargues and de Bel-Air 2015). As this volume's ambition is to understand *global* migration, this chapter locates the Gulf in global migration systems and exposes key features of migration governance outside Western contexts. It shows how immigration is embedded in long histories of foreign relations between the Gulf, the wider Middle East, the Ottoman and British Empires, the United States and Asia and is tied to the political economy of labor-demanding, oil-producing countries and the socio-political structure of Gulf monarchies. As such, it not only offers an insight into the workings of migration governance in non-democratic and illiberal contexts but also highlights the importance of historical interdependencies in contemporary global migration dynamics. It also opens up discussions of theories designed to analyse democratic (im)migration states and liberal paradoxes in migration management (Hollifield 2004; Natter 2018).

The chapter begins with a *longue durée* overview of how Gulf migration systems unfolded from the early 20th century to today. Gulf migration systems evolved from dependency within the Ottoman and British imperial realms to regional integration in the pan-Arab era (1960s-1991) and diplomatic interdependence with the Asian Global South. These systems, which varied across time, connected the Gulf to different regions: to India and Middle Eastern and East African colonies and Western imperial metropolises, to the pan-Arab Middle East, and, finally, to South and Southeast Asia again since the 1990s. The chapter links these varying migration geographies to the politics of migration governance, which shifted from colonial to regional to global migration systems.

The second part of the chapter unpacks the dynamics of migration governance in Gulf countries today. It describes the role of states, markets and social institutions, including employers, recruiters, brokers and sponsors, families and migrant networks. The section highlights the diversity of formal and informal institutions embedded in migration governance. It illustrates the recent emergence of *illiberal* migration states, in parallel to *liberal* migration states in Western contexts (Hollifield 2004), thus feeding into debates on the varieties of migration states across the world.

2. International Migration Systems and Gulf History

Permanent and temporary migration, motivated by trade, labor, politics, or religious devotion, are central to the Gulf's history. This section describes the changing international geographies and urban topographies of immigration to the Gulf through three historical sequences. The first sequence stretches from the colonial to the post-colonial era, tracing patterns of migration to the Gulf from the first "oil boom" of the 1930s. The second sequence describes the 1960s, leading to the second "oil boom" and first "migration boom" after 1973. The third sequence occurs from the 1990s onwards, with new migration patterns emerging in the context of the diversification of the Gulf economies and the "second migration boom" in the 2000s.

Colonial migration governance and imperial geographies (1930s-1960s)

From the 1930s to the 1970s, most Gulf states were under colonial control within the British Empire.² The Saudi kingdom, by contrast, was founded in 1932 as an independent state occupying central Arabia that progressively conquered former Ottoman territories in both the western (Hejaz and the Red Sea) and eastern regions (al Hasa oasis region and Dammam and the coastal area). Although never formally colonized, Saudi Arabia fell under colonialism "by proxy" (Ochonu 2014), that is, indirect colonial domination by the United States through the influence of ARAMCO, the monopolistic American-owned oil company. British or American governments and firms, in articulation with the rulers and elites of local sheikhdoms, thus operated colonial migration governance directly, indirectly, or by proxy. Migration systems under colonization were not only shaped by government policies but also by non-state institutions that impacted the urban, local, regional and international levels of migration management.³ As such, Western, Arab and Asian businessmen, together with diplomats and intermediaries, shaped Gulf colonial migration governance along vernacular or imported institutions, cultural and social norms, racial and class hierarchies.⁴ The two central features of mobility in the region were incipient oil-related labor migration and Muslim pilgrimages.

² Kuwait was under British control until 1961, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE - formerly the "trucial states" – until 1971. The sultanate of Oman was a British protectorate until 1971.

³ Given the recent downplaying of the role of states in world history (Osterhammel and Camiller 2014), looking at all types of migration institutions and their articulation to governmental regulations and state power is particularly important to understanding global migration (Bosma, van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Sarkar 2013).

⁴ As Klotz showed for South Africa, colonial and post-colonial history offers powerful elements to understanding contemporary features of Gulf migration governance (Klotz 2012).

The discovery of oil and labour migration under colonial rule

Through treaties signed from 1820 to 1916, the coast sheikhdoms surrendered sovereign control over immigration and granted oil and gas concessions in exchange for British protection. Labor migration systems were conditioned by imperial interests, channelled via oil companies partly or entirely owned by British or American firms (Seccombe and Lawless 1986). These exogenous determinants of migration governance were more potent than the oft-cited “endogenous” or “traditional” characteristics of Gulf societies or pre-existing small-scale mobilities linked to slave trading and the pearl industry. In a nascent oil economy, as archival documents from British political officers confirm, “the demand for labour all along the Arab shores of the Gulf greatly exceeds supply” (Seccombe 1983, 5). The development of the oil industry led to large population movements of various kinds.⁵

1. Mobility of nationals and Gulf locals (domestic and intra-Gulf migration) from non-oil areas to oil areas for unskilled work, which we could term *vernacular mobility*;
2. Recruitment of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers for manual and crucial work from the Arab world and outside the region (the British Raj, notably), which we could term *colonial mobility*;
3. Immigration of British and American skilled expatriates, such as engineers and managers, which we could term *imperial mobility*.

Foreign oil companies directly managed these different types of mobility for the hydrocarbon industry and its necessary infrastructure, and they did so in close collaboration with local political elites and ruling families. The typology proposed above reflects the political and economic drivers of migration governance at the local level and more globally, across the British Empire and the Saudi-American colonial relation by proxy.

The first type, *vernacular mobility*, characterises local mobility systems within Gulf states. Domestic and intra-regional migration in the 1930s was shaped by “nationality clauses” inserted in oil concession agreements, which allowed Gulf sheikhs to compel foreign-owned companies to hire locals (Errichiello 2012). Both in the colonial coastal sheikhdoms and in

⁵ From the discovery of oil in 1932 to 1936, the number of employees in the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) rose from 610 to 5,038. In Saudi Arabia, the first drilling camp was opened in 1934 in Dhahran. The California Standard Oil Company (CASOC) and later its subsidiary Arabian-American Oil Company (ARAMCO) went from 150 employees in 1935 to 3,641 in 1939. The Anglo-American Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) and Qatar’s PDQ (Petroleum Development Qatar) boomed slightly later.

the recently-created state of Saudi Arabia, nationality clauses were intended to compensate local economies for the decline in the pearl-fishing sector. However, securing jobs for nationals was a political concern for local sheikhs who needed to maintain clientelist ties and ensure that their subjects remained loyal: the genesis of monarch-subject dependency within the contemporary “rentier state” can thus be traced to these early employment policies. But to staff the oil industry with locals, rulers and oil companies had to organize internal migration of workers across Gulf states, bringing subjects to the oil towns and settling Bedouins around the wells. In Saudi Arabia, these population policies were also a way to mitigate the influence of Shia Arabs in the kingdom’s eastern provinces as Sunni Saudi workers from other regions were brought to oil towns. But implementation proved difficult as few locals possessed identity papers and workers coming from Gulf and other Arab countries forged certificates and circulated across the region. Gulf locals were mainly recruited as unskilled workers in low-paying jobs with difficult working conditions, mostly construction rather than the oil sector (except for ARAMCO, see Figure 1).

Colonial mobility refers to the patterns of migration to the Gulf between the 1930s and the 1950s. As historian Ian Seccombe (1983) notes, the transfer of workers was organized across the Empire from 1833 (when slavery was abolished in the British Empire) until the 1920s.⁶ The number of British Indians for skilled and semi-skilled work in Bahrain rose from 450 in 1930 to 1,550 in 1939 (Seccombe 1983, 8). The British agent in Manama actively pushed for more recruitment from the Raj to balance the Iranian immigrants who were considered (by both the Empire and local Sunni rulers) a dangerous Shia minority. However, Indian migrants proved to be less “docile” than expected, leading strikes and social movements in the 1930s. In Kuwait, Qatar and the Emirates, Indian immigrants came to work in the oil industry, developed businesses and filled the nascent state administration. Immigration also came from more populated Arab countries, even if massive numbers of Arab immigrants only began arriving in the 1950s.

With a larger population than other Gulf territories, Saudi Arabia could draw more from a local labor force. Although Saudi Arabia was never formally colonised, ARAMCO directly

⁶ Indentured migration was organized as a contract-binding relationship, creating enslaved or “unfree” labor conditions for wage-earning workers. This hybrid form of exploitation generally entailed surveillance, strict housing and social segregation and the integration of indentured immigrants depended upon the ethnic origin of immigrants, the period and the host context. The colonial migration industry at times fostered indentured migration of women or family reunion to persuade workers to prolong their indenture. Therefore, while indentured migration was conceived as temporary, South Asian and Chinese migrants did settle in their host colonies (see chapter by Audie Klotz on South Africa).

managed labor recruitment and immigrant management in the territorial enclaves that hosted the oil and gas companies (Vitalis 2006). The absence of British imperial ties to South Asia meant that ARAMCO did not prioritize laborers from the Raj. Instead, when ARAMCO recruiters opened a recruitment office in Asmara in 1944, they sought to attract skilled and semi-skilled Italian workers from the former Italian colony of Eritrea, alongside Americans and low-skilled workers from Yemen and other neighboring countries. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the rising cost of labor coupled with Italian workers' strikes from 1945 to 1949 (over the terrible housing conditions in oil camps and unequal pay compared to American expatriates) resulted in the termination of labor ties with Eritrea. ARAMCO officials turned to neighboring Arab countries, opening labor recruitment offices in Khartoum and Aden (between 1945 and 1947) and Beirut and the Palestinian Territories (in 1949). After the strike by Italian workers in 1947, new migration corridors were also opened with India.

