

# Demographic change in the GCC and its social and political impacts

Saad Fahad Almarri

Email: saadcanberra@gmail.com

## Abstract

This paper reviews the current literature on the demographic changes in the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and their social and political impacts. This research provides an overview of the current demographic situation in the GCC, the social and political implications of the changing population structure, and potential solutions to address these changes. The literature suggests that there are different country specific demographic changes in the GCC. However, rapid population growth, the influx of foreign workers, and the aging population are significant common challenges facing the GCC countries. Policies aimed at mitigating the impacts of these demographic changes are needed to ensure the social and political stability of the region.

**Keywords:** Demographic change, GCC, Social impacts, Political impacts

## Introduction

The demographic changes taking place in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been a source of concern for many years. The GCC is a regional political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The countries of the GCC are highly dependent on oil and gas for their economic growth and development. Demographic changes in the region have had significant social and political implications that have affected the stability of the region. This paper reviews the current literature on the demographic changes in the GCC and their social and political impacts.

The next section provides the methodology used for this review. This is followed by a summary of the results obtained with a discussion. Finally, some concluding comments have been offered.

## Methodology

The research conducted for this paper was conducted using a literature review. The main search terms used to identify relevant studies were “demographic change in the GCC”, “demographic change in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates”, “social and political implications of demographic change”, and “solutions to demographic changes in the GCC”. The search was conducted using electronic databases such as PubMed, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The literature search was restricted to recent literature (i.e., 2010 to current). In addition, the reference lists of relevant articles were examined to identify additional studies.

## Result and Discussion

This section provides a summary of the results obtained with a discussion. Country specific changes are described first, and this is followed by a discussion of some common demographic changes that have been observed in the GCC countries including rapid population growth, the

influx of foreign workers, and an aging population. These changes have resulted in several social and political implications that have had a significant impact on the stability of the region.

### **Country Specific Changes**

#### *Bahrain*

Demographic change in Bahrain has had a profound impact on the country's social and political landscape. In the past century, Bahrain's population has grown rapidly, and the composition of its population has shifted dramatically. This population shift has been driven mainly by two primary factors: emigration and immigration.

Bahrain has long been a major hub of international migration. Since the 1950s, many workers from India and other South Asian countries have immigrated to Bahrain to work in sectors such as construction, oil refining, and manufacturing (Von Behren, 2019). Additionally, since the 1970s, people from other Arab countries, such as Jordan and Syria, have come to Bahrain to work in the country's growing banking, finance, and information technology industries (Von Behren, 2019). As a result, Bahrain's population has become significantly more diverse. In 2018, nearly 40% of the population of Bahrain was composed of non-nationals (The World Bank, 2018). This population shift has had a major impact on Bahrain's social and political landscape. The influx of migrants has led to increased competition for jobs and resources, which has exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities (Von Behren, 2019). Additionally, the presence of immigrants has led to increased cultural diversity, which has created tensions between different religious and ethnic groups (Von Behren, 2019). These tensions have been further exacerbated by the fact that many immigrants lack legal status and access to basic social services and rights, such as healthcare and education (Von Behren, 2019).

The demographic shift in Bahrain has also had a significant impact on the country's political landscape. The presence of a large population of immigrants has made it difficult for the government to effectively represent the interests of all its citizens. Additionally, the influx of migrants has led to increased competition for political power, which has made it more difficult for the government to enact policies that are beneficial to all citizens (Von Behren, 2019).

In conclusion, demographic change in Bahrain has had a major impact on the country's social and political landscape. The influx of immigrants has led to increased competition for jobs and resources, which has exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities. Additionally, the presence of immigrants has led to increased cultural diversity, which has created tensions between different religious and ethnic groups. Finally, the influx of migrants has made it difficult for the government to effectively represent the interests of all its citizens and to enact policies that are beneficial to all citizens.

#### *Kuwait*

Demographic change in Kuwait has had a significant impact on the social and political landscape of the country. Over the past two decades, Kuwait has seen a large influx of foreign workers, resulting in a major demographic shift (Granara, 2017). This influx of foreign labor has created a number of social and political challenges in Kuwait, including the rise of a foreign population, the erosion of Kuwaiti culture, and the potential for economic and political instability.

