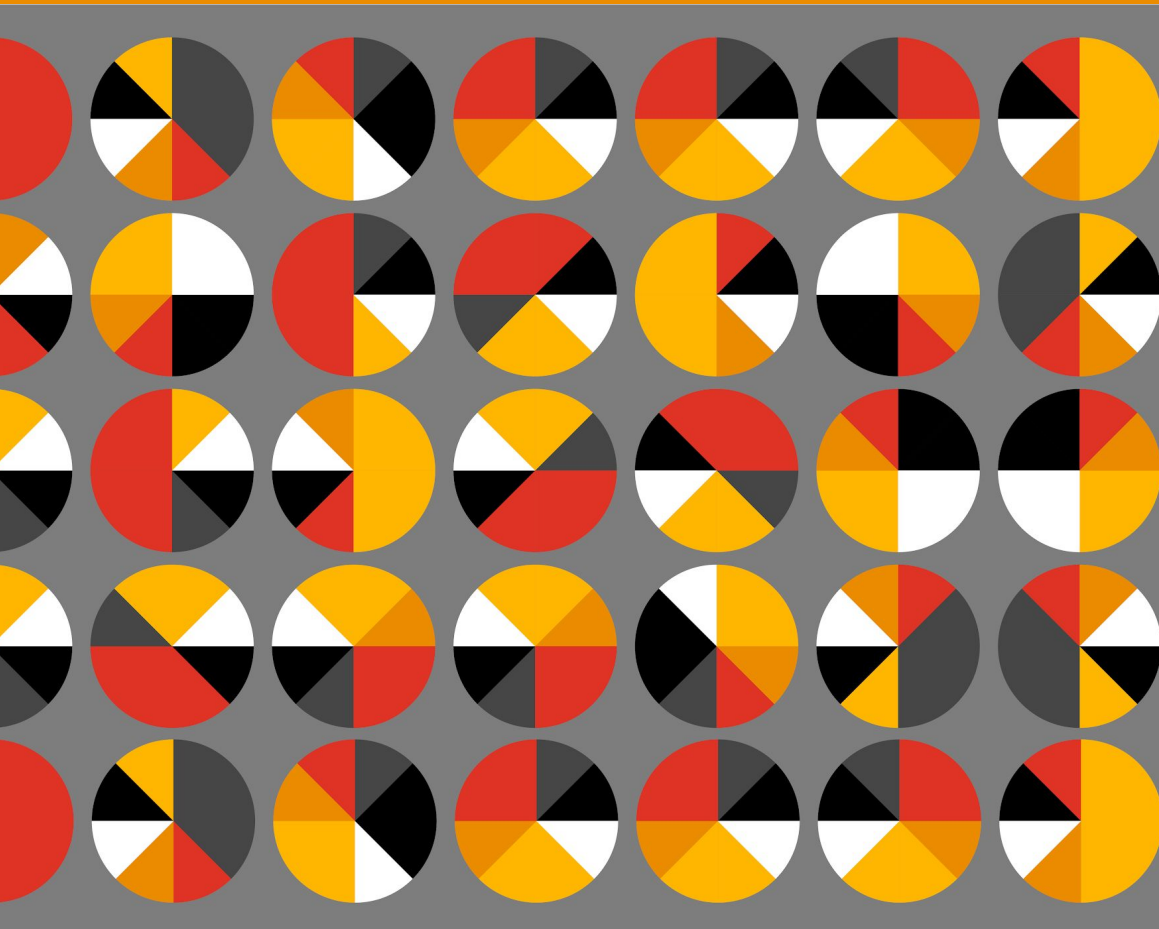


GCC: Immigration and Employment roundup

September 2021



In brief

Several GCC countries, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have resumed the issuance of visit visas, welcoming tourists whilst also ensuring COVID-19 measures remain in place.

The UAE has further rolled out long-term visas and provided further guidance in relation to specific categories of Golden Visa applicants, welcoming skilled individuals and investment into the country. New visa categories have also been recently announced to attract new talent to the UAE. The Saudisation drive continues in Saudi Arabia, with total Saudisation expected in the Finance and Insurance sectors.

Vaccinations have become mandatory for employees in the public and private sectors in Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain has announced that it will adopt a National Labour Market Plan to boost employment for Bahraini nationals.

In detail

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Visit visas resume

UAE Authorities have announced that visit visas will resume for travellers from all countries on 30 August 2021. This will be welcome news for individuals and business visitors from certain countries where travel has been restricted or suspended due to COVID-19, which included India, Pakistan and South Africa.

- visas on arrival will be issued to those travellers who are exempt from applying for a visa in advance of their onward journey to Dubai;
- GDRFA and ICA approval is no longer required for entry to the UAE;
- individuals from the following countries will be required to produce a negative COVID-19 test result with a QR code within 48 hours of the time the sample was collected from an approved health facility/ a negative rapid PCR test result with a QR code for a test conducted at the departure airport within six hours of departure: Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Uganda, Vietnam, Zambia, Indonesia;
- travellers from all other countries will need a negative COVID-19 test result, within 72 hours of departure. Individuals travelling from Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt and Ethiopia require reports with a QR code; and
- passengers arriving from over sixty countries, including Bangladesh, Egypt, Lebanon, the Philippines and Turkey, will be required to take another PCR test on arrival at Dubai airport.