	"Indigenous" laborers	US "senior staff" employed	"Indians"
1933	n.a.	n.a	n.a
1934	n.a	n.a	n.a
1935	120	c.30	n.a
1936	1100	c.60	n.a
1937	1550	c.50	n.a
1938	2745	236	n.a
1939	3178	322	n.a
1940	2688	226	37
1941	1647	107	c.40
1942	1654	87	n.a
1943	2692	116	c.50
1944	7585	961	n.a
1945	8100	1367	599
1946	5491	894	323
1947	12018	1855	602
1948	12226	4184	914
1949	n.a	4811	1063
1950	10767	2826	1122
1951	13786	3230	1813
1952	14819	4067	2430
1953	13555	3717	2406
1954	14182	3141	2451

Figure 1: Composition of the SOCAL-ARAMCO labor force from 1933 to 1954. Source: (Seccombe and Lawless 1987, 107–10)

Finally, *imperial mobility* was organized along the lines of colonial rivalries. British political officers sought to limit the recruitment of American skilled expatriates to minimize US influence in the industry (Seccombe and Lawless 1986, 555). In 1945, pressure from the British political agent led to the transfer of the American staff of BAPCO in Bahrain to ARAMCO. US expatriates composed the entirety of an exponentially growing “senior staff” in the American-owned CASOC and later ARAMCO (see Figure 2), with no British staff in the company’s rosters up to the 1950s.

	BAPCO		KOC		PD (Q)		CASOC/ARAMCO
Year	British	US	British	US	British	US	US
1933	8	19	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a
1934	15	24	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a
1935	26	49	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	c.30
1936	157	153	13	17	1	n.a	c.60
1937	308	126	13	2	n.a	n.a	c.50
1938	224	90	17	2	n.a	n.a	236
1939	191	67	16	2	n.a	n.a	322
1940	162	55	14	2	8	5	226
1941	158	34	14	2	8	5	107
1942	126	32	14	2	n.a	n.a	87
1943	111	39	3	n.a	n.a	n.a	116
1944	87	56	2	n.a	n.a	n.a	961
1945	313	183	9	6	n.a	n.a	1367
1946	324	90	50	11	36	2	894
1947	497	155	95	56	106	17	1855
1948	585	97	505	459	n.a	n.a	4184
1949	841	179	1293	193	180	20	1811
1950	860	87	546	52	153	16	2826

Figure 2: Number of British and US expatriates in foreign-owned oil companies in the Gulf, 1933-1950. Source: (Seccombe and Lawless 1986, 556)

Companies did more than explore, drill and extract oil and gas or select laborers from abroad. They also fully organized the travel, legal conditions of employment, and regulated, to a significant extent, the daily lives of migrant workers (Seccombe 1983). Even after indentured labor was formally suppressed, immigration remained organized as a contract-binding relationship, creating unfree labor and exploitative relations between employees and employers. This was implemented through legal instruments like the sponsorship system or *kafala*. Stemming from religious and commercial local laws (Hassan 1986), the *kafala* regulated social interactions and foreigners’ protection in Gulf societies. With the rise of oil

immigration, sponsors (*kufala*) became crucial intermediaries in the management of the arrival and presence of foreigners (AlShehabi 2019). The *kafala* thus became part of a general “policing” of migration which articulated imperial transnational institutions and vernacular regulations. This hybrid institution thus worked as a local replacement of imperial indentured migration.

Oil firms catered for the daily transportation, housing and leisure of foreigners and locals alike. They also built entire cities and designed roads. The urban fabric of oil towns along the Gulf shores followed the designs of British planners and American engineers in collaboration with colonial bureaucrats and local rulers. The housing policies of oil firms shaped homes and livelihoods through formal and informal rules of segregation and social control. These policies enforced national hierarchies between workers, not only pay and working disparities but also differences in material aspects of daily life. In Qatar and Kuwait, workers were segregated in the urban spaces according to nationality and employment status (contracted workers, month or day laborers). British employees lived in expatriate bungalows while contract day laborers or migrants resided in workers’ dormitories or mud huts or tents (Seccombe and Lawless 1986). Temporary housing was progressively replaced by permanent buildings and infrastructures (water, electricity, roads). The Ahmadi oil field in Kuwait was paired with a city designed by the Kuwait Oil Company that mostly housed foreign workers while Kuwaitis resided in Kuwait City. British and American expatriates in Bahrain lived in Awali camp while Bahraini and Iranian low-skilled workers, who were generally contracted on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, resided in Manama and were bused in daily by BAPCO (Seccombe 1983, 62). In the Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia, field camps around oil wells and pipelines turned into towns (Vitalis 2006). Oil towns like Dhahran or Ras Tannura comprised an “American city” with shops, bungalows and movie theaters. These were juxtaposed to dormitories, bunkhouses and even shanty towns for Saudis and other foreigners. If foreigners were trapped for months and even years in these enclaves, company buses took the Saudis, usually single young males, back to their hometowns for the vacation periods. While these housing and living conditions spurred fits of social unrest among migrant communities or locals, they did not affect the overall segregated and hierarchical patterns of migration governance. The urban patterns of segregation created by oil firms served as a matrix for post-colonial urbanization. Even though Gulf cities evolved differently among the monarchies, two common features are the fragmentation of urbanism and the segmentation of spaces in a context of public-private generated urban development (Elsheshtawy 2011).

Governments and developers have historically colluded to produce a segregated urban planning marked by class, gender, and race segregation, as can be seen in the examples of Kuwait City (Al-Nakib 2016) and Riyadh (Al-Naim 2008; Menoret 2014). These colonial patterns of urban growth eventually came to be perceived as a spearhead of global modernity, as Yasser ElSheshtawy theorized as a form of “*dubaisation*.” Dubai, Singapore and other Southern “global cities” [see Charles Hirschman’s chapter] offer a model of rapid growth, hypermodernity, concentration and super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) enmeshed within spatial and social segregation and the political alienation of foreigners.

Ruling Hajj: imperial control over the Islamic pilgrimage

Alongside oil-led migration that boomed in the 1930s, another type of mobility was a central challenge for both the material and symbolic imperial project: the circulation of Muslim pilgrims to and from Mecca and Medina.⁷ Ottoman, Hashemite, European and Saudi authorities have successively sought to control the Hijaz region in Western Arabia, a site of power and a hub of transnational cultural, economic and political networks. In the nineteenth century, the development of modern (steam) transportation increased the number of pilgrims and generated migration around the pilgrimage economy and the development of the holy sites.

Increased mobility among pilgrims also led to the emergence of global health concerns. The British Empire - the first “Muslim power” of the nineteenth century – intensified imperial techniques of migration control, in cooperation with other colonial powers concerned with the management of Muslim pilgrims (France, Italy, the Ottoman Empire). The first global health regulations concerning mobility emerged as a result of the need to regulate pilgrims in the wake of the first global cholera pandemic in 1865.⁸ Ottoman and European representatives and health officials met in Istanbul in 1866 to craft a “sanitary world order,” resulting in pilgrims bearing the stigma of a “risky group” until the mid-twentieth century (Chiffolleau 2015, 161). Strictly enforced practices of control included issuing passports, organizing transportation, housing, and health controls, mandatory vaccination and quarantine measures, as well as training pilgrims in pilgrimage rituals. These forms of organized mobility by the

⁷ Performing *Hajj* – an annually fixed pilgrimage to Mecca during the last month of the Islamic calendar – is one of the five pillars of Islam, and thus a religious obligation for believers. The *Umrah* is a “smaller” and more flexible version of the pilgrimage; it is optional and can be performed any time during the year.

⁸ In 1865, around 90,000 pilgrims were contaminated (one third of them died) in the Hijaz, and the disease spread to Africa, Europe, and North America (Low 2008).

colonial state led to the emergence of identification techniques and bureaucratic control. Since the holy sites were forbidden to non-Muslims, state management was enforced mostly by Muslim brokers and administrators, with minimal involvement from British officials (Slight 2015).

The poorest pilgrims from the “sending regions” of India who stayed on as beggars in the Hijaz were repatriated at the Raj’s expense (Slight 2015, chap. 3). During the same period, inter-imperial cooperation developed to manage flows of pilgrims: convoys mixed Nigerians with subjects from “Afrique Occidentale Française,” flows from Singapore combined pilgrims from British Malaya and Dutch-controlled Indonesia (Chantre 2018).

