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Political Transformation of Migration through Iqomah: A Study of the Paradigm Shift in Saudi Arabia's Labor Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of Saudi Arabia's migration policy through the reform of the Iqomah system and its implications for labor diplomacy. Using a normative juridical method, this study analyzes regulatory changes, bilateral labor agreements, and the normative framework governing migrant worker mobility. The results show that the Iqomah reform strengthens the legal status of workers, reorganizes the sponsorship mechanism, and increases administrative transparency through the digitization of services. These changes encourage a shift in labor diplomacy from a reactive pattern to a more proactive and collaborative approach in line with international standards. The study concludes that the Iqomah reform not only reconstructs the legal structure of labor relations but also influences the pattern of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and worker-sending countries. The study's recommendations include improving bilateral coordination, refining legal protection instruments, and the need for further research to assess the implementation of reforms and enrich the development of migration diplomacy theory.

Keywords: *Migration Policy; Iqomah Reform; Labor Diplomacy; Saudi Arabia.*

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of migration governance in Saudi Arabia in recent years has marked a very significant strategic change, particularly through the modernization of the Iqomah policy as a legal instrument for foreign residents. These changes do not stand alone, but are an integral part of broader labor reforms under the Vision 2030 framework (Alshamli, 2023). This transformation has attracted academic attention because it reflects a paradigm shift in labor diplomacy and a repositioning of the relationship between worker-sending countries and Saudi Arabia as a major destination country.

The dynamics of international migration in the Middle East are fundamentally shaped by a high dependence on foreign labor. Saudi Arabia is one of the countries most dependent on migrant workers, especially from Asia and Africa. This situation makes the Iqomah policy not only an administrative instrument but also a diplomatic instrument that has the potential to influence relations between countries. Changes in the implementation of Iqomah and labor reforms therefore need to be understood as policies with cross-sectoral implications (Thiollet, 2023).

Before the reform took place, Iqomah was often associated with structural weaknesses in the kafalah system that placed migrant workers in a vulnerable position. The individual sponsorship mechanism provided scope for practices that hindered labor mobility and had the potential to lead to abuse of authority (Alshariff, 2015). This condition has long been a diplomatic issue between Saudi Arabia and migrant-sending countries. Therefore, the latest labor reforms provide an important moment to reevaluate how Iqomah is used as a tool for migration management.

As global pressure to improve migrant worker protection standards increases, Saudi Arabia has begun to change its approach to migration policy. These changes are not only

domestic in nature, but also have a strong international diplomatic dimension. Partner countries expect that these reforms will improve the bargaining position of migrant workers and enhance the quality of legal protection afforded to them.

The transformation of migration policy in Saudi Arabia cannot be separated from the country's need to strengthen its international image. After decades of criticism of its kafalah policy, reforms that loosen dependence on sponsors are seen as an effort to improve its global reputation while ensuring the stability of its labor supply. This shows that the Iqomah policy is not merely an administrative matter, but rather a diplomatic instrument used to maintain mutually beneficial strategic relationships.

The updated Iqomah policy has major implications for the mechanism of inter-country cooperation. Labor mobility reforms allow workers to change employers without sponsor permission, creating a more flexible migration system. These changes affect bilateral negotiation patterns, particularly in labor MoUs that regulate the rights and obligations of workers and employers.

These changes also present new issues that need to be critically examined. On the one hand, the reforms mark progress in improving migration regulations; on the other hand, implementation in the field still faces challenges. The mismatch between the regulatory framework and administrative practices has the potential to hamper the effectiveness of the Iqomah policy transformation.

The complexity of these issues forms an important backdrop to this study. The transformation of migration policy through Iqomah needs to be analyzed in the context of major changes following labor reforms that have affected Saudi Arabia's diplomatic relations with worker-sending countries. This analysis is important to understand the extent to which policy changes have actually shifted the paradigm of labor diplomacy in the region. The research question that arises is how changes in the Iqomah policy affect diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and labor-sending countries. Another issue concerns the effectiveness of the policy in improving worker protection and its impact on the stability of the international labor market.

