

Southeast Asians In The Middle East: The Role Of Filipino Migrant Workers In The Saudi Arabian Economy

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Abstract:

Encouraging mass immigration is how many countries address labour shortage nowadays. Migrant workers make significant contributions to their native country's gross national product, while also playing an important role in the host nation's economy. A country of 117 million, the Philippines is one of the world's largest exporters of human capital. Most Filipino migrant workers are employed in the Middle East, with the majority of them¹ finding work in Saudi Arabia. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to explore the main characteristics of the Saudi Arabian economy and the situation of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in the country. It seeks to support the hypothesis that Filipino workers have played an increasingly important role in the Saudi economy despite the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: Middle East, economy, Saudi Arabia, overseas Filipino workers

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, we can observe many countries encouraging mass immigration to address various labor shortages. Many immigrants are more than willing to leave their native countries for foreign environments in the hopes of finding a better life, no matter the distance from their home. In most cases, migrant workers not only help financially support their relatives, but they also make significant contributions to their native country's gross national product. At the same time, it is clear that foreign workers play a significant role in the host country's economy and contribute to its development.

In most literature on such economic issues, the most populous and geographically largest emigration and immigration countries, such as India, China, Mexico, the United States, Germany, and Russia, receive the lion's share of attention. Southeast Asia, on the other hand, including the Philippines, are often overlooked despite the island nation being one of the world's largest exporters of human capital with a population of 117 million (Castro-Palaganas, et. al, 2022), and 8.9% of the country's GDP coming from remittances (Rosales, 2023), which means that the country's economic development is linked in no small measure to Filipino nationals working abroad (Orbeta & Zosa, 2009). Most Filipino migrant workers are employed in the Middle East, the majority working in Saudi Arabia.

The question then arises: What role do overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) play in the Saudi Arabian economy? The aim of this study is to answer the above question, as the available literature which has addressed the issue, e.g. Sevilla (2016) studied the impact of nationalization of the Saudi labor market on OFWs, Rahmouni & Debbiche (2017) analyzed the impact of foreign workers' remittances on the development of the Saudi

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economy, and Aldarmi & Salameh (2019) studied the impact of foreign workers' remittances on the Saudi economy using the Bai-Perron test and OLS regression, but a comprehensive treatment of the academic problem outlined above is still lacking. In addition, recent events (e.g. the Covid-19 epidemic) have had a significant impact on migration trends, making it even more timely than before to conduct this study and draw the appropriate conclusions. The paper takes an interdisciplinary approach and uses the latest available statistical data to support the hypothesis that Filipino workers are playing an increasingly important role in the economy of the Arab country despite the coronavirus epidemic, i.e. their presence is of vital national economic interest not only for Manila but also for Riyadh.

2. Filipino migrant workers in the Middle East

The Philippines has a long history of internal and external migration. Until the 1970s, however, the employment of Filipinos overseas was limited and without state support and regulation. President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. signed Presidential Decree No. 442 in May 1974, which established the Labor Code, which included a government-subsidized labor export policy (Rosales, 2023). Since then, successive Philippine governments have taken great care to promote overseas employment, partly to combat the problem of unemployment while generating significant revenue for the state. Over the years, the legal framework for regulating migration has gradually evolved, and the new institutions have also placed a strong emphasis on protecting the rights of migrant workers. Some argue that a 'culture of migration' has emerged, i.e. overseas emigration for work is now an integral part of Filipino culture in the 21st century (Asis, 2006).

The emigration of Filipino labor has also been aided by international developments. In the Middle East, massive development has taken place on the back of substantial hydrocarbon reserves, which has led to significant labor shortages in the petroleum and construction sectors. As a result, many Filipinos found employment in Middle Eastern countries (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain) as well as in the United States. At the same time, Arab countries have made conscious efforts to create an attractive environment for their growing number of migrant workers. Over time, the service sector has also opened to them, which has led to a significant increase in the proportion of women in employment. In the mid-1980s, there were only 380,000, predominantly male, workers in the region; by 2021, the number had risen to over 890,000, and 60% of them were women (Overseas Filipino Workers, 2021).

Although the Philippine government remains interested in supporting the export of labor due to remittances (USD 40 billion in 2023) and the high unemployment rate (4.2% in October 2023, the highest since April 2005), abuses against workers have repeatedly prompted the government in Manila to temporarily ban migration to the countries in question (e.g. the number of people working abroad in the Philippines). Separate from government action, the number of Filipinos working abroad has fallen in recent years due to Covid-19, declining from 2.3 million in 2018 to 1.83 million in 2021, but has begun to rise again. According to data from 2022, Saudi Arabia had the highest number of Filipino migrant workers among Middle Eastern countries at around 450,000 (Mapa, 2023).