After King Abdelaziz al Saud conquered Hejaz in 1926, and thus the two holy sites of Islam, with the support of Great Britain, he sought to capture the political dividends of the pilgrimage. Claiming to provide a safer and better organized Hajj for Muslims, he maintained the sanitary and political management designed by the Ottoman, Hashemite, and British authorities who had previously controlled the Hajj. In the 1950s, the Saudi monarchy began to massively invest oil revenues into pilgrimage infrastructures and policies to control pilgrims. The number of pilgrims jumped from around 100,000 in the 1950s to 700,000 in the 1970s (Tagliacozzo and Toorawa 2016, 132). The Saudi regime promoted an official discourse around the ruling family’s destiny as “custodian of the two holy mosques” (the title was formally adopted by King Fahd in 1986), using the religious lexicon to build the country’s national identity (Ménoret 2003). The management of pilgrims and religious mobility from the Muslim world became even more central to both domestic and international politics after the Islamic revolution in Iran and attempted coup in Mecca in 1979.

Post-colonial migration regime and regional interdependence: oil, migration and pan-Arab politics (1960s-1990)

The post-colonial migration regime from the 1960s to the 1990s was characterized by the combination of the legacy of colonial institutions with the emancipatory dynamics of regional migration interdependence (Hollifield 1992b, 579). In the wake of the second oil boom, a “migration boom” from neighboring Arab countries occurred. Arab immigration was rooted in regional and international politics of independence – the push for regional integration and Arab unity (Shafik 1999; see also chapter by Gerasimos Tsourapas). As Gulf economies became increasingly dependent upon oil revenues and foreign labor, migration regimes relied

upon regional interdependence between the Arab labor-exporting countries and the oil monarchies (Thiollet 2011). After the decolonization of the former British colonies and the emancipation of Saudi Arabia from American colonization by proxy, therefore, migration systems had a dual dependence upon oil revenues and foreign labor.

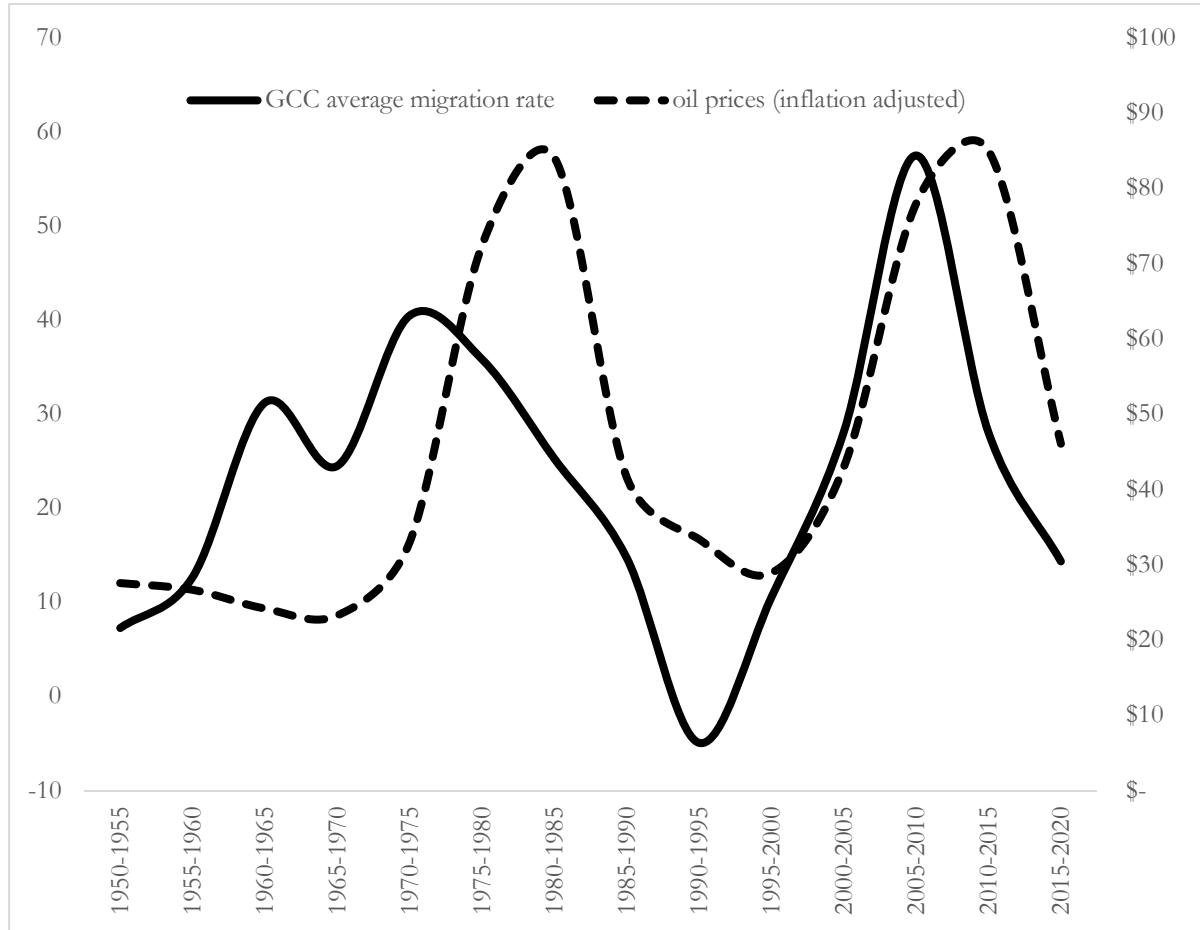
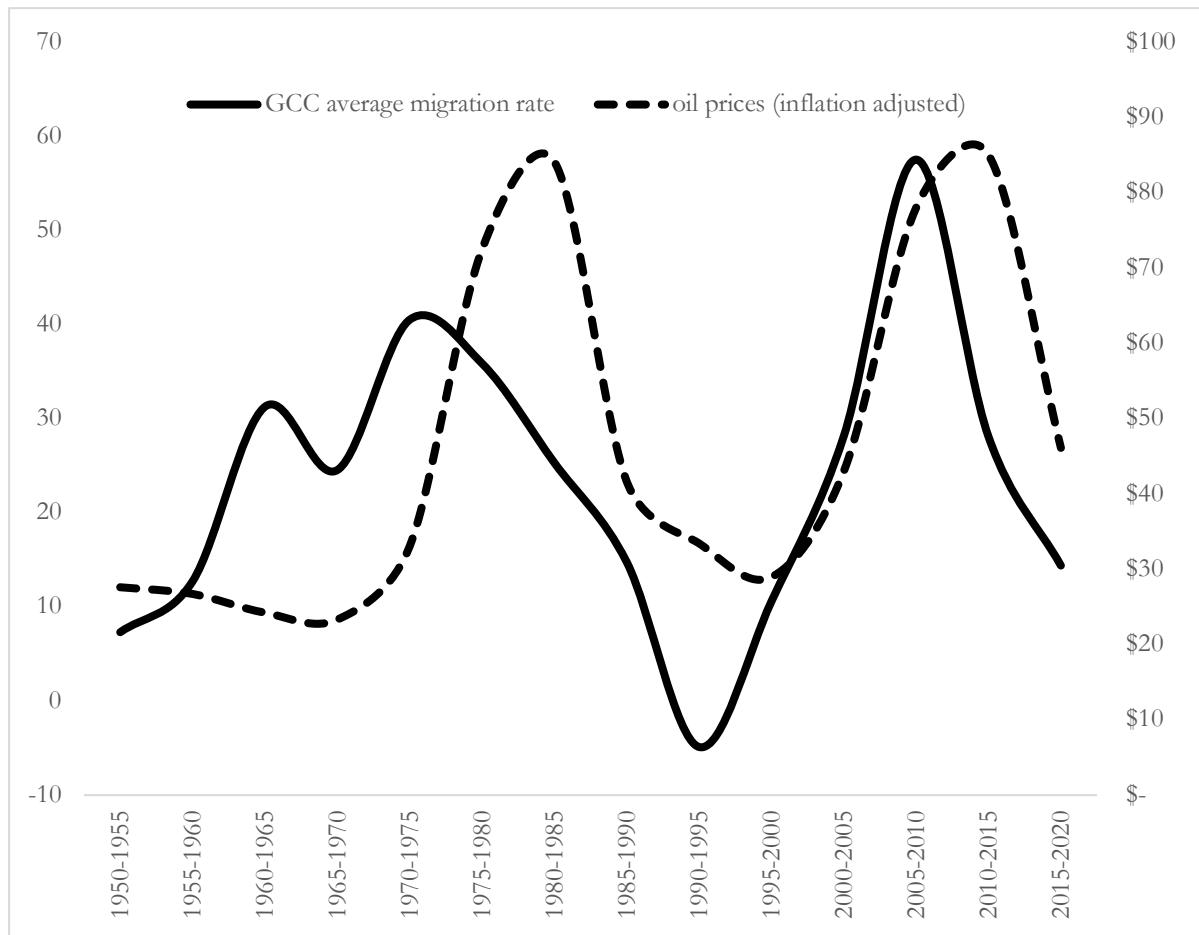


