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# Quest for the Best: Foreign Athletes as High-Skilled Migrants in the Gulf Region

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'History in the making.' With these words on Twitter, Al-Nassr, a Saudi Arabian Football club, announced the arrival of one of the world's top athletes in the team. The club's decision to sign Cristiano Ronaldo for a staggering [US\\$214.5 million](#) has made it evident that some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are not hesitant to invest significantly in attracting the best talents. Economic pundits are touting the move as an effort to stimulate a financial windfall for the club and Saudi Arabia at large.

Besides the intricacies of financial gains, this move signifies a new dawn of athlete migration in the Gulf region. While the deal, in terms of its financial worth, is unprecedented, the arrival of a foreign athlete in a local club or a national team in the Gulf region is not. GCC states have always been an attractive platform for foreign athletes to develop and showcase their athletic abilities at national and international levels. For instance, Mohamed Suleiman of Sudanese origin, Sultan Khmis Zaman (formerly known as Onesphore Nkuzimana) from Burundi, and Kenyan-born Abert Chepkurui (now known as Ahmed Hassan Abdullah) have represented Qatar. Rashid Ramzi, Maryam Yusuf Jamal, Ruth Jebet, and Eunice Jepkirui Kirwa have won medals for Bahrain in the Olympics. In the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympics, there were at least thirteen foreign-born players in Bahrain's Olympics team, three in Qatar, two in the UAE, and one

in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, at least fifty-five athletes have previously moved from other countries to compete for GCC states. These moves are called "[transfer of allegiance](#)." In 2022, World Athletics, the international governing body for athletics, permitted four foreign athletes to transfer their [allegiance to Qatar](#).

However, the migration of foreign athletes to the region has not gone without scrutiny and negative publicity. Several media reports and studies have criticized the management of athlete migration in the region. [CNBC](#) remarked that GCC states are "buying Olympic medals," while an op-ed in [The New York Times](#) argued that Qatar's Olympic team "is imported." Josef Burton, a former U.S. diplomat, wrote an article in [Foreign Policy](#) entitled "Team Qatar Wanted Immigrant Players—Not Citizens" claiming that GCC states use foreign athletes to participate in prestigious international sports events while not giving them full citizenship rights. Furthermore, athletes are sent on a temporary mission passport that does not accrue them any citizenship benefits.

It should be noted that the narrative against GCC states has shown remarkable consistency, whether it is regarding foreign athletes, the treatment of migrant workers, or their migration policy. They have been criticized repeatedly because of their policy of not giving citizenship to foreign people.

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<sup>1</sup> All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

We argue that these critical perspectives on migration suffer from a methodological fallacy resulting from employing the Western theoretical framework in analyzing migratory patterns beyond the West. While studying the Gulf, many researchers have relied on concepts that do not capture the specific nuances of migration to the region. For instance, Burton's op-ed title contains the phrase "Immigrant Players." However, foreign nationals residing in the Gulf are not referred to as "immigrants" but rather "migrants." The use of the term migrants for foreign nationals in the Gulf reflects GCC states' migration policy. The term immigrant refers to an individual who leaves their country of origin to settle permanently in another country. A migrant, according to [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM), is an individual "who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons." Unlike in the Global North, where the path to naturalization remains open, the permanent settlement of foreign individuals in the GCC states is limited and selective. Hence, an individual migrating to work or pursuing a career as an athlete in the region is considered a migrant. Since there is no universal path to citizenship, to refer to a foreign national residing in the Gulf as an immigrant is indicative of conceptual obliviousness. The conflation of the two terms also has policy implications, as the term "immigrant" projects a sense that the individual is entitled to a set of rights emanating from citizenship. GCC states invite migrants only temporarily. In fact, temporariness is a defining characteristic of migration in the region.

The desire to maintain a homogenous core of society in each GCC state has resulted in the region's distinct migration policy. Except for Saudi Arabia and Oman, in all the other states, the population of migrants is higher than that of citizens. In states such as Qatar and UAE, migrants comprise eighty percent of the total population. Allowing migrants to settle permanently would completely alter the demographic profile, making indigenous people a tiny minority in their own country. States in the Global North that allow for naturalization do so primarily because it suits their interests in the long run. One of the pressing issues that several states in the Global North are facing is an aging population. This is not the case for GCC states. Young people under the age of thirty constitute more than [one-third of the region's population](#).

Nonetheless, a case can be made that athletes are not simply migrants as they represent states internationally, and to be able to represent a country, athletes must be citizens. Traditionally, it has been understood that athletes represent the nation's values and identity. However, this can only ring true if the athlete has historical, cultural, and national ties to the country they represent. We know that this is not always the case in practice. Many athletes have represented states without any historical or ethnic links to them. For instance, several top football players in European teams are of African heritage. Notable mentions are Kylian Mbappe in France, Romelu Lukaku in Belgium, Antonio Rüdiger in Germany, and others. As far as the nationality of athletes is concerned, we have examples of athletes who have represented one or more states at various stages of their career. For instance, Eileen Gu, the

youngest Olympic freestyle ski champion born and raised in the U.S., represented China in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. She has previously represented the U.S. Similarly, Aljona Savchenko and Bruno Massot, who once represented Ukraine and France, respectively, won Gold in the 2018 Olympics for Germany.

It is clear that importance is placed not on the cultural and historical links but rather on the athlete's legal status, partly because in contemporary times globalization has made the sense of identity and belonging significantly malleable compared to previous times. Increasing interconnectedness and migratory processes have paved the way for ideas, cultures, and talents to flow across state boundaries more swiftly than ever before. GCC states have seized this opportunity by inviting foreign athletes as they desire skilled populations to strengthen their human capital. In this context, athletes' migration to the Gulf region should be considered an extension of GCC states' developmental trajectory and a form of temporary skill migration. Some athletes who have represented or are currently representing the national teams have been naturalized. However, the scope of naturalization is limited and does not set a precedent for athlete migration and naturalization. The rationale behind the framework of non-permanent citizenship for athletes who represent GCC states internationally is reflective of the states' desire to maintain an ethnically homogenous core of societies. Besides that, it must be noted that the contract between foreign athletes and GCC states is not based on zero-sum principles, where states gain Olympic golds and football championships at the expense of foreign athletes. The GCC states offer platforms for foreign athletes

to nurture and demonstrate their skills while simultaneously providing opportunities to gain fame and fortune. Furthermore, the path to representing their countries of origin remains open as well.

#### **About the author**

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