Pandemic Mobilities in the Persian Gulf: Unpacking the "Crises"

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic migrant communities have become immobile–stuck in the destination countries, or unable to continue their journeys in transit or in origin countries. This project brings together a collection of essays that seek to spell out how migrant communities in the Global South, namely in Mexico, Nepal, Qatar and Zimbabwe, have been affected by, and reacted to the pandemic. Inspired by a mobility justice approach, we speak to the (changing) power relations inherent to mobility, as well as the intersectional nature of migration with inequalities mapped along a global geography of race and class, amongst others. We do this by acknowledging that long before COVID-19, migration and mobility were intrinsically embedded into a hierarchical globalized regime of asymmetric power, that largely determines who can move and under what conditions. The essays aim to not only re-centre the Global South, but also to view these cases as relational to each other and to the state of global affairs.

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author gives an example for how particular policies during COVID-19 in Qatar have affected the lives of migrants there, and in their countries of origin. Originally aimed at improving the conditions of migrant communities in Qatar, the Wage Protection System has further restricted the mobility of these communities. The author sets the wider scene for this case, by examining the different meanings and framings of “crisis” in world and in the Gulf. A “crisis” that is utilized by the state, or by specific structures of it, for further intervention and restrictions. As such, the Pandemic is yet another layer of a wider securitized and crisis-based approach. Moreover, this article also gives a nuanced account for how migrants in Qatar and in the Gulf are not one social group, but rather they are often perceived and treated along hierarchical lines of race and class.

The six Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf states do not see themselves as destinations for permanent settlement, have not acceded to any of the United Nations refugee conventions and do not offer easy pathways to citizenship for immigrants (Babar 2021: 412–414). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) increasingly considers itself to be a global destination for travel and tourism, but in most of the other Gulf states, the primary form of inward mobility that has occurred over the past five decades is temporary labour migration. Across the region, migrants make up large components of national populations and in several of them they heavily outnumber citizens. This demographic "imbalance" between citizens and foreigners is part of an ongoing public and policy debate in the Gulf, which frames the crisis of Gulf migration as a crisis of Gulf demography (Forstenlechner and Rutledge 2011). Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates combined host somewhere between 25 and 30 million foreign workers. In Qatar and the UAE, the foreign populations vastly outnumber citizens by approximately 9 to 1, and the labour market across the region is dominated by lower skill, lower income migrant workers.

Lower income migrant workers make up a large proportion of the regional demography and early on in the COVID-19 pandemic's spread were identified by host states as a community of critical concern. Due to their dense numerical presence in the region, as well as their living and working arrangements that put them into regular and sustained contact with many others, lower income migrant workers are seen as a community that is particularly susceptible to infectious disease (CIRS and WISH 2019). As a result, most Gulf governments introduced a range of targeted measures specifically to contain the virus from spreading among the worker community. In addition to mass testing campaigns, heightened sanitation measures in workers' accommodations and workplaces, and the quarantining and isolation of those infected or suspected of being infected, the migrant community contended with even more severe restrictions placed on their mobility than others did.

From the spring of 2020, COVID-19 upended mobilities at the global level. The crisis produced by the pandemic had an almost immediate and, in some cases, transformative impact on human mobility. International travel all but ceased, as even forms of human mobility normally undertaken with relative ease – business travel, tourism, student migration – were suddenly brought to a resounding halt. Not only

interstate and international travel, but even domestic mobility was curtailed in ways that could not have been imagined in 2019. The pandemic served to add a crisis to an already existing crisis; disease-mitigating measures reinforced the broader existential crisis of mobility and migration (Hut et al. 2020).

At a global level, both policy and public narratives suggest that most forms of contemporary human movement across international borders are destabilising. Elite forms of global mobility, such as diplomatic travel, business travel, student mobilities or recreational travel and tourism usually tend to be excluded from this framing. However, other forms of human mobility – the mobilities of those seeking extended forms of residence outside their state of origin, those who propose to live and work outside their homelands and those seeking refuge – are regarded as problematic for states and policymakers. Migration has increasingly come to be considered as something that is an aberration, or a deviation from normal human behaviour preferences in the age of nation-states. Human beings moving themselves around the world on their own impulses and for their own reasons are a challenge to states and societies. These desired and expressed mobilities need to be examined, categorised, legitimised, managed, controlled and increasingly, if identified as threatening, limited. It is not just the act of mobility per se that is regarded as abnormal, but even the migrant himself/herself is a deviation from the preferred human category of "citizen" or "national". The migrant has unknowable loyalties, and the reasons for his/her mobility are tied to some defects in either circumstance, geography or capacity. The migrant asserting his/her mobility rights by crossing a border for a job is doing so due to weak livelihood opportunities at home. The asylum seeker or refugee is fleeing from war, persecution and volatility, presumably because his/her society is disordered, violent and dysfunctional. The undocumented migrant illicitly making his/her way onto foreign territory does so because he/she cannot meet or is not willing to adhere to the justified legal means to access entry. Even these categorisations and partitions among those who engage in mobilities are themselves problematic, as establishing who is a refugee and who is a migrant is no easy matter.

