

Crisis of Elite Migration in the Islamic World; Causes and Consequences

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Abstract

*E*lite migration—defined as the transnational mobility of highly educated professionals, intellectuals, technocrats, scientists, and entrepreneurial actors—has become one of the most consequential demographic and political transformations affecting Muslim-majority societies during the past four decades. In contrast to large-scale labor migration, the emigration of highly skilled individuals directly influences state capacity, shapes trajectories of institutional reform, restructures patterns of socio-economic stratification, and affects national systems of knowledge production and innovation. This study examines the structural, economic, political, and socio-cultural determinants that drive elite emigration from Muslim-majority states and evaluates the broader implications of this phenomenon for governance, economic development, social cohesion, and relations between states and their diasporic communities. The central objective is to identify the principal drivers and adverse consequences of this persistent migratory pattern—frequently conceptualized as “brain drain”—and to demonstrate why it has evolved into a serious and intensifying crisis across large parts of the Islamic world. The impact of elite migration is not uniform across Muslim-majority countries. In certain hydrocarbon-rich states of the southern Persian Gulf, elite mobility may generate selective benefits through circular migration and transnational capital flows. In many other contexts, however, sustained outflows of highly skilled individuals have produced significant developmental and institutional costs. Building upon existing theoretical and empirical scholarship, the study employs an analytical framework that contrasts pessimistic and optimistic interpretations of skilled migration. While some perspectives emphasize potential gains through remittances, knowledge transfer, and diaspora engagement, the findings of this research indicate that persistent elite outflows are predominantly driven by weak governance structures, political repression, systemic insecurity, and limited avenues for professional advancement. Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative content analysis supplemented by statistical data drawn from academic and research institutions.

Keywords: Elite migration, Islamic world, Brain drain, Governance, Diaspora, Crisis

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Introduction

Several centuries ago, Marc Lescarbot suggested that individuals leave their homelands under the influence of three principal forces: the pursuit of better opportunities, demographic pressures that strain available resources, and internal discord manifested in conflict and instability. In contemporary scholarship, the Global Commission on International Migration reformulated these drivers as the "three Ds"—development, demographics, and democracy—thereby underscoring their enduring relevance in shaping global mobility patterns (Alonso, 2011: 10).

Although numerous studies have sought to explain the complex challenges confronting the Islamic world, relatively few have established a coherent hierarchy among these crises. Instead, many analyses treat structural problems—such as economic stagnation, governance deficits, political repression, and social fragmentation—as analytically equivalent, without adequately distinguishing their relative significance or interrelationships (Saeedi Rad & Mirjalili, 2023).

Elite migration, commonly referred to as "brain drain," denotes the emigration of individuals possessing advanced educational qualifications, specialized technical expertise, or significant socio-political influence. Its consequences are particularly pronounced in Muslim-majority countries, where public institutions often depend on relatively small cohorts of highly trained professionals—including engineers, physicians, academics, scientists, and senior administrators—to sustain essential governmental and economic functions.

Geographically encompassing the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, the Islamic world has experienced substantial waves of skilled emigration since the late twentieth century. Empirical evidence indicates that skilled emigration rates in many Muslim-majority countries exceed the global average, with some countries witnessing more than 40% of their tertiary-educated populations residing abroad (Beine et al., 2001).

Human capital constitutes a fundamental determinant of long-term competitiveness and sustainable development. This consideration is particularly salient for the member states of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), many of which face structural constraints, including limited educational attainment and shortages of highly skilled labour. In several cases, the scale of skilled emigration has increased over time, thereby posing a significant obstacle to socio-economic development (IDB, 2006: v).

By mid-2024, the global stock of international migrants had reached approximately 304 million individuals, of whom an estimated 80 million—nearly 29%—identified as Muslims (Kramer & Tong, 2024). Within this broader context, elite migration from Muslim-majority societies represents not merely a demographic shift but also a structural transformation that

affects political stability, administrative modernization, economic innovation, and the evolution of public discourse.

The principal objective of this study is to investigate the underlying drivers and structural consequences of elite migration in Muslim-majority countries and to conceptualize this phenomenon as a deepening systemic crisis affecting significant parts of the Islamic world.

It is important to emphasize that the consequences of elite migration vary considerably across countries. In certain hydrocarbon-rich states of the southern Persian Gulf, elite mobility exhibits a dual character. Although these countries continue to rely heavily on expatriate expertise, outward migration among their own nationals may also facilitate transnational networking, capital accumulation, and knowledge transfer. By contrast, in many other Muslim-majority countries, sustained elite emigration contributes to the depletion of scientific talent, managerial expertise, and innovative capacity. More broadly, this process entails the transfer of intellectual and creative capital from Islamic societies to Western countries and other global centres of technological and economic advancement.

Conceptualizing elite migration as a crisis requires first clarifying the concept of "crisis" itself. Although the term occupies a central position in the social sciences, it remains conceptually contested. Owing to its extensive and often indiscriminate use, it frequently lacks analytical precision (Eastham et al., 1970: 463).

At a general level, a crisis denotes a multidimensional condition characterized by severe disruption, structural imbalance, or a critical phase of instability within a given system (Nteka, 2021). Although the term often evokes associations with violence or acute conflict, crisis and violence are not synonymous. Rather, a crisis represents a critical juncture during which established patterns of governance, legitimacy, or institutional effectiveness come under significant strain (Sweijts, 2016: 17).

Accordingly, for the purposes of this study, a crisis is defined as a critical and potentially destabilizing turning point at which structural weaknesses converge to threaten the stability, functionality, or long-term viability of a political and socio-economic system. From this perspective, sustained elite emigration should be understood not merely as a form of population mobility but as a structural turning point with far-reaching developmental and political consequences.

The present analysis confronts several methodological and empirical challenges. Although the available data clearly indicate substantial levels of skilled emigration, their interpretation remains constrained by persistent limitations. First, data reliability is uneven, as many countries do not systematically record emigrants' educational attainment or professional backgrounds, while several widely used international datasets rely on statistics that lag behind current realities. Second, Muslim-majority countries

exhibit considerable diversity in their political systems, economic structures, and regional contexts, making broad generalizations analytically problematic. Third, systematic empirical research on return migration, "brain gain," and reintegration processes remains relatively limited. Finally, micro-level assessments evaluating the effectiveness of diaspora engagement policies in generating measurable institutional or economic benefits remain scarce.

