11 Troubles Caused by Migrated People

While labour migration is the primary type of population movement in the Middle East, the region has been the site of a series of flights within countries, and flows of refugees in response to wars, civil unrest, and political changes.

MIGRATION OF FOREIGN LABOUR

A factor which is regionally based but which poses a threat at the national level is that of expatriate labour migration. Throughout most of the post-1973 period, there have been movements of workers, skilled and unskilled, from oil-poor to oil-rich countries. In fact, the rapid economic growth of the underpopulated Arabian peninsula could not have materialised without foreigners, attracted to the region by the opportunities of earning higher wages.

Labour migration in the Gulf region follows a different pattern from the one familiar in the USA and other industrial countries. Developed countries often attract lower skilled workers from developing countries – Mexicans to the USA, or Algerians to France. In the Gulf, however, migrants are moving from one developing country to another.

Whether the expatriates outnumber the indigenous population, as in the case of the UAE, Qatar, or Kuwait, or whether they form smaller groups, as in the other states, this constantly expanding foreign workforce has proved indispensable for any GCC state embarking on economic development. These expatriates are found in all sectors of the economy and at all levels of skill, at times dominating both owing to their ability or to the lack of inclination or availability of locals to engage in hard labour.

Accurate information as to the size of the expatriate community in each Gulf state is difficult to find, being a politically sensitive issue and a source of embarrassment to some regimes. Government statistics usually try to diminish the size of the immigrant population and to inflate their own. But what is certain is that the dependence of the GCC states on foreigners for labour has no parallel in modern economic history.
In 1990, according to UN estimates, foreign workers comprised over two-thirds of the overall labour force in the GCC. While Saudi Arabia is the biggest magnet for migrant labour, attracting about 55 per cent of the foreign workers in the Gulf, expatriates have the largest impact on the labour forces of the UAE and Qatar. Non-indigenous labours comprised 84 per cent of the labour force in the UAE in 1975; by 1990 their share had grown close to 90 per cent. In Qatar, the foreign share of the labour force grew from 83 per cent to 92 per cent over the same period. Expatriates made up at least 80 per cent of Kuwait's labour force in 1990; since then, the Kuwaiti government has been trying hard to decrease this ratio to as low as possible. In other GCC states, the ratio of non-indigenous labour over nationals amounted in 1990 to 51 per cent in Bahrain and 70 per cent in both Oman and Saudi Arabia. The migration of foreign labour has changed the status of the national population into minority, as in the case of the UAE (where nationals represented only 20 per cent of the total population in 1990), Kuwait and Qatar (both 27 per cent), and Bahrain (47 per cent). The 1990 proportion of the indigenous population over the total was 66 per cent in Saudi Arabia, and 73 per cent in Oman.

According to a study published by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA) in 1993, the numbers of expatriate labour in the GCC region had grown from 1.1 million in 1975 to some 5.7 million in 1992. As the GCC countries strive to attain greater self-sufficiency in agriculture, industry and commerce, the local supply of skilled and unskilled labour will never suffice, and therefore the requirements for expatriate labour will continue. By the year 2000, their number could reach around 9 million.

Generally speaking, and although Asians and Far Easterns have constituted the majority of the non-indigenous labour force in the Gulf since the early 1980s, the group of expatriates that hold highly ranked positions within the public sectors and form the backbone of expanding ministries in the Gulf is of Arab origin. Many sensitive key civil and military positions are filled by Palestinians, Egyptians and Jordanians. This is true mainly in Qatar and the UAE (and Kuwait before the conflict with Iraq). A large part of the Omani civil service is being manned by Yemenis and Zanzibaris. Sudanese are prominent in the UAE's municipal services. Pakistanis (Baluchis) and Yemenis are found in large numbers in non-commissioned levels of Oman's army while many Omanis and Pakistanis serve in the UAE's military forces. Bahraini and Qatari armed forces have many Yemenis. The Palestinians are found in the media and practically control the education system in the Gulf. Many Egyptians, too, are teachers, being