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# Deportation, Displacement, and Reintegration: Pakistani Migrant Workers Returning from the UAE Amid Geopolitical Crisis

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***Abstract:*** This article examines the reported deportation and crisis-driven return of Pakistani migrant workers from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during the 2026 regional crisis and considers its implications for reintegration in Pakistan. Drawing on qualitative critical-interpretive document analysis, the study reviews event-specific journalistic reporting, Pakistani migration-governance documents, material on Gulf labor regimes, and scholarship on deportation and reintegration. The analysis does not find sufficient publicly available evidence to establish that the UAE implemented a formally documented policy of sectarian deportation against Pakistani Shi'a workers. Rather, it identifies a politically sensitive context in which routine immigration enforcement, reported experiences of discretionary suspicion, and the structural deportability of temporary migrant workers appeared to converge. Reported accounts indicate possible disruption to employment, access to savings, personal belongings, and future migration plans; read alongside reintegration scholarship, these accounts point to plausible economic, social, and psychosocial risks after return to Pakistan. The article develops the concept of securitized labor governance to explain how temporary labor regimes may become more security-inflected during geopolitical crisis without necessarily constituting a formal discriminatory policy. It concludes

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by recommending a coordinated, district-linked crisis-returnee response in Pakistan, including registration, consular case documentation, legal referral, psychosocial support, and livelihood assistance.
***Keywords:*** deportation; crisis-driven return; Pakistani migrant workers; reintegration; gulf labor migration; deportability; sectarianized suspicion

Labor migration to the Gulf is central to Pakistan's political economy, household livelihood strategies, and remittance-dependent development model. The migration system in Pakistan has been heavily reliant on temporary labor exports and the World Bank's review of Pakistan's migration system concludes that the export of labor has been regarded as an avenue for employment, a remedy for labor-market pressures, and a way for remittance generation and overall progress of the household (World Bank, 2018). Similarly, the policy formulation process on Pakistan's migration governance reveals that the entire formal labor migration to date is concentrated on the Gulf destination and the region is structurally significant to Pakistan's migration corridor, instead of being on the periphery of it (Hussain, 2026; Qaisrani et al., 2022). This dependency creates a double-sided nature of migration, one that is an opportunity, and one that may present vulnerabilities when there is sudden fluctuation in labor demand, documentation systems, or political climates in the country the migrant chooses to go to (Bendari et al., 2026; Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018).

The United Arab Emirates has enjoyed a special place among the Gulf countries due to its age-old status as a principal destination for Pakistani laborers in both low and semi-skilled and service jobs. In fact, as revealed by demography and labor studies conducted in the UAE, foreign workers are so salient in the UAE's labor market that they are economically indispensable, and yet politically and legally precarious (De Bel-Air, 2018; Soenjoto & Mahmudah, 2026). Similarly, Pakistan-based migration governance publications have commented that migration to the Gulf has been driven by temporary work arrangements, employer dependency, multiple intermediaries and differential legal protections, but not by a means to secure settlement or permanent membership (Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018). In such systems economic inclusion isn't the end of removability. It frequently occurs in conjunction with it.

This wider picture is crucial to grasp the overall picture of the 2026 dispute about the deportation of Pakistani workers from the UAE. Available event-specific reporting indicated that some Pakistani workers returned after removal from the UAE with disrupted employment, restricted access to savings, or loss of personal belongings. Some reported accounts, particularly those involving Shi'a workers, also described questioning related to Iran, remittances, names, or religious affiliation during a period of heightened regional tension. Pakistani authorities, however, rejected claims of sect-specific victimization and maintained that removals were connected to administrative or legal grounds. According to a Senate discussion reported by Dawn, 3,494 Pakistanis were deported from the UAE between January and April 2026, while more than two million Pakistanis were residing in the country. These competing accounts make the episode analytically significant but do not, by themselves, establish a formal policy of sectarian deportation.

