The Journey to Arabia: A Visual Essay

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The Journey to Arabia

Andrew Gardner

As our species, now knee-deep in the contemporary era of mobility, continues to burn through the remainder of our planet’s petroleum reserves, humans in ever greater numbers find themselves uprooted from home, consigned to search for opportunity beyond local frontiers. In concordance with these movements and mobilities, our vocabulary continues to expand to accommodate contemporary realities: political refugees, illegal immigrants, guest workers, transnational laborers, circular migrants, diasporas, tourists, cosmopolitans and more — these terms all grasp at some aspect of human dispersal and movement. The uneven global distribution and historic accumulations of capital provide a fundamental compass to these mobilities, and as a result, migrations oriented toward the wealthy, developed nations of North America and Europe continue to anchor our understandings of this contemporary era of mobility.

The Arab Gulf States, another region of significant capital accumulation, have generated their own gravity amidst these movements. This visual essay provides a window to that frontier in this era of mobility. For two decades, my ethnographic work has explored transnational labor migration in the Indian Ocean world, wherein the petroleum-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula compose the destination for the third-largest transnational movement of humans on our planet.\(^1\) For tens of millions of individuals in this Indian Ocean world and beyond, toiling in the wealthy Gulf States for some portion of one’s life has emerged as a principal coping strategy, a rite of passage, an escape hatch for various political, social and economic frictions, and a gateway for many to a sustained engagement with modernity.

The destination Gulf States consist of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Conversely, the list of states from which these transnational labor flows depart is more diverse, and new additions to that list are a periodic feature of this migration system. Regardless, over the past century the mainstay nations from which migrants in this system are drawn include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and various other Middle Eastern states. This visual essay addresses that whole, but focuses primarily on the transnational conduit that connects Nepal and Qatar — regions where my ethnographic research agenda has been particularly focused in the past decade.

While there are multiple threads woven through any set of ethnographic photographs, one angle on this collection would be to conceptualize this migrant journey into three realms: the circumstances and contexts from...
which these transnational migrants emerge, and to which they commonly stay tethered, for the most part; the experience of transit in this migration system, and the various institutions, persons and relations that both enable and harness these movements; and the lived experiences migrants encounter and endure in the host states where they reside while away from home. In these photographs, albeit with several exceptions, that host state is Qatar.

These migrants’ experiences, and this migration system as a whole, differ from other systems in numerous ways. It is certainly of note that in some Gulf States and in some regions of Arabia, the populations of foreign migrants at work make up a majority of the population and thereby dissemble the minority lens through which populations of resident foreigners are perceived in Europe, North America and elsewhere. In Qatar, for example, foreign workers make up about 90% of the total population there — a demographically overwhelming presence. Also noteworthy is the *kefala* — the sponsorship system that orchestrates relations between foreign workers and the citizens, states, institutions and the employers that host them. Via the *kefala*, labor migrants are bound to the employer who sponsored their migration and entry, and can depart that relationship only with great travail. In addition, while populations of migrants are a long-standing feature of the societies on the Arabian Peninsula, their presence is widely conceptualized as temporary. Notions of assimilation and naturalization are not features of the social relations between foreign workers, citizens and states in Arabia.

Finally, this visual essay trains its lens on the lived experiences of the South Asian laboring class of transnational migrants. This population is the most significant, substantial and historic of the many populations of migrants that now flow to the region. But while this visual essay speaks to that central, experiential feature of this migration system, it elides other components of the migrant population that also comprise these mobilities. Female migrants — particularly workers in the domestic sector — are a significant component of the transnational flows of labor to Arabia. Similarly, migrants from different portions of Africa are a growing presence in the Gulf States, and their experiences — like those of migrants from North Africa and other portions of the Middle East — are also omitted from this portrait. In addition, this visual essay provides no glimpse of the more privileged classes of professionals, technocrats and merchants who also travel the very same transnational circuits as the laboring class portrayed here.