These issues need to be addressed through a study that combines policy analysis, diplomacy theory, and the perspective of international migration governance. Such an approach allows researchers to examine policy changes not merely as administrative measures, but as diplomatic strategies with broad implications. As a form of problem solving, this study offers a comprehensive approach that links regulatory analysis, bilateral diplomatic dynamics, and the impact of policies on migrant workers. Thus, this study is expected to contribute academically to mapping the relationship between domestic policies and diplomatic interests (Anwar et al., 2025).

This study aims to identify and explain the political transformation of migration in Saudi Arabia through the modernization of the Iqomah policy. Another objective is to analyze how labor reforms have impacted labor diplomacy and bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and worker-sending countries. The benefits of this research are expected to be felt by various parties. Academically, this research enriches the literature on migration governance in the Middle East. Practically, this research provides a critical perspective that can be used by policymakers in worker-sending countries.

Relevant theoretical studies include diplomacy theory, international migration theory, and public policy theory. Classical and contemporary diplomacy theory provides a framework for explaining how countries use domestic policy as a tool for international negotiation. Meanwhile, international migration theory provides an understanding of the push and pull factors that influence labor flows to Saudi Arabia.

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The concept of labor diplomacy is an important framework for mapping how countries intervene in the conditions of their citizens abroad. Studies on labor migration to Saudi Arabia show that labor diplomacy has long been a strategic instrument for worker-sending countries. Therefore, changes in Iqomah policy need to be analyzed in the context of these relationships.

Public policy theory helps explain how reforms are carried out, including internal and external factors that influence the Saudi government's decisions. The ongoing labor reforms cannot be separated from international pressure, domestic needs, and the government's desire to strengthen its global image. This theoretical framework provides a strong conceptual basis for examining the paradigm shift in labor diplomacy in the context of the Iqomah reform. The theoretical foundation also serves as a basis for constructing consistent and relevant scientific arguments (Hamzah, 2007).

The expected outcome of this research is a comprehensive understanding of the impact of political migration transformation on international relations in the region. By understanding these dynamics, this study can provide a clearer picture of the future of migration governance in Saudi Arabia. In addition, this study is expected to identify the challenges faced in the implementation of the Iqomah policy. These findings are important for providing policy recommendations that can improve the effectiveness of migrant worker protection (Venkateswaran & Phillipose, 2025).

In an academic context, this study offers a contribution in the form of empirical analysis of Saudi Arabia's migration policy, which remains relatively unexplored. This study can serve as a reference for further research in the field of international migration policy. The geopolitical situation in the region also plays a role in shaping Saudi migration policy. Instability in several neighboring countries has forced Saudi Arabia to maintain a strong and well-managed migration system. The Iqomah policy is one of the instruments that contributes to this stability.

The transformation of this policy ultimately aims to create a safer, more orderly, and internationally compliant working environment. This step is in line with the Saudi government's efforts to strengthen its position as a regional economic center that is friendly to both professional and non-professional workers. However, the success of this transformation is highly dependent on coordination between the Saudi government, employers, and labor-sending countries. Diplomatic interactions between countries remain an important factor in ensuring the smooth implementation of policies.

Thus, the paradigm shift in Saudi Arabia's labor diplomacy is not only evident in regulations but also in a more open and cooperative approach to foreign relations. The implementation of a more modern Iqomah serves as a bridge towards a more structured migration management system. This study also proposes a new understanding of the role of Iqomah as part of the migration identity in Saudi Arabia. Iqomah is not merely a residence permit, but a symbol of a migration political system that is undergoing transformation. This policy change provides an opportunity for worker-sending countries to strengthen diplomacy and the protection of their citizens. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of cooperation between countries in ensuring that the ongoing reforms truly have the desired impact (Davis & Trebicock, 2008).

Overall, this study views the political transformation of migration through the Iqomah as an important point in the evolution of Saudi Arabia's migration system. These changes open up space for labor diplomacy reforms that are more oriented towards protection and equal cooperation. This study is ultimately expected to contribute not only to the academic realm, but also to better diplomatic practices and policy-making for migrant workers in the future.