The issue is thus not simply deportation itself. More significant is the question of how deportation was understood, rationalized, contested and experienced in distinct institutional and social locations. Deportation studies have long since been about the politics of deportation, and the refusal to view it as a mundane administrative process. As De Genova demonstrates in her study of deportability, migrants can be governed not only by deportation itself, but by the constant threat of deportation, which inflicts a sense of insecurity on everyday life even before

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it is actually implemented (De Genova, 2002). In a similar fashion, Walters (2002) posits that deportation must be understood as a form of ‘political technology of expulsion' instead of as a straightforward bureaucratic reaction to transgression of mobility. These insights are especially relevant in the Gulf context, where labor migrants are in the greatest demand but structurally temporary.

The case is important also because deportation doesn't stop at the border. Upon their return to Pakistan, workers will need to reintegrate into labor markets, households, social expectations and local moral economies that are ill-prepared to accommodate crisis-driven return. The migration governance literature in Pakistan repeatedly highlights that the government has been more successful in creating the institutions and infrastructure for departure and valuing remittances, than in receiving and reintegrating returnees (Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018). While outward labor mobility is well documented with country-wise, district-wise, occupation-wise and province-wise statistics of emigration, readily available statistics of return and deportation are still leaner with the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE), and it is a matter of institutional visibility that these statistics are not readily available for the kind of differentiated questions the present case has raised (BEOE, 2025). Although reintegration initiatives do exist, the need for reintegration to be human-rights based and gender responsive further suggests that this is under-consolidated and not fully institutionalized (International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD], 2025), and ICMPD's work in Pakistan explicitly identifies sustainable reintegration as a priority for migration governance (ICMPD, 2026a).

This article addresses two related questions:

1. How can the 2026 removals of Pakistani migrant workers from the UAE be interpreted through deportability, contingent belonging, securitized labor governance, and geopolitical crisis?
2. What do the reported characteristics of this episode reveal about the preparedness of Pakistan’s reintegration architecture for crisis-driven return?

The problems are inter-connected, but the article does not assert that deportation abroad and failure of reintegration at home are elements of one clearly combined policy regime. That's a stronger statement that would need to be backed up with a lot more institutional evidence than has been presented. Instead, the article argues more soberingly that the UAE episode showed that deportable workers can be more vulnerable during crisis in the region and their sudden return was an indication of the fragility of Pakistan's reintegration architecture (ICMPD, 2025; World Bank, 2018).

The article also addresses an important analytical issue with the case: sectarianism. There are multiple examples of testimony in the available reporting about deportation based on Shi'a identity, on perceived connections to Iran, or on communal visibility. However, there is no comparative data on how many Sunni Pakistani workers were deported in the same period, nor is there a publicly documented UAE policy on deportation of Shi'a Pakistanis as such. It is important, therefore, to keep a scholarly argument in focus and in step with the record of evidence. It does not necessarily view sectarianized suspicion as a state policy, but as a pattern of differentiated vulnerability "that is reported and perceived.

The rest of the article is divided into six sections. Following this introduction, the literature review covers the study of deportation, the scholarship on migration in the Gulf and return-migration theory, and then constructs a formal theoretical context of deportability, contingent belonging, securitized labor governance and multidimensional reintegration. The methodology section provides description of the study design, critical-interpretive document analysis, the inventory of sources, coding logic, and limitations. The results section reports the

major empirical patterns that arose from the corpus. An assessment of the alternative explanations is then carried out, Kuschminder, 2017's reintegration model operationalized, and statements that can and cannot be made on the basis of the evidence provided (Kuschminder, 2017). The conclusion sets the article's contribution into perspective, pinpoints key policy actors, and indicates areas for future research.