Nonetheless, as stated, the ambition for this collection of images is to provide a glimpse into the experiences of a set of mobilities and migrations outside the circuits most commonly discussed in our growing awareness of this global era of mobility.
Note

1. These photographs were products of a sustained sequence of research projects, including several funded by Qatar’s National Priorities Research Program (NPRP) as well as its Undergraduate Research Experience Program (UREP), by Georgetown’s Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS), by the Open Society Foundation, by Columbia University’s Research & Empirical Analysis of Labor Migration (REALM) initiative, and by Qatar University’s New Faculty Research Program. This essay was crafted thanks to time spent at the University of Washington’s Whiteley Center.

Andrew Gardner is a professor of anthropology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. He is a sociocultural anthropologist and ethnographer by training. For the past two decades, Andrew’s fieldwork has focused on the places, peoples and societies that interact in the hydrocarbon-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Nepal, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. Between 2008 and 2010, he also served as an assistant professor of anthropology at Qatar University. He is the author of numerous journal articles, book chapters and other published material, including the monograph *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration and the Indian Community in Bahrain* (Cornell).
I. Home

Figure 1. This Nepali family pooled household resources to fund their son’s journey to Qatar, where he was employed as the lead administrator in a small construction firm’s office. Photograph by Kristin Giordano, 2010.
Figure 2. With their oldest son working as a mason in residential construction in Doha, this family in Nepal has seen their fortunes improve. Their oldest son’s remittances fueled the construction of this Arabesque new home (the largest in the village), and their younger son (pictured here) intends to follow his sibling’s lead to Arabia. Photography by Kristin Giordano, 2010.
Figure 3. After years immersed in the frontlines of conflict in Sri Lanka, this Tamilian family arranged for their oldest son to escape the violent local frictions by obtaining work in Qatar. Photography by Andrew Gardner, 2010.
II. Transit

Figure 4. For many Nepalese migrants, the journey to Arabia commences with the arduous journey over busy, mountainous roads to Kathmandu from the hinterlands of rural Nepal. Almost all the migration infrastructure is located in Kathmandu, the capital city. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2016.
Figure 5. The urban landscape of Kathmandu surrounding the bus station has, over the past decade, filled with hotels and guesthouses utilized by potential transnational migrants as they navigate the complexities of labor brokerage, recruitment, training and certification by the state. Photograph by Zahra Babar, 2016.
Figure 6. Gulf employers provide recruitment agencies in the sending states with lists of the labor they seek. Transnational labor migrants in this Gulf-directed Indian Ocean migration system typically pay $1,000 or more to obtain two-year work contracts. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2016.
Figure 7. For many South Asian migrants, the flight to Arabia is their first time aloft, and the routes to the Gulf States evidence the scale of these transnational migrations. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2016.
III. Workers in Arabia

Figure 8. In Arabia, migrants commonly reside in employer-arranged labor camps, oftentimes located at the fringes of the city, like this dormitory-style camp in the Industrial Area of Doha, Qatar. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2010.
Figure 9. Labor migrants might also reside in villas no longer desirable to the local Arab population. Nearly 100 men shared the six bedrooms of this villa, also referred to as a “labor camp” by migrants, citizens and employers. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2009.
Figure 10. Migrants are typically housed six or more to a room in these labor camps. Photograph by Andrew Gardner, 2009.
Figure 11. Buses carry the workforce between their camps and their worksites in Arabia. Photograph by Ramesh Pandey, 2009.
Figure 12. Labor migrants’ monthly wages are low in Arabia, and substantial portions of their earnings service the debt they and their families incurred for initial entry into this migration system. Photograph by Kristin Giordano, 2009.
Figure 13. Monthly wages are also highly variable, and even with the debts these transnational migrants typically incur, wages oftentimes surpass what might be available in the sending state. Photograph by Kristin Giordano, 2009.
Figure 14. Labor migrants celebrating Diwali, the Hindu “festival of lights,” at their labor camp. Photography by Andrew Gardner, 2009.
Figure 15. For millions of men and women in a dozen different sending states, employment in the Gulf States functions as a rite of passage — a common feature of a young adult’s life trajectory, a chance to see a bit more of the world and to explore what opportunities might present themselves. Photograph by Deependra Giri, 2009.