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Gulf Affairs: What is the role of the Council of Ministers of Labor and Council of Ministers of Social Affairs in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States?

Al-Jassim: Like all other cooperative GCC entities, the inauguration of the Council of Ministers of Labor and Council of Ministers of Social Affairs stems from the GCC states' shared history, values, and belonging. Moreover, the similarity of living conditions, economy and culture necessitated that these states establish joint operations.

The decision to inaugurate this council was made in 1978, during a convention for ministers of labor and of social affairs. This council expresses these states' awareness of all the details of that critical period, in which all the GCC states were facing challenges especially related to labor and social affairs. Tackling these challenges effectively has a significant impact on the advancement of these states and the improvement of life conditions.

¹ The interview was translated from Arabic

IV. Interviews

The founding statute declared the cooperation between member states in the following:

1. Setting labor policies to ensure effective use of manpower.
2. Fostering an environment of equality and encouraging career mobility among citizens of member states.
3. Creating an atmosphere that is attractive to Arab labor, and securing the necessary assurances for its stability.
4. Setting labor education and training programs.
5. Unifying as much as possible all policies pertaining to labor laws, social security, and industrial relations between member states.
6. Unifying as much as possible the basic principles for social and labor laws.
7. Protecting human resources and taking necessary health and safety precautions.

The council's executive bureau translates the aforementioned points into the following action points:

1. Setting unified work policies to ensure unity in principles.
2. Setting model frameworks to ensure unity in goals and standards.
3. Adapting and implementing cooperative projects related to labor and social affairs.
4. Conducting studies and research in all member states to monitor any pressing issues and trends.
5. Holding regular workshops and training programs across member states to develop solutions for relevant challenges.

Gulf Affairs: What are the biggest challenges that face the council in the field of labor?

Al-Jassim:

1. One of the main concerns is the issue of temporary expat labor, which includes domestic help. All GCC states are an attractive destination for expatriate labor, which certainly increased the population number. This increase has, without a doubt, its political and socio-economic implications.
2. Labor nationalization and finding appropriate jobs that can provide suitable income to the member states' citizens. This issue is of high importance to the council and all labor ministers of member states.
3. Awareness of the nature of GCC labor markets. Many researchers in the field of labor affairs, especially foreign researchers, are unaware of the GCC states' labor ministries efforts when it comes to the subject of labor.

The environment in these states is very unique, and labor-exporting countries are aware of this—GCC states contribute greatly to the economy of these countries. The biggest challenge, therefore, is to explain to foreign researchers how unique the environment is in member states, and to show that the problems that face expatriate labor are a small fraction when compared to the numerous success stories of positive cooperation between expatriate laborers and the local employers (in both the private and public sectors).

What are your plans to address these challenges?

Al-Jassim:

1. The council's executive bureau liaises between the ministries of labor in all member states. The council

- proposes joint programs in the annual and regular meetings between ministers and officials, and highlights successful examples in any of the member states to inspire the other members.
2. The council tasks the executive bureau with identifying current or upcoming challenges and proposing solutions and ways of cooperation between the GCC states. The bureau, among other things, works on the following:
 - a. Conducting research on labor issues.
 - b. Organizing workshops and training courses to raise awareness about labor affairs.
 - c. Liaising between member states on regional and international issues.

Gulf Affairs: What are the main initiatives and projects conducted by the council?

Al-Jassim: Firstly, there are initiatives that each member state launched independently. These initiatives are numerous—each GCC state launched several successful programs and awareness campaigns related to nationalizing the labor force. Member states have also successfully (and independently) established entities to mediate and resolve issues between laborers and employers. Member states have also established campaigns and entities to resolve issues between domestic workers and their employers.

Secondly, all member states regularly participate in meetings and conventions to discuss the most pressing issues of labor affairs. Through the council, all GCC states have specific teams tasked with conducting research and proposing solutions for issues of domestic labor, nationalizing the labor force, tackling unemployment, and monitoring the labor market. Reports from each independent team are submitted annually to the council.

Gulf Affairs: How do you evaluate the success of the council in the projects it conducted?

Al-Jassim: More than 35 years have passed since the establishment of the council, and we take pride in this fruitful journey. Despite the many challenges, we succeeded in establishing a unified framework for our labor and social legislations and laws. We also succeeded in exchanging expertise and rotating leadership among member states. We certainly have more upcoming projects and cooperation opportunities, which further strengthen our bond and help us achieve our joint goals and ambitions in serving our citizens and actualizing our development plans. However, we still have a long way to go. Priorities, globally, are always in flux, which requires continuous hard work.

Gulf Affairs: How would you evaluate the success of each GCC state in the field of nationalizing labor force?

Al-Jassim: The success of any GCC state is the success of all GCC states, since we continuously exchange experiences. All GCC states have successful examples in nationalizing campaigns. For example, the UAE launched the initiative: *Ibshir, Na'am, Ebda', Rashih Nafsik, Ein al-Mustaqbal*, and others. The Kingdom of Bahrain established the Labor Market Regulatory Authority, launched the campaign *Tamkeen*, and established the National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education and Training. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched the initiatives *Nitaqat, Taqat*, and *Hafiz*. It also established the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation. Qatar announced its labor market strategy 2011-2016 which still reaps the fruits of its success in enabling Qatari nationals and raising their skills.

IV. Interviews

The Sultanate of Oman launched a nationalization campaign titled *Sanad*, which was a big success. It also established the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority. Kuwait established the Kuwait Occupational Standards, Assessment and Certification program, as well as the Manpower and Government Restructuring Program, and is soon launching the Public Authority for Manpower. All these programs and initiatives aim to increase the number of national labor in both the public and private sectors.

Gulf Affairs: What are the obstacles that you face in your efforts to nationalize the workforce in GCC states?

Al-Jassim: The most pressing obstacle is the lack of independent work in the culture of the GCC citizen. GCC citizens still favor working in the government sector because of the job security and the social security benefits. GCC states are working on bridging the gap between the benefits of public vs private employees, and its efforts so far have been successful to a large extent.

Countering the negative culture of dependence on the government necessitates turning to other sources of innovation, like small and medium enterprises. Indeed, many GCC states have established programs and initiatives to help citizens start their own businesses. A good example of that is the initiative *Tamkeen* in Bahrain, as well as the funds that many GCC states have started to support SMEs. The goal of these establishments is to decrease the rate of unemployment and encourage independence. The council also has a special team tasked with monitoring the labor market for any obstacles that face SME owners and entrepreneurs and proposing solutions. The council also gives an annual award to the best SME in the GCC states.

Gulf Affairs: How does the head of the executive bureau see the future of national workforce in the GCC?

Al-Jassim: There certainly are challenges and obstacles. One of these challenges is the expatriate labor and their impact on population density, demographics, and the *Khaleeji* identity, as well as the socio-economic and labor structure in the GCC.

The second challenge is finding suitable positions for GCC citizens, especially university graduates. These two challenges require diligence from the ministers of labor in all GCC states. Currently, GCC citizens are facing many challenges when it comes to finding suitable jobs, while on the other hand the dependence on foreign labor is increasing significantly. Overcoming this relies mostly on changing the culture of *Khaleeji* citizens and their concept of suitable work that provides decent income.