Drawing on established scholarship, this study adopts a theoretical framework that incorporates both pessimistic and optimistic perspectives on skilled migration. While some approaches emphasize potential benefits—including remittances, transnational knowledge transfer, and diaspora investment—the overall evidence suggests that persistent elite outflows are primarily associated with governance deficiencies, restrictive political environments, systemic insecurity, and limited professional opportunities.

Methodologically, this research combines qualitative content analysis with statistical evidence compiled by academic institutions and international organizations. By integrating interpretive and empirical approaches, it seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment of the crisis of elite migration in the Islamic world.

1. Literature Review

A substantial and growing body of academic literature has examined the phenomenon of brain drain and elite migration from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including political science, economics, sociology, and development studies. Although these contributions differ in their theoretical orientations and empirical emphases, they can be broadly classified into three principal thematic categories: political determinants, economic drivers, and socio-cultural factors shaping elite migration.

1.1. Political Drivers of Elite Migration

Research on governance structures and authoritarian resilience in Muslim-majority regions consistently highlights the role of political repression, weak meritocratic institutions, and entrenched bureaucratic inertia in driving skilled individuals to emigrate. Studies of state resilience in the Middle East demonstrate that coercive institutional arrangements and limited political pluralism restrict professional advancement while suppressing independent intellectual activity (Bellin, 2004). Within such environments, institutional rigidity and restricted political participation create powerful structural disincentives for highly educated citizens to remain in their home countries.

Similarly, comparative research on authoritarian persistence indicates that durable non-democratic regimes often constrain elite circulation and limit upward mobility within domestic political and economic hierarchies. Under these conditions, highly skilled professionals perceive few opportunities for

career advancement and consequently seek employment and professional development abroad (Brownlee, 2012).

In countries affected by prolonged conflict and state fragmentation—including Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan—elite migration constitutes part of a broader process of institutional deterioration. Conflict-induced displacement disproportionately affects professionals working in critical sectors such as healthcare, engineering, education, and public administration. The departure of these individuals not only reflects political instability but also intensifies governance deficiencies and further weakens already fragile state institutions (Chatty, 2018). In such contexts, elite migration functions simultaneously as both a consequence and a catalyst of state decline.

1.2. Economic Drivers of Elite Migration

Economic explanations of skilled migration have long emphasized disparities in wages, employment opportunities, and returns to education as primary determinants of international mobility. Classical theories of migration identify income differentials and labour market imbalances as central incentives encouraging highly skilled individuals to relocate to more advanced economies (Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974). In many Muslim-majority countries, these incentives are further reinforced by weak industrial diversification, limited investment in research and development, and underdeveloped innovation ecosystems.

More recent empirical studies focusing on regions such as North Africa and South Asia confirm that high levels of graduate unemployment, underemployment, and inadequate professional remuneration significantly contribute to outward migration. Where domestic labour markets fail to absorb university graduates effectively, migration becomes a rational strategy for maximizing returns on investments in human capital (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Nevertheless, economic motivations extend well beyond income differentials. Structural constraints—including limited access to venture capital, bureaucratic barriers to entrepreneurship, weak research infrastructure, and insufficient integration into global knowledge networks—also play a decisive role in shaping elite migration decisions.

1.3. Social and Cultural Drivers of Elite Migration

In addition to political and economic determinants, sociological research emphasizes the significance of socio-cultural factors in shaping patterns of elite migration. Normative constraints, gender inequality, generational tensions, and restrictions on intellectual autonomy frequently interact with political and economic pressures to encourage skilled emigration.

Research on gendered migration demonstrates that female professionals in restrictive socio-cultural environments often regard migration as a pathway to greater career opportunities, stronger legal protections, and

enhanced personal autonomy (Kofman & Raghuram, 2015). In these circumstances, migration reflects not only structural inequalities but also the strategic exercise of individual agency.

Studies of youth movements and social transformation further suggest that educated younger generations in many Muslim-majority societies experience increasing dissatisfaction with rigid cultural expectations, limited civic freedoms, and constrained opportunities for self-expression. Such perceptions substantially increase emigration aspirations among highly educated young professionals (Bayat, 2013).

At the global level, demographic analyses provide valuable insights into the size and geographical distribution of Muslim diaspora communities, thereby offering broader context for understanding contemporary patterns of elite mobility (Kramer & Tong, 2024). Likewise, international institutional reports—including the Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality, published by the United Nations Development Programme (2016)—document the scale of youth migration across Arab countries and identify the structural barriers limiting domestic opportunities.

Taken together, the existing literature demonstrates that elite migration is driven by a complex interaction of political, economic, and socio-cultural forces. Although numerous studies have examined particular dimensions of skilled migration through demographic, economic, or political perspectives, comparatively few have integrated these factors into a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis focused specifically on the Islamic world. The principal contribution of the present study lies in its synthesis of updated empirical evidence with political, economic, and socio-cultural explanations within a unified analytical framework.

2. Theoretical Debate: Pessimistic and Optimistic Frameworks

2.1. Conceptualizing Elite Migration

The growing prominence of brain drain in development studies necessitates careful conceptual clarification. The phenomenon cannot be adequately captured by a single, universally accepted definition. Simplistic interpretations that equate brain drain solely with the emigration of highly trained professionals—such as physicians, engineers, or scientists—overlook its broader institutional and structural dimensions.

Traditionally, brain drain has been operationalized through the highly skilled migration rate, defined as the proportion of a country's tertiary-educated labour force residing abroad (IDB, 2006: ix). Although this quantitative indicator facilitates cross-national comparison, it does not fully capture the qualitative implications of elite mobility.

Elite migration refers to the departure of individuals whose expertise, authority, or influence exerts a disproportionate impact on governance,

economic performance, and socio-political development. Unlike the broader concept of highly skilled migration, elite migration encompasses individuals whose significance extends beyond formal educational qualifications. These include:

- Individuals exercising institutional authority, such as senior judges, high-ranking civil servants, and policymakers;
- Economic actors with substantial market influence, including entrepreneurs and major investors;
- Producers of knowledge and innovation, including academics, scientists, and researchers; and
- Cultural and communicative figures who shape public discourse, including journalists, artists, and religious scholars (Isaakyan, 2024).

