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Foreign Labor and Questions of Identity in the Arabian Gulf

Baqir al-Najjar | August 2013

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Introduction

Numerous studies have concluded that the large presence of foreign labor in the Gulf could eventually lead to a loss of national identity. Large concentrations of foreigners, composed of numerous ethnicities, constitute communities that are, in effect, less attached to their immediate political, social, and cultural surroundings than they are to their native countries in India, Pakistan, Iran, the Philippines, and other Arab states. Foreign communities in the Gulf have become practically autonomous, with distinct habits, traditions, languages, and cultures, and many remain closely linked to their native countries through their economic investments and remittances. Various attempts to grant immigrants the nationality of their adopted countries have not succeeded because of the general lack of social policies devoted to assimilating immigrants within the host societies. Ultimately, their links to their ethnic communities remain closer than those with the local society, with some immigrant groups having formed ethnic “ghettos” within the host countries, such as the Indian, Persian, Arab, and Chinese communities in the Gulf.

As a result of the immigrants’ demographic weight, in comparison to the small size of the native population, immigrants have become quite visible and influential in GCC countries. In some cases, some immigrant groups are themselves larger than the entire native population. Beyond the question of numbers, however, the presence of immigrants has become even more significant in light of the vital positions they now occupy due to the current development models in the Gulf. The contribution of foreign laborers and experts is essential in all aspects of economic, social, and sometimes cultural life, and can even impact the internal political dynamics in the host countries.

On Identity

The concept of identity used in this study is derived from the widely-held thesis in the social sciences that identity is a dynamic and fluid concept, as opposed to the common political conception of identity as a static, eternal, and essential object. That is, while identity exists in a state of relative stability, it undergoes changes and shifts but it is not forgotten or effaced. Identity, like all other social entities, transforms over time; some of its components may even be abandoned, while others can be revived. Some examples of this are the revival of the Hebrew language, the rebirth of certain national

identities, and the transformation of some languages from oral to written. Certain components of identity, such as language, religion, and sect, constitute the main vehicles for its preservation and through this framework, identity persists, resists, and adapts to changing situations.¹ An individual's sense of identity is constructed through symbols and meanings that are related to characteristics and forms of behavior, and through deeply-rooted linguistic and religious practices that persist despite sweeping changes to the social environment. Immigrant groups that establish local communities in the host countries tend to be shaped by their new social and cultural contexts. These immigrant communities constitute both a communication channel with their homelands, and a bridge for assimilation in the host societies.

Identity, nonetheless, remains the lens through which we see each other and differentiate between "self" and "other". It is also the line of demarcation that allows one to distinguish the "us" from the "them". It represents a number of distinctive, shared characteristics that distinguish one group of individuals from another. Within identity, traits such as language, religion, sect, customs, traditions, history, class, profession, and geographical identification are intertwined. These elements can be very specific, operating on the level of neighborhoods, villages, the desert, tribes, clans, and families—both immediate and extended. These components articulate the relation of a broader group identity to a sub-identity. By expressing a temporal and spatial state, identity not only shapes the feelings, values, and tendencies of individuals, but it also shapes their overall image, which distinguishes them from the other.

Identity resembles a series of circles, with sub-identities and micro-identities overlapping in times of peace and inclusion, but that can separate out from one another if necessary in times of difficulty and conflict. The degree of overlap, integration, or detachment between the circles that make up one's broader identity is determined by cultural context, wealth distribution, and political practice regardless of the type of government, conflicts of interests, religions, and sects. Through conflict between these elements, identity may shrink down to its smaller component circles, taking on a racial, national, sectarian, regional, or tribal form. At times, these elements may even break down into racist, chauvinistic identities that reject the other, denigrating those of different religions, sects, or races. Such phenomena was witnessed during the civil wars of Lebanon, Yugoslavia, Iraq, and others. Identity is ultimately constructed through

¹ Marshall, *A Dictionary of Sociology*, 71-76.

elements of difference with the other, not through similarities. Such differences, or attempts to establish differences, are the factors behind the creation of identity.²

The identities of individuals and groups do not disappear. They may shrink and be absorbed within larger identities, or they may be subdued for periods of time. They can also reemerge, and their revival or provocation can lead to various forms of expression, which may be violent or destructive. An individual's network of social relations shapes various components of his or her identity, thus representing a host of differing frames of reference that can at times be contradictory. Identity expresses itself within the community and comes to the surface when a threat is felt from another group, community, or state.

