Migrants and monarchs: regime survival, state transformation and migration politics in Saudi Arabia

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June 2021

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Abstract

How was the Saudi monarchy able to stave off the Arab Spring? One answer to this question lies in migration politics, which are integral to the regime's ad hoc survival strategies. An analysis of migration politics, moreover, brings to light longstanding dynamics of state transformation in what remains one of the largest immigration countries in the world. Drawing on discourse analysis, institutional history, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in state bureaucracies, I explore the critical, albeit under-researched, role of migration politics in political change from the 1991 Gulf crisis to the 2011 uprisings. First, I show that, in times of crisis, Saudi monarchs made migration a central political issue: while maintaining mass immigration into the country, they used immigrants as scapegoats to deflect popular grievances and further individual power-seeking agendas. Secondly, I demonstrate that migration became a policy domain with its own rules, bureaucratic practices, power relations, and rationalities – a process designed to impose a state monopoly over migration control. Thirdly, I introduce the notion of "migration rent" and use it to describe the changing social and power relations between migrants, citizens, and the state. Finally, I suggest that migration politics are key to understanding both short- and long-term political change.

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> *In 2012 in Paris, Saudi officials invited me to discuss the likelihood of violent uprisings in Saudi Arabia based on the socio-economic and political situation in the Kingdom and to provide recommendation to avoid a revolution. The conversation ended rapidly but my interest was triggered. Having worked with and on immigrants in Saudi Arabia, I embarked on a new ethnographic journey inside the Saudi state.*

As the Arab Spring shattered authoritarian regimes across the Middle East, the Saudi monarchy launched contingent and structural counter-revolutionary policies: repression against opponents and insurgent Shia minorities in the Eastern provinces, military and diplomatic interventions against pro-democracy movements in Bahrain, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, cash distributions, salary increases in the public sector, and reforms against rising prices and housing shortages in big cities. Ruling elites also reactivated dormant labour market and immigration reforms from the early 1990s seeking to fight unemployment of educated and uneducated youth.

In this paper, I analyse migration politics as part and parcel of contingent regime survival strategies in times of crises on the one hand and of state's transformation in the long run on the other. Migration policies were not only crafted as *ad hoc* counter-revolutionary strategies, they also served the opportunistic power-seeking strategies within the Saudi monarchy and eventually participated in state-led socio-political engineering. Studying migration discourses and policies thus provides off-centre insights into political changes. As Algerian sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) noted about France, researching migration politics deepens our understanding of the state. It 'de-naturalises' and 're-historicises' it, questioning the roots of its authority and its mechanisms of internal structuration. I further argue that migration is central to rethinking state-society relations through what Myron Weiner (1990, p. 142) called the "broader" social contract[1] between the state, immigrants, and citizens.

In the context of the Arab Spring, ruling elites sought to deflate grievances in the short-

term by pitting expatriate workers against the local workforce in the competition for jobs and organising mass deportation of irregular immigrants. They framed labour and migration reforms as an answer to the structural dependence of rentier economies upon immigrant labour, as well as a long-term solution to give jobs to Saudis in the formal private sector. Since the 1990s, Saudi Arabia's unemployment rates have been hovering around ten percent, reaching over twelve percent in 2011 and fifteen in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic (General Statistical Authority, 2019). Half of the Saudi labour force was employed in the plethoric public sector at the beginning of the 2010s (Hertog, 2014, p. 4), while private jobs were overwhelmingly held by foreigners. With decreased oil income in the 1990s and again in the 2010s, state administrations and public firms became reluctant to absorb the increasing numbers of young educated Saudis entering the job market each year as a result of the Saudi youth bulge.

Yet, reforms did not aim to decrease Saudi Arabia's dependency on foreign workers – although this was presented as their main objective. The country continued to "import" large numbers of immigrants. Their share in the Saudi population grew to reach a historical high of 38% in 2019 (see Figure 1) with immigrants coming mostly from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, and offering diverse skill levels. Contrary to the main representations of immigrants as workers, the foreign population also includes so-called "dependents", a quarter of whom are children (General Statistical Authority, 2019). Rather than decreasing immigration, ruling elites impose greater state control over market and societal institutions, such as the Chambers of Commerce, employers, and social intermediaries like brokers and migrants' sponsors. The regime uses migration reforms as a tool to modernise the state and to change the boundaries between politics, market, and society, thus promising to recast the rentier social contract[2] while keeping the monarchy intact. It engineers socioeconomic and demographic transformations in order to prevent political change in the long run.

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2019
Migrant stock	4998445	5122702	5263387	6501819	8429956	10771366	13122338
Migrants as % of population	31	27	25	27	31	34	38
		1990-95	1995-2000	2000-05	2005-10	2010-15	2015-19

Annual % of change of the migrant stock		0,5	0,5	4,2	5,2	4,9	4,9

Table 1: Saudi Arabia migration profile 1990-2020 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019)

This article focuses on a major yet understudied case of migration politics. Despite an increasing wealth of research on migration politics (Hollifield & Wong, 2013), research outside of Western democracies is still scarce. Some scholars even deny the existence of migration policies in the Global South (Brochmann & Hammar, 1999, p. 12) for lack of empirically-grounded knowledge. Yet, Saudi Arabia is the third largest immigration country in the world according to the UN (2019) and consistently scores among the world's least liberal autocracies.[3] Among the top ten immigration countries, the only two authoritarian regimes are Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as autocracies usually feature as the main emigration nations. Saudi Arabia is also the largest and richest immigration country in the Global South. While migration had always been an important constituent of economic and social relations, it only became a central *political* issue with the Gulf war and a domestic crisis in the early 1990s. This politicisation increased during the Arab Spring. Both the size of migration and magnitude of reforms undertaken offer an exceptional vantage point to study the link between migration politics and political change.

The first two sections describe the top-down politicisation of migration from the Gulf crisis (1991) to the Arab Spring (2011). Discourses that were initially marked by "immigration denial" progressively came to present migration as a prominent political issue in the public sphere. At the top of the monarchy, Princes Na'ef in 1991, Abdallah in the early 2000s, and Mohammed bin Salman in 2015 successively pushed migration and labour reforms as part of their power-seeking agenda.

The second section focuses on meanings of the reforms and the discourses of policymakers and bureaucrats. I show how the institutionalisation of migration politics legitimises new distributive policies of public money, thus maintaining and expending the rentier-state contract.

The final section describes how the reforms contribute to "bringing the State back" into migration control by diminishing the role of private (formal and informal) market actors – including sponsors within the *kafala* system. By disciplining migration, the state seeks to monopolise the control over migrants and migration.