There are limited exemptions to the above requirements, and if anyone tests positive on arrival for COVID-19, they will be required to undergo isolation and follow Dubai Health Authority guidelines. Our team is able to assist you in navigating these new measures, to adequately plan for hiring or business travel to the UAE.

Golden Visa update

Individuals can now be nominated for a 10-year Golden visa by the public, via the Federal Authority of Identity and Citizenship (ICA) app. People who are eligible range from those who have made an investment in the UAE, to those with specialised talents and bright students, subject to meeting specific criteria. The ICA app will ask for certain information and documentation in support of a nomination.

Doctors

The UAE is also inviting Doctors and their families to apply for 10-year Golden Visas via the ICA website (smartservices.ica.gov.ae). Doctors who are licenced by the UAE health regulatory bodies can apply for their Golden visas until September 2022. Relevant Government departments will review applications first, before issuing a Golden visa to successful applicants.

Students

Outstanding students with a minimum grade of ninety-five percent in private and public schools, and university graduates who have a distinction GPA of at least 3.75 on graduation, are eligible for five-year Golden visas. Parents and applicants are able to check a student's eligibility, via the newly launched Abu Dhabi Residents Office website, adro.gov.ae by entering their Emirates ID and student number.

Coders

The UAE Government has also announced the introduction of Golden Visas for Coders, through the National Programme of Coders. One hundred thousand Golden visas have been made available to Coders, and applications are to be made either through the ICA or Office of Artificial Intelligence in the UAE Government (after a referral from the National Authority of AI). The initiative is available to both residents and non-residents of the UAE, and coders of all age groups and nationalities can apply.

Golden visa applications under this category extend to:

- distinguished experts and talents who achieved success in various areas of coding;
- those who work for pioneering international technological firms; and
- graduates of software engineering, computer sciences, hardware engineering, information technology, artificial intelligence, data science, big data and electrical engineering.

Abu Dhabi Residents Office

The Abu Dhabi Residents Office is a division of the Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development, and their website was launched this summer, outlining different ways in which individuals can qualify for Golden Visa. This includes, but is not limited to, the following categories:

- Entrepreneurs
- Executive Directors
- Specialists in Priority Educational Areas
- Sportsmen
- PhD holders

Please see our [last update](#) in relation to Golden visas, where we reported on the expansion of the Golden visa programme. Our team has experience in assisting clients in the Golden visa process, and can offer assessments with respect to eligibility, guidance and end-to-end application support.

Dubai's Long-Term Cultural Visa

The Dubai Culture and Arts Authority (Dubai Culture) has now opened its doors for creative entrepreneurs and talented individuals in AI Quoz to apply for a long-term, 10-year cultural visa. This initiative is in line with Dubai Culture's aim to support and preserve the country's creative talents, but also attract talented people from overseas to live and work in the UAE.

As part of the application process, applicants are required to submit a creative profile, any awards, portfolios and other evidence in support. Our team is able to guide and support applicants through the entire process.

New Emirates ID cards

The Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship (ICA) has unveiled a new version of the Emirates ID card, with new features and design. Those who have a valid Emirates ID card do not need to receive a new version, until it expires, or they request a replacement of a damaged card.

New visa categories announced - Green Visa and Freelance Visa

Two new exciting visa categories, the Green visa and Freelance visa, were announced by the Minister of State for Foreign Trade at the start of September, during a press event in Dubai on 'The Principles of the 50' which is part of the UAE's strategic plans for economic, political and social growth.

High performing students, business people, investors and those with specialised skills, will be eligible for the Green visa. Benefits of the Green visa are set to include:

- the ability to sponsor parents;
- the ability to sponsor sons until the age of 25 (this is generally 18 years for other visa categories);
- individuals will be given a 90-180 grace period on cancellation of their Green visa (more than the 30 days provided with other visa categories).

Freelance visas will apply to self-employed individuals or independent businesses, and could be an expanded version of the UAE's current Freelance visas allowing greater flexibility for companies and individuals alike. We await more details including full eligibility criteria, and will publish those details once available. The announcement of these two new categories represents a continued move to increase talent and investment into the UAE.

In other news

The Minister of State for Foreign Trade, Dr Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, also announced that widows and divorced women will be able to remain in the UAE for a year before being required to depart or regularise their Immigration status. This is similar to an exemption the authorities put in place a few years ago, extending it from the usual 30 day grace period. More details will follow in due course. A temporary visa scheme will also be introduced to allow students aged 15 and above to gain experience in the workplace.

One hundred day plan to boost employment of Emiratis in the private sector

The Emirati Human Resources Development Council (EHRDC) has announced that it will develop a one hundred day plan which aims to increase the number of Emiratis in employment in the private sector in the UAE.