Figure 3: Average migration rate (per 1000 population) from 1950-2015 for the 6 GCC countries and oil prices. Source: (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017b)



illustrates the strong correlation between oil prices and migration rates from 1973 onwards, keeping in mind that the oil sector largely drove the overall growth of other economic sectors (construction, services, etc.).⁹ In the late 1950s and the 1960s, labor immigration started increasing in the GCC states with small native populations (Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE) as oil prices were kept artificially low by British and American oil companies. The 1973 nationalization of oil companies and the creation of OPEC established political control over the oil and gas supply and trading prices by the Gulf states, leading to a sharp price increase. This political emancipation generated the first “oil boom,” which was correlated with a sharp increase in migration rates. In the 1970s, foreigners – mainly coming from other Arab countries, India and Pakistan – comprised 72% of the labor force in the Gulf monarchies. In the 1980s, the Middle East had become the largest migrant labor market in history. In 1985 the total workforce in the Gulf was 7.1 million, of which 5.5 million were foreigners (Birks, Seccombe, and Sinclair 1988, 267). The oil price shock of 1986 led to an economic dip and a large outflow of migrants (as well as a sharp drop in overall migration rates). The trough of

⁹ The number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants over a period of 4 years, divided by the population of the receiving country over that period. It is expressed as average annual net number of migrants per 1,000 population.

this trend was reached with the 1991 Gulf War, resulting in hundreds of thousands of migrants departing or being deported from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. In the late 1990s, economic diversification kicked off in Dubai and in a more limited fashion in Bahrain (Fasano and Iqbal 2003). The demand for foreign labor in the service economy matched that from the oil and gas sectors. This “second migration boom” ended with the 2011 Arab Springs, which led to a downturn in migration rates. The temporal variations in migration rates echo the fluctuations of energy markets and economic dynamics but also register political shocks and dynamics.

In spite of the structural dependence of Gulf states upon oil, migration flows varied in their composition across countries and across time. In the 1970s, some authors claim that 88% of immigrants in the Gulf hailed from Arab countries (Choucri 1986, 253). Importing Arab immigrants was a kind of “migration as diplomacy” (Thiollet 2011) by Gulf governments, who were otherwise minor players in Pan-Arab politics. The circulation of workers from populated Arab countries to labor-demanding oil economies contributed to the dynamics of regional cooperation (Beaugé & Roussillon, 1988; Fargues, 2000; Thiollet, 2017). Arab migration was both a direct consequence and an accelerator of regional integration (Hudson 1999). It was encouraged by GCC states through formal and informal migration or asylum policies. No formal agreement was ever concluded regarding the numerous Egyptian immigrants in the Gulf, yet Nasser and Sadat promoted emigration for political and economic reasons (Tsourapas 2018b, 59–127). State-facilitated migration processes and private entrepreneurs and migrant networks fed chain migration through recruitment of kin and fellow citizens. Strong ethnic economies emerged for Arab immigrants in semi- and high-skilled jobs, supported by the comparative advantage of a shared language and cultural environment. Fluency in Arabic, for instance, allowed Egyptian and Jordanian-Palestinian teachers and professors to migrate since their degrees were easily recognized by Gulf schools and academia.

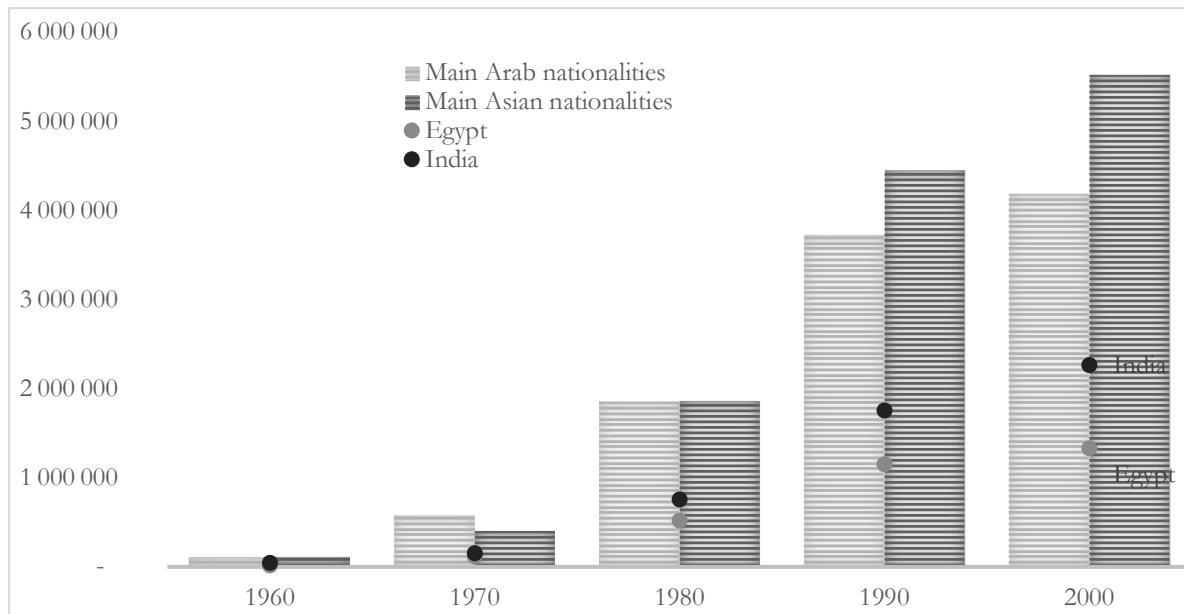


Figure 4: Evolution of the composition of immigration to the Gulf by main Arab and Asian nationalities. Source: (World Bank 2011)

Asylum seekers were also included in the overall circulation of Arab workers as “migrants”: after 1949 and increasingly so after the Six-Day (1967) and Yom Kippur (1973) Wars, Palestinians were able to enter and settle in most GCC states, although they did not enjoy refugee status under international or regional conventions (like the Casablanca Protocol, signed by the League of Arab States in 1965). Eritrean refugees were granted similar privileges during the Eritrean War of Independence (1962-1991), gaining access to residence permits and labor markets in Saudi Arabia based on a royal decree but without formal protection (Thiollet 2011, 110 et sq.).

In the 1980s, however, the composition of immigration flows began to change. The number of Indian and Pakistani immigrants increased. New nationalities also appeared: South Korean contractors in the construction sector and Southeast Asian immigrants in the service sector. Variations in migrant origins are noticeable in Saudi Arabia and Qatar retained a large proportion of Arab immigrants, notably Yemenis and Egyptians, whereas smaller Gulf countries saw their historical link with former British colonies strengthened by new Asian immigration flows. Overall, Asian immigrants had come to “replace” Arab workers across similar skill categories and sectors.¹⁰

Arab	South Asian	South-East Asian	Other	TOTAL
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¹⁰ Andrej Kapiszewski (2006) documented the “De-Arabization of the Labour Market” in a widely used report, “Arab versus Asian migrants in the GCC,” for the UN Population Division.

Bahrain	<i>Stocks</i>	7 600	70 900	10 700	7 700	96 900
	<i>share</i>	8%	73%	11%	8%	100%
Kuwait	<i>Stocks</i>	252 900	242 700	31 200	17 100	543 900
	<i>share</i>	47%	45%	6%	3%	100%
Oman	<i>Stocks</i>	20 900	280 800	4 600	7 800	314 100
	<i>share</i>	7%	89%	2%	3%	100%
Qatar	<i>Stocks</i>	16 400	46 200	4 000	4 100	70 700
	<i>share</i>	23%	65%	6%	6%	100%
Saudi Arabia	<i>Stocks</i>	1 154 200	1 126 300	968 400	273 800	3 522 700
	<i>share</i>	33%	32%	27%	8%	100%
UAE	<i>Stocks</i>	95 500	447 700	25 000	30 300	598 500
	<i>share</i>	16%	75%	4%	5%	100%
TOTAL	<i>Stocks</i>	1 547 500	2 214 600	1 043 900	340 800	5 146 800
	<i>share</i>	30%	43%	20%	7%	100%

Figure 5: Number and share of immigrants in each GCC country by main groups of origin in 1985. Source: (Birks, Seccombe, and Sinclair 1988, 274)

This shift to South and then Southeast Asian immigration is usually explained by economic drivers: as oil revenues declined in the 1980s (Figure 5), Asian workers were often said to be “cheaper” (Naufal 2014). Scholars, however, stress the importance of political factors behind the rapid shift in the composition of immigration: Asian migrants were supposedly less likely to integrate and more easily controlled by governments and social actors than Arab nationals (Choucri 1986; Humphrey, Charbit, and Palat 1991). Historian John Chalcraft hypothesizes that in the 1950s and 1960s, migration “was an element in a serious challenge to the rule of beleaguered monarchs” and “formed an important element in oppositional [domestic] assemblages,” whereas from the 1970s to the 2000s, it became an “adjunct rather than a challenge to the resurgent power of patrimonial ruling families” (Chalcraft 2010, 3). In the 1980s, the shift in the origin countries of migrants could also be linked to the imperative of preventing the settlement and integration of foreign workers and their families. Concerns for cultural security as well as regime survival thus drove the selection of immigrants: to preserve monarchical rule, Gulf states came to consider Arab-speaking teachers who had staffed Gulf schools and universities as an army of foreign educators with potentially threatening socialist or anti-monarchical ideas. However, rather than a revolutionary shift from Arab to Asian immigration, the changes observed are path-dependent on the colonial migration patterns described earlier.

