Emiratisation, Omanisation and Saudisation- common causes: common solutions?

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Countries in the Middle East region rely heavily on the use of expatriates to underpin their booming economies. However, this reliance on expatriates can, according to Rees (2007) have long-term political, economic and social consequences. Hence, several countries have therefore started to introduce policies aimed at influencing the demand and supply of expatriates and indigenous workers. This paper focuses specifically on the attempts made in this respect by the governments of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Saudi-Arabia. The paper starts by introducing the topic area. It then discusses what is meant by the terms Emiratisation, Omanisation and Saudisation and explores why organizations are not using nationals. After this, the paper looks at the way the nationalization programmes are implemented and reinforced and, ultimately, how successful they are. The paper concludes by drawing out the differences and similarities between the nationalization programmes in Oman, the UAE and Saudi-Arabia. As such, the paper fills a gap in the existing literature on nationalization programmes in the Gulf region.

Field of Research: HRM, Emiratisation, Omanisation, Saudisation, localisation

1. Introduction

The Middle East is an under-researched area in HRM literature and some of the research available refers to the Middle East area rather than to individual countries. The Gulf Co-Operation council (GCC) is one of the areas in the Middle East and consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (Harry, 2007).

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In 2006, the total population of the GCC reached over 35 million, an increase of over 5 million compared with 2000. It is estimated that figures will rise to nearly 39 million by 2010 and 58 million by 2030 (Gulfinthemedia 2008). The world tribune suggests that foreign labour in the region is 70 percent of the work force. The United Arab Emirates have the largest percentage of foreign labor (88%) while in Saudi-Arabia and Oman this percentage is respectively 72 % and 54 %. Hence, there is a heavy dependency on expatriates in the entire GCC. Rees et al. (2007: 33) suggest that "the dependence on an expatriate workforce has serious long-term political, economic and social consequences". To counter some of these consequences states in the Middle East have started introducing several policies aimed at influencing the demand and supply of expatriates and indigenous workers.

Shah (2006) suggests that policies aimed to affect the supply of workers include policies which affect the cost of living (e.g. policy of health insurance, verification of university degrees), nabbing and deportation of overstayers and illegals, stricter regulation of visa issuance, restrictions on visa trading. Policies aimed to affect the demand for indigenous workers include policies on creating job opportunities through training and through market based measures (charging fees for hiring expats and providing cash benefits for employing nationals), nationalization through administrative measures (e.g. quotas, bans and nationalization of the public sector work force) (Shah 2006).

The commitment to reduce the number of expatriates in the GCC via state-led labour market policies is referred to as Bahrainization, Omanization (Metcalfe, 2007), Saudization (Al-Subhi Al-Harbi 1997, Al-Dosary and Masiur Rahman 2005, Gulf 2008) and Emiratization (Tanmia, 2006)/ Emiratisation (Morris, 2005). However, Rees et al (2007: 36) "posit a lack of international academic literature that is focused directly upon nationalization strategies such as Emiratization, Omanization and Saudisatrion represents a glaring weakness in the international knowledge bases as it relates to HRM in the Middle East". The current paper will discuss Omanization, Emiratization and Saudization and conduct comparisons between them.

2. Literature Review

This section is structured around a number of questions relating to nationalization programmes, namely: What is Emiratisation/Omanisation/Saudisation? Why are companies not using nationals? Which sectors does it apply to? How is it reinforced? How successful is it? Why is it successful? These questions will be answered in subsequently.

What is Emiratisation/Omanisation/Saudisation?

Emiratisation is an example of "the interventionist approach often taken by governments of the region" (Harry 2007). It is a policy which "aims to reduce the country's reliance on expatriate labour and increase the participation of nationals in the labour market" (Wilkins 2001:8). "Emiratization is an affirmative action quota driven employment policy that ensures UAE nationals are given employment opportunities in the private sector" Godwin (2006:8). In order to do so, "the government has selected industries they considered suitable for national men and women to work in and set quotas that the organizations within these industries have to meet” Morris (2005: 6). Hence, Emiratisation, “the nationalization of the labour market-programme” which started in the year 2000” (Suter 2005: 33), is “A policy of ‘positive discrimination’ which can increase the presence of nationals in firms” (Dubai in world competitiveness 2005 (2005: 107).

