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The Demographic and Economic Framework of Migration in Kuwait

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The Demographic and Economic Framework of Migration in Kuwait

Françoise De Bel-Air

Abstract: As of December 2012, 68 percent of residents in Kuwait were expatriates. Most come from Asia and especially from India (30 percent of all foreign residents). Three-quarters of expatriates are active. They account for 83 percent of the total active population and 93 percent of the private sector's workforce. Asians are mainly involved in the services and craft sectors, while Arabs more often fill managerial posts. Recent flows suggest a shift in recruitment policies towards upgrading the workforce's level of qualifications and occupations.

Data also show the extent of forced migration from Kuwait: 400,000 Arabs, most of them of Palestinian origin, were forced to flee the country after the First Gulf War. Also, Kuwait's stateless residents (the Bidun) have been compelled to emigrate since 1985, while those still in the country are considered illegal residents.

Keywords: Kuwait; Foreign Population; National Population; Stateless; Labour; Migration; Policy; Statistics.

Kuwait oil fields were discovered in the 1930s; by 1952, the country had become the largest exporter of oil in the Gulf region. From the onset of the country's development process sustained by oil wealth, labour immigrants were called upon to build the national economy and infrastructure. Foreign residents outnumbered Kuwaiti citizens as early as 1960. The first immigrants originated from Europe, North America, and the Asian subcontinent, yet Arabs were the largest foreign community (50 to 65 percent of expatriates between 1965 and 1989). Palestinians accounted for half of them, and were mostly involved in the development of the education and health care sectors.

In spite of their stake in Kuwait's development process, most foreigners were hired as contract workers and, therefore, not entitled to any social and political rights or to naturalisation. Moreover, the length of stay in the Gulf countries is conditional to that of the labour contract, even though before the first Gulf War (1990-1991), some migrants (mostly Arabs) had been settled in Kuwait for decades.

The emergence of regional and domestic political tensions in the 1980s (due to the Iran-Iraq war as well as deteriorating ties with Iraq) led to drastic changes in migration policies and dynamics. First, Asian labourers started replacing Arabs in the workforce, as the latter were deemed too politically active. Second, over suspicions of collusion with political foes in the region (chiefly Iraq), Kuwait's 250,000 stateless citizens (the Bidun, i.e., "without"), most of whom were of local Bedouin descent or settled for decades, were suddenly made illegal residents, and hence placed under threat of deportation. Third, the first Gulf War which broke out in August 1990 following the invasion of Kuwaiti territory by Iraqi troops forced many Kuwaitis and expatriates to seek refuge abroad. Among them were some 400,000 Arab foreign residents. Nationals of countries supporting Saddam Hussein's regime (350,000 Jordanians and Palestinians alone) were thus compelled to leave, and only very few Jordanians re-entered Kuwait before the mid-2000s.

As of today, and owing to the record profits granted by oil price rise since 2003, Kuwait has resumed hiring vast numbers of foreign manpower. In 2012, non-nationals constituted 69 percent of the country's total population. Kuwaitis are a minority in their own country and this "demographic imbalance" is a matter of great concern for most nationals.

In 2009, the authorities announced a \$140-billion five-year development plan to diversify the country's economy, gradually moving it away from oil to become a competitive financial hub for the Gulf region. Meanwhile, security concerns gained prominence following the "Arab Spring" uprisings and several public demonstrations by the Bidun against discrimination aimed at them. Tensions also rose over slow economic growth despite large oil revenues, the emergence of youth unemployment (23.3 percent among the 15-24 years),¹ and over traffic and facilities' congestion, for which migrant workers are deemed responsible. As a consequence, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour announced in 2012 a policy of reducing the flow of foreigners coming to Kuwait by 100,000 every year for the coming decade, mainly by cutting down on unskilled workers entering the country and by targeting irregular labourers.

OUTWARD MIGRATION

Stock

Drawing a picture of Kuwaitis residing abroad is a difficult task. First, Kuwaiti statistics are scarce regarding expatriate nationals.² Also, neighbouring countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) do not publish data on foreign residents disaggregated by country of citizenship, or by country of birth. Other Arab countries known to have received vast numbers of refugees from Kuwait during the First Gulf War, such as Jordan where some 350,000 Jordanian nationals resettled, most of whom were originally from Palestine, disclose neither the detailed migratory patterns of their resident population nor their countries of birth. This makes it difficult to update data on the population originating from Kuwait, collected in the early 1990s upon their arrival in Jordan.