The crisis framing of migration implies that not only are migrants engaging in abnormal acts of mobility, they are doing so in incalculable numbers and for indeterminate reasons and threaten to overwhelm the capacity of states that receive them (Cantat et al. 2020). The migration crisis designates migrants as an amorphous

and complex mass of fluid humanity. They are potential rule-breakers who are taking part in their own personal quests, driven by self-interest and creating a crisis for states and communities by imposing themselves upon them. Their behaviour provokes anxiety, causes disruption, and in order to manage them and their mobility there is a need for surveillance, authentication and mechanisms for control. Current fears of migration and the adoption of a crisis framework are deeply class based and are partially a consequence of the marginalisation of labour movements and the failure of socialist and leftist politics. The framing of migration as a crisis is frequently also a reflection of local and national political dynamics and unresolved debates around identity and nationalism. Classifying human mobility and migration as a destabilising factor is aligned with a view that we live in a religious and ethnically homogenous world where national lines fit neatly around such defined homogenous communities.

Framing migration as an existential crisis, for one, suggests that there is an imagined alternative reality where people do not move, neither by choice nor necessity. And yet, the crisis framework does not appear to consider the global conditions that would need to be in place so that people would neither want nor need to move from their birthplace. Additionally, framing human mobility as a crisis implicitly and explicitly operates as a sudden call for action to address an immediate and time-sensitive challenge. The adoption of a crisis narrative is the outcome of complex social, political and economic dynamics within a state, and produces a host of new interactions and interventions (Heyman et al. 2018). This may be articulated as an international organisation's humanitarian call to arms to support vulnerable cities hosting large populations of the displaced and to endorse relief efforts in "crisis zones" that are producing flows of people. Or it may also materialise as a state-led and securitised system of increasing border controls, enhancing vetting mechanisms, and creating physical walls and barriers. Regardless, even when a crisis around mobility is expressed purportedly to support those living under duress, it still reinforces the view that people's uncontrolled movement is a dangerous and abnormal occurrence (Nawyn 2018). The ways in which human mobility is framed as crisis turns the movement and expression of mobility itself into the central problem. Addressing human mobility through a crisis lens seldom includes deliberate, focused, transnational and long-term efforts rooted in conceptual

understanding that migration is a consequence of greater, unsettled global debates and histories of material life.

Given the density of the Gulf region's migrant population as well as its emergence as one of the hotspots for migrant workers and COVID-19, this is an important geography from which to study how the twin crises of mobility and the virus have overlapped and what the longer term consequences of this might be. This essay builds on emerging conceptions of mobility justice by considering the experiences of labour migrants in the Persian Gulf in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, as one particular vulnerable group that has experienced the effects of mobility curtailment most acutely. Both labour migration and the pandemic are considered and have been treated as crises that have afflicted and continue to afflict the region. The pandemic is not a manufactured crisis, as it poses a serious and real risk to human life and wellbeing and its consequences have been severely felt on all parts of the planet. Early on, scientists confirmed the virus's ability to spread via human mobility. COVID-19 moved rapidly from one part of the world to the other via travellers and, almost immediately, states demonstrated their intent to control the crisis by taking emphatic actions to curtail human mobility into and out of their territories. However, as others have noted, lower-income and marginalised communities are those who – even at the best of times – contend with the greatest limitations on their mobility and, as a result of COVID-19, are likely to find their right to movement even more curtailed (Hut et al. 2020). In the Gulf states, as the virus spread through the population, the migrant workers and their right to mobility quickly came to be identified as a threat to public health and security. The Gulf experience during the height of the pandemic demonstrates how these overlapping crises influenced the mobility rights of the highly marginalised community of migrants. Examining this case not only contributes to our understanding of what might be occurring in other contexts, but also reveals how the already tenuous mobility rights of the poor are further eroded by sudden exogenous events (Pai 2020).

