



Migrant workers' conditions in Qatar

Prospects of change on the road to the 2022 World Cup

SUMMARY *The decision of FIFA, world football's governing body, to hold the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, despite its climate constraints and the lack of a domestic football tradition, was a major victory in Qatar's long-term strategy aimed at enhancing the Emirate's international outreach, within a broader ambitious foreign policy.*

However commentators stress that the challenge of hosting the World Cup could trigger major social change, endangering the Qatari political system which has remained untouched by the Arab Spring. Indeed the absolute monarchy is sustained by a generous benefits system for the minority – Qatari citizens – while the majority – 94% of the, mostly migrant, workforce – suffers harsh working and living conditions. Although Qatari law includes considerable protection for migrant workers, this is scarcely enforced in practice. One reason is the legal provisions that grant excessive rights to employers (sponsorship system), while denying any rights of association to workers. International civil society pressure on Qatar, conscious of its public image, could bring about unexpected changes in the entire Gulf region. Neighbouring countries have all developed similar arrangements to deal with the foreign workforce, on which they depend.



Doha, Qatar.

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Socio-demographic conditions

A major exporter of gas and oil, and major overseas investor, the 11 600 km² nation of Qatar has the [highest GDP](#) per capita and the highest rate of [millionaires](#) in the world. The absolute monarchy's 225 000 citizens benefit, amongst other things, from free education, free healthcare, virtually guaranteed – and well-paid – employment (95% of them work in public companies and services, earning several thousands US dollars per month) and pay almost no taxes.¹

However, the great majority of the 1.7 million inhabitants of the Emirate live in very different conditions, characterised by extreme poverty and alienation. Indeed Qatar has the highest ratio of migrants in the world: 94% of its workforce comes from abroad, mostly from India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. Those migrants, in contrast to the small percentage of expatriates from the West and other Gulf states, live and work in harsh conditions, mainly in the construction sector (about 500 000 in [2010](#)) and domestic services.

This is an updated version, taking account of Parliament's resolution of 21 November.

International civil society is trying to seize the opportunity of the forthcoming World Cup, to be organised in Qatar in 2022, to put pressure on the Qatari ruling family to improve migrant workers' situation. Moreover, construction workers are expected to double in number – to 1 million – to build infrastructure worth [US\\$220 billion](#) for the 2022 event, including nine new stadia.²

Sport as foreign policy instrument

Main drivers of foreign policy

Since the beginning of the 1990s (with the invasion of Kuwait and growing discord with Saudi Arabia), Qatar has started to develop an ambitious foreign policy aimed at consolidating and diversifying its security by using all economic, diplomatic and strategic levers at its disposal.³

First, Qatar has reinforced its **relations with the US** through several defence agreements. The Al Udeid air-base, the US's biggest base abroad, has housed the Central Command for US Forces in the Middle East since 2003, and is a main security guarantee for Qatar.⁴

Second, the Emirate pursues a dynamic and **multidirectional investment strategy**. This is undertaken via the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), a grouping of national investment funds, and through private acquisitions by the royal family which consists of 6 000 members (including 2 000 princes).⁵ In 2012, Qatari international assets were worth US\$219 billion, making the Emirate the world's biggest investor.⁶

Selected Qatari investments in the EU:

15.1% of the London Stock Exchange
17% of Volkswagen AG
12.83% of Lagardère Group
100% of Paris Saint Germain Football Club
100% of the Paris Handball Club

Third, Qatar has chosen to **enhance its visibility and influence** at regional and international levels through a number of complementary means:

- Offering its mediation services, backed by generous humanitarian assistance, in several regional conflicts, (for example Lebanon, Darfur and the Israeli-Palestinian case),
- Expansion of its al-Jazeera satellite television network, and
- Organising or sponsoring world class cultural and sporting events.

Sport as an instrument of soft power

Spectacular Qatari involvement in high-level sports activities⁷ is one of the main vectors of its international outreach, and part of its overall investment strategy.⁸ This policy is structured around three axes:⁹

- Transformation of Doha city into a sports hub through the construction of top-level sports facilities.
- Lobbying international sports federations to host major international competitions (it will host the 2015 Handball World Championship and FIFA World Cup 2022; but failed to win the 2017 Athletics World Championship and the 2016 and 2020 Olympic Games).
- Sports-oriented foreign investment and sponsoring/acquisition of clubs (Paris Saint Germain FC, FC Barcelona and others) and prestigious events (Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe horse race) as well as development of sports TV channels and sports-clothing brands (Burrda).