Identity is thus composed of historical and religious frames of reference, value systems, and ethnic origins, as well as geographical, class, and professional relations. Such components intersect, constituting circles of identity that relate an individual to others in the same or other geographical spaces. This intersection may take place within a racial, national, or regional framework, or through a shared language. Identity can also expand and unite individuals from different races, if there is another shared component, such as religion. Religion also provides the framework for sub-identities and micro-identities when sects are taken into account; for example, Islam encompasses Sunni, Shia, Ibadi, Druze, Ismaili, Aalawi, and Zaidi Muslims, and so on. Within these communities, there are yet smaller groups existing as branches of the same sect, schools of thought, or scholarly institutions. These differences can also be expressed in a racial or regional manner: Arab Sunnis, non-Arab Sunnis, Arab Shias, Persian Shias, Arabs—including all their tribal, religious, and sectarian differences—and non-Arabs, with their ethnic differences. Catholic Christians are distinct from Protestant Christians, Arab Christians from non-Arab Christians; and smaller sectarian sub-groups likewise exist within each sect. Roman Catholics, for instance, are distinct from Chaldean Catholics, Maronite Catholics, and so forth. Like religions and other communities, these sub-groups represent larger circles that are interspersed with other smaller circles of identity based on racial, sectarian, and geographical affiliations.

Identity assimilates communities into larger comprehensive identities, or breaks them down into smaller ones. Religions, sects, and ethnicities are among the basic building blocks in the construction of identity, as they transcend political boundaries and

² Al-Najjar, "Groups and Communities," 48.

permeate geographical, cultural, social, and political spaces, forming what Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells terms transnational societies or spaces.³ These terms refer to identities that have been created by immigrants through their interactions with host societies, combining elements from their original societies with others that they acquire in the host societies. Over time, these identities may lose their political connections to their native societies, but they maintain some of their original traits in their social environments and cultural expressions. These include language, cuisine, religion, sect, the names that they give to their children, and sometimes political beliefs. These traits may prevent the full assimilation of some immigrant communities in their first and even second generations. This fact does not necessarily reflect an anti-assimilation policy in host countries; rather, the fact that the immigrant communities themselves find isolation and solidarity to be beneficial for the management of their economic and social interests and for strengthening their bargaining position in society. This leads to the growth of the phenomenon of transnational societies and spaces, as described above.⁴ This phenomenon also explains the emergence of Indian, Chinese, Turkish, Arab, and Hispanic neighborhoods in the heart of European and North American cities.

According to Castells, identity emerges through one of the three following situations. It may be a result of challenging measures or influences deriving from the host society that incite the need for protection and isolation, as an expression of a community's cultural, social, or religious autonomy. Secondly, it may originate in the form of a resistance identity, where identity serves as a refuge for its members and as a space for solidarity in the face of the violent external world, and sometimes in the face of internal enemies. Or finally, it may emerge as the expression of a cultural edifice in which members of the community unite around a number of values, which, when adopted, constitutes a distinguishing mark for the group.⁵

Foreign Labor: A Multi-Identity Society

During the last four decades, Gulf societies have undergone brisk and sweeping demographic shifts, and the demographic changes that some countries in the region

³ Castells, *The Power of Identity*.

⁴ Brettell and Hollifield, *Migration Theory*, 2000.