## Literature Review

The literature that is applicable to this case falls under three partially different yet overlapping fields of study: deportation studies, Gulf labor-migration studies, and return-migration and reintegration studies. The first group of writings are from deportation studies. De Genova's deportability is a key concept as it reveals that migration regulation works not only through the visible implements of deportation. It also works in the latent everyday potential of removal, which formulates migrant vulnerability long before the official deportation process (De Genova, 2002). Walters hereby expands this insight by arguing that deportation must be historicized and denaturalized as a means of power, as it is a means of police of membership, space, and alienness, not only through the act of border entry control, but through practices of deportation as well (Walters, 2002). This literature is relevant to the current article as it moves the debate from a legal-administrative frame of deportation to a politics of removability. It also offers an understanding of how the state of deportability can be as analytically relevant as deportation.

The second strand relates to forced return. At the core of Cassarino's research on return is the idea of return as a process rather than a mere movement home, which is influenced by preparedness and the mobilization of resources (Cassarino, 2013). But, Cassarino's model was developed with the focus on voluntary or at least planned return, not deportation. That criticism shouldn't be reason to give up on Cassarino completely, though, but rather to use him more judiciously. Cassarino is not mentioned in this article as a comprehensive theory of deportation. Narrowly, he is enlisted to shed light on the disruptions of deportation, specifically preparedness, temporality, savings accumulation, and the viability of migration as a return strategy. In this respect, Cassarino's framework is analytically relevant because it is the absence of the conditions it suggests are important for successful re-integration that makes forced return analytically interesting.

The third area of scholarship is migration in the Gulf. Labor migration in the Gulf has long been a subject of research which reveals that it is mediated by temporariness, employer-dependency, and inequity in the form of regulation. The UAE labor market data provides evidence of the majority of the private-sector workforce being migrants, pointing to the fact that migrants are the bedrock of economic life in the UAE, yet this conditionality makes them institutionally precarious (De Bel-Air, 2018). This is corroborated by Pakistan-specific policy analysis, which highlights that the migration of Pakistani workers is tied closely with the demand in the Gulf, the exploitation of the workers due to the involvement of labor recruiters and the structurally constrained nature of laborers outside the country (Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018). The inclusion of human-rights reporting on the UAE brings another layer of focus on how the kafala sponsorship system remains a restriction on job mobility and puts migrant workers at risk of debt, wage theft, ineffective implementation of their rights, and deportable insecurity beyond just any one crisis moment (Amnesty International, 2025). This literature is important because it places the 2026 episode in a greater context of controlled mobility than as a singular aberration.

The fourth workgroup is about return and reintegration. The notion that returns equates with reintegration is challenged by the contemporary understanding of the scholarship. Kuschminder’s (2017) work is particularly relevant as she conceptualizes reintegration as a

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multidimensional process, comprising economic, social and psychosocial aspects, which are all influenced by family circumstances, local opportunities and institutional support (Kuschminder, 2017). The OECD's work on sustainable reintegration also highlights that there are overlaps between return, reintegration and re-migration, and that returnees enter into social worlds, not into empty spaces (Arslan et al., 2023; OECD, 2020). There is evidence in the literature to substantiate this overall picture for Pakistan. Both the World Bank's review of Pakistan's migration system and the study on 'Migration-relevant policies in Pakistan' by Qaisrani et al. (2022) indicate that Pakistan's governance architecture is still stronger on emigration than on return, and that institutional support for returnees is fragmented, reactive, and underdeveloped. Equally, recent reintegration-focused research in Pakistan also highlights that returnees often struggle with poor labor market absorption, insufficient institutional support and guidance, and that support for reintegration varies by district and household (Farooq & Arif, 2025; Hussain et al., 2026; ICMPD, 2025; Wijeratne & Pathmeswaran, 2026).

## Theoretical Framework

Four key concepts are used in this article: deportability, contingent belonging, securitized labor governance and multidimensional reintegration. These are not used as descriptive labels. They are treated as operating ideas which structure empirical analysis.

Deportability refers to the condition in which migrants are governed through their continuing exposure to possible removal, even when deportation is not immediately enacted (De Genova, 2002). It is therefore distinct from deportation itself. In the present study, deportability is examined through reported uncertainty about legal status, limited procedural transparency, dependency on employers and immigration authorities, restricted control over mobility and employment, and the perceived possibility of sudden removal. These conditions are particularly relevant to temporary labor migrants whose residence and work status remain contingent on regulatory compliance and institutional discretion.