Legal framework

Qatar's international legal obligations

Qatar has [ratified](#) five of eight fundamental International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions establishing core labour rights, including the [ILO Forced Labour Convention](#) of 1930, the [Convention on the Abolition of Forced Labour](#) of 1957, and the [Labour Inspection Convention](#) of 1947.

According to the [ILO](#), forced labour – which affects 21 million people worldwide – is [defined](#) as the situation in which the persons involved are made to work against their will, coerced by their recruiter or

employer, for example through violence or threats of violence, or by more subtle means such as **accumulation of debt, retention of identity papers** or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities.

[Reportedly](#), high-level ILO officials blame Qatar for failing to properly implement the ILO Conventions, in particular through an inadequate inspection system and a lack of coherence in state policy on use of migrant workers. Qatar and other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are "target" countries of the [ILO strategy](#) to eliminate forced labour.

Qatar has [not ratified](#) ILO Conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, but as an ILO member is obliged to respect, promote, and ensure core labour rights, including those two.¹⁰

Domestic law

Under domestic law (mainly Law No 4 of 2009 regulating the entry and exit of expatriates, their residency and sponsorship, and Law No 14 of 2004 regulating labour in the private sector) every non-citizen worker entering the country is linked to a particular job and under the responsibility of a Qatari citizen or company (the "**kafala**" system). The sponsor therefore controls a worker's entry, stay (they can be expelled within seven days at the sponsor's request) and exit visa (which can be refused by the sponsor thus amounting to a "travel ban"). This system restricts the rights of migrants to change employer and opens the way to abuses. Qatari sponsors are only allowed to keep the passports of the workers they sponsor for the time period required to obtain a residence permit or visa renewal. The law forbids recruitment agents to charge workers recruitment fees, but does not address the problem of employers which cooperate with foreign agencies charging such fees. Under the law, travel costs fall on the employer on first arrival and after termination of the contract.

As far as [working conditions](#) are concerned, the legislation sets maximum working hours of 48 hours per week, one month's annual leave and end-of-service payments, but does not fix a minimum wage. It defines strictly **minimum living conditions**, such as the number of workers per room (four in normal, and eight in temporary dwellings), with single beds with mattresses, air conditioning, and water-cooler.

The law bans migrant workers, unlike nationals, from joining trade unions and engaging in collective bargaining.

Qatar's [80 000](#) domestic workers, the majority women, have been excluded from the scope of Qatari labour law. Long-standing [draft](#) legislation was to be debated by the Government in October 2013, but is [considered](#) insufficient by civil society.

Labour conditions in practice

Several sources¹¹ confirm poor enforcement of both national and international labour standards in Qatar, pointing to exploitative working conditions. In particular, the situation of foreign workers sometimes matches the ILO's "forced labour" definition.

Passport confiscation

According to a Qatar University study, quoted in the US State Department's [2013 Trafficking in Persons Report](#), 86% of migrant workers surrendered their passport to their employers. This, as pointed out by [Human Rights Watch](#), is a restriction on workers' freedoms under international law.

Fraudulent debt accumulation

Low-income migrants pay up to several thousand US dollars to get a job in the Emirate. This practice is prohibited under Qatari law. A large share of those amounts, which are usually paid to agencies in home countries, appear eventually to end up in Qatari recruitment agencies.¹²

High interest rate (up to [35%](#)) loans are often the only way for migrants to obtain such sums. The debt bondage this creates is

aggravated by the fact that the wages are often lower than promised by recruitment intermediaries, once the contract is (re)-signed in Qatar. This makes repayment more difficult and restricts the freedom of workers to break the contract in case of abuse.

Difficult working conditions

According to Human Rights Watch [reporting](#), a majority of construction workers work 9-11 hours per day, with four additional hours spent on transport, for wages of US\$8-11 per day. Working conditions are particularly hard in summer, when the temperature reaches up to 45 degrees Celsius. Although outdoor work is forbidden during the hottest hours, this rule is rarely respected. According to the Nepalese embassy in Doha, 44 Nepali workers died between 4 June and 8 August 2013, mostly of heart attacks, heart failure or workplace accidents. Indeed inadequate health and safety measures, sometimes including even the lack of such basics as helmets, have raised fatality rates for construction workers in Qatar.¹³

[Domestic workers](#) in Qatar have the fifth longest working week in the world (60 hours), with wages ranked amongst the lowest worldwide and frequent [reports](#) of mistreatment.

Underpayment or non-payment of wages

One of the most common complaints concerns the withholding of wages: 33% of workers questioned by the Qatar Human Rights Committee said they were not paid on a regular basis.¹⁴ In some cases companies would keep a "deposit" of 1-3 months' salary in order to prevent workers from quitting their jobs early.