⁵ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 65.

have experienced over the last eight years represent unique cases in modern history. Between 2003 and 2008, the region's population increased by around six million, from 31 to 37 million. It rose to 44.6 million in 2010 (see table), and is expected to reach at least 55 million in 2015.⁶ Neither the 2008 economic crisis nor the wave of Arab revolutions has stopped the ballooning immigrant demographics in the Gulf, though they may have slowed down the rate of growth.

The average demographic growth rate in the region between 2003 and 2010 was estimated at 18.4 percent, with a million residents are added to the local population each year, with the majority of this increase coming from immigrant foreign labor. Some countries in the region have seen their populations double or triple in size in 10 years, such as Qatar and Bahrain, two cases that exhibit the major social, cultural, economic, and political transformations that are caused by the rapid population increase due to the demand for foreign labor. Qatar's population rose from less than 500,000 in 2002 to 1.8 million in 2012, while Bahrain's population almost doubled, from 650,000 in 2003 to 1.25 million in 2012.

It is important to note that this population increase, which is a result of the rising demands for foreign labor, is less related to society's actual needs than to overgrown needs that have resulted from the integration of these countries into the international market. The total labor force in the GCC countries increased from 11.5 million laborers in 2003 to 16.6 million in 2008 and 18.3 million in 2010.⁷ The table below shows that while foreign labor represents 47.3 percent of the population in these countries, its proportion of the labor market is 73 percent. Additionally, the biggest increase in demand for foreign labor occurred from 2003-2008, during which time the price of petroleum increased significantly, leading to a glut of construction projects in the region.

The Gulf countries have among the highest proportions of foreign labor in the world. Foreign workers, for instance, represent 29 percent of the total population of the Sultanate of Oman, roughly 39 percent of Saudi Arabia's population, and 54 percent of Bahrain's. In the rest of the GCC countries, foreign labor represents the majority of the population, often between 80 and 90 percent. As a result, foreign laborers constitute

⁶ Al-Najjar, "The Future Labor Needs in the GCC States," 2009.

⁷ Ibid.

the majority of the labor market, with an average percentage approaching 73.1 percent of the total labor force in the respective GCC states, a rate that rises in some countries to approximately 90 percent.⁸ The local contribution to the labor force in some of these countries remains generally low, and is likely to decrease with the growth in the numbers of foreign laborers. The majority of locals are concentrated in the public sector as opposed to the private sector. The participation of local labor in the private sector is below 1 percent in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, 3 percent in Kuwait, 16 percent in the Sultanate of Oman, and 19.1 percent and 19.7 percent in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia respectively, which have the highest rates among Gulf countries.⁹

Table: Size of the population and labor force in the GCC states in 2010

Country	Population		Total	Labor Force		Total
	Citizens	Non-citizens		Citizens	Non-citizens	
Kuwait	1,133,214	2,433,223	3,566,437	347,621	1,779,955	2,127,576
Saudi Arabia	18,707,576	8,429,401	27,136,977	3,837,968	4,310,024	8,147,992
Bahrain	568,399	666,172	1,234,571	139,347	457,694	592,040
United Arab Emirates	947,997	7,316,073	8,244,070	250,271	4,909,084	5,159,355
Qatar	254,484	1,442,079	1,696,563	71,076	199,107	1,270,183
Sultanate of Oman	1,957,336	816,143	2,773,479	274,027	740,241	1,014,268
Total	23,569,006	21,083,091	44,652,097	4,920,310	13,396,083	18,316,414

Source: Al-Najjar, "The Future Labor Needs in the GCC States," 2009.