Some data is only available from OECD countries:

	Born in Kuwait	Kuwaiti nationals
European Union	4,983	1,184
<i>of which Germany</i>		775
<i>Sweden</i>	1,558	
Other countries	40,515	111
<i>of which Australia</i>	4,640	
<i>Canada (2006)</i>	10,520	
<i>United States</i>	23,967	
Total	44,598	1,295

Source: receiving OECD countries' national statistics, International Migration Database. (<http://stats.oecd.org/>)

Other countries include: Finland; Iceland; New Zealand; Norway; Switzerland; Japan; Korea.

This table suggests that those born in Kuwait:

1. Tend to be naturalised in the countries where they most often settled (Canada, the US and Australia). Immigrants to those countries may therefore be long-term migrants or have no intention or possibility to return to Kuwait.
2. The bulk of those born in Kuwait may not be Kuwaiti nationals, but rather stemming from those long-term migrant communities found quasi-settled in the country when Gulf War I broke out in August 1990.

INWARD MIGRATION

Stock

In December 2012, non-Kuwaitis accounted for 68.3 percent of the resident population in Kuwait, or 2,611,292 persons. Of these, 1,896,910 are economically active (82.6 percent of the total active population), of which 1,864,137 are employed.⁴ As opposed to Kuwaiti nationals, mostly enrolled in the government sector (78 percent), the bulk of non-Kuwaiti manpower is employed in the private and domestic labour sectors (63 and 30.3 percent, respectively, of the non-national employed population). Foreign labourers make up to 93.4 percent of the private sector's workforce that year.

The profile of the foreign population is that of a predominantly male (65.3 percent), poorly educated (70 percent of employed population has below secondary level education) and relatively young population (mean age is 32.8 years), demographically distorted by the overrepresentation of working age groups in its age structure: those 15 to 60 years old make up 83.4 percent of the non-nationals as a whole. The bulk of foreign labourers work in the private household sector (29 percent), wholesale and retail trade sector (14.8 percent), construction (9.9 percent) and manufacturing (6.1 percent) sectors.

Country/ region of citizenship	total	%	Migration Status		
			Worker	Family member	Other resident
Arab countries	757,365	32,9	58,7	38,8	2,5
<i>of which Egypt</i>	482,692	21,0	42,6	56,0	1,4
<i>Syria</i>	135,554	5,9	37,2	61,3	1,5
<i>Jordan</i>	55,081	2,4	68,5	28,5	3,0
Asia	1,415,519	61,6	86,4	11,4	2,2
<i>of which India</i>	692,525	30,1	93,6	4,8	1,6
<i>Bangladesh</i>	190,171	8,3	75,9	22,1	2,1
<i>Philippines</i>	161,742	7,0	84,5	13,4	2,1
<i>Pakistan</i>	120,040	5,2	93,9	3,6	2,5
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	109,860	4,8	94,1	3,9	2,0
Africa	92,324	4,0	92,0	5,7	2,3
<i>of which Ethiopia</i>	77,279	3,4	82,1	0,3	1,3
Other regions	34,476	1,5	51,9	45,0	3,0
Total	2,299,691	100	77,0	20,7	2,3

The migration status is inferred from the distribution of expatriates by type of residence permits held as of December 31st, 2012.

Workers are holders of permits n°17 (government labor), 18 (non-government labor); 19 (business); 20 (domestic help).

Family members hold a dependent permit (n°22, for spouse, children or elderly dependent relatives).

Other residents are holders of temporary permits (n°14), students permits (n°23) and self resident permits (n°24).

Residency procedures do not apply to GCC nationals; the Bidun are not included in the residency documents holders.

Source: Ministry of Interior

Most foreign nationals in Kuwait came from Asia (62 percent of the total). Indians alone make up 30 percent

OUTWARD MIGRATION

These long-term migrants are, first, Arabs coming mainly from Palestine. Some arrived in Kuwait in the 1950s (when the country opened up to migrant labourers), forced out of their homeland by the creation of Israel in 1948; others came after 1950 when Jordan annexed the West Bank. The latter thus carried Jordanian nationality. The Palestinians who found refuge in Syria and Lebanon were carrying UN travel documents. Another wave of migrants went to Kuwait and other oil-producing countries after the 1973 oil boom. Most of these Palestinians were considering themselves settled in Kuwait, for they could not go back to Palestine, or had experienced discrimination and lack of prospects in their first country of resettlement.

After the war in 1991, as Jordan and Palestine were accused by the Gulf countries to be supporters of Saddam Hussein's regime, 350,000 Jordanians and Palestinians were compelled to leave and barred from re-entering Kuwait. A share of those born in Kuwait and resettled in North America, for instance, may well be from Palestinian descent.