Contingent belonging refers to a condition in which migrants are economically included but lack secure social, political, or legal membership. In the Gulf context, migrant workers may contribute to the economy for extended periods while remaining excluded from durable settlement, political participation, and long-term rights protections (Anthias, 2008; Bosniak, 2006). In this study, contingent belonging is operationalized through the contrast between Pakistani workers' sustained contribution to the UAE labor market and their continued vulnerability to administrative pressure, changing employer relations, and heightened suspicion during regional crisis.

Third, securitized labor governance is the article's main conceptual contribution. It is a type of migration management in which a labor regime persists under normal legal and administrative categories but comes to be increasingly shaped by security logics in times of political crisis. The distinction here is that the issue is not crimmigration itself, but rather the intersection of criminal law and immigration law. It is not the same as the notion of a deportation regime, as it is directed specifically at the temporary labor regimes in which the migrants fit well as workers but are easily manageable as dangers. Moreover, it's not just about precarisation of employment processes being intensified, but about a political coding of workers in an environment saturated with security as hyper-precarity. In this article, securitized labor governance is operationalized as the intersection of routine administrative discourse and the claimed experiences of challenges, suspicions and selective exposure during the regional crisis relating to Iran.

Fourth, multidimensional reintegration is the concept of reintegration being evaluated not only from a physical re-entry perspective, but also from economic, social, and psychosocial

aspects (Kuschminder, 2017). Economic reintegration relates to employment, debt, savings and livelihood stability post return. Social reintegration issues are related to expectations of the household, social position, stigma and re-positioning of the returnee in the family or community. Psychosocial reintegration involves uncertainty, shame, emotional distress and disruption of future planning (Wijeratne & Pathmeswaran, 2026).

The research gap is not the absence of previous research on Gulf migration, deportation and Pakistani return migration. That would not be sustainable. The actual gap is more specific: there is a limited scholarship linking deportation related return from the Gulf in the geopolitical crisis with the politics of reintegration in Pakistan through a deportability-contingent belonging-labor governance-multidimensional reintegration lens.

## Methodology

Qualitative document analysis with critical-interpretive epistemological approach is used in this study. It takes as its basic premise that the 2026 deportation in the UAE is a phenomenon in which public knowledge is incomplete, ambiguous, and socially constructed, and in which there are discrepancies between documents, which are not necessarily evidence failures but more a part of the phenomenon. This is a position that is closer to a constructivist critical than a naïve realist approach as it looks at not just what happened but how the event was told, contested, and institutionalized in various sources (Morgan, 2022).

There is no direct researcher-generated deportee testimony in this study as it does not include primary interviews. Rather, it compares and contrasts published works in four categories of sources: (1) event-specific reporting on the 2026 controversy, (2) Pakistani migration-governance and reintegration documents, (3) structural materials on Gulf labor regimes and migrant vulnerability, and (4) theoretical literature in the field of deportation and reintegration. Sources included here are Reuters (2026), RFE/RL (Khattak, 2026), Dawn (2026a), Arab News (2026b), A Migrant's Journey for Better Opportunities: The Case of Pakistan (2018) by the World Bank, the MIGNEX background paper on migration-relevant policies in Pakistan (2022) and the BEOE statistics portal, as well as ICMPD material on sustainable reintegration in Pakistan, and some conceptual works by De Genova, Walters, Cassarino and Kuschminder.

Coding was done in two phases. The deductive codes in the first stage were based on the theoretical framework: official explanations of deportation, suspicion deported, material losses during deportation, and post-return reintegration stress. The second stage was interpretive comparison which was done across the corpus to identify the consensus, disagreement, and silence of documents. A limited amount of qualitative software was not used due to the smaller size of the corpus which could be handled by close manual reading. This meant that competing interpretations were addressed in an explicit, rather than synthetic, manner: official state pronouncements were not interpreted as ‘facts', while newspaper accounts were not interpreted as necessarily representing ‘formal policy'.