I. THE CRISES AS A GEOGRAPHIC DIVIDE

The crisis of migration and mobility has frequently limited its focus to flows of movement from East to West or South to North (Piguet 2020; Lucassen 2017). Displacement or mobility that takes place within the East or South to South, or even within the domestic space of states in the Global South is seldom posited as a global crisis. The crisis as such has a specific and hegemonic location in relation to human mobility and is focused on mobility from post- or neo-colonial spaces to the centres of power and affluence. The crisis lens fixes attention on migrants moving from Asia to Europe or from South America to North America. It is not as much of a crisis when movements occur within the South or within the East. Afghans in Iran and Pakistan are not a crisis nor are Syrians in Lebanon and Turkey, except for the threat they pose by encroaching too close to the artificial "Western" borders of the Mediterranean littoral. The migration of workers from Asia and Africa to the Persian Gulf is not placed within a crisis lens. Spaces like the Gulf, where large migrant numbers have increased, have been considered exceptional to the global rules of migration, instead associated mostly with local and unusual conditions, such as the hyper economic booms associated with hydro-carbon economies.

Labour migration to the Gulf States may not explicitly be framed as a crisis within the broader comparative literature or from the perspective of Western media and policymakers, but locally, the demographic consequences of hosting large cohorts of foreign workers is articulated by Gulf-based policymakers and citizens as a dangerous problem of critical proportions. While the reliance on large numbers of foreigners is partially attributable to the small population of the states, it is also a direct consequence of deliberate economic and political choices and policies made by the Gulf states' rulers. Despite the fact that the reliance on labour migration has allowed these states to engage in extensive and rapid economic and infrastructural development over the past decades, the density of migrant communities across the six monarchies is frequently framed as a dangerous and critical situation that threatens the social and cultural fabric of the region. The largest cohorts of labour migrants who populate the Gulf come from Asia, an alien geography with massive populations that are potentially ready and willing to come and take up yet more space in the local labour market. There are also groups of skilled and highly skilled

migrants present in the region, working in technical jobs, as engineers, teachers, doctors and in other skilled occupations. Many of these skilled workers also come from Asia and the greater Middle East, but there is an ongoing conceptual alignment locally that automatically assigns highly skilled (and highly desired, talented) workers to a “Western” nationality. Highly skilled and “Western” workers are not considered to pose a threat or to generate a crisis in the Gulf states.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also defined the crisis as being geographically determined. The virus arose in the East, as the initial cases were identified in Wuhan, China, and from there it swiftly spread elsewhere. And yet, COVID-19 only became officially discussed within the language of “crisis” when it engulfed the European heartland and moved further west across the Atlantic. The bulk of media and policy attention for much of 2020 fixated on European and American citizens’ experiences of the coronavirus, as their daily death rates, numbers of new infections and lockdown experiences were transmitted around the world. The East and South of the world were the social and economic geographies that presented a potential risk to the rest of the world – where the virus came from and where it would grow out of control, under states considered inept and weak or dishonest and dictatorial. Their populations were large and their cultural and social practices alien. Just as the populist anti-immigration discourse in the West is steeped in racialised undertones, so too it appears is COVID-19. There have been reports that the virus has fuelled xenophobic and racist attacks in Europe, Australia and North America in particular, and even in Africa (Human Rights Watch 2020). No outright racists attacks on migrant workers have been reported as having occurred in the Gulf states as a result of the virus, and regional governments have been far more restrained in invoking China as being responsible for the pandemic. However, the largest component of the labour migrant population is of South and South East Asian origin, and these communities have received greater scrutiny for their potential to spread the disease.

II. THE CRISES AS A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DIVIDE

When the COVID-19 virus was identified in the six monarchies of the Persian Gulf, the states rapidly rolled out a range of mitigation measures to control its spread. Public health authorities issued a number of regulations to limit contact between people, shutting down schools, businesses, international travel, limiting in-person contact for most government services and imposing various restrictions on the right to personal mobility for the general public. Through much of the spring of 2020 and into the early summer months, Gulf populations were largely encouraged to stay at home except for the most essential reasons. Some of these measures remained in place for months, and while their impact was felt by all citizens and non-citizens, certain cohorts of the regional population felt their impact more severely. The framing of both mobility and the pandemic as a crisis has had disproportional consequences on the Gulf's migrant population.