Second, emigrants born in Kuwait and residing in OECD countries may also be originally from the "Bidun" community, a category of stateless persons living in the country. Kuwait's Bidun population originates from three broad categories:

1. those whose ancestors failed to apply for nationality or lacked necessary documentation at the time the 1959 Nationality Law came into force (among those are mainly descendants of Bedouin populations)
2. those recruited to work in Kuwait's army or police force during the 1960s who settled in Kuwait, along with their families (coming originally from Iraq, Jordan and Syria)
3. the children of Kuwaiti mothers and stateless or foreign fathers (nationality in Kuwait being transmitted by patrilineal descent, the children of a Kuwaiti mother and non-Kuwaiti father [with specific nationality] inherit the father's nationality. They are stateless if the father is stateless).

After 1985, over suspicions of collusion with political foes in the region (chiefly Iraq), they were progressively

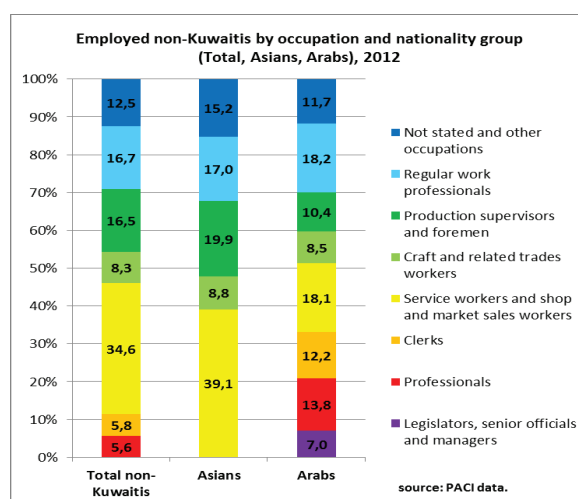
INWARD MIGRATION

of all non-Kuwaitis. Another third of the foreign population are nationals from Asian and North African Arab countries, of which Egyptians are the vast majority (21 percent of all foreigners).

The foreign population displays a great demographic and socio-economic diversity. Asian and African populations are overwhelmingly made up of workers, while Arabs (except for the Egyptians) and other national subgroups have a sizable share of non-active, family dependents.

Indeed, the income level (a minimum of 250 Kuwaiti Dinars⁵ monthly) determines the ability of the (male) worker to sponsor his family members for residency in Kuwait. Foreign labourers in general, and among them Asians, are generally confined to services and "blue collar" occupations and thus unlikely to meet the required conditions.

Arab expatriates, by contrast, display more diversity in their occupations. They often fill the upper level occupations (32 percent of Arab workers are in managerial, professional and clerical positions), even though it is likely that a part of the Egyptian expatriate population is in the lower echelons of the occupational structure.



The occupation and income level being correlated with the presence of family members in Kuwait, it can also explain the discrepancy between Asians and Arabs regarding place of birth. The proportion of Asians born in Kuwait is only 6 percent, while it reaches 35 per-

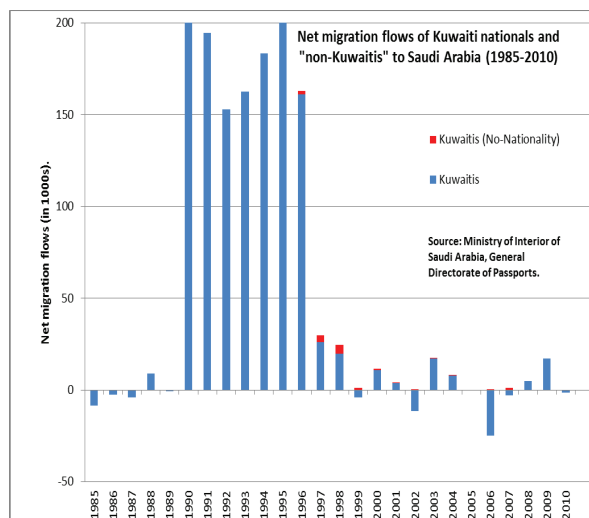
OUTWARD MIGRATION

deprived of all the socio-economic privileges they had shared with Kuwaiti citizens until 1985 (employment on par with Kuwaitis, access to free health and education, for instance). Stripped of any source of income or access to public infrastructure, their fate thus became one of forcible exile abroad or poverty-stricken life under threat of deportation. Data on migration flows confirm the likelihood of some Biduns' emigration and settlement in non-Arab countries.