This conceptual distinction has important analytical implications. The departure of a single senior policymaker or internationally recognized scientific researcher may undermine institutional continuity and strategic capacity far more than the emigration of large numbers of lower-skilled workers. Consequently, elite migration should be assessed not only in quantitative terms but also with respect to its qualitative effects on state capacity, policy formulation, institutional performance, and knowledge production.

2.2. Pessimistic and Optimistic Theoretical Frameworks

The developmental consequences of migration for countries of origin have long been the subject of academic debate. These discussions are commonly framed through the contrasting perspectives of migration optimism and migration pessimism. This divergence reflects broader theoretical divisions within the social sciences—particularly between functionalist and structuralist traditions—and parallels debates in development theory concerning balanced growth and uneven development. Moreover, ideological orientations, including neoliberal and state-centred perspectives, continue to shape competing interpretations of migration outcomes (De Haas, 2010: 229).

2.2.1. Optimistic Perspectives: Neo-Classical and Developmentalist Approaches

Neo-classical migration theory conceptualizes population mobility as an adjustment mechanism that promotes the efficient global allocation of labour and capital. From this perspective, migration benefits both countries of origin and destination by reducing wage differentials, improving labour market efficiency, and enhancing overall economic productivity.

Within balanced growth models, labour mobility from rural or economically peripheral regions to urban and industrial centres—whether within national borders or across them—is regarded as an integral component of modernization and structural economic transformation (Todaro, 1969: 139). Migration is therefore viewed as a catalyst for

development through the generation of remittances, the transfer of knowledge and skills, and the encouragement of investment in human capital.

Historically, academic and policy debates on migration have followed a cyclical trajectory. Optimistic perspectives predominated during the mid-twentieth century, gave way to more critical assessments from the 1970s to the 1990s, and have experienced a partial revival in recent decades, particularly in relation to diaspora engagement, knowledge circulation, and transnational development.

2.2.2. Pessimistic Perspectives

The optimistic expectation that migration would promote development has been increasingly challenged by structuralist and dependency theories. Accumulating empirical evidence has questioned the assumption that migration necessarily contributes to reducing global inequalities.

From a historical-structural perspective, migration is embedded within unequal global economic relationships shaped by the dynamics of capitalist expansion. Rather than mitigating uneven development, skilled migration may reinforce existing inequalities by transferring valuable human capital from peripheral economies to more developed core countries. Migration is therefore understood primarily as a consequence of structural constraints rather than as a mechanism capable of overcoming them.

Within this framework, the emigration of highly educated individuals weakens institutional capacity, diminishes domestic innovation, and reinforces long-term dependence on external centres of economic and technological power (De Haas, 2010: 232).

Table 1- Opposing theoretical views on migration and development

Migration optimists	Migration pessimists
Functionalist	Structuralist
Neo-classical	Neo-Marxist
Modernization	Disintegration
Net North-South transfer	Net South-North transfer
Brain gain	Brain drain
More equality	More inequality
Remittance investment	Consumption
Less migration	More migration

Source: De Haas, 2010: 229

Particularly in developing and politically unstable contexts, brain drain is viewed as a process that intensifies existing developmental asymmetries and constrains long-term national autonomy.

Drawing upon the empirical evidence examined in this study, elite migration cannot be regarded as a strategically beneficial or development-enhancing phenomenon for most countries of origin within the Islamic

world. While certain theoretical perspectives emphasize the potential gains associated with remittances, knowledge circulation, and diaspora engagement, the cumulative consequences of sustained skilled emigration indicate that pessimistic interpretations offer greater explanatory power in many cases. The scale, persistence, and sectoral concentration of elite outflows suggest structural losses that outweigh prospective compensatory mechanisms.

3. Data on Immigration Rates in Islamic Countries

Quantitative assessments of global migration flows provide only approximate estimations of actual mobility patterns. International datasets—particularly those compiled by the United Nations—are heavily dependent upon the statistical reporting systems of individual states. These systems differ substantially in methodological rigor, definitional criteria, and institutional capacity, resulting in inconsistencies across countries. Moreover, undocumented and irregular migration, which has become an increasingly significant dimension of contemporary transnational mobility, remains largely absent from official statistics. Comparable limitations affect the measurement of migration originating from Muslim-majority countries, including highly skilled emigration.

Although the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has acknowledged migration as an issue of strategic importance, it has yet to establish a centralized and methodologically harmonized research mechanism capable of producing comprehensive and comparable migration data across its member states. Consequently, scholars must rely on a combination of international databases, regional reports, and national-level studies in order to approximate migration trends. The statistical materials and visual representations presented in this study draw upon such sources, including country-specific and subregional analyses that illuminate patterns of elite mobility.

Multiple factors contribute to attracting educated youth and highly skilled professionals from Muslim-majority countries to Europe, North America, Australia, and other advanced industrial societies. These factors extend beyond purely economic considerations. They include expectations of higher living standards, political stability, long-term security, access to advanced research infrastructure, and pathways to permanent residency or citizenship facilitated by immigration policies designed to attract highly qualified individuals. Many destination countries actively compete for global talent through specialized visa regimes and incentive structures aimed at maximizing the economic and technological benefits derived from skilled migrants.

In addition to these "pull" factors, a range of "push" dynamics operates within sending countries. Educated individuals may experience professional marginalization, limited meritocratic advancement, bureaucratic obstacles,