Migration regimes since the 1990s: The quest for migration control

From the 1990s onwards, immigration continued to grow, albeit irregularly. The early 1990s started with one of the biggest migration crises ever experienced worldwide and a sharp drop in immigration flows (Figure 3). The 2000s gave way to a “second migration boom,” with mass immigration flows in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. As Figure 6 shows, the stock of immigrants increased more rapidly across countries in the early 2000s. The immigrant population increased from 8 to 10 million from 1990 to 2000, jumping to 20 million in 2010 and 25 million in 2015.

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE	TOTAL
1990	173 212	1 074 391	304 000	309 753	4 998 445	1 306 574	8 166 375
1995	205 979	921 954	539 643	361 673	5 122 702	1 824 118	8 976 069
2000	239 361	1 127 640	623 608	359 697	5 263 387	2 446 675	10 060 368
2005	404 018	1 333 327	666 160	646 026	6 501 819	3 281 036	12 832 386
2010	657 856	1 871 537	816 221	1 456 413	8 429 956	7 316 611	20 548 594
2015	704 137	2 866 136	1 844 978	1 687 640	10 185 945	8 095 126	25 383 962

Figure 6: Immigrant stocks in the GCC. Source: (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017b)

The composition of immigrant stocks continued to change across the 1990s and enacted again the former colonial interdependence between South Asia and the Gulf. New migration corridors also emerged with Southeast Asian sending countries. This second migration boom saw Pakistani taxi drivers replace Egyptians and Iraqis, Indian IT specialists coming in large numbers, Filipino rather than Australian nurses, maids from Indonesia rather than Eritrea or Ethiopia, and Chinese companies stepping into the construction sector (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017b). In the 2000s, the introduction of English as a teaching language alongside Arabic at the secondary and tertiary levels in the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar led to Indian and Pakistani teachers and professors replacing Arab ones.

	Number of immigrants	Share of total immigrant population (%)
India	8 181 319	32,2
Bangladesh	2 808 582	11,1
Pakistan	2 791 934	11,0
Egypt	2 374 997	9,4
Indonesia	1 789 508	7,0
Philippines	1 507 837	5,9
Yemen	871 375	3,4
Syrian Arab Republic	689 975	2,7
Sri Lanka	654 027	2,6
Nepal	602 692	2,4
Sudan	538 690	2,1
Jordan	463 851	1,8
Afghanistan	376 790	1,5
Myanmar	202 720	0,8
Lebanon	193 020	0,8
Ethiopia	138 123	0,5

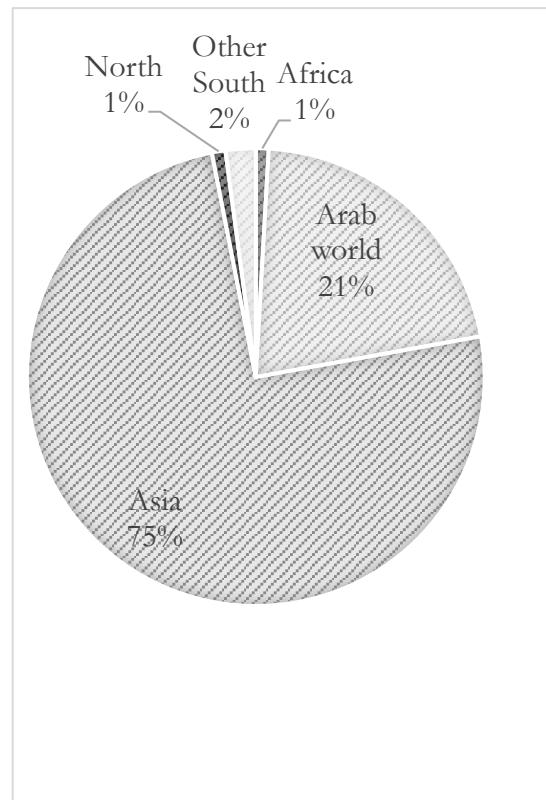


Figure 7: Main migrant communities by nationalities and regions of origin in the GCC in 2015. Source: (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015)

Migration diplomacy became geared towards diversifying labor imports in order to reduce the dependence upon sending countries and lowering the risk of hosting large, politically-active foreign communities. This diversification strategy was only partially effective, eventually leading to a new polarization in the Gulf migration systems: South and Southeast Asia became the main source of immigrants in the region (Figure 7 and Figure 8) and new sectoral dependencies began to emerge for low-skilled and highly-skilled jobs. In 2015, Indians were the largest expatriate community in the UAE and Qatar. In the early 2000s most Indian workers in the Gulf were unskilled or semi-skilled workers, but around 20% were white-collar and 10% were professionals (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2015).

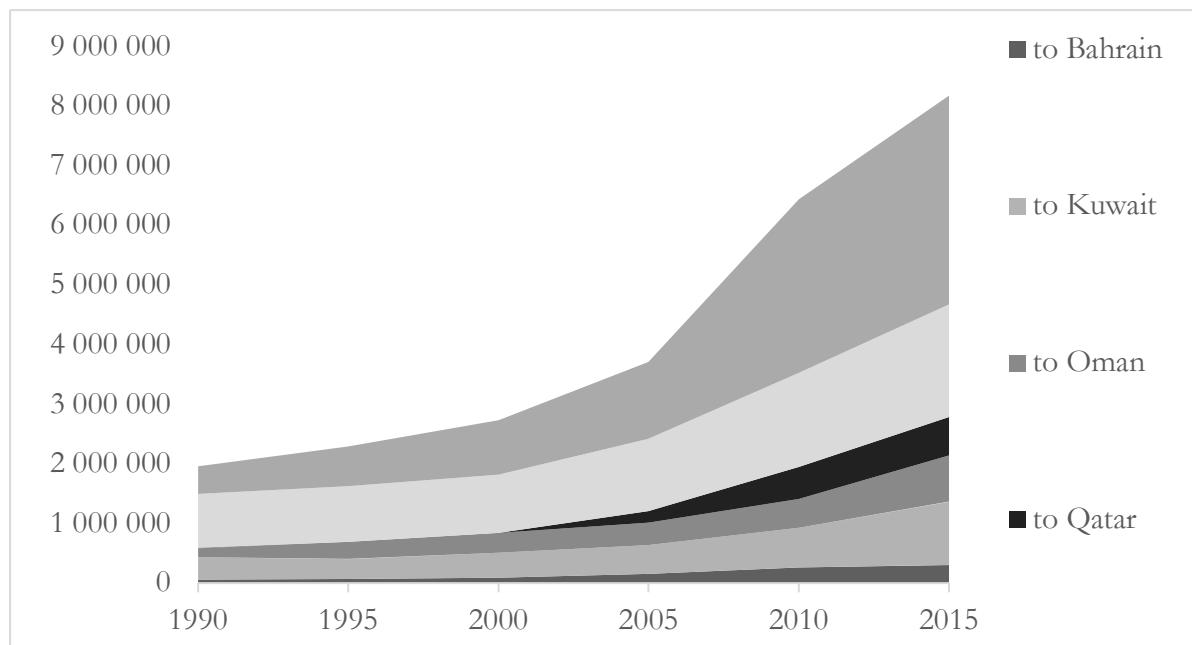


Figure 8: Evolution of the number of Indian immigrants to the Gulf countries from 1990 to 2015. Source: (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2017b)

The quest for migration control: Migration politics in times of crises (1991, 2011)

From the 1990s onwards, Gulf governments sought to better control migration flows and foreigners – including Muslim pilgrims. This signalled a “sovereign turn” in Gulf migration governance (Thiollet 2019, 18 sq.): not only did migration politics become a “hot” issue in times of political crises (1991 and 2011), but Gulf governments also adopted migration and labor market policies that empowered state-led agencies and public bureaucracies at the expense of firms and intermediaries that traditionally operated as brokers of labor migration. States started to exercise stricter control over firms, recruiting agencies and other market actors.

The 1991 Gulf War created a shock for Gulf governments and Gulf societies, heavily affecting the economies of the monarchies and creating deep insecurity. Migrants frightened by the Iraqi invasion left Kuwait in large numbers. This migrant flight revealed the dependence upon foreign labor in Kuwait and other Gulf states – some sectors of Kuwait’s economy became paralyzed by the labor shortage. Secondly, and more structurally, Arab immigrants who were well connected to locals and to larger regional cultural and political networks had come to be seen throughout the 1970s and 1980s as a growing threat to local rulers (Chalcraft 2011; Thiollet 2015).