During the year 2000, the Bidun remaining in Kuwait, considered illegal residents by the authorities, were deprived of the civil identification cards issued to citizens and legal non-Kuwaiti residents. Instead, the 'Bidun committee' issued security cards to 106,000 of them who registered as stateless residents until 2000 (last figure), with claims to Kuwaiti nationality. These cards are a protection against deportation. However, the number of naturalisations allowed annually is only 2,000, and this quota has never been reached. Moreover, some stateless persons are refused such cards and thus remain unaccounted for in population figures.³

Flows

Data on arrivals and departures are missing for the years 1990 to 1994 in Kuwaiti statistics. However, seen from Kuwait's neighbouring country Saudi Arabia, the traumatic experience of the First Gulf War is evidenced by population movements from Kuwait to the Kingdom.



INWARD MIGRATION

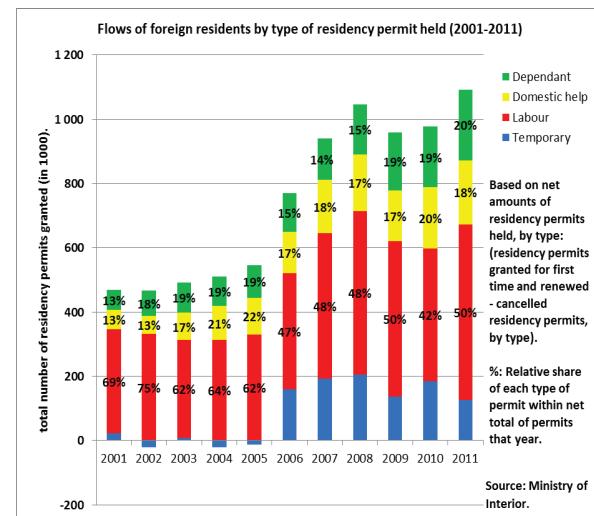
cent for Arabs. PACI data classifies the Bidun with the non-Kuwaitis, which can partly explain this high figure. Also, as was often witnessed before the First Gulf War and ensuing exodus of Palestinians from Kuwait, some expatriates may be able to settle durably in Kuwait, in spite of the region's migration policies aiming at preventing foreigners' long-term stay.

Flows

Within less than a decade, the number of those granted residency permits (first time and renewed) doubled, from 624,192 permits in 2001 to 1,306,634 in 2008. Cancellations of permits peaked in 2005 with 523,000 cancellations. Since 2007, the net amount of residencies delivered has remained steady.

The relative distribution of permits by type suggests a slight change in the structure of the flows over the decade. The relative share of workers dropped from 70-75 percent of permit holders in 2001, to 45-50 percent ten years later. The relative share of holders in the "dependents" category, by contrast, seems on the increase, from 13 percent to 20 percent of the total over the period.

Along with the rising numbers of temporary and "domestic helpers" permit holders, this suggests that Kuwait's recruitment policies may be shifting, towards hiring workers in higher occupation levels. Indeed, skilled and highly-skilled workers are financially able to afford

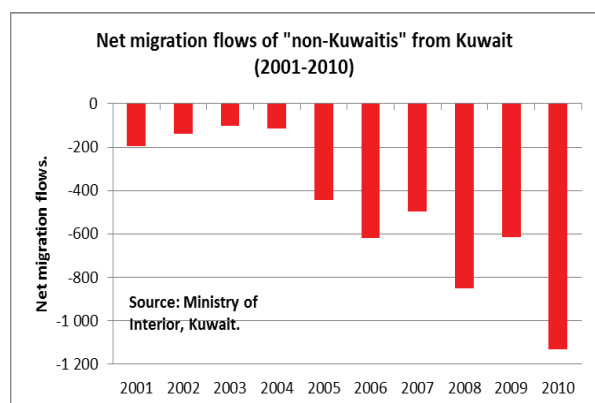


OUTWARD MIGRATION

From 1990 to 1996, massive net entrance flows to Saudi Arabia can be witnessed, reaching 245,000 persons in 1990. Other countries in the region, as well as in Europe and North America, received Kuwaiti nationals fleeing the war.

Interestingly, the Bidun population can also be spotted in Saudi data, from 1996 to the year 2007. Over the period, net migration flows of those categorised as “Kuwaiti–no nationality” to Saudi Arabia are always positive (i.e., more entries than exits), reaching up to 4,500 persons for the year 1998. Earlier, they were counted with the Kuwaiti nationals by Saudi border authorities.

This is consistent with the negative net migration flows of Bidun from Kuwait. In Kuwaiti statistics of border movements, they are the populations categorized as “Non-Kuwaitis.”