Migration, regime survival, and (de)politicisation

This article first engages with scholarly debates on autocratic resilience and the adaptability of illiberal regimes (Heydemann & Leenders, 2011). Research on autocratic resilience rarely builds upon migration politics and only a few studies have looked at the connection between migration and autocratic survival. Miller and Peters (2018) investigated how restrictive emigration policies tend to prevent anti-regime activism from abroad, and Natter (2020) studied how migration reforms sought to consolidate the Moroccan monarchy. This article also contributes to discussions on the resource curse and the relation between oil and regime survival in autocracies and democracies (Ross, 2001; Smith, 2004). I show that the politics of immigration are part and parcel of the Saudi regime's survival strategies. I do so focusing on dynamics of *top-down* (de)politicisation of migration where (de)politicisation refers to both discourses and sociological processes.[4]

On the one hand, the growing salience of migration in state discourse generally connects with the institutional expansion of the migration "policy domain" (Guiraudon, 2003). It marks a shift from previously unpolitical matters or actors to the political, either through the *top-down* agenda-setting by political parties or administrations or through the *bottom-up* "social mobilisation (of social groups) and public debates (in mass media)" (Zürn, 2018, p. 141). While, the politicisation of migration is generally studied in Western democratic contexts (Brug et al., 2015), I show that it is also central to the quest for popular legitimacy of the Saudi autocracy (Gerschewski, 2018). It constitutes an attempt to broaden support for its authoritarian rulers (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007) in the context of the Arab Spring.

On the other hand, the politicisation of migration is tied to a contradictory process of depoliticisation in public discourses and policies that hinges upon free-market economic arguments and frames migration as pure commodity. Such economisation of migration works as a legitimising tool for social reforms by relying upon economic expertise as shown by Christina Boswell (2008) in other contexts and as a way "to avoid the most contentious forms of polemics" (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 155). It is classically described as a neo-liberal "dominant model of statecraft in the twenty-first century" in democracies (Flinders & Wood, 2014, p. 135).

Migration, state transformation, and the social contract

Secondly, I discuss the connection between migration politics and socio-political transformations. Studies on immigration policies generally use regime characteristics (authoritarian, liberal) as independent variables to explain the substance of migration policies.

For the Gulf, Mirilovic (2010) finds that authoritarianism determines open immigration policies. For Shin (2017), it is the oil rent that determines openness to immigration. Contrary to these research designs and building upon Sayad's intuition, I use migration politics as a way to investigate regime dynamics and state transformation, notably the emergence of a Saudi developmental state (Evans et al., 1985, p. 68). The relationships between the state and the business sector and its representatives are changing. Reforms are employed to enforce what I called a sovereign turn (Thiollet, 2019, p. 4). They bring the state in[to] matters it only loosely governed before. And as Robert (2018) argued for East Asian autocracies, the hold developmental states acquire over the economy and society does not wane despite neoliberal discourses. Such transformations are observed across the boundaries of political regimes in other regions, notably in Europe (Geddes, 2001; Guiraudon & Lahav, 2000).

Migration politics thus is brought into broader conversations on the political economy of the state. It does so in a context where the literature on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emphasises the exceptionality of illiberal rentier polities, using political Islam and oil as factors that explain their modernisation and democratisation deficit (Ayubi, 1996; Chaudhry, 1997; Ross, 2001). Scholars have debated the content (Haykel et al., 2015), depth, and meanings of social reforms (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; Jones, 2003). Yet, they overlooked immigration. They considered oil as central for a regime that hybridises authoritarian state-based monarchical rule with patronage networks channelled both by ethnic kinship (tribes and extended family or 'â'ila) and trading families. Migration thus remains unproblematised in discussions on economic reforms as transformative of the Saudi social contract (Thompson, 2019).

Similar to the way Hazem Beblawi (1987) analysed how citizenship is a source of economic benefit via the oil rent, Egyptian sociologist Ibrahim Saad Eddin (1982) framed migration as a form of rent through which employers and migration intermediaries, notably sponsors, extract income from migrant workers. Following them, I introduce the notion of *migration rent* (Thiollet, 2021) as a rent-seeking behaviour typically channelled through private operators (recruiters, employers, sponsors) and social institutions like the *kafala*. Contrary to state-own oil firms, the state delegates its authority over migration to private actors and turns citizens into *migration rentiers*. Yet recent reforms of the formal and informal institutions that regulate migration seek to claim a new state monopoly over the control of migration and change the broader social contract.

Method

This research relies on semi-structured interviews, discourse analysis of Saudi media and public policy documents (in English and Arabic), and socio-historical analysis. I spent between two weeks and two months in Saudi Arabia five times between 2006 and 2017 as a visiting scholar with a Saudi research institute. During these visits, I conducted semi-structured interviews with bureaucrats, businessmen, and active and retired public officials at various levels of political responsibility within the parliament (*Majlis ash-Shura*), the Ministry of Labour, the Human Resource Development Fund, local branches of placement and labour offices *Taqat* and *Makatib al-'amal* (for nationals), and recruitment committees *Lijân al-istiqdam* (for immigrants), as well as representatives of the Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Riyadh and the Jeddah and Riyadh Chambers of Commerce (see list in Appendix). Interviews lasted for one hour or more and I met some interviewees several times between 2013 and 2017. My analysis also relies on fieldwork observations collected from offices, corridors, and meeting rooms at the Ministry of Labour, in local administrations, and Chambers of Commerce in Riyadh and Jeddah, as well as observations in the offices and training centres of one "mega" recruitment company.