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METHOD

The research method used in this study is normative legal research with an analytical-descriptive design that emphasizes the exploration and interpretation of positive legal norms governing migration policy in Saudi Arabia, particularly related to the implementation of Iqomah and labor reform. The research focuses on Saudi Arabia's national regulations, bilateral legal instruments between Saudi Arabia and worker-sending countries, and relevant international legal standards such as ILO provisions on the protection of migrant workers.

The research targets include legal products in the form of laws, administrative policies, labor regulations, the kafalah system, and diplomatic documents governing cross-border labor mobility. This study focuses on the relationship between the transformation of the Iqomah policy and the changing paradigm of labor diplomacy that developed after the labor reform was implemented.

Data collection techniques were carried out through a literature study by compiling primary, secondary, and tertiary legal materials, where primary legal materials were in the form of legislation and international agreements, while secondary legal materials included academic journals, scientific literature, international agency reports, and official government publications. The research instruments were developed through systematic document analysis to trace norms, principles and relevant legal concepts (Salehijam, 2018).

Data analysis techniques use a qualitative approach with legal interpretation methods that include systematic, historical, teleological, and conceptual interpretations to explain the causal relationship between the Iqomah policy reform and the dynamics of Saudi Arabia's labor diplomacy. This approach enables the formulation of comprehensive legal arguments and explains the normative implications of political transformation of migration in Saudi Arabia in the context of bilateral relations and international migration governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study show that the modernization of the Iqomah policy has brought significant changes to Saudi Arabia's migration governance, especially after the labor reforms that began to be implemented on a massive scale since 2020 (Aref, 2021). These reforms have not only changed the relationship between workers and employers, but also affected the structure of labor diplomacy between Saudi Arabia and labor-sending countries.

The first finding indicates that the new Iqomah policy strengthens the position of migrant workers in the Saudi labor system. Workers who were previously tightly bound to their sponsors now have greater mobility, including the right to change jobs without sponsor permission under certain conditions. This change indicates a shift in policy towards a migration model that is more responsive to worker protection norms (Koswara et al., 2022).

Research also found that the modernization of Iqomah through the digitization of services such as Absher, Muqeem, and Qiwa has increased the transparency of residence permit management. The digital system allows for faster verification of employment status, thereby reducing inconsistent administrative practices and improving the reliability of migration data. A review of legal documents shows that changes in labor mobility policies have direct implications for bilateral diplomacy. Worker-sending countries have gained greater scope to propose adjustments to labor MoUs in order to protect their citizens from vulnerability while working in Saudi Arabia.

Significant changes were also found in the labor dispute resolution mechanism. The reform provides workers with broader access to file complaints through official channels without the threat of unilateral cancellation of their Iqomah by employers. These findings confirm increased legal protection in Saudi Arabia's migration policy structure. In the context of labor diplomacy, the study found that the Iqomah reform is an important instrument for improving Saudi Arabia's relations with Asian countries. A more inclusive

policy is considered capable of reducing the diplomatic tensions that previously arose due to the often-criticized kafalah system (Vachruddin, 2024).

The results of the identification of regulations show that the renewal of the Iqomah policy substantially approaches the international standards recommended by the ILO. Although it has not fully adopted the principles of international conventions, this step reflects efforts toward normative convergence in migration governance. Findings on the structure of reforms show that policy changes are not only intended as a response to international pressure, but also as an internal necessity to support economic transformation within the framework of Vision 2030. Foreign workers are an important component of ambitious national development projects.

Research finds that the modernization of Iqomah has played a role in increasing Saudi Arabia's attractiveness as a destination for work, especially for skilled workers. More flexible policies allow companies to recruit foreign workers with greater efficiency and lower legal risk (Kazancoglu, 2023). One important finding is the shift towards a more collaborative paradigm in labor diplomacy. Worker-sending countries no longer only demand protection, but are also involved in administrative coordination mechanisms through bilateral and regional forums.

Normative findings show that the reformed Iqomah policy strengthens the Saudi government's position as the dominant actor in determining the direction of migration relations. However, this dominance is now exercised with more inclusive principles than previous policy patterns. In the area of supervision, research shows that digital systems strengthen the state's ability to monitor worker mobility and reduce residency permit violations. Biometric data is the main basis for preventing document fraud and tracking illegal workers).