The UAE government uses “The National Human Resources Development & Employment Authority”, also called Tanmia, to lead the Emiratisation effort (Tanmia, 2006). Tanmia is a UAE Federal Government Authority with main objectives to (Tanmia, 2006):

- Create job opportunities for UAE National Workforce
- Reduce the unemployment ratio
- Enhance the Skills and productivity of the National workforce; and
- Recommend relevant policies to the UAE Federal Government

The efforts of Tanmia aid in effective localization of the workforce. According to Potter (1989: 26) “Effective localization has occurred when a local national is filling a required job sufficiently competently to fulfill organizational needs” and not merely filling a job, which would be a diluted definition as it only responds cosmetically to the requirement. Thus, Emiratisation focuses on a package of policies which help nationals successfully carry out jobs which were formerly filled by non-nationals.

Like in the UAE, the Omani government has embarked on a process of localization/*Omanization* of the workforce. Aycan et al (2007:13) suggest that Oman “in common with other Middle Eastern states has been heavily reliant on expatriate workers both for advanced technical and professional expertise and for manual labour.” Ghailani and Khan (2004) argue that ”The government of Oman sees private sector as a vehicle of growth and development , where the larger employment generation and absorption of Omani population in gainful employment is more likely to occur”. Al-Hamadi et al (2007: 105) further emphasise the role of the private sector when they argue that ”Through Omanization, it is anticipated that the Omani nationals , rather than the expatriate workforce, will, in the longer term, promote efficiency and effectiveness in both the public and the private sectors.”

They (Al-Hamadi et al 2007: 105) further suggests that (2007: 105) in order to avoid unemployment in certain occupations and surplus in others the government has initiated measures:

1. Setting control procedures on expatriate labour coming into the private sector particularly in occupations that can be easily Omanized.
2. Preparation of suitable manpower planning that meet the needs of the private sector.
3. Improving working conditions of the private sector
4. To support willing Omanis to establish small commercial projects and encourage (…) being entrepreneurs in their own field of interest by offering them guidelines and suitable incentives (…)

The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited (2007: 4) puts forward that “Omanisation” (the replacement of expatriate workers with local staff) will remain high on the agenda, with the government continuing to fund higher education in order to develop local professional and technical expertise. These measures, together with training and development of Omani nationals (Al-Hamadi et al 2007), should lead to higher participation of Omani's in the workforce.

Saudization (or localization) has been defined as the replacement of the expatriate labour force with a trained and qualified local labour force in a planned manner that will ensure the continuity of work Al-Harbi (1997)". This policy thus "favour domestic workers – (Meed 2007)."

The Saudi government has set out a policy with 3 main goals (Looney 2004 in Al-Dosary and Rahman 2005).

- Increased employment for Saudi nationals across all sectors of the domestic economy.
- Reduced and reversed over-reliance on foreign workers.
- Recapture and reinvestment of income which otherwise would have flowed overseas as remittances to foreign worker home countries.

Al-Dosary and Masiur Rahman (2005:495) note in this respect that "The most prominent governmental policy in reducing the level of unemployment is the Saudization (localization) program by means of which the government is trying to replace foreign workers with Saudis.

Looking at the three Nationalisation programmes, Emiratisation, Omanisation and Saudisation, it becomes clear that they all focus on reducing the reliance on expatriates by replacing them with local workers. They are all seen as 'positive discrimination' of local nationals. However, even though many think that these programmes are just about reaching 'quotas', the literature suggest that the use of quota's is just one of several policies of the Nationalisation projects and hence, the nationalization projects include a number of Shah's (2006) policies to influence supply and demand

Why are companies not using nationals?

Dubai in world competitiveness 2005 (2005: 107) states that "Today many UAE citizens still concentrate their career perspectives on government and public entities. In the private sector, the UAE nationals represent no more than 2% of the workforce" which underpins Harry's (2007:135) observation that "the governments are major employers of citizens throughout the GCC". The low number of nationals in the private sector can be explored from two different angles: the employer's perspective and the employee's perspective.

When it comes to employees, Morris (2005:7) suggests that nationals have ""come to see themselves as a "natural middle class, and will generally only accept work congruent with these expectations". The World Economic Forum (2008:12) suggests that these expectations mainly concern "comfortable white-collar jobs in managerial roles whether or not they are qualifies for such positions", while DBM Arabian Gulf (2006:4) posits that industries such as retail and service "are unlikey to suit the aspirations of nationals". Hence, Wilkins (2001:7) suggests that "The greatest challenge facing the UAE government is encouraging nationals to take up manual and technical jobs and jobs in the private sector".