From immigration denial to top-down politicisation

From the 1990s to the 2010s, migration progressively became what Myron Weiner called the "population problem", which is both a statistical reality and the source of "a noisy chorus of rhetoric and a turbulent set of contending responses" (Weiner & Teitelbaum, 2001, p. X). Migrants came to form a growing share of the Saudi population (Figure 1). Discourses and policies evolved from framing the political challenge posed by migrants as 'foreign agitators' in social mobilisations in the 1950s (Chalcraft, 2011) to focusing on foreigners' economic and social power in local populations and labour markets. In other terms, the politicisation of *immigrants* was replaced by the politicisation of *immigration* as a structural phenomenon.
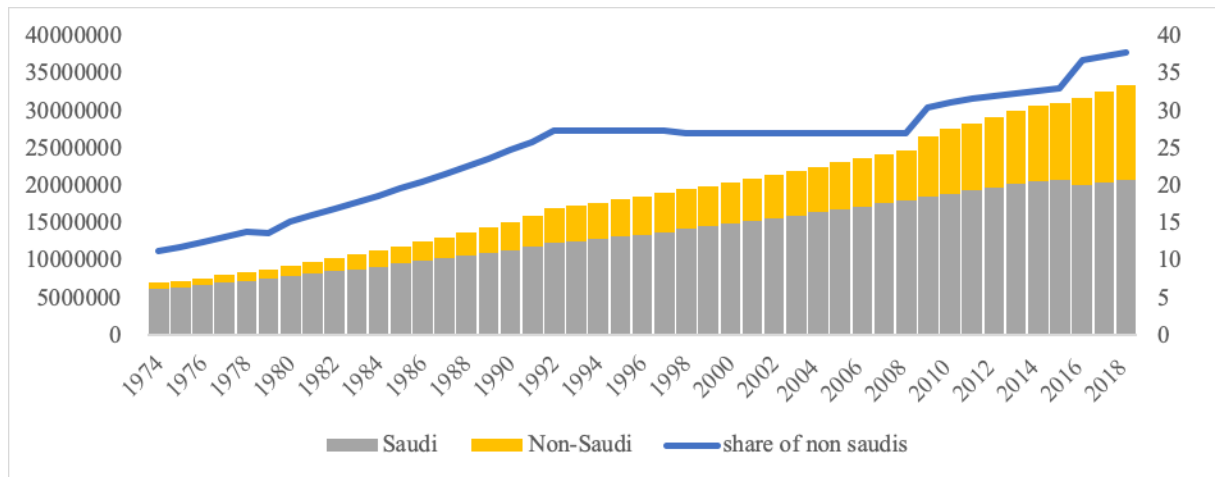
Figure 1: Saudis and Migrants (1974-2018). Sources: General Statistical Authority and Saudi Central Bank (SAMA), 2020

Immigration as a population problem gained momentum from the 1990s and 2010s, albeit intermittently replaced by terrorism and security in the early 2000s. In 1992, "immigration management" was identified as an important object of study for Saudi scholars (Salama, 1992). At the regional level, a prominent Kuwait-based regional think-tank created in 1979 devoted its 1994 annual conference to population policies (Gulf Development Forum, 1994). In 2012, in the context of the Arab Spring, migration and population policies were considered as an important dimension of popular discontent (Gulf Development Forum, 2012). In 2014, migration and the population "imbalance" was the main theme of the annual conference (Al-Shehabi & Gulf Development Forum, 2014).

However, officials strictly delineate migration as a labour market issue and migrants as workers. Almost every high-ranking official interviewed from 2006 to 2017 started our conversation by denying the existence of immigration:

We do not use the term '(im)migrants'; we use the term expatriates or foreign workers. The term 'migration' gives the impression that they will be given citizenship. We prefer the idea of 'worker under contract', which implies a calendar and a defined length of stay ... This is a very important point. These people are workers under temporary contracts; at the end of their contract, they go back home. (I1)

Again in 2015:

The terminology is important. We do not use the word 'migration' or 'migrant' and this has been recognised by the IOM! We talk about 'temporarily contracted foreign workers' and they do not come here to migrate and settle. (I4)

This is characteristic of "immigration denial" (Thiollet, 2019). The terminological taboo builds upon legal realities: the Saudi citizenship regime forbids dual citizenship, limits naturalisation, and, in practice, is submitted to the discretionary ruling of the Ministry of Interior (Ministry of Interior, 1954, p. article 10), which results in an extremely low number of naturalisations. Although ambivalent debates on diversity and cosmopolitanism have timidly bloomed in the 2000s (Thiollet & Assaf, 2021), immigration denial enforces a discursive link between migration and labour. It frames migration as a purely economic matter and migrants as economic agents. This issue-linkage process is central to the politics of migration throughout the period observed in discourse, the political culture of administrations, and institutional configurations of migration management. It politicises *migration* as a labour issue and conversely depoliticises *immigration* as a cultural, societal, and political question. Such immigration denial echoes well-known discourses and policies treating immigrants as mere *guestworkers* in Germany and *braceros* in the United States (Castles, 1985; Martin, 2001).

State-owned press and public opinion

The term "(im)migrant" (*muhâjir* plur. *muhâjirun-muhâjirin*) is hardly ever used in Saudi media. Yet, the salience of immigration issues formulated in other terms[5] works as an indicator of government-led politicisation given that the press is a tool of state propaganda. Newspapers are submitted to strictly enforced censorship[6] and are directly or indirectly fully-owned or under majority shareholding by royal family members. In the country's main Arabic-speaking media, media coverage of migration in and to Saudi Arabia grew after the Arab Spring and peaked again in 2015. This corresponds to the phases of state-led migration reforms detailed below. Content analysis indicates that migration is mostly framed as a threat (to political or existential security) and as a labour issue.
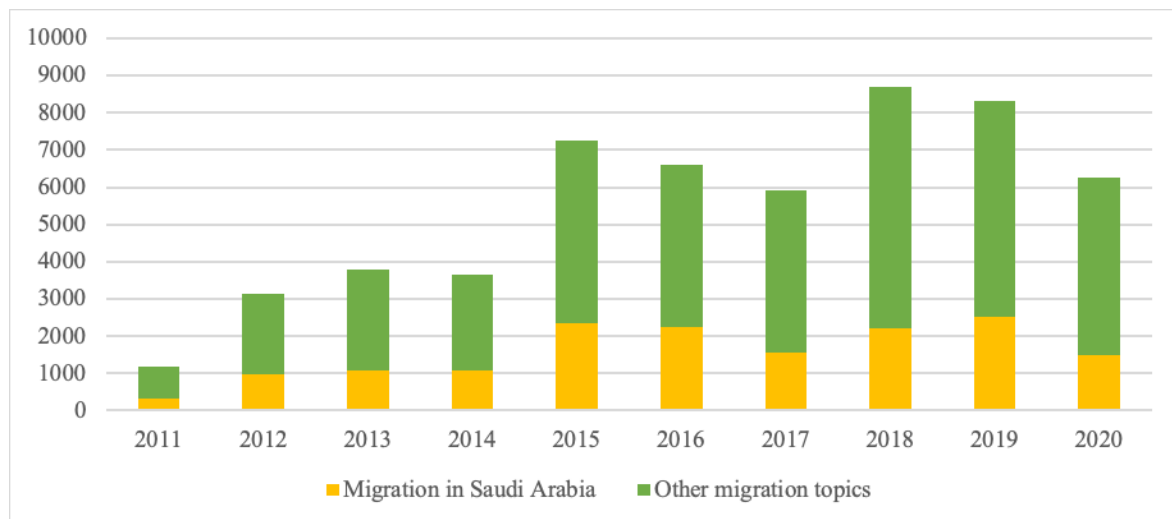
Figure 2: Migration-related headlines in main Saudi press titles in Arabic from 2010 to 2020. Source: Factiva, 2020