The methodology has a number of limits. First, there is not enough evidence to establish a sect-disaggregated comparative deportation rate and consequently the article does not assert that the differential targeting is a fact. Second, since the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's labor migrants are male, and since all of the available information on this episode involves male workers, the findings should be interpreted as pertaining to male labor migration, rather than all Pakistani migrants (Qaisrani et al., 2022). Third, Arab News (2026a), is utilized just as a vehicle for official Pakistani statements, and it is cross read with Dawn and Senate reporting, not as a state document. Finally, the study does not claim to measure the prevalence or severity of economic, social, or psychosocial outcomes among all affected returnees. Its claims in these

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domains are limited to reported experiences in the event-specific corpus and literature-informed inferences regarding plausible reintegration risks.

## Results

The document corpus yields five main findings. The first is the fact that there are two competing, but institutionally significant narratives about the 2026 removals. The official Pakistani story portrayed deportations as an administrative or legal procedure. The officials, both in their media statements and in the Parliament, warded off allegations of targeting of Pakistanis and Shi'a Pakistanis in particular by the UAE. The Senate discussion indicated that 3,494 deportations took place between January and April 2026 and explicitly stated that there was no evidence of discriminatory targeting, though it did mention that administrative actions had followed the regional conflict (Dawn, 2026a). In this story deportation is personal, legal, and manageable.

The second story is based on accounts of the deportees that have been reported by Reuters (2026) and RFE/RL. These accounts spoke of detention, questioning, sudden deportation and the loss of possessions or savings, a number of workers explaining their experience in the context of sectarian identity, in particular Shi'a names, communal visibility, and Iran or remittances. What's notable about these reports is not only that they claimed workers were subjected to discriminatory treatment, but that they repeatedly referred to the process as opaque. Deportation was not so much a clear legal verdict as a process in which there was little explanation, much arbitrariness, and high vulnerability. The distinction is analytically important since it implies that the opacity of the procedures was also harmful.

The third discovery has to do with time. Several reports attributed the increased deportation fears to the regional turmoil over Iran. The importance of timing is not only that the events were in order, but that the workers, community leaders, and the state officials all knew what deportation meant in a geopolitical context. The controversy did not go unrecorded in the Senate meeting, as it was noted that the UAE had taken administrative action after the war, though it was not agreed to as a targeted victimization (Dawn, 2026b). This implies that the political dimension cannot be divorced from the deportation issue, although it is not necessarily proof of a sectarian motivation.

The fourth discovery is that the removals occurred within an existing framework of migrant precarity in the UAE labor regime. Amnesty International's report highlights that the kafala system persisted in tying migrant workers to their employers, limiting their employment opportunities, subjecting them to recruitment debt and leaving them with inadequate safeguards for their rights in the UAE (Amnesty International, 2025). Structural characteristics of the UAE labor market also reveal that migrants are in the majority in the labor market, but at the same time lack long-term membership of the labor system (De Bel-Air, 2018). This background is important because it indicates that the 2026 deportation episode wasn't just a random occurrence. It arose in a labor order which was already structurally imbued with removability. This is a vulnerability that seems to have been activated or exacerbated by the crisis and not developed during it.

The fifth finding is related to return and reintegration in Pakistan. The World Bank's analysis of the migration system in Pakistan indicates that the institutional dimensions of return and reintegration are weaker than those of emigration facilitation and overseas engagement (World Bank, 2018). Similarly, fragmented migration governance, policy incoherence and lack of comprehensive planning around return migrants is an issue highlighted in Pakistan by Qaisrani et al. (2022). The current reintegration project in Pakistan also shows that sustainable reintegration remains a policy project and not a fully-fledged reintegration system operating

nationwide, in crisis mode (ICMPD, 2025). Given these circumstances, deported workers are likely to return with their savings having been disrupted, jobs having been lost, and competing accounts of deportation, the return of these individuals is unlikely to be a seamless experience and will likely exacerbate reintegration stress.