3. The Economy of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has the largest economy in the Middle East and ranks eighteenth in the world (IMF, 2023). It is a permanent and founding member of OPEC and, as one of the world's largest economies, is also a member of the G20. In addition, Saudi Arabia has the second largest proven crude oil reserves and the sixth largest measured natural gas reserves in the world (Anthony, 2023). The country is currently the world's largest exporter of crude oil. Other important parts of the economy are the refining of oil reserves and chemical

production, which is largely vertically integrated into the state-owned company Saudi Aramco.²

It is also important to note that Saudi Arabia, which is bidding to host Expo 2030, plans to transform its capital Riyadh into a global metropolis.³ The country also wants to double the size and population of the city, with a total investment of around 800 billion dollars (El Dahan, 2023). The Arab Gulf state aims to modernize and diversify its economy to gradually reduce its dependence on oil export revenues in the coming decades.⁴ However, the \$8 billion cost of building the Expo site pales in comparison to the \$400 billion in construction investment currently being made in the city of eight million inhabitants. Saudi Arabia is building the world's largest transportation network, the world's largest airport and more than 30 megaprojects are under construction (The Arab Weekly, 2023).⁵

Saudi Arabia wishes to disprove the idea that the country cannot thrive without oil. This is precisely why it plans to build a futuristic clean-energy city in the desert by the end of 2024. The project is called Neom, and the kingdom hopes that its realization will make it independent of oil and transform the country into a technology hub like Silicon Valley. It has been referred to as the world's largest carbon dioxide-free system in the world and consisting of 16 districts, the metropolis would rely solely on wind turbines, solar energy, and hydrogen fuel produced by electrolysis using green electricity (Neom, é. n.).⁶

4. Foreign Residents and Workers in Saudi Arabia

Soon after the discovery of oil in the late 1930s, an influx of foreign workers began to arrive in the Saudi Arabia. Initially, most of the arrivals came from the Arab and Western countries as technical, professional, and administrative staff, but soon a considerable number began arriving from Southeast Asia.

Presently, Saudi Arabia facing a growing need for foreign workers in the agriculture, cleaning, and domestic services. The hierarchy of foreign workers often depends on their country of origin.⁷ Workers from Arab and Western countries tend to occupy higher positions and lower positions are generally held by people from Africa and Southeast Asia (Sobaih – Elnasr, 2023, 4).

According to the Saudi census of 2022⁸, the number of foreigners in Saudi Arabia reached 13.38 million, representing 41.6% of the total population of 32.2 million. The number of male residents was 10.24 million, which is 76.5% of the total population, while the number of women was 3.14 million, or 23.5% of the population. Bangladeshi nationals represent the largest group of foreigners with around 2.12 million, representing 15.8% of all foreigners, followed by Indian nationals with about 1.88 million, or 14%, followed by Pakistani, Yemeni, and Egyptian nationals (Argaam, 2023).

5. Wages for Foreign Employees

² Not only are there large reserves of oil in Saudi Arabia, but it is also located close to the earth's surface, which makes extraction cheaper and more profitable compared to other places. The oil sector accounts for around 87% of Saudi budget revenues, 90% of export revenues and 42% of GDP (Forbes, n.d.). Saudi Arabia's oil reserves and production are largely managed by the aforementioned state-owned company Saudi Aramco (Tárik, 2023).

³ Saudi Arabia strives for regional hegemony and competes with Turkey and Iran, among others (Marsai & N. Rózsa, 2024).

⁴ Regarding Saudi Arabia, the case of Oman can serve as an example. See Al-Kathiri – Dhaoui, 2023

⁵ As far as the future is concerned, it is important to mention the so-called "Vision 2030" development plan. The vision consists of three main pillars: to make the country the heart of the Arab and Islamic world; to become a global investment center; to make the country a hub between Afro-Eurasia. The Saudi "Vision 2030" is based on three main themes that define goals to be achieved by 2030, such as a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation (Vision 2030, n.d.).

⁶ For more on the sustainability challenge, see Jermsittiparsert, 2021, p. 2-3.

⁷ See: Subsection "Wages for foreign employees".

⁸ The statistical data are available on the Argaam website. See Argaam, 2023.

Saudi Arabia's official minimum wage in 2023 was 4,000 Saudi riyals per month, equivalent to USD 1,065 (Wage Centre, 2023). It is important to note that this amount only applies to local citizens and public sector employees, not to foreigners and private sector employees. Furthermore, there is no minimum wage in the private sector in Saudi Arabia. According to official data from the Saudi Arabia's General Directorate of Statistics, the average salary in 2023 was 10,238 Saudi riyals per month, which is equivalent to USD 2,730 (Wage Centre, 2023). This average salary includes the public and private sector, non-profit organizations, and international and regional agencies. It is the average salary of local employees without allowances, compensation, or bonuses.