Government-owned press is a good indicator of top-down politicisation of migration rather than a predictor of Saudi public attitudes toward migration. Overall, Saudis have a positive perception of migration (IPSOS, 2017). Across the 24 countries polled in 2017, Saudis are the most convinced that immigration has had a very or fairly positive impact on their country, with a 45% positive opinion against a 21% average of all other countries. Positive views on immigration increased during the 2010s: 38% positive in 2011, 52% in 2015, and 45% in 2017. Yet, the ratio of those who believe there are too many migrants in Saudi Arabia rose by 10% during the Arab Spring, between 2011 (58%) and 2013 (69%). It fell back to 54% in 2017, which is still higher than the survey average (48%). Public opinion thus partly reflects the politicisation of migration by the monarchy. The emergence population politics was largely determined by the royal politics of individual strategies and regime survival since the 1990s.

The royal politics of immigration

Three princes have spearheaded migration and labour reforms since the 1990s: Na'ef during the popular unrest after the 1991 Iraq war, Abdallah (who became king in 2005) during the reformist movement in 2002 and during the Arab Spring in 2011, and Mohammed bin Salman after 2015. They used migration and labour market issues as a source of personal and regime legitimacy at times of political instability.

After the 1991 Gulf war, social unrest shattered the Saudi regime and met with repression and co-optation despite limited constitutional change (Okruhlik, 2002, p. 27). While the causes of popular discontent were diverse, Prince Na'ef, Minister of Interior since 1975, worked to politicise high immigration and the unemployment of Saudis as a "country issue" of "national importance" that a public official analysed in 2015. The Prince soon became the main "political figure" willing to go "to the root of the problem" by pushing for policies to "nationalise" the labour market (I2). In the early 1990s, he pushed for *Saudisation* policies, claiming to replace foreign workers by nationals to eradicate unemployment. In 1994, he reformed the *kafala* sponsorship system by authorizing periodic raids in working places to control migrant workers' status and reaffirm the responsibility of sponsors to oversee the legality of the stays of their employees.[7] Na'ef created the Manpower Council to pilot labour market reforms, including reforms of the *kafala*. He designed the "strategies" of manpower development (I1), while at the same time making the Immigration and Passports Service under "his" Ministry of Interior become the principal agents of state control over immigration. In 1997, Saudi diplomatic representations abroad had to receive approval from Immigration and Passports Service before delivering a tourist or work visa.[8] This was part of his direct competition with Crown Prince Abdallah, *de facto* ruler after King Fahd was left incapacitated by a stroke in 1995. The mandate Na'ef gave himself and the institutions he controlled were only superficially technical and, in fact, highly political: Saudisation was meant to rally the population around a national project to remedy the opposition that emerged during the Gulf War.

In the early 2000s, Na'ef rearranged his political agenda to focus on domestic and international terrorism. As soon as 2003, Abdallah adopted a favourable stance towards popular demands for social justice, civil rights and liberties, and democratisation (Jones, 2003) culminating in the Saudi National Reform Document[9]. His competitor Na'ef opposed them, saying "no to change, yes to development" (Jones, 2003). While limiting political openings, Abdallah adopted a reformist agenda to redress the worsening socioeconomic situation. He targeted the lower middle class suffering from decaying infrastructures, decreasing welfare, and rising unemployment among a young and increasingly educated population. The liberal opposition and the public widely supported the political and structural socioeconomic changes he initiated.

Abdallah put the Ministry of Labour at the centre of the governmentalisation of migration control. He opened ministries and state agencies to new political elites often coming

from the business sector and local elites rather than the royal family, which he expected would be loyal to him (I1). In August 2010, he nominated Adel Faqih, an engineer from the private sector and former mayor of Jeddah, as Minister of Labour, a traditionally secondary ministry which no important members of the Royal Family would claim. Na'ef's bastions were stripped of part of their authority over migration: the Manpower Council was disbanded in 2004 (Ramady, 2010, p. 210). Abdallah created the Ministry of Labour, splitting the former Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and giving a new centre to the labour and migration policy domain. In the context of the Ninth Development Plan, the Ministry of Labour proposed a Saudi Employment Strategy and launched a new Saudisation campaign to address "labour market imbalances". The preceding waves of Saudisation were founded on repressive public policies (fines) and proved ineffective (Hertog, 2014). *Nitaqat*[10] programmes heralded by the Ministry of Labour launched in 2011 and were grounded upon economic incentives (*Mazaya* programs) for firms and Saudis and legal constraints on firms and migrants. *Nitaqat* became the flagship policies of the national strategy that aimed at replacing foreigners by nationals in the private sector. HRDF (the fund or *sundûq* in Arabic) became the "pilot agency" of the emerging developmental state described by Wade (1990), performing think tank functions, charting the blue print of migration and labour market policies, and funding them. Reforms combined elements of rationalisation of public policies and institutional transformations. A traditionally powerless Ministry of Labour started to claim authority over migration control via new labour market regulations, competing with the Ministry of Interior, which remained under the leadership of Na'ef until his death in 2012 and under his son Mohammed bin Na'ef after him.

With the Arab Spring, the monarchy used reforms as a counter-revolutionary tool alongside broad co-optation and large buy-outs, thus smothering protest in the country, with the exception of a small pocket of rebellion in the Shiite East. The enhanced redistribution of oil wealth by the state led to an almost 25% increase in public spending between 2010 and 2011 and a further budgetary increase of up to 20% in 2014. Expansionary public spending served as a reminder of the nation's collective allegiance to the rentier state and the patrimonial ties between the ruling family and its people.

A second phase of migration and labour market reforms started in January 2015 under King Salman. The King's son Mohammed bin Salman progressively put the reform process under his direct control and migration served his power-seeking strategy as his title changed from Defence Minister to Deputy Crown Prince and Crown Prince in June 2017.