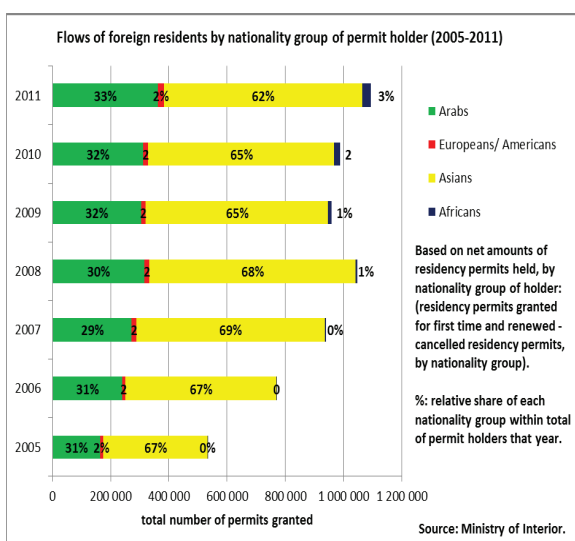


After 1985, Bidun residents in Kuwait were made illegal residents, thus facing deportation to their country of origin, if any. Most of them indeed had no citizenship documents and hence nowhere to be deported to. However, those who escaped the invasion of the country by Iraqi troops, alongside Kuwaiti nationals, were later barred from re-entering the country. This policy of conditioning exit from the country to accepting a stamp stating “no re-entry into Kuwait” on one’s travel document lasted until after the war. Also, the Ministry of Interior has continued to issue deportation orders, the overwhelming majority of these being “administrative deportation” orders, explicitly exempted from judicial review.

INWARD MIGRATION

services as well as sponsor their relatives for residency in Kuwait.

The distribution of permit holders by region of origin confirms the numeric domination of Asian expatriates. However, their relative share seems to be on a slight decline since the mid-2000s, which would be consistent with policy changes aiming at upgrading the skill level of the workforce.



The recent crackdowns on undocumented migrants in the country may further affect the expatriate populations’ size, as well as national and occupational composition. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour stated in mid-2013 that over 67,000 migrants had been stripped of their residencies in Kuwait in 2012, due to overstays abroad (38,000) and deportation (28,232). From April to July 2013, at least an additional 2,000 migrants were deported from the country for traffic violations.

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Endnotes

1. Arab Human Development Report, 2010.
2. The 2005 census collected data on Kuwaiti expatriates but did not disclose the methodology used. The published results contain only one table on Kuwaitis resident abroad for short-term stays.
3. The issue of the Bidun communities and the changes affecting their administrative and social status since the mid-1980s are of great importance as to the reliability of population data in Kuwait. Prior to 1989, stateless persons were categorised as Kuwaitis in national statistics released by the Ministry of Planning. When Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) started issuing population statistics, the Authority counted the Biduns with the non-Kuwaitis and thus created a discrepancy with MoP population data. After 1989 when they became illegal residents, the Bidun are unaccounted for in labour and residency permits’ data released by PACI, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and the Ministry of Interior.
4. The source of data used here is the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI), an independent government body in charge of: 1- centralising all population and labour force data in order to manage a fully computerised population register; 2- issuing mandatory civil identification cards (*Bitāqa madaniyya*) to every resident of the country, regardless of age and nationality. The other source of demographic and socioeconomic data on Kuwait is the Central Statistical Office (CSO) in the Planning Ministry. The CSO has conducted ten population and housing censuses since its inception in 1957. However, since 1995, a marked discrepancy has been witnessed between the PACI and the CSO population figures. The PACI database is connected electronically with other administrations and bodies registering demographic events and professional or residency issues (births and death; departures and arrivals; end of service, residency and ID deliveries, etc.). The PACI data are thus regularly updated. Therefore, it is likely that residents were undercounted by the CSO during census operations See N. Shah, *Population of Kuwait. Structure and Dynamics* (Kuwait: Kuwait University Academic Publication Council, 2010), chapter 1.
5. \$882 or 652.50 Euros as of October 1, 2013.

About the Author



Françoise De Bel-Air (Ph.D.) is a researcher and consultant based in Paris, France. A socio-demographer by training, she specialises in the political demography of Arab countries, with an emphasis on the Middle Eastern and Gulf States. She has been a research fellow and programme manager in the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Amman, Jordan. She is currently involved in several European and international projects focusing on recent changes in family structures in the Arab world, highly-skilled and female migration, as well as GCC countries' demographic dynamics and policies. She has published over thirty-five book chapters, scientific articles and research papers, and an edited volume on Migration and Politics in the Middle East (2006). She is currently working on a book on Jordan and the refugee issue. Contact: f_dba@hotmail.com

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