Considering this, it can be assumed that the wages of foreign employees working in Saudi Arabia are significantly lower than the wages of Saudi nationals, and there are also significant differences between people of different nationalities (Al-Qahtani, 2023)⁹:

In general, Saudi nationals are paid better than foreign employees. There are several reasons for this. First, the Saudi government has taken various measures to favor Saudi nationals in the labor market (Gov.sa, 2023). For example, local companies are encouraged to favor Saudi workers through tax breaks or other subsidies. Second, foreign workers tend to work in lower-paid sectors such as construction, the service sector, or domestic work. Wages in these sectors are generally lower and less competitive than in highly skilled and specialized occupations.

Looking at these wage differentials, we can conclude that it is profitable for Saudi employers to hire foreigners for jobs that require lower technical skills and that it is very difficult or near impossible to find local workers for certain positions. If one looks at the average salary of a Saudi national (4,000 riyals), one can clearly see that employing a foreigner can save employers thousands of riyals.

6. The Legal Framework for Foreign Employment: the Kafala System, Reforms and Criticisms

The kafala (Arabic for "guarantee" or "surety") system is a migration and labor market model used by many of Arab Gulf countries. The sponsorship system, or "kafala", has been a central element of Saudi migration policy since the arrival of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. The cornerstone of this system is that every migrant must have a local sponsor (a person or organization) who is responsible for obtaining work and residence permits. By taking on a sponsorship, the employer assumes full economic and legal responsibility for the employee for the duration of the contract. The sponsor is the official intermediary between the foreign employee and the administration. By accepting the sponsorship, the sponsor declares that the foreigner will work for him and undertakes to inform the immigration authorities of any changes to the employment contract (expiry, extension, or termination) or changes to the worker's status. The sponsor undertakes, at his own expense, to send the worker home at the end of the employment contract (Longva, 1999).

The kafala system restricts the mobility of workers, as official authorization is required to change jobs or employers. For this reason, workers often find themselves in a dependent position and can be vulnerable to their sponsors.

Recently, Saudi Arabia has eased restrictions on its sponsorship system for foreign workers, which had previously been criticized by human rights and labor organizations. From March 2021, workers in the energy, construction, and hospitality sectors will be able to change jobs in the country without the permission of their sponsor. In addition, the Saudi Arabia's leadership has allowed migrant workers to leave the country without the permission of their sponsors, although they still need the government's approval. However, according to

⁹ The salary of foreigners working in Saudi Arabia does not necessarily depend on position but varies according to the country of origin of the employees, and there are often significant differences between salaries. These differences depend on many factors such as nationality, work experience, qualifications, position and company policy. Average salaries range from 900 to 1500 Saudi riyals, with Filipinos among the better earners at 1500 riyals.

human rights organizations, these changes do not affect the three and a half million domestic workers who are most at risk of abuse and violations (BBC Arabic, 2021).

Saudi Arabia's leadership hopes that these changes will make the country more attractive to foreign investment. Local media praised the relaxation of the sponsorship system, and the *Okaz* newspaper wrote: "As of today, 6.27 million residents of the country will benefit from better labor contracts" (BBC Arabic, 2021). After the introduction of the new system, employees without Saudi citizenship will have the following rights (Abeer, 2023):

- can change jobs without consulting the sponsor;
- can enter and leave the kingdom without consulting the sponsor;
- are no longer dependent on the sponsor;
- can choose what to work on, improving their quality of work;
- can keep their passport (carry it with them).

According to experts, these changes will increase the efficiency of the Saudi Arabian labor market and attract foreign investors. Many believe that the changes will bring a plethora of benefits, including an improvement in the quality of labor in the country (BBC, 2021).¹⁰

When it comes to OWFs, they are often linked to Saudi Arabia's informal economy. In recent years, human traffickers posing as labor brokers have forced people from South and Southeast Asia and East Africa to migrate to Saudi Arabia to work in construction, agriculture, and as domestic workers. According to the U.S. State Department, once they arrive, they are isolated and forced to work in substandard conditions (Kiunguyu, 2022).¹¹

7. The importance of Philippine OFW for the Saudi Economy

Filipino migrant workers play an important role in the Saudi economy and contribute significantly to economic development (Al Arabiya, 2022). In recent decades, Filipino workers have flocked to Saudi Arabia in large numbers, partly due to economic demand and infrastructure development. These migrant workers are present in a variety of sectors, including construction, healthcare, hospitality, and domestic services. Their role in construction is particularly pronounced as the Saudi government embarks on large-scale infrastructure projects such as building new cities and developing transportation networks (Arab News, 2023a).

