

# Migrant Labor in the Arabian Gulf: The Case Study of Dubai, United Arab Emirates

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## Introduction

The *kafala* system regulating labor migration in the Arabian Gulf, best described as a sponsorship system, has played a central role in the rapid economic development of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. Though it has allowed GCC States to obtain the resources necessary to develop both economically and cosmetically, the system has had an array of undesirable byproducts that have significantly altered the texture of Gulf society.

The *kafala* system promotes the rapid influx of migrants to meet the labor demand while simultaneously subjugating this imported population through its lax regulations and exclusion from the legal framework in Gulf States. As a result, the Gulf has witnessed an emergence of multi-tiered societies where locals are situated in the top tier and migrant populations consistently occupy the lowest rungs of society. The *kafala* system has produced structural inequalities in Gulf States and has resulted in grave human rights abuses against migrant laborers.

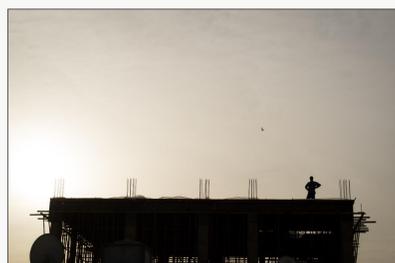
Today, the effects of the *kafala* system are visible in every aspect of Gulf society. The spatial layout of Gulf cities speaks to the social dynamic that the *kafala* system fosters. Just as nationals live and exist in the heart of the city, they are central to the benefits of the *kafala* system. Migrant labor populations typically live on the periphery of Gulf cities, which mirrors their marginalized role in society.

## Objectives

The main objective is to contextualize migrant labor in the GCC and illustrate how the components of the *kafala* system affect each tier of society. It is often perceived that migrants in the Gulf have a sense of mobility and self-determination. However, the sponsorship system, which ties all migrants to a national sponsor, places the migrant in a subjugated position and excludes them from the legal framework of the country. By classifying migrants as “guests” or “temporary workers,” GCC governments have created a legal system that omits migrant workers from any form of protection or benefits from the state. One of the aims is to determine how GCC states justify and perpetuate the exclusion of migrants from the legal framework, and how this encourages human rights abuses and the marginalization of the import labor population.

## Methods

Using primary sources such as newspapers, secondary sources on the Gulf region, and data on the labor force from the Dubai government, I have explored the effects of the *kafala* system on the migrant population and the legality of its operation. I also used reports of firsthand testimonials from migrant laborers in Dubai to supplement my findings.



## Background

The oil boom in the 1950s and 60s initiated an era of development and modernization in the Gulf, which placed a high demand on labor (Gardner 2010). Because of relatively small population sizes, GCC countries have relied on import labor to balance their local labor deficits, which has been primarily sourced from the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. During this time, the demographic profile of the typical migrant also shifted. Until the late 1980s and 1990s, the majority of migrants came from other Arab countries, such as Egypt and other Gulf States. This time period saw a sharp decrease in the numbers of Arab migrants and a substantial increase in Asian migrants, a shift that is often referred to as the “Asianization” of migrant labor. (Kamrava and Babar 2012). Because this also entailed a shift from cultural homogeneity to the import of contrasting identities, the Gulf States sought a mechanism to regulate the massive influx of divergent populations.

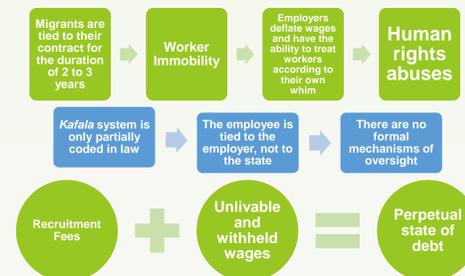
## Findings and Discussion

The *kafala* system emerged as a way for GCC governments to monitor migrant laborers through national sponsors.

### Components of the *kafala* system:

- Each migrant must be tied to a national sponsor, who is required to oversee the process of obtaining a work visa and arranging employment. The *kafeel*, or sponsor, is usually the migrant’s employer (Ali 2010).
- Migrant workers must operate through contracts. This system situates migrant workers as temporary or “guest” workers of Gulf countries for 2 to 3 years at a time, which creates an environment of temporality and impermanence for the laborers (Vora 2013).
- Nationals must comprise a majority of company ownership (Ali 2010).
- The *kafala* system is only partially coded in law. The migrant is connected to his or her *kafeel*, not to the state (Gardner 2010).

### Effects of the *kafala* system on migrants:



### Effects of the *kafala* system on Gulf nationals:

- Nationals profit from their role as sponsors and as business owners. Because the *kafala* system requires nationals to comprise a majority of ownership for all companies, a significant number of nationals profit as business partners in exchange for carrying little weight in the company (Ali 2010).

