

# Policy Report

## Special Issue

*Stepwise and Return Migration between the Gulf,  
Europe and North America – How do GCC Countries  
Fare in the Global Competition for Talent?*

No. 2

# Second Generation Highly Skilled Pakistanis in Dubai

## Drivers of Secondary Migration

Gennaro Errichiello

### Executive Summary

Between 2011 and 2022, the number of highly skilled professionals in the private sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) grew by 132%, reflecting changing labour market priorities. For Pakistan, which is one of the main migrant-sending countries to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and to the UAE, this presents both opportunities — aligning training with demand for skilled labour — and risks, including reduced demand for low-skilled workers and brain drain.

This policy brief examines the role of highly skilled Pakistani migrants in the UAE within the country's shift toward a knowledge-based economy. Drawing on interviews with second-generation Pakistanis in Dubai, the brief shows how legal frameworks and migration policies shape life trajectories. While new schemes like the Golden Visa offer some stability, most remain in 'permanent temporariness', with limited rights and no path to citizenship.

To strengthen the UAE's migration framework and advance its transition toward a more sustainable and knowledge-driven economy, this brief recommends several key policy actions. Expanding inclusive, long-term residency options will help attract and retain skilled individuals whose expertise contributes to national development. Promoting civic inclusion and recognising second-generation residents as active contributors to the UAE's knowledge economy will further enhance social cohesion and long-term investment in human capital. In parallel, strengthening data collection and bilateral coordination with key partner countries will improve policy design, implementation, and responsiveness to emerging trends. Together, these measures can help align the UAE's migration policies with national strategic goals, fostering more stable, inclusive, and forward-looking pathways for migrants and residents alike.

## Introduction

“With the UAE’s demand for skilled workers continuing to grow, the opportunity for Pakistan is immense if they focus on improving skills”.<sup>1</sup>

This statement, made by the Ambassador of Pakistan to the United Arab Emirates, reflects a strategic shift in the UAE’s labour market: a strategic transition toward a more skilled and diversified migrant workforce, enhancing competitiveness and ensuring long-term sustainability beyond reliance on low-skilled labourers. For Pakistan, this transition presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The country has long relied on remittances from unskilled and semi-skilled Gulf workers, but it must now invest in skill development and human capital to stay competitive in the evolving global labour market. At the same time, policymakers need to address the risk of brain drain by creating incentives and opportunities that encourage skilled workers to contribute to the domestic economy.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this transformation also raises important questions for those already settled in the UAE, particularly second-generation individuals born in the UAE or other Gulf countries, as well as those who migrated to the region at a young age and have since grown up and have settled in the UAE — who experience long-term residence without the prospect of citizenship. Despite their deep social, economic, and emotional ties to the UAE, these individuals remain legally temporary. Their experiences offer valuable insights into how national migration policies and global labour market shifts intersect with everyday life, identity, and future planning.

This policy brief draws on interviews with 29 second-generation Pakistanis in Dubai<sup>3</sup>, showing how their experiences echo common themes among second-generation individuals — legal exclusion, uncertainty, and settlement dilemmas — while also reflecting the unique position of Pakistanis as a large but understudied community in the Gulf. Their narratives offer critical insights for policymakers working to align migration governance with demographic and labour market priorities.

## Background, Context and Methodology

Between 1971 and 2022, semi- and unskilled workers from Pakistan constituted the majority of the country’s migrant workforce in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, while “highly qualified workers such as doctors and engineers and highly skilled workers such as nurses and computer programmers comprised only 4 percent from 2011 to 2022.”<sup>4</sup>

The number of highly skilled professionals in the UAE’s private sector increased by approximately 132% between 2011 and 2022.<sup>5</sup> In 2023, Pakistani highly skilled/qualified workers in the UAE represented about 17.5 percent of all Pakistani migrants.<sup>6</sup> This significant rise reflects the growing importance of a skilled workforce to the UAE’s economic transformation, particularly as the country advances toward a knowledge-driven model of growth. Indeed, national policy documents emphasise that investment in sectors such as science and technology can enhance competitiveness, positioning the UAE as ‘an attractive destination for global talent...to work and partake in accelerating economic productivity’.<sup>7</sup> In response, the UAE has introduced new visa schemes and long-term residency pathways to attract and retain highly skilled migrants, aligning with national goals to enhance global competitiveness.<sup>8</sup>

