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Knowledge for All

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The COVID-19 Health and Socio-economic Crises: Consequences on Population and Migration in the Gulf

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Abstract

The workshop focuses on the impact of COVID-19 in the Gulf states from two different points of view: the health-related crisis and the socio-economic crisis generated initially by low oil prices and aggravated by the coronavirus-induced economic slowdown. It seeks to describe and analyse the outcomes of the two crises on the Gulf national and foreign resident populations.

The workshop welcomes paper proposals focusing on these issues, documenting and analysing the outcomes of the two crises on Gulf national and foreign resident populations. Priority is given to first-hand observation or material (new datasets, field

surveys conducted in Gulf states, direct observation, ...) and to papers that focus on the Gulf states (not on the countries of origin).

Description and Rationale

Objectives and Scope

A. Topic

The first cases of Covid-19 in the GCC region were recorded in the UAE on 29 January 2020. Members of a family from Wuhan, China, on holidays in the country were the first to be tested positive for the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 in the Middle East. As of 25 November 2020, the pandemic has claimed 1,004,138 cumulated infection cases and 9,207 deaths in the six GCC countries, according to the records of the World Health Organisation (WHO),¹ for a population of 58.7 million.

The COVID-19 pandemic also broke out on the backdrop of a creeping economic crisis due to low oil and gas prices since 2014 and tightening of policies of workforce nationalization. The drop in oil prices to below 20 US\$ per barrel in March 2020, added to massive measures to counter the disease taken by public and private actors, such as lockdowns, have resulted in large-scale job destructions. Loss of livelihood for the most vulnerable segments of the population generated an unprecedented economic and societal crisis. In the case of migrant workers, the reduction or cessation of income, and consequently, possibility to remit affected not only their conditions in the GCC but also the lives of millions of families in migrants' origin countries. Some forced repatriations of migrants occurred at the beginning of the epidemic, for instance to Nepal and to Ethiopia. However, becoming suddenly jobless and resourceless, other migrants found themselves stranded in the Gulf countries and unable to return to their homes.

On the eve of the pandemic outbreak in 2019, the six GCC countries hosted 30 million foreign citizens.² These made up 11% of the world's total migrant stock,³ and more than a half (53%) of the Gulf region's resident population. As much as 88% of the residents of Qatar and the UAE were foreign immigrants, down to 38% in Saudi Arabia. Foreign workers made up between 57% and 95% of the Gulf countries' workforces, respectively in Saudi Arabia and in Qatar.⁴ The top-five origin countries were India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, and the Philippines, making up 65% of all expatriates in the GCC (Table 1).

Table 1. Estimates of the figures of total populations and foreign nationals (top-five nationalities), by country of residence in the GCC (2019)

¹ As compiled by Johns Hopkins University: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region>.

² <https://gulfmigration.org/gcc-total-population-and-percentage-of-nationals-and-non-nationals-in-gcc-countries-national-statistics-2017-2018-with-numbers/>.

³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2019). International Migrant Stock 2019 (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2019)

⁴ <https://gulfmigration.org/glimm-database/demographic-and-economic-module/>.

Country of residence \ Country of destination	Bahrain (1) (2)	Kuwait* (1) (2) (3)	Oman** (1) (2) (4)	Qatar (1) (2)	Saudi Arabia (1) (2)	UAE (1) (2)	Total GCC
India	318,547	1,012,104	748,461	698,088	2,440,489	3,419,875	8,637,564
Bangladesh	82,518	281,131	690,407	263,086	1,246,052	1,079,013	3,642,207
Pakistan	78,638	109,427	257,105	90,000	1,447,071	981,536	2,963,777
Egypt	24,569	670,524	46,970	200,000	1,300,000	400,000***	2,642,063
Philippines	50,585	213,989	49,243	200,000	628,894	556,407	1,699,118
Total foreign nationals	782,000	3,218,525	2,022,470	2,499,057	13,114,971	8,587,256	30,224,279
Total population	1,641,172	4,621,638	4,601,706	2,832,067	34,268,528	9,770,529	57,735,640

* figures for the five countries refer to end of 2018
** figures for the five countries refer to mid-2018
*** figure refers to 2014

Sources: (1) receiving countries' figures, Gulf Labour Markets and Migration Programme (GLMM) <https://gulfmigration.org/glmm-database/demographic-and-economic-module/>; (2) UN/ DESA. Total migrant stock by origin and destination countries, mid- 2019 https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/data/UN_MigrantStockByOriginAndDestination_2019.xlsx
(3) Kuwait Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) data (administrative records) <https://www.paci.gov.kw/stat/>
(4) Oman: National Center for Statistics and Information (NCSI). *Population Statistics*, Issue 8, 2019.