Hierarchies and Identities in the Foreign Labor Community

Foreign laborers in the Gulf come from over 150 countries, representing the majority of the world's countries, with the most coming from the Indian subcontinent: India,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Others come from Arab countries and other regions, such as Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and Latin America. The foreign population in the Gulf is, therefore, not an ethnically, culturally, and religiously homogenous body, but resembles more a social and ethnic mosaic. Arab immigrants make up less than 10 percent of the total foreign population, with the majority of the immigrants originating from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Arab immigrants played a greater role in the economies of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia prior to the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Since that time, the proportion of Asian laborers has grown tremendously at the expense of the Arab immigrant population throughout the Gulf region. Like other foreigners, Arab immigrants have various geographical origins, expectations, professions, roles, and socioeconomic levels.¹⁰

The labor market in Gulf countries is marked by a certain measure of ethnic segregation, though this is not the case in terms of salary and job security. Rather, labor tends to be ethnically segregated, with specific professions monopolized by certain immigrant communities. For example, low and middle-tier jobs in the construction sector are monopolized by Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani labor, and some Filipino labor is also present in the sector. Sewing and the garment industry tend to be the domain of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi workers. Likewise, car repair shops are almost exclusively operated by Indian and Bangladeshi laborers, with a limited presence of Arab and Asian nationalities. Asian labor also dominates the tourism and hospitality sectors, whose workers originate mainly from India and the Philippines. On the other hand, Egyptian, Palestinian, and other Arab nationalities have a near monopoly in the bureaucratic, educational, and medical domains; they also occupy many positions in the government sector. Due to the predominance of Arab labor in these fields, some of these sectors have become almost impenetrable to other ethnic groups.

Although there are exceptions, the bulk of Asian laborers, representing 65 to 80 percent of the total foreign labor in the Gulf, are concentrated in low-paying occupations, such as construction, car repair shops, personal services, and homecare; a small percentage of them enjoy high incomes. European workers, on the other hand, enjoy high incomes and occupy leading administrative positions in the private, public-private, real estate, investment, and banking sectors; some also work in public bureaucracy. Their homes

¹⁰ Al-Najjar, *The Dream of Immigration for Wealth*, 164.

and neighborhoods usually feature swimming pools, tennis courts, private clubs, and luxurious restaurants. These fields also include some highly-trained and educated Arab and Asian professionals. High incomes among foreign workers are also found in the business sector. Arab and Asian businessmen tend to reside in private housing areas away from the middle-class and upper-class neighborhoods, or in mixed residential areas, and generally limit themselves to their ethnic or professional group or to their social class, which is common among immigrant communities in GCC countries. Some of these groups, such as the Arab and Asian business class, have established economic projects, usually with local partners. This class is heterogeneous and within it economic ambitions and interests may clash or converge.¹¹

Immigrant labor brings with it its smaller identities, which are expressed in the social and economic networks of foreign communities. Palestinian, Egyptian, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and to a lesser extent, Filipino and Chinese immigrants tend to live in specific ethnic neighborhoods with their own facilities. These residential concentrations are sometimes based on the community's village of origin, or according to the religious or sectarian group with which they identify. Geographical, national, and religious identities emerge as sources of psychological, social, and economic support. For example, Arab immigrants sometimes attempt to employ their Arab identity in order to reinforce their position vis-à-vis other nationalities. Other communities emphasize their Muslim identity in the face of non-Muslims, their Sunni as opposed to Shiite identity, or even their tribal affiliations.

The mid-level professions tend to be occupied by Arab, Asian, Indian, Filipino, and some Eastern European laborers, representing an extremely diverse social mosaic, with constantly battling micro- and macro-identities. Arabs usually work in the government service sector, such as education and health, while the private sector often hires Filipinos and Indians in commercial positions and occupations that require technical skills. This group, with all its ethnic differences, represents the core of the social, economic, and cultural life in all of the region's countries. The relatively high incomes of these groups have helped them to establish their own social practices and customs, some of which are organized through committees and associations. These communities remain closed and ethnically exclusive, whether of Arab or other origin.¹²

¹¹ Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 19.

¹² Al-Najjar, *The Dream of Immigration for Wealth*, 163-185.