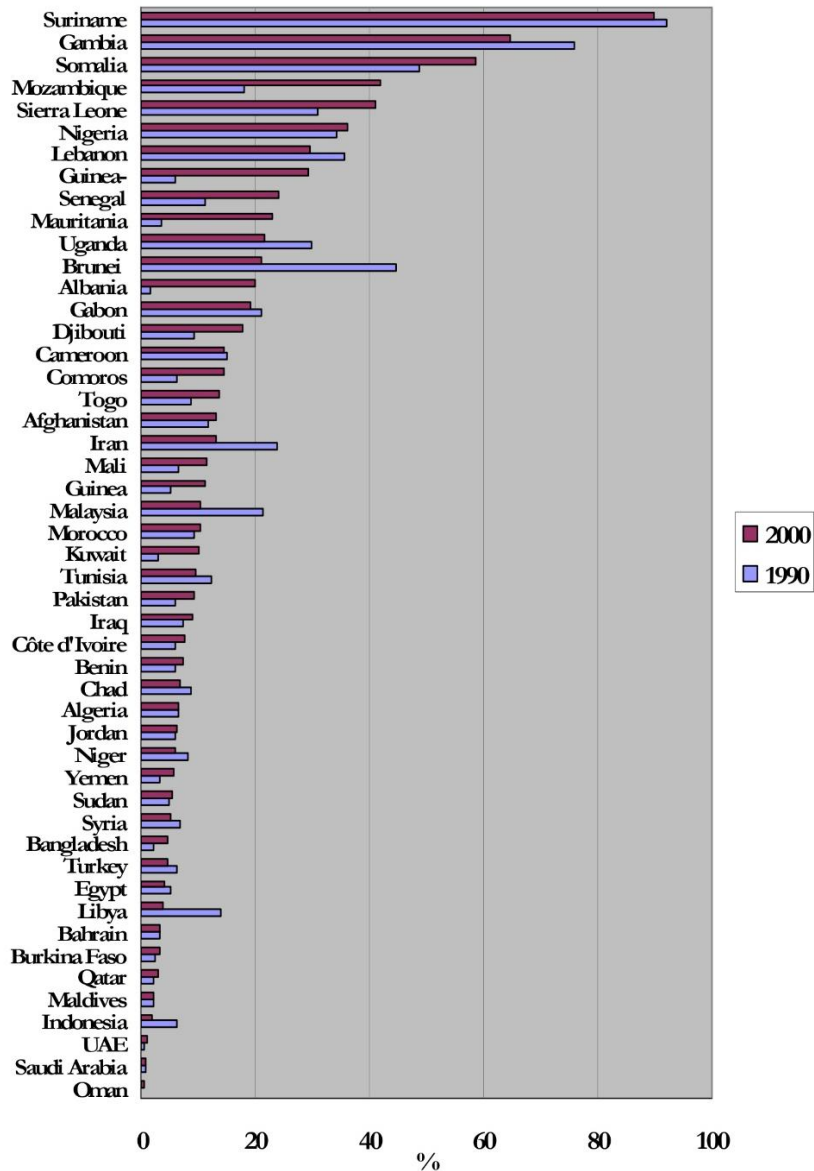
political constraints, or insufficient recognition of their expertise. In some contexts, the perception of exclusion from meaningful participation in economic or public life contributes to a sense of alienation that reinforces migration intentions. Thus, elite emigration often reflects the interaction between external opportunities and internal structural deficiencies.

Statistical evidence reported in the mid-2010s illustrates the magnitude of skilled outflows from developing Muslim-majority countries. According to available estimates:

- Approximately 50% of physicians and 26% of engineers originating from developing Muslim-majority states were reported to have migrated, with the majority settling in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom;
- The number of migrants holding advanced scientific degrees from Egypt alone was estimated at approximately 450,000 individuals; and
- More than 4,100 scientists from Muslim-majority countries were reported to be employed in Western research centres across various disciplines.

Although these figures date to 2016 and therefore require cautious interpretation, they nonetheless illustrate the scale of highly skilled emigration at that time. Given continuing political, economic, and institutional pressures in several regions, it is plausible that the absolute numbers have increased in subsequent years. Regardless of the precise contemporary totals, the available data indicate a substantial transfer of scientific, medical, engineering, and technical expertise from Muslim-majority societies to advanced industrial economies (Malik, 2016: 28).

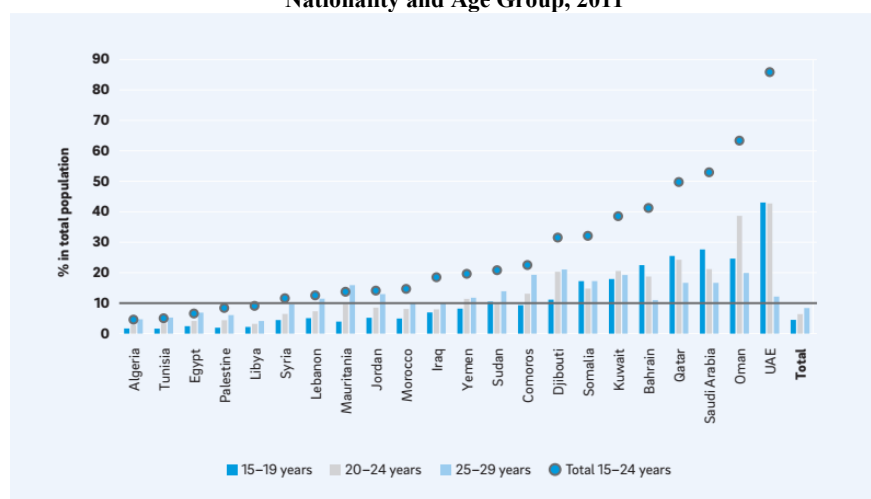
Chart 1- Highly-Skilled Migration Rate for Member Countries to OECD Countries, 1990 and 2000



Source: IDB, 2006: 14

The Chart below illustrates the proportion of young migrants from Arab states—many of them members of the OIC—residing in OECD countries, disaggregated by nationality and age cohort.

Chart 2- Share of Young Migrants from Arab Countries in OECD Countries by Nationality and Age Group, 2011



Source: (United Nations Development Programme, 2016: 152)

Table 2- Classification of Member Countries by Level of Brain Drain, 2000

Level of Brain Drain	Member Country
Very High ($20 \leq \text{Brain Drain}$)	Suriname, Gambia, Somalia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Lebanon, Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Mauritania, Uganda, Brunei, Albania
High ($10 \leq \text{Brain Drain} < 20$)	Gabon, Djibouti, Cameroon, Comoros, Togo, Afghanistan, Iran, Mali, Guinea, Malaysia, Morocco, Kuwait
Moderate ($5 \leq \text{Brain Drain} < 10$)	Tunisia, Pakistan, Iraq, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, Chad, Algeria, Jordan, Niger, Yemen, Sudan, Syria
Low ($0 < \text{Brain Drain} < 5$)	Bangladesh, Turkey, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Maldives, Indonesia, UAE, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Oman, Turkmenistan, Palestine

Source: IDB, 2006:16

These patterns underscore the structural significance of elite migration. The departure of trained physicians, engineers, and researchers entails not only a numerical reduction in human capital but also the loss of institutional memory, mentorship capacity, and innovation potential. Such outflows may generate long-term developmental constraints that are difficult to reverse, particularly in states already facing shortages of highly qualified personnel.