A broad literature has highlighted the fact that lower skill, lower income migrant workers in the Gulf contend with ongoing challenges and violations of their labour rights as well as with working and living conditions that are unhealthy and unsafe (Gardner 2010; Gardner 2012; Hanieh 2016). Migrants at the early stages of their migration process contend with deception and unscrupulous labour recruiters, many of whom extract large financial payments in return for a visa and job contract in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Once in the Gulf, migrants may have to cope with difficult and unsanitary living quarters as well as arduous and unsafe working conditions. Some Gulf countries imposed a full lockdown of labour camps where migrants were housed, allowing no one in or out except for pre-approved reasons. Over and above contending with a complete disruption to their daily lives, many migrants struggled with the economic consequences of the virus and the strategies put in place to contain it. As large sections of the Gulf economy shut down entirely during the first wave of the pandemic, migrants contended with weeks and months of unemployment or partial employment, reductions in work hours and wages, salary cuts, removal of benefits and in some cases the loss of jobs and contracts entirely.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that migrants' most pressing source of anxiety in the Gulf has been tied to their financial precarity, to their wages not being on time, to

being paid less than their contractually-stipulated salary amounts, or to having sums deducted from their wages for arbitrary reasons. Under COVID-19, migrants' employment issues and wage violations have been exacerbated due to the economic impact of business shutdowns. Further evidence of this can be seen in Qatar through data publically shared by the Wage Protection System (WPS) Unit that monitors the payment of workers' wages. Under Qatari labour law, all employers must pay their workers through electronic bank transfers that are monitored through the WPS Unit, which, via Qatar's Central Bank, is able to track salary payments made to individual workers by their employers. The WPS Unit is designed to red-flag companies if any discrepancies in the monthly payment of workers' wages are identified. The WPS Unit shares this information with the Ministry of Labour, which then undertakes disciplinary actions against the companies that engage in wage violations. In January 2020, the WPS Unit identified 588 companies for such disciplinary action, which reflects the usual number of monthly violations identified. However, data for June 2020 revealed that 8,756 companies were deemed to be in violation of their workers' wages, almost 15 times more than the monthly norm and clearly an indication that the lockdown and closures of businesses was affecting wages for workers.

Despite having their mobility curtailed, many migrants continued to work during the height of the pandemic. However, working in the lower tiers of the labour market, migrants contended with grim conditions that made following basic health guidelines for virus prevention close to impossible. Many of them live together in dormitory-style accommodations in specially designed labour camps provided by employers. Communal living on a mass scale is the norm for lower income workers across the region, rendering attempts at social distancing and maintaining high standards of personal hygiene in these circumstances almost an exercise in futility. Not only have the lockdowns and perimeter controls prevented migrants from easily leaving their residential areas, but maintaining COVID-19 health protocols within their accommodation has been a challenge.

As the Gulf construction industry has largely continued to operate during lockdowns, tens of thousands of labourers, many of whom are migrants, have been unable to maintain proper social distancing on building sites and construction projects, as well as while using public transport. Grocery stores, transport and delivery services and many other parts of the labour market deemed as "essential" – and dominated by

migrants – have also remained active throughout the pandemic. While masks, sanitisation and symptom checks have increasingly been adopted by many employers and made compulsory on many worksites, these measures were clearly not effective enough to stop disease transmission during the first wave of the disease. Other migrants faced different challenges as they were unable to work at all. Especially those in the hospitality and retail sectors suddenly had no work, went without wages and lived for months under the duress of financial anxiety.

As Dodds et al. suggest, there is a clear contrast between how the privileged and the marginalised have been discussed as groups responsible for spreading the virus (Dodds et al. 2020). Elite and hyper-mobile tourists who have spread the virus through holidays and social interactions receive quite a different scrutiny than do lower income migrants who live in group accommodations (ibid.). While job security has been affected across the region during the pandemic, not all foreign workers have been affected equally. During the first long months of the lockdown, white collar workers, both citizens and foreign, contended with the challenges of being suddenly confined at home. However, many skilled and highly skilled foreigners were able to work remotely and to remain employed and paid. Certain sectors were downsized, and skilled and highly skilled migrants did contend with job losses and salary reductions, but in general they were better prepared to cope with the financial consequences.

III. THE CRISIS AS STATE POWER AND SOLUTIONS THAT OUTLAST THE CRISIS

The term crisis is never deployed as an emotionally neutral concept; it is used strategically to elicit a certain response. Populist platforms deploy crisis rhetoric to generate, maintain and sustain the support of their constituencies. Authoritarian regimes employ similar strategies in order to enhance their structures of political dominance and diminish dissent. Strategically using a crisis narrative serves to obscure the fact that the system itself is problematic, and that a phenomenon has occurred not as a systemic disturbance but is itself a functional element of the problematic system. Deeming labour migration a crisis – without adequately considering the structural factors that cause it nor the material structures and legal-political superstructure that have entrenched it into the political economy of the Gulf – allows policymakers to create ever more onerous forms of governance without ever addressing any core issues.