However, during the coronavirus epidemic, the number of foreign guest workers in Saudi Arabia dropped significantly, but after the gradual lifting of restrictions, OFWs are now returning. Significantly, Filipino workers contributed around 32.5 billion dollars to the Philippine's economy in 2022. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has remained the number one destination country for Filipino workers for many years, and about one-third of workers leaving the Philippines in 2023 choose the Kingdom (Arab News, 2023b).¹²

The number of Filipinos moving to Saudi Arabia for work continued to rise in 2023 and was the highest among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.¹³ Of the nearly 1.8 million Filipino workers in GCC countries, about half a million live and work in Saudi

¹⁰ The Saudi government has been frequently criticized in recent decades for the living conditions of foreign workers, with this criticism focusing on labor market practices, labor rights, and human rights issues (HRW, 2004). Foreign workers, including migrant workers from the Philippines, often face challenges in terms of livable working conditions, and fair treatment.

¹¹ Foreign workers providing domestic and personal services are particularly vulnerable to potential abuse. International human rights organizations emphasize the importance of fair treatment, fair wages, labor rights, and decent working conditions and have on many occasions drawn attention to the need for significant reforms in these areas in Saudi Arabia (Begum, 2020).

¹² Saudi Arabia is an attractive alternative for Filipinos for several reasons: Unlike other countries, Riyadh does not levy personal income tax on income earned in the country through employment, accommodation and travel costs are covered by the employer in most cases, as is the statutory health insurance for employees.

¹³ In second place are the United Arab Emirates with more than 250,600 Filipinos seeking employment in 2023, compared to almost 166,200 in 2022. The two Gulf states are followed by Hong Kong and Singapore, which are also popular destinations for Filipino expatriates.

Arabia, which has been the most popular destination for overseas employment for decades. According to data collected between January and October 2023, more than 380,000 Filipino nationals went to work in Saudi Arabia. In 2022, this figure was only 143,850 (Aben, 2023). According to Arnold Mamaclay, president of the Philippine Employment Agency, the popularity of Saudi Arabia is not only because it is an established labor market for Filipinos and the two countries' governments have good relations, but also due to the many ongoing projects and simplified immigration procedures (Aben, 2023). He said that the Saudis are hiring Filipino workers in large numbers and that the rules for issuing visas have also been significantly relaxed, with the Saudi embassy issuing visas within a day (Aben, 2023). Filipinos not only play an important but also an effective role in the Kingdom, where they are favored because they speak English very well and have a high level of technical knowledge that they have already acquired in their education (Impian Maid, 2019). Although current policies require employers in the Kingdom to give preference to Saudi nationals, there are still many jobs available for non-Saudis, especially in the construction and hospitality sectors. Saudi Arabia's many megaprojects and gigaprojects offer countless opportunities, especially for skilled labor. The demand for domestic workers has also increased, which could be because Saudi women are becoming more active in the workforce. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's economy is growing rapidly and the country's middle class is considered significant. With this middle class entering the workforce, the need for domestic help has also increased, aided by the Crown Prince's¹⁴ endorsement of women's participation in economic development¹⁵ (Aben, 2023).

8. Conclusion

As one of the largest labor exporting countries in the world, the Philippine economy relies heavily on remittances for economic support and emigration to solve the problem of unemployment. The majority of OFWs find work in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia being the most popular destination. The question rightly arises: what role do OFWs play in the Saudi economy? After studying the structure of the country's economy in the Middle East, the situation of foreign workers, the employment system and the specific case of Filipino workers, our hypothesis was confirmed, and we can safely say that OFWs are playing an increasingly important role in the Arab economy and that Riyadh has a vested interest in their presence. Today, huge construction investments are being made in the capital Riyadh and dozens of mega projects are underway across Saudi Arabia. This suggests that the massive development is likely to require the arrival of even more foreign workers, including Filipinos, meaning that the Saudi economy will continue to rely heavily on migrant labor.

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¹⁴ In the time before Mohammed bin Salman, women enjoyed fewer freedoms and the country was governed in a more extreme framework (Kmeckó, 2023).

¹⁵ The reforms implemented as part of the Vision 2030 plan are leading to changes in Saudi Arabia that reflect the improvement and transformation of women's social status. As Saudi women's participation in society and the labor market increases, businesses are providing more opportunities for Saudi women as they become increasingly important to the country's economic development and consumer market (Ho, 2019).

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