In the context of Kuschminder framework these reintegration challenges can be articulated more precisely. Deportations had economic impacts of lost wages, lost savings, loss of property and failed migration plans that relied on remaining outside for long enough to recoup migration expenses. Such trends are similar to the findings of other studies which have reported that investment in labor migration in Pakistan is typically high and benefits are received at a later stage for the household (Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018). Sudden deportation has more than just a negative impact on employment status. It breaks the temporal flow of the migration project. Workers do not go home at the end of a cycle, but before they can turn mobility into security.

Socially, return under these circumstances might be interpreted in a very different way than planned or successful return. Literature on reintegration highlights that returnees bring expectations back to their households as a result of their migration experiences, particularly in terms of provision, remittance support and in terms of increased visibility of their status (Kuschminder, 2017; OECD, 2020). This changes the experience of family members who leave with the expectation of a positive outcome and come back haunting stories of loss, humiliation or disorientation. While the current research does not involve family interviews, the similarities between the hardship experienced by returnees as documented in this study and in the reintegration, literature indicate that many returnees were under pressure to obtain employment as soon as possible, as well as to explain why they had to leave the country so quickly.

Psychosocially, it is reported as ‘rupture' not ‘return in an ordered way'. Shock, confusion and suspect/disposable with workers. These are not all easily visible in administrative categories, but the focus on reintegration scholarship is on such harm, as return is not merely an act of material reintegration but one of affective reintegration (Kuschminder, 2017). The migrant who comes home without his savings, explanation, and control of the meaning of his departure, is not just home. He comes back with a weight of uncertainty which may influence household relations, re-migration choices and attitudes towards the state's willingness to safeguard him.

Evidence is also limited in its scope. The corpus does not have evidence regarding the numbers of deported Sunni Pakistanis, nor does it demonstrate a documentary chain of evidence confirming UAE's formal policy of deporting by sect. This restriction is not cosmetic, but substantive. It means that the findings do not support a conclusion of a definite and proven "sectarian targeting" as state policy, despite the evidence of "structured uncertainty", "crisis-amplified precarity" and "reported sectarianized suspicions". That is a key component of the analytical purity of the updated article.

## Discussion

The key contribution of the case is the demonstration of the possibility of a dual nature of explanations, legal-administrative and political-sociology. The official Pakistani account states deportations were regular, routine and non-discriminatory. That explanation might have some truth in it. It's likely that overstays or documentation problems or other immigration-related infractions are going to be part of any large deportation pattern. However, deportation research warns not to overlook the politics of deportation because a legal basis does not necessarily contain everything. A legally available category may be expanded into a realm of "discretionary suspicion" particularly when migrants are already "structurally deportable" (De Genova, 2002; ICMPD, 2026b; Walters, 2002). So, the issue isn't if immigration law was there,

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but if the political environment it was applied in became “politically saturated” in ways that changed the vulnerability of migrants.

This is where the idea of securitized labor governance is helpful. There is insufficient evidence that the UAE has been openly engaging in a sectarian-security policy with regards to labor migration in 2026. That would be an overstatement. The evidence that does exist is that the temporary labor order, which was already grounded in removability, seems to have been more security-influenced during the regional crisis. State actors continued to engage in administrative communication, and workers indicated that they were being questioned in ways they read as having Iran, Shi'a identity, and/or communal association implications. The co-existence is analytically significant. It implies the possibility of formal administrative governance of labor, which in practice might be more secure.

The Gulf context is strengthened to the argument. Both research into the UAE labor market, and Amnesty's reporting on migrant-worker vulnerability, indicate that migrant workers are key to the labor market but are poorly protected, particularly because of the strong leverage of employers or authorities over migrant workers, and the laws restricting their mobility, particularly through the sponsorship system (Amnesty International, 2025; De Bel-Air, 2018; ICMPD, 2026b). In this context, a change from worker to suspect does not need to involve a complete legal change. It can happen via the enhanced examination, administrative filtering and triggering of existing legal contingencies. Securitized labor governance calls attention, therefore, not to a paradigm shift but to a crisis-oriented recalibration of an existing inequitable labor system.