Housing conditions

Most migrant workers live in "labour camps", in over-crowded rooms and in repulsive sanitary conditions. Since 2011, these large-scale facilities cannot be located in "family areas", which are de facto reserved for Qataris. Amnesty International reports of accommodation where electricity is cut off,

and without windows or cooling systems or even sufficient access to running water, which is a blatant violation of Qatari law.¹⁵

Poor functioning of complaints system

Although in cases of abuse workers in theory have the right to bring complaints to the Labour Complaints Department, in practice there are major obstacles. First, there is the language barrier: only a few foreign workers speak Arabic, the language in which a complaint must be filed, and the service has no translators to assist workers. Second, from the moment a complaint is launched, the employer is contacted to participate in dispute resolution. In most cases this has resulted in the loss of the job, income/salary and accommodation and almost certainly the right to continue to work in Qatar. In practice, only a small percentage of requests to transfer sponsorship based on claims of abuse is granted.

Stakeholders' views

Reactions of the Qatari Government

[According](#) to the Labour Ministry Under-Secretary Hussein al-Mullah, Qatar has met "99% of the (local) labour code." However, Qatar promised to [increase](#) the number of inspectors and translators and hired an international law firm, DLA Piper, to conduct an investigation. Following the most recent Amnesty International report, the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee [rejected](#) the accusation of slavery-like conditions, but declared itself committed to working towards the development of a [plan](#) to improve the welfare of migrant workers. The Government has [committed](#) itself to introduce amendments to labour law that would criminalise non-payment of workers' wages. It has also announced a new committee to study the sponsorship law.

The British consulting company, [Halcrow](#), part of the CH2M Hill Group and [appointed](#) as official programme management consultant to the Qatar 2022 Supreme Committee, has [declared](#) a "zero tolerance

policy on the use of forced labour and other human trafficking practices," [stressing](#) however that it has "no control (over) or input" into residential sites or terms of employment of subcontractors.

[Subcontractors](#) blame project owners and main contractors – multinational companies or Qatari developers – for excessively tight delivery deadlines and structural problems with cash flow stopping them from providing their workers with appropriate accommodation, working conditions and on-time pay.

FIFA

Since its decision to award the 2022 World Cup to Qatar, FIFA has come under severe [criticism](#). It has made clear that workers' rights in Qatar are primarily a "responsibility for Qatar and the companies – many of them European companies – who work there". FIFA spokesman Walter De Gregorio [denied](#) that Qatar would be stripped of the 2022 World Cup, but did not exclude that it be moved to the winter months to avoid extreme summer temperatures.

Human rights NGOs

Aidan McQuade, director of Anti-Slavery International, [called](#) for a boycott of the World Cup which he said was prepared by "modern day slaves". "Two hundred years ago, people used the whip to keep slaves in their place; today they use the confiscation of identity documents", he stated. James Lynch, a spokesman for Amnesty International, [denounced](#) "European apathy about forced labour in the Middle East".

The November 2013 [Amnesty International report](#) confirms routine and widespread exploitation of migrant workers, linked to systemic problems in the way migrant workers' employment is regulated and implemented. The NGO calls on the Qatari Government, amongst others, to **fundamentally reform its sponsorship law** in order to grant workers the right to change their employer and leave the country without prior agreement of their sponsor.

The protections of a reformed labour law, which should **give rights to all to form trade unions** and to go on strike, should also be extended to domestic workers. The enforcement of legal protection should be improved, as well as the system for delivering justice in cases of abuse.

International trade union organisations

[Building and Wood-workers International](#) sent a [delegation](#) to Qatar in October 2013 to assess working conditions in the sector. They [called](#) on the Qatar Government to amend the "kafala" system of sponsorship, and to take steps to stop the illegal practice of collecting recruitment fees and altering contracts signed in home countries once in Qatar.

Sharan Burrow, secretary-general of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) [called](#) Qatar a "slave state", and warned that, if current trends continued, 4 000 workers might die building infrastructure for the 2022 World Cup. The ITUC [claims](#) Qatar's response to workers rights' abuses has so far been weak and disappointing. German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) chief [Michael Sommer](#), also president of the International Trade Union Confederation, called on FIFA to remove the 2022 World Cup from Qatar, unless there is "an immediate end to forced labour conditions". A [campaign](#) involving national trade union leaders has been set up to put pressure on domestic football federations.

International institutions

The ILO [recognised](#) that there were major problems with migrant workers' conditions. It has [established](#) a tripartite committee to review the evidence and make recommendations to the Qatar Government.

European Union position

At EU level, very few official documents even mention the problem. The two short paragraphs on Qatar in the [EU Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World in 2012](#) state that migrant

workers in Qatar continue to be subject to abuse.