Policy reforms have also contributed to a decline in the number of workers who overstay or work outside their professional permits. The modernization of Iqomah procedures has facilitated the renewal and transfer of professions through an online system, thereby minimizing violations due to complicated manual processes. Regulatory data shows that policy changes have also modified the power relations between workers, employers, and the state. The state has taken on a more dominant role in ensuring legal certainty, while the role of employers as sponsors has been restricted.

Research also shows implementation barriers, particularly related to employers' inconsistent understanding of the new rules. Although reforms are underway, the transition to a completely new system still requires more intensive administrative adaptation and socialization (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Observations of bilateral relations show that worker-sending countries, Like the Philippines, India, and Indonesia, they have begun to modify their approach to labor diplomacy, focusing on utilizing the space provided by the Iqomah reform to improve the protection of their citizens. In the new policy structure, Iqomah is no longer positioned as a control tool, but as an integrated migration management instrument. This finding reflects a more modern paradigm shift in line with global standards (Luo, 2024).

Other findings show that Saudi Arabia's diplomacy is now more proactive in building its image as a migrant-friendly country. Labor reforms are often presented in international forums to strengthen the legitimacy of national migration policies. Research has found that the paradigm shift in labor diplomacy has had a significant impact on increasing labor market stability. Companies benefit from clearer rules, while workers gain better administrative guarantees. In legal terms, changes to the Iqomah provide greater certainty regarding the legal status of workers. A stable legal status is an important factor in creating more productive working relationships and reducing conflict (Annamalah et al., 2025).

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Analysis of the research results shows that reform has had a major impact on social relations between workers and employers. Relationships that were previously highly subordinate are now beginning to transform into more equal working relationships. The next finding shows that policy reforms encourage worker-sending countries to adjust their domestic migration regulations. These adjustments are made to be more compatible with Saudi Arabia's new policies and to facilitate a safe migration process.

Research notes that the new policies improve workers' access to dispute resolution mechanisms through legal channels. This access strengthens workers' bargaining position and reduces their vulnerability to exploitation. Normative findings show that policy transformation has the potential to serve as a model for other Gulf countries to undertake similar reforms. GCC countries are now beginning to consider adjusting their migration systems based on Saudi Arabia's experience.

The results of the study also confirm that the modernization of Iqomah has an impact on the efficiency of the government system. The use of digital platforms reduces bureaucracy and improves the accuracy of foreign population data recording. In a macro context, these reforms help Saudi Arabia create a more conducive investment environment. Legal and well-managed foreign labor is an added value to national economic stability.

The findings show that the political transformation of migration through Iqomah has become a catalyst for a new paradigm in labor diplomacy. This paradigm emphasizes cooperation, protection, and stability rather than unilateral domination. Overall, the research results show that the Iqomah policy reform has not only succeeded in improving administrative efficiency but also contributed to enhancing Saudi Arabia's international relations. This policy strengthens Saudi Arabia's position as a major actor in global migration management (Malit Jr & AlShanqityi, 2025).

Ultimately, the study concludes that the transformation of migration policy in Saudi Arabia through the modernization of Iqomah is a strategic step that has a positive impact on worker protection, bilateral diplomacy, and international migration governance. This change reflects a shift in policy towards a more inclusive, adaptive, and justice-based model.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the reform of the Iqomah system in Saudi Arabia has brought about major changes in migration governance and encouraged the emergence of a new paradigm of more equitable labor diplomacy through the restructuring of sponsorship mechanisms, strengthening the legal status of workers, and increasing regulatory accountability. This transformation has not only expanded the scope for bilateral cooperation based on international rights and standards, but has also shifted the approach to diplomacy from a reactive pattern to a more proactive and strategic model. Based on these findings, the study recommends strengthening inter-state coordination, improving legal protection instruments, and harmonizing policies, as well as encouraging further research that examines the implementation of reforms at the practical level to enrich the development of modern migration diplomacy theory.

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