B. Focus

The workshop will focus on the impact of COVID-19 in the Gulf states from two different points of view: the health-related crisis and the socio-economic crisis generated initially by low oil prices and aggravated by the coronavirus-induced economic slowdown. It seeks to describe and analyse the outcomes of the two crises on the Gulf national and foreign resident populations.

1. Covid-19 as a health crisis: its impact on Gulf migrants and nationals

According to WHO records as of 25 November 2020, Covid-19-related mortality rates in the GCC region range from 57 deaths per million in the UAE, to 272 in Oman. Saudi Arabia, the most populated of the six GCC states, displays a rate of 167 deaths per million. The GCC total mortality rate (157 per one million population) stands below the world average of 179 deaths per one million population. Mortality due to the Covid-19 in any of the six GCC countries is lower than in many Western (e.g., Belgium: 1359 deaths per one million; U.K.: 814; USA: 773) and in the Middle East (Iran: 545).⁵ Nonetheless, the Gulf states record comparatively high levels of infection. Figures of cumulated cases of Covid-19 per one million population stand at 7,663 worldwide and at 10,228 in Saudi Arabia, up to a high of 50,650 in Bahrain, the third highest rate worldwide. Qatar ranks n°6 worldwide with 47,847 cumulated cases per one million population.⁶

Migrants to the Gulf come from countries less affected by the pandemic than Gulf states: Covid-19-related mortality rates range from 35 cumulated deaths per million population in Pakistan, to 98 in India (Egypt: 64). Such figures may be taken with caution: Gulf states were said to have massively tested resident populations, which increases the number of recorded infections, if compared to countries performing less tests. However, the pandemic initially hit migrants disproportionately: in Saudi Arabia, for instance, expatriates concentrated 73% of all confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 83% of the new cases reported at the beginning of the epidemics (20 April 2020),⁷ when

⁵ <https://covid19.who.int/table?tableChartType=heat>.

⁶ <https://covid19.who.int/table?tableChartType=heat>.

⁷ Saudi Ministry of Health data:

<https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/Ministry/MediaCenter/News/Pages/News-2020-04-20-002.aspx>.

expatriates make up only 38% of Saudi Arabia's population. Another question of interest is that the distribution of cases by nationality started changing later. New confirmed cases included 60% Saudi citizens and 40% non-Saudi residents by June 2020.⁸ Unlike in Western countries, only 5% of the reported cases were aged 65 and above and the bulk of cases (85%) were reported in "adult" age groups.⁹

2. The drop in oil prices and the COVID-19- related economic crisis in the GCC: socio-economic outcomes on migrants and Gulf nationals

At the onset of the economic crisis in Spring 2020, some experts forecasted that employment "could fall by around 13% [across the six Gulf Cooperation Council member states], with peak-to-trough job losses of some 900,000 in the UAE and 1.7m in Saudi Arabia".¹⁰ In Dubai alone, 70% of business owners expected their companies to close before the end of 2020.¹¹ Consequently, the numbers of residents was expected to decline by between 4% (in Saudi Arabia and Oman) and around 10% (in the UAE and Qatar).¹² In Saudi Arabia, around 1.2 million foreign employees were expected to leave the Saudi labour market.¹³ The suspension or delay in mega-projects or world-class events such as Dubai Expo 2020 was feared to affect other sectors, such as construction and logistics, while the aviation industry was expected to lay off as many as 800,000 employees from the six Gulf States' national companies.¹⁴ As soon as February 2020, "early leave" schemes, unpaid leaves, salary cuts and payment terminations were forced on expatriate workers. Many complained about unpaid wages and withholding of end of service benefits by employers. Massive layoffs also happened.