Muslim migrants tend to relocate primarily to states that provide substantial economic opportunities, higher standards of living, political stability, or a combination of these factors. Their destinations are geographically diverse and reflect both regional proximity and global economic hierarchies. Among the ten most common destination countries for Muslim migrants, four are located in the Middle East and North Africa, two in Europe, three in Asia and the Pacific, and one—the United States—in

North America (Kramer & Tong, 2024). This distribution illustrates that Muslim migration is neither exclusively oriented toward Western societies nor confined to intra-regional mobility; rather, it follows complex transnational corridors shaped by labour demand, political conditions, and historical ties.

Saudi Arabia—widely recognized as the birthplace of Islam—constitutes the largest single destination for Muslim migrants. Approximately 13% of all Muslim migrants worldwide—an estimated 10.8 million individuals—reside in the Kingdom. This places Saudi Arabia among the world's leading migrant-receiving states. Nearly 40% of its total population is foreign-born, and roughly 80% of migrants residing in the country identify as Muslim, closely mirroring the religious composition of Saudi society, where approximately 93% of the population is Muslim (Kramer & Tong, 2024). The country's oil-based economy and sustained demand for foreign labour—particularly in construction, healthcare, and services—have made it a central node in contemporary Muslim migration networks.

The United Arab Emirates follows closely, hosting more than six million foreign-born Muslims and ranking as the second most significant destination for Muslim migrants globally. Similar to Saudi Arabia, the UAE combines a high per capita income with a structural reliance on foreign labour. International migrants constitute approximately 94% of the country's total population, making it one of the most demographically distinctive states in the world. In both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Muslim migrants originate predominantly from South Asian countries—particularly India—reflecting long-standing labour migration corridors linking South Asia with the Gulf region (Kramer & Tong, 2024).

Turkey ranks third, with approximately 5.9 million Muslim migrants recorded in 2020. Positioned at the intersection of Europe and Asia and possessing a comparatively diversified economy relative to several neighbouring states, Turkey has become a principal host country for asylum seekers and displaced populations. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 dramatically altered Turkey's migration profile, leading to a substantial increase in refugee inflows. As a result, the number of Muslim migrants residing in Turkey increased approximately sixfold over the past decade.

Germany and the United States represent the next most common destinations for Muslim migrants. Their prominence reflects broader global patterns of movement toward advanced industrial economies characterized by established diaspora communities, strong labour markets, and comparatively open educational and research systems (Kramer & Tong, 2024). These destinations are particularly significant for highly educated migrants, who are often drawn by access to advanced research infrastructure, professional autonomy, and institutional stability.

4. Modalities of Elite Migration

Elite migration within the Islamic world manifests in multiple forms, shaped by varying structural conditions, political environments, and professional trajectories. These modalities differ in duration, motivation, and institutional consequence.

Table 3- Modalities of Elite Migration

Modality	Description	Examples
Permanent migration	Long-term or indefinite settlement abroad	Physicians relocating to OECD countries; scientists integrating into Western academic institutions
Circular migration	Recurrent mobility between origin and destination for employment or research	Visiting scholars; international consultants; transnational entrepreneurs
Forced exile	Politically motivated departure under threat or coercion	Political dissidents from Iran; journalists and academics from Turkey
Regional elite relocation	Movement to wealthier states within the same region	Professionals relocating to GCC member states

Source: Author

These modalities are analytically significant because they entail different developmental implications. Permanent migration often results in enduring human capital depletion, whereas circular migration may facilitate knowledge exchange and transnational collaboration. Forced exile reflects acute political rupture and may signal deeper crises of governance. Regional relocation—particularly to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—illustrates intra-regional stratification within the Islamic world, where wealth disparities shape mobility patterns.

5. General Causes and Structural Roots

A comprehensive examination of the drivers of elite outflows from Muslim-majority countries reveals an interrelated constellation of structural challenges. Among the most salient are pervasive uncertainty regarding future prospects, insufficient institutional recognition of professional achievement, macroeconomic volatility, chronic inflationary pressures, widening income disparities, and concerns about intergenerational mobility. Additional factors include recurring social tensions, weakly institutionalized meritocratic norms, policy inconsistency, limited political commitment to structural reform, chronic underinvestment in research and development, demographic pressures in certain contexts, and an overall lack of economic predictability. Collectively, these structural conditions contribute to the intensification of elite emigration (Ghanbari-Jahromi & Ahmadi Marzaleh, 2024: 436).

No single comprehensive theory fully explains the scale and direction of contemporary migration flows. Instead, migration outcomes reflect the interaction of economic, political, and social forces operating simultaneously on both the supply and demand sides of global labour markets. On the supply side, frequently cited drivers include wage disparities between labour-exporting and labour-importing countries, limited employment opportunities for highly educated individuals, political instability, weak investment climates that fail to utilize skilled labour effectively, and educational systems that produce large numbers of university graduates without corresponding labour market absorption capacity. On the demand side, advanced economies and labour-importing states actively seek migrant workers—particularly in high-skilled sectors—thereby reinforcing outward flows (IDB, 2006).

5.1. Economic and Professional Drivers

Across many Muslim-majority societies, structural economic constraints undermine the capacity of domestic economies to absorb and retain highly trained professionals. Narrow production structures, overreliance on volatile commodity sectors, limited industrial diversification, and chronic underinvestment in scientific and technological institutions create environments in which advanced skills are insufficiently rewarded.

Wage differentials remain among the most powerful predictors of elite emigration. For physicians, engineers, and research scientists, earnings in OECD countries may exceed domestic salaries by multiples ranging from five to fifteen. Under such conditions, migration frequently constitutes a rational economic decision, even when accompanied by significant social and emotional costs.

Contributing structural conditions include:

- Severe constraints on research funding, with research and development expenditures in many MENA countries remaining below 1% of GDP;
- Restrictions on academic freedom and limited institutional autonomy;
- Obsolete or inadequate infrastructure in universities, hospitals, and industrial sectors;
- Regulatory and bureaucratic frameworks that inhibit entrepreneurship and innovation.