In 2015, the Ministries of Labour and Social Affairs merged into the Ministry of Labour and Social Development. The overall frame of the reforms was re-vamped by Mohammed Bin

Salman in 2016, through the National Transformation Program 2020 and Vision 2030. Under this new planning scheme, public spending soared again, fuelling a new wave of social reforms and the political empowerment of Mohammed Bin Salman (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2017). He combined his control over economic and social policies becoming Head of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs. While claiming the entirety of socio-economic reforms under his leadership, he also established a progressive control over international and external security sectors. This allowed him to progressively evict competing political figures, notably the Minister of Interior, Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister Mohammed bin Na'ef who lost all his positions and titles in 2017 and was arrested in 2020. Faqih – who had become Minister of Economy – was jailed for corruption together with other political and business figures from "liberal" circles. This crackdown on potential opponents and challengers reconfigured the executive branch in November 2017. In 2019, the Prince Mohammed Bin Salman merged the Ministry of Labour and Social Development with the Ministry of Civil Service to create the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development.

The bureaucratic politics of migration reforms

The social reforms of the 1990s and 2010s link migration and labour market management issues, pitting citizens against migrants in the labour market and within firms. Saudisation policies aim at boosting employment of Saudi nationals in the private sector and increasing their salaries to "put an end to the dominance of expatriate workers in critical jobs and bring down the unemployment rate" (Al-Rasheed, 2016). While immigration rates and migrants' stocks continued to increase over the period (table 1 and figure 1), reforms created new financial transfers towards women and low-income Saudi workers. This process first showcases the governmentalisation of migration control. It also consolidates, individualises, and modernises the redistribution of public money that characterises the rentier state. New bureaucrats spearheading the reforms often come from the private sector, and many have studied and worked abroad. They work closely with teams of consultants from the Boston Consulting Group and other firms whom I met in the corridors and offices of the Ministry and HRDF. Yet as they claim to move away from the *oil* rentier mentality, they reassert in practice a new state-channelled *migration rentierism*. As some of my interviewees put bluntly: taxing immigrants is meant to pay for Saudis wages.

The invention of (women's) unemployment

Since the first wave of Saudisation in the 1990s, public jobs were one of the main vectors of rent distribution from the state to citizens. The early Saudisation measure led to mass enrolment of Saudi workers in state bureaucracies. Public jobs became the adjustment variable to avoid unemployment. The public sector in the 2010s counted between 900,000 and 1.8 million civil servants, according to public sources and an independent report (Hertog, 2015, pp. 101–102), while only around 800,000 Saudis were employed in the formal private sector. Average wages in public jobs are 58% higher than in the private sector. In 2014, around 400,000 new Saudi workers, both skilled and unskilled, arrive every year on the job market. Young Saudis are the main unemployed (see Figure 3) or under-employed group, and women progressively came to form the majority of unemployed Saudis. Even though unskilled women of all ages were not the "target" of employment policies (I2), they became the main beneficiaries of *Hafez* as a new channel of rent distribution.
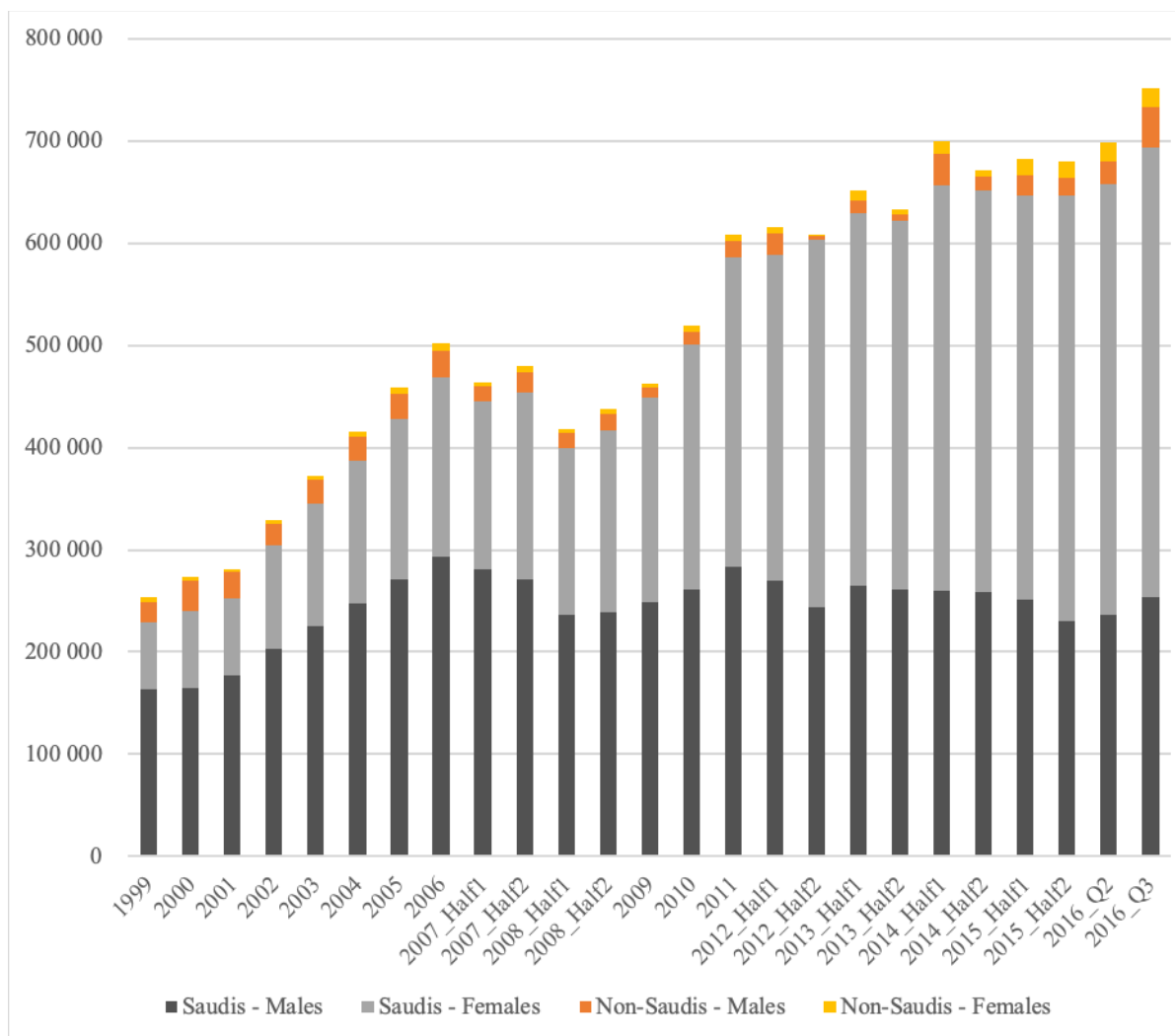
Figure 1: Unemployment in Saudi Arabia by nationality and gender from 1999-2016. Source: General Statistical Authority, 2020

In November 2011, the government created an unemployment insurance system for young Saudis: *Hafez* ("incentive" in Arabic) offered up to SAR 2,000 per month for a maximum of 12 months to active job seekers between 20 and 35 upon online or in-person declaration. In exchange, they take part in HRDF training under the *Taqat*[11] placement program and actively look for jobs. The initial program included 700,000 recipients, 80% of whom were women. In 2013, there were around two million beneficiaries out of five million applicants, costing SAR 30 billion (USD 8 billion) to the state. In February 2014, *Hafez* 2 was set to include unemployed Saudis from low income backgrounds between the ages of 35 and 60 as well as those who dropped out of *Hafez* 1. In 2014, 95% of the 200,000 recipients were women. *Hafez* encourages beneficiaries to actively look for jobs by providing their "missed" benefits as a lump sum after beneficiaries are recruited.