The EHRDC has announced that a number of measures and partnerships will be formed between organisations, companies and free zones to boost the employment prospects of UAE Nationals.

The 'action plan' will involve the introduction of new legislation, policies and initiatives to ensure that UAE Nationals are employed in the private sector, which will seek to protect and enhance the growth of the private sector encompassing expats and UAE Nationals. As an employer in the UAE, it is important to look out for the enactment of these new policies, any new legislation and requirements.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

Saudisation of Finance and Insurance sectors

Finance and Insurance sectors are set to implement total Saudisation, with the hiring of Saudi nationals to replace over 90,000 expatriates who currently occupy jobs in these industries. We await further details as to when complete Saudisation is expected to take effect, and how or if the renewal of expatriate residence permits (Iqamas) will be affected. Companies in these sectors will need to be prepared for this change, which forms part of the Kingdom's Vision 2030.

Vaccinated travellers and returning residents

Saudi Arabia has lifted the suspension of the entry of tourist visa holders since the beginning of August of this year. Those who are fully vaccinated, i.e. received two doses of Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, or Moderna, one dose of the Johnson & Johnson or two doses of the Sinopharma or Sinovac (on the condition that travellers have received an additional dose of one of the above mentioned vaccines), are exempt from quarantining on arrival. Individuals are also required to present a negative PCR test report that is no older than 72 hours, prior to their departure.

The Kingdom has also lifted its travel ban on the UAE, South Africa and Argentina. There are still countries that continue to remain on the Kingdom's list, including (but not limited to), Brazil, Egypt, Pakistan and Vietnam, and individuals departing from these countries must spend fourteen days in a third country before entering Saudi Arabia.

Residents returning to Saudi Arabia are also required to quarantine if they have not been vaccinated, along with being required to take PCR tests on the first and seventh day of arrival. Residents with Iqamas, are required to register vaccines received overseas. For more information on travel requirements to Saudi Arabia, please contact our team.

Vaccination now mandatory for employees in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

From 1 August 2021, employees in both the public and private sector in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be required to be vaccinated against Covid-19 in order to attend the workplace.

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (MHRSD) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI) issued updates on 7 May 2021 and 18 May 2021 confirming that it will be mandatory to have Covid-19 vaccination status for the following:

- entry for all economic, commercial, cultural, entertainment or sporting activities;
- entry for all cultural, scientific, social or entertainment events;
- entry into all governmental or private establishments;
- entry into all governmental or private educational facilities; and
- using public transportation.

It has not yet been confirmed how the precise mechanisms of the decision will be implemented, including how exemptions will work and what brand of vaccination is required to count as valid. It is understood that the Tawakkalna app will be used to check the vaccination status of employees.

It is not clear from the rules whether an employer can rely on the new regulations for employees who are not required to attend the office. As with most countries at the moment, it appears that vaccination rates are high and as the requirement to be vaccinated spreads to more and more areas (such as social and entertainment venues), the impetus on an employee to get vaccinated will grow.

Bahrain

Over the course of 2021 to 2024, the government of Bahrain will adopt a National Labour Market Plan, designed specifically to generate employment for Bahrainis, strengthen the current framework for regulation and ensure that the contribution to the country's economy made by the private sector continues to increase.

In terms of timing, it is estimated that by 2023, the key objectives of the plan will be implemented.

These currently include:

- bringing in a new framework which favours expatriate workers (those that have the required and demanded skills of the Bahrain's labor market);
- increasing the number of Bahraini women in the labor market;
- increasing investment in technology;
- providing support (including financial support) to private businesses who are committed and focused on employing Bahrainis;
- introducing a new range of education and training initiatives;
- reviewing and evaluating the current Bahrainization rates (in the private sector) to ensure they correspond to the current needs and demands of the labor market; and
- reviewing commercial regulatory procedures and focusing on compliance with Bahrainization rules and protecting workers' rights.

Key takeaway

Whilst travel is opening up in the GCC, there are COVID-19 measures that remain in place and travel requirements need to be adhered to in order to be able to enter into the UAE and Saudi Arabia for example. Understanding these requirements are essential to avoid issues on arrival.

More routes and doors have opened for residents, and non-residents in certain categories, to apply for a 10-year Golden Visa, and presents an opportunity for individuals to base themselves in the UAE on a long-term basis. We anticipate that more details on the Green visa and Freelance visa will be announced in due course.

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How can we help?

We understand that this remains a challenging and unpredictable time for many companies and their employees. We can help to:

- assist with advising on travel bans across the GCC, and navigating/managing various COVID-19 requirements;
- provide up-to-date advice on travel restrictions and COVID-19 testing requirements as well as options for employers in relation to policies around vaccinations;
- assess an individual's eligibility for a Golden Visa, and provide end-to-end advice and support;
- strategise your company's hiring needs into the GCC.

Let's talk

For a deeper discussion of how these issues might affect your business, please contact:

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