Other reasons for the attractiveness of the governmental sector can be found in 'salaries and working conditions'. The government sector is perceived to offer higher salaries (Godwin 2006, Nelson 2004, Wilkins 2001), shorter working hours and more flexibility in hours (Nelson 2004, Harry 2007, Wilkins 2001), better work conditions (Godwin 2006) and better non-monetary benefits (Nelson 2004) than private sector companies. Al-Ali (2006) also reports that Nationals do not see career development prospects in the private sector and that there is little opportunity for training and promotion. Thus: to attract Nationals "the private sector has to offer much better wages to attract citizens away from jobs with the government" (Harry 2007: 137).

When it comes to employers in the private sector, they might be reluctant to employ nationals for a variety of reasons. Nelson (2004:16) suggests that "private sector employers have long-held negative perceptions of Nationals as less productive" and being more expensive than non-nationals". The negative perceptions of Nationals are not only that they are 'less productive' (Nelson 2004) but also includes the stereotypes "under skilled and unmotivated" (Gulf 2007: 4). Al-Ali (2006, 2008) also reports that there low fluency in English and low levels of trust are barriers to workforce participation.

Even though in first instance it might be surprising to see that employing expatriates is cheaper than hiring local labour, there might be clear explanations for the higher payroll cost. Gulf (2007: 4) reports that the salary expectations of Nationals are higher than those of the immigrant workers. Furthermore, Morris (2005:4) suggests that "the price of expatriate labour is generally considerably less than that of national labour". Also, "the UAE has minimum wage provisions that apply only nationals and employers must make mandatory pension contributions to the State for each of their Emirati employees" (Amy Ballinger, DLA Piper 2007: 3) and hence increase payroll cost for National employees. Another reason for the low participation rate of Nationals in the private sector is given by Harry (2007: 138) who posits that "the formal or informal rights of the nationals compared to alternative candidates cause employers to avoid recruiting them".

The situation in Oman is rather similar to that of the UAE. Al-Hamadi et al (2007:104) state that "Data currently available reveal that Omanis prefer to work in certain sectors while rejecting others (such as construction and other manual jobs)". Again, the government sector seems to be the 'employer of choice' amongst the locals. Al-Lamki (1998:393) suggests that the strong preference amongst Omani to join the government sector is due to attributes like "life long employment, further educational opportunities, wages, benefits, working conditions, working hours, retirement benefits and the like". Furthermore, Al-Lamki (1998: 392) indicates that "the private sector discourages and disqualifies Omanies from applying because of the requirements for work experience and English language skills". Furthermore, the demand for expatriates might be fuelled by the perception private sector employers hold of Omani's. According to Business Middle East (2003:7) "Employers complain about the lack of punctuality on the part of Omanis and say that locals have a higher rate of absenteeism than expatriate staff".

Once again, the situation in Saudi Arabia seems very similar to those in the UAE and Oman. A high preference for the government sector and a 'negative' perception of the local labour force. Al-Dosari (2004) describes seventeen factors which are believed to be the main factors in the low participation rates of Saudi workers in the private sector, which amongst others, include language skills, lower wages, and benefits, inflexibility of relocation in the Kingdom, long working hours etc. However, besides this, the high preference for the governmental sector might also have a deeper grounded reason: Al-Dosary and Rahman (2005: 496) suggests that “Before 1984, Saudi graduates were forbidden to work in the private sector and had to work for the government as it has sponsored their studies (Maimani, 1989).”

The private sector in Saudi-Arabia, shows resistance to the Saudisation effort. Mellahi and Wood (2001) argued that there are four interrelated reasons for the private sector’s resistance to Saudisation, namely: labour cost, social and cultural perceptions towards work in the private sector which influences recruitment and retainment levels, discipline and control and the inability to integrate in a multi-cultural work environment. Mellahi and Wood (2001: 147) argue in this respect that “the highly interventionist nature of the Saudi economy has resulted in a large number of locals having less skills and work ethics and, possibly, productivity, than their relatively privileged status would suggest.”

Comparison of the Nationalisation programmes suggests certain types of jobs and certain sectors are deemed unsuitable by locals. In all 3 countries the government is the employer of choice for the indigenous workforce. Higher wages, shorter working hours and more flexibility are reasons for locals to choose the government sector over the private sector. Private sector employers seem to prefer expats due to their knowledge, skills (including language skills), working attitude, related discipline issues and, one of the main factor, lower pay roll cost for hiring expats.

Which sectors does it apply to?

Al Dosary (2004: 128) refers to the strategic approaches which the World Bank sugges that for nationalization of the local labor force namely, nationalization across the board, across key sectors, across key administrative control functions or by giving selected emphasis, as the conditions dictate.