Meanwhile, pre-crisis labour nationalization measures (Saudisation, Kuwaitisation, Omanisation...) and policies continued unabated, intending to limit foreigners' presence in Gulf labour markets. Oman, for instance, phased out many foreign expatriates from managerial and governmental posts during 2020, while Kuwait started enacting plans in May 2020, to replace expats with citizens, mainly in administrative jobs in different municipal sectors.¹⁵ Mid-2020, Kuwait's National Assembly approved a law to decrease the share of expatriates in the resident population, from 70% to 30%. In apparent contradiction with policies seeking to decrease the numbers of foreigners in Gulf labour markets and societies, other measures were passed during 2020, which

⁸ <https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/Ministry/MediaCenter/News/Pages/News-2020-06-20-002.aspx>. After this date, reports on cases stopped being disaggregated by nationality in MoH's news.

⁹ <https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/Ministry/MediaCenter/News/Pages/News-2020-06-20-002.aspx>. After this date, reports on cases stopped being disaggregated by nationality in MoH's news.

¹⁰ <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/my-oxford/publications/561739>.

¹¹ <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/coronavirus/2020/05/22/Around-70-of-Dubai-companies-expect-closure-within-6-months-amid-coronavirus-Survey>

¹² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-22/oxford-economics-sees-exodus-of-expat-workers-from-across-gcc>.

¹³ Jadwa Investment. *Saudi Labour Market*, June 2020 - <https://www.sustg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Saudi-labor-market-June-2020.pdf>.

¹⁴ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2020-04-23-01/>.

¹⁵ <https://gulfnnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/covid-19-kuwait-has-already-started-replacing-expats-with-nationals-1.71539714>.

aim to make Gulf states more attractive to expatriates, such as in the UAE.¹⁶ Reforms of the sponsorship system were also decided in Qatar and Saudi Arabia, aimed to promote foreign employees' mobility, in order to boost the attractiveness and productivity of national labour markets.

C. Objectives

1. Explore the social dimensions of exposure to the disease and its outcome for individuals, nationals as well as foreign nationals

Are Gulf natives less/more susceptible than migrants to get the disease? Is its lethality (ratio deaths / cases) higher or lower among natives compared with migrants, in every Gulf state? What roles do individual variables such as demographic characteristics (age, sex), socioeconomic status, living conditions (in labour camps, in segregated areas, at the employers' house in the case of domestic workers, for instance), working conditions, etc. play? Did specific sectors of national and foreign Gulf populations suffer from the epidemic more than others?

How did the pandemic affect the mobility of foreign residents, within areas of residence in the Gulf, and in terms of entries and exits? What health protection measures and policies, such as lockdowns, were taken to counter the spread of the epidemic, and how were they applied to migrants specifically? Did health protection measures apply differently to nationals and to foreign nationals? Did health measures and policies create differential categories among migrants? Did the pandemic change nationals' perception of migrants? What repercussions is the pandemic expected to have on expatriates' returns to the Gulf states?

Moreover, COVID being a highly contagious disease the question of whether international migration is a factor of circulation of the virus must be asked. If so, in what direction does it work: from origin to destination countries, or the other way around, or both?

2. Assess the consequences of the two-fold economic downturn on Gulf populations and labour markets

Which impact did the economic downturn and subsequent policies targeting migrant workers have on the numbers of foreign residents and workers in Gulf states? Did predictions regarding job losses and migrants' returns occur, or not? If not, how did foreign residents achieve to stay in Gulf states? Do data exist to document outflows, by nationality of workers, activity sectors, skill levels and occupation, etc.?

To what extent did the economic downturn affect nationals and foreign nationals differently? How did nationals experience the crisis, were some sectors of national populations more affected than others, and why? Will the structure of Gulf labour markets and societies appear durably changed by the economic downturn?

¹⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pandemic-prompts-gulf-countries-to-adopt-more-western-norms-11605103200>.

Regarding future dynamics, to what extent does the crisis appear as an “opportunity” to streamline pre-crisis policy orientations, such as nationalising labour and curb “demographic imbalances”? Will the size and structure of foreign workers’ return flows start changing, as a result of new measures or ongoing pre-crisis policies? Are policies aiming to upgrade Gulf economies and build “Knowledge economies” in the region effectively phasing out low-skilled workers? Is the nationality composition of return flows also changing, due to countries of origin strategies to diversify destinations for their nationals, or to Gulf states’ own policies? How can we interpret recent measures seeking to make Gulf countries more attractive, for example reforms to the kafala system? Will the pandemic eventually result in Gulf states’ economic model being called into question?

