

## **Lesson on immigration to be found in Arab gulf**

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As the issue of immigration returns to the forefront of politics in Tennessee and elsewhere in the United States, Americans would be wise to consider the experience of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Admittedly, the GCC provides an unlikely model for Americans: The GCC states are Muslim and Arab monarchies situated a half-world away from North America. Yet, GCC states have grappled with the same issues present in the current U.S. immigration debate: foreigners filling jobs which local workers refuse to do, border controls and illegal immigration, government aid to immigrants, and whether foreigners threaten national security and collective national identity.

GCC states have long seen documented and undocumented foreign workers as the solution to the labor needs of their oil-financed economies until their citizens had the necessary skills to manage modern businesses. They spent millions of dollars on education for their citizens and regularly encouraged businesses to employ them. But decades after the programs started, few GCC nationals have the abilities or are willing to fill the jobs of foreigners. This fact reflects the preference for government employment among GCC nationals, their frequent lack of a work ethic, and that more GCC women pursue higher education than men. Though women are on average more literate and skilled than their male counterparts, many women become housewives after their schooling.

Two examples illustrate this process well: When the UAE expelled 300,000 expatriates in 1996, the country suffered labor shortages, inflation and reduced economic growth. Most of the expatriates returned to their old jobs in 1997. When Saudi religious leaders highlighted the danger to public morality from allowing foreign men to work in Saudi lingerie stores, the government prohibited expatriate men from working in the shops after June 1, 2006. But when the deadline arrived, Riyadh announced that foreign men could continue working in the shops indefinitely; reportedly, businesses had vigorously opposed the proposal. Bans on foreigners working as vegetable sellers, travel agents and gold sellers were unsuccessful, as well. In these cases, foreigners were rehired after the official bans went into effect.

The presence of foreign workers in the GCC generates anxieties that many Americans could understand. Jamal al-Suwaidi, who directs The Center for Emirates Studies, a UAE think tank, observed in 2006 that UAE citizens "do not exist" in the UAE. The UAE, he added is "filled with various nationalities to such an extent that there is no longer any place left for us." He warned that the UAE's citizens "will pay a high price for this problem."

While al-Suwaidi did not define what the price would be, he implied that Emirati culture may vanish in a society increasingly composed of people who are neither Arab nor Muslim.

Strikingly, GCC governments have not responded to this problem by seeking further control over international borders or by enacting more prohibitions on hiring foreigners. Instead, they have integrated their foreign workers into local society. Social services, salaries and working conditions for foreigners have improved in recent years. Some foreigners have won citizenship and have even been allowed to construct churches. Might Americans benefit from examining the GCC model, which seeks to truly integrate immigrant populations?

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