Emiratisation started in 2000. By 2004, “the banking sector was directed to hire UAE nationals in all branch manager positions before the end of 2004” (Godwin 2006:9). Until 2006, the Emiratisation quota was restricted to banking and finance sectors (Gulfnews 2006) and “the UAE’s banking sector has been set an ambitious 50 per cent Emiratization target by the year 2008” (Rees et al. 2007: 38). However, the government is constantly updating its Emiratisation policies and, in 2007, companies with more than 100 employees were told that they “should employ only Emiratis in their human resource department, and move towards implementing the same rule for secretarial roles” (Gulf 2007: 4). This is in line with Forstenlechner (2008) who suggeststhat jobs in banking, insurance and hospitality sectors are targeted for Emiratisation, as well as the jobs of HR Managers, secretaries and public relations officers.

In Oman the focus of *Omanisation* is also on the private sector as the “the private sector takes precedence due to the very low Omanization rate, especially in the skilled and highly skilled occupations” (Al-Lamki 1998:380). In Oman, targets have been set for sectors as a whole (e.g. industry, tailoring services and banks), or for different categories within the sector. For example, there are different Omanisation percentages set for local companies, assisting services, engineers and draughtsman in the Oil & Gas sector. (Directorate General of Employment, 2008). This suggest that Omanisation uses a mixed approach, namely through key sectors and selected emphasis.

Since the mid-1990's there have been several *Saudisation* efforts. They include, amongst others, a general requirement to increase Saudi manpower by five percent annually, reducing the number of expatriate workers to 20 percent of the total population in a decade and accelerated Saudization of the banking sector (Looney, 2004). Also, the Saudi government has set percentages for different positions and industries. For example, the saudisation percentage for contracting companies is 5 per cent (Arabreform.net 2009) and the government has requested that in the gold industry "nationals make up at least 10 per cent of the industry's workforce, a figure that should increase by between 2 per cent and 5 per cent a year" (MEED 2007). Thus, Emiratisation, Omanisation and Saudisation all work with clear quota systems. However, where some nationalization programmes focus on industries, other focus specifically on positions/levels in organizations or have a general nationalization quota.

How is it reinforced?

As discussed earlier, Shah (2006) suggested that there are different policies aimed to affect the supply and demand for workers. Forstenlechner (2008) furthermore postulates that punitive action and the existence of a Visa Application system provides governments with opportunities to ensure compliance with Nationalisation programmes. As will become clear in this section, the 3 nationalisation programmes draw on a variety of methods to reinforce the localization of labour.

One of the key policies in Emiratisation is the quota system. "Under the New Labour Law, the Labour department will have the right and duty to check these quotas when conducting inspections of workplaces" (Amy Ballinger, 2007: 3). While in the beginning stage, the programme relied on voluntary compliance (Morris 2005) rather than legislative action, the focus now seemed to have changed. In September 2007, the government "stepped up the enforcement of existing rules, cutting fees for companies that complied and freezing all relation with the Labour Ministry with those that did not – a painful deterrent, since it is illegal to bring new expatriate workers into the country without government approval" (Gulf 2007: 4).

Furthermore, "the government also introduced the concept of the 'Emiratization and Levy Payroll Fees " (Rees et al 2007:38), which can be compared with putting tax on employing expats and providing discounts and financial gain for employing Nationals. "Other government-led Emiratization initiatives have involved restricting the number of work permits issued for expatriate labour, and job design strategies which require employers to review shift work patterns as well as introducing more part-time employment (Rees et al. 2007:38)".

The situation in Oman is similar. Like in the UAE, it operates a "Labour Levy rebate scheme" (Al Lamki 1998: 384) which "provides for compensation to be given to private sector firms in lieu of the salaries and allowances payable to Omanies during their period of training". Furthermore, Oman has a social security law. "This law provides the most needed security for Omani employees working in the private sector. It protects and offers retirement security to Omani employees who hold permanent positions in the private sector" (Al Lamki (1998: 384). Beside these 2 policies, Ghailani and Khan (2004:164) suggests that on the long term, Omanisation can only be effective when there is a clear link between education and required skills and knowledge and states that schools have "to play an important role in providing human capital equipped with right kind of education, skills and competencies in order to gain employment in the private sector".