As the head of a deserted local female branch of *Taqat* explained, *Hafez* was in practice massively utilised by uneducated women, including her own mother, to provide extra income to the household. But very few actually sought jobs or intended to do so (I11). The head of the male branch in the same office also lamented the weak efficiency of public placement, mostly due to the competition of recruitment agencies for educated workers (I12). *Taqat* was then left to place uneducated Saudis, which proved difficult.

Subsidising nationals, taxing immigrants

The issue of labour competitivity is presented as central by most officials: Saudis are generally not considered competitive due to their lack of employable skills (for the most skilled work) and their high wage expectations (for unskilled work). In the short run, wage subsidies seek to compensate this "structural disadvantage" (I2) by artificially lowering the costs of low- and middle-skilled Saudi employees for firms. In 2014, "Payroll Rebate", a BCG-inspired program, rewarded "well-saudised" firms in the *Nitaqat* and increased the wages of Saudi employees by paying back employers from 5 to 50% of the wage increase. In 2015, the "Payroll Rebate" program manager at HRDF predicted with hand-made graphs on a white board that the

> *"labour costs for Saudis will progressively decrease and converge with that of expatriates for skilled and very skilled jobs [allowing to] progressively decrease the subsidies as the labour costs of Saudis in the private sector reach the market price. We*

are counting on the fact that Saudis will become more competent and more competitive."(I2)

The Saudi "economic bureaucracy" (Wade, 1990) at the same time legitimises heavy wage subsidies and praises free market dynamics: "we want to operate a free market in Saudi Arabia" and "we need to free all labourers and have real labour market prices" (I3, I4). While some interviewees in 2015 sincerely hoped that "workers' nationality [would soon] become irrelevant" (I2), follow-up interviews in 2017 revealed that cutting on subsidies had proved impossible and the recruitment of nationals still relied upon state money.

The reforms relied upon increasing the income generated by immigration. In 2013, a monthly fine of SAR 200 was introduced for employers who did not abide with the *Nitaqat* regulations for every employee who went over the authorised quota in the company (less than 50%). On top of this, a fixed fee of SAR 2,500 for administrative costs linked to the registration of the residence of foreign workers (*iqama*) also had to be paid directly to HRDF by employers for these same 'extra' foreign workers in the *Nitaqat* framework. In 2018, a new fee payable by employers was introduced for each foreign employee and set to increase incrementally each year until 2021 by SAR 200 each month, depending on the foreign to Saudi employee ratio in the firm (I8). In addition, in July 2017 a tax on foreign "dependents" (family members of an expatriate worker) was introduced and set to increase incrementally until 2020 from SAR 100 to 400 per month to be paid up front upon visa renewal. As a result, independent low-income workers had to send their families back home while high-income migrants could afford to keep them. This created a class-based inequality between migrants that did not previously exist in the country but converged with income-based residence rights in the UAE.

Disciplining migration

Reforms aimed at bringing migration intermediaries, notably the *kafala* system and the recruitment sector, back into state control used the Chambers of Commerce as institutional leverage. Bureaucrats, flanked by foreign consultants, seek to discipline[12] migration by strengthening the legal boundaries between formal and informal practices and enforcing mass deportations.

Reforming the kafala

The *kafala* is often described as a cornerstone of migration regulations in the Gulf[13]. It resembles intermediary institutions that have been found to both create social linkages and foster exploitation in Europe or Canada (Bosma et al., 2013; Harney, 1979). The *kafala*

delegates control over migration and migrants to the discretionary power of brokers and private employers. Despite state delegation, it nevertheless relies heavily upon patrimonial ties within the ruling family as royals enjoy sponsorship privileges (they can sponsor more migrants than lay people). In the 1980s, recruitment became the business of large companies instead of individuals (Beaugé, 1986), which increased mass exploitative practices, notably in the construction sector. It has been under continuous critique by both states and human rights activists since the 1990s and portrayed by scholars as an instrument to exploit migrants (Longva, 1999). More structurally, the *kafala* have long determined the "broader" social contract between the state, migrants, and citizens as a migration rent contract. Consequently, the income generated by the *kafala* constitutes citizens as *migration rentiers*. As a *Majlis al-Shura* representative noted,

> *"The shadow economy is feeding our citizens. For instance, a widow can get additional income by being a* kafil.*"* (I5)

Reforms undertaken since the 1990s seek to create a state monopoly over the legitimate means of movement into Saudi Arabia as well as within the country, as John Torpey (1998) famously analysed. This explains why reforms met much resistance from within Gulf societies (Diop et al., 2015). The state intends to strip employers, sponsors, and even migrant entrepreneurs themselves who bring co-nationals in, from their prerogatives, symbolic power, and income (Thiollet, 2019, p. 21) while private actors try and bypass state policies as shown in the case of the Emirates (Malit & Tsourapas, 2021).

The reforms seem, at first, to empower foreigners employed in large firms. Migrants employed in firms with "too many immigrants", according to *Nitaqat*'s labelling, are allowed to quit their jobs without their employer's permission – but only to work for "well-saudised" businesses. Yet, brokers' authority is in fact replaced by a ministerial approval through the IT-system *Wafeed* ("expatriate"). This digitalised intervention of the Ministry of Labour evicts informal practices and enhances state control. In 2014, temporary work authorisations were introduced for "dependents" (the families of foreign workers) without transfer of sponsorship through a ministry website (*Ajeer*). Again in November 2020, HRDF pledged a relaxation of control over migrant workers' mobility in March 2021 (Kerr, 2020), which in fact transfers the control of migrant workers' mobility from the employer/sponsor to the state via a smartphone application (*Absher*) and official website (*Qiwa*).