In previous eras, Arab labor played a major role in shaping the general regional identity, especially during the 1970s when the strong Arab presence in the Gulf asserted the Arab national identity of the region. Beginning in the 1980s, Arab Islamists also played a role in affirming the Gulf region's Islamic identity, sometimes competing with Arabist notions of identity. Other Arab communities, due to the progressive fragmentation of identity in the Arab region, emphasized their sectarian or tribal identities. Some began to assert Islam against other religions, such as Christianity, while others became proponents of Sunni Islam against Shiism, with some going as far as stressing the micro-identities within these sects, such as the Shafii, Maliki, Hanbali, and Hanafi schools. Tribal identities have been important among immigrants as well, especially those coming from the Syrian Desert and Jordan.

Workers in low-skilled jobs, such as construction, car repair shops, and home and personal services, tend to come from the Indian subcontinent, such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, as well as the Philippines, with a minority from Sri Lanka and Arab countries. They endure difficult circumstances in terms of their social, economic, housing, and living conditions, which has prompted these workers to organize protests and strikes in recent years, to which the governments have responded harshly.¹³ These protests have sometimes been organized along ethnic lines, when the labor community in question is of a single nationality, as was the case with the Bangladeshi demonstrations in Kuwait's cleaning service sector in August 2008, during which they protested against the delayed payment of their salaries; another example are the protests organized by Indian laborers in the construction sector in Bahrain and Dubai for similar reasons. Egyptian laborers in Kuwait have also protested over their living conditions, which developed into a confrontation with security forces. In other cases, these protests have included several ethnic groups and nationalities working within the same company, such as the strikes led by Asian laborers of different nationalities in Dubai's construction sector due to their low wages, the delay in their payment, and deteriorating living and working conditions.¹⁴

Generally speaking, labor strikes are more easily organized when the laborers belong to a single nationality, even if they have different religious backgrounds. Ethnic affiliation

¹³ Al-Najjar, *Foreign Labor in the Gulf*, 2008.

¹⁴ Regarding the strike by Egyptians who work in security firms in Kuwait, the Kuwaiti reaction, and that of the Egyptian embassy in Kuwait, see *al-Jarida* (Kuwait), June 9, 2008.

is not only a source of solidarity and mutual support, it is also an important source of an individual's social awareness and confidence. Ethnicity is a central concept for experiencing social differences vis-à-vis the other, and represents an important reservoir of solidarity for communities mobilizing to demand their rights. Sharing an ethnic origin also creates a bridge of trust between members of communities at home and abroad. For example, commercial and trading networks have been built along ethnic lines within Asian communities throughout the world, especially among the Chinese and Indians. The relationship of trust that makes these enterprises possible was first and foremost established upon a common ethnic identity.¹⁵

It is noticeable that the degree of sympathy toward the protests varies in accordance with the dominant ethnic character of protesters and observers. While local English-language newspapers, which are mostly staffed by Asian employees, expressed a certain degree of sympathy with the Asian strikers, local Arabic-language newspapers were less sympathetic toward the strikes, going as far as to warn readers against the threats that Asian labor represents for the region's political and cultural identity. This group of laborers resides either in homes that were built specifically for them on or off the work site, or in low-cost housing in old neighborhoods that were abandoned by local residents, who have moved to new residential areas. The neighborhoods inhabited by low-skilled foreign workers are overcrowded, lack security, and are prone to fires that leave many casualties. Furthermore, due to the deteriorating social and economic conditions in these areas, crimes of sexual assault, theft, and murder tend to occur frequently as well.¹⁶

Language, religion, and sometimes sect and class, in addition to the place of work and residence, are all factors that separate the foreign from the local population in the Gulf countries. Communities of foreign workers tend to cluster according to nationality without opening up to other communities; indeed, something akin to ethnic/class ghettos are common. Low-wage Egyptian labor workers, for instance, usually concentrate in the low-cost peripheral areas, such as al-Farwaniya in Kuwait, while low-wage Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian laborers often inhabit old houses left by the local population, some of which are crumbling and unsafe, or in peripheral residential concentrations that are built specifically to house foreign labor. For example, Asian

¹⁵ Castells, *The Power of Identity*, 55.