Research underscores the complex ways in which second-generation South Asian migrants experience belonging in Dubai amid the absence of citizenship rights. Many, as Ali notes<sup>9</sup>, return to Dubai after studying abroad, drawn by family networks and a lifestyle often perceived as more desirable than staying in Western or origin countries. Despite legal exclusion from Emirati citizenship, these individuals express strong attachments to Dubai, rooted in social ties, material security, and everyday life.<sup>10</sup>

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Ethnographic studies show that citizenship and belonging remain key concerns. While some second-generation individuals report feelings of being ‘second-class citizens’,<sup>11</sup> others embrace a form of permanent temporariness, living transnationally and holding Western passports while contributing economically and socially to the UAE.<sup>12</sup>

Drawing on 29 qualitative interviews with second-generation Pakistanis in their 20s and 30s in Dubai recorded in 2014, 2015, 2022 and 2025, this policy brief examines how the UAE’s legal frameworks and migration policies shape their everyday experiences and future aspirations. Due to space limits, this report highlights three narratives to illustrate diverse experiences and aspirations. These narratives highlight the contradictions of a migration system built on structural temporariness, where citizenship is unattainable, but official discourse seeks to attract and retain skilled professionals. This gap underscores the need for more coherent and inclusive policies.

### Key Findings and Analysis

Ethnographic research on migration in the GCC countries has consistently underscored the profound effects of legal and structural temporariness on migrants’ daily experiences and long-term trajectories.<sup>13</sup> These legal constraints significantly shape migrants’ rights, social participation, and future planning. Temporariness functions as a de facto permanent condition in the UAE, deeply embedded in the country’s migration governance model. Nonetheless, migrants — particularly middle and upper-class professionals — negotiate this status through everyday forms of integration and attachment, cultivating a sense of belonging despite formal exclusion.<sup>14</sup> While some migrants remain ambivalent about long-term settlement, recent reforms such as the Golden Visa and retirement visa offer new avenues for stability. Although participants — still in their 20s and 30s and not yet of pension age — could in theory benefit from these reforms, their future outlook remains uncertain.

The experiences of second-generation Pakistanis in Dubai highlight the complexities of living under such a system. Although born and raised in the UAE, they are legally classified as foreign residents, despite having limited or no ties to Pakistan. Some lack fluency in Urdu, further complicating their identification with their country of origin. They feel culturally and socially embedded in Dubai, where they have spent their lives, yet remain legally and politically marginalised. This conflict is particularly evident when considering their future trajectories. As Parveen (aged 33), born and raised in Dubai and working as a copywriter, explained:

“Right now, my life in Dubai is quite stable. I own my own apartment here, it’s a freehold property, and my parents also own their home, which is a freehold apartment as well. So, you could say I have a strong sense of stability in Dubai...As for the future, I don’t have any major plans yet; I’ll just see where life takes me.”

Parveen’s case shows how material stability in Dubai — through property ownership and family rootedness — does not guarantee long-term security. Despite deep local ties, she remains excluded from citizenship, reflecting the precarity produced by the UAE’s structurally temporary migration regime. This highlights the need for residency reforms that go beyond short-term visas, as current Gulf policies prioritise demographic balance and citizen privileges over stability for long-term residents.

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Almas (aged 21), who migrated to Dubai at the age of three and now works as an accountant, expressed a similar desire to stay:

“Yes, I do plan to stay here long term. I've completed my education and worked for two years. Right now, I'm just taking a break, but I'm definitely looking for new job opportunities. Because I'm committed to building a life here, I believe — Inshallah — when the time comes, I'll get married here as well...I wouldn't choose to leave Dubai unless there's a very compelling opportunity. Do you know what I mean? For example, if I received a job offer from the UK, US, or Canada with sponsorship for permanent residency or citizenship, then yes, I'd consider moving. But if that doesn't happen, I'm comfortable staying here.”

Almas' story shows how rootedness coexists with uncertainty, underscoring the need for clearer long-term residency pathways. Without reform, exclusionary citizenship policies risk driving skilled second-generation Pakistanis toward secondary migration, with Canada emerging as a key destination, as reported by some of the participants. Saad (aged 39), who was born in Saudi Arabia and moved to Dubai in 1998 and has his own copywriting company, illustrates how family considerations and geopolitical uncertainty shape planning:

“That's the million-dollar question. Honestly, I'm not sure. My wife and I have been discussing it for years, and we go back and forth quite a lot...If [our children] begin school here, it's likely they'll continue... we're at a point where if we don't relocate soon, we'll probably remain here until they finish school...That said, given the current global situation, moving isn't easy. We're not considering Pakistan. The UK is quite unstable at the moment, and while the US might be a more viable option, I'm not American. That would mean navigating immigration and employment processes, which adds further complexity.”

Such accounts reflect an emerging sense of stability among long-term residents, particularly those with property ownership and deep familial roots in the UAE. These lived realities call for a more flexible, inclusive migration framework that acknowledges the long-standing presence, contributions, and aspirations of second-generation individuals who, while formally excluded, consider the UAE their home.

The cases of Parveen, Almas, and Saad highlight how restrictive migration frameworks shape second-generation strategies across different life stages. Despite viewing Dubai as 'home,' their future depends on clearer, more secure residency pathways without which skilled residents may seek stability elsewhere. Parveen, who was born in Dubai and owns property along with her parents, presents a strong sense of economic and emotional rootedness. She emphasises her stable situation and frames her current life in Dubai as secure. She remains vague about the long-term; this ambivalence reflects a recurring theme among second-generation residents: while materially settled, they remain structurally excluded due to lack of citizenship and limited long-term guarantees.

Almas' case echoes this ambivalence but with more emphasis on career-driven conditionality. Despite her desire to remain and build a life in Dubai, she makes it clear that the lack of permanent residency or citizenship would prompt her to leave if a compelling opportunity arose elsewhere. Her view reveals a pragmatic approach rooted in professional aspirations and legal precarity.

Saad, by contrast, offers a family-oriented and strategic lens. Having lived in Dubai since 1998 and raised a family there, his decisions are shaped by his children's schooling and the global instability of alternative destinations. His narrative shows that long-term residents often stay not purely by choice, but because viable alternatives are limited. While he rejects the idea of returning to Pakistan and questions the feasibility of relocating to the UK or US, he also underscores the complex calculations involved in migration decisions when legal permanence is out of reach.

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Together, these three accounts reflect a shared experience of structural exclusion amid emotional belonging.<sup>15</sup> All three participants demonstrate that their future remains uncertain and contingent on external policy shifts or global opportunities. They collectively highlight a policy gap in the UAE's migration framework: While efforts such as the Golden and Green Visas mark steps toward attracting skilled migrants, they fall short of addressing the long-term aspirations of those already embedded in Emirati society. This comparison suggests a crucial need for inclusive residency policies that recognise not only economic contributions but also the social and emotional ties formed by migrants.

### Policy Implications and Recommendations

In light of the shifting labour dynamics in the UAE and the lived experiences of second-generation Pakistanis in Dubai, the following policy recommendations aim to guide Emirati policymakers in adapting to a changing regional migration landscape:

- **Expand inclusive, long-term residency options.** Current schemes like the Golden and Green Visas largely benefit high-income professionals, overlooking long-term residents without elite credentials. Therefore, the UAE should offer residency pathways for second-generation individuals and recognise integration, education, and community engagement — not just income.
- **Value the contributions of future generations of migrants.** Despite exclusion from formal rights, second-generation individuals maintain strong ties to Dubai. Therefore, the UAE authorities should promote civic inclusion and social integration and improve access to property rights, education, and social services.
- **Strengthen data and bilateral coordination.** Better governance relies on robust data and cooperation. Policymakers should collect data on second-generation's aspirations and integration and use evidence-based insights to shape future labour and migration policies.

By addressing both structural constraints and migrant aspirations, these recommendations offer a roadmap for equitable, future-oriented migration governance.

### Conclusion

The shifting dynamics of the UAE's labour market present both challenges and opportunities for Pakistan and its diaspora. As the UAE transitions toward a knowledge-based economy, demand for highly skilled professionals is expected to rise, offering new pathways for long-term residence through initiatives like the Golden and Green Visas. However, second-generation Pakistanis — such as Parveen, Almas, and Saad — remain embedded in a paradox of emotional belonging and legal exclusion. Despite strong social and material ties to Dubai, their futures remain uncertain due to restrictive citizenship and residency frameworks. For the UAE, inclusive migration policies that acknowledge the contributions of long-term residents are essential to ensuring sustainable integration. A coherent, bilateral approach — rooted in long-term planning, skills investment, and inclusive governance — can transform migration into a mutually beneficial strategy for both sending and receiving states.

## About the Author

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## Endnotes

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