Reforms have yielded few positive impacts for migrants' rights and their benefits are highly class-dependent (Thiollet, 2019). Informal negotiations within the *kafala* relationship used to allow low-skilled migrants to extend their period of residence, sponsor family members for immigration, and change jobs (Longuenesse, 1988). They came under greater state control widening the gap between high-skilled migrants (who benefitted from migrant labour regulation) and low-skilled migrants (who are the most subjected to exploitative practices and no longer benefit from the informal social relations with locals). Additionally, the new labour regulations and laws adopted in the 2010s paradoxically "produced" more illegality (Frantz 2017) by toughening the boundaries between formal and informal practices.

Policing the (in)formal recruitment sector

Earlier phases of Saudisation in the 1990s and early 2000s had created a large number of 'fake businesses' (I6). These intermediary companies generate work visas, which were then 'resold' to other firms. From the perspective of migrants and employers, they offered "free visas"[14] using the *kafala* to circumvent state regulations of migration. Free-visa holders have greater flexibility and mobility at the margins of the job market and lower employment costs for both workers and employers (Dito, 2015). However, migrants live and work in a grey zone where arbitrary enforcement and power relations rule: even if visas are legally sold by individuals or recruitment agencies in countries of origin or in the Kingdom, the migrant faces sanction and potential deportation as soon as he or she changes jobs.

While "for a long time, the state has agreed to look away from the shadow economy" (I5), the reforms broke a habit of tolerance towards informal practices. In February 2012, the Ministry of Labour introduced a decree regulating overseas manpower recruitment through licences for "Mega Recruitment Companies". Ten companies were initially licenced, selected among the largest recruitment firms whose owners often had strong ties with the Chambers of Commerce and ruling elites. The licencing system concentrates business opportunities, especially for low-skilled immigration, in the hands of a very small number of intermediaries under state surveillance. In parallel, the state organised a breakdown on small firms to track the statuses of foreign employees. In 2014, around 200,000 businesses had closed since the programme began ('Nitaqat: 200,000 Firms Closed Down', 2014) and foreclosures mainly affected these intermediary companies. A number of them, however, were also "real" small production firms, almost entirely dependent on foreign labourers.[15] According to a member of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, "seventy percent of these businesses were actually illegal, or linked to illegal partnerships" with *kufala'* and "under-the-table practices." (I7)

The Chambers of Commerce, crucial for recruitment, became increasingly involved in the reforms. A businessperson stated that the Chambers were "the NGOs of the private sector", collaborating with the Ministry to discuss and implement the reforms. The Chambers gained a pivotal role through committees (*lijan al istiqdam*) for the recruitment of foreigners and nationals (*lajna watani*) and were increasingly asked to enforce Saudisation measures. As a representative of the Council of Chambers stated in 2013,

> "When the government started Saudisation in the 1990s, the chambers and businessmen refused it" but now "respecting quotas and Nitaqat now comes as a national duty rather than a business objective."(I9)

In December 2016, the Council of Chambers created a "Vision Realization Office (VRO)" to "enhance the contribution of the private sector to the realization of the Saudi Vision 2030" (CSC, 2016) which manifest state intervention and surveillance. The control imposed on the recruitment sector and more largely on employers via the Chambers of Commerce reshapes negotiating grounds for the alliance between the business sector and the ruling family. It seeks to formally "embed" the autonomy of economic actors (Evans, 1992) into the working of the developmental state and its bureaucracies and regulations beyond classical personal ties. By doing so, it pits big business against small and medium businesses which, as an HRD official said, "are using camouflage for bringing expats in" (I8):

> "The large and medium businesses love Nitaqat! Not the small businesses. It is too complicated and there is not enough trust in the Government. [...] Overall, the private sector is patriarchal and does not believe in social change. It is a question of [backward] mentality." (I7)

Policing (irregular) migrants

Reforms claim to break with informal dynamics and practices using digital data and administrative control. The discursive and organisational securitisation of migration, as defined by Didier Bigo (2001) is part of a broader agenda of state-service-digitalisation. Yet, the counting and control over irregular migrants illustrates the aforementioned competition between the Ministry of Labour and its agencies on the one hand, and the Ministry of Interior and the security sector on the other. Public interviewees from the private sector often highlighted the political struggle around data and information in migration policies:

> "In 2012, nobody was ready for the reforms. The Ministry of Interior had no computarised programs. Now, all the data are with the Ministry of Interior, the Jawazat [Passport

Authority]. The Ministry of Labour and the Labour Offices still technically do the paperwork, but they do not have full power. They are trying to get the issuance of [all papers for immigrants] under their authority, but so far they have not succeeded." (I10)

In 2006, the Immigration and Passports Service began to keep files on irregular immigrants who overstayed Hajj or Umra' visas. In 2012, fingerprinting for female foreigner workers was introduced and became mandatory in April 2014. In 2014, biometric registration became mandatory upon renewal of *iqama* or new entry, and in January 2015, children of immigrants became subject to biometric submission for *iqama*. In December 2017, biometric registration also became mandatory for pilgrims.

Data collection and digitalisation is combined with increased publicising of population statistics as an instrument of control and public communication. The Central Department of Statistical Information became the General Authority for Statistics in 2016 when statistical yearbooks, demographic, and labour market surveys alongside a wide array of information became available in Arabic and English. The Ministry of Interior's website publishes monthly statistics on irregular migration, disclosing numbers and locations of "violators of the residency, labour and border system/regulations", as well as statistics of deported migrants.[16]

The Ministry of Interior led several two-step campaigns against undocumented workers, starting with "correction campaigns" (*hamalat al-tashih*) that included periods of amnesty before ending with mass deportations. In 2013, between 4 to 5.3 million individuals were concerned, which is half of the official foreign population (Arab News, 2013). Around two million were able to correct their status in the country, while around one million had to leave and around two million were deported. These campaigns mostly targeted free-visa holders. The amnesty period allowed selective regularisation depending upon the nature of statutory infraction and the financial and administrative support provided to immigrants by their employers, *kufala'*, or embassies. Ethiopians, Somalis, and over six hundred thousand Yemenis were the main victims of the crackdowns (Human Rights Watch, 2015), but over a hundred thousand Pakistanis were also deported. The 2017 campaign "A Nation Without Violations" led to the deportation of 345,089 expatriates between April and May 2017, according to the Saudi Passport Authority.

The amnesty periods generated intense administrative work and corruption. Some migrants and their families could regularise their situation by, for example, validating their affiliation to a new sponsor or signing a work contract in cases where they had been irregularly employed. On top of the official cost of administrative legal procedures were added the costs of generalised corruption, as the sympathy of the different administrative levels concerned by

the procedures had to be purchased. Migrants bore the costs. In parallel, the threat of expulsion put workers in a precarious situation, depriving them of any room to protect their rights vis-à-vis their employers.