Crises lead to securitisation and politicisation, and both of these then lead to the development of a host of interactions and institutional involvement. It is not just that the state takes over once a crisis is declared, but it is the parts of the state that become activated that are problematic. The security apparatus of the state takes centre stage in the midst of a crisis. Across the Persian Gulf, both the control and management of mobility and migration as well as management of the pandemic were led by the national Ministries of Interior. While the Ministries of Public Health were central in terms of determining public health policies for managing disease and health-related aspects of the pandemic, various apparatuses of the state that handle domestic security issues, such as the police and border security agencies, played a pivotal role. A crisis demands the mobilisation of a militarised response, a security response, the creation of cadres of "first responders" and the assembling of an apparatus deputised to address the cause and consequences of the crisis above all other state priorities. State of emergency practices in Qatar combined security and scientific logics to "temporarily" suspend people's right to determine what they consider to be best for their personal health and well-being, as well as the right to mobility.

As Pallister-Wilkins suggests in writing on the effects of humanitarian interventions, a crisis ascribes certain logics to geographies designated as crisis "hot spots" (Pallister-Wilkins 2018). Hot spots require their own particular modes of attention and action, and the pandemic logics in Qatar also led to defining certain areas of the city as virus "hot spots". In the spring and early summer of 2020, it was the labour camps where migrants were housed that were identified as such sites. There, the disease could grow out of control and thus, it was essential to deploy a set of special arrangements for managing the people and the disease within the hot spot. The state's logic of identifying, registering and addressing the COVID-positive cases within these areas with greater intensity than in other parts of the country was articulated as being essential for the safety, protection and well-being of the larger community as well as of the migrants themselves. The measures imposed towards this end, such as controlling and reinforcing the perimeters of the labour camps, establishing special protocols for controlling migrants' inward and outward mobility, and creating deliberate strategies for screening and sanitisation, looked more like a deliberate means to cordon off particular communities who posed a threat to the rest of society. In the post-pandemic Gulf, it is likely that migrant workers will find their health to be continuously monitored and surveilled, and their right to mobility closely tied to their health status. It is also possible that strategies of cordoning communities off will be considered to be a successful means of addressing further outbreaks of infectious disease.

Operational features of the labour migration governance system have been highlighted in unusual ways during the pandemic, and in particular the WPS Unit, mentioned earlier in the article, was used in an innovative way by Qatari state authorities. Once borders in Qatar were reopened after initial emergency measures were lifted in August 2020, workers with active visas who had been stuck outside the country when the Qatari border had closed were permitted to apply for exceptional entry permits that had to be submitted by their employers and visa sponsors. Employers and sponsors were able to submit applications through an online application system and request the Ministry of Interior to grant an exceptional entry permit for their workers stranded overseas. However, the vetting of applications was tied to the WPS Unit, as applying companies were run through the system to check for any red flags. The WPS Unit consists of an electronic payment tracking system

to determine whether wages have been paid to workers and is able to determine whether any companies are in violation of wage payments. During the pandemic, companies that had been red-flagged by the WPS Unit for having failed to abide by wage and salary laws were unable to successfully apply for exceptional entry permits for their workers. Special entry to Qatar was denied to those migrants whose companies were WPS Unit offenders, creating a paradoxical situation where migrants were suffering, unable to enter Qatar and take up their jobs, because their hiring companies were in violation of labour laws. While these laws and the disciplinary mechanisms are designed to protect migrants and their labour rights, they also generated a loss of mobility rights and access for migrants who were desperate to return.

With limited economic prospects in their home countries, many of which are states with fragile economic and political systems struggling to cope with the additional challenges to public health caused by the pandemic, lower income migrants are increasingly stuck in place. Burdened with the financial responsibility they bear for their families back home, migrants in the Gulf are likely to continue to abide by restrictions to their mobility, ongoing social distancing, enhanced sanitisation practices, as well as the intrusiveness of mass testing and vaccinations. It is highly likely that the emergency practices adopted by Gulf states to ensure compliance with COVID-19 restrictions, such as fining, arresting and media-shaming those in violation of the regulations, will continue for the coming months if not much longer. Lower income migrants, already a marginalised category, will find themselves bound more than others to comply with new measures and restrictions that are imposed, many of which directly impact their mobility.

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