The case also has relevance beyond the case itself as the notion of contingent belonging helps explain that. The Pakistani workers in UAE were economically but not securely. Their status was not that of members, settlers, or recognized political bodies, but rather that of a part of the labor market, sometimes for years. What they wanted to be was always subject to the smooth running of documents, employer relations and political climate. With that alignment eroded, the migrants were easily shifted from people needed to people to be moved. Contingent belonging hence encapsulates the paradox at the heart of Gulf labor mobilization: strong economic integration, weak political security.

The sectarian issue needs even more attention. There is no evidence of the UAE having a formal policy targeting Pakistani Shi'a workers. It also does not afford a basis for an empirical demonstration of differential treatment when compared with the rates of deportation of Sunni people. The evidence does indicate that many deportees were the ones telling the story, and that these categories were in this moment of geopolitical crisis, socially meaningful. This is still an important finding. Lived perceptions are important because they influence levels of community fear, migrant behavior and the legitimacy of state narratives in migration politics. However, perception is not a necessarily true policy.

Alternate explanations need to be considered too. One reason is regular immigration checks, such as overstays or problems with documents, or criminal charges, which Pakistani authorities repeatedly pointed to. A second explanation is to be found in the overall precarity of Gulf labor migration, which is high regardless of sectarian identity, since enforcement is high and legal visibility low. A third possible explanation is that regional conflict intensified scrutiny of foreign workers that had a politically sensitive background but did not necessarily result in a formal program of deportation of people of a particular faith. The alternatives do not remove the usefulness of a suspicion that has been sectarianized, but they do imply that that suspicion is one possible source of vulnerability, not necessarily the only or the most proven source.

This calibrated interpretation also enhances the approach to reintegration in the article. Economic reintegration was compromised as deportations were said to have resulted in lost wages, access to savings, and/or time required for migration to be economically advantageous.

On the other hand, the sudden closure of migration routes allowed for little recovery of sunk costs, and the return to a reduced liquidity environment involved a reversion to family and/or local labor markets (Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018). The symbolic nature of overseas employment in Pakistan can be linked to notions of masculine provision, sacrifice, and eventual upward mobility, creating challenges for social reintegration. The deportee comes back with a broken narrative – years of being away were not years of success, but years of being interrupted (ICMPD, 2026b; Kuschminder, 2017; OECD, 2020). Psychosocial reintegration was also negatively affected, with reports of shock, suspicion, and uncertainty indicating that return was not only difficult financially, but also emotionally.

The results of these findings have immediate implications for Pakistan's migration governance. There are institutions for overseas Pakistanis, emigration management, and diaspora engagement in Pakistan, however, in the policy literature, the reintegration institutions are weaker, less coordinated and less operational than the emigration promotion institutions (Qaisrani et al., 2022; World Bank, 2018). This is reflected in the BEOE statistics portal: the statistics related to outward mobility can be organized in a systematic way (country-wise, district-wise, occupational emigration statistics), while return and deportation governance is far less visible in a systematic way publicly available (BEOE, 2025). ICMPD's continued reintegration work also indicates that sustainable reintegration is being developed as a result of project implementation and policy development rather than a well-developed national architecture (ICMPD, 2025). In the present case, therefore, a gap is observed between the level of reliance on labor migration in Pakistan and the thinness of the institutional capacity to deal with an unexpected return.