Anticipated Participants

The workshop welcomes paper proposals focusing on the issues outlined above, documenting and analysing the outcomes of the two crises (health, socio-economic) on Gulf national and foreign resident populations. Priority will be given to first-hand observation or material (new datasets, field surveys conducted in Gulf states, direct observation, ...) and to papers that focus on the Gulf states, not on the countries of origin.

Workshop Directors’ Biographies

Françoise De Bel-Air (PhD) is a researcher and consultant based in Paris, France. A socio-demographer by training, she specializes in the demography of Arab countries, especially in the Middle East and the Gulf region. She has been a research fellow at the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Amman, Jordan for several years and a part-time Professor at the Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute of Florence, Italy. Her research focusses on political demography, as well as on the demographic and socio-political dynamics in the region: youth, intergenerational and gender relationships, family structures, labour and forced migration, migration and population policies. Her recent publications include a special issue of *Arabian Humanities* (2019) on “Marriage and Family in the Gulf Today” (with B. Destremau and J. Safar); Chapter 7 “Exclusion, Mobility and Migration” in the *Arab Human Development Report 2016 on Youth*; “Asian Migration to the Gulf States in the 21st Century”, in Chowdhury, M. and Rajan, I. (eds). *South Asian Migration to the Gulf: Causes and Consequences*, Palgrave, 2018; *Mapping ENI SPCs migrants in the Euro-Mediterranean region: An inventory of statistical sources*, ICMPD, Vienna, 2020 and “‘Blocked Youth’: The Politics of Migration from the SEM Countries before and after the Arab Uprisings.” *The International Spectator* (53): 2018.

Nasra M. Shah is Professor at the Lahore School of Economics since September 2018. Until then, she was professor of Demography at the Department of Community Medicine and Behavioral Sciences at the Faculty of Medicine, Kuwait University. She received her doctoral degree in Population Dynamics from the Johns Hopkins University, School of Public Health, Baltimore, USA. Professor Shah’s research has focused on several different demographic issues in the context of health and societal development. She has conducted extensive research on the Asian region, especially

Pakistan and the major South Asian countries. Kuwait is another major country on which her work has focused for almost 30 years. She has addressed questions related to the role that social factors play in the reduction of infant and child mortality, and on the predictors of fertility and contraceptive use. She has also analyzed changes in the social, economic and health status of women in several Asian and Pacific countries and edited a major volume on the socioeconomic and demographic profile of Pakistani Women. One of her latest research interests includes the study of psychosocial factors in aging and the role that networks play in the aging process. Labor migration, especially from Asian countries to the oil-rich Gulf countries, has been one of the consistent themes in Dr. Shah's research for more than 35 years. She has published two books and numerous articles on various migration topics. Her research has focused on the perspective of sending as well as receiving countries. It has addressed topics such as socioeconomic profiles of migrant workers, economic progress of migrant workers, domestic worker migration, violence against women migrants, increasingly restrictive policies of receiving countries, irregular migration, the role of social networks in the migration process, and aspirations and plans of 2nd generation non-nationals. Her many publications include books on Asian Labor Migration: Pipeline to the Middle East; Pakistani Women; Basic Needs, Women and Development; Population of Kuwait: Structure and Dynamics and Skilful Survivals: Irregular Migration to the Gulf.

Philippe Fargues is a French demographer. He is a part-time Professor at the Robert Schuman Centre of the European University Institute and an Affiliate at the Middle East Initiative of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School. He was the founding Director of EUI's Migration Policy Centre and held senior positions at the National Institute for Demographic Studies in Paris and the American University in Cairo and taught at Harvard and various universities in France, the Middle East and Africa. His research interests include population, international migration and politics. His recent publications include: *Skilful Survivals. Irregular Migration to the Gulf* (with Nasra Shah, GRC-Cambridge, 2017); *Mass migration and uprisings in the Arab countries: An analytical framework* (International Development Policy, 2017); *Migration from North Africa and the Middle East: Skilled Migrants, Development and Globalisation* (IB Tauris, 2015), *Is What We Hear About Migration Really True? Questioning Eight Migration Stereotypes* (EUI, 2014); *International Migration and the Nation State in Arab Countries* (Middle East Law and Governance, 2013); *Demography, Migration and Revolt in the South of the Mediterranean* (Brookings, 2012); *International Migration and the Demographic Transition: a Two-Way Interaction* (International Migration Review, 2011).

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