Governments thus started to openly use various means of coercive and retaliatory policies to

heighten control over immigration flows, resorting to the surveillance and occasional repression of foreign residents. If selected deportation had already existed in the 1950s, it became a major instrument of retaliatory diplomacy (Thiollet 2019, 10) in ways that have been studied in other countries around the Mediterranean (Tsourapas 2018a). In 1991 the Kuwaiti government deployed retaliatory policies towards Palestinian migrants because of the Palestinian Liberation Organization's support of Saddam Hussein. Residence permits were cancelled or not renewed, state-owned firms laid off Palestinian employees, and Palestinians who had left the country before the invasion were not permitted to return. Yemenis in Saudi Arabia – the main expatriate community in the country, accounting for 27% of the labor force in 1990 – also faced deportation in retaliation for the tacit support granted to Saddam Hussein by Yemeni president Ali Abdallah Saleh. Approximately one million Yemeni immigrants were sent home after residency procedures were tightened. In 2013, in the wake of the Arab Springs and the democratization movement in Yemen, a large deportation movement once again affected the Yemeni community in Saudi Arabia. Yemenis were the targets of choice (together with Ethiopians) in the “correction” campaigns launched against irregular immigrants – about 600,000 Yemenis were expelled between 2013 and 2014. Yemeni nationals who remained came under acute police surveillance, especially in Jeddah and Yemeni-Saudi border cities. A democratizing and later Houthi-led Yemen posed a serious security threat to Riyadh: the Houthi rebellion in 2013 was supported by Iran, Saudi Arabia's main competitor for regional hegemony in the Middle East. The Kingdom started a war on Yemeni soil in 2015 and began targeting the large and long-settled Yemeni diaspora with mass deportations.

The quest for migration control: Managing Gulf-Asian migration interdependence

Migration interdependence between Gulf monarchies and Asian sending countries has led to both increased multilateral cooperation and diplomatic tensions. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue, initiated in 2008 to “improve the governance of labour migration in the Asia-Gulf corridor” through “non-binding regional consultative processes,” was organized under the auspices of the IOM and the ILO.¹¹ International NGOs increasingly pressed for legal norms to be adopted on migrant rights (Human Rights Watch 2010, 2014, 2015). Diplomatic struggles between sending and receiving countries became more frequent and were in many cases linked to negotiations on setting up a minimum wage for foreigners in the Gulf. Migrant wage

¹¹ See Official website <http://abudhabidialogue.org.ae/about-abu-dhabi-dialogue>

levels are a key variable in determining the amount of remittances sent to countries of origin, many of whom depend heavily on these transfers. In the 2000s, the Gulf rapidly became the largest source of wealth transfer to Asian countries: out of a total of 98 billion USD in remittances, 72 billion USD came from the Gulf (World Bank 2016).¹² Remittances offer a tangible measure of migration interdependence (as shown in the introduction of this volume), and they are central to the bilateral negotiations and arm wrestling between Asian and Gulf governments. Asian sending states are eager to secure emigration channels and remittances but are also concerned by the security of migrants. They started to use “migration bans” against Gulf monarchies to retaliate against migrant abuses and to pressure Gulf governments into improving working conditions and raising wages. In 2011 Indonesia protested the beheading of an Indonesian maid by announcing an emigration ban on female domestic workers to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government retaliated by banning all labor migration from Indonesia. Similar campaigns were launched by the Philippines against Saudi Arabia in 2012 and Kuwait in 2016. Nepal banned female migration to the Gulf in 2012, and the Indian government forbids the emigration of female workers under thirty years of age. These diplomatic struggles often pit the defence of the civil and labor rights of migrants in the Gulf to wage negotiations by sending countries. In 2016 the murder of a Filipino maid in Kuwait led the Philippines to threaten a ban on the emigration of domestic workers, which was averted only through the Kuwaiti Parliament setting a minimum wage for Filipino maids (State of Kuwait 2016).

The quest for migration control: Leveraging pilgrims

The quest for migration control in Saudi Arabia and across Muslim countries also included reforms in the management of Haji and Umrah pilgrimages for both international and domestic migrants.¹³ There were around 1.3 million international pilgrims for the Hajj in the late 1990s, a figure rising to 1.8 million in 2019; a further 600,000 “internal pilgrims” were recorded inside Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ Performers of Umrah rose to 11.5 million internal pilgrims in 2018 and 6.7 million foreigners.¹⁵ With over 20 million visitors from within and outside the country, mass circulation implicates both international and internal politics. As migration

¹² Official remittances from the GCC to the Philippines rocketed from almost zero to over 3 billion between 1990 and 2011 (Bangko Sentral Ng Pilipinas 2017)

¹³ Both pilgrimages involve visiting holy sites and performing rituals but Hajj is limited to a specific month while Umrah can be performed any time during the year.

¹⁴ Source: General Authority for Statistics, Saudi Arabia. URL: <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/28>

¹⁵ Source: General Authority for Statistics for Hajj <https://www.stats.gov.sa/en/28>; https://www.stats.gov.sa/sites/default/files/umrah_statistics_bulletin_2018_en.pdf

control progressively became a public concern and settling in Saudi Arabia began to require a pre-established work contract, *Haj* and *Umra* became the main entry mechanisms for “overstaying” pilgrims. The historically blurred boundaries between traveller, merchant and pilgrim have progressively morphed into rigid categories of state-led migration management as official discourse (and *ad hoc* visas) now strictly differentiate between “foreign workers” and Muslim “pilgrims.”

In 1987 Saudi Arabia and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) introduced a quota system to strictly control, by nationality, the annual number of pilgrims.¹⁶ In 2013 quotas were drastically reduced (-20% for foreigners, -50% for Saudis) under the pretext of the renovation of the holy sites but more pointedly for political concerns (the Arab Springs). The quota system leads to unequal access, granting Muslims from non-Muslim countries more opportunities to perform the pilgrimage than citizens of Muslim countries. Furthermore, quotas vary by nationality, with various African nationals banned over Ebola fears (Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia from 2014 to 2016 and the DRC in 2019). Stricter control over the pilgrimage dovetails with an attempt to more strictly control migration, a process that culminated in labor market and migration reforms that took place in the 2010s.

3. Illiberal Migration States in the Gulf

Migration governance in the Gulf today is made up of intertwined interventions of states, markets and social actors, including employers, recruiters, brokers and sponsors, families and migrants themselves at the domestic and international level. The role of the state increased significantly in the 1990s, bringing to light a new type of “migration state.” This section first discusses the structural features of migration governance in rentier monarchies by introducing the notion of “migration rentiers.” It then explores how formal and informal institutions shape segmented labor markets and organize an overarching regime of differential exclusion by managing immigrant lives in segregated environments and exclusionary contexts.

Migration rentiers: The Gulf model of migration governance

Gulf countries have among the highest ratios of migrants to natives in the world: half of the region’s residents are migrants. Despite abrupt historical variations discussed above, Gulf migration rates have always stayed above 10% (except during the 1991 Gulf War), a much

¹⁶ 1000 pilgrims per year for 1 million for each Muslim country. For non-Muslim countries more generous and *ad hoc* ratios are negotiated yearly.

higher rate than high-immigrant countries like the US (between 1 to 6%) or Canada (between 2 to 8%). This reflects the “demographic imbalance” that scholars and public officials have identified (Al-Shehabi 2014). For labor markets, this “imbalance” created migration dependency (Thiollet 2019) corresponding to the oil-dependence of rentier economies. As shown in Figure 9, foreigners account for 40% of the overall population in contemporary Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia; the figure is between 70% to 90% for Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE. Two categories can be formed when combining migration and rentier characteristics: sparsely populated countries that are extremely dependent upon oil and gas revenue (UAE, Qatar, Kuwait) are *extreme* rentier states, while larger societies that are less dependent upon oil and gas revenue (Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain) are *middling* rentier states (Herb 2014).