¹⁶ Al-Najjar, *The Sociology of the Arabian Gulf*, 1999.

laborers live in old areas of Manama and Muharraq in Bahrain, and remnants of the old neighborhoods in Najma, Qatar, as well as Huli, al-Naqra, and the densely populated residential neighborhoods in Kuwait.

Some of these communities do not inhabit specific locations, and in this case their identities are expressed through their social networks, which sometimes compete and conflict. The social channels and relations of these groups reflects a "social ghettoization" based in residential areas, clubs, and associations. The restaurants and temples frequented by these communities are not only an affirmation of their specific identity, but also spaces for congregation and social solidarity and to exchange information and support, such as the best ways to deal with bosses and bureaucracy. For example, the cities of Huli and al-Naqra in Kuwait housed the largest concentrations of working class and middle class Palestinians before their departure in 1990.

The interwoven social networks of immigrants express their larger and smaller identities: Arab laborers do not gather as Arabs, but most often according to nationality and, in many instances, sect, social class, or profession. Egyptians tend to stay with Egyptians, and the same is true of Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese, Iraqis, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Filipinos, and so on. The most basic identity expressed through these social networks may be nationality or sect, as in the relations between Muslim and Christian Arab laborers, for example. Sectarian affiliation often becomes the criterion upon which alliances and contacts are established among Arab communities whose home countries witness frequent sectarian clashes over power and politics, such as Egyptians, Lebanese, and Iraqis. Muslim and Christian Arab immigrants often perceive religious identity as the cornerstone of their social and economic networks, with these divisions operating on smaller and smaller levels within each sectarian group.

Language, ethnicity, and other elements of identity represent barriers that not only separate the local from the immigrant society, but also one immigrant community from another. These communities often diverge over the policies of their home governments, or the conflicts confronting the social and ethnic groups in the home countries; these divergences add to their fragmentation. Competition also exists between different Arab immigrant communities over power and economic resources in the host countries, taking its most pronounced form in the competition between Egyptians and Palestinians. This conflict over power and resources has recently extended to include other groups, such as the Iraqi, Syrian, Jordanian, and Lebanese communities, as well as between these Arab communities and the Indian and Pakistani labor. Some of these

immigrant groups dominate the administrative and human resources departments of specific companies, private and public, which facilitates continuous recruitment from among the same ethnic group.

Second Generation Immigrants: Mixed Identities

While the identity of first generation immigrants is closely linked to their country of origin—in terms of language, familial relations, and religious and cultural customs—second generation immigrants feature relations and identities that are culturally, socially, and economically closer to the host society, even when these immigrants are not perceived as part of the local population. In the second generation, identities inherited from the first generation, such as language, blood relations, and ethnicity, enter into conflict with new identities constituted through their upbringing within the host society and within its economic, political, cultural, social, and religious contexts. The second generation of Arab and foreign immigrants in the Gulf have become more attached to their host societies than to their native countries; ghettoization and identity differences within the host country have not prevented second-generation immigrants from developing new identities that are closely tied to the host societies.