In Jeddah, the correction campaigns were organised with the Chamber of Commerce. Tents were set on the esplanade in front of the Chamber's building, where Chamber staff coordinated with employers, consulates, and community representatives to channel demands of regularisation. By collaborating with the Ministry of Labour in "correcting" statuses and providing foreign workers with the means to stay, the private actors tried to mitigate the impact of deportations on firms, especially in small businesses and migrants with "poorer" consulates or embassies that could not afford to provide legal support. Employers and their representation continue to operate as intermediaries for migrants, but the poorest foreigners, low-skilled workers, were still out of reach. They fell victim to the Ministry of Interior's raids on construction sites, at checkpoints, and in migrants' homes in working class neighbourhoods of large cities (Bani Malik in Jeddah, Manfuha in the south of Riyadh).

Conclusion

Across thirty years and two major political crises, migration politics has shifted from immigration denial and a partly informal migration regime based on private intermediaries toward a modernised, state-centred, and discursively neoliberal migration regime. In this article, I showed how immigration reforms are designed not only as *ad hoc* counter-revolutionary measures against a potential Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia but also as part of the authoritarian (high) modernization project James Scott theorised (1998, pp. 88–90). The reforms and the rationalities that support them for different types of actors entail powerful social engineering which relies upon the administrative ordering and policing. They equip the state with increased structural authority upon market institutions and upon the Saudi society by controlling not only immigrants but also Saudis, be they workers, unemployed women, employers, or brokers. The state has also tightened its grip on both the oil rent and the migration rent by taxing migrants and subsidising citizens. This changes the power and social relations between the three components of the broader Saudi social contract—the state, citizens and migrants—extending the authority of the state. From the particular case of Saudi Arabia, I observe generalisable historical trends in the connection between migration politics and state (trans)formation that are not regime specific. Similar processes can be observed across history both in the Global South

and in the Global North, calling for more comparative research across political regimes and types of states.

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[1] The term "contract" can only be understood metaphorically here as noted by Toby Jones (2003). The term does not refer to an actual contractual engagement between the monarch and the citizen but as a fictional narrative that establishes the political legitimacy of the sovereign state over the people.

[2] In rentier states, ruling elites are often considered to uphold joint authority over economic and political spheres and use redistributive (welfare) policies, kinship solidarity, and occasional repression to control civil society (Al-Naqeeb, 1990; Ayubi, 1996; Beblawi, 1987).

[3] Source: Economic Intelligence unit 2019 report www.eiu.com and Freedom House 2019.

[4] Politicisation usually refers to "an increase in salience and diversity of opinions on specific societal topics" (De Wilde, 2011, p. 561). Although mostly studied in democratic contexts as a way to pressure the policy making process (through partisan politics, public opinion, free media, etc.), it can also serve non-democratic ones to measure politicisation: salience, polarisation of opinion, participation of actors, and audiences. The process can be either *top-down* (state-led politicisation within policy domains, public organisations, and state apparels) or *bottom-up* (social movements' activism and political socialisation within civil society and non-state actors and institutions).

[5] The search included several migration keywords excluding overly general terms and restricting the search to domestic news and pieces: *'uamala (al-)ajnabiya* (عمالة الأجنبية), *'umala al-wafida* (عمالة الوافدة), *mughtaribin* (مغتربين), *'umala al-aljanib* (عمال الأجانب), *muhajirin* (مهاجرين), *ajanib* (أجانبة). The search was conducted in the main general press titles and the Saudi News Agency in Arabic since 2010 available through FACTIVA, which provides information on headlines and article contents. Sources: Aleqtisadiyah (2011-2020); Asharq Alawsat (2011-2020); Saudi Press Agency (2011-2020) MBC Arabic (2011-2020). Sources in Arabic were mostly available only from 2011 onwards and two sources were added (Al Madina (2016-2020); Al Riyadh (2015-2020)) with little effect on the yearly distribution.

[6] Legal constraints concern both establishments and contents. They feature in the 1992 Basic Law and were reinforced with the 2003 Printing and Publication Law, the 2005 reform imposing control of the Ministry of Culture and Information over media outlets, and the 2009, 2011, and 2014 laws extending control over the press under the pretext of terrorism prevention. Regular media closures, jailing and condemnation, and even assassination of bloggers, journalists, and public figures for their press statements enforce self-censorship as much as ex post control.

[7] Decree 30, 1/3/1415, 8 August 1994, Council of Ministers, 'Regulation to remedy the situation of foreigners in an irregular or provisional situation in the Kingdom' (translated from Arabic).

[8] Decree 90, 14/5/1418, 17 September 1997, Council of Ministers, 'Law draft'. Secretary General of the Council of Ministers (*diwan ra'issa majlis al wizâra*), translated from Arabic.

[9] Text available on the website of the former "Saudi Institute" (now Gulf Institute) in Washington DC. See https://al-bab.com/documents/saudi-national-reform-document

[10] *Nitaqat*, literally 'zone' in Arabic, classifies private business of more than 9 employees with regard to the rate of Saudi employees in a business, penalising "Red or Yellow" firms that have less than 11% of Saudi workers by restricting their ability to apply for or extend work visas from the Ministry of Labour.

[11] *Taqat* is at the same time an electronic platform operated by the HRDF that facilitates employment and training services for Saudi workers and is also embodied in local training centres across cities in the country. See https://hrdf.org.sa/Program/394/TAQAT_The_National_Labor_Gateway?bc=266

[12] We understand discipline here as a management technique designed to orient the actions and rationalities of agents, which includes information (data), control, surveillance, organisation, and sanction exerted on individuals or groups. Discipline is often coupled with but distinct from techniques of control (Foucault, 2004, pp. 44–50).

[13] It administratively ties the legal presence of foreigners on Saudi soil and their access to the labour market to a local sponsor (*kafil* plur. *kufala'*) in exchange for a fee, and establishes a legal bond of dependence, exploitation, protection, and hierarchy within and beyond the labour market.

[14] Although a work visa is legally tied to a work contract, "free (work) visas" are sold by individuals or companies who declare a fictitious or short-lived activity to bring immigrants into the country regularly. Once arrived, migrants are "free" to find and change jobs, provided that they continue to pay their *kafil*.

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[15] Even though the Saudisation only applies to firms with over 9 employees, the new regulations weigh heavily upon small businesses, which constitute a large majority of the 17,000 firms classified as Red.

[16] See the "information" section of the National Center for Security Operations on the Ministry of Interior website. URL: https://www.moi.gov.sa/