The **European Parliament (EP)** has given more visibility to what it called the "deplorable situation" of migrant workers first in two resolutions (from [2008](#) and [2011](#)) on EU trade relations with the GCC, and more recently, in November 2013, in adopting a specific [resolution on the situation of migrant workers in Qatar](#).

In its resolution of 2011 the EP called for abolition of the "kafala" system and reform of Qatar's labour law, including rights to form trade unions, to ensure migrant workers' full social and legal protection. In the 2013 resolution however the demand for the abolition of "kafala" was not reiterated, with MEPs insisting instead on effective implementation of existing legislation and welcoming the efforts made by the Qatari government to address the issue. The EP has also called on the GCC to ratify and implement a number of international treaties, including the [Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families](#), which has not yet been [ratified](#) either by the GCC or EU Member States.

The EP has also appealed to FIFA to send a strong message to Qatar, "to prevent preparations for the 2022 World Cup from being overshadowed by allegation of forced labour", and to EU corporations involved in preparations to provide working conditions in line with international human rights standards.

Prospects for change?

Qatar's rising international profile, one of the main drivers of its foreign policy, could be jeopardised by the [gap](#) between image and action. This has been qualified by commentators as a fundamental challenge to the credibility of Qatar's public diplomacy measures. The country performs poorly on human rights, with its citizens deprived of basic political and civil liberties (it is

classified as "not free" in Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2012](#) report), and mistreats the majority of its foreign workforce. Yet it presents itself as an advocate of democracy and the main humanitarian aid provider in the Arab world, as well as a generous sports and [cultural sponsor](#) in the West. This inconsistency, if exploited by international stakeholders, [could](#) become an incentive for policy change towards and in Qatar.

For some [authors](#), the organisation of the 2022 World Cup could open a "Pandora's box of demographic change" that could have an impact on the entire Gulf region. Indeed a change in status and conditions of migrant workers, although improbable, could challenge the delicate equilibrium¹⁶, in which the Qatari monarchy maintains its position through the generous system of social and economic privileges applicable only to Qatari citizens. Even on the Qatari side, [voices](#) have risen to denounce this policy, which allows the autocratic regime to stay in power. It consists of redistribution of oil revenue to purchase loyalty, both at home and abroad, and an immigration policy which increases the influx of migrant workers – a disposable and temporary population without social and political rights, and easy to control.

Qatari [pro-reform](#) observers are [calling](#) on the Government to halt the imbalance in the population, and to gradually reform it to avoid turning Qataris into an unproductive and vanishing minority.

Further reading

[The Dark side of migration: spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup](#)/ Amnesty International, November 2013.

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<http://www.library.ep.ec>
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Endnotes

- ¹ [Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar ahead of FIFA 2022](#)/ Human Rights Watch, 2012. p. 35; *Le Qatar: Les secrets du coffre fort*/ Chesnot C., Malbrunot, G., Michel Lafon éditions, 2013, p. 107.
- ² [The dark side of migration: spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup](#)/ Amnesty International, November 2013, p. 5.
- ³ *Le Qatar aujourd'hui*/ Lazar M., Michalon Editeur 2013, pp. 126-191.
- ⁴ *Idem*. p. 148.
- ⁵ *L'énigme de Qatar*/ Ennasri N., Editions Armand Colin, 2013, p. 161.
- ⁶ *Pourquoi le Qatar achète le monde?*/ Malbrunot G., *Politique Internationale* No 135, 2012.
- ⁷ *Le Qatar aujourd'hui*; p. 209.
- ⁸ *Le Qatar: Les secrets du coffre fort*; Chapter 12, *Les armes du soft power*.
- ⁹ *L'énigme de Qatar*; pp. 132-144.
- ¹⁰ [Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar ahead of FIFA 2022](#)/ Human Rights Watch, 2012, p. 28.
- ¹¹ [A Portrait of Low-Income Migrants in Contemporary Qatar](#)/ Gardner A. et al, *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3.1, June 2013, p. 9.
- ¹² [Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar ahead of FIFA 2022](#)/ Human Rights Watch, 2012, p. 34.
- ¹³ [The dark side of migration: spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup](#)/ Amnesty International, November 2013, p. 46.
- ¹⁴ [Building a Better World Cup: Protecting Migrant Workers in Qatar ahead of FIFA 2022](#); p. 41.
- ¹⁵ [The dark side of migration: spotlight on Qatar's construction sector ahead of the World Cup](#); pp. 45-50.
- ¹⁶ *Qatar(isme): Essai d'analyse de fonctionnement d'un système*/ Djermoun S, Hersant E., L'Harmattan, 2013. p. 103.