However, the state of isolation and to some extent marginalization in which some of the immigrants live also encourages the appearance of trends that oppose the host countries' immigrants' rights policies. This situation is best exemplified by the case of the *Bidun*¹⁷ in Kuwait. Currently, Gulf states are experiencing the third generation of the Bidun, who, due to their state of marginalization and social exclusion, have developed views that are critical of the host countries. They are especially critical of the group of locals who oppose their naturalization and call for their return to the countries whence their families came. These tensions were expressed through the violent reaction of the Kuwaiti security forces against this group during the events of December 2011 and January 2012. The reaction to these protests revealed the views held by a number of locals toward the new generation of immigrants, who represent a large component of Kuwaiti society and often do not enjoy the same public services as the locals, such as education and healthcare. The second generation of immigrants, however, perceive themselves as part of the host society, culturally, socially, and economically, even if

¹⁷ The *Bidun* are a stateless population who do not hold Kuwaiti citizenship.

they are classified as non-locals.¹⁸

While some of the second generation immigrants have social relations with their peers in the local society, the fact that they belong to a foreign nationality also encourages them to share social and cultural activities with people who share their national and ethnic background. This is the general condition of second and third generation immigrants, and not only the case of a specific group within this generation.

Fears of Cultural Dilution

The Gulf is witnessing the emergence of a society of foreigners with a growing size and role, compared to the locals' society, which is rapidly becoming a minority within its own country despite holding the political reins. This has given rise to fears of the effacement of local identity, not only in terms of its changing cultural and social characteristics, but also politically. It is feared that if the number of immigrants are allowed to increase and multiply, new international pacts and laws may force the home governments to provide them with political, cultural, and economic rights on an equal basis with the citizens, which would lead to the dominance of foreign identities in these countries. If this situation is allowed to continue, some argue Gulf societies will end up becoming an extension of the societies from which the bulk of the immigrants derive. Beyond the question of demographics, the use of the Arabic language is already shrinking in government institutions and the private sector; in fact, Arabic as a first language is even disappearing from private and public schools in the Gulf. Foreign domestic workers and nannies may also have a strong influence over the new generations in the Gulf, not only from a linguistic perspective, but also in terms of the values and culture they communicate to the coming generation in the region. These factors combined may lead to the disappearance of a national culture among the new generation, and its replacement by a new set of hybrid identities. In fact, some senior officials have begun to express the idea that, despite the great economic role performed by foreign labor in the Gulf, "it does not involve a great measure of partnership with the host societies".¹⁹ Furthermore, officials warn that the Gulf region

¹⁸ Al-Mufti, "Human beings like us," December 22, 2011.

¹⁹ Al-Alawi, "Identity and National Belonging in the Arabian Gulf," 2009.

"is undergoing a major demographic shift that threatens its cultural and social identity, if treaties and agreements were to be imposed on the region's [governments] in order to naturalize foreign labor".²⁰ These words echo the warning of Dubai's police chief, Dhahi Bin Khalfan, who said, "I fear that we are building skyscrapers and losing the Emirates," reflecting oft-repeated concerns in Gulf societies that the large and strong presence of foreign labor threatens their social and cultural identity.²¹

Furthermore, the domination of immigrants over all forms of economic activity, as well as social and intellectual life, tends to increase the marginalization of the local society, not only in the economic sphere, but also in culture and in politics. While such an extreme scenario is not likely to take place in the near future, the loss of local identity cannot be discounted given the demographic data and the international situation, which now contains forces capable of undermining national sovereignty for the interest of global powers. A researcher in the field of international labor standards wrote:

The main concern among the countries of the Arabian Gulf region clearly surfaced with the appearance of international treaties that often dictate that the civic and political rights of immigrant and guest workers must be guaranteed. Greater fears have emerged regarding the right to nationality and to own property, and the right of the foreign families of these workers to join them in the host countries, which would lead to a greater demographic imbalance to the benefit of the foreign labor.²²

Some argue that the solution lies in naturalizing more immigrant Arabs, or bringing more Arabs into the Gulf region. However, such a policy has not led to a solution, as some Gulf states have realized, but has instead caused political skirmishes and tensions in the relationship between the state and some local population groups. The naturalization of some of the foreign labor force may lead to further complicating the relationship between the state and society if it were part of a plan of demographic engineering, aiming to weaken certain local demographic components and change the internal demographic balance, rather than a policy that seeks to create an ethnic balance between the foreign labor population and the local Arab population. Such

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Huwaidi, 2009; and Keyrouz, "Police Chief Says Slash Immigration," April 20, 2008.