"In general, Saudization is taking place in the Kingdom by using a quota system or directly banning expatriates from working in certain activities" (Al-Dosary and Rahman 2005:500). According to Al-Amr (2001) the government has placed the responsibility for Saudisation with GOTEVT (General Organization for Technical Education and Vocational Training). When reflecting on reinforcing Saudisation Meed (2004) notes that "clear guidelines have not been issued and enforcement has not been taken seriously. Labour offices have continued to issue work permits and visas for expatriates and of the list of 25 reserved categories, the authorities have been accused of overlooking and forgetting 21 of them". Thus, the 'Saudisation' efforts, which aim to reduce dependence on expatriate labour and boost job opportunities for nationals" (GULF 2005:3) relies heavily on the quota systems. However, as Al-Dosary and Rahman (2005: 495) suggest "Saudization should place importance on skill development among Saudi nationals by strengthening educational and vocational training, and providing time-specific incentives rather than relying only on a quota system. Saudization should be implemented more through market forces and incentives" Thus, all 3 nationalisation programmes rely heavily on setting and enforcing quota's. However, the quota system is often combined with training initiatives, levies and rebates to make employing Nationals more attractive to companies.

How successful is it? Why is it this successful?

The success of the Nationalisation programmes seem to be mixed and linked to business sectors. For example, Godwin (2006: 9) commented that in the UAE "the business sector has been slow to adhere to the quotas and anecdotal evidence from the newspaper media suggests that the Emiratization policy is treated as a form of taxation". Morris (2005:6) actually states that "None of the industries have achieved quota". However, there are some sectors which seem to be well on track: Tanmia reports that by 2006 "Three banks exceeded the accumulated target of 40%, while 1 bank almost met this target (Tanmia 2006)". Nevertheless, "the selective gains in some sectors may be counterbalanced by a disproportional influx in some other sectors" Shah (2006: 11). Both Godwin (2006) and Forstenlechner (2008) make reference to anecdotal evidence, however, unlike Godwin (2006) Forstenlechner actually (2008) uses it to highlight the success of Emiratisation.

In Oman, the banking sector is again one of the leading sectors for nationalization. As Al-Lamki (2005:176) state "data from the banking sector indicated an overwhelming achievement of ninety one percent (91%) Omanization". Al-Lamki suggests that the success of the Omanization in the banking sector can be reached in any sector, with the necessary planning, training and development. Nevertheless, The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited (2007: 4) suggests that “Despite changes to the labour law, however, supply-side problems-in particular, the greater cost of employing locals and the additional rights they enjoy once in a post- are likely to continue to slow progress on Omanisation “.

While reflecting on the nationalization programme in Saudi Arabia, Al-Dosary and Rahman (2005:499) suggest that “Despite different Saudization efforts, laudable progress has been achieved only in the public sector”. Mellahi (2007:94) notes in this respect that “private sector organization conform to the Saudization quotas because of fear of sanctions, and not because they believe that it is immoral not to do so”. They just adhere to the hard, interventionist approach, rather than Saudisation resulting from a normative approach. Mellahi and Wood (2001: 149) postulate that “official affirmative action quotas being largely flouted” and GULF (2008:2) reported that “The decision to cut the Saudisation quota from 30% to 20% in certain industries highlights the pressure the government is under to strike the difficult balance between improving stability in the short term and creating jobs for its citizens in the longer term”. Thus, the success of the nationalization programmes seem debatable. There seems to be slow progress in some sectors while in other sectors, such as Banking, nationalization is successful. However, the success in one sector might affect the successful nationalization of other sectors.

3. Conclusion

It has become clear that the economies of Saudi-Arabia, Oman and the UAE rely heavily on foreign labour. Nationals are mainly working in the government sector, and seem to have clear preferences as to what kind of job/sectors they want to work in. Rees (2007) suggests that dependence on the foreign labour force can have serious long-term political, economic and social consequences. The governments of Saudi-Arabia, Oman and the UAE have started programmes to reduce the dependency on foreign workers, which are respectively called Saudisation, Omanisation and Emiratisation. The programmes are mainly aimed at the private sector.

One of the key elements of the Nationalisation programme is the quota system. These quotas are either set for sectors (e.g. Banking) or certain positions (e.g. HRM). Besides operating the quota system, all programmes rely heavily on training and development of nationals. Furthermore, levies and rebates are used to make employing Nationals more attractive to companies. Nevertheless, is seems that the approach to Nationalisation in the 3 countries is one of intervention rather than using a normative approach. The success of the nationalization effort seems debatable. Some sectors, such as banking, seem to have been successful in all 3 countries, whereas other sectors seem to struggle to reach the quota set, which might be related to the ‘unattractiveness’ of the sector to Nationals. Nevertheless, the need for localization stays apparent.

The mainly anecdotal evidence suggests that, in some cases, governments are not strictly enforcing the programmes and, if this is really the case, then the effectiveness of the programmes might improve after doing so. After all: “unless governments and business owners can meet the challenges of employment creation and localization the region will face serious economic, social and security problems” (Harry 2007: 144).

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