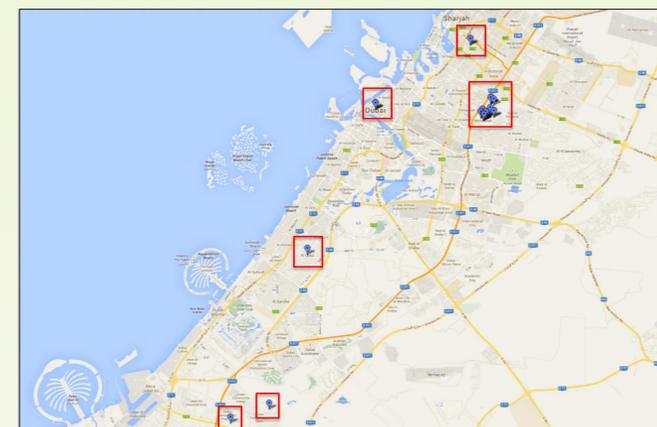
### Effects of the *kafala* system on the state:

- Governments benefit from the *kafala* system because migrants are less of a threat to the political and economic structures present in the country (Ali 2010). Governments also benefit because labor management is left to the companies instead of to the state.
- When under scrutiny for human rights abuses in the international community, states can articulate themselves as playing a minimal role as the guarantor of rights for migrants.

## Discussion continued

### Social and Spatial Segregation

The *kafala* system allows GCC countries to perpetuate the inhumane treatment of migrants through locating the management of laborers at the level of the employer instead of the state. Governments have participated in constructing a psychological dynamic of separation between citizens and non-citizens by centralizing the role of citizens through the welfare state and the simultaneous physical exclusion of migrants from the city. Migrant labor populations face both physical and socially-constructed barriers to inclusion in society. Today, migrant populations live in labor camps on the periphery of the city, which mirrors the social and legal marginalization they experience. By placing labor camps on the outskirts of the city, it becomes nearly impossible for laborers to interact with the population in the core of the city.



Map of Dubai's Labor Camps

### Other mechanisms of social and spatial exclusion:

- The language barrier – India, for example, is home to hundreds of dialects, which can even vary within the same state. The differences in language both between the laborers and with the local population presents a significant barrier to societal immersion (Gardner 2010).
- The welfare state – Through providing exclusive benefits to citizens, governments create rigid boundaries and classifications between citizens and non-citizens; nationals and non-nationals; and Western expatriates and Asian and African migrant laborers.
- Neighborhoods dedicated to certain nationalities instill a sense of exclusivity.
- Free trade zones promote the segregation between companies owned by nationals and Western multinational companies. Though these areas provide a haven where foreigners can feel a sense of belonging, the irony is that these areas also generate feelings of exclusion through constructing physical areas exclusive to foreign business investors.
- High prices in central areas of the city, such as in malls, systematically inhibits migrants from feeling a sense of inclusion in these areas.



## Case Study: Dubai, UAE

The discovery of oil is often seen as the distinct catalyst that carried Dubai from its mercantilist history to its new role as a global player in the realm of tourism, finance, and real estate. However, the lived experiences during periods of rapid transformation are often left out of modernization narratives of Gulf societies. Though the discovery of oil certainly played an important role in the rapid transformation of Dubai from a regional port city to a globally important trading center, the role that various sub-groups and migrant populations played in this transformation are integral to Dubai’s iconic presence in contemporary landscapes.



90% of the population in the UAE is on a temporary visa (Ali 2010).

It is estimated that by 2020, Emiratis will account for less than 4% of the workforce (Janardhan 2011).



Dubai is known for its luxury and extravagance, but you do not have to travel far to find contrasting lifestyles. When one thinks of expatriates, there is a common image of Westerners seeking tax-free work. The reality is that the majority of expatriates are Arab immigrants and, in greater numbers, migrant workers from Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. They provide the backbone of society and labor to provide the Gulf with its iconic infrastructure.

Dubai is a city of dualities and divides, and is home to many political, social, and spatial boundaries and dichotomies. All of the legal and social mechanisms discussed in the previous sections have played out in a way that has created rigid boundaries between different social classes, races, nationalities, and religions. These divisions between various populations in Dubai are perpetuated by the government through rigid distinctions between citizens and residents, nationals and non-nationals, locals and expatriates, as well as temporary workers from South Asia and Western migrants. These distinctions used in political discourse trickle down to every level of society. Because the government makes distinctions between different nationalities and legal statuses, the citizenry follows suit and uses these same distinctions in commercial enterprise, in the media, and in daily life. This dynamic of exclusivity and



separation in Dubai then trickles down to the migrants themselves, perpetuating feelings of inferiority, unimportance, and exclusion.

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**Acknowledgements:**  
Dr. Tricia Hepner, advisor  
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# Migrant Labor in the Arabian Gulf

## *The Case of Dubai, United Arab Emirates*

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This research explores the topic of labor migration in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates -- and seeks to determine how the subjugation of migrant laborers are initiated and perpetuated. The *kafala* (sponsorship) system has placed a central role in the rapid economic development in the GCC states. Though it has allowed the Gulf States to obtain the resources necessary to develop both economically and cosmetically, the system has had an array of undesirable byproducts that have significantly altered the texture of Gulf societies. The *kafala* system promotes the rapid influx of migrants to meet the labor demand while simultaneously subjugating this imported population through its lax regulations and exclusion from the legal framework in Gulf States. As a result, the Gulf has witnessed an emergence of multi-tiered societies where locals are situated in the top tier and migrant populations consistently occupy the lowest rungs of society. The *kafala* system has produced structural inequalities in Gulf States and has resulted in grave human rights abuses against migrant laborers. Today, the effects of the *kafala* system are visible in every aspect of Gulf society. A case study of Dubai, United Arab Emirates is used to examine how legal norms produce and interact with the lived experiences of South Asian migrant laborers. The case study discusses how the *kafala* system unfolds in one of the most iconic cities in the world and seeks to articulate the lived experiences that are often omitted from modernization narratives.