5.1.1. Wage Differentials and Push–Pull Dynamics

Substantial disparities in wages and living standards between origin countries and wealthier destinations—whether GCC states, Europe, or North America—generate strong economic incentives for migration among both low- and high-skilled workers. Empirical research consistently identifies income gaps as one of the most influential determinants of outward mobility. Migrants frequently achieve significant increases in household income through higher earnings and remittance transfers. Analyses by the World

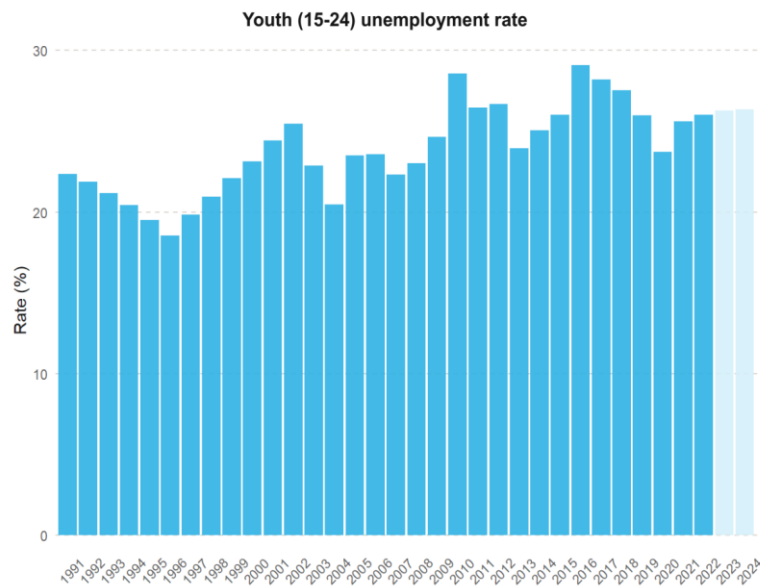
Bank highlight wage inequality and uneven development as central structural drivers of global migration flows (World Bank Group, 2023).

5.1.2. Youth Unemployment and Labour Underutilization

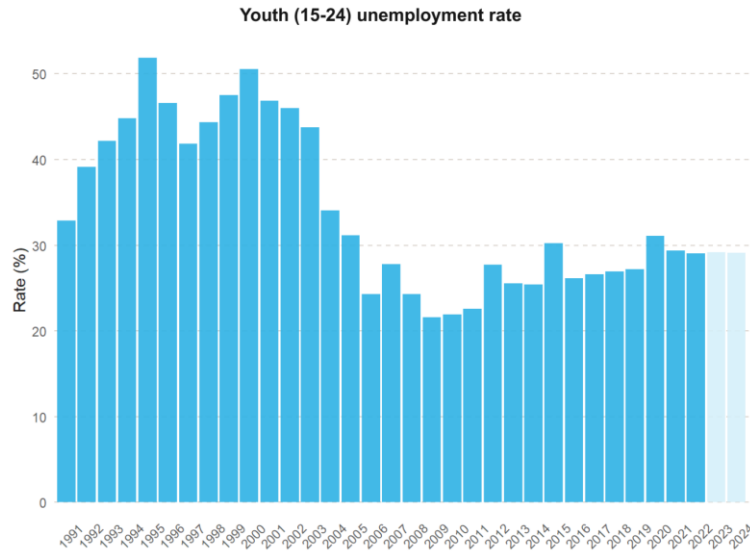
Persistently elevated youth unemployment rates, combined with widespread underemployment and high levels of NEET status (not in employment, education, or training), reinforce emigration pressures among younger cohorts. In contexts where domestic economies are unable to absorb large numbers of labour market entrants, migration emerges as a pragmatic strategy for securing economic stability. Modelling conducted by the International Labour Organization indicates that youth unemployment rates in Arab states remain in the high twenties as a percentage of the labour force, with broader labour underutilization measures reaching even higher levels (International Labour Organization, 2024).

The charts below illustrate youth unemployment trends in several Islamic countries between 1991 and 2025. These high youth unemployment rates—persistently present over decades—represent a powerful impetus for many young Muslims who view migration as a viable pathway toward stability and self-advancement.

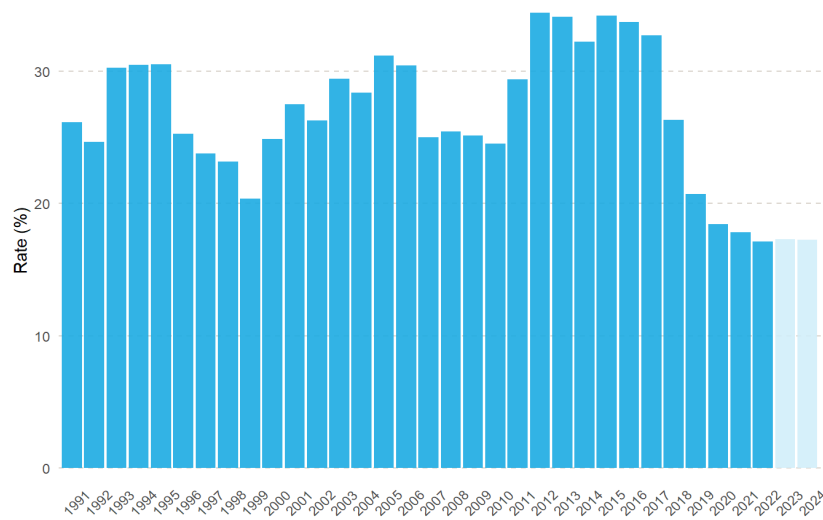
Chart 3- Youth Unemployment Rate, Iran (1991–2024)



Source: UNICEF DATA (2023)

Chart 4- Youth Unemployment Rate, Algeria (1991–2024)

Source: UNICEF DATA (2023)

Chart 5- Youth Unemployment Rate, Egypt (1991–2024)

Source: UNICEF DATA (2023)

5.1.3. Poverty, Human Development Deficits, and the Search for Decent Work

In environments characterized by entrenched poverty, inadequate social services, and limited access to formal-sector employment, migration becomes a mechanism for pursuing economic security and social dignity.