Country (year, source)	Nationals	Immigrants	Total Population	
Bahrain (2017 eGovernment Authority)	677 506	45%	823 610	55% 1 501 116
Qatar (data available from QSA for total population through 2010 census results for total population, for migrant population through Labour Force Survey and for ESCWA-UN report on World Migration Stocks for Migrant Population)	243 267	14%	1 456 168	86% 1 699 435
Oman (2013 midyear estimates NCSI)	2 172 002	56%	1 683 204	44% 3 855 206
Kuwait (2011 Public Authority for Civil Information, PACI)	1 258 254	31%	2 781 191	69% 4 039 445
United Arab Emirates (2010 National Bureau of Statistics)	947 997	11%	7 316 073	89% 8 264 070
Saudi Arabia (2017 Population Characteristics Survey, General Authority for Statistics)	20 408 362	63%	12 143 974	37% 32 552 336
Total GCC	25 707 388	50%	26 204 220	50% 51 911 608

Figure 9: Number and proportion of Nationals and Immigrants in the Gulf based upon the latest official statistics published by each government (compilation by the author)

Migration governance in the Gulf involves various private and public institutions. On the one hand, state policies and public authorities historically delineated a legal context preventing naturalization and integration and, more recently, worked to control the labor market by nationalizing key industries or firms. Since the 1990s, migrants have been held in a state of temporariness by restrictive legal measures and coercive practices like mass deportation. These policies impact livelihoods but do not seem to prevent all foreigners from settling, as several qualitative studies have shown (Thiollet 2010; Thiollet and Assaf 2020; Vora 2013). On the other hand, private actors from the migration industry, local labor markets, and

intermediaries shape highly segmented labor markets and enforce intersectional hierarchies between migrants and nationals and between migrant groups themselves. These tactics are not specific to the Gulf; they can be observed in advanced economies like Germany (Constant and Massey 2005) or across the EU (Felbo-Kolding, Leschke, and F. Spreckelsen 2019) as a key feature of the domestic governance of immigrants. In the Gulf, though, these measures create particularly strong boundaries between both locals and foreigners since they are reinforced by state policies. However, the private-public dichotomy does not fully capture Gulf migration governance, which hybridizes authoritarian state-based monarchical rule with patronage networks channelled both by ethnic kinship (tribes and extended family or ‘â’ila) and trading families. Ruling elites also maintain their authority thanks to state policies using tax-exemption and welfare policies, combined with ideological and religious control and occasional repression (Al-Naqeeb 1990; Ayubi 1996; Chaudhry 1997; Luciani and Salamé 1988; Ross 2001; Thiollet 2015). Reforms starting in the 1990s have formally “brought the state in” migration governance through policing practices that reinforce discrimination between migrants and nationals and among migrants. These political changes illustrate the workings of *illiberal* migration states, in parallel to *liberal* migration states in Western contexts (Hollifield 2004).

Even if political arrangements and power configurations between tribal elites, ruling dynasties and important merchant families vary across Gulf countries and have evolved over time, the Gulf states share common traits as migration rentiers, creating a “Gulf model” of migration governance (Thiollet 2017, 22).¹⁷

The first common feature is the overarching differential or segmented exclusion of migrants.¹⁸ States uphold regimes of exclusionary citizenship with almost no access to naturalization. They also formally and informally discriminate between migrants and non-migrants in housing regulations and access to social welfare programs and public services. Migrants are “excluded essentials” (Okruhlik 1999): exploited as workers, useful as consumers, but formally excluded from rentier polities.

The second characteristic of the Gulf model is the paradoxical existence of cosmopolitan dynamics within exclusionary contexts. Gulf societies are characterized by super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) due to the significant numbers of migrants shaping the environments and

¹⁷ See for Saudi Arabia (Chaudhry 1997; Hertog 2011) and for Kuwait (Herb 2014).

¹⁸ Exclusionary politics targeting immigrants also mesh with multiple vectors of segmentation and exclusion for locals along tribal, ethic, religious or sectarian and gender identities within countries.

social relations of Gulf cities (Thiollet and Assaf 2020). In the UAE, for instance, public records on residence permits indicate that “a third of the total non-citizen population has lived in the UAE for over ten years” (Lori 2012, 19). In Saudi Arabia, one quarter of the non-resident population was not of “working age,” indicating a large number of migrant families in the kingdom (Thiollet 2014). As ethnographers who have studied the daily lives and identities of migrants in the region have noted (Le Renard 2016; Lori 2019; Thiollet and Assaf 2020; Vora 2013; Walsh 2014), there are tensions between exclusion and incorporation, belonging and alienation.

The third feature of the Gulf model is that immigrants are kept “in check,” as anthropologist Anh Nga Longva (1999) explained, not only by state policies but also by social institutions (like the sponsorship system) that regulate the labor market and also shape the lives, practices and cultures of the Gulf urban environment. The sponsorship system, or *kafala*, is a central institution of Gulf migration governance. It ties the legal presence of foreigners and their access to the labor market to a local sponsor (in exchange for a fee), establishing a legal bond of dependence, exploitation, protection and hierarchy within and beyond the labor market. Similar intermediaries in migration governance in other societies across history have been found to create social linkages between foreigners and locals but also to foster exploitation (Bosma, van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Sarkar 2013; Harney 1979). The *kafala* system can be described as a way for States to delegate migration control to citizens (Thiollet 2019, 21). Foreign entrepreneurs, themselves sponsored by locals, can also be sponsors (*kafil* plur. *kufala*) of fellow countrymen or other foreign nationals. In the 1980s, the *kafala* evolved from being mostly managed and controlled by individual employers to being connected to large recruitment companies; this weakened whatever social solidarities the system generated and opened up the system to mass exploitative practices (Beaugé 1986). The *kafala* works as a rent-seeking behavior (SaadEddin 1982) within oil rentier polities, resulting in what I call “migration rentierism” as nationals and the national economy sustain their livelihoods and wealth by extracting financial resources from migrants. The system is also a means to manifest the political ascendancy of citizens, a numerical minority in most GCC countries, over foreigners.

Human rights activists and scholars have specifically criticized the *kafala* as a mechanism to exploit migrants, a form of quasi-slavery, or as a system extracting a financial rent from the labor of migrant workers. But governments have also criticized the system for weakening state control over immigrants rather than enhancing it; this happens because labor regulation

is delegated to social intermediaries (AFP 2016; Khan and Harroff-Tavel 2011). Gulf governments began trying to reform the *kafala* system in the 1990s, but those reforms have had little success after meeting much resistance from within Gulf societies. When Qatar and Bahrain sought to replace *kafala* with stricter public policing of migration and immigrants, there was strong resistance from citizens and the business sector that benefits financially and socially from a system that maintains foreigners in a position of subaltern dependency (Diop, Johnston, and Le 2015; Lori 2012). The anti-*kafala* coalition brings together strange bedfellows (Tichenor 2008). The system itself results in ambivalent outcomes in highly-segmented societies where informal (and formal) processes of inclusion and exclusion have major impacts on migrant rights and lives (Thiollet and Assaf 2020; Vora and Koch 2015).

Labor market segmentation

Gulf labor markets are strongly segmented between the public and private sectors, with public policies tending to reinforce the segmentation along the lines of migration rentierism. Rentier states have not only distributed the dividends of oil wealth to citizens through public spending and social benefits but have also used employment policies to buy loyalty from citizens. Already under British colonial rule in the Persian Gulf and American domination by proxy in Saudi Arabia, local rulers sought to secure employment for locals in the nascent oil industry through “nationality clauses” in concession agreements. In the 1990s, nationals were employed in large numbers in the public sector. Putting citizens on the state payroll extended clientelism far beyond royal families and major business allies. These nationalization (*tawteen*) policies shifted the historical labor market segmentation between migrants and non-migrants across sectors: nationals who were predominantly in the private sector prior to the 1990s started to staff state bureaucracies while foreign workers were progressively banned from obtaining public employment. Migrant workers now mostly work in the private sector, where nationals are under-represented, if not quasi-absent (see Figure 10). To correct this, governments have tried to employ more nationals in the public sector through a second round of nationalization policies in the 2000s and 2010s.¹⁹

¹⁹ For Bahrain, see Louer 2008.

Country (year)	Nationals	Non-Nationals
Bahrain (2014)	16,2	83,8
Kuwait (2015)	4,1	95,9
Oman (2014)	10,9	89,1
Saudi Arabia (2017)	24,7	75,3
Qatar (2012)	0,7	99,3
United Arab Emirates (2007)	3,7	96,3

Figure 10: Share of nationals and migrants in the private sectors labour force (%) based upon official statistics published by each government (author's compilation)

States have sought to replace foreign workers in the medium and long run. Starting in 2011 Saudi Arabia launched programs to decrease the number of expatriates in private firms (*Nitaqat*) and provide wage-subsidies (*Taqat*) for nationals in private companies. In the Emirates, nationals employed by private companies are entitled by law to the same social security benefits as workers in government firms or offices; they also receive additional benefits through the *Absher* program. Gulf governments have also increased taxes on foreign labor by raising the fees for residence permits (*Iqama*) or changes in work permits or sponsors. Companies that fail to meet the required nationalization of their staff are fined. The policies taken across countries to tackle the nationals-expat wage gap and changing labor market dynamics combine economic incentives with financial and legal constraints. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the government tops up the salaries of nationals to lower the economic motivation to hire “cheaper” foreign workers. While these policies have not been remarkably successful in integrating locals into the private sector (Hertog 2014), they yield political benefits, having managed, for instance, to dampen the revolutionary fervor among nationals during the Arab Springs (Thiollet 2015).

Beyond formal public regulations, semi-formal and informal dynamics driven by private actors and institutions also shape the dynamics of segmentation in Gulf labor markets. As in most labor markets, nationals tend to earn more than foreigners for the same job (Portes and Zhou 1993). In the Gulf, wages also vary for different groups of migrant workers according to nationality. While these inequalities tend to be particularly visible for low-skilled and care workers, they can also be seen in skilled labor. A regional survey shows that “Westerners” earn more than “Arabs,” who in turn earn more than “Asians,” even in clerical and managerial posts.²⁰

²⁰ In 2017, a retail bank manager for instance earned an average monthly wage of \$8,918 if he/she were “Arab”, \$6,846 if he/she were “Asian” and \$10,747 if he/she were “Westerner” (Gulf Business 2017).