²² Matar, "The Attempts to do Away with Reliance," 287.

attempts at political naturalization have actually led to tensions between long-standing nationals and those who are often termed “the newly naturalized”; in other words, ill-studied naturalization may lead to further political and ethnic tension and fragmentation on the domestic level. This quandary reflects the limited ability of these societies, with their miniscule demographics, to assimilate new nationals. In the absence of social policies geared toward assimilation, and with the difficulty of changing the value system of the local population, newly naturalized citizens are unlikely to be quickly integrated into the local community, which would doubtlessly lead these naturalized individuals to form ethnic ghettos that would contribute to the mosaic-like nature of the region’s societies.²³

Conclusion

Whether the scenarios discussed above are a real possibility or mere fears—as many decision makers in the region believe—the challenges imposed by foreign labor in the Gulf go beyond the overt cultural, social, and political factors. The fact that foreign labor is overly represented and even dominant in all stages of production and development, exceeding any potential contribution by the local labor force, permits foreign labor to impose its cultural and political conditions on the region’s societies. The construction boom and the building of modern skyscrapers, resorts, and large economic projects require foreign labor in their construction and management. Moreover, most of these projects are geared toward high- and middle-income foreign laborers. These economic activities may be extremely profitable to those undertaking them, but they may also bring about serious repercussions for the country as a whole, especially in terms of security and politics.²⁴

Some countries have attempted to assuage these fears through creating a “ladder” of economic and political benefits that are exclusively geared toward nationals, or certain groups of nationals. However, this strategy is not likely to lead to further integration or to political, social, and economic efficiency within society. Instead, these measures could lead to both the creation of a social hierarchy that may take a dangerous political direction in the future, and lead to further fragmentation of national identity.

²³ Holes, “Dialect and National Identity,” 52-72.

²⁴ Al-Shahabi, *Uprooting: Real Estate Projects*, 2012.

Given these fears, political actors in the Gulf are wary of discussing further social integration among citizens, let alone among foreign residents. This would require the assimilation of the citizens with naturalized foreigners, a process that would go beyond the matrix of social services currently provided. This issue touches upon the essence of the question of the transition toward a “citizenship society”. It is difficult to open a discussion about policies of social and cultural integration that goes beyond the economic role of the foreign labor; that is, their economic assimilation is not accompanied by comprehensive social policies.

Many questions also remain as to the extent of the assimilation of foreign labor in Western countries; in fact, the instances of protest and violence that occasionally occur in the immigrant neighborhoods of Western cities reflect the failure or inadequacy of integration policies, which have led to ghettoization and social isolationism—a fact officially acknowledged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. If this is the case in the West, it is difficult to see how integration might take place within the Gulf region’s political, social, and religious contexts, some of which conflict with the modern and post-modern institutional culture in Western societies.²⁵

In the absence of the establishment of a modern state based on the bond of citizenship, justice, the rule of law, and equal opportunity among all components of society, it is extremely difficult to assimilate immigrants. It is, thus, quite difficult to compare the European situation, or even the situation in some Asian and Latin American countries, with the circumstances in the Gulf in terms of state-building, development, and the capacity of the state to establish a citizenship society. In these countries, tribal and sectarian affiliations tend to determine an individual’s position and benefits in society. Some of these benefits are partially or wholly dependent on an individual’s proximity to the power center in society. In many instances, these divisions have been employed in internal and external conflicts, most apparent in the Kuwaiti and Bahraini cases. In sum, the Gulf societies, due to the delay in the construction of the modern state on the institutional, legal, and constitutional levels, have extreme difficulties integrating the population of their home societies—let alone assimilating immigrants.

²⁵ Rogers and Tillie, *Multicultural Policies and Citizenship*.

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