Structural inequality, slow growth, and weak social protection systems intensify outward mobility pressures. Analyses by the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank demonstrate strong correlations between low human development indicators and elevated migration propensities (Conceição, 2023–2024).

5.1.4. Macroeconomic Shocks and Financial Instability

Acute macroeconomic disruptions—such as currency devaluations, inflationary surges, fiscal austerity, and subsidy reductions—often trigger new waves of migration. As domestic purchasing power erodes and employment prospects deteriorate, households increasingly view international relocation as a strategy for restoring stability. Recent World Bank assessments illustrate how macroeconomic crises in several countries have reshaped remittance flows and intensified incentives for outward movement.

5.2. Political Causes

Elite migration from Muslim-majority countries is profoundly shaped by political conditions, particularly governance structures, power concentration, and state–society relations. Although economic factors are significant, political dynamics frequently constitute decisive triggers for the departure of intellectuals, professionals, and civic actors.

5.2.1. Authoritarian Governance and Political Repression

In contexts characterized by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule—where political dissent is constrained and academic or professional autonomy is limited—highly educated individuals often seek relocation abroad in pursuit of security and intellectual freedom. For example, following the consolidation of executive authority in Egypt after the 2013 military intervention, significant numbers of academics, civil society activists, and political actors emigrated amid heightened legal and security pressures (Brownlee et al., 2015).

Such patterns underscore the intimate connection between political liberalization, institutional autonomy, and the retention of national talent. Where governance structures restrict civic participation and suppress independent professional activity, elite emigration becomes not merely an economic response but a political act shaped by considerations of safety, dignity, and autonomy.

5.2.2. Sectarian Conflict and State Fragility

Elite migration intensifies significantly in contexts marked by sectarian polarization, institutional fragmentation, and declining state authority. Where political orders are structured around communal divisions and state

institutions fail to guarantee basic security, highly skilled professionals often become direct or indirect targets of violence. In post-2003 Iraq, widespread insecurity and the proliferation of armed non-state actors led to systematic threats and attacks against physicians, engineers, academics, and other professionals. The resulting exodus of skilled personnel severely undermined public-sector functionality, particularly in healthcare, higher education, and infrastructure management.

A comparable, though structurally distinct, pattern is observable in Lebanon. Chronic political deadlock, entrenched sectarian power-sharing arrangements, recurrent fiscal crises, and periodic episodes of violence have generated sustained uncertainty regarding long-term national prospects. Under these conditions, many highly educated Lebanese citizens—across diverse confessional backgrounds—have sought professional opportunities abroad, thereby contributing to a persistent cycle of outward migration (Traboulsi, 2012). In both cases, elite emigration reflects not only economic calculation but also profound concerns regarding institutional reliability and personal security.

5.2.3. State Control over Economic Opportunities and Patronage Systems

In numerous Muslim-majority states, access to professional advancement is mediated by political patronage networks rather than through transparent, merit-based procedures. When career mobility depends predominantly on factional affiliation, personal loyalty, or clientelist ties, highly trained individuals frequently perceive limited prospects for fair recognition. Migration, in such contexts, becomes a strategy for escaping constrained opportunity structures.

This dynamic is evident in several Gulf monarchies, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar. Although these states actively attract foreign labour and offer competitive compensation packages, domestic professionals may nonetheless encounter restricted political participation and limited upward mobility within state-dominated economic sectors. The concentration of economic power in governmental or quasi-governmental institutions can inadvertently narrow pathways for independent professional development.

Similar patterns can be observed in Pakistan, where political volatility, patronage-based hiring practices, and insufficient funding for research institutions contribute to sustained outflows of scientists, physicians, and engineers (Akmal et al., 2024). In such environments, the decision to emigrate reflects a rational response to structural distortions in labour markets and governance systems.

5.2.4. Legal and Institutional Constraints on Academic and Intellectual Life

Restrictions on academic freedom, media independence, and cultural expression represent another significant political driver of elite migration. When universities operate under political surveillance, when research

agendas are subject to ideological constraints, or when public intellectuals face censorship and legal prosecution, the space for innovation and critical inquiry contracts.

Turkey provides a particularly illustrative example. Following the attempted coup in 2016, large-scale dismissals, arrests, and institutional purges affected academics, civil servants, and journalists. The disruption of academic institutions and the narrowing of intellectual autonomy prompted many scholars to relocate to Europe, North America, and other regions in order to continue their work in environments perceived as more secure and professionally supportive. Such developments underscore the intimate relationship between institutional freedom and the retention of intellectual capital.

5.2.5. Governance Failures and Political Dynamics

The question of how to limit state authority and define the boundaries of political power has long preoccupied political theorists and reform movements (Ryahi & Kereminezad, 2023). In many Muslim-majority societies, however, governance challenges are not abstract theoretical concerns but concrete structural realities that shape everyday professional life. Persistent deficiencies in transparency, accountability, and the rule of law constitute some of the most powerful push factors driving elite emigration.

These governance weaknesses manifest themselves through interconnected mechanisms:

- Systemic corruption and entrenched patronage networks undermine meritocratic advancement, thereby discouraging ambitious professionals and innovators;
- Surveillance regimes, censorship practices, and intimidation tactics erode the autonomy of journalists, academics, and civil society actors; and
- Discriminatory policies based on sectarian, ethnic, or political identity restrict equal access to public-sector employment and career mobility.

As Schiller and colleagues observe, intellectuals, cultural producers, and politically engaged professionals are often among the first to emigrate in authoritarian contexts, as their visibility and influence render them particularly vulnerable to state control (Schiller et al., 1992). The departure of these actors frequently signals deeper institutional fragility.

5.2.6. Security and Armed Conflict

Armed conflict and chronic insecurity magnify existing governance failures and accelerate elite emigration. Civil wars in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and Yemen have displaced millions of individuals, including substantial numbers of physicians, engineers, educators, and administrators. The loss of such

professionals further diminishes prospects for post-conflict reconstruction and institutional recovery.

Reports by the United Nations Development Programme emphasize that insecurity compounds pre-existing social and economic vulnerabilities, thereby accelerating the departure of individuals whose expertise is most critical for national rebuilding. In fragile states, even modest reductions in skilled personnel can generate disproportionate declines in administrative effectiveness and public service provision.