The informal labor market plays an important role in migration governance in the Gulf economies. Even if the share of the shadow economy and informal employment seems to be much lower in GCC than other MENA countries, informal or semi-formal employment is not negligible (Chen and Harvey 2017) and mostly concerns foreign workers.²¹ The difficulty lies in estimating a phenomenon that by design is meant to be hidden and for which governments have poor or inaccurate data (de Bel-Air 2017). However, amnesty and deportations campaigns carried in the GCC states since 2010 provide some information on irregular migration and employment. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, a “correction campaign” against irregular immigration in 2013 unveiled, out of a total population of around 10 million foreign residents, around 5 million “irregular situations,” including 1 million workers registered as “runaways” by the Ministry of Labor (Thiollet 2015). These numbers highlight the size and economic importance of irregular migration and employment. Irregular employment in the Gulf primarily concerns low-skilled workers, particularly women in domestic service (Fargues and Shah 2017). Rather than “unauthorized entry,” irregular migration is mostly about unauthorized residence or work status. Until recent labor market and migration reforms, illicit or semi-formal employment was largely tolerated. The unofficial category of “free visas” is a good example of that. Migrant brokers trading work visas bring immigrants into the country and sponsor them but do not employ them, which means that migrants are “free” to find and change jobs, provided that they continue to pay their *kafil* a fee for sponsoring them. Free-visas are legally sold by recruitment agencies in both countries of origin and host countries, but as soon as a holder chose to change jobs he or she may face deportation. The free-visa holder’s legal status is in a grey zone where arbitrary enforcement, negotiations and power relations rule. The labor regulations and laws adopted to better control migrant workers that target these informal practices paradoxically “produced” irregularity (Frantz 2017): the rigidity of the *kafala* system created incentives to escape control and enhanced the appeal of the “free-worker.” Such practices within the informal or semi-formal labor market provide flexibility and lower employment costs for both workers and employers (Dito 2015).

²¹ The average size of the shadow economy (as share of the GDP) in the MENA region was around 30% in the 1990s (Schneider, Buehn, and Montenegro 2010) and tended to be on the rise in the 2000s and 2010s (Schneider and Medina 2018) but compared to non-GCC economics, the Gulf displays lower undeclared outputs as share of the GDP and much lower Labor informality in GCC countries, as proxied by the share of the labor force not contributing to social security: 6,4% for the Gulf vs 67% for non GCC countries. (Angel-Urdinola and Tanabe 2012, 2)

Diversity and differential exclusion

Migration governance has historically differentiated between types of migrants based on class (Cohen 1988; Van Hear 2014), creating regimes of differential *inclusion* in Western immigration countries, with skilled and well-off immigrants having more rights than poor and less skilled ones (De Genova 2017; Könönen 2018). In the Gulf exclusionary context, migration governance organizes differential *exclusion* based on class and origin, creating varied access for Western, Asian, Arab or African immigrants to labor markets and, in some instances, public services. Since the 1990s, governments have adopted class-based migration policies – in which income determines rights to residence, whether family reunification is allowed, or even access to public services – that seem to lower the impact of migration diplomacy observed in previous historical periods. From around the same time, most GCC countries began to limit the duration of stay for unskilled foreigners while granting long-term residence to the wealthiest, “tiering” residency rights in a way that reinforces social and economic inequalities (Jamal 2015).²² Kuwait caps family reunion based on income (Government of Kuwait 1992) and the parliament has discussed, since the 1980s, limiting the duration of stay for immigrants (Stanton Russell 1989). The UAE imposes a six-year limit on duration of stay for all migrants while exempting wealthy “expatriates” who own private estates or invest in the Emirates and specific categories of highly skilled professionals and their families, to whom long-term visas and residence rights (5 or 10 years) became accessible in 2019 without *kufala’* (General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs 2019). Family reunification is only open to wealthy immigrants in the Emirates. In Saudi Arabia a residence cap for unskilled workers led to the introduction of a flat fee on migrant workers’ dependents in 2015 and 2017, directly hindering family reunification for low-wage migrants. If most industrialized countries have a form of financial discrimination to residency rights, the Gulf monarchies push that to the extreme by preventing long-term settlement except for the wealthiest. In this way, the process results in “precarious non-citizenship” (Goldring and Landolt 2013).

When it comes to labor rights, a number of international organizations (including the ILO), major NGOs (like Human Rights Watch), and some voices from within GCC countries started in the 2000s to press for greater recognition of the rights of migrant workers and their families

²² Micro-ethnographies on Sri Lankan maids (Gamburd 1995), construction workers in Qatar (Gardner et al. 2013), Indian middle-class migrants in Dubai (Vora 2013), or British expatriates in the UAE (Walsh 2014) document how social conditions and livelihoods of immigrants may vary.

(Fakkar 2009). International pressure, coupled with the desire of GCC states to raise their global profile, led to the adoption of a series of labor reforms in the 1990s (Thiollet 2019, 10). These included such measures as limiting maximum working hours, mandatory insurance, capping recruitment fees and in some places a minimum wage. At the same time, these reforms institutionalized inequality by excluding nearly 3.5 million domestic workers from mainstream labor laws. This legal gap, together with the power given to employers and sponsors of domestic labor, has created an institutional and material basis for exploitation. Delay, non-payment or under-payment of wages, retention of passports for coercive purposes, and a lack of social insurance and access to health care are frequent occurrences for low-skilled workers (Gardner et al. 2013). These wrongs are rarely redressed by the authorities or the courts (Thiollet 2019, 18). In the construction sector, unskilled workers are housed in remote “labor camps,” with no transportation available save company buses which only go from the dormitory to the work site and back (Bruslé 2012).

While the urban environment of Gulf cities is extremely diverse, offering venues and spaces for inter-group encounters, it is also subject to intersectional policing, with gender, ethnic and class determining access to public spaces (streets, squares, corniche) and leisure spaces such as shopping malls (Thiollet 2010). These formal and informal practices of policing and segregation exerted by recruiters, employers, real estate agents, police and private security guards put into force a form of illiberal migration governance based on hierarchy, segregation and discrimination.

4. Conclusion

If the migration patterns observed in the Gulf appear grounded in extremely specific socio-economic and political orders of rentier monarchies, this chapter has aimed to show that they are also part of broader trends of migration politics and shape global trends of migration governance.

In recent years, migration governance has been immersed in seemingly contradictory trends across levels and actors: norms diffusion and international advocacy push for labor rights while domestic conditions restrict their implementation; internal politics prompt openness to immigration while migration diplomacy determines the selection of immigrants and enforces the high turnover of foreign workers; domestic policies and everyday practices limit the agency of most immigrants while providing formal rights to some; labor markets and social

dynamics at the micro-level challenge state-led migration control. Gulf migration governance invites us to think beyond liberalism and the ‘liberal paradox’ (Hollifield 1992a). In the Gulf, rather than market-driven openness to immigration and political closure vis-à-vis immigrants, government employers and private brokers work together to organize mass immigration in an exclusionary context.

Yet the illiberal practices and policies observed in the Gulf also feature in liberal democracies in Europe and North America: as recent empirical studies show, the gap between business and government preferences (Peters 2015) or between public opinion and migration policy (Morales, Pilet, and Ruedin 2015) has shrunk, leading to converging anti-immigrant policies and practices. The Gulf thus illustrates the relevance of illiberal migration governance. These illiberal “modes of governing” (Gamlen and Marsh 2011, xiii), which include practices that sometimes betray policies on paper, are not regime dependent, as can be seen in such cases as Tunisia or Morocco (Natter 2018), India ([see chapter by Kamal Sadiq](#)), Japan or Korea ([see chapter by Erin Chung](#)) or even recent political developments in Western Europe and North America ([see chapter by James Hollifield](#)). The coexistence of liberal and illiberal policies and practices, in cases like emigration and diaspora management (Glasius 2018), can be seen in the management of immigration across political regimes. Security concerns increasingly tend to drive migration governance within and between countries (Adamson 2006; Choucri 2002; Rudolph 2003; Weiner 1993). Global migration might be increasingly managed globally on hierarchical grounds that shape the right to move and settle. Skill and class discrimination fuel the global competition for talent, resulting in visa and citizenship policies favoring wealthier migrants (Mau 2010; Shachar and Hirsch 2014). This trend contradicts the liberal convergence hypothesis (Cornelius, Martin, and Hollifield 1994; Hollifield 1992a), which assumes that migration management is progressively underpinned by rights. Large-N comparative policy indexes do not include the Gulf countries (de Haas, Natter, and Vezzoli 2018), but they confirm the (re)structuring of global migration governance through intersectional hierarchies. The place of the Gulf states in the global political dynamics of migration is therefore unambiguous: while outliers, Gulf monarchies offer a magnifying lens to observe illiberal migration governance at work in the rest of the world.

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