Pakistan’s response should be coordinated, time-bound, and linked across federal, overseas, provincial, and district-level institutions. In the short term, the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD), working with the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF), could establish a standardized crisis-returnee registration, screening, and referral mechanism at major points of entry. This mechanism could record immediate needs, documentation status, employment disruption, wage-related claims, debt exposure, and referral requirements while protecting returnees’ personal data. In the medium term, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Pakistani missions in the Gulf could document disputed removals and facilitate consular follow-up on reported wage claims, access to savings, and personal belongings. Provincial labor departments and district administrations could then provide locally accessible referral pathways for employment services, skills recognition, debt counselling, psychosocial support, legal aid, and livelihood assistance. Such measures are administratively feasible if they are supported by defined institutional roles, data-sharing safeguards, focal persons, and clear referral protocols. In the longer term, Pakistan should integrate return and reintegration into mainstream migration governance rather than treating them only as reactive responses to crisis.

The theory contribution of the article can now be more clearly defined. First, it demonstrates the usefulness of deportability and contingent belonging as analytical tools for understanding the migration of workers to the Gulf, which can involve migrants being central to the economy while having an insecure sense of belonging. Second, it ideas a concept of securitized labor governance that suggests that temporary labor systems can be more security-inflected in the context of geopolitical crisis without having to show that a formal discriminatory policy is in place.

## Conclusion

This article examined the reported deportation and crisis-driven return of Pakistani migrant workers from the UAE during the 2026 regional crisis through the lenses of

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deportability, contingent belonging, securitized labor governance, and multidimensional reintegration. The available documentary record does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that the UAE implemented a publicly documented policy of sectarian deportation against Pakistani Shi'a workers. However, the corpus indicates that the episode unfolded amid routine immigration enforcement, structural vulnerability within temporary labor arrangements, heightened regional tension, and reported experiences of sectarianized suspicion.

The article's principal contribution is to show how these conditions can coexist without being analytically conflated. Deportability captures workers' continuing exposure to removal; contingent belonging explains their economic inclusion without secure membership; and securitized labor governance identifies how geopolitical crisis may heighten security-oriented scrutiny within an already unequal temporary labor system. This framework does not convert reported experiences into proof of formal policy. Rather, it explains why reported uncertainty, opacity, and perceived selective vulnerability can be politically and socially consequential even where conclusive evidence of systematic sectarian targeting is unavailable.

The study also extends the analysis beyond the host state by considering return and reintegration in Pakistan. Event-specific reports of disrupted employment, savings, belongings, and migration plans, when read alongside reintegration scholarship, suggest potential economic, social, and psychosocial risks for affected returnees. These implications should be interpreted as reported experiences and literature-informed risks rather than population-wide measured outcomes. The evidence nevertheless highlights the importance of a more responsive reintegration system for migrants who return suddenly under crisis conditions.

Policy responses should therefore combine immediate registration and referral mechanisms, consular documentation of contested cases and wage-related claims, district-level livelihood and psychosocial support, and stronger coordination among MOPHRD, OPF, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistani missions, provincial labor departments, and district administrations. Over the longer term, return and reintegration should be treated as a routine component of migration governance rather than as an afterthought when crises occur.

Further research should use comparative and field-based evidence to examine deportation patterns by sectarian identity, occupation, visa status, gender, and district of origin. Interviews with returnees, households, consular officials, and labor intermediaries would be particularly valuable for examining the economic, social, and psychosocial pathways of crisis-driven return. Such research would enable stronger conclusions about differential treatment, the lived experience of removal, and the effectiveness of reintegration support in Pakistan.

## Declarations

### Ethical Approval Statement

Not Applicable

### Ethics Statement

Not Applicable

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declaration of the use of AI

The authors affirm that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools or services were used in the conception, design, analysis, writing, or editing of this manuscript. All content has been produced solely by the authors through manual effort, and the integrity of the research and scholarly expression is the result of human academic work alone.

## Authors Contributions Statement

*Zubair Hussain, Ihtisham Ullah* and *Agustino Silverius Mbunda**:*** Conceptualization, methodology, writing original draft, writing review & editing.

*Dr. Muhammad Munib Khalid and Saeed Agha Ahmadzai:* analysis, interpretation of data and supervise the research.

All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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