5.2.7. International Education and Transnational Talent Pipelines

International educational mobility constitutes another politically relevant dimension of elite migration. Large cohorts of students from Muslim-majority societies pursue advanced degrees in Western Europe, North America, and, increasingly, East Asia. While international study may initially be conceived of as temporary, a significant proportion of graduates ultimately remain abroad.

Levitt and Jaworsky describe this dynamic as an "internationalization trap," whereby globally recognized academic credentials create attractive professional opportunities in host countries while origin-country institutions struggle to offer comparable conditions. The result is a gradual but sustained integration of highly trained individuals into foreign labour markets, thereby reinforcing long-term patterns of brain drain (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007).

6. Consequences

A comprehensive assessment of elite migration from Muslim-majority societies reveals far-reaching structural consequences. Large-scale brain drain depletes national reservoirs of scientific, medical, technical, and intellectual expertise at a time when many countries urgently require such capacities for development and modernization. The resulting shortages often compel governments to recruit foreign experts at considerable financial cost. Beyond the economic expense, reliance on externally sourced expertise may generate political and institutional dependencies that complicate long-term strategic planning.

A report by the Arab League highlights several indicative patterns:

- Approximately 54% of Arab students who pursue education abroad do not return to their home countries;
- Roughly 34% of physicians practising in the United Kingdom originate from Arab states;
- An estimated 75% of highly educated Arab migrants reside in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Canada;
- The Arab region accounts for approximately 31% of total brain drain from developing countries to Western states; and
- Arab physicians constitute nearly 50% of all doctors migrating from developing countries to Western destinations (Malik, 2016).

Although such figures require continual updating, they underscore the magnitude of skilled emigration and its concentration in critical sectors.

6.1. Institutional Capacity and Governance

The loss of administrators, researchers, policy experts, and senior professionals weakens the institutional foundations of sending states. As institutional memory erodes, policy continuity becomes fragile, and administrative effectiveness declines. In fragile or post-conflict contexts, even limited elite outflows can accelerate institutional decay and hinder reform initiatives.

6.2. Economic Growth, Innovation, and Inequality

Elite migration has significant macroeconomic implications. The departure of skilled professionals constrains technological upgrading, industrial diversification, and the development of innovation ecosystems. Although remittances and diaspora investments may generate measurable financial inflows, these contributions rarely compensate for the structural loss of human capital in key sectors such as healthcare, research, and advanced manufacturing.

Furthermore, elite migration may exacerbate domestic inequality. Individuals possessing the resources and qualifications necessary to migrate are typically among the most advantaged segments of society. Their departure can widen socio-economic gaps and diminish the availability of professional mentors and institutional advocates within sending communities.

6.3. Sociopolitical Impacts

The emigration of reform-oriented intellectuals, technocrats, and cultural figures carries significant political consequences. Their absence narrows the spectrum of moderate and reformist voices capable of mediating between state institutions and broader society. In certain contexts, this vacuum may reinforce authoritarian tendencies; in others, it may create space for more radical or exclusionary actors to gain influence.

Cultural and intellectual life is likewise affected. The departure of journalists, artists, and scholars may weaken public debate, reduce critical engagement, and diminish the vibrancy of national cultural production.

6.4. Positive Externalities: Diaspora Knowledge Transfer and Brain Circulation

Despite these challenges, elite diasporas can generate constructive externalities under appropriate policy conditions. Diaspora networks may facilitate:

- Entrepreneurial investment and venture capital flows;
- International research collaboration;
- Mentorship and professional training for emerging scholars; and

- Temporary return initiatives that enhance domestic expertise.

However, such benefits are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. They require deliberate institutional design, stable governance frameworks, and sustained engagement strategies.

Abdul Razak and colleagues argue that mitigating brain drain requires comprehensive strategic planning. Among the proposed measures is the reduction of armed conflict and political violence, which destabilize societies and divert public resources toward military expenditure. Reallocating financial resources from armaments to education, research, and scientific infrastructure could strengthen domestic knowledge systems and thereby reduce incentives for emigration (Abdul Razak et al., 2026). Particularly in resource-rich Middle Eastern states—where hydrocarbon revenues provide substantial fiscal capacity—such reallocation is presented as both feasible and strategically necessary.

Conclusion

Elite migration from Muslim-majority societies constitutes a complex structural transformation with far-reaching and enduring implications. Available empirical evidence indicates that many of these states continue to record substantial rates of emigration among tertiary-educated populations, particularly in strategically vital sectors such as healthcare, engineering, and advanced scientific research. The cumulative loss of highly trained professionals imposes significant constraints on governance quality, institutional effectiveness, economic diversification, and broader processes of social development within countries of origin.

For states seeking to advance inclusive growth, social equity, and long-term development, sustained investment in human capital is indispensable. Scientists, engineers, medical practitioners, educators, and innovators form the backbone of knowledge-based economies and resilient public institutions. Yet these actors are often among the most mobile segments of society, and they are especially likely to emigrate when confronted with systemic corruption, limited professional autonomy, political repression, or restricted opportunities for merit-based advancement. Although many Muslim-majority countries command considerable demographic potential, cultural capital, and—particularly in hydrocarbon-exporting economies—substantial financial resources, persistent governance deficits and entrenched patronage structures undermine their capacity to retain skilled citizens.

Accordingly, elite migration should not be reduced to a narrow economic or demographic phenomenon. Rather, it reflects deeper institutional and political dynamics that shape the relationship between the state and society. The sustained departure of highly educated individuals signals structural imbalances in opportunity, accountability, and institutional trust. At the same time, such mobility does not inevitably translate into permanent national decline. Under appropriate policy frameworks, diaspora networks can

facilitate transnational research collaboration, entrepreneurial investment, knowledge exchange, and institutional learning. In this sense, the adverse effects traditionally associated with “brain drain” may, in certain contexts, evolve into patterns of “brain circulation.”

Nevertheless, mitigating the structural drivers of elite outmigration requires more than short-term incentive schemes or symbolic retention initiatives. Durable solutions depend upon comprehensive institutional reform, the strengthening of transparent and accountable governance, sustained investment in education and research infrastructure, and the cultivation of political environments in which professional achievement is decoupled from factional allegiance. Only through such systemic transformations can Muslim-majority societies reshape elite migration from a persistent structural liability into a potential resource for sustainable and autonomous development.

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