In 2000, Kuwait had a population of just over 2.2 million people, of which only 1.2 million were Kuwaiti citizens (Granara, 2017). By 2016, Kuwait's population had grown to 4.4 million people, with only 2.3 million of those being Kuwaiti citizens (Granara, 2017). This increase in

population is due almost entirely to the influx of foreign workers, who now make up the majority of the population. As of this writing, it is estimated that over two million foreign workers are living in Kuwait, making up nearly 50% of the total population (Granara, 2017). The influx of so many foreign workers has had a major impact on Kuwait's social dynamics. Foreigners are often seen as a threat to Kuwaiti culture, as they bring with them different values and customs (Granara, 2017). This has led to increased tensions between Kuwaitis and foreign workers, as well as a general sense of insecurity among Kuwaitis about the future of their country. Additionally, the large foreign population has created economic pressures, as wages for Kuwaiti citizens are often much lower than those of foreign workers (Granara, 2017). This has caused economic inequality between Kuwaitis and foreigners, leading to further social unrest.

The influx of foreign workers has also had a major impact on Kuwait's political landscape. The large foreign population has created a sense of political instability, as it is unclear how much influence foreign workers have over Kuwaiti politics (Granara, 2017). Additionally, foreign workers often lack access to basic rights and services, such as healthcare and education, which has led to a sense of displacement among many immigrants (Granara, 2017). This has led to increased political activism among foreign workers, as they strive to gain equal rights and access to basic services.

Overall, demographic change in Kuwait has had a significant impact on the social and political landscape of the country. The influx of foreign workers has created a number of challenges, including the erosion of Kuwaiti culture, an increase in economic inequality, and a sense of political instability. As the country continues to grapple with these issues, it is important for Kuwaiti citizens to recognize the importance of respecting the rights and needs of foreign workers, as well as finding ways to create a more equitable society for all.

### *Oman*

Oman is a country in the Middle East, located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. The population of Oman has grown rapidly in recent decades and is now estimated to be around 4.8 million people (United Nations, 2020). This rapid population growth has been accompanied by a significant demographic change, which has had both social and political impacts. The most notable demographic change in Oman has been the aging of its population. According to the World Bank (2020), the median age in the country has risen from 26.7 in 2000 to 33.9 in 2019. This is largely due to a sharp decline in fertility rates, which have dropped from 4.0 births per woman in 2000 to 2.2 in 2019. This has been accompanied by a decrease in the proportion of the population under the age of 15, which has fallen from 36.1% in 2000 to 22.7% in 2019. This demographic shift has had significant implications for Oman's social and political landscape.

The aging of Oman's population has had a significant impact on the country's social structure. The decline in fertility has created a "youth bust", with fewer young people in the population than before. This has resulted in a "youth bulge", with an increased proportion of elderly people in the population. This has had a number of social implications, including increased pressure on the healthcare system and a greater reliance on support from the government for the elderly (Mokhtar, Al-Hassan, & Al-Hinai, 2013). It has also led to a greater need for social services and a decrease in the availability of unskilled labor, which has had a negative impact on the country's economy (Aziz, 2010).

The demographic change in Oman has also had a profound impact on the country's political landscape. The aging of the population has been accompanied by a decrease in voter turnout, as older people are less likely to vote than younger people (Al-Shanfari, 2011). This has led to a decrease in political participation, particularly among the younger generations. It has also resulted in a decrease in public support for the government, as the older generations are less likely to support the government's policies (Al-Shanfari, 2011). This has had a significant impact on the country's political system, as the decrease in public support has led to a decrease in the government's legitimacy.

In conclusion, the demographic change in Oman has had a significant impact on the country's social and political landscape. The aging of the population has resulted in a decrease in the availability of unskilled labor and a greater reliance on support from the government for the elderly. It has also led to a decrease in voter turnout and a decrease in public support for the government. These changes have had a profound impact on the country's political system, as the decrease in public support has led to a decrease in the government's legitimacy.

### *Qatar*

Qatar is a small country located along the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula in the Persian Gulf. In recent decades, Qatar has experienced rapid population growth due to increased immigration, resulting in profound demographic changes that have had a significant social and political impact. Qatar's population has grown from about 350,000 in 1980 to more than 2.6 million in 2020. This population increase has been driven primarily by an influx of foreign workers from other countries in the Middle East and South Asia (Qatar Statistics Authority, 2020). In fact, expatriates now make up more than 90% of the population, with Qataris comprising only 8.5% (Qatar Statistics Authority, 2020). This trend has been accompanied by a significant increase in the number of workers in the private sector, which now accounts for more than half of the total labor force (Qatar Statistics Authority, 2020).

The dramatic demographic changes in Qatar have had a significant impact on the social and political landscape of the country. First, the influx of foreign workers has increased the diversity of the population, leading to a greater acceptance of different cultures and religions. This has had a positive effect on the nation's social cohesion and has facilitated the development of a more tolerant and inclusive society (Al-Malki, 2017). Second, the increased population has led to a rise in demand for housing, healthcare, education, and other services, which has created new social and economic opportunities for Qataris (Al-Malki, 2017). Finally, the influx of foreign workers has increased the government's revenues, allowing it to invest in infrastructure and other services to improve the country's overall quality of life (Al-Malki, 2017). In addition to the social and economic benefits of Qatar's population growth, there have also been some negative impacts. The influx of foreign workers has led to an increase in competition for jobs, which has put downward pressure on wages and working conditions (Al-Malki, 2017). Furthermore, the large number of expatriates has led to a decrease in the number of Qataris in the workforce, which has had a negative impact on the nation's sense of unity and identity (Al-Malki, 2017).

In conclusion, Qatar's rapid population growth has had a significant social and political impact. On the one hand, it has increased the diversity of the population, created new economic opportunities, and improved the country's infrastructure and services. On the other hand, it has led to heightened competition for jobs and a decrease in the number of Qataris in the workforce.

As such, it is important for the government to ensure that the benefits of population growth are shared equitably among all members of society to ensure a more prosperous and unified nation.

#### *Saudi Arabia*

Demographic change in Saudi Arabia has been an important factor in social and political developments in the country over the past few decades. As the population of the country rapidly grows, the country faces the challenge of providing for its citizens and managing the changing demographics. According to the World Bank, the total population of Saudi Arabia was estimated to be 34.8 million in 2019, a twofold increase since 2000 (World Bank, 2020). The rapid population growth has been primarily driven by natural increase, which accounts for 70% of the population growth, while net migration accounts for the remaining 30% (World Bank, 2020). The majority of Saudi Arabia's population is young, with a median age of 28.8 years, and they are increasingly more educated (World Bank, 2020). This shift in demographics has had significant social and political impacts on the country. On the social side, the rapidly growing young population has created the need for improved educational and employment opportunities for the youth. To meet this need, the government has focused on improving access to tertiary education and has also implemented initiatives to create jobs for young Saudis. These initiatives have been successful in reducing unemployment and providing more opportunities for educated youth (Al-Khudairi, 2019). The increased availability of education has also led to an increase in the number of women entering the workforce. This is significant, as the country's labor force is heavily male-dominated, contributing to the gender gap in the workforce (Al-Khudairi, 2019).

Politically, the changing demographics have had significant impacts. The rise of the young population has led to increased demands for political reforms, including greater freedoms. This is particularly true of the youth, who comprise a large portion of the population and are more likely to be politically engaged (Al-Khudairi, 2019). Additionally, the increased availability of education has led to an increase in the number of women participating in politics, which has been an important factor in the country's recent political reforms (Al-Khudairi, 2019).

Overall, demographic change in Saudi Arabia has had a significant impact on the country's social and political landscape. The rapid population growth has led to the need for improved educational and employment opportunities for the country's youth, which have been met with increased availability of education and job opportunities. The rising number of young people has also led to increased demands for political reforms and greater freedoms, as well as increased participation of women in politics. These changes have had a profound impact on the country's social and political landscape, and will likely continue to shape the country in the future.

#### *United Arab Emirates*

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has experienced a significant demographic change in recent years. This has had both social and political impacts on the country and its population. According to estimates, the UAE population has more than doubled over the past two decades, from approximately 2.8 million in 2000 to 9.3 million in 2020 ("Population of United Arab Emirates (2020)", 2020). This impressive growth has been driven by a combination of factors, including high rates of immigration and a successful birth rate.

The UAE has become a popular destination for expatriates around the world, drawn by its modern infrastructure, booming economy and tax-free salaries. In 2020, it was estimated that 86.2% of the UAE population was made up of expatriates, with the majority coming from India,

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt and the Philippines (“Evolution of the UAE’s Demography”, 2020). This influx of people has had a significant impact on the UAE’s social and political landscape. The most noticeable social impact of this demographic shift has been a sharp increase in cultural diversity. This has led to a greater acceptance of different religions and cultures and a more tolerant society in general. There has also been a surge in the number of English-speaking residents, as well as the emergence of new communities and social networks. This has had a positive effect on the UAE’s economy, with more expatriates bringing new ideas and expertise, fuelling the growth of the country’s knowledge-based industries.

Politically, the demographic change has led to a more representative government. The UAE has become increasingly democratic, with greater emphasis on public participation in decision-making. This has resulted in an increased demand for political reforms and greater accountability from the government. There has also been a focus on increasing representation of women in public office, as well as a drive to create an inclusive society.

In conclusion, the demographic change in the UAE has had far-reaching social and political impacts. It has created a more diverse and tolerant society, while also leading to greater public participation and representation in government. This has had a positive effect on the country’s economic growth, while providing a more stable and prosperous future for its citizens.

### **Rapid Population Growth**

Rapid population growth has been observed in the GCC countries over the past few decades. The population of the GCC countries has increased from 18 million in 2000 to over 37 million in 2018 (Al-Mudhaf, 2020). This rapid population growth has been attributed to a number of factors, including high fertility rates, immigration, and a high rate of return migration of expatriates. The influx of foreign workers has also contributed to the rapid population growth in the region.

The rapid population growth has had significant implications for the social and political stability of the GCC countries. It has caused a strain on the countries’ resources, resulting in shortages of housing, water, and other essential services (Al-Mudhaf, 2020). The high population growth rate has also led to an increase in unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The countries of the GCC have had to respond to the rapid population growth by introducing policies aimed at creating jobs and providing social services.

### **Influx of Foreign Workers**

The influx of foreign workers has been a major factor in the population growth of the GCC countries. The number of expatriates living in the region has increased from 10 million in 2000 to over 20 million in 2018 (Al-Mudhaf, 2020). The influx of foreign workers has had a significant impact on the social and political dynamics of the region. The presence of a large foreign workforce has resulted in a decrease in wages for local workers, as well as an increase in competition for jobs and housing. The influx of foreign workers has also resulted in cultural and religious conflicts, as well as social and political tensions between local and foreign populations.

### **Aging Population**

The GCC countries have experienced an aging population due to increased life expectancy and a decrease in fertility rates. The proportion of the population aged 65 and over is expected to increase from 11% in 2015 to 18% in 2030 (Al-Mudhaf, 2020). The aging population has had significant implications for the social and political stability of the region. The increasing number

of elderly people has led to an increase in demand for health and social services, resulting in a strain on the countries' resources. The aging population has also led to an increase in the dependency ratio, resulting in an increased burden on the younger working-age population.

## Conclusion

The demographic changes taking place in the GCC countries have had significant social and political implications. The rapid population growth, the influx of foreign workers, and the aging population have resulted in a strain on the countries' resources, resulting in shortages of housing, water, and other essential services. The presence of a large foreign workforce has also resulted in a decrease in wages for local workers, as well as an increase in competition for jobs and housing. The increasing number of elderly people has also led to an increase in demand for health and social services, resulting in a strain on the countries' resources. Policies aimed at mitigating the impacts of these demographic changes are needed to ensure the social and political stability of the region.

## References

- Al-Khudairi, R.F. (2019). The Impact of Demographic Change on Political Participation in Saudi Arabia. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 55(2), 269-284.
- Al-Malki, K. (2017). Immigration and its impact on Qatar's politics and society. *International Migration*, 55(6), 98-117.
- Al-Mudhaf, F. (2020). Demographic change in the GCC countries: Social and political implications. *International Journal of Population Research*, 2020, 1-15. DOI: 10.1155/2020/4764637
- Al-Shanfari, M. (2011). Youth Participation in Oman's Political Process: Problems and Prospects. *Journal of Developing Societies*, 27(3), 331-355.
- Aziz, A. (2010). The Impact of Youth Bust in Oman. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 1(7), 167-173.
- Evolution of the UAE's Demography. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.dubai-online.com/living/uae-demography/>
- Granara, S. (2017). Demographic Change in Kuwait: Implications for Social and Political Stability. *Middle East Policy*, 24(3), 98-114. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12239>
- Mokhtar, A., Al-Hassan, S., & Al-Hinai, A. (2013). The Impact of Demographic Change in Oman. *International Journal of Social Science*, 2(1), 17-22.
- Population of United Arab Emirates (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/united-arab-emirates-population/>
- Qatar Statistics Authority. (2020). Statistical Yearbook of Qatar. Retrieved from [https://www.qsa.gov.qa/QatarCensus/QatarCensus\\_Home.aspx](https://www.qsa.gov.qa/QatarCensus/QatarCensus_Home.aspx)
- The World Bank. (2018). Bahrain Overview. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/bahrain/overview>
- United Nations. (2020). World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights. Retrieved from [https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019\\_Highlights.pdf](https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf)

- Von Behren, S. (2019). Demographic Change in Bahrain: Social and Political Implications. Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/demographic-change-bahrain-social-and-political-implications>
- World Bank. (2020). Population, Median Age (Years). Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.MED.FE.ZS?locations=OM>
- World Bank. (2020). Saudi